

Vol 4 Issue 11 Dec 2014

ISSN No : 2230-7850

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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Welcome to ISRJ

RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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IRRATIONALITY IN SOMETHING HAPPENED AND CATCH-22

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Abstract:- The present paper throws light on the irrational nature of the modern men. This study is closely related to the politics, economics and social conditions after World War II. For this Joseph Heller uses the unique technique – Black Humor – to express the stark realities of the contemporary society in America.

Keywords: Catch -22, Something Happened, Irrationality, labyrinth imagery.

INTRODUCTION

Conrad Knickerbocker, in the New York Times Books Review of September 27, 1964, noted that the character of American humor had undergone a great change since Second World War. He noticed: Something terrible (to many people) and marvelous (to others) has happened to the national sense of humor since World War II. Not only is more serious American fiction funnier, but our comic writers like medieval magicians, have divided into two camps white and black. (1) The new humor is “bitter, perverse and sadistic”, Knickerbocker explained that it was “black in its pessimism, its refusal of compromise and its mortal sting.”(2) In this connection Ihab Hassan, influential critic of the age, noted that a transformation taking place in American humor. American fiction has moved towards black Humor after World War II. During the 1960s, a large number of writers in America were presenting their vision of life through black humor.

Joseph Heller is one of the black humorist depicting his world view through his writing. His fictional works has an elements of absurdity, immorality, irrationality, anxiety and labyrinth imagery. These elements are the characteristics of black humor.

Irrationality - Irrationalism is a philosophical movement flourished in 19th and early twentieth century. It claimed to enrich the apprehension of human life. Irrationalism is rooted in metaphysics. It emphasised the dimensions of instinct, feeling and will as over and against reason. Before the Nineteenth century, there were many irrationalists including poets, dramatists and philosophers. In Greek culture, Pindar stressed the term in his poetry. Pythagoras and Empedocles discussed the strain of irrationality in their works.

Irrationality as the subject matter in literature. It is an expression of human longing for the irrational. In Romanticism, irrationality was valued over the sterile, calculating and emotionless philosophy brought about by the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. The Dadaist and surrealist also used irrationality as a basis for their art. The Dadaists aimed at demolishing the concept of bourgeois ideology, art, morality rationality and culture. The Black humorist depict the irrationality in their works. Joseph Heller’s work reveals the theme of Irrationality, Immorality and Absurdity.

Catch 22, Prize - winning novel, published in 1961. The publication of this novel saw new vigour in American literature. It is the most important book since World War II written by an American. It is the representative of Black Humor which was a new style of writing at that time. In The New York Times, Heller once said, “ I never thought of Catch -22 as a comic novel but I wanted the reader to be amused, and.... I wanted him to be ashamed that he was amused. My literary bent is more toward the morbid and the tragic. Great carnage is taking place and my idea was to use humor to make ridiculous the things that are irrational and very terrible .(3)

Catch 22 is, of course, Heller’s illustration of the irrational nature of the world. Any attempt to argue logically and reasonably ends in paradox; one reaches that point where thought reaches its confines. It is a story of the young American army pilot Yossarian. It is set in an island near Italy at the end of World War II in 1944. The novel

was first published in 1961. It is a satire against the bureaucratic rules of the army. The army officers want to fly more missions by Yossarian but he was not ready to do it. So he wanted to escape from the situation. He can be declared unfit to fly any more missions by feigning himself as insane. He tries to act insane. Insanity is the another form of Irrationality. According to Friedrich Nietzsche; "The irrationality of a thing is no argument against its existence, rather a condition of it." (4) Catch -22 itself is the symbol of irrationality. Almost all soldiers in the novel respond to this symbol by feigning themselves as insane. By applying this idea they are able to survive and live military life under Catch-22. Catch-22 is used to help the soldier's superiors by using their powers to control others. The war will not be fought if the principles of Catch -22 are not declared. Otherwise the soldiers are aware about their identity and self. They realize that they are fighting a senseless and baseless war where the officers save their life. They are more worried about their own life or careers than fighting the war.

