

Black Humour Movie (Peepli Live - 2010): A Resilient Satire on Indian Media and Politics

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Abstract

This paper emphasises on a famous black humour movie Peepli Live. It is a satire on farmers' suicides and the country's subsequent media and political response. Movies are a powerful medium of expression that conveys useful information on history, civilization, philosophy, politics, education and religion (Nayak, 2015). The film Peepli Live employs black humour to expose several ambiguities related to India's sociological, psychological, political, and economic contexts. The design intensifies as the story unfolds, with each of the sub-plots interacting increasingly with each other. The main character Natha is a poor villager portrayed as a helpless person in very tragic circumstances and is presented in a comic light throughout the film. The film begins with Natha and his brother worrying about their financial condition and their futile attempts to find a solution for it. It all starts as the two brother's approach a heartless and corrupt politician who sarcastically suggests that committing suicide could help solve their financial woes since the government was offering monetary compensation to the families of farmers who commit suicide. The helplessness in the situation was caused by many factors, including poverty and made worse by societal and governmental systems. However, the situation's absurdity and poignancy are powerfully captured with the help of dark humour since an issue as grave as suicide may perhaps be addressed successfully only through this device. As the story unfolds, new situations arise, which add further chaos to their already chaotic world. The story finally ends with Natha having avoided the imminent threat of forced suicide unexpectedly. The main objective of this paper is to examine the satire the current system of local and national politics, and the media in India.

I Introduction:

Peepli Live may be described as a highly experimental film, produced when the Indian film industry experimented with compelling and socially relevant scripts. The story emerges from

a complex background and has a strong local and national relevance. The film describes several critical issues farmers face, the current system of local and national politics, and the media in India.

Peepli Live uses black humour to introduce these issues and leaves the audience with pertinent questions about the current system and the uncertainties about the future. While the film is essentially the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government, it also highlights other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the media's insensitivity towards impoverished farmers. *Peepli Live* was released when the issue of farmer suicides was a burning topic of discussion in the political, media and academic circles. While the film is essentially the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government, it also raises other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the insensitivity of a section of the media towards the impoverished condition of farmers. The film begins with Natha and his brother worrying about their financial condition and their futile attempts to find a solution for it. It all begins as the two brother's approach a heartless and corrupt politician who sarcastically suggests that committing suicide could help solve their financial woes since the government was offering monetary compensation to the families of farmers who commit suicide. The helplessness in the situation was caused by many factors, including poverty and made worse by societal and governmental systems. However, the situation's absurdity and poignancy are powerfully captured with the help of dark humour since an issue as grave as suicide may perhaps be addressed successfully only through this device.

II The Significance of Black Humour in *Peepli Live*

The use of black humour in *Peepli Live* may be considered as a refreshing approach to depict the bleak issues presented in the film. In the past, numerous films have been made on themes that make up the story of *Peepli Live* rural poverty, family dynamics, socio-political apathy and the plight of farmers. However, most filmmakers have seriously dealt with these issues, mostly avoiding humour.

Defiantly, *Peepli Live* presents facts realistically but simultaneously employs dark comedy to treat issues common in earlier films on similar topics. *Peepli Live* incorporates black

humour through its characters, settings, music and dialogues. The film employs tragicomedy for its affinity with dark humour to reflect both tragedy and comedy while retaining a certain gravity of diction. This film can, therefore, be considered as a tragicomedy for the message it conveys.

In depicting the main protagonist's family, the filmmaker uses humour to show how Natha, despite being the major breadwinner in his family, is completely voiceless and is disregarded by one and all. His wife Dhaniya asks him to leave the house during an argument, his brother manipulates him into thinking that his death will be beneficial for the family, and his children unaware of the gravity of the situation innocently ask when he will die. Even his bed-ridden mother is abusive every time she addresses him. The use of black humour to depict the family situation brings about a fresh perspective wherein the film does not turn out to be a sentimental drama that arouses pity but can convey factual evidences in an effective manner and without exaggeration.

