

Black Humour And Identity Crisis As Depicted In Lynn Coady's 'Saints Of Big Harbour'

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Abstract: This paper illustrates the phenomenon of identity crisis, alienation and also the effectiveness of the narrative technique 'dark humour' employed by one of the most promising contemporary writers of Canadian literature, Lynn Coady. Her second fiction 'Saints of Big Harbour', published in 2002, not only depicts the passion of a small-town life, but also portrays the violence, teenage angst and suffocating ennui faced by the teenagers in the contemporary Canadian rural society, through subtle humour. This paper consists of three parts, in which the first part discusses the tension undergone by the characters in their quest for identity. The second part of the paper portrays the alienation and the trauma faced by different characters. The final part brings out the significance of Coady's implementation of the technique 'dark humour' in her fictions. Thus the paper endeavours to throw light on the theme of sense of alienation, reflection of black humour and the struggle for identity as depicted in the fictions of Lynn Coady.

Keywords: identity crisis, black humour, alienation, teenage angst, ennui

I. Introduction about the novel

Published in 2002, **Saints of Big Harbour** is a story about a fatherless teenager oppressed by the boredom and poverty of rural Nova Scotia, Canada. It was Coady's first novel to be published in the United States. Guy Boucher is a young boy of fourteen years, dominated by his monstrous uncle, Isadore, who is alcoholic and violent. Isadore is permitted to board with Guy and his mother in exchange of the use of his truck. His wants to make Guy a man by forcing him to drink and play hockey. Guy makes the truck a medium to attract a girlfriend by nearby Big Harbour. But when an awkward courtship turns bad, he touches off a sluggish turmoil fuelled by malice and suffocating boredom. The plot revolves around the challenges faced by him and the struggle he has undergone.

Quest for Identity as a recurrent motif

Among the widely popular thematic concepts, the theme of identity crisis is the most fertile field. The novelist is obsessed with suffering and dejection and ultimately that leads to its kindred theme, Identity Crisis. Crisis has been a vital subject in literature right from Shakespeare to till today. Conflicts that arise due to the individuals' identity are very much a crucial issue. Identity crisis has been a much debated topic in the recent years than it was earlier. The concept of 'identity crisis' originated in the works of developmental psychologist Eric Erickson and it was he who coined the term, and believed that it was one of the major conflicts faced by people. An identity crisis is a period or a particular time in life when an individual seriously looks for answers about his or her being and search for an identity. -In much American literature, tragedy is closely tied to characters' confusion about their identity. Their emotional sufferings are frequently occasioned by their inability to overcome the crisis. T. S. Eliot's poem **The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock** (1915) uses the dramatic monologue form to depict a person's wavering between wanting to be himself and the familiar comforts of an emotionally closed, drawing-room life. (Identity crisis as a literary tragedy) This term can rightly be applied to the teenagers in their period of transformation from their adolescence to adulthood. 'Identity Crisis' is one of the most significant themes dealt by Lynn Coady successfully than any other contemporary Canadian writer. She was identified as -a brilliant voice in Canadian literature by a renowned Canadian novelist David Adam Richard. Almost all her central characters are teens and it is they who face conflicts the more. Guy Boucher, a fatherless teenager and Isadore, his maternal uncle are not exceptionals.

Lynn Coady, with her first novel, **Strange Heaven** in 1992, won a clutch of awards and acclaims. It had strong autobiographical influences. She was adopted into a large family in an industrial town, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The landscape of her first fiction and **Saints of Big Harbour** is Nova Scotia. She is not an outsider writer, but deals with her first hand perceptions and experiences. The fiction was precisely considered as -Sharply written, intelligently layered...Its themes are all dealt with in impressive detail. (Guardian, magazine) Coady writes about teenagers in small town Nova Scotia in 1982-83. She combines skilful characterisation with keen sense of comedy of a small town life to make **Saints of Big Harbour** more

than just a slab of social pessimism. The plot takes the readers back to 1982 in the chapter entitled *'_SKIN.'* So ingeniously Coady brings the concept of alienation in the very first chapter to intensify the theme of identity crisis. The central character, Guy, an adolescent who lives with his mother and his father is gone long before. He has all the attributes of a young guy who is free from the restrictions of a father. His name *'_Guy'* is symbolic in nature, he is a representative of any guy of an small industrial town in Canada. He works to fulfil the needs of his family by taking up truck driving as his livelihood. Big harbour is a smalltown –of ennui, addiction, failure, cowardice and violence in which we find men behaving badly or self-destructively and women despairingly, apathetically, manipulatively or hysterically. (Kemp, 2002. article) Guy is definitely –mummy's boy who strives for his mother's attention, love and care. His sense of alienation and to discover who he is continues till the end of it. The following passage proves it, for instance-

After school I drive back into Big Harbour to get my mother, which is not so bad because I can hang around the arcade or the mall or somewhere while I wait for it to be five. The irony of the situation is my mother's job. My mother's job is being a housekeeper. She looks after someone else's house and someone else's kids all day while I fry bacon for her alcoholic brother. (p.5)