The irrational and the mad logic of the principle of Catch-22 can be seen in the conversation between the protagonist John Yossarian and Doc Daneeka, the flight surgeon. Doc Daneeka explains why he cannot ground Yossarian's tentmate Orr although the rule of Catch-22 allows him to do so :

"Is Orr crazy?"
"He sure is," Doc Daneeka Said.
"Can you ground him?"
"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to.
That's part of the rule"
"Then why doesn't he ask you?"
"Because he's crazy Doc Daneeka said.
"He has to be crazy to keep flying combat mission after all the close calls he's had. Sure I can ground Orr. But First he has to ask me to."
"That's all he has to do to be grounded ?"
"That's all Let him ask me."
"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.
"No. Then I can't ground him."
"You mean there's a catch?"
"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied.
"Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."(5)

The novel concerns many major themes but this is the best example of the explanation of the meaning of Catch-22. Orr can be grounded if he is crazy but he wants to be grounded, he must be sane. The chapter five is more important in the novel which foreshadow a major events in the novel: "Snowden lay dying in back." Heller scornfully forward his approach to "military intelligence". Chief White Halloot is Captain Black's assistant. He could not attend school as a child because his family was constantly on the move. The chief explains that our whole family had a natural affinity for petroleum deposits. So his family wandered everywhere for discovering the oil. There was nowhere place left to flee when the war broke out Then the chief found a place as an assistant intelligence officer in the Army Air forces. Heller satirises the qualities of Army Air force officers.

The theme of individuality is prominent in the novel. The character of Lieutenant Scheisskopf, the training unit commander for Yossarian and Clevinger. He is more interested in his authority than the lives of the soldiers. He has taken the advantage of the war by taking the opportunity to wear an officer's uniform every day. He compels the soldier to participate in military parades even in the heat of the sun, despite the pointlessness of the whole exercise. For him, the war and the military as 'blessing' that give him the chance to control people. The view of Yossarian is opposite to Lieutenant Scheisskopf. Yossarian hates the military parades because they are absurd. It is his opposition to this irrationality. The military parades are not useful for the effort of the war. It is just a form of posturing, a parade of individuals who are considered superiors. The reality of the soldiers are different from the organised manner of military parades. War for soldier is like enemy. War brings out the worst in humanity. When the soldier thinks reasonably then they realised that the war is senseless but the irrational rules and principles of the military institution keep them from getting out of responsibility borne from an irrational cause.

Heller operates his protagonist in diverse worlds. In his first novel Catch-22, the locale is the Mediterranean island of Pianosa. All the characters belong to the 256th squadron of the American Air Force. Every action in the novel spring from their fighting against the Germans. Captain John Yossarian is the protagonist of the novel. Not much is told about his past. He is portrayed in the novel as a leading bombardier. He has been trying to fly the required number of missions in order to be released from the military junta. But the quota of flights is arbitrarily raised by Colonel Cathcart, the commanding officer of the squadron, on grounds that are entirely personal. He wants that his picture must appear in The Saturday Evening Post like that of the "colonel" of an American bomber group in England who was in the habit of conducting a prayer before each mission.

Colonel Cathcart subordinates the interests of other to the satiation of his own egostic dream of becoming a general and of being immortalized by the new media. Catch -22 compared with the "Big Brother's Watch" in George

Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eightyfour*. It is the sinister that determines every official move in the squadron and eliminates all chances of individual freedom. Yossarian confronted with such a situation has only two ways of escape. Either he has to conform to the pattern implied by Catch-22, or he has to register his protest. Yossarian examines his relationship with the 'war' he fights. He questions the motives of his commanding officers when he discovers that his torturers are none other than his fellow Americans. So after undergoing a lot of mental and physical suffering, he finally decides to desert the squadron.

The military officials are able to control the soldiers by imprisoning them in the belief that they should be brave, selfless and patriotic. The officials are achieved power and superiority through irrationality. The downfall of the soldiers in Catch-22 brings about in the hands of the power-hungry and egotistical military officials. The downfall of the soldiers happens in four expected ways - death during combat, death through suicide, sudden disappearances and insanity. These four ways are the channels for them to express their depression and frustration in this situation. Unfortunately, the soldiers live their life according to the rule of Catch-22. They struggle against the situation but in vain. Finally they give way to insanity in reality. Insanity is just the initial course of action. For some, suicide and eventual death follow insanity. Insanity is followed by a sudden disappearance for the other soldiers. In this connection Stephen Rowe's analysis of irrationality and the Catch-22, is relevant. He shows the dominance of the irrational rule causes soldier to succumb to insanity and death:

".....the recoil against the confusion, shallowness, and decadence of the present can take the form of escape into both an idealized sense of the past and some equally idealized vision of the future. Here frustration with Catch-22, becomes so severe that escape is sought not only from the present, but from history altogether....." (6)

