

## Legacies of Humour and Saner Insanities *-A Critical Analysis of the Creative World of PG Wodehouse*

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**KEY TERMS:** Received Standard Colonial India Indian English writings Indian reality Comic Romances  
Dionysian abandon dialogic comic narratives

**ABSTRACT:** This paper makes a study of the legacy of comedy which PG Wodehouse inherited and ingenious ways in which he has transformed the classical and contemporary veins of humour to a narrative strain that is often irreverent and bordering onto territories of fantasy. The causes of such wayward unpredictability and eerie spaces which Wodehouse ushers into his narratorial enterprise are distantly alluded to a distraught childhood and coerced graduation into adulthood for which he had never been emotionally and spiritually evolved. The apparent dichotomies between being and becoming often pushed into weary unconscious to the borders of silent and unstated insanities, socially aloof and distanced. The stereo-cast, typeset and often cliched shadowy selves of characters who populate his fictional canvas could often be tracing their ancestry this chaotic uncertainties of self that loomed large in the unconscious self of the author. However this ultimately led some of the most power literary creations that demarcates uncertain imaginings of the human consciousness. This paper is an enquiry into that theme.

The vivacity and dynamism that informs the detailing of the Indian life invariably casts its spell on writers of Indian origin for whom this sensitivity often appears like a birthright. They relish and replenish it with a characteristic elan of homecoming, discovering in it flavours that are nostalgic and primordial morphing into hilarious resurgence of the intense chaos that determine the Indian spacial identities from its temples to market places, academies of sanitised disciplines to the irreverence of avant-garde darings of artistic enterprises. The general absence of these unwieldiness in the Westernised consciousness serves as compelling factor for many of its enterprising adventurist writers to indulge in the transformative rumination on the Indian reality, which may become a doomed affair for the uninitiated ones to grab the forever elusive Indian factor. Yet the ingenious one may attain a remarkable transition there, resurrecting an Indian ethos to be appropriated by the Western sensibilities. The spaces of Indian sensibility refurbished by PG Wodehouse charters out such an engaging discourse. The racy detours of Indian English writings with its enlivening idiosyncrasies seems to derived its legacies from the writings of Wodehouse to some extent. The severe formalities with grammar in the Indian version of English which lies at the core of the vivid and racy idiom in un-English contexts becomes an object of many of the idiosyncratic imitative obsessions to be parodied and satirised too frequently. Despite the fact of its existence in India for more than a century, it never acquired its dialectical character and power due to the lack any defining attributes. Even as the popularity of American English with its own Hollywood and affable fiction was nearly overshadowing the rigidities of King's English, the faithful Indians never had been willing to desert the supposed glories of the language of their colonial masters, still continuing to worship sacred charms of Received Standard, with its supposed notions of elitism.

Many of the characters of Rudyard Kipling like Hurree Babu are cunning contrivances calculated to make a severe assault on the educated Indian's incurable obsessions with twilight charms of fading facades of Oxford English. His characters act as spoil sports to many of the self proclaimed virtues of aspiring English educated Indians. The typecast syntactic patterns that nearly becomes the register of his utterances take their ignominious lineage from the jargonist English textbooks he might have learnt at the school rather than the lively dynamism that underlies the language of the routine patterns of life in the street and home. In his insistent compulsion to demarcate his identity, he stretches this idiosyncratic language to its absurdist banal limits, ultimately letting himself to be derided for the human mockery he has been reduced to. His self defeatist strategies carefully drawn out with the language becomes the incidental cause for the demise of both. George Orwell often feared the banal impact the language of Wodehouse would push his readers to, who could often be remaining ignorant of the power of the sardonic understatements those sentences were capable of. Validating this apprehension of Orwell, many an educated Indian elite often fell into the trap of counting Wodehouse as a preeminent satirist from the Upper classes English and European sensibility. Incidentally Wodehouse never revealed any genuine awareness of the epochal political transformations that were beginning to unfurl in the world around him. Satire acquires its edges when it draws its sustainable power from the vicissitudes of the political turmoils that

underline the contemporary history, but satire as deemed by Wodehouse acquires a kind of frigid morbidity as it dissociates itself from and excludes all pretensions to a genuine political awareness. It is luxuriously begins to indulge in a mindless creed of unabashed and near irresponsible indulgence characteristic of the Upper class European mindset. Drawing its ultimate power of assault, Wodehouse's satire seems to be immersed in the sheer audacity and abundance of metaphor and simile. Writes Hensher, "...one of the greats, the insistent trivia of his concerns should not detract from the untiring mastery of his style, the extravagance of his English." Hitchens suspects that the enormity of praise and adoration that is often lavished on Wodehouse serves as a malefic deterrent to understand the genuine spiritedness of the writer and offer him his due historical placing which is the dire requirement of academic judgement. There has to be concerted as well as irreverent treatment of the comic genius of the writer along the lines of the comic traditions in literature.