The theme of teenage angst, in Coady's fictions, culminates in theme of identity crisis subsequently. Guy is terribly bored in his life and it offers no future, no hope, but only tons of responsibilities and humiliations. When he says-

–So my life is incredibly boring, driving into town and back. Guys at school think I have made because I've got a truck, and I get into Big Harbour all the time by myself. It is a big joke. It feels like a big joke. (p. 5)

And, in another instance he says: –It's stupid, embarrassing life. (p.6)

The degradation of moral values and education is well illustrated in the characterisation of English teacher, Alison Mason who is in the company of Isadore sets a wrong example for teenagers in Big Harbour. They are *'_drunks'* and Guy is intolerably annoyed with the very presence of his English teacher, when he says –the person who wrote that story was a total bastard. And whenever I see Alison Mason, I feel like he is the guy who wrote that book or at least the closest thing to him. (p.10)

Coady is rightly recognised as –not only understands the passion of a small-town life, she feels the comedy too. (Observer, magazine)

Alienation: A thematic approach

Alienation is defined as emotional isolation and dissociation from others. In her fictions characters are consistently alienated and experience isolation from society. Alienation is seen as a sign of personal dissatisfaction with several structural elements of society; it has been related particularly to economic and political elements. This dissatisfaction has been defined in the more recent studies in terms of expressions by individuals of feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement. (Lystad, Mary Haneman. *Social Alienation: A review of Current Literature*, 1972)

Coady's characters in **Saints of Big Harbour**, are some of the most downtrodden, oppressed and exploited people of Big Harbour. Guy's mother, Guy and Isadore are all fall under the category. No doubt, Guy must be the one who is depressed than the other two as he is in the process of metamorphosis. Guy laments over the unintended fate as he utters:

What the fuck does she care what I'm doing out of school, she doesn't care about anything but her goddamn job, she doesn't care about me or anything that I might be doing. (p.32)

Dark Humour: A narrative tool depicting modern tragedy

As there is no concrete definition for *'_dark humour'*, but in any general context it is viewed as a humour that is –dark, morbid and cruel, yet still found funny. In the late 19th and 20th centuries Absurdist dramatists made it popular to depict the cruelty of human predicament. It as a form of humour that considers human sufferings as absurd rather than pitiable.

The concept of *'_black'* humour is an area in which there has been an upsurge of interest especially in North America, in the last two decades or so, here too there is a lack of an agreed terminology has been apparent. Different writers use the term to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these. (O'Neill, Patric. *The Comedy of Entrophy: The concept of Black Humour*, p.145)

Coady is a –rare talent! (Ireland on Sunday, Newspaper) who is able to capture the violence fuelled by malice, booze and suffocating ennui through subtle humour. The 1975 edition of the New Columbia Encyclopedia defines it as *'_grotesque or morbid humour used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox and cruelty of modern life'* (p.146) Coady has made use of her every opportunity to depict the theme

of black humour, and her every title suggests it. Though the word 'saints' sounds positive but she uses it in an altogether different connotation. Lynn Coady has portrayed many demons and monsters but certainly no saints. He is caught in a situation where he is just a puppet and has no control over what happens around him. He is continuously haunted by so called 'saints' in different disguises and tries every possible ways to get rid of them. Big Harbour is a place mixed with violence, humour and exploitation and it is the teenagers who are largely targeted at. Coady's treatment of 'dark humour' sometimes goes beyond the limits and -her writing dwell on dejection and excrement. Shit signifies the messes in which her characters live their tawdry lives. All boys are 'shit-disturbers.' (Hepburn, Allan. 2004) Her blend of farce and dark humour is a characteristic feature unique to Coady, the following words from the text proves it—

-Evil becomes her favourite word. She says it at school. She takes a bite of someone's Vachon cake.
-Mmmmmmm. E-vil!!

-Did Jesus pee, she remembers wondering as a kid. Did Jesus poo? It was important. (119)

Each of her chapter's title is purposely written absurd in choosing to use her own of punctuation by breaking all the accepted norms of grammar, for instance—

Skin, Tournament, Normal, Winner, Defense, The Game, House, Luck, Ice, Eve, Weight, Gasp, and many more. Not just her titles are humorous in punctuation but in its content as well where she titled a chapter as -The BEARDED LADY that touches the absurdity at its peak. Characters thrive on hatred. -Coady's characters speak raw, colloquial English. They are small minded, brawling sentimental, banal and alcoholic. They live by rumours and manipulations. Characters define themselves in terms of catastrophe. (Hepburn, Allan. 2004)

The repetition of events and actions quite often gives the effect of humour. The dialogues and action just repeats over and over again to depict the absurdity of human predicament. The act of drinking just repeats endlessly and like an addiction for all and thus Allan Hepburn rightly termed it as -addiction realism. Everyone is addicted to drinking and it is quite a normal routine for all, the young as well as the old. (Hepburn, Allan. 2004)

II. Conclusion

What one finds in Lynn Coady's theme is the humour that depicts the hidden 'quest for identity', that is the very spice of life. None can deny the fact that her fictions are deep rooted in reality and exposes a typical rural society of Canada. It is true that her attitude is as varied as her fiction and her perspective is vague. But she speaks with the human voice and her humour is tinged with reality.

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