Published by
Pencraft International
B-1/41 Ashok Vihar II, Delhi-110052
ISSN 2395-1206

THE IACLALS JOURNAL

Volume 10, 2024

THE IACLALS JOURNAL

Volume 10, 2024

Wit, Humour and the Carnivalesque in Literature and Performance

Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in India

Iaclals

The IACLALS Journal
Volume 10 2024

Wit, Humour and the Carnivalesque in Literature and Performance

Editor
Amitendu Bhattacharya

ISSN: 2395-1206

Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in India

The IACLALS Journal

(Blind Peer Reviewed)

Publisher
Pencraft International
B-1/41, Ashok Vihar II
Delhi-110052
*Phones:*9810453841, 9910664817
E-mail: pencraftjain@gmail.com

Printed at
Sagar Color Scan
4, Ansari Road
Darya Ganj
New Delhi-110002

For Advertisements
Please contact the publisher
Pencraft International,
B-1/41, Ashok Vihar II
Delhi-110052

Subscriptions

One Year:
Institution Rs.500/-; US$25; UK 16 Pounds
Individual Rs.400/-; US$20; UK 13 Pounds
Iaclals Members Rs. 150/-

Two Years:
Institution Rs.700/-; US$40; UK 25 Pounds
Individual Rs.600/-; US$30; UK 19 Pounds
Iaclals Members Rs. 250/-

Three Years:
Institution Rs.900/-; US$55; UK 35 Pounds
Individual Rs.750/-; US$40; UK 25 Pounds
Iaclals Members Rs. 350/-

Please mail subscriptions to the Treasurer, ***IACLALS***

Contents
Volume 10 2024

EDITORIAL

This issue of *The IACLALS Journal* (Volume 10, Issue 2024) features a selection of research papers presented at the IACLALS Annual Conference hosted by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani – K K Birla Goa Campus from 15 to 17 February 2024 on the theme of "Wit, Humour and the Carnivalesque in Literature and Performance." This was the first in-person conference after three online conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic—and Goa was the perfect setting.

Wit, humour, and the carnivalesque are foundational to world literature and performance since they function as instruments of both entertainment and social critique. These modes have consistently empowered marginalized voices by destabilizing entrenched hierarchies. Across historical and cultural contexts, from classical comedy and modern satire to political caricature and Indian folk traditions, comic expression demonstrates a transformative, subversive, and rhetorical potency. The Annual Conference sought to examine the continuities and ruptures of these forms in local and global traditions as well as to interrogate the therapeutic and societal significance of the carnivalesque.

Over three days, more than a hundred presentations explored wit, humour, and the carnivalesque across folk traditions, literature, visual arts, cinema, and social and political realities. The papers collected here reflect this diversity and present critical insights from scholars at all career stages. I, and the members of the journal's editorial team, are grateful to all participants and contributors for making this conference successful and facilitating this publication. We are confident that this journal issue will rekindle intellectual interest in and discussion on the complex entanglement of humour and critique in human society and its cultural productions.

And lastly, like some previous issues, this one too could not be produced expeditiously because of various logistical impediments, and we sincerely apologize for the delay and promise to do better in the future. I may here mention that the eagerness and commitment of the IACLALS office-bearers towards smoothly running the journal ensured that this issue saw the light of day.

Amitendu Bhattacharya

..

Rabelaisian Renaissance: Dissecting Gender Dynamics within the Carnivalesque Landscape of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

Kalplata

Abstract

In Renaissance literature, François Rabelais stands out with his remarkable work *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. This narrative, emerging from a rapidly changing European society, seamlessly blends Rabelais's satirical genius with a profound exploration of societal intricacies. The 'carnivalesque', a term deepened by Mikhail Bakhtin, envisions an arena where conventional norms dissolve, creating space for uninhibited expression, critique and transformation. Through vivid depictions of celebrations, sharp-witted dialogues and bold characters, Rabelais employs the carnivalesque to mirror and interrogate established norms, particularly focusing on the fluidity and dynamism of gender roles. The narrative's depiction of places, such as the forward-thinking Abbey of Thélème, exemplifies imagined realms where traditional gender identities are freed from societal constraints, encouraging re-evaluation and reinterpretation. Such narrative choices pave the way for an enlightening journey into the mutable and multifaceted nature of gender perceptions during the Renaissance. Furthermore, Rabelais's narrative strategy and thematic focus prompt academic discussions around the nature, expression and implications of gender roles within a society in flux. This paper delves into the labyrinth of Rabelais's intricate portrayal of gender interplay set against the vibrant backdrop of the carnivalesque. Considering recent research, this exploration not only aims to unearth and understand its nuances and subtleties but also contextualises these findings within modern scholarly dialogues on gender dynamics. By journeying through this rich narrative landscape, the paper seeks to offer a comprehensive perspective on the evolution and dynamism of gender constructs during the Renaissance era and their reverberations in contemporary academia.

Keywords: Renaissance, Carnivalesque, Gender Dynamics, Rabelais.

François Rabelais, who was born in the French city of Chinon in 1494 and died in 1553, emerged as a prominent literary figure in the Renaissance. His career evolved from monastic life to medicine, but it is his literary legacy that endures. His series *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is a satirical narrative that follows the adventures of a giant father, Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. Written in the contemporary French of the time, this work remains a testament to his skill in weaving complex narratives and his sophisticated use of language. The language itself, while reflective of the era's linguistic norms, is dense with layered meanings and rich with allusions. This period was one of significant transition, characterised by intense religious reformations, scientific explorations and the early stirrings of modern thought. In such transformative times, Rabelais's works navigate through humour and depth, employing a festive lens to critique and reshape societal norms, with an acute focus on the gender constructs of his day.

The narrative of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* captivates with its dynamic language, grounded humour and forthright portrayal of the human form and its workings. Rabelais's writing is bursting with vitality and creative flair, presenting a rich linguistic banquet that melds sharp satire, humorous imitation and profound contemplation. The book's structure unfolds through a series of episodes, resembling the eclectic and vibrant feel of a carnival rather than a single, orderly path. This method of storytelling speaks to a liberty of structure and substance, something that Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic from the 20th century, later defined as 'carnivalesque'. It is a space where the usual social order is turned on its head and the standard rules are thrown out the window. Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, as a narrative strategy, resonates powerfully within Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel. This concept acts as a prism through which we can examine the transformative power of humour and satire when confronting and undermining entrenched authorities. Within Rabelais's tale, the carnivalesque becomes a domain where traditional gender distinctions flow more freely, permitting a nuanced, yet spirited critique of the period's gender constructs. The Abbey of Thélème, a monastery embodies an idealised world where gender roles and societal norms are chosen at will, a stark contrast to the prescriptive duties of the time. Incorporating Bakhtin's theoretical insights with an in-depth examination of Rabelais's narrative, this analysis aims to highlight how the carnivalesque operates as a rebellious current against the fixed gender roles of the Renaissance, carving out a playground for transformation and possibility. It will illustrate that Rabelais's use of humour and the grotesque transcends mere comedy, serving instead as a potent vehicle for societal commentary and intellectual challenge. Through this exploration, we uncover a window into the evolving and complex nature of gender during the Renaissance, which continues to reverberate through today's scholarly discussions on gender dynamics.

As we embark on this literary journey, our discussion begins with the poignant narrative of Badebec's death, Garguantua's wife, a canvas where the interplay of gender and emotion under the carnivalesque lens is richly depicted. Following

this, we will transition to the liberating atmosphere of the Abbey of Thélème, where gender roles are reimagined with remarkable autonomy. Together, these facets of Rabelais's work invite us to contemplate the fluidity and complexity of gender within the broader context of Renaissance society's transformative currents.

Badebec's death and the theme of carnivalesque

In François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the portrayal of gender is deftly explored through the carnivalesque lens, effectively capturing the multifaceted gender dynamics of the Renaissance. The text's depiction of Badebec's death and Gargantua's profound grief serves as a significant example. Gargantua's poignant expression, 'To live without her is for me but to languish. Alas, Badebec, my sweeting, my beloved, my quim so little and lovely' (Rabelais 2006: 24) echoes the carnivalesque element of exaggeration, blending deep emotional resonance with elements of the absurd. This juxtaposition, a hallmark of Rabelais's work, is emblematic of the carnivalesque as Mikhail Bakhtin discusses in 'Rabelais and His World', wherein societal norms and the rigidity of gender roles are upended, revealing a space for free, uninhibited expression of the self in contrast to the restrained comportment typically expected during the era.

Bakhtin elaborates on this transformative power of the carnivalesque, stating, 'In carnival, the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated.' (Bakhtin 1984: x) This relation is vividly portrayed in Gargantua's hyperbolic mourning, where the boundaries between sorrow and absurdity blur, allowing a masculine figure to openly display vulnerability and deep affection. This dynamic aligns with Bakhtin's observation that 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (Bakhtin 1984: 7), where the grief of Gargantua becomes a medium to challenge and subvert the expected stoic male bereavement of the period.

Moreover, Rabelais's treatment of Gargantua's grief through the lens of the carnivalesque serves as a critical commentary on the performative aspects of gender roles. The exaggerated lamentations of Gargantua, when he mourns Badebec with phrases such as 'my quim so little and lovely' (Rabelais 2006: 24) not only highlight the emotional intensity of his loss but also satirise the conventional expectations of masculine stoicism. As Bakhtin notes, 'carnival builds its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state' (Bakhtin 1984: xxi), allowing for a fluidity in gender expression that is often constrained in traditional societal structures. The carnivalesque thus functions as a subversive tool, enabling Rabelais to critique and destabilise established gender norms. In this narrative space, the typical binaries of gender are rendered mutable and the expression of grief becomes an act of resistance against the rigid prescriptions of masculinity. The portrayal of Gargantua's mourning underscores the potential for the carnivalesque to facilitate a more nuanced and liberated exploration of gender dynamics.

Furthermore, the intertwining of humour and pathos in Rabelais's depiction of Gargantua's grief exemplifies the carnivalesque's capacity to elevate personal tragedy to a universal commentary on human experience. This approach aligns with Bakhtin's assertion that 'carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom' (Bakhtin 1984: 410). Through this inclusive narrative strategy, Rabelais invites readers to engage with the text on a deeper level, reflecting on the performative nature of gender and the societal implications of emotional expression.

Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* employs the carnivalesque to intricately examine and critique the gender dynamics of the Renaissance. By leveraging exaggerated emotional expression and subverting traditional gender roles, Rabelais creates a narrative that challenges and redefines the boundaries of gender identity. This hyperbolic lamentation also aligns with Bakhtin's observations of the carnivalesque body, which is often portrayed in exaggerated, grotesque terms that celebrate its materiality and subvert traditional conceptions of decorum. Through this lens, Gargantua's sorrow becomes a means to challenge the gender norms of his time, allowing for a masculine figure to display vulnerability and deep affection openly, which, in the context of the period, would be an inversion of the expected stoic male bereavement.

Also, the narrative's engagement with feminist perspectives, particularly through the lens of object relations theory as outlined by Melanie Klein, supports a deep analysis of Gargantua's mourning process. When Gargantua substitutes Badebec with objects of daily comfort — 'my tenderling, my codpiece, my slippers, my slip-on' (Rabelais 2006: 24) — it can be interpreted as an embodiment of Klein's idea that objects can become symbolic standings for lost relationships. Klein posits that 'the child acquires a nostalgia for [a good object] that is comparable to mourning' (Kristeva 2001: 64). This nostalgia, laden with the child's love and guilt, arises from the 'feeling of losing the good object through his own destructiveness' (Kristeva 2001: 64). Such feelings are intrinsic to the depressive position, where the child, perceiving the mother as a whole object, mourns her absence and simultaneously strives to repair the internalised object through loving actions. Klein states, 'the reappearance of his mother and her care for him are essential to this process… The non-appearance of his mother or the lack of her love can leave him at the mercy of his depressive and persecutory fears.' (Kristeva 2001: 66) This dynamic illustrates not only the depth of Gargantua's grief but also the intrinsic human need to maintain connection, transcending the physical loss through the attachment to personal objects. In turn, this challenges the gendered expectations of expressing loss and longing, as Gargantua's hyperbolic lamentation can be seen as an act of reparation, akin to Klein's theory where 'pain, suffering, and reparation… result in the reconstruction… of the internal and external lost object' (Kristeva 2001: 67).

Rabelais, through his vivid use of language and the carnivalesque, does not simply use humour to navigate the tragic but rather elevates the discourse on human experience. His narrative encapsulates the Renaissance struggle with life's

immutable forces, while also reflecting the era's evolving understanding of gender dynamics. Thus, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* emerges not only as a testament to Rabelais's storytelling prowess but also as a rich academic resource for exploring gender perceptions during the Renaissance, interweaving the carnivalesque with a nuanced portrayal of human emotion, as Rabelais provides a fertile ground for dissecting the intersections of humour, gender and mortality within the complex mosaic of human society. By melding the carnivalesque with a sensitive portrayal of grief, Rabelais offers a narrative that transcends the traditional confines of gendered expression, aligning with Bakhtin's perspective on the liberating power of the carnivalesque. The text, through its satirical and earnest tones, creates a space where the rigid structures that define gender roles are not just bent but are turned on their head, inviting a more fluid and encompassing exploration of the human condition. In this light, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* stands as a vibrant illustration of Bakhtin's ideas, serving as a dynamic reflection of the gender discourse of its time. Rabelais's work, robust with carnivalesque exaggeration and rich emotional landscapes, offers a compelling argument for the subversive potential of humour and satire within the realm of gender studies. It exemplifies how literature can be both a mirror and a mallet, reflecting societal norms and simultaneously shattering them, allowing for the emergence of new understandings and expressions of gender identity, grief and the breadth of the human emotional spectrum.

Moving from the deep reflections on loss and gender in the story of Badebec's death, we now shift our focus to the Abbey of Thélème, where Rabelais expands on these themes, presenting a space where freedom and gender expression are explored with enlightened liberty.

Abbey of Thélème and Carnivalesque

In the intricate fabric of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the Abbey of Thélème stands as a microcosm of an idealised society where gender roles and expectations are subverted and reimagined. This reimagining is poignantly encapsulated in the phrase, 'The ladies dressed according to their own fancy and judgement. Subsequently by their free will they were reformed in the following manner' (Rabelais 2006: 369), highlighting the autonomy granted to women in Thélème-—a stark contrast to the rigid confines of Renaissance society.

The Abbey of Thélème, as described in Rabelais's text, is founded on principles that diverge radically from contemporary religious and social institutions. 'Do what thou wilt' (Rabelais 2006: 372) is the famous rule of this Abbey, advocating for a form of personal liberty that challenges the period's normative constraints. This rule, which might be easily misinterpreted as an endorsement of hedonism, aligns more closely with the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance, which emphasised individual moral responsibility.

The theoretical framework of feminist utopianism, which considers how societies can structurally support the flourishing of all genders, provides a valuable lens for examining Thélème. The descriptions of the Abbey—'The ladies' apartments

stretched from the Arctic Tower as far as the Mesembrine Gate. The men occupied the rest. Placed outside between the first two towers where the ladies could enjoy them were the tilt-yard, the hippodrome, the amphitheatre and the wonderful baths having basins at three levels, with all sorts of equipment and an abundance of distilled waters of myrrh' (Rabelais 2006: 367)—suggest a space where women's freedom and agency are paramount, as these spaces were designed for their enjoyment and leisure, a radical thought for Rabelais's era.