As happens in the case of every writer, Wodehouse seems to have relied on his personal experience during the inaugural moments of his entrepreneurship in writing. The insistent realism that seems to characterise his school stories are having an enticing sustainability even today as they penetrate into the self-effacing character of the writer. When many of his generation found impact of schooling as a calculated self-destructive space, Wodehouse seems to have near obsession with vagaries of this childhood experience as capable of offering creative fulfilment. His initiation into adulthood literally trailed through the ecclesiastically conditioned childhood morality with its insane imposition of emotional repression and sanitised etiquette. One of the illustrative instances in the writings of Wodehouse are those sporting events which is equidistantly poised between the game of rules and rules of the game, the drab dialectics between the radical rioters and morose orthodoxy. Herein seems to emerge strategical approach of Wodehouse, the reticent resilience of the writer watching dispassionately the evolving dialogical patterns which seems to ferret out the startling psychological realism, to be vehemently denounced by the man who authored it.

Orwell identified the American period of Wodehouse as coinciding with the creation of comic romances. Orwell goes onto warn Wodehouse readers against the possible traps the coinage 'comic romances' are holding forth, because ultimately, these writing seems to suggest much more, nearly laying foundations for the most of the ingenuity for which Wodehouse became known in the later ages. Wodehouse unpretentiously sticks onto the traditional formulaic patterns of accidental encounters leading onto marriages and so on, even as the real thrust on the story seems to be subliminally shifting onto another level wherein the vibrant theme of the comic minimalism, leading onto the assertion of Wodehouse's ingenuity as the master of the understatement and a great comic spirit seems to survive the pages of the narrative. A near Dionysian abandon and hilarity seems to be effervescent flavour of Wodehouse of these times. The dialogues instead of serving as stagnant communicative patterns, serve as the tacit transit routes of an ideal the satirist seems to have believed in. A brilliant balancing act is attained between romance, comedy and realism. One classic instance of this attainment in *The Little Nugger* (1913) which could be seen as a brilliant parody of an act of kidnapping, a story to be endlessly appropriated by the tinsel world of Hollywood in the later years. Wodehouse's transition to the social themes is suggested by works like *Psmith, Journalist* (1915) and after a time he seems to be reviving his interest in the workings of the human psyche with *Jill the Reckless* (1920). The quasi cult like status which the hero of Psmith novels began to acquire has been indicative of the changing perceptions of the comic ideal which Wodehouse had succeeded in bringing about.

Wodehouse nearly pioneered the concept of creating a cycle of books with characters reinventing themselves, thereby consecrating comedy into academic spaces to be revisited by comedies. The gradual transition of Psmith, Journalist (1915) from romance to social concerns like life in the slums, seems to be ideal meeting ground of the classical humour of Aristophanes to existential Albert Camus. Comedy seems to have the full circle with Psmith stories, as they begin regale themes with their signature emphasis on the human situation and the sentient compassion that begins to flow from there. In the later stories of the series, love and romance is gradually relegated to the background, even as more serious themes which comedy is capable of regurgitating seems to be emerging as the inevitable aftermath. Wodehouse consistent refusals to engage with the world of realities might be having their roots its alienated schooling experiences and failures in love affairs. The family could not salvage him from the psychological tremors of maturing into adulthood. Unlike the Wordsworthian initiations meditative solitude and tranquility, Wodehouse was compelled to seek it out for himself out of spiritual and social depravities to which he was subjected through the unselfconscious interventions of a number of factors. Too often he had to push himself into an acting-in process, he acted out friendships, relationships and social camaraderies, fully conscious of their lack of conviction and nor wanting any. But unlike Kipling and many other boys of his generation, Wodehouse never regretted or rebelled against the nightmares of alienation his life was subjected to.

In his entire career as writer, Wodehouse could never understand the continuous intrusions the literary critics were making into his life, and suspected their perpetual presence “as a form of patronage.” The calculated restraint which Orwell and Evelyn Waugh exerted in their cautious approach to Wodehouse could be due to this in all probability. In his immensely productive life, Wodehouse authored nearly ninety books mostly careening to the traditional framework of the narrative geometry, sometimes the stock effects and stereotypical encounters reaching the point of no return with their jarring monosyllabic patterns reaching the highest decibels- children acquiring adult dispositions, morbid imperturbable butler, insensate aunt, impotent husbands, American millionaires flashing off their latest acquisitions- the list becomes too petulant and predictable.

The comic genius of Wodehouse seems to be attaining the totality of expression towards the latter half of 1920's. The scenes that are intimately linked to each other permitting a near natural evolution into the climaxing scenario, the onrush of the scenes carrying the urbanity of wit, sarcasm and repartee, reaching the consummate moments with perfect flourish. The sustainable rhythmic patterns of prose reaching the natural crescendo. The near visual impact of the narrative begins to carry its irresistible appeal. Towards the end of his career, Wodehouse's once vibrant prose seems to reveal definitive signs of a decline. The plot construction begins to reveal signs of definitive missing points and a structure that begins to give way. The fine balance between plot development and dialogues go amiss never to be retrieved again. The minor characters fades into near irrelevance having nothing much to contribute to the evolution of the plot.

The near irrational hatred of Wodehouse to some of the illustrious authors and their acclaimed narrative patterns may serve as serious pointers to his own serious failings towards the end of career in maintaining the sustainability of narrative appeal, these writers included names like Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Balzac and even Dickens. The intemperance of Wodehouse towards these greats of the narrative art are indicative of the uncertainties which he had begun to experience, which might have seriously undermined his faith in the art he had pursued with a feeling whose exact roots may be lying covered somewhere in his vanquished childhood experiences like the befuddling metaphor of 'Rose Bud' in *Citizen Kane*.

The compulsive reality of comedy as presenting an alternate idea of life which otherwise is deemed in terms of the self-assumed sublimity of a perennial tragic experience, has been as old of the beginnings of literary expression, but whose real impact has to be philosophically reinstated in the later civilisation. Even then comedy was often seen as the potent suspect capable of dragging the facades of tragic eternity in the dust, so there had been studied alienation of semitic religions and certain orthodoxy amongst the academic universe to dissociate themselves from the possible ravages, comedy was capable of. In the narrative art, it was Lawrence Sterne, the unyielding maverick who brought about the ultimate transformation in the prevalent resistance to tragedy with his audacious *Life and Times of Tristram Shandy*, with its irreverent bawdy jokes, arcane learning, never ending digressions and a narrative style that was unheard of. In the world that was turned topsy-turvy, another Don Quixote was riding his horse to the closely guarded territories of pretensions and boasting of greatness.

Nineteenth century continued this tirade against the claims of profundity and illusions of greatness, especially in the dialogic comic narratives of Thomas Love Peacock, and controversial writings of utilitarian philosophers like James Mill and John Stuart Mill. The next logical stage in the evolution of huge compendium of comic genius has been its gaining currency in the world of ideas and literary fashions. Peacock was literary sitting on the heap of wreckages of glory he had caused, taking care not to spare even names such as Shelley, Coleridge, Byron and Jeremy Bentham, cunning altering and parodying images, themes and characters they had created with so much precision and care.

It was inevitable that writers even in distant lands such as Mark Twain enthusiastically began to explore the nuances of the reinvented power of comedy. The mutated version of comic spirit in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, speak of the changing mores of the comic ideal. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* reveals the ultimate evolutionary detailing of the genre. The trend setting themes of dream-logic.

Wodehouse builds his irreverent world by deriding and abjuring all ideas that had helped world to derive a sense of being and belonging. His humour may not be having many parallels, though it is not difficult to see Edwardian motifs and narrative structures reside at its core. But here all analogies, histories and contracts take their retreat as Wodehouse begins to waver unsteadily into the world of sheer fantasies where mostly the characters may not be bearing much relations with life. In near choreographed and imaginatively contrive world, they begin to speak a language that strangely enough begins to look like human, the voice of new humanity through an act of reinventing the ancient strains of the comic spirit.

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