Heller, through Catch-22, presents the struggle of the individual to free himself from the tyrannical clutches of the institution, while the institution of military bureaucracy through its irrational administration of justice, economics and with its myopic goals tries to deprive him of his freedom and reduce him to the state of a mere inanimate object. Heller depicts the characters like Colonel Cathcart, Cargill, Scheisskopf, Korn, General Peckem, Captain Black and Milo Minderbinder shows the inhumanity, tyranny and oppression of military bureaucracy. The military bureaucracy exploits war for personal advantages. For Doc Daneeka, the medical officer, war is "God Send" to make money, for Captain Black war helps to give vent to his sadistic impulses, for Colonel Cathcart to make his picture appear in *The Saturday Evening Post*, for Colonel Korn and General Peckem to get ahead, for Scheisskopf to practise his innate parading, for Milo Minderbinder, the mess officer, to become rich. The military bureaucracy concerns itself more with the exploitation of the individual for trivial. The fact that the military institution cares more for reports than for people is shown through his remarks when Yossarian flies twice over a bridge at Ferrara, and destroys it during the second time, but gets Kraft killed in the process. The death of Kraft is not valuable for Colonel. He will explain it in his report.

Heller attacks the absurdities of the military bureaucracy through Scheisskopf's insane obsession with parading, Cargill's ability to make losses in business, Captain Black's Loyalty Oaths. Scheisskopf's love for compulsive parades shows the mad emphasis of the military bureaucracy. Soldiers are taught parading in their basic training in order to help them. It develops a sense of solidarity and group efficiency which they must learn to apply to the real and advanced problems of warfare. But he is fixed in that early stage of military training non-combatant by principle, personality and preference, Scheisskopf is totally divorced from reality. With its standard of bureaucratic efficiency, military bureaucracy makes mediocrity triumph over ability. Colonel Cargill is another object in the hands of military institution uses to oppress the men in the squadron. Heller satirises American business tactics and exposes the absurdity of military logic.

The military bureaucracy gives more importance to records than people. Doc Daneeka registers his name on various flight rosters so that he can collect flight pay, but quite interestingly he stays safely on the ground. Since he is listed as aboard Mc Watt's plane and does not parachute out. Officially he was dead. His protest is of no avail. It is "impossible" logically for him to be alive. His pay stops and death benefits go out to his wife. She ignores her husband's letters explaining everything after Whitcomb's formal letters and several large insurance cheques convince her of the reality of her widowhood. Apart from the satire on the quick adjustment that war-widows can make, the ironic justice administered to the greedy Doc Daneeka. Heller's emphasis on the mechanical nature of the institution of military bureaucracy which proves that records are more real than people. Lieutenant Mudd is killed in the air but since he has not signed before the flight. Officially he did not go aloft and according to official records he is alive and Doc Daneeka is officially dead. Both the persons-Mudd and Doc Daneeka-symbolise the death-in-life and the life-in-death, that the institution of bureaucracy can create. Like Doc Daneeka, Colonel Korn practises a profession strictly for selfish ends and, like Milo Minderbinder and Mrs. Doc Daneeka he knows how to exploit the chaos of war. He is engaged in currency manipulation and black market operations.

The conflict in the novel is between the military bureaucracy's attempt to close all the loopholes of escape, the hero's determination to open them up and the protagonist Yossarian's strong determination not to submit his freedom and himself to the tyranny of military bureaucracy is the driving force in the novel.

Something Happened (1974), Heller's second novel thirteen years after *Catch-22*, published in 1974. The hero of the novel Robert Slocum engaged in a stream of consciousness narrative about his job, his childhood, his family, his sexual adventure and his own psyche. He has not any emotional bond for his family. He remains

dissatisfied and pessimistic about his life despite enjoying its comfort. Bob and Yossarian are similar in many ways, the former is more passive while the latter is active. Bob's passivity helps Heller in the creation of the novel. Through Black Humor, Heller shows how the money-minded American individual succumbs to selfishness and disregards the quality of life in favor of momentary happiness.

Black Humor as a tool in *Something Happened* in order to expose the moral vacuum in the society. Heller employs the technique-Black Humor-to suggest the irrational nature of the society. It reflects the disordered essence of contemporary existence and showing man's illusory view of the world. Heller shows how an irrational institution can disrupt the psychological balance of an individual. The novel also throws light on how the institution can corrupt an individual and make him a puppet in its hand. Heller presents this novel with a pessimistic message and a hero who has an unheroic nature. The institution of corporation creates an irremediable emptiness and confusion in the life of the individual. The individuals fail to understand the process of life as the institution puts an immense stress on it. They take the help of culture, sophistication and false position to hide their inner suffering and fears. The novel is problematic with its extremely limited mode of narration and with the hero's unheroic character and a pessimistic message. It begins in anxiety and ends in despair. The way the combat group is the frame work of the military bureaucracy in *Catch-22*, the corporation is the frame work of the society in which the individual suffers in *Something Happened*. As in *Catch-22*, here also corporation makes people struggle and spend more energy for power and status than for the declared goals of winning the war and serving the customs. They grope for status in the dark labyrinth of a giant corporation. As the institution of military bureaucracy makes the officials engage themselves in power struggles instead of defeating the enemy, the corporation indulges its people in a struggle for a position and makes them jealous of each other. It is this jealousy and pure petty spite that makes Green obstruct Slocum from making his three minute speech at the company convention.