The emphasis on aesthetic beauty and the sensory pleasures within Thélème –'Hard by the entrance leading to the ladies' chambers were the perfumers and hairdressers, through whose hands the men passed when they called on the ladies' (Rabelais 2006: 369)—can be interpreted through the gaze of sensory ethnography, where the lived experience and sensual engagement with space play crucial roles in the understanding of a culture. As Pink states, ethnography is 'a process of creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on ethnographers' own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process' (Pink 2015: 5). This approach helps us to see how the sensory experiences in Thélème are not just about pleasure but about how individuals engage with their environment in a meaningful way. According to Pink, 'the idea of a sensory ethnography advanced here is based on an understanding of the senses as interconnected and interrelated' (Pink 2015: xiii). Therefore, the elaborate sensory experiences provided by the perfumers and hairdressers at Thélème can be seen as a way to 'communicate about sensory experience' (Pink 2015: 4). By considering these sensory practices, we can understand how the interplay of sensory experiences and aesthetic beauty in Thélème shapes the social interactions and cultural norms of its inhabitants, emphasising the cultural significance of sensory engagement. This aligns with the broader themes of the carnivalesque in Rabelais's work, where the dissolution of conventional norms and the exploration of liberated expressions reflect a dynamic and mutable social landscape. The sensory richness of Thélème thus serves as a microcosm of the broader societal shifts that Rabelais critiques and reimagines, tying into the essay's exploration of gender dynamics and societal transformations during the Renaissance.

Besides, the Abbey's sartorial practices – 'Their belts were of silk in the colours of their doublets: each one at his side a beautiful sword with a gold handle; the scabbard was sheathed in velvet to match the breeches and hose; its tip was of gold as costly as those of the ladies. Their bonnets were of black velvet, furnished with plenteous jewels and gold buttons; above it rose a white feather, delicately divided by golden spangles' (Rabelais 2006: 370) –exemplify a deliberate move away from gendered clothing towards a celebration of personal expression and adornment. This aligns with the concept of performative acts as proposed by Judith Butler, where gender is an act performed, an identity continuously constructed through performance rather than a fixed state. Butler argues that gender is not 'a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an

identity tenuously constituted in time (…)'– an identity 'instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1999: 179).

To extend this argument, we can consider how the clothing in Thélème reflects a performative practice that echoes Butler's conception of gender performativity, which challenges the traditional dress codes that have long dictated and reinforced gender identities. The Abbey's egalitarian approach to dress, where both men's and women's attire is equally ornate and self-styled, suggests a dismantling of conventional gender distinctions in favour of an individualised self-fashioning. This perspective is supported by Butler's assertion that 'the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler 1999: 179).

Examining the clothing of Thélème's inhabitants through Joanne Entwistle's theoretical lens reveals dress as a 'second skin', embodying identity and agency. Entwistle posits that dress is a 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle 2015: 13), meaning clothing is deeply tied to social contexts and personal identity. This is evident in Thélème, where inhabitants use detailed and personalised adornments, such as 'a beautiful sword with a gilt handle; the scabbard was sheathed in velvet' (Rabelais 2006: 370), to express individuality and status.

In Thélème, clothing serves as a visual language, less prescriptive and more fluid than outside the Abbey. This aligns with Entwistle's idea that 'dress frames the embodied self' and acts as a 'visual metaphor for identity' (Entwistle 2015: 87). Here, sartorial practices reflect a dynamic and performative approach to gender, resonating with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where identity is an ongoing performance shaped by societal norms and individual actions. Thus, the sartorial choices in Thélème illustrate how clothing functions to articulate and navigate complex identities, embodying the freedom and creativity of the Abbey's open society.

Elizabeth Wilson's analysis of fashion as a form of modernity, where dress is entwined with the individual's negotiation of self in a complex social world, aligns well with the depiction of clothing in Thélème. In 'Body Dressing', Wilson highlights how fashion operates not just as a superficial layer but as an integral aspect of identity construction. Fashion in Thélème, rather than being an imposed structure, becomes a medium of self-expression that mirrors the Abbey's values of freedom and individuality. Ruth Holliday quotes Elizabeth Wilson: 'fashion becomes an important – indeed vital – medium in the recreation of the lost self or "decentred subject'" (Holliday 2001: 218). Wilson discusses how fashion in modern society is both a form of self-realisation and a means of negotiating one's position within the social hierarchy. This perspective is particularly relevant to Thélème, where the inhabitants' sartorial choices are an expression of their individual identities and social roles within the community. This is a departure from the rigid markers of gender and class distinctions typical of the period in which Rabelais was writing. According to Susan Kaiser, 'fashion helps individuals collectively adapt to a

rapidly changing world, everyday appearance style may signify hope as well as resistance' (Kaiser 2001: 86). Moreover, Wilson emphasises the paradox of fashion: while it offers a way to belong to a collective identity, it also allows for individual distinction. This dual role of fashion is evident in Thélème, where inhabitants use their clothing to communicate personal attributes and social status within a context that encourages individuality over conformity. Kaiser remarks, '(…) style becomes a means of entering the discourse of being and becoming in the world' (Kaiser 2001: 86).

Integrating these feminist theories with Rabelais's depiction of the Abbey's attire practices allows for a deeper understanding of how clothing functions not just as a utilitarian necessity or aesthetic pleasure, but as a vital component of individual and collective identity construction. It also enables a re-reading of Rabelais's text as a progressive narrative that prefigures modern concepts of gender fluidity and self-expression through fashion. The Abbey of Thélème, therefore, can be interpreted as an early utopian vision that champions personal choice and freedom, emblematic of a move towards a more egalitarian society where the distinction between 'men's' and 'women's' attire is blurred in favour of a shared human splendour.

This vision of shared splendour extends beyond mere sartorial choices to challenge the very structure of time that traditionally regimented life within the monastic orders of the period. In the liberating confines of the Abbey of Thélème, Rabelais orchestrates a departure not only from the monastic regimentation of time but also from the rigid gender roles demarcated by society. 'And because in the religious Orders of our world everything is circumscribed, delimited and ruled by Hours, it was decreed that not one clock nor sundial should be there.' (Rabelais 2006: 361) Here, Rabelais evokes a thematic rejection of temporal constraints, as echoed in Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'rhythmanalysis', which posits a life attuned to natural and personal cadences rather than the mechanical ticking of societal obligations. Lefebvre emphasises the importance of rhythms in understanding everyday life, noting that '[T]he rhythmanalyst will not be obliged to *jump* from the inside to the outside of observed *bodies*; he should come to listen to them *as a whole* and unify them by taking his own rhythms as a reference: by integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa' (Lefebvre 2004: 20). This holistic view of rhythms aligns with Rabelais's depiction of Thélème, where time and dress are not merely functional but deeply integrated into the inhabitants' lived experiences. Lefebvre further explains that '(…) everyday life remains shot through and traversed by great cosmic and vital rhythms: day and night, the months and the seasons, and still more precisely biological rhythms. In the everyday, this results in the perpetual interaction of these rhythms with repetitive processes linked to homogeneous time' (Lefebvre 2004: 73). This interaction of natural rhythms with societal structures mirrors the Abbey's approach to clothing and gender roles, where the natural expression of individuality is emphasised over rigid societal norms.

Such a philosophy in Thélème extends to the realm of gender, where attire is chosen not by the hour or dictated by convention, but by the individual's own sense and intelligence. This temporal and sartorial freedom articulates a proto-feminist vision, anticipating contemporary debates on the fluidity of gender. Thélème thus emerges as a profound narrative space, interweaving the essence of time with the fabric of gender, crafting a society resonant with the rhythms of modern feminist thought and the autonomy of self-expression.

Moreover, the construction of Thélème, free of walls and fences –'First, then,' said Gargantua, 'since all other abbeys are fearsomely fenced in, no walls or railings are ever to be built around it' (Rabelais 2006: 361) – can be seen through the prism of Foucault's heterotopias, which are places of otherness, simultaneously physical and metaphorically outside society's norms. Foucault describes heterotopias as 'those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others' (Foucault 1984: 252). Thélème is a heterotopia, a place of otherness, where norms are suspended and new social orders are envisioned. Foucault elaborates that these spaces are 'a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects' (Foucault 1984: 253). The Abbey's lack of physical barriers embodies this idea, representing a space where traditional social structures are dismantled, allowing for a reimagining of societal norms and personal freedoms. Thus, Thélème can be seen not merely as a physical structure but as a conceptual space where Rabelais articulates his vision of an ideal society that transcends contemporary gender norms. The Abbey stands as a testament to Rabelais's forward-thinking views on gender equality and individual freedom, encapsulating the Renaissance humanist's belief in the potential of humanity to transcend its limitations through reason, creativity and the pursuit of knowledge.

As we close the vibrant chapters of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, we find ourselves at a crossroads of laughter and wisdom. The Abbey of Thélème, more than a mere figment of Rabelais's rich imagination, symbolises a place where gender and social constraints are unshackled and the human spirit is free to express itself. This tension between liberation and hierarchy invites scrutiny, encouraging us to consider whose voices are truly empowered within such a utopian space. This delicate interplay between humour and critique provides a fertile ground for exploring complex themes of identity, freedom, and societal structures, paving the way for modern theoretical interpretations. In this light, the work's enduring relevance lies in its capacity to resonate with and challenge contemporary discourses.

François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* continues to inspire critical discourse, particularly within the contexts of intersectional feminism and gender fluidity. The grotesque realism of Rabelais's carnivalesque not only dismantles fixed boundaries of identity and power but also invites reinterpretation through modern theoretical lenses. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality critiques how identity politics often 'conflates or ignores intragroup differences'

(Crenshaw 1991: 1242), highlighting the layered intersections of gender, class and race in shaping individual experiences. When applied to the Abbey of Thélème, this perspective interrogates the extent to which the dismantling of hierarchies truly liberates all voices, revealing how the space subtly perpetuates exclusions based on race and socioeconomic status. Through such analyses, the Abbey emerges as both a space of potential freedom and a site for questioning the boundaries of inclusion. Similarly, Bell Hooks reinforces this critique by arguing that 'gender, race, and class combined determined female destiny (…)', (Hooks 2014: xiii) pointing to the limitations of utopian constructs in addressing systemic inequalities. The fluidity of time and identity in the Abbey aligns with Jack Halberstam's concept of queer temporality, which disrupts normative life trajectories. Halberstam contends that queer time resists conventional markers such as birth, marriage, reproduction, or death while embracing alternative rhythms that subvert linear progress (Halberstam 2005: 2). The Abbey's rejection of clocks and adherence to natural cycles echoes this radical disruption, creating a space for fluid gender expressions and non-hierarchical existences. Furthermore, Astrida Neimanis's hydrofeminism enriches this analysis by reimagining embodiment through the metaphor of water, proposing that 'bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human' (Neimanis 2017: 2). Her theory complements Rabelais's depictions of bodily fluids and grotesque transformations, framing them as sites of ecological interconnectedness and relational identity that challenge anthropocentric norms. Additionally, David Howes's sensory anthropology underscores the cultural construction of sensory experiences, asserting that 'the senses are made, not given' (Howes 2022: 45). Rabelais's vivid sensory depictions of feasting and physicality exemplify this, transforming sensory excess into a collective expression of liberation. Together, these theoretical frameworks illuminate the enduring resonance of Rabelais's carnivalesque in contemporary critiques of identity, power and embodiment, bridging literary traditions and modern debates.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail and Hélène Iswolsky. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. *'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', Stanford Law Review,* 43(6): 1241–99.

Entwistle, Joanne. 2015. *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Foucault, Michel and Paul Rainbow (ed.). 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press.

Holliday, Ruth. 2001. 'Fashioning the Queer Self', in Entwistle, Joanne and Elizabeth Wilson (eds), *Body Dressing*, pp. 215–32. Oxford: Berg.

Hooks, Bell. 2014. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.* New York: Routledge.

Howes, David. 2022. *The Sensory Studies Manifesto: Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kaiser, Susan. 2001. 'Minding Appearances: Style, Truth and Subjectivity'. in Entwistle, Joanne and Elizabeth Wilson (eds), *Body Dressing*, pp. 79–102. Oxford: Berg.

Kristeva, Julia. 2001. *Melanie Klein*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lefebvre, Henri. 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. New York: Continuum.

Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Rabelais, François. 2006. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Translated and edited by M. A. Screech. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Unveiling the Carnivalesque Masquerade: (De)constructing the Dynamics of Gender and Power in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* via a Bakhtinian Lens

Sukriti Bhukkal

Abstract

Published in 1677, *The Rover*, written by Aphra Behn, a reworking of Thomas Killigrew's lengthy closet drama *Thomaso or The Wanderer* is set in Spanish Naples, just before Lent, during the carnival, creating a backdrop that effectively highlights 'the desire to break free from societal constraints'. Bakhtin's exploration of medieval culture unveils the transformative power of carnival time, offering a profound shift in worldview by temporarily liberating individuals from established hierarchies and norms. Its unconventional authorship, being that of the sole professional woman playwright of the time makes it particularly appropriate for feminist critique as well. Behn, in the play, is not dealing with the usual restoration comedy of 'fops and wits' with the intention 'merely to titillate' the audience, but offers a representation that attempts to focus on the question of gender, power and liberation, predominantly through the characters of Hellena, Florinda and Angellica. The playwright also invites the audiences to embrace the spirit of carnival and revel in the joyous chaos of renewal and change.

Key Words: Restoration, carnivalesque, subversion, liberty

The 1660s in English history, the period of the Restoration, were characterised by intense opposition to Republicanism in general and Puritanism in particular. The period witnessed a campaign launched by the supporters of Charles II and a compromise between the merchant class and the king against the interests of millions who were affected by the passion and the fervour of the English Revolution.

Restoration and 18th-century England marked a radical departure from Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, wherein the relations between women and the

literary canon carried a special significance. Due to the expansion of print culture, women as writers became a lot more visible, one of whom was Aphra Behn. As a writer, Behn was one of the first in her time to appreciate the existence of a market for literature in which a work could be sold to make a living. This would have been perceived to be 'particularly enigmatic' by the contemporary Puritan eye, driven by 'individual morality and idealism'. It was combined with a new interest in eroticism and an introduction of female actors on the stage. As Thomas Betterton demonstrated:

> Actresses are permitted. Because in the past "the women's parts have been Acted by men in the habits of women at which some have taken Offence," the King gives permission that "all womens partes to be Acted in either of the said two Companies for the time to come may be performed by women. (Quinsey 1996: 9)

> In other words, the period witnessed the entry of women into a world previously inhabited by men: women as playwrights, women as actresses and women as spectators. Katherine Quinsey asserts that this "was a period when the presence of women on and offstage resulted in the enactment of 'a deeply ambivalent engagement with questions of female subjectivity', thus 'greatly expanding speaking roles for women and playing almost obsessively on the presence of women in the theater'. (Quinsey 1996: 10)

Within this cultural milieu, Behn remained critical and apprehensive of the code: economic, social and moral that sought to contain a woman's existence by marriage, ethics and religious behaviour. The title of a biography of Aphra Behn written in the 20th century is *The Incomparable Astrea,* suggesting that the inclusion of 'Astrea' implies that Behn was a celestial being or a non-human. IIn this context, Behn resists conventional constructions of *womanly* conduct, instead articulating a strikingly youthful, unapologetically amoral, and profoundly hedonistic perspective. It should be noted that the shift in attitudes towards women was seen predominantly within the realm of drama, wherein authors hid themselves behind their characters. Drama allowed for a free space within which moral censorship would mostly be directed towards the fictional world created by the writers. For Behn, specifically Puritanism as a philosophical concept did create problems as it hindered imaginative expression and was rightly termed as being detrimental to human celebration and pleasure. As a doctrine, it set too many restrictions on individual capacities and capabilities. The religious aspect that underlined self-righteousness closed all doors for democratic debate and open ended readings of issues. Due to the domination of Puritanism at the time, preaching took precedence over study and, as a consequence there was no scope for questioning or self-introspection. The 1650s and 60s called for a massive struggle against the old orthodoxy embodied by the king on the one side, and an encouragement for experimentation and critique on the other.

