CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN HUMOR.

American humor is as varied and multifaceted as the very culture itself and a study or an analysis of it is interesting and challenging. The word 'American humor' has come to mean comedy in its broadest sense. It is not merely clowning, fooling, brilliance, satire, farce, irony, though it is all these and something more. A partial appreciation of it is attempted here which serves as a proper backdrop for a comparative study of Mark Twain, the legendary American humorist, and Joseph Heller, the much appreciated contemporary black humor novelist. It is interesting to note that American humor manifests itself as traditional humor, frontier humor, high humor, Yankee humor, Backwoods humor, plantation humor of black slaves, Jewish humor, urban tall tale humor, black humor, slapstick humor - the list can go on. It being a vast and a virgin subject, a study of all these is not aimed here. Besides defining humor, a close look at only two
Defining humor and a strict demarcation of it from others is quite difficult. "Humor is a generic term for every thing that excites laughter, frivolous or vulgar"¹ and "Fun is the most conservative element of society and it ought to be cherished and encouraged by all lawful means ... laughter is an enemy to malice, a foe to scandal and a friend to every virtue"². One may be surprised to know that humor has its birth under stress and agony. It is tragedy first and then comedy. It is an expression of helpless rage against the senseless shocking absurd world. Misery triggers off laughter. Adversity, though not the touchstone, has mirth in a slight degree. It is also defined in the following way: "It begins in gritty particulars"³, Says Pinsker. There is defeat at the back of victory. The dark crude realities of life are expressed in a language rich with ideas and feelings⁴. Exaggeration, sarcasm, irony, word play, paradox, are tools of this
humor. Humor is repressed aggression and desire. "Belly laughs are merely the tip of their collective icebergs. Larger reservoirs of hostility, anger, and frustration lie just underneath - the prevailing style of our most popular stand up comedians is built upon the psychodynamics of failure."4 "It is groan made gay. Laughter is not man's first impulse; he cries first. Comedy always comes second, late, after the fact and in spite of it or because of it."5 It lies buried deep down below the rock of tragedy and if it jets forth onto the surface, it is only temporary. The humorist perceives his battle to be futile. He is pitted hopelessly helplessly against the cruel world. Knowing fully well that he is a loser he grins and looks elsewhere for something easier. He makes a joke of the whole thing preferring the present to eternity, the easier to the more difficult. Losing hope in the beginning itself he laughs at, makes a target of, every sacred cow of those accepted, much-revered beliefs in the world, everything momentous is reduced to malicious tomfoolery.
Humor is like a shade to sun going always with tragedy, repairing, filling the blanks left by the latter. Tragedy drains us off, leaves a vacuum in its upward surge and humor which follows it, fills in those vacuums. It complements tragedy. It is very much needed as an aside to this tragic world. While revealing all those concealed by tragedy it relieves the world of its gloom. Stonely opines that "People never plot mischief when they are merry, ... it promotes good temper enlivens the heart and brightens the intellect." It scratches freely to get to the truth and the scratch gives us the laughter. It is a bold reminder of the naked truth with all its foolish grin. It is the last bit of the bitter truth which is already explored by tragedy. Belittling the truth does not result in humor. But the fact that the secret is revealed, the unwanted is uttered at last, the much afraid is opposed, gives us a great relief and from the relief the humor erupts. We live with oppressing realities, getting tense at the thought of it all, but not daring to utter openly. The moment these fears are
talked out the harsh tragedy bows in for humor. Humor is misery smiling with an altogether changed view. It looks right in the eye. It is the laughter with mischief in the eye and hurt deep within, a grin against death, against agony. Behind the mirth there is maddened frustration and intense pathos, and gnawing anguish.

Humor instils fear and thus controls eccentricity. It expels the unwanted rigidity in us. Humor aims at the discovery of human nature through observation. It is the most majestic human device of self-defence. It repudiates suffering. Though liberating us or relieving us from wounds, it does not eject agony at the cost of others. Neither it gives licence to lawless desires. And also it is not vengeful. It is incomparable. It emanates laughter, it creates pleasure out of pain but it does not ignore mental sanity. It reconciles life and calamity.
Humor differs from comedy. Comedy attacks follies. It is concerned with the present with the interest in future. It must have always something to attack, and is in revolt against falsehood and pretension. It aims at reformation. It is positive as it believes that life in general is good and amusing. It is moralistic as it is concerned with the difference between what is and what ought to be. It is critical. It evokes thoughtful laughter. It is concerned with reasoning, logic. It recognizes the mechanical side of living. It investigates life. It is surprising. It is broad in its perception. But humor is intensive. Humor recognizes its limits. It is a form of satire.