The central principle of the corporation is fear-fear in every aspects of life, in world, at home and out in the town. Fear is seen as the necessary webbing of the corporate orders. Fear becomes so much a part of the day that people are sharply aware of fear as a set condition of every moment, and of human relationships, that when fear is absent they feel threatened and confused. The safety valve is a mockery in corporation as well as in the individuals life. The charts of company organization show not of responsibility but of envy, hope, fear, ambition, frustration, rivalry, hatred and disappointment. The corporation makes the men selfish and force them to compete for position and promotions. They are always suspicious of each other as they consider that one is conspiring against the other.

"I scare Green and Green scares White, and White scares Black and Black scares Brown and Green, and Brown scares me and Green and Andy Kagle, and all of this is absolutely true, because Horace White really is afraid of conversation with Jack, Green, and Johnny Brown, who bulldozes everyone around him with his strong shoulders practical mind, and tough outspoken mouth, is afraid of Lester Black who protects him." (7) A fear of unknown 'Something' close doors lack of self-perception, lack of self-determination, inaction and false values distort Slocum's personality and obstruct him from striving for his freedom. He is afraid of even in his office and out of his office. Though he can never define clearly what that 'something' is he always mourns that 'something' happened to his family to make them so unhappy and he still fears that something might happen to make the situation worse, change his life and topsy turvy his world. The irrationality of the world around him fills him with helplessness and inability.

The corporation flourishes and grows every year but the pressure and the strain it imposes on the people who help it grow, make them either commit suicide or go crazy and nervous breakdown is a common occurrence in the novel. The corporation compels the people to leave their higher ideals and to engage in very trifling things. The corporation makes them how to hate their challenges or responsibilities. The corporation does not need them, but it makes them need it. It is interested in itself only not for the betterment of the people. So the people are its victims. They are suffering from mental disturbances, psychological trauma. The corporation wanted that the people should be always its slaves. It encourages them for growing their sense of failure. The corporation like the military institution in *Catch-22*, which uses one general against the other, in order to achieve its economic success, uses one person against the other and leaves them afraid, suspicious and worried. As the institution uses one individual against the other and makes him alone, the individual fails to understand the alienation and the silence that surrounds him and he fails to have a check on the brutal oppression and work for his freedom. The corporation crushes even the people who have confidence in themselves and faith in their principles and convictions. They become disasters and fall victims to the institutions as they fail to devise hypocritical policies.

Heller's protagonists in his other novels are victimised, exploited and robbed of their freedom by the institutions, rebel against them in order to achieve their freedom. But Bob Slocum, the protagonist of *Something Happened* not only fails to rebel against the institution of corporation in order to achieve his freedom, but on the other hand merges himself with the corporation. He becomes a sadistic figure and creates fear, insecurity and havoc in the lives of the members of his family. Slocum fails to achieve freedom from the institutional tyranny as he lacks potential freedom and misuses his freedom of choice. When he chooses a high position in the corporation and abandons his 'lost boy', he rejects the very life force of the individual-that is freedom. He often compares his present life with his childhood which makes him divided against himself and makes him long for the lost innocence. He was an artless boy whose strength was uncorrupted innocence but now he is a part of the corrupt world. The oppression of

the corporation, fear of death and loneliness depresses him and makes him long for the 'lost boy' in him. Slocum heroically tries to get over the haunting perplexities and anxieties by his intense aspiration for the lost innocence, the recovery of which he hopes will lead him beyond the need of soulless compromise. But the total flatness of living which is symbolic of contemporary American consciousness entraps Slocum as victim of a stale routine. His life is empty and miserable while his boy's life symbolises love, laughter and fun. He has the same instinctual values as his son, but in the process of his growing up he has lost them and he comes to inresit the vices of the society and the corporation he works for. He longs to become free, innocent, generous and loving again by recapturing the lost little boy inside him. Throughout the novel he laments the loss of the 'lovely little me'.

Till the end he oscillates between his lost boy and corporate adult, but in the end he kills his inner self and becomes a perfect representative of the corporation. In the end he tries to gain command in life, he get his daughter a new car, decides to keep Derek, buys a new convertible for his wife and for once he act on his own in his office. He has nothing left in life, neither the honesty, nor the conscience, not even the boy who stands for eternal happiness, though he says the everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command." (8) Slocum remains a victim and agent of the institution as he fails to distangle himself from its tyranny and corruption to attain his individual freedom.

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