Published in 1677, *The Rover*, a reworking of Thomas Killigrew's lengthy closet drama *Thomaso* or *The Wanderer*, is set in Spanish Naples, just before Lent during the carnival, creating a backdrop that effectively highlights 'the desire to break free from societal constraints'(Hutner 1993: 40). The decision to place *The Rover* in a carnival setting was a "deliberate departure from the source play which was 'inspired

by (Killigrew's) own exile experiences and fantasies during the Interregnum'(Hutner 1993: 45). While *Thomaso* unfolds against 'the backdrop of the Spanish Inquisition in Madrid', *The Rover* unleashes its 'cavaliers to revel and indulge in carnival-time Naples' (Hutner 1993: 45). This choice of contrasting 'Restoration values within the carnival setting' achieved more than just adding 'festivity or enhancing the intrigues of disguise and mistaken identity'. Moreover, just like most Restoration plays *The Rover* has a typical plot about love intrigues and marriages. However, its unconventional authorship, being that of the sole professional woman playwright of the time makes it particularly appropriate for feminist critique as well.

Aphra Behn's selection of the carnival time for *The Rover* reveals significant interpretative implications. The sisters Florinda and Hellena, choosing to participate in the carnival festivities while disguised as gypsies, initiate repercussions and could be perceived as a subversive act or an escape from the authority of the patriarchal social order. As Susan Carlson writes, 'the liberties of carnival make possible the women's characters' agency as well as the play's assault on social institutions like marriage'(Carlson 1995: 520). Florinda, opposed to marrying the suitors chosen by her father and brother, along with her cousin Valeria and the adventurous governess Callis, who harbours a 'youthful itch of going'(Behn 1999: 10) , respond eagerly to Hellena's suggestion: 'Let's ramble'(Behn 1999: 10). Hellena, who is described as a 'gay young woman designed for a nun' (Behn 1999: 3), is reluctant to follow her family's plan of entering a convent, and emerges as the driving force behind the entire escapade. The women, seeking to remain unrecognized, adopt an intricate disguise as they clandestinely leave the house and join the carnival festivities. In this act, the women not only physically but also metaphorically defy the boundaries set by their male guardians. It may be noted that the play is infused with the dissolution of hierarchy and a celebration of carnality) reminiscent of the Carnival festivals, as has been observed by Bakhtin as well. In the carnival, Bakhtin argues, '[w]hat is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it: that is everything resulting from socio- hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people.' (Bakhtin 1984: 11)

A critical reading of *The Rover* reveals the pervasive influence of the carnivalesque spirit throughout the play, as tensions and displacements of a similar nature form the foundation of its construction. Unlike conventional Restoration comedies featuring fops and wits aimed solely at titillating audiences, Behn explores gender dynamics, power structures and female liberation. Both Florinda and Hellena emerge as charismatic and outspoken women, and Hellena accuses her brother of following the ill customs of our country and making a slave of his sister. Demonstrating a shared conviction, Florinda asserts that she understands 'what's due to my beauty, birth, and fortune, and more to my soul, than to obey those unjust commands' (Behn 1999: 9). The rebellious spirit that sets the stage for their 'transgressive acts' becomes apparent when Hellena praises Florinda's 'dear disobedience' and confesses her own love for 'mischief strangely', urging the other women to 'take all innocent freedoms' offered by the carnival (Behn 1999:9). Florinda wages a relentless fight with her brother Don

Pedro against the commodification of forced marriage and to achieve what she regards as 'her commitment to a man of constant ways' (Behn 1999: 9). The eventual union with her lover puts her in a position of success, making her rebellion seem worthy. On one level, Florinda's attack on 'patriarchal compulsion points to the internal contradictions' which work to 'destabilize ideologies of gender' (Pacheco 1998: 324). However, it should be noted that the social parameters within the space of marriage typifying a relationship remain unchanged. The problem with Florinda is that she remains within the 'inscribed within male discourse' (Pacheco 1998 : 326) and confines of marital bliss, i.e., constancy, loyalty, sweet sentiment, perseverance and fortitude. These values may earn an appreciative attitude from the men but the women, devoid of rights and power, are merely just tools to keep up the prevailing norms of orthodoxy and stability. Because Florinda's self-esteem derives entirely from her status as a lady, she is able to measure her human value only by patriarchal standards. When it comes to her relationship with Belvile, Florinda avoids 'acknowledging her own sexual impulses' by 'recoding their passion into a narrative of chivalric courtesy and nobility' (Pacheco 1998 : 327).

This is precisely what differentiates Hellena from her sister as she defies, bargains, calculates and resists not from within but outside the accepted realms of codes of behaviour. Despite her family's pleas to curb her wild behaviour for the sake of her honour, Hellena actively seeks a man who can match her madness. Behn weaves religion into *The Rover* through a critique of church customs, voiced by the 'devout' Hellena who champions libertine ideals. Hellena tells Florinda that she would like to see her and Belvile together because she hopes he has 'some mad companion or other that will spoil [her] devotion' (Behn 1999: 13). Throughout the events of the carnival, Hellena remains *resolutely unwilling* to return home and conform to the restrictive expectations imposed on her. Her libertine impulses become especially visible when she encounters Wilmore. Their flirtation begins almost instantly, and Hellena openly rejects the notion of chastity, declaring that vowing to "die a maid" is nothing but a "foolish" constraint (Behn 1999: 14).

Angellica Bianca, a renowned courtesan, defies conventional expectations associated with the archetypal sinner. Bianca, who shares Aphra Behn's initials, having not loved before, remains ignorant and intact; thus, the play underscores the 'virginity of her heart' (Behn 1999: 198). Bianca loses her emotional virginity when she falls in love with Willmore, revealing the paradoxical overturning brought about by the carnival night. While her body is viewed as a commodity available to anyone, her virgin heart provides her with 'innocent security' where 'all men were born my [Angellica's] slaves'. Everything changes when her heart experiences love, a 'submissive passion' that prompts her to 'humbly bow, which [she] ne'er did, to anything but Heaven' (Behn 1999: 56)

Behn extends the carnivalesque mode to its furthest expressive limits, orchestrating a narrative in which the characters' engagements: structured around games of desire, verbal wit, and pleasurable acts of concealment, culminate in an ostensibly harmonious resolution. Yet this comic fabric, along with the conventionally mandated marital denouement, is sharply unsettled by the attempted rape episode,

which exposes the underlying instability and ethical ambivalence of the play's celebratory surface. At the heart of the upside-down logic of the carnival lies the grotesque body: a body open to 'consumption and production'(Bakhtin 1984: 26), joyously celebrating liberation from any form of restraint. s The play is suffused with carnal energies, vividly represented through the procession of masked and costumed men and women, in which the imagery of horns and roses operates as a thinly veiled metaphor for sexual anatomy. Sexual innuendo permeates the dialogue, reaching its apex in Willmore's conduct, driven by an almost inexhaustible erotic impulse. Behn's deployment of bawdy humour frequently merges with scatological comedy most notably when Blunt, duped by Lucetta, is quite literally plunged into the filth, or when Hellena satirically evokes the marital bed of the elderly husband. She describes him sprawled in 'foul sheets,' yawning and belching with theatrical exaggeration, summoning his 'young wife with a snore or two,' (Behn 1999: 24) a depiction that underscores the grotesque corporeality underpinning the play's sexual politics.

During carnival, entrenched hierarchies are suspended and the rigid class distinctions governing everyday social life dissolve into a temporary atmosphere of egalitarianism and inclusion. This inversion of the normative order not only offers release from structural constraints but also generates a collective experience of agency and communal empowerment. Carnival resists notions of closure and fixed identity, instead affirming the fluidity of becoming and continual transformation. As a liminal space, it blurs boundaries and enables individuals to experiment with alternative selves and imagined realities. Such openness to metamorphosis facilitates renewal, allowing participants to engage in practices of self-fashioning and reinvention. Aphra Behn's *The Rover* exemplifies this carnivalesque impulse, reproducing the upheavals, inversions and corporeal exuberance characteristic of festive culture. Set amid the Neapolitan carnival, the play unfolds as a dynamic examination of desire, power, and identity. Central to *The Rover* is its interrogation of sexual autonomy and its challenge to traditional gender hierarchies. Characters such as Angellica and Hellena articulate their agency through bold, transgressive actions, resisting patriarchal constraints in their pursuit of pleasure and self-determination. Thus, they embody the carnivalesque ethos of freedom, improvisation and embodied self-expression.

The play further draws on the carnivalesque tradition of disguise and masquerade, as characters adopt masks and counterfeit identities to navigate the unpredictable world of carnival. These transformations function not merely as concealment but as mechanisms for exploring alternate subjectivities and engaging in strategic deception. Equally central is the celebration of the grotesque body, manifested through bawdy humour, physical excess and theatricalised corporeality. Much of the comedy arises from depictions of bodily functions and unruly embodiment, destabilising normative standards of decorum. By foregrounding the visceral and the corporeal, *The Rover* taps into the carnivalesque celebration of the body in all its disorderly vibrancy.

Behn's linguistic choices further amplify this festive atmosphere. Her use of vernacular idiom, sexual innuendo and earthy humour produces a rhetorical excess mirroring the sensory overload of carnival itself. The exuberant and richly textured

language invites audiences to inhabit the world of carnival with its heightened pleasures and intensities. Infused with the full force of the carnivalesque, *The Rover* emerges as a spirited exploration of liberation, transformation and bodily excess. Through its dramatization of upheaval and renewal, the play encourages audiences to embrace the anarchic pleasures and generative possibilities at the heart of the carnival tradition.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail, and Helene Iswolsky. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press.

Behn, A. 1999. *The Rover*. Broadview Press.

Carlson, S. 1995. 'Cannibalizing and Carnivalizing: Reviving Aphra Behn's *The Rover*', *THEATRE JOURNAL-WASHINGTON*, 47: 517–39.

Copeland, N., 2014. '"Once a whore and ever"? Whore and Virgin in The Rover and Its Antecedents', *Early Women Writers,* pp. 149–59. Routledge.

Corse, T. 2005. 'Seventeenth-Century Naples and Aphra Behn's "The Rover"', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture*, 1660–1700, 29(2): 41–51.

Diamond, E. 2014. 'Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*', *Early Women Writers*, pp. 160–82. Routledge.

Franceschina, J. 1995. 'Shadow and Substance in Aphra Behn's "The Rover": The Semiotics of Restoration Performance', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture*, 1660–1700, 19(1): 29–42.

Hobby, E. 1999. 'No stolen object, but her own: Aphra Behn's Rover and Thomas Killigrew's Thomaso', *Women'Writing*, 6(1): 113–27.

Hutner, Heidi, editor. *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*. U of Virginia P, 1993.

Kaufman, A. 1996. '"The Perils of Florinda": Aphra Behn, Rape, and the Subversion of Libertinism in *The Rover*, Part I' *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research*, 11(2): (1-196)

Nash, J. 1994. 'The sight on't would beget a warm desire: "Visual Pleasure in Aphra Behn's" *The Rover*', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture*, 1660-1700, 18(2): 77–87.

Pacheco, A. 1998. 'Rape and the Female Subject in Aphra Behn's "The Rover", *ELH*, 65(2): 323–45.

Pearson, J. 1991. 'Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn', *The Review of English Studies*, 42(165): 40–56.

Quinsey, K.M (ed.). 1996. *Broken boundaries: women & feminism in Restoration drama*. University Press of Kentucky.

Sikkink, L. 2011. 'Playing Dress Up: Identity Construction through Disguise in *The Rover*', *Selected Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature,*Stewart, A.M. 1997. Rape, Patriarchy, and the Libertine Ethos: The Function of Sexual Violence in Aphra Behn's "The Golden Age" and The Rover, Part I', *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research*, 12(2)

Stodard, N.E. 2017. *Aphra Behn on the Contemporary American Stage: Behn's Feminist Legacy and Woman-Directed Revivals of The Rover*. University of South Florida.

White, Angela. "Portrayal of Restoration Women in The Rover." *Magnificat: A Journal of Undergraduate Nonfiction*, Apr. 2014, 46–51, marymount.edu/academics/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/05/Magnificat-2014.

In Connect, Disconnect: Exploring Pluripotency of Wit and Humour in a Cross-cultural Study of the *'Adda'*

Ipsita Sengupta

Abstract

'Adda' has spatial roots in bhasha etymology; it seems to seek a homing in. Dipesh Chakrabarty locates adda in the context of 20th-century Bengali literary modernism and the production of a self-conscious nationalist project, but the term has already gained a supra-national currency in the lexicon of authors like Saiyad Mujtaba Ali. Humour as a mode of interrogation and meditation gathered in conversation provides a premise for most literary-fictive representations of the adda. What if one unhomes the word and traces the adda as a nomad motif in select fictive-literary and documentary works, highlighting the practice of freewheeling conversations between friends as a formative core? Which patterns of connection would these representations of free-wheeling collective conversations axiomatically prescribe, and what counters preserve? Humour speaks the tongue of counters, ambiguity, irony and unmaskings. Could a failure to connect and be homed emerge as a shadow narrative across creative representations of the adda in its de-provincialized possibilities? In this paper I explore the pluripotent limn of humour through moments that describe, prescribe, question, disrupt, digress, or gather the eluded in four texts composed across location, language, tense, and medium – James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), Milan Kundera's fiction *Slowness* (1995) in English translation, French-Iranian novelist Marjane Satrapi's graphic novella *Embroideries* (2003) in English translation, and Shaunak Sen's 2022 documentary *All That Breathes*. An adda allegedly strives to uphold counterpoints, horizontal thinking, planetarity and the promise of difficult solidarities. How does this relate to its appetite and aversion for someplace else, or nomads from that elsewhere? I explore in this paper.