The reaction of the politicians in the village is also presented through humour. It begins when the politicians make a mockery of Natha and Budhia's plight and suggest that they commit suicide to help their families out of the situation. Later, the powerful policymakers send a television set and a "Lal Bahadur" (hand pump) hoping to make amends for their earlier reactions. Both gifts are probably never used because electricity and water are scarce or missing from most Indian villages. Another important area of focus in the film is the media's role in the situation. The hysteria with which the media reacts when they discover the story is presented as a powerful satire. This enables the film to criticize the political scenario in India at local and national levels and the current status of media's role in society. It indirectly criticizes these systems by focusing on how the powerful strata of society exploit their less powerful counterparts with little or no regard for ethical and moral values. The use of black humour in *Peepili Live* invokes an extensive array of emotions, and the audience often experiences humour and grief in the same scenes. The plot of *Peepili [Live]*, especially the part in which suicide is considered as a solution for Natha's miseries, borders on the absurd. However, the real life circumstances on which this film is based makes the story believable. The use of black humour in portraying extremely serious issues in media and politics in India has contributed effectively towards generating a sense of consciousness among viewers. The viewers are conveyed important messages about civic roles and what circumstances may be created if power continues to be

misused rampantly. This cautionary tale is not a typical traditional narrative with a moral message yet manages to reach the audience effectively. The tone of black comedy may have been responsible for its critical and commercial success worldwide.

III Significant Instances of Black Humour in Peepli Live

The main characteristics explored in the film *Peepli Live* include chaos, anarchy, and deception. Despite the subject matter being unpleasant, painful, serious and at times shocking, these disturbing elements have managed to attract the audience's attention due to the element of humour being included in them.

Natha comes across as a confused and helpless farmer with no control over his decisions and most importantly, his life. His cunning brother skilfully manipulates him to the extent that he agrees to die so that his family may live. The two brothers arrive at this unusual arrangement due to a suggestion made in prank by the village politicians. Bhai Thakur, Gudda and some other local politicians make fun of their plight when the two brothers approach them to discuss their problem. Thakur tells Budhia and Natha that "the government too likes a fair give and take, there's at least one thing you can give to the government, that is, your life so that the government will pay you back." Instead of providing monetary support to Natha's family, the politicians inadvertently suggest that they should commit suicide so that the family will be provided the government's compensatory aid given to the family of suicide victims.

The characterization of Budhia and Natha in *Peepli Live* closely relates with Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, who exist in a similar dreamlike vacuum and attempt to communicate nothing. Natha and Budhia's relationship seems co-dependent initially; however Budhia is cleverer of the two and influences his brother's decision regarding suicide. Budhia says to Natha that "it takes only two minutes, since you won't let me die, you do it; it is the same thing." Despite being in a very grave situation, Natha's sadness does not last long. In the film's beginning, he is shown singing a love song, perhaps inappropriate under the given circumstances. Such behavior may be considered abnormal and foolish and provides some insight into his personality early in the film. In a particular scene while the two brothers are discussing their plight with the

politicians, Natha's attention is not entirely focused on the conversation. Natha participates little in the conversation and instead stares attentively at the food being served to the politicians. This scene is presented in a light hearted manner made especially funny by Natha's candid expressions and his hungry eyes glued to the rich food placed before the ministers. Still, it conveys the stark reality that many families in similar circumstances in India cannot afford enough food. For Natha's family of six living in poverty, a proper meal is perhaps a luxury, which explains why his gaze is fixed on the food.

At home too, Natha is continually beaten around by one and all. His wife is not the typical docile and domesticated woman depicted in most films based in rural India. Her manner of expressing anger towards her husband, brother-in-law, mother-in-law and children is completely unrestrained. Natha endures the verbal abuse silently; never displaying signs of anger in his behavior towards Dhaniya. Stricken by poverty the entire family appears cranky and agitated and Natha often become the target of their anger and frustrations. Budhia replies Amma and says "don't get worked up, you'll have a fit." Amma gets angry and shouts at Budhia: "curse your tongue. You want to kill me? Why don't you get a fit?" Just after that when Budhia hurts her, she curses Dhaniya and kicks Natha violently telling him: "why are you sitting like a zombie?" The whole scene reflects Amma's dominating, sarcastic and dark personality. Dhaniya's character is depicted as a fearless woman who does not hesitate to abuse anyone. This is her way of releasing her anger and frustration. She is headstrong, violent and screams at Amma, Natha, Budhia and her children. In the film, Natha's mother, Amma, is an old and ailing woman.

However, despite her physical weakness, she is very vocal in expression. She cannot move by herself and is confined to her bed throughout the movie. Occasionally Amma wishes to spend some time in the pleasant winter sun and calls out to her sons who transport her along with the bed to the courtyard. When Budhia and Natha return home after meeting the politician with no solution for their problem, Amma wants them to place her bed in the courtyard. She shouts at Budhia, "Aren't you listening? Put my bed under the sun. Budhia shouts back at his Amma, saying "I have spent half my life dragging you in and out of the sun, we are losing our own land and all you care for is sunshine." Amma impatiently screams at Budhia saying "and smoking pot all day is sure to save the land, right? You said you had no money!" Thus, scene after scene the madness and pathos in the lives of the villagers of Peepli is depicted powerfully but with an undercurrent of biting humour.

In another scene, she hits Natha on his back while lying helplessly on a bed unable to move her body. The scene is made hilarious by an element of surprise in the situation. Despite being physically dependent on others, the old and seemingly helpless woman surprises Natha and the audience. Natha appears stunned but remains unresponsive, otherwise. Similarly, in another scene, Natha's son, like many others around him is waiting for the live suicide to take place, asks Natha when he will die. A child's question may be considered innocent under most circumstances, however this query is tragic as it represents the general mood of the village. Scenes such as these that depict the mistreatment Natha is subjected to, may have humoured the audience but simultaneously created sympathy for Natha. The use of black humour draws the audience's attention to the situation in a non-serious yet impactful way. Natha's physicality, style of expression, mannerisms and tone again recall Samuel Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's idea of the 'suffering of being' is viewed as fundamentally existentialist in 20th century world phenomena and likewise in *Peepli [Live]*, everybody seems to be suffering endlessly.

The film also focuses on the upper class, including the administrators and media personnel who are not struggling like the poor villagers, but are suffering nonetheless. They are a part of a vicious cycle that refuses to end. The portrayal of dishonest politicians whose objective is to gain power and not serve the country is effectively demonstrated when they make fun of the villagers' plight instead of helping them. At the end of the movie, there is a discussion on the launch of a new program 'Natha Card' to help farmers. This is yet another attempt by the powerful individuals in authority to compensate for the responsibilities that they did not fulfil. The people of *Peepli* are perhaps no longer hopeful about any transformation for the better. Past experiences have resulted in this kind of cynicism. When Rakesh is summoned by his boss to visit Tyagi ji in *Peepli*, he claims that "nothing is changed in *Peepli* over sixty years" and Rakesh is so sure when he states that "no change will happen in *Peepli* after visiting Tyagi or after election."

The media also participate in a similar system run by powerful people. In Nandita's conversation with her boss who insists that she finds a story that can increase the TRP's significantly, no matter what it takes. Nandita sarcastically comments that perhaps she should kill someone then to get such a story. Her tone here indicates Nandita's vulnerability and explains why she pursues Natha's story the way she does. The

immense power that the media possesses can influence people in a very positive way; however that does not happen and the media turns a live suicide into a spectacle. Nandita and Deepak represent many young and well qualified professionals today who ignore their conscience when faced with tempting choices. This, they probably believe is the easier to move ahead in their career. Quick success reinforces their behavior and the cycle of dishonesty continues. Similarly, other instances are presented through humour in order to expose the shallowness of other individuals who are a part of this system including Kidwai, Ram Yadav, Bhai Thakur and Pappu Lal, all struggling for position and power. This situation may be understood in reference to Max F. Schulz's Black Humour Fiction of the Sixties which in turn refers to Barth, Vonnegut, Bruce J. Friedman, Leonard Cohen, Thomas Berger and Robert Coover as they identify a "disintegrating world, unredeemed by a coherent order and consequently able to sustain only discontinuous states of being, in short an absurd universe"

Two of the most significant tragedies in Peepli Live are the deaths of Hori Mahato, a helpless, poverty-stricken farmer who digs a plot of land every day and sells the soil obtained from it; and that of Rakesh, the local reporter who dies an unfortunate death while pursuing Natha's case. A considerable part of the film revolves around the possible suicide of Natha. On his visit to Peepli to gather information, Rakesh finds Hori Mahato digging a plot of land. He asks Mahato the direction towards Peepli but does not receive any reply. Mahato seems completely absorbed in his work. Rakesh shouts at him, calling him "deaf" and comments that he must be looking for gold. Later, Rakesh learns of the suffering Hori Mahato endures daily to obtain a handful of rice. According to Rakesh, Mahato's death is not accidental but a final destiny.

Rakesh, the Jan Morcha reporter is first seen sitting with his colleagues at the local newspaper office near Peepli. He seems honest with his work and is extremely fascinated by the English speaking and charismatic ITVN reporter, Nandita. His style of presenting his comments on the current situation is humorous. Reciting in English, he says to his friends: "Cloth is aplenty, but the shirt is tight, clouds are aplenty, but such little rain, drought. Cars are aplenty, but barely enough oil. Try driving! That's why on Iraq bombs were dropped!" He fails to convince Nandita that Hori Mahato's death is also important and the media must draw attention to such cases.

Rakesh follows Natha's case honestly and for a while it seems that he could be the hero who will turn things around. However, he dies accidentally when he follows Natha's captors to the warehouse which later catches fire. Rakesh's remains are charred beyond recognition and everyone concludes that it is the body of Natha. The audience, however, knows that this is actually Rakesh when the camera focuses on the wrist of the skeletal remains as it is being carried out of the warehouse. On the wrist is a bracelet of a blue coloured stone, a replica of the bracelet worn by the famous hero Salman Khan who probably was Rakesh's idol. Black humour in this scene is used to mark the fall of the aspiring hero, Rakesh.

Peepli Live presents a powerful satire on contemporary India and this concept is perhaps powerfully summed up in the song: 'Des mera rang rasiya babu' which roughly translates to: 'A river of colours paints this land, with a trick in the colourant at every bend, a mystery in every speck and bubble, shallow to look at, but deep within, India, you see, is a clever mix. The lyrics of this song refer to the different colours and hues that make up India. These differences are evident in Indian festivals, cultures, people, politics, and religion. The song describes the hardships and uncertainties people face; adding that people are large hearted but have no means to help others. This song of despair and helplessness highlights the many possibilities and the lack of enterprise to achieve them.

The surprise at the end of Peepli Live is probably the film's high point. When the warehouse where Natha is held captive catches fire, Rakesh's charred remains are mistakenly assumed to be Natha's. In this confusion, Natha manages to escape. The last scene reveals that Natha is working as a laborer at a construction site in the city. He seems to have accidentally found a way out of his troubles and has more control over his life circumstances than he earlier had. The fate of Natha's family, however, remains unchanged since his accidental death does not fetch the compensation his family had expected. The poor in India, represented by Natha's family, are therefore shown to be an unfortunate lot surrounded by struggles and misery.

IV Conclusion

The filmmaker employs black humour to tell the story of a village, particularly a family facing straitened circumstances. Many dark themes related to death and disintegration have been highlighted non-seriously by incorporating humour. Films have

shaped Indian society in myriad ways and thus have become a significant part of India's cultural transformation. The film *Peepli Live* is based on the issue of farmer suicides and narrates the story of Natha who is encouraged to die so that his family can benefit from the government's compensation money provided to the family of suicide victims. The events that follow in the village such as the governmental apathy, the media's insensitivity and the disorder in Natha's family are illustrated in a very engaging fashion. The surprise at the end of *Peepli Live* is probably the film's high point. When the warehouse where Natha is held captive catches fire, Rakesh's charred remains are mistakenly assumed to be Natha's. In this confusion, Natha manages to escape. The last scene reveals that Natha is working as a laborer at a construction site in the city. He seems to have accidentally found a way out of his troubles and has more control over his life circumstances than he earlier had. However, the fate of Natha's family remains unchanged since his accidental death does not fetch the compensation his family had expected. The poor in India, represented by Natha's family, are therefore shown to be a hapless lot surrounded by struggles and misery. Several aspects that make up the Indian media such as sensational and biased reporting and selective reporting are discussed in this thesis. The instances depicted in *Peepli Live* may be considered just as a representative sample of the Indian media. While this film focuses mostly on the media's lack of social and moral responsibility, it may be important to mention that the media in India has often been associated with behaviour that has resulted in positive outcomes. The outcome is funny, yet the film deeply impacts the audience, resulting in considerable commercial and critical success. Black humour makes it possible to question many societal situations and structures without creating much controversy. The film *Peepli Live* was focus on sexuality, socialization, and liberation. The male and female characters in this film behave in non-traditional ways and some finally find alternative solutions in the process of being liberated. The radical behaviours of male and female characters in *Peepli Live* have been satirically presented to communicate these new possibilities to the audience. The rural women appear independent, liberated, and decisive and find their solutions while their male counterparts are confused, isolated, powerless and indecisive. One of the most important aspects of the film *Peepli Live* is the new style of depiction of gender roles. The characters have been designed purposefully to be able to display the deviations in societal roles according to changing times. However, this does not result in trivializing issues and

instead it highlights how serious issues have not been dealt with seriousness so far. Thus Peepli Live may be regarded as a radical film of national significance with several important social messages. Using satire, it reveals ambiguities in the social and political spheres and raises serious questions of immense relevance for contemporary India.

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