Humor differs from satire as satire aims at an amendment of morals and manners. Satire criticizes. It must be amiable to the readers but enemical to its enemies against whom satire is intended. The criticism can be personal or impersonal i.e. general. Anger is at the base of satire though it is not overtly expressed. And its language is highly controlled.
Such lofty language is only to conceal the seething rage and to pretend a disregard of the rival. Satire can be distinguished from humor. Satire confines itself to a single object or a group of related objects. There will be an underlying unity. Comic devices are no doubt used but the target is limited. There is severe derision in satire whereas there is amusement in humor. There is relentless pursuit on the part of satirist of his target. Satire has a predetermined end and it does demand an intelligent reader. The reader does not have any other choice but accepting the writer's or satirist's condemning. Satire can use burlesque. But the purpose is lost if the reader is not acquainted with the original sources that are burlesqued. It can be ironical, invective too. But humor generalizes and it is not punitive.

It differs from Irony. Bergson in his essay 'Le Rire' says that 'most common of (comic) contrast is that between real and the ideal, between what is and
what ought to be." The reader is made to feel to be one with the writer. It is exclusive, it states facts, but through mystification. It demands an inner circle of audience. It blows up the victim only to punch him down. The victim has to discover the real intention of the ironical statement and the discovery will only hurt him. Understanding here does not end in a reward; neither, the failing to understand serves the purpose as it proves one to be a moron. The richer the language, the purer will be the irony and it needs the reader's energetic participation. It is negative mostly as it is used to expose the blemishes and to shatter one's confidence. Irony can be satirical but there is no vice-versa. There are pessimism and melancholy in it. "Humor is the counterpart of irony. Irony is oratorical in nature while humor partakes of scientific. Irony is emphasized the higher we allow ourselves to be uplifted by the idea of the good that ought to be. Thus irony may grow so hot in us that it becomes a kind of high pressure eloquence. Humor is more emphasized the deeper we go down into our evil
that actually is in order to set down in details in the most cold blooded indifference."\(^8\)

Humor is not wit as wit aims only to throw light surprising the reader or the listener. The recipient must be intelligent enough to catch the wit. It does not aim to reform or amend the society. It is not hostile, it doesn’t criticize. It confines itself to words and ideas unlike its counterpart humor which is about human nature. Augustie Angellier defined humor as a "combination of raillery or mockery with realism. Raillery can appear as both wit and humor, but wit generalizes while humor particularizes."\(^9\) "It is a turn of mind towards all kinds of impression. It is an equal and unexpected disposition toward, sadness as well as joy, but joy is often melancholy and sadness breaks out in cheerful comic gestures. Some of its subtle pursuits of thought almost fatigue the reader, some of naiveties disarm him"\(^10\) says Gabriel de Lautrace in his preface.
Comments like "to translate American humor is to translate America," and William Dean Howell's remark, "our humor springs from its multiform American experience of life and securely addresses itself - in reminiscence in phrase, in its whole material - to the intelligence bred of like experience" reveal the breadth and depth of American humor. A study of it reveals that American humor stands for exaggeration, pomp and hugeness. Exaggeration originates in stunning boast which result in tall tales. Tall tales lead to the art of humor in writing. Thus humor is the result of the urge to outdo others in lying, demanding a willing suspension of disbelief from the reader or listener of these early tall tales and for the teller "never too little" was the principle. Rich language, highly imaginative metaphors evoked the needed mood to enjoy the tall tales. Here comes Frontier humor which is the exalted form where tall tales are cleverly, artistically manipulated, fabricated into novels. Frontier humor took roots when the Civil War sealed the fate of the country. The Northern way of
industrialized life was to be adopted. The pioneers moved across, building industrial cities. The depressing, frustrating conditions made them laugh as there was no time for this, much too much of sadness. It was a bitter, rough laughter. The humorist who looks at this world with all its evil with a smile is the right person to describe this frontier life as his smile is close to tears. He is endowed with compassion for victims which is not to be found in a satirist or in a writer of irony. He rejects to complain as he identifies himself with the victim. He proudly tries to punish the guilty, while taking a pleasure in absurdity of things.

Frontier humor was not ferocious but was good natured. It was a gentleman’s laughter though there was seething rage down within. Laughter was a relief which was the prodigy of skepticism mingled with belief. It was the marrow of Americanism. It had the local colour, the European being cast aside, and was sentimental with stinging realism asserting individual
independence. The free individual was becoming a myth, and his struggle for his integrity was the crux of the frontier humor. Life was full of paradoxes - terrible poverty amidst dazzling riches, upholding slavery in spite of Christianity, honesty along with duplicity. This miserable burden was slighted with a roughish laughter and this is frontier humor.

Whom else can we think of as the befitting example of this frontier humor, except the legendary humorist, "the Lincoln of literature" \(^{13}\) - Mark Twain. \(^{7}\) He turned frontier humor into high art, capitalizing the situation. With him it has become fresh, original, native, imbibing three century old tradition and remaining gentle romantic, realistic. He is endowed with warm compassion for the victims and his novels are voyages, quests of the holy grail and sagas of the individual, trying to be free and society becoming a shadow. "Frontier humor is a tradition of political conservatism and gentlemanly." \(^{14}\) and frontier
humorists were gentlemen humorists satirizing vulgarity, barbarism, ignorance, maintaining a safer distance. These humorists, for that matter any humorist, exaggerate the contrast between illusion and reality and the contrast is so extreme that it becomes laughable. This frontier humor or south western humor was due to the need of those writers to report and belittle. These gentlemen humorists were aloof from natives and exaggerated the life they found there just to ensure their superiority. They had sharp eyes, keen ears, and a great desire to report the customs, wit, dialect as they appeal to superior wits like them. They were realistic though they exaggerated, and they always maintained an unemotional aesthetic distance. They believed that a common man can always fathom and can get to the truth in spite of incongruities that life is shrouded in.

Frontier humorists like Petroleum V. Nasby, Josh Billings, Artemus Award, were very serious in the guise of semiliterate buffoons providing comedy through
misspelling, burlesque, and tall tales, under statement, black dialect, deadpan vernacular, incongruity. Mostly they preferred tall tale or profanity. It was to relieve the misery as earlier said, "for one thing frontier men joked about the rigor, loneliness, cruelty of their way of life as a means of whistling in the dark, of laughing way teror and depression." And so their humor burlesqued the life. It was bafflingly extravagant though realistic. Human interest was shown and the picaresque element was lessened. It was a "leather lunged laughter laughing at things which it did not understand". An undercurrent of satire is its main feature.

The common pattern of these humorists is to make a character expose others or ridicule himself of his pretentions. The failure to recognize ones real stature is the butt of ridicule. Hypocrisy, vanity result in affected behaviour and this affected behaviour is the cause of ridicule. They remind us of
Henry Fielding who said, "from affectation only the misfortune and calamities of like or imperfections of nature may become object of ridicule." The ridicule cuts the enemy down to his size. The contrast of appearance and reality is presented through irony. It may be an over-statement or an under-statement and the humorist always says something quite different from what he actually means. Irony of statement is made more effective by irony of manner. The pleasure is in the laughter which is the result of reader's effort in discovering the difference between what is said and what is actually meant. And it always implied a belief in the existence of well defined standards accepted by the intelligence.

Mark Twain with his gigantic stride changed the whole scene. He excelled all his seniors and gave his works a magician's touch that took him to the high pedestal of glory.
Mark Twain, "an essential grammar for American comic devices."\textsuperscript{18} exploited all these devices with dexterous improvisation making it all his own. He is a genius who learnt from tradition and used it for more subtle, profound purposes than his forerunners. He deviated from his seniors by casting off affectation as a cause for ridicule. And he did not distance himself aesthetically as they did. In his novels human beings are gullible because of their desire for romance and sensation whereas in the novels of his forerunners it is affectation that is laughed at. His novels are of the real world and not artificially created. He is preoccupied with the differences between reality and appearance. This use of appearances differentiates him from others. He is an embodiment of the subtle, complex, urbane folksy wisdom and hence he could be nothing else but a humorist as only humor could express that wisdom. Quick to absorb the local colour, being an idealist, with a burning rage at injustice he came as an answer to Whitman's cry "What is the reason in our time, our lands, that we see no fresh local
courage, sanity of our own - the Mississippi Stalwart Western men, real mental and physical facts, southerners etc. in body of literature?"19.

A fundamental humorist, (though often rejected by him) Twain imbibed and transcended the frontier tradition. He used humor as a weapon to lampoon the society as there is a satirist in him. He enriched frontier humor by the wealth of his nature. And today his forerunners, from whom he learnt a lot, are of value only because Mark Twain adopted their techniques. He is sagacious in not repeating the mistakes of his forerunners - i.e. remaining just a humorist. he himself said that humor, the most perishable will be forgotten if it is just humor and nothing else. To be remembered "it must not professedly teach, it must not professedly preach, but it must do both, if it would live for ever"20. He attacked injustice, oppression, selfishness and he "himself gone grailing in behalf of a loftier dream than ever King Arthur knew".21 He dissipated the gloom of his period. Not being a social
satirist he recreated his observation in hit-and-run fashion - And the Satanic laughter emerges. He inherited the devices of satiric attack and the strategies of psychic defence. His was the race of fertile imagination with an underlying coarseness. His distinction is in making the dialect as vernacular. The poker terminology used by his forerunners was embellished with western colour; and it provides a second line of story and shows the character of the speaker. This was not to be found in his predecessors.

Hostility towards something different and rejection of it is seen in frontier novels of humor. So also contrasting east and west, Europe and America, and the poker face as the central image are characteristic features of this genre. And Mark Twain only improvised them as is felt by Constance Rourke: "He was primarily a recounter, with an unequalled dramatic authority as Howells called it. He was never the conscious artist, always the improviser. He had
the garrulity and the inconsequence of the earlier comic story tellers of the stage and tavern and his comic sense was their almost without alternative."22 This bard of America is as controversial a figure as his country is. He "gathered himself almost unconsciously the life and spirit of a whole nation, and poured it forth more as a voice than a deliberate artist."23 One can simply agree with Hemingway who said that American literature began the day when Huckleberry Finn was created.

If frontier humor is a child of the Civil War, the Second World War gave rise to another major event i.e. Black Humor. Humor during World War II was not belligerent, was not sceptical or anxious. America as a nation believed in integrity and its leadership. Humor of this period was not distinct and it was just of 'rugged individual or poor little men."24 Post-War period was sickening and shattering. Black humor emerges out of these sick comedians. The country was terrified by the barbarous war and life was unbearable,
miserable with all its growing violence, crime, and unemployment. The baffling, stupefying sickening reality was too much for the writers to deal with and make it credible. Here came the sick comedians commenting the collective lunacy with vengeance. Their language was rotten and their technique was "scatological". They were intensely scathing and hostile to audience. Their sickening humor conveyed their 'excremental vision'. They criticized for the pleasure of criticizing and soon they stopped appealing to audience. They had a natural death.

But they paved the way to black humor. The black humorists, basing themselves on these sick comedians enriched themselves by absorbing the rich humor of Melville, Twain and West. Black humor is worthy of closer probing as quite a number of writers of different potentialities like John Barth, Pyncheon, Ishmael Reed, Joseph Heller, and many others are often labelled so. Exact definition of Black humor is quite
difficult. Andre Breton, a French Writer, with his 'Anthologie de l'humor noir' gave altogether a new meaning to the term, thus facilitating a vast range to the term Black humor, which earlier meant only as black bile produced by the brain resulting in melancholy. He redefined it as a stance or an attitude, having its independent existence, yet can be implanted into writing. It opposes simplistic thinking, scorns limitation of thought. It lampoons sentiments, social conventions. It coldly shatters complacency and exposes the absurd universe. It aims at shocking the audience/readers by exposing the blatant realities that lie underneath smooth surfacial harmony. Yet it laughs away as it knows that nothing can reform this absurd existence. After horrifying the audience it jolts them back to the same by a comic turn. It transcends the fears of life by wit.

This balck humor, thus defined by the French became totally diferent by its advent in American scene. It became darker bifurcating into 'black humor'
and black comedy. It soon became the spirit and a very dominant tone of twentieth century. The fact that various novels are dubbed under this label shows that black humor is all inclusive and still transcends the limits of these genres. Its darker hue was due to contributions of sick comedians of the 1950s along with earlier writers. "Melville's wry ambiguities, Twain's satanic laughter, West's grotesque apocalyses enriched the blackness of their comic vision. They disturbed the readers leaving them thoroughly confused. The readers did not know how to react to the alternating horror and comedy. They exaggerated (exaggeration being the tool of humor) absurdities to impress the readers of this preposterous world. The literature of the sixties is dominated by whiners, some serious, like Saul Bellow, and some others comfortably comic like Joseph Heller. "Black humor is a phenomenon of the 1960's comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and an aesthetic for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear technological world intrinsically without confinement."
Each critic has his own method of labelling writers as black humourists so as to suit his needs and no wonder if we feel that speaking about black humour is like speaking about every thing. "I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned beef sandwich"\textsuperscript{29}, says - Bruce Jay Friedman in his introduction to Black humor.

Black humor can be just an angle of vision or a technique. Black humor is satirical without the seriousness of satire. Black humor is 'Zany'. Like Satire it never tells what should be. As W.H. Auden says, "Satire presupposes conscience and reason as the judges between true and false, the moral and immoral to which it appeals but, for the west these faculties are themselves the creatures of unreality. It challenges, faculties of judgement".\textsuperscript{30} Black humorist in search for new arenas, new standard, fresh language,\textit{goes} beyond satire. Satire demands a tougher mind, and a tighter lip and a black humorist, for want of such patience
turns away from scathing satire to an apparently foolish grin.

Neither it is irony or parody, though irony is at the core of humor. Irony here in black humor becomes a life saving measure. The deliberate irony here confuses the reader as it implies that the meek wins and yet the winner is the loser. Thus black humor transcends irony and even parody though they both are devices of satire.

These twentieth century writers realized the urge for absolutes, the latter being beyond man’s reach. This paradox, this ambiguity baffles them and this baffling conflict is dramatized in their novels. The battle is won when man becomes aware of the urge and his limitations. And success lies in the clever confusion of these contradictions. Man cannot live with and without society and this clash is the very essence of existence. The individual inherits the
traits of society while society is the custodian of the individual. His happiness is in living with society in peace without being drowned by it. This struggle of the individual is depicted in these novels through class-clash. In social novel it's a clash between the hero who is the proletariat and the antagonist who is the capitalist. In socio-political war novels or simply war novels the military and its officers are the oppressing social power and the soldier who resists them is the hero. Heller's 'Catch-22' is the best example where the hero Yossarian opposes those oppressing officers. Thenovels, The Dead Are Mine of James E.Ross, The War Boom of Mandel, The Thin Red Line of JamesJones, The Spring the War Ended of Stephen Linakis, fall in this category. These novels stopped showing the hero as an intellectual. He is just a man against the oppressing army. He is not a noble warrior any more but just a helpless individual exploited by the army. The hero is just worried about himself or his surroundings at the most, but not the whole country. The hero defies though he does not defy the
power outright. He exists without surrendering. And that is only by saying 'No', by not fighting any longer. But this defiance is not successful all the time. Winning war is no more important.

Like any writer, black humorists too have their forerunners. They copied them but excelled them. "Black humorists owe much to the stand up comedians, than to sit down novelist. They depend upon rapid fire delivery and comic pacing but not on the comprehensive vision or actualized characterization we associate with the novel."31 Neither do they have the problem of existentialist. Amidst the exaggeration and creating things bigger than the life, they have the luxury of legend and the, characters are free from clamping realities. The characters names, identities change very often thus becoming the signs of war with harsh realities. Realities are stretched so far and excess is the essence of black humor; and the balck humorist becomes zany. They generally attacked the easy victims such as mom, flags etc. These twentieth century black
humorists learnt to deal with soul destroying reality: the reality being that the individual lives in concentration camp with constant fear and anxiety and aggression.

Their creative humor decovers the stereotypes and bares the absurdities of relations with invented forms of irony and satire. Their humor shatters the very foundation of western humanism. "The lens of black humor had a habit of stretching the world into grotesque shapes, of letting us in on the absurdity that was always there. No matter, scratch the surface of nearly any writer in the 1960’s and there was sure to be a Black Humorist lurking around the edges some where." 32

Black humor can be traced even in inter-century humor. Bierce, a prose poet looms large in the scene. He incessantly attacked romantic combats. His urge was to express and not to report. He embodied comic fury
which sprang because of the Civil War. He mightily abused warfare. He was disengaged, less compulsive, and he was credulous. He was unfailingly romantic. And all these are inherent qualities of black humorists. Like Bierce they are lyricists prone to dark comedy and the beauty or depravity of what they experience depend on their society. They are able to pick on weaknesses only because of their alternative immense attraction and repulsion.

Joseph Heller, most often, for want of any other fitting term, is labelled a black humorist. Like any great world novelist he transcends this label. Like Mark Twain, he niched his place among novelists of humor, by fusing the tradition with his vision and touch. In his novels Black humor shades into large concerns of an absurd vision and the stakes are raised all round. Heller took this absurdity more seriously like Kesey (One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest). He turned to death instead of easier targets and death in his novels crops up in comic guises. A shocking interplay of
horror and comedy shakes and baffles the readers. His novels are found to be on the verge of existentialism. The repeated turning back to itself sustains comedy. Heller succeeds in making the novel humorous in spite of absurdities.

_Catch-22_ is the best example for this. Yossarian the hero of the novel halts the motion of the novel by all his deliberate interruptions and thus evokes humor. He is an ineffectual angel of humor. He stands as the representative of this unhappy human race, suppressed, victimized and even belittled by the dominating powers in the society. The novel says that the tragedy is in the very fact that the individual does not matter to the tyrannical society. He is left with only one choice— to yield. And the hero yields by fighting a futile fight. He is helpless, he is alone. When he wins he loses too, as his winning is again a choice offered by the higher-ups. Yossarian succeeds in leaving the army, in rejecting to fight, but he goes
out into the civil life only as a supporter of those against whom he fought so far.

Heller's humor is of many devices. Unexpected truth is one among them, parody is another. Authentic original is skillfully violated in parody. Irony is yet another method. Irony, the core of humor is more so used in Jewish humor. Ghetto humor emanates from a bleak future and a gruesome present. Nothing is sure and irony saves the life. Irony is humorous because of the terrifying gap between subject and object.

Heller attacks the society with all its oppressing exploiting institutions such as medicine, law, business, psychiatry, army and any such, which will be cruelly wiping out the very existence of an individual. His novels sum up his perception of reality. Reality makes the apparatus absolutely powerful over the individual who accepts it. Those others who reject it become its prisoners. His heroes struggle for self
preservation against those tyrannical institutions that try to preserve the accepted ideals however meaningless they may be. And this clash is comically exposed. Through his novels he supports the individual unduly subjected by society. But the clash is not that simple. The struggle is for freedom but the very word freedom complicates the issue. One may wonder freedom for what? and at the cost of what? The question rises whether it is worth it in spite of its negation of the society or the country where the hero lives. Another question that looms large is what happens if everybody claims freedom defining it in his own way. In the name of seeking freedom isn’t there the danger of avoiding one’s own responsibility which lubricates the machine of society? Does not it result in chaos? Heller answers these questions and his answering in a way kills the humor. But undoubtedly he is today’s major black humorist.

Ensuing chapters estimate and evaluate these two writers in comparison and in contrast.
NOTES


4. Sanford Pinsker, p.259


6. Peter Stonely, Mark Twain And The Feminine Aesthetic. p.77

8. Ibid


11. *American Humor,* p.15

12. Peter Stonley, *Mark Twain And the Feminine Aesthetic,* p.77

13. Ibid


17. Ibid, p.10


20. Allan Gribben, p.36

21. Edward Wagenknecht, p.4


23. Ibid p.101
24. Walter Blair, "Laughter in Wartime America" from Mark Twain And Huck Finn, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1962), p.120.

25. Ibid p.5.

26. Ibid p.130.

27. Sarah Blacher Cohen, Comic Relief, p.4


29. Bruce J. Friedman, p.11.

30. Ibid, p.10

31. Sanford Pinsker, p.17.

32. Ibid, p.11.