Keywords: Adda and nomadology, De-provincializing the adda, the Johnsonian adda, Adda and its incommunicables, Enlightenment and adda, Wit and humour in adda

De-provincializing the adda

The word '*adda*' has spatial roots in bhasha etymology; it seems to seek a homing in. As historian and political thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty observes in his chapter titled 'Adda: A History of Sociality' (Chakrabarty 2008: 180–214), it could refer to 'a dwelling place; a haunt; a (fixed or permanent) meeting-place, a rendezvous; a place or institution for practicing anything … a company of idle talkers, their meeting-place or talk', a semantic range he gathered from the 1968 Sahitya Samsad edition of a Bengali-to-English dictionary (Chakrabarty 2008: 187). It could also imply a lair for intoxication and addiction in Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, as I discovered from Gyanendramohan Das's Bengali dictionary, also published by Sahitya Samsad (Das 1986: 205). Though Dipesh Chakrabarty locates the adda in the context of 20th-century Bengali literary modernism and the production of a self-conscious nationalist project in his essay, the term had already gained supra-national currency in the lexicon of authors like Saiyad Mujtaba Ali, who held that the men of Cairo came second to none in being addicts to adda (Ali 325–30; Chakrabarty 183).[1]

Humour as a mode of interrogation and meditation gathered in conversation provides a premise for most literary-fictive representations of the adda. What if I unhome the word and trace the adda as a nomad motif in select fictive-literary and documentary works composed across space and tense, highlighting the 'practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations' as the formative core, according to Chakrabarty's approximate rendering of the term (181)? Which patterns of connection would these representations of free-wheeling collective conversations then axiomatically prescribe, and what counters preserve? Humour speaks the tongue of counters, ambiguity, irony and unmaskings, even to rotes of non-exclusion. Could the failure to connect, belong and be homed emerge as a shadow-narrative in refrain across creative representations of adda – a veritable repository of sportive raillery, wit and humour – in fecund performance of its de-provincialized possibilities?[2]

In this paper I explore the pluripotent[3] limn of humour through moments that describe, prescribe, question, disrupt, digress, or gather the eluded in four texts composed across location, language, tense and medium. Of these, three are literary texts and one a documentary film, all four located in the liminal between fiction and non-fiction,[4] summoning vignettes of friends in prolonged, informal conversation. Two are situated in the non-West, in Tehran and Delhi. The texts I choose for the study include Scottish biographer James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791); Czech and French novelist Milan Kundera's fiction *Slowness* (1995), translated from the French by Linda Asher (1996); French-Iranian novelist Marjane Satrapi's graphic novella *Embroideries* (2003), translated from the French by Anjali Singh (2008); and Delhi-based Shaunak Sen's 2022 documentary *All That Breathes*. Boswell's literary memorialisation of Dr Samuel Johnson and Kundera's *Slowness* evoke the 18th century, the age of the rise of the novel in Europe and of the individual and her elusive, refracted, increasingly divergent-contingent truths. The adda incubated in this location buds a node of individuation that could resist

the uniformity of truth, obscenity of certitudes and the non-thought of received ideas so lampooned by Gustave Flaubert in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. Such an adda is made in incalculables and born of the spirit of laughter let loose in a creatrix of collectives, coeval with the rise of the novel in Europe. 'The age¢lastes [those bereft of humour in Greek, a word introduced in French by Francois Rabelais], the nonthought of received ideas, and kitsch are one and the same, the three-headed enemy of the art [of the novel] born as the echo of God's laughter,' contends Milan Kundera in his essay 'Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe' (Kundera 1986: 164). The proposition applies to the 18th-century adda in Europe and its afterlives. Despite remaining a 'flawed social practice' in its varied avatars (Chakrabarty 2008: 181), the adda, while remaining housed in an enlightenment architecture of exclusions along gender and class lines, strives to uphold counterpoints, horizontal thinking, planetarity and the promise of difficult solidarities. Or does it?

All We Imagine as Light:[5] the enlightenment template of the Johnsonian adda

Unlikely friendships are at the heart of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. These include the improbable friendship the righteous biographer-linguist struck with the gay, dissipated, much younger Topham Beauclark with whom he sallied forth into Covent Garden at three in the morning (Boswell 2008: 135-6), or his close association in early youth with the profligate Richard Savage reduced to the lowest state of wretchedness (94), or for that matter, the friendship cultivated through decades with the reluctantly amoral, goggle-eyed word-catcher, the theatrically self-staging Boswell. The text is curated as an amplified uneven noting of gamings. The gamings occur in a form that blurs forms and bends borders by hoarding letters, opinions, conversations, anecdotes, dramatisation of the more important encounters, urgent invocations of the quotidian, and an ample collectanea of Johnson's sayings from other friends in the years when Boswell was absent, all towards conserving that 'of a volatile and evanescent kind' (Boswell 2008: 23) – the Johnsonian adda tantalising in its unfinished trails.

The Johnsonians, that elect set of cronies kindled to life by James Boswell in his famed biography, used to gather at taverns and coffeehouses and their friends' posh places in London, yet hardly ever at Johnson's den. Wit, humour and ready repartee constituted for them the sacraments of civility and friendship, and conversation, contradiction were upheld as their cherished values. 'A tavern chair was the throne of human felicity' (Boswell 1979: 350), concluded Johnson on behalf of the Literary Club he founded in 1764 with his friends – among them Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, solicitor writer John Hawkins and literary connoisseurs, also landed gentry, Bennet Langton and Topham Beauclark. These were the keepers of truth over tea-drinking and talk (Boswell 1979: 213), aspirational 18th-century male British bearers of the enlightenment. Some were pedigreed members of gentility; some had arrived at London and how, including, for instance, Johnson's pupil and feted actor David Garrick;, a few

remained desperately aspirational, such as the Scottish Boswell. In the texts I choose to study, an adda, in betrayal of its spatial etymology, tends to nucleate around nomadology,[6] a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari, which could signify in this context a guerrilla grammar of discussions seeded with allusions, appetite and aversion for someplace else, and infiltrators from that elsewhere. Johnson, the 'public oracle' (Boswell 1979: 151) and upholder of what he considered to be the sacral order of the homo hierarchicus, could 'toss and gore' (Boswell 1979: 277) at such addas with his ready repartees. He could just as readily be mimicked and laughed at by his set of mocking adorers, countering him with sportive raillery about his positions against 'upstarts and aliens' (89), such as, notoriously, the Scots, but also 'foreigners', including the French and Americans, let alone exotic barbarians from the East (259). The issues pitched at him could be as diverse as daughters crossing the love-lines, literary criticism, the remote and the metropolitan, the upstarts, propriety when it came to women i.e. the gender divide, the hierarchy of the arts, Americans and the life of the savage, the state of the London poor, patriotism and so on. Johnson would respond with his ready aphorisms and unending cornucopia of truth-trinkets, assiduously gathered by James Boswell, friend and aspiring memoirist, scribe of righteous epigrams and pieties, and also self-confessed amoral drifter and fellow melancholic. The ideologies used to interpret the issues pitched at Johnson by jousting wits in long addas through the boisterous, often bawdy, food-faddish London evening carnivals were not quite as non-exclusive.

'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel' (Boswell 1979: 182), Johnson concludes, and positions himself against 'extreme nationality' (170). Yet the sage is also a staunch propounder of the inequities of equality. Shakespeare's *Othello* for him is a morality play around an unequal match. And as to the 'absurdity of the levelling doctrine' (Boswell 1979: 113), Johnson rails: 'I am a friend to subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of society. There is a reciprocal pleasure in governing and being governed' (101). And elsewhere, 'All intellectual improvement arises from leisure; all leisure arises from one working for another' (164). The exclusivist remained vigilant against the slightest degrees of falsehood and against the pretences of women to intellect, authorship or socially forbidden love matches. All such attempts needed to be exorcised: 'Women can spin very well; but they cannot make a good book of cookery' (Boswell 1979: 246). They could survive only as his hostess, the scintillator of salons. This grammarian of relations between categories and communes, the arch dispenser of truths, would be regularly contested in his truth-dispensing and then laughed at by friends including the allegedly doting disciple Boswell, or some of the women of charming conversation who were otherwise his patrons. When he comes down heavily on the Americans as a nation of convicts, insisting, 'I am willing to love all mankind, except an American', Miss Seward quietly rebuffs, 'Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured' (Boswell 1979: 247), alluding to the unfair tax regime imposed on that settler colony by the British around that time.

The Johnsonian adda seems to preserve conversation-as-contest, counters and outsiders.

Yet conversation in the Johnsonian universe, replete with wit and humour, brimming with the bawdy and the carnivalesque, risks morphing into an elegant game of retorts in flight from meaning: 'from a spirit of contradiction and a delight in shewing his powers, he [Johnson] would often maintain the wrong side with equal warmth and ingenuity; so that, when there was an audience, his real opinions could seldom be gathered from his talk' (Boswell 2008: 1006).[7]The amplified version of an adda in *The Life* renders as well the angst of the failure to communicate, and commit, when it comes to some of the elusive, almost absented narratives, such as those regarding race and colonisation in diverse dimensions. It registers the disconnect, or freefall of the shadow-narratives, belonging to the invisibilised, those who hover to test and tease the limits and inventions, the coarsening and complicities of this adda ensconced in enlightenment-confected and inflicted truth. His distaste of outsiders notwithstanding, the melancholic misfit Dictionary Johnson[8]appears in his biography as an unhearthed exotic and nomad in the London scene, a Leechfield-born outsider outrageously draped, and further, gatherer of the curious and unhomed in his house, including the blind Welsh poet Anna Williams and Francis Barber, a freed Jamaican slave. 'I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority', he maintained (Boswell 1979: 47). Lord Chesterfield, the patron who notoriously refused to assist during the long years of the making of his Dictionary (1746-55), termed him 'a respectable Hottentot' in his letters (Boswell 2008: 145); despite the royal pension received from George III, the Doctor was aware of the growing indifference of the British aristocracy towards him. Was Johnson's truth-parsing a finally failed attempt to belong to the literary-aristocratic cliques of London, a fossil fetish of disconnect with the 'fury of innovation' (Boswell 1979: 291) that marked the age? Julian Barnes's dark satire *England, England* (1998) features a cross-epochal Dr Johnson installed as Dining Experience option and touristy gimmick in a plastic, profiteering, kitschy 21st-century nationalist theme park brandished 'England, England'. The actor playing Dr Johnson in the theme park begins to inhabit the role and soon collapses into madness and melancholy. His 'broad, scarred, tormented face' (Barnes 1998: 211) and truth Babel on the brink of being dismissed in a postmodern market-state serve only to amplify Johnson's nomad disconnect across epochs.

Of the adda and its antidote: a trans-epochal take in *Slowness*

Does adda need an antidote? It could in an 18th-century European setting, where 'every whispered word reverberates, swells, into multiple and unending echoes' (Kundera 1995: 9). Or in our times, contoured by the camera and induced urge to clone, conform. What if an 18th century adda of Europe, conserved with the hunger for archetypes in Boswell's biography, walked into our times? Milan Kundera's *Slowness* is a trans-epochal take on 18th-century Europe, libertine and

enlightened, and its values of conversation and wit located among the upper-class French men and women then, and now. It is composed as a conversation between the 18th and late 20th centuries, on the possibilities of wit, humour, wander and dis/connect, the adda and its antidote, made in intertexts and elusive bibliographical/orthographic memories in multiple languages. It is a tangle of fiction and non-fiction. Part of the self-reflexive text comprises Kundera's annotations and reflections on the French novella *Point de lendemain (No Tomorrow)*, first published almost anonymously in 1777 with six enigmatic letters supplanting the name of the novelist. Other parts evoke silhouettes of contemporary life spent in ecstasy or terror of the camera and the technologies of speed, with recurrent references to Pontevin, an historian at the Bibliotheque Nationale, and his interesting theories regarding the 'dancers' or contemporary exhibitionists in public life and their 'moral judo' (Kundera 1995: 19), theories he cultivates with wicked glee in the company of his small circle of friends, Vincent being of them the most innocent and charming. In a hyper-communicative world exiled to the threat of disclosure and utter disconnect, irony could be the only redeeming instrument of interpretation, action. The gang of cronies do not care for public renown; Café Gascon is their regular meeting place: 'Among their patron saints, the greatest is d'Artagnon: the patron saint of friendship, the single value they hold sacred' (Kundera 1995: 28).

The 1777 novella invoked as intertext in *Slowness* relates a young Chevalier's secret amorous encounter with Madame de T. through an intense unforeseeable night of conversation and coition, an almost intangible memory that needs to be 'veiled by the penumbra of secrecy, of discretion, of mystification, of anonymity' (Kundera 1995: 40) in order to be preserved. The 18th[t]-century, innocent though it might have been of the technical revolution of speed and its ecstasy, and the consequent universals of forgetting and addiction to holograms and hyperbole, holds a book of mirrors to our times, reflecting 'A world, where everything gets told' (Kundera 1995: 9). Kundera images that world, the underside to enlightenment conversation and assemblies across Europe, as a 'resonating seashell' where 'whatever the characters have undergone they have undergone for the sake of telling about it, for transmitting, communicating, confessing, writing it' (Kundera 1995: 9).[9] If the 18th-century adda in Europe could brew such a matrix of surveillance, exile of confidence and conquest that segues into our intimidatingly uniform g/age of globalisation, documentation on camera and instantaneous transmission, then whither the counter? Again, the highly cherished 18th-century adda values of wit and conversation could generate the antidote to its merry cruelty, through discretion and fiction.

As *Slowness* reveals through its reading of *Point de lendemain*, wit in 18th-century conversation could serve not only to scintillate salons, but also brew a contrapuntal possibility to protect the private and amoral, the inner worlds of individuals, in elusion from the epochal urge to transmit and render everything obscenely transparent. Wit in conversation composes and protects the discrete

intimate encounter between the young chevalier and Madame de T., an antidote to the adda, to which ubiquitous social form both continue to belong. Conversation and humour in that context morph into a contrapuntal technique of tenderness which holds friendship sacred and discretion as the supreme virtue, preserves the private as inviolate and grows into a mnemonics of love, laughter, wit and splendid slowness. In the contemporary cage of camera, an excess of connect reduces all words to their antithesis or kitsch, and reality to a haze of news events, a mirage given to the diabolics of speed. Now conversations, allegedly intimate, could curdle into set pieces performed for a ubiquitous audience, either invisible or imagined, even if as an adjudicatory gang of cronies. Vincent the innocent too cannot escape being preoccupied with inventing and editing for his adda cronies an amorous adventure episode set at the entomology conference he attends, rather than questing for the lovely stranger Julie he has met and befriended at the same conference. The moment they stood on the brink of tenderness and intimacy evaporated. This age has imperceptibly left the zone of intimacy and actively resists it, with the world 'suddenly changed under our feet into a stage set with no way out' (Kundera 1995: 100), and only counterfeits left to preserve. No protagonists are spared from acting and performing for a crowd anonymous or potential, however private the moment. In an age of 'extravagant conformism' (Kundera 1986: 49), humour can only be spare. It becomes a refugee in the residual, a function of forgetting and indifference, rendered through an implacable uninterest in listening, or the bathos projected in tragic moves of sentiment and infantility, highlighting the disconnect between individuals lost in a forest of symbols and words. 'There was no mutual topic', the author observes (Kundera 1995: 53), only a battle for ears, and stage-space. Even as he prepares to regale his cronies at Café Gascon with the concocted conference adventure, Vincent struggles to blot out 'the unbearably heartbreaking memory of Julie' (148-9). Not even the nomad spectre of the young chevalier from *Point de lendemain*, who walks into the court of the chateau, both venue of the conference and setting of the 1777 novella, can jolt Vincent out of his disconnect, or the stubborn urge to speak and perform his story. But it is in this nomad spectre, an epitome of discretion and slowness from the 18th century, that Kundera rests his hope for wit, conversation, laughter and kindness, in the adda and beyond.

Adda in light of the ageclastes

Given that an adda in any form is trans-tending,[10] and so invoking of nomads and counters, what if the term were transplanted to the rendezvous of a set of women in post-Islamic Revolution Tehran of the early 1990s? Gender gustakhi, going by what the Johnsonian set illustrates[11] and Dipesh Chakrabarty theorises regarding the gender norms of adda in the context of 20th-century Kolkata (Chakrabarty 2008: 181, 207-11). And yet, Marjane's depiction of just such a rendezvous in *Embroideries* could be construed a legatee of European enlightenment modernity and informal conversations, given the role of Europe as

a nomad motif of elsewhere for almost all the women present in that adda, and the ethics of alterity it conjures for them against the age¢lastes of Iran, the death-dealing guardians of the Revolution. *Embroideries*, a graphic novel in black and white illustrations composed without pagination by Jonathan Cape, renders the uninhibited tea-talk of a close-knit group of women of relative socio-economic privilege in Tehran of the early 1990s. It could be read as the shadow-narrative to Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-3, trans. 2003), a graphic novel that memorializes the narrator's formative years partitioned between Tehran and Vienna after the 1979 Revolution, and refuses to forget 'those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom … suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland' (Satrapi 2003: Introduction). The Iranian Revolution forms the looming unsaid of *Embroideries*.

The novel is set in Tehran with the narrator as a young adolescent. *Embroideries* bends boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. The format is memoiristic, polyphonic, unapologetic, and the members of the post-lunch discussion comprise friends and relatives across generations. The narrator remembers these women as provocative, irreverent and rebels against templates and singulars, at a remove from the truth-tailoring Johnsonian set as also the death-dealing guardians of the Revolution. The samovar post lunch brews the art of slow cooking – of tales and tea. Storytellers all, the women disagree vociferously on topics ranging from the outrageous to the downright serious, from adultery to cosmetic surgery. It is here that the narrator curates the observation that being a widow allows one to think and act for herself, or that living with a man could be an unfeasible proposition and becoming a lover outside marriage quite the preferred alternative to remaining the wife, a code vouched for by her aunt Parvine the painter. The narrator's witty and luminous grandmother tutors her in the effectiveness of opium to craft the languorous look at parties and attract lovers, and sets the tone for the gathering with the amoral edict, 'To speak behind others' backs is the ventilator of the heart'.

The young girl slowly registers that the nine women use the language of allusions and the ludicrous to embroider into tea-talk their collective heartbreak, desire and disillusionment, a horror of the local tyranny of kitsch around females and the feminine and ambiguity around the global West. The West provides an address for their imaginative hunger for alternatives, it could shape-shift into a zone of escape, liberty, deceit and the latest innovations in cosmetic surgery, only to reinforce the orthodoxies around female sexual chastity and appeal. Young Azzi's Switzerland-based Iranian groom smuggled her wedding gold out of the country with her consent on his way back to Switzerland, as one was not permitted to leave Iran with more than a few grams of gold after the 1979 revolution. Azzi then received a letter of divorce from Switzerland. The women stitch the non-formulaic of failure and betrayal into their litany of hilarity and heartbreak around self, society and the nomadology they name Europe. Exclusions persist. The women bury their wicked tongues in the presence of men. It is an adda that refuses to be broken by age¢lastes but is exiled to a gaming, sometimes bitter tongue.

Adda as a function of difference, and being dirted

All That Breathes, the 2022 documentary film by Shaunak Sen, nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature Film and carefully absented ever since on mainstream national electronic and digital media, does not feature a set of idling talkers at a leisure haunt. Among the myriad life-forms, it features three humans, three hurting healers from Delhi on a life-and-death mission to save dying kites hurtling from the skies or grounded and waiting. In the time scale of a perennial emergency, both their conversation and silence well with the unsaid and morph into an accidental, unlikely adda. The film gathers a collective that rides 'speciestic difference' (50×00) in the palette and poetry of garbage, the new natural for a fraternity of breathers who find themselves dirted, misplaced. Rats, kites in soar and swim, mosquitoes, dogs, pigs, horses in the dark, frogs, ants, centipedes and other worms, the stork, the disappeared vulture, fiction-perfumed allusions to the snowy owl from the Harry Potter series being sold at an absurd price in Kolkata, flies, turtles, lizards, snails, cows, camels, squirrels, and Muslim humans from a decrepit waterlogged neighbourhood of east Delhi – all life forms that bleed into the imagination and lives lived in Delhi – are curated in a rhythm of play and laughter, jagged with wounds and the incommunicable.

As wounded kites keep dropping from the sky, the three hurting healers, brothers Nadeem, Saud and their assistant Salik who have given themselves to nursing these birds to freedom and flight, laugh around the prospect of nuclear bombs, with the beloved kites still alive to consume their cadavers, given the mass culture of pollution, cannibalisation. There is no attempt to decode the speciestic difference with a rhetoric of planetarity or understanding. In an epiphanic moment, Saud cedes, 'However much time you spend with an animal, or love it, you can never claim that you understand it. Man is the loneliest species. The speciestic difference is like a jail' (49×22-50×02). The broken beings kindle an adda of their difference and undecipherables. Kites swoop the glasses off their rescuers, brothers and friends laugh around a game of cramped cricket played in a shrunk room in the basement. Here too the humour of futurisms and laughter throb to the ache of leaving and betrayal, as one brother is about to leave the other and Delhi for a brief wildlife rescue training stint in the US. Only, unlike in the other addas explored above, the nomadology of someplace else morphs into the here and the now in this film. It gathers the invisibilised and pulverised, and protects-projects the poetry of the dirted. Puddles of polluted water hum and tremor to the reflections of skies and a plane, and the cityscape or the scapes of garbage turn magically fluid, opening doors to annihilation but also to experiments in endless adaptation – metamorphosis.

Endnotes

1. 'Our [Bengali] adda, the English club, the German pub, the chai-khana of Kabul, the French bistro – and even the nomad ghats of Kashi – are nothing when compared to the cafes of Cairo … The [male] regulars of a Cairo café spend half of their day at the haunt, keeping their better halves at home!' (Ali 326).

The above constitutes my translation from the Bengali text.

2. In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty reads the Bengali adda of the 19th and 20th centuries as an instrument of capitalist translation into post-/colonial modernities for and from the margins of a non-Western space. Yet adda being a trans-tending, border-bending term invites being de-provincialized. Its beginnings in modernity, limits, margins, solidarities, and ineluctables could be examined and compared in creative representations across space, time and language.
3. 'Pluripotent', etymologically signifying 'plural possibilities', is a biochemical term that refers to the unique attribute of embryonal stem cells to regenerate or develop into any cell type; stem cell researchers John B. Gurdon and Shinya Yamanaka have since discovered that even mature i.e. specialised cells could be reprogrammed to become pluripotent.

   I have applied this biochemical qualifier to the infinite unfinished of the possibilities of humour; like a pluripotent cell, the fluid field could act as a repository of renewal into fresh possibilities to re-create spaces being unitarised and made into a gulag, whether on the pretext of empire, enlightenment, the nationing project or a promised land. Sometimes the other, translational, defiant possibilities of humour could be harvested from pasts and prints allegedly obsessed with stasis, hierarchies and the disappearing of margins, just as the mature, specialised cells could be biologically and chronologically reverted to emerge as pluripotent stem cells.

   On stem cells and pluripotency, see oncologist and researcher Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Emperor of All Maladies: a Biography of Cancer* (2011), p. 458.

   On the Nobel-winning discovery of the reprogramming of mature cells to become pluripotent, see 'The 2012 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine - Press Release', *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB 2014, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2012/press-release (accessed on 29 May 2024).
4. Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, rife with fissures and hints, was never an act of mameluk mimesis, a mere weave of the Doctor's quotes by a self-effacing biographer. As David Womersley contends in his introduction with reference to a detail Boswell inserted regarding Johnson's fear of death and damnation in the biography, which was not originally present in his journal: 'Is this a real memory of Johnson's behaviour on that day in 1773, which somehow failed to be recorded in the journal? … Or is it rather a glimpse of an ideal Johnson … forged by that process of repeated tacking between memory and imagination to which Boswell refers' (Womersley 2008: xxxv).
5. The sub-title is inspired by Payel Kapadia's 2024 drama film *All We Imagine as Light* which won the Grand Prix at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. The film enters the heart of desolation and darkness pulsating for its outsider-nomads in the garb of neon lights streaming the city.
6. In their trans-disciplinary 1986 essay *Nomadology: The War Machine*, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari trace the chaos and beauty of the nomadic that infiltrates and shapes, disciplines and nations. The text begins with exploring the status of warriors as nomads and the history of their relation with the authority of the state that they kept threatening, but expands into nomadology, an ontology of outsiders and transits shaping and shape-shifting the orbits of knowing, territorialising and being dispossessed.
7. One could read in this context the editorial interpretation of Johnson's subtle and increasingly complicated position on Toryism (Womersley 2008: xxviii-xxx), despite Boswell labelling his mentor a 'Hercules' among Torys (Boswell 2008: 26).

8. Samuel Johnson's 'morbid melancholy' (Johnson 1979: 44) debilitated him from time to time, he remained an avid reader of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (152).
9. One is reminded of the comic horror that looms over another 18th century text, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) which bears an uncanny likeness to the 18th-century world worded in Kundera, where 'what first appears to be a merrily obscene game shifts imperceptibly and ineluctably into a life-and-death struggle' (Kundera 1995: 9).
10. 'Trans-', a prefix of excess derived from Latin 'trans' denoting 'across', signifies the urge to test, un-think, re-draw and finally, cross as also smudge boundaries and the conditions of confinement and exclusions they might represent.
11. Yet, in Johnson's time, there was a co-eval attempt to transgress the gender division implicit in a London adda, as documented in *Life*: 'About this time it was much the fashion for several ladies to have evening assemblies, where the fair sex might participate in conversation with literary and ingenious men, animated by a desire to please. These societies were denominated *Blue-stocking Clubs* … Johnson was prevailed with to come sometimes into these circles' (Boswell 2008: 823).

Works Cited

Ali, Syed Mujtaba. 1975. Reprint, 1994/95. 'Adda-Passport', in *Syed Mujtaba Ali Rachanabali* [*The Collected Works of Syed Mujtaba Ali*], Vol. 3, pp. 325–30. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh.

Barnes, Julian. 1998. Vintage edition, 2008. *England, England*. London: Vintage.

Boswell, James. 1791. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Edited and abridged with an introduction and notes by Christopher Hibbert, 1979. London: Penguin Classics.

Boswell, James. 1791. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Edited with an introduction by David Womersley, 2008. London: Penguin Classics.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. With a New Preface, 2008. 'Adda: A History of Sociality.' *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, pp. 180–213. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Das, Gyanandramohan. 1986. *Bangla Bhashar Abhidhaan* [*A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*]. Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1986. *Nomadology: The War Machine*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Kapadia, Payel. 2024. Director. *All We Imagine as Light*. Drama Film. Cannes: Petit Chaos, Chalk & Cheese Films, BALDR Film, Les Films Fauves, Another Birth, Pulpa Films, Arte France Cinema.

Kundera, Milan. 1995. *Slowness* [*La Lenteur*]. Translated from the French by Linda Asher, 1996. New York: Harper Perennial.

Kundera, Milan. 1986. *The Art of the Novel* [*L¢Art du roman*], pp. 157-165. Translated from the French by Linda Asher, 2005. London: Faber and Faber.

Mukherjee, Siddhartha. 2011. *The Emperor of All Maladies: a Biography of Cancer*, p. 458. London: Fourth Estate.

Satrapi, Marjane. 2003. *Embroideries* [*Broderies*]. Translated from the French by Anjali Singh, 2008. London: Jonathan Cape.

Satrapi, Marjane. 2000-3. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *The Story of a Return* [*Persepolis 1-4*]. Translated from the French by Anjali Singh, 2004. London: Jonathan Cape.

Sen, Shaunak. 2022. Director. *All that Breathes*. Documentary Film. Sundance: HBO Documentary Films, Rise Films, Kiterabbit Films, and HHMI Tangled Bank Studios.

'The 2012 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine - Press Release', *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB 2014, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2012/press-release (accessed on 29 May 2024).

Mir-Dickens Analogy and the *Latifa*s in *Zikr-i-Mir*: Understanding the Humour of Mir Taqi Mir

Mohd Aqib

Abstract

In *She-e-Shor-Angez*, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi draws an analogy between the 18th-century Mughal poet Mir Taqi Mir and the 19th-century English novelist Charles Dickens, positing a similarity between them on various grounds, including humour in their works. The present paper contrasts this analogy with the latifas in *Zikr-i-Mir,* which is widely seen as Mir's autobiography, to explore the range of humour in Mir's writings and place his comparison with Dickens in the broader context of postcolonial humour research in Urdu. By doing so, the paper draws attention to the interrelationship between perspectives of humour, Mir's iconography and shifting literary interests in Urdu in the 20th century.

Keywords: Mir Taqi Mir, Zikr-i-Mir, Urdu, Humour, Latifa

A. Introduction

Not until a long time time ago was Mirza Ghalib commonly seen as the tallest figure in Urdu poetry, even among the critics. This view was challenged in 1990 by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (1935–2020) in his seminal work titled *She'r-e-Shor Angez* (*lit.,* The Poetry That Makes a Noise[1]). In this four-volume study of Mir's poetry (1723-1810), Faruqi raises Mir's stature above Ghalib's through unequivocally titled essays, such as 'Khuda-e-Sukhan, Mir Ki Ghalib?' (God of Poetry, Mir or Ghalib?) and 'Ghalib Ki Miri' (The Mir-ness of Ghalib), while also making a pertinent comparison between Mir and Charles Dickens to illustrate the distinction between the two poets. He argues that, as opposed to Ghalib, who shows little interest in day-to-day events during his metaphysical pursuits, Mir carefully captures the physical world around him and animates it with meanings to which anyone can relate based on lived experiences. Further, he writes:

> Mir's *kulliyat* (collected verse) reminds me of Charles Dickens. The same hurly-burly, the same mixture of unique and ordinary, peculiar and prosaic, the same abundance and paucity, the same spontaneous but astonishing humour, the same hustle and bustle. It appears that this kulliyat is a sea full of life. (Faruqi 2006: 50)

In the analogy that Faruqi draws between Mir and Dickens, there are two observations worth noting. It is necessary to argue that Mir's poetry is 'full of life' and emphasise the importance of humour in completing the picture of life's fullness. The following discussion analyses these observations to situate Faruqi's Mir-Dickens analogy within a broader context of humour research. By doing so, the present paper draws attention to the interrelationship between perspectives of humour, Mir's iconography and shifting literary interests in Urdu in the 20th century.

B. Mir Taqi Mir: A Sea Full of Life

1. Faruqi's argument: Context and impact

It will be difficult to find a critic of Mir who does not acknowledge him as a great poet. Mir has a vast oeuvre of ghazals in Urdu and Persian, as well as poetry in several other forms and meters. He has also written prose in Persian. His prose works include an 'autobiography'[2] written in a premodern form and titled *Zikr-i-Mir* (henceforth *Zikr*), which he describes as 'ahval-i-khud (my story), containing the events of my halat (life), savanih-i-rozgar (the incidents of my times) and some [other related] hikayat (anecdotes) and naqlha (tales).' (Naim 1999: 29)

The majority of Mir's fame rests on his achievements in Urdu ghazal. Several poets have written verses in his praise and made a tradition out of it. Ghalib himself is not untouched by it, as he declares in one of his well-known couplets:

> 'Ghalib', indeed, I go by what 'Nasikh' says—
> "He who does not follow Mir is himself destitute." (Pritchett A Desertful)

Couplets like this one must have encouraged Faruqi in his argument to achieve a taller icon without having to diminish the tallest. He explains that his point is not that Ghalib copied Mir's style or tried to imitate it at any point in his career. Rather, both poets shared similarities in their *zahni saakht* (intellectual configuration) and *tarz-i-fikr* (conceptual orientation), suggesting that Ghalib found his creative voice through Mir's influence, much like one benefits from a guiding light. (Faruqi 2006: 42) Having established this relationship and speaking of the differences between the two poets, Faruqi says that Ghalib's themes are rather limited as compared to Mir's—a difference that emerges from their varying attitudes towards the physical world that they witness. Ghalib presents it in abstractions, as if looking through it, and in a highly ornate poetic language. On the other hand, Mir expresses it through concrete details and everyday speech. Further, he says that the range of Mir's themes, the drama in his couplets that engages a wider array of characters, their placements in real-life situations, and the language that they speak testify to the remark of Intizar Husain, who sees a novelist in Mir. Taking this thought further, Faruqi proposes Dickens as an apt analogue of Mir, saying that:

> There is no experience of life, no pleasure from ecstasy of enlightenment to madness of passion, disgrace, failure, hatred, disillusioning, deceit, pauperism, sinister smiles, from breast-beating to bursts of laughter, sexual pleasures, and self-surrender to love—there is no emotion or act from which Mir has abstained himself. It is therefore not surprising that his poetry appears different from that of Ghalib. (Faruqi 2006: 50)

Faruqi explains further that, as compared to Mir, Ghalib succeeds in creating a miniature universe using fewer themes, but it remains a miniature nonetheless.

When seen in the context of the modern history of Urdu literature, Faruqi's argument goes beyond making a customary comparison between two poets. It in fact has a wide range of implications. Altaf Husain Hali's treatise of natural poetry, Kalimuddin Ahmed's criticism of the Urdu ghazal as a 'semi-barbaric' genre and Mohammad Sadiq's *A History of Urdu Literature* are some of the representative examples of a reactionary mode beginning from the late 19th century onwards that was to be adopted against the classical mode of Urdu ghazal. Arguing that Mir's poetry is 'full of life' dismisses such views of the ghazal and presents it as a genre capable of representing all life depending on the poet's ability. Further, by making a connection with the novel, it re-introduces ghazal as an enabler of modern forms of writing. Furthermore, it salvages Mir's image from the stereotype of a lover-lunatic who, in popular imagination, does nothing but lament in verse. Most notably, it expands Urdu literature's history by weaving the classical and modern into one strand.

2. Looking for Mir: Evidence and illusion

Faruqi is certainly not alone in feeling the need to argue that Mir's poetry is full of life. In 1947, Jafar Ali Khan 'Asar Lakhnavi' (1885–1967) established an earlier precedent for this in his work titled *Mazamir Yani Intekhab-i-Kalam-i-Mir Ma Muqaddama-o-Maqala* (Mazamir, which translates to Selected Verses of Mir with a Foreword and a Thesis). In his foreword, Jafar complains:

> It is sad to say that people generally take Mir's in-depth study for granted, and based on only those couplets that are popular, they form the opinion that Mir has simplicity and plainness, pain and fragility, and that is all. (Khan 1947: 6)

To contradict this image, Jafar first creates a Sufi figure out of Mir by drawing upon Mir's portrayal of himself in *Zikr*, and then, by interpreting Mir's poetry in its light, argues that it has several layers and knots of meaning. He explains that in Mir's poetry, love serves as a metaphor using which he articulates his deep observations of nature and a larger philosophy of life.

Although Jafar may have arrived at a conclusion that agrees more readily with Faruqi's argument, the premise that he establishes has proven to be questionable in the long run. He runs into an uneasy silence when, after placing Mir on a pedestal of spirituality that the latter claims for himself in *Zikr*, he cannot account for the 'scanty fragment' of Mir's poetry that, according to him, is of low quality and vulgar, including such things as odes to homosexuality. Faced with this question, he acts on the principle of 'take what is clean and leave what is turbid'

and simply leaves it unanswered to be dealt with by 'a particular kind of critics and experts' (Khan 1947: 76).

By all means, Jafar's predicament is not very different from that of Maulvi Abdul Haq either. In 1928, in the middle of a lifelong career of discovering, compiling, and publishing old manuscripts, Haq reintroduced *Zikr* to the Urdu readers as Mir's 'self-written story of life', whose narrative can be divided into three sections. Of these, the first shows Mir growing up under the shadow of his 'highly venerated' Sufi father and in similar company of the latter's enlightened friends. The second is an account of a long series of wars and their impacts on Mir's life, interspersed with occasional insights into his personal relations and poetry. The final section is a collection of 55 'jokes' or 'witty tales' (C. M. Naim's translations of the term 'latifa' as discussed below). Writing *Zikr*'s foreword, Haq begins by throwing light on the value that its publication holds in dispelling the myths and fallacies that have spread about Mir. He goes on to correct many of them, such as those relating to Mir's pedigree, his relations with the poet and lexicographer Khan-i-Arzoo, Mir's visit to Lucknow, the delicacy of his temperament, his religious beliefs, and the year of his death (Haq 1928: 8). Before he concludes, Haq finds himself in a spot like Asar. Betraying an attempt to protect Mir's image, he writes:

> At the end of the book, Mir has recorded some latifas, with a few being old and historical, while others from his own period are full of fun. But, sadly, some of them are so lewd that it is impossible to write or narrate them. It tells us of the taste of that period; otherwise, who can doubt Mir's chastity and seriousness? That is why, also because they were irrelevant, I have removed them from the book. (Haq 1928: 26)

The ambivalent withdrawal of Jafar and the prescriptive disapproval of Haq on matters of 'vulgarities' associated with Mir throw shadows of doubt on the labels of 'chastity' or 'seriousness' attached to Mir's figure. A key issue that can be raised in the defence of Asar and Haq is the strength of the Victorian code of acceptable behaviour in contemporary society. Moreover, the political sensibilities that emerged after the end of the Mughal Empire must have influenced both of their stances. Additionally, it can be argued that their dilemmas largely stem from their excessive reliance on Zikr, which shapes their interpretation of Mir's poetry and persona.

3. Questioning the reliability of *Zikr*: Bringing the latifa's into light

The transformations in Urdu literature between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century significantly decreased Mir's relevance and perpetrated images of him that were either false or incomplete. Notwithstanding this, a keen interest in Mir suddenly rekindled when the poets writing in the aftermath of the partition found in him a desirable model. As Ali Sardar Jafri explains, 'The violence in the communal riots of 1947 brought back to the minds of the young poets the images of Mir's times, which is why they shunned the modern voices of Ghalib, Iqbal, and Josh and found solace in Mir.' (Jafri 1960: 13). In 1952, Progressive writer Suhail

Azimabadi's (1911-1979) plan to publish a special edition of his journal *Tahzib* on Mir is indicative of Mir's resurgence in the post-Partition period of which Jafri speaks (Faruqi 1996: 11, Harganvi 1992: 103–5). This edition was supposed to contain an Urdu translation of *Zikr* done by Nisar Ahmed Faruqi. However, in a turn of events, the Mir edition of *Tahzib* never came out, and the translation was eventually published in 1957 under the title *Mir Ki Aap Beeti: Zikr Ka Urdu Tarjuma* (Mir's Life Narrative: Urdu Translation of Zikr). A revised edition of the translation appeared in 1996 with a revised foreword by the translator.

Malik Ram (1906-1993), a renowned scholar, introduces N. A. Faruqi's translation to the Urdu readers, highlighting its importance as a primer of spiritual and ethical education (Faruqi 1996: 17–8) and thereby reproducing the perspective of Haq and Asar. On the contrary, the translator freely expresses his doubts in this matter. He asserts that Mir's extravagant encounters with Sufi mystics are likely fabrications. He also disagrees with the popular view that Mir's language is 'simple and sweet' and counters it by pointing out that a considerable portion of Zikr cannot be understood without consulting dictionaries (Faruqi 1996: 23). Furthermore, he questions the genre of Zikr by noting that it does not fulfil the expectations of an autobiography and emphasises its value as a source for historical writing. In conclusion, N. A. Faruqi debunks the false narratives of the 'divine nature' of Mir's love, arguing that it is difficult to definitively determine whether Mir is portraying a divine or material love in his poetry. He further adds that the latter kind of love didn't leave Mir until his last days (Faruqi 1996: 37). In this manner, despite going against many views previously held about Mir, N A Faruqi, too, at the end, excludes the troublesome latifas by simply reiterating Haq's remarks for their excision.

Apparently, the only occasion in the 20th century when the latifas were published in Urdu came when Syed Masud Hasan Rizavi Adeeb, who was in possession of one of the six original manuscripts of *Zikr*, published an article titled 'Mir Ke Latife'. In it, he translated 23 latifas to draw attention to their historical value. Another occasion when the latifas were paid critical attention came in 1999 when C. M. Naim translated *Zikr* into English and observed more deeply in his introduction the curiosities that it had aroused in N. A. Faruqi. In Naim's introduction, Mir, in a revised avatar, comes across as 'a man of appetites' who can openly find pleasure in the company of his friends and lovers, who can write unique poems displaying 'a keen appreciation of natural beauty', who is 'quite fond of animals at times' and keeps various pets. (Naim 1999: 4-5) Naim writes that Mir's childhood encounters with Sufi mystics in *Zikr* appear to be fictional, as in his other prose work titled *Faiz-i-Mir*, since there seems to be no sign of those Sufis ever existing. His father, too, does not appear to have had the kind of status as a mystic that Mir describes. In fact, he says that two important purposes that Mir had in mind, among others, while writing *Zikr* were to claim a Sayyid lineage for himself and establish his father as a major Sufi. (Naim 1999: 11–2) Further, probing the question of *Zikr*'s genre while observing that Mir does not lay claim

to its originality, Naim looks for a pre-existing model and points out Shaikh Mohammad Ali Hazin's *Tazkirat-al-Ahval* (1742) and Anand Ram Mukhlis's *Badai-i Vaqai* as Mir's probable inspirations. Hence, he says, it was not uncommon for Mir to interweave personal and collective histories in his autobiography. But the 'jokes' at the end certainly seem to be a novelty. Coming to them, he writes:

> Their inclusion in ZM comes as a surprise—I have not come across any book which could have provided a model to Mir—but the coarse language and prurience of many of these should not surprise us: not if we have paid sufficient attention to Mir's satires, where too his language is often quite rough. These jokes—even if not all of them are very funny—come as a corrective to the doleful image of Mir offered in almost all the writings on him. (Naim 1999: 16)

Naim therefore considers the 'jokes' as representing an essential part of Mir's personality that 'almost all the writings on him' have ignored. Providing reasons for it, he points at the Victorian sense of propriety and the 'prevalent belief' after 1857 that supposed all poets of Delhi 'to be sober, otherworldly and mostly full of despair' in response to the '"decline" in civilization'. Furthermore, he explores why Mir concludes with the 'jokes', suggesting that Mir may have simply wanted to 'end on an informal and happier note'; however, if one seeks a more substantial reason,:

> The inclusion of jokes begins to make ample sense when we note the self-image that Mir projects in ZM for our benefit: a man equally at home among otherworldly Sufis and this-worldly nobles. (Naim 1999: 16)

In conclusion, Naim notes that the inclusion of jokes by Mir was in keeping with a textual tradition according to which 'the telling of jokes and finding delight in them was not merely acceptable but almost quite integral to Islamicate social discourse' (Naim 1999: 17).

C. Explaining Laughter: Mir's Humour in Theory

1. Humour research in Urdu: Changing perspectives

Taking liberties in translation (Naim 1999: 21) and providing comprehensive annotations to give the readers a taste of Mir's humour—this is how Naim translates one of his 'jokes':

> One day Mulla Baqir Majlisi was walking down the road when he stepped into some excrement. Since there was no water to clean himself, he stopped and stood there at a loss. A luti saw him and said, 'Aren't you ever lost in yourself!' The Mulla was so embarrassed that he walked away just as he was. (Naim 1999: 131)

Naim tells in footnotes that Mulla Baqir Majlisi was an eminent 17th-century scholar and that *'luti'* means 'a man of vulgar and obscene habits; a sodomite; a shameless and good-for-nothing fellow'. He uses the phrases 'jokes', 'witty anecdotes' and 'witty tales' interchangeably to translate Mir's term 'latife'. Such elaboration

suggests the complexities of translating humour between culturally different languages and across distant periods of time. An Urdu translator like N. A. Faruqi, on the other hand, may not have faced as much difficulty since the original term is equally well known in Urdu as in Persian. Though the temporal distance of the source text might have challenged him too.

Urdu vocabulary is rich in terms to describe various nuances of humour, but there is not as much critical discourse on it. In 1956, Wazir Agha became the first Urdu scholar to pursue a doctorate in this area and published his thesis as *Urdu Adab Mein Tanz-o-Mizah* (Satire and Humour in Urdu Literature) two years later. Before it, Rasheed Ahmed Siddiqui's *Tanziyat-o-Mazhakat* (Poetics of Satire and Humour) happened to be the only work of note. Agha explains this paucity as the result of Perso-Arabic influence on Urdu, wherein premodern values restricted humour to mere fun and granted it no further epistemological significance. (Agha 1990: 23) Speaking of the foundations of humourous literature in Urdu, he writes that its premodern forms are characterised by an undeveloped *tanz* (satire), whereas the higher standards of *khalis mizah* (subtle humour) began to be pursued only as late as in the 20th century, under the influence of English literature. Looking from this perspective and echoing the view of Mir that was then prevalent, Agha sees Mir as essentially a poet of the inner affairs of the heart and not the outer world as such. According to him, Mir only contaminates his pen by writing satires that do not befit his mysticism and pathos (Agha 1990: 90). He excels at satire only when he focusses on the inner world, as demonstrated in his lampoon about home, where he uses the symbol of 'home' to humorously critique himself and his emotions. (Agha 1990: 89)

The attitude towards premodern humour that Agha exhibits began to change around the 1970s-80s, when humourists and scholars like Khwaja Abdul Ghafur, Ahmed Jamal Pasha, Qamar Raees and others produced important critical texts that seem to expose the colonial foundations of the erstwhile humour research and establish an indigenous perspective. Notably, Ghafur's contributions in the form of his various collections, critical commentaries and literary activism led to the establishment of 'latifa' as a bona fide genre. As he writes in one of his essays, there is no word in English that can convey its defining characteristics. He looks at the word 'joke' as inevitably associated with 'joker' and makes the case that 'latifa' rises above clownery to produce a 'light tickle that gradually and unknowingly seeps into the body and soul' (Ghafur Qahqahazar: 18–9). In his collection of critical essays on humour and satire in Urdu titled Critical Survey of Humour and Satire, while laying out new territories for scholarly research, Ghafur critiques Siddiqi's view in *Tanziyat-o-Mazhakat*, who sees it as Urdu's poverty to not have a term that can truly convey the meaning of 'satire' and whose suggestion of '*tanz*' as its nearest approximate has been used as a standard ever since. He contradicts Rasheed by saying that Urdu absorbed the varied Perso-Arabic lexicon of humour, including terms like '*hajv-i-haja'*, '*hajv-i-malih'*, etc., which individually portray different attributes of satire. (Ghafur 1983: 16)

Ghafur's contemporary, Pasha, articulates similar views when he looks for a comparative term of 'latifa' in English and says that 'jest', 'mot', 'wit', 'pleasantry', 'irony', 'pun', 'quip', 'humour', 'joke', and 'satire', etc. fall short of conveying the sense of 'latifa' despite having a close connection with it (1982:13). Pasha divides 'latifa' into four categories, namely, i) *tabassum-afrin*, ii) *khanda-i-danda-numaa*, iii) *qahqaha*, and iv) *kasifa* (1982: 5–8). The first of these is the highest category, while the fourth is the least. He describes the differences among them in terms of various factors, such as their genesis (spontaneity in real-life conversations or intentionality in literary works), the tools of humour that they use (such as wit, irony, allusion, etc.), the purposes at stake (providing the audience with the strength to bear the bitterness of life or hurling an insult at a rival), and the physiological effect that they produce (smile, grin, or guffaw). Additionally, he highlights the associations of latifas with royal courts and reflects on certain Urdu works that he identifies as exceptions in its literary history, which he claims is otherwise dominated by the fourth type (1982: 13–4). At the end, taking note of the changes happening in his times, he writes:

> The current period is an important time in the history of latifa because it is now reclaiming its lost status and dignity. (1982: 17)

2. Classifying Mir's humour: Considering the aptness of Mir-Dickens analogy

Unlike his predecessors, who often turned their eyes away, Pasha keeps space in the fourth category for the humorous expressions of uncivilised emotions and thoughts that cannot be told or heard in respectable settings, like home or formal gatherings. (1982:7) In addressing the issue of 'vulgarity', Pasha adopts a balanced approach, neither rejecting the premodern humorous traditions nor imposing western models as benchmarks for higher standards. It implies that Mir's latifas and most of his satires can fall into the category of 'kasifa' without disturbing the ranks of the other categories. In addition to this, Pasha's essay helps in putting the latifa's into perspective in another significant way. It uncovers a well-established tradition of appending latifas to memoirs or poetry collections, which began in the Arab world with Al-Jahiz in the ninth century. From Arab, the tradition flowed into Persian, about which Pasha writes:

> In *Majma-al Anwar,* written in 540 Hijri [12th century], Nizami Samarqandi laid the foundations of textualising latifa, but *Majma-al Hikayat* far exceeds others in popularity. This trend grew such deep roots in Persia that every person who wrote memoirs or poetry also wrote latifas. (1982: 13)

Thus, as one can note, Pasha's essay warrants Naim's gesture towards a 'textual tradition' in keeping with which Mir included latife in his autobiography. However, it renders those speculations somewhat redundant, which posit that by including them, Mir is making a statement vis-à-vis the philosophy or portrayal of self—unless it is a dominant feature of the practice itself to which Mir's act belongs. An attempt to view the autobiographical portion of *Zikr* in combination with the latifas as a purposeful juxtaposition of pathos and humour may be confused with their blend, which is remarkably different from the satire of his lampoons and latifas in

the sense of being self-directed rather than targeting others and which is spread throughout his oeuvre. Consider the following couplet, for instance:

> Denying me the fulfilment of her promise
> Life turned out to be unfaithful to me.[3]

Outwardly, the present couplet seems to show the beloved/God as a promise-keeper and life as a betrayer. But deeper insight reveals the beloved/God as uncaring of the poet's dying condition and the poet as a devoted lover who hurls a taunt at her/Him without diminishing his faith in love. Mir's portrayal of the themes of life's transience and unrequited love, infused with a subtle tone of sarcasm, creates a voice that Naim describes as 'almost luminous in its intensity, an intriguing mix of self-mockery and self-assertion'. (1999: 5)

Such examples in Mir's Urdu ghazals, where he creates humour at his own expense, can be easily distinguished from those that serve as the conventional spaces of satires targeted at the priests who represent figures of authority and counsellors who represent rote learners. In the latter case, Mir openly criticises his targets without any pretence, as illustrated in the couplet below:

> The preacher who is now naked in the mosque was at the tavern last night
> Giving away his robe, jacket, shirt, and cap as rewards while drunk[4]

Rather than the recognisably biting humour found localised in Mir's latifas, lampoons, and couplets such as the one noted above, the other kind of omnipresent humour inherent in his style seems more apt in his comparison with Dickens, whose satirical voice strictly abides by Victorian propriety even as it critiques Victorian institutions. For example, consider the following sentence from A Tale of Two Cities, where the narrator describes how the prisoners on trial—who were only there in name, as they were certain to be hanged—inadvertently brought diseases from jail that would often spread and kill the judges as well:

> It had more than once happened, that the judge in the black cap pronounced his own doom as certainly as the prisoner's, and even died before him. (2012: 65)

To see the resemblance between Mir and Dickens in their applications of humour more closely, observe that Dickens also merges pathos with humour in the above example. He evokes among his readers sympathy for the prisoners whose doom seems totally uncalled for, but the emotional tension thus generated is swiftly diffused by the comic result of the judges dying before the prisoners as if to serve natural justice. Thus, in Dickens, too, humour often features as a reassurance of life in the face of harsh realities, as it does in Mir, which allows Faruqi to draw an analogy between them.

D. Conclusion

Amid the transformations in Mir's image in the 21st century, there has been an important development more recently. Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind) published a new edition of *Zikr*'s Urdu translation in 2024, incorporating the latifas for the first

time. Several Urdu critics and commentators are welcoming this change, interpreting it as a sign of contemporary society emerging from the narrow-mindedness of modernity and paving the way for a broader mindset by drawing lessons from the premodern past.

End Notes

1. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are done by the author.
2. Zahida Sabri challenges the use of the term 'autobiography' in connection with *Zikr* by arguing that the title *Zikr* should be interpreted as 'an account by the poet' rather than 'of the poet'. (Sabri 2015: 225–6)
3. us ke iifa-i-ahd tak na jiye/umr ne hum se bevafai ki (Meer Uske ifa)
4. shaikh jo hai masjid mein nanga raat ko tha maikhane mein/jubba khirqa kurta topi masti mein inam kiya (Meer ulTi ho)

Works cited

Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind). 2024. *Mir Ki Khud Navisht Savaneh: Zikr-i-Mir Ke Mukammal Matn Ka Pahla Tarjuma.* Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind).

Adeeb, Syed Masud Hasan Rizavi. 1969. *Nigarishat-e-Adeeb.* Lucknow: Kitab Nagar.

Agha, Wazir. 1990. *Urdu Adab Mein Tanzo-Mizah*. Aligarh: Educational Book House.

Dickens, Charles. 2012. *A Tale of Two Cities.* London: Collins Classics.

Faruqi, Shamsur Rahman. 2006. *She'r-e-Shor Angez Vol. I.* Delhi: NCPUL.

Faruqi, Nisar Ahmed. 1996. *Mir Ki Aap Beeti: Zikr-i-Mir Ka Urdu Tarjuma*. Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind).

Ghafur, Khwaja Abdul. *Qahqahazar.* Mumbai: Shahryar Abidi.

Ghafur, Khwaja Abdul. 1983. *Tanz-o-Mizah Ka Tanqidi Jaaiza.* Delhi: Modern Publishing House.

Haq, Abdul. 1928. 'Muqaddamah', in *Zikr-i-Mir: Mir Taqi Mir Ki Khud Navisht Savaaneh.* Aurangabad: Anjuman Urdu Press.

Harganvi, Manazir Ashiq. 1992. Suhail Azimabadi. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Jafri, Ali Sardar. 1960. *Divan-i-Mir.* Mumbai: Hindustani Book Trust.

Khan, Jafar Ali. 1947. 'Muqaddamah', in *Mazamir yaani Intikhab-i-Kalam-i-Mir Ma Muqaddama-o-Maqaala*. Delhi: Kitabi Duniya.

Meer, Taqi Meer. 'uske ifa-e-ahd tak na jiye', https://www.rekhta.org/couplets/us-ke-iifaa-e-ahd-tak-na-jiye-mir-taqi-mir-couplets (accessed on Aug 13, 2024)

Meer, Taqi Meer. 'ulTi ho gain sab tadbiren kuchh na dawa ne kaam kiya', https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/ultii-ho-gaiin-sab-tadbiiren-kuchh-na-davaa-ne-kaam-kiyaa-meer-taqi-meer-ghazals (accessed on Aug 13, 2024)

Naim, C. M. 1999. *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal poet, Mir Muhammad Taqi »Mir', 1723–1810.* Oxford University Press.

Pasha, Ahmed Jamal. 1982. *Zarafat Aur Tanqid*. Tanda: Bihar Urdu Academy.

Pritchett, Frances W.*A Desertful of Roses,* https://franpritchett.com/00ghalib/092/92_07.html (accessed on 10 Jun 2024).

Sabri, Zahida. 2015. 'Mir Taqi Mir's Zikr-i Mr: An Account of the Poet or an Account by the Poet?', *The Medieval History Journal,* 18(2), https://franpritchett.com/00garden/texts/txt_sabri_zikr-e_mir_2015.pdf (accessed on 10 June 2024)

Theorising the Popular: Wit and Humour in Samuel Beckett and Nabarun Bhattacharya

Swatee Sinha

Abstract

The paper proposes to investigate the concept of the 'popular' in the works of Samuel Beckett and Nabarun Bhattacharya through their use of unconventional humour and dark wit. The plays of Beckett or Bhattacharya's short fictional prose often engage scant resources and minimal props, taking as their focal point the bare-bodied, destitute subject, concretised through the figure of the tramp/or the tribe of *fyatarus* whose gesticulations, body language and crude vocabulary reinvent the notion of the comic. Often bordering on slapstick, the works use a kind of stalling mechanism, freezing the frame at a critical juncture to mute the loud humour or guffaw that is usually associated with slapstick and provoke a darker vein of thought. Both Beckett and Bhattacharya reformat how a work communicates with the audience by simultaneously provoking laughter and arresting humour, and show a marked transition from highbrow art towards more interactive and immersive forms of theatre and fiction writing, which draw on contemporary modes of popular entertainment. Inventive games and role-playing, 'a series of practical and mental puzzles' contribute to the wit and decadent humour, portraying popular lived experiences. The sense of agency, or the lack of it, becomes linked to bodily movements, which often experience a limitation despite the sense of boundless spatiality. The characters often structure their actions around intentional tasks or goals, which are often inane or lack a sense of deeper purpose. These apparently futile games or ploys, which provoke humour, become a mode of deflecting attention from existential thoughts which plague the characters. The threadbare plot/storyline and the gradual depletion of resources in terms of props, both human and non-human, portend towards a narrative closure with the exhaustion of humour as a resource to combat cynicism and bleakness of a life marked by spiritual destitution.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Nabarun Bhattacharya, humour, wit, popular entertainment, existentialism

The paper proposes to investigate the concept of the 'popular' in the works of Samuel Beckett and Nabarun Bhattacharya through their use of unconventional humour and dark wit. The plays of Beckett or Bhattacharya's short fictional prose often engage scant resources and minimal props, taking as their focal point the bare-bodied, destitute subject, concretised through the figure of the tramp/or the tribe of *fyatarus*[1] whose gesticulations, body language and crude vocabulary reinvent the notion of the comic. Often bordering on slapstick, the works use a kind of stalling mechanism, freezing the frame at a critical juncture to mute the loud humour or guffaw that is usually associated with slapstick and provoke a darker vein of thought. Both Beckett and Bhattacharya reformat how a work communicates with the audience by simultaneously provoking laughter and arresting humour, and show a marked transition from highbrow art towards more interactive and immersive forms of theatre and fiction writing, which draw on contemporary modes of popular entertainment. Inventive games and role-playing, a series of practical and cognitive exercises contribute to the wit and decadent humour, portraying popular lived experiences. The sense of agency, or the lack of it, becomes linked to bodily movements, which often experience a limitation despite the sense of boundless spatiality. The characters often structure their actions around intentional tasks or goals, which are often inane or lack a sense of deeper purpose. These apparently futile games or ploys, which provoke humour, become a mode of deflecting attention from existential thoughts which plague the characters. The threadbare plot/storyline and the gradual depletion of resources in terms of props, both human and non-human, portend towards a narrative closure with the exhaustion of humour as a resource to combat cynicism and bleakness of a life marked by spiritual destitution.

Humour and wit in the plays of Samuel Beckett operate as an existential response to death and decadence. Beckett's brand of humour, which relies heavily on comic features of slapstick and loud physical gesticulations, often runs out of steam due to the gradual petering away of language in the face of an existential void. The plays thus set up an interface between literature and philosophy and use a dry humour, innovative games, and mental puzzles as a kind of trampoline and launchpad to ward off the imminent end. Humour thus functions as a coping mechanism and a sort of refuge, working as a stop-gap arrangement and providing momentary respite from the pervading sense of meaninglessness that the surrounding void represents. As an imaginative and intellectual ploy, it draws upon the threadbare material resources that the characters desperately cling to as they negotiate the painful desiccation of language as a mode of expression and an encroaching silence that threatens to engulf the characters' feeble attempts to generate meaning.

The characters in Beckett's plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957)and *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) often appear as washed-out figures condemned to partake in an endless drill comprising absurd gestures. The residual signs of corporeal animation that the characters exhibit draw upon the last reserves

of their dwindling physical resources to piece together a comic act as a final response to the threat of obliteration. The characters, who appear as tramps dressed in motley costumes, which are often ill-fitting, evoke a dreary vision of the clown or comic entertainer struggling to hold the audience's attention. The audience is constantly aware of the characters' feeble attempts to survive the void and the inherent tensions in the text, which surface as a complex juggling act where a fall in the tempo of the comic action may spell inevitable doom and loss of control and engulfment by the void. There are moments when the action slows down, threatening to screech to a halt, and it must be reinfused with fresh spurts of comic gusto to liven up the tempo. Humour in Beckett thus involves a careful rationing of energy as a limited resource; what makes this carefully calibrated expenditure of energy a necessary act is the capacity of humour to act as a buoy in a sea of desolation. Humour and wit function as a barricade which keeps at bay the slow build-up of stark emotions as the characters, who are often senile, maimed or delimbed figures with a limited range of mobility, gradually descend into a zone of paralysis. Suzanne Dow cites Ruby Cohn (1962) who associates Beckettian humour with a response to 'corporeal and epistemological impoverishment' (Dow, 122). The acts of comic ambulation transform into a coping mechanism against 'embodied indigence' (Dow 122) and radical contraction of the horizon of motion/action. Against the vast spatio-temporal expanse that defines the Beckettian canvas, the scope for human agency and action remains limited. Dow also quotes, Steven Connor (2008) who speaks of the 'radical finitude' of Beckett's 'comically moribund, bogged down, bed- or bin-bound characters' (Dow, 122) whose response to nihilism is articulated through a dampened humour that often fails to take flight and secure agency. When Hamm attempts to sleep in *Endgame,* hoping to dream of a sprightlier time as an anodyne to the pain of existence, his feeble attempts to prop up his existence are mocked by his father Nagg, who is then rebuked by Nell for his insensitivity:

> 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness'… 'And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh anymore.' (Nell in *Endgame*) (McDonald. 2009:86)

Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* belongs to the genre of black comedy and engages with distressful situations in a humorous way. The play, which premiered in 1957, belongs to the tradition of absurdist drama popularized by the playwright and theatre critic Martin Esslin (1960). The Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin:1960), which focuses on absurdist elements, documents an existential crisis where characters suffer from a lack of purpose and the meaninglessness of existence. The resultant anxiety and uncertainty are dealt with dark strain of humuor where the verbiage of polite highbrow conversation is reduced to slang and slapstick. In *Endgame*, the characters of Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg engage in a routine tableau of actions stretched to the point of absurdity, where the depletion and bleeding out of

meaning itself provokes cynical laughter. Nagg and Nell, the aging couple's kissing routine seems to tire Nell, and she responds by asking 'Why this farce day after day?' (McDonald. 2009: 82) – a question directed to none. As the last stirrings of life and motion lose their moorings with encroaching old age and decrepitude, embodied in Nell and Nagg's paralysed existence, and Nagg's missing tooth, Nagg, the oldest figure, tries to maintain a sense of equilibrium through his moments of vulnerabilities by seeking refuge in humour. Reprimanded for his garrulity, Nagg regales Nell with a joke that he once told her during a visit to Lake Como when the couple was young and in love. The joke revolves around a tailor who takes more than three months to stitch together a pair of trousers, provoking the infuriated customer to complain that it took God six days to create the world. The tailor's cryptic reply, 'But my dear Sir,' '. . . look—at the world—and look—at my TROUSERS!' (McDonald, 2009: 91) carries an undercurrent of sarcasm at the general situation. When Nell asks Nagg why he keeps reiterating his stale jokes, he responds by saying: 'to cheer you up'. Nagg's loquaciousness irritates Hamm, who cannot contain his anger and lashes out at the elderly couple, 'Have you not finished? Will you never finish? Will this never finish?' and orders Clov to 'screw down the lids' (McDonald. 2009: 93) and stamp out the guffaw. The sporadic humour cannot blot out the looming sense of anxiety and uncertainty, as when Nell isolates herself in her bin and refuses to respond to Nagg's knocking on the lid forcing him to sink into a state of depression and, in an echo of Prospero from the Tempest, declaring 'Our revels now are ended' (133). Hamm's fixation with his three-legged stuffed dog, which he carries around requesting Clov to speak to the dog, decorate it with ribbons and make it stand upright, are evocative of a tragic humour that foregrounds the character's need for emotional succor, and his eventual frustration with the insensate effigy when he throws away the stuffed toy calling it 'dirty brute' (133). Humour is often sadistic, as when Hamm's remark that there is something dripping in his head and he wonders whether it is his heart provokes Nagg's laughter, and Nagg is gently chided by Nell for his cruelty: 'One mustn't laugh at those things Nagg. Why must you always laugh at them?'. Her rejoinder 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that' (McDonald. 2009:86) resonates with Esslin's observation that just as a character slipping on a banana skin may provoke laughter in the audience because it is funny to witness someone else's pain or discomfort which does not tantamount to grave physical injury, humor in such circumstances is immediately revoked if it portends something more dark or sinister. The play's very title encapsulates the theatrics of the game, the dramatization of a final strategic move before the drawing of the curtains. As a terminal act ending in a stalemate, the play blends elements of the theatre of the absurd and the theatre of cruelty to concoct a dark brand of humour. As a single act which unfolds in a claustrophobic room stripped of all paraphernalia, whose only aperture to the world outside is a small window, the play is a prelude to the final moment of apocalypse. The critic Ruby Cohn (1962) observes that in *Endgame* Beckett portrays 'the death of the stock props of Western civilization – family, cohesion, filial, parental and connubial

love, faith in God, artistic appreciation and creation'. Humour as a stop-gap arrangement momentarily diffuses the tension, and the characters' feeble attempt to keep the conversation flowing as a kind of entertainment that tones down the otherwise bleak scenario often falls flat or is met with rude interruptions that remind one of the inevitable dwindling of resources and the fatal end that awaits. Hamm's sudden announcement that it is time for his recital and his command to a reluctant Clov, who resists the part of a listener, to arouse Nagg again mirrors a weakening hold on circumstances. The story revolves around a past Christmas eve when Hamm was visited by a poor man begging for food for his infant son. In his recollection, Hamm had agreed to provide refuge to the poor man, employing him as a gardener and had taken his young son into custody. The story is cut short at this juncture by Nagg's demand for a sugarplum for having listened to Hamm's recital. The news that they have run out of sugarplums leaves the otherwise jovial Nagg in a state of exasperation as he curses Hamm and "lashes out at him", 'I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice — any voice. Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope' (McDonald. 2009: 132).

As Suzanne Dow (2011) writes, humour in Beckett is not a redemption of 'a negativity occasioned by humanity's finitude'(121); there is little or no scope for sublation and attenuation of the state of paralysis and finitude or imminent doom, and, placed against the bleak backdrop of 'inhuman infinitude' (121) humour functions as a coping strategy, a bulwark against dissolution occasioned not only by a decline in corporeal strength but also by the attendant state of senility and reduced cognitive response. Humour and wit in Beckett, thus become an indicator of cognitive agency, taking stock of one's limitations, a reckoning with the collapse of all stable frames of reference, as when looking through the spyglass at the opening of *Endgame*, Clov remarks, that all is 'Zero', 'corpsed'(99) summing up the state of moratorium with which the characters must negotiate as a painful exercise in cognisance and awareness leading to philosophical wisdom with humour providing a kind of salve. Pain provokes sadistic laughter, which is however short-lived, drifting into silence as we realise the state of existential incommunicado that strips us of agency, deflating all our feeble attempts at survival against the dirge of inevitable decay and looming threat of physical dissolution. In both Beckett and Bhattacharya, the use of humour remains unconventional, neurotic, exuding a nervous energy, transcending the bounds of the rational and entering the zone of the nonsensical to provoke laughter. In Beckett, the explosive nature of humour verging on farce is detonated or short-circuited through a reminder of its proximity to the Lacanian Real or Freudian uncanny in their evocation of the unrepresentable void within. The comic vein thus becomes a stop-gap arrangement to stall/or decelerate the gradual descent into the void. Commenting on Beckett's humour infused with a dry humour and wry wit, Vinson Cunningham (2023) writes: 'Endgame' is a series of thwartings—thwarted connections, thwarted meanings,

clipped-off attempts to tell a story.… 'And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh anymore.'

Beckett's existential vision, infused with dark humour and a wry wit, finds a close parallel in the works of the Bengali postmodernist writer Nabarun Bhattacharya and his post-apocalyptic landscapes of planetary decay inhabited by run-down, emaciated characters whose short stature, scurried motions and perpetual scavenging for scarce resources echo the bleak landscapes of Beckett's plays. Supriya Chaudhuri, in her essay 'The Bengali Novel' underscores the elements of 'fantasy, surreal farce and linguistic and narrative experiment' (122) that define Nabarun Bhattacharya's novels *Herbert* (1997) and *Kangal Malsat* (2002) heralding the return of the comic mode in 20th century Bengali fiction. The strain of comedy that Bhattacharya's works perhaps engage with is best defined as deflatory and satirical, bordering on black humour, which finds a resonance with Beckett's absurdist humour and bleak existential landscapes. In an interview, Bhattacharya once remarked: 'I don't understand writing just as a way of offering entertainment. For me, writing has a deeper alchemy and there's a risk of explosion there' (Bhattacharya and Chattopadhyay 2015:6). Humour in Nabarun Bhattacharya becomes a kind of epistemological triumph over the repressive policies of the state apparatus, a Marxist deflation of the grand architectonics of state politics, leaving the state machinery clueless in the wake of a carnivalesque ploy, partaking in the disruptive poetics of Bakhtin's carnivalesque aesthetics with its subversive tones. Humour thus transforms into a sophisticated ideological tool in the hands of the subaltern miscreants in Bhattacharya's works; washed-out characters and anti-social riff-raffs who don the mantle of the jester to project a derisive politics of laughter, much to the bafflement of the organised political machinery of the state, ramming through its cordon of tightened administrative security with its strong censoring mechanism designed to stamp out dissent. Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay (2015), in their essay, emphasise the political agency of Nabarun's satirical humour, which transforms literary practice into a vehicle of resistance:

> Literature doesn't become political by imparting knowledge; instead it becomes political by questioning a 'phallogocentric' (phallic as well as logocentric or reason-centric) construction of Statist knowledge by installing nonknowledge (Bhattacharya and Chattopadhyay 2015:7).

The phrase 'nonknowledge' again foregrounds the epistemological power of the nonsensical in dismantling the conventional tropes of language through a derisive poetics of dry humour, with a sharp satirical intent. Much like Beckett's tramps, Nabarun's political miscreants stir up humour in a decadent political landscape that has stripped them of all agency; the morbid humour is often mobilised through visual gags and the hurling of excremental objects at the dominant socio-political order as part of a ludic exercise in political transgression. This feat of scatological

absurdity, which borders on farce, becomes an act of defamation that, as Bhattacharya and Chattopadhyay (2015) observe, engages in an overt display of 'ridiculous indecency' (8) to sabotage the logocentric, phallic bourgeois socio-political order by engaging with the theatrics of absurd comedy. In Nabarun Bhattacharya, humour becomes a powerful weapon, a political exercise in launching a series of onslaughts on the political machinery and the bourgeois socio-political order. Both Beckett and Bhattacharya rely on visual gags to supplement their doggerel prose, and sparse verbal effusions to erect a feeble defence against the bleak infinitude of human existence.

In Bhattacharya, black humour is deployed in the description of excremental landscapes, human faeces and vomit, or the city disgorging its waste in the form of garbage dumps or badly constructed drainage systems, with scavenging rodents and nocturnal pests such as lizards and cockroaches feasting on organic refuse or nibbling on leftovers. These descriptions seem to undermine any remaining traces of bourgeois decorum, as the characters, who seem to have lost all socio-cultural moorings and have fallen into a state of debauchery, figure their way through a decadent urban slum. The frivolity and casual humour brought into the discussion of serious and disturbing subjects compel the audience to think. This strain of humour, also known as gallows humour (Bhattacharya 2020: 140), works in close correspondence with the genre of tragic farce. Bhattacharya's short story 'Fyatarus in the Spring Festival' offers a brief foray into his use of the carnivalesque and dark humour as part of a political ploy devised by the subalterns. Set in the modern-day metropolis of Kolkata, divided along lines of caste and class, the story focuses on a motley crew of slum dwellers represented by the 'fyatarus', Bhattacharya's magic realist notion of 'flying humans'or the fyatarus, belonging to the city's underclass, which exist as a kind of smudge or a blot staining the polished façade of bourgeois social order and economic affluence. These edgy subaltern figures, living in shanties in the Telipara slum in the shadow of the city's high rises, exude a subversive energy, which finds an outlet in their use of excremental slangs and verbal abuse and invectives using 'swear words' to defame the bourgeoisie socio-cultural fabric. The hurling of filth in the form of verbal abuse and slang words becomes part of a strategic ploy to ambush a spring get-together planned by the social elite celebrating the spring festivity of Holi. The fictive characters of the dispossessed *fyatarus* infiltrate the sanitized space represented by the bourgeois status quo as anarchic elements, gate-crashing into the elite get-together as part of an explosive gesture to sabotage bourgeois complacency; launching a carnivalesque attack to 'dirtify, to threaten the establishment and to destabilize the status quo' (Anindya Shekhar Purakayastha) that has disowned and expunged them from the civic space.

Much of the humour is scatological, sabotaging a bourgeois aesthetics. The revolutionary society of *fyatarus* breaks into the spring festival of Holi being celebrated at the posh South Calcutta high-rise of Himgiri Apartments. The very concept of the spring festival is itself deconstructed and debased by the *fyatarus*

when DS remarks, 'Spring brings pox, and the Goddess of pox will be worshipped' (Bhattacharya 2020: 19). He is chided for his ignorance by Madan, who defines the spring fest as a celebration to mark the day of Holi, where 'girls tie flowers and sing like cats, and some alpha-males throw colours from the backside. Pure whoring' (19), thus ridiculing the petite-bourgeois and their trivial preoccupations. Himgiri Apartments, which houses one hundred and twenty 'filthy-rich families' (20), is also the abode of the popular writer Nabani Dhar. Dhar, who lives on the 9th floor of the apartment, is left out of the list of invitees for the upcoming celebrations on account of his soon-to-be-published autobiography *Split Wide Open,* which threatens to expose the scandals of the filthy rich domiciled in the apartment block alongside his own.

> That is the blunder! Along with his own scandals, he is exposing everyone else's—whose wife is going around with whom and all that. They have filed at least four or five defamation cases against him. They have also threatened him. All of them at Himgiri have decided in a meeting that there will be no entry for Nabani-da (Bhattacharya 2020: 20).

The *fyatarus* constitute a groupuscule of social riff-raffs who team up to ambush the spring festivities and unsettle the sanctity of the carefully choreographed smearing of floral colours, with pelting of waste matter, filth, and a verbal cascade of sexually charged innuendos to defame elitist bourgeois façade of sophisticated exchange. DS, Madan da and Purandar hatch a plot over tea, biscuits, and Charminar 'Solid, liquid, smoke, all three went in and the plan came up. What? Of fucking up the function?' (Bhattacharya 2020: 21). The Telipara slum, which lies just outside the Himgiri Apartments, harbours a country liquor shanty attracting both old and young thugs who frequent the place. The fyatarus pay a visit to the Telipara slum and rope in these anti-socials over a boozing meet to gatecrash the celebrations at Himgiri Apartments.

> A big crowd consisting of tipsy people, women and children went towards Himgiri. The chief guest, the famous procurator, Gojendranath Porel, had just arrived. The mic testing was on. Using the influence of one promoter resident, Miss Piu and Miss Jhinuk had arrived with their boyfriends. The evening was waning. Girls with flower bands, boys in designer kurtas, colours, food, and hidden business of booze were ready. A sudden noise came from outside. (Bhattacharya 2020: 22)

As doormen bolt the door in fear, the crowd of tipsy revellers crashes against the gate, letting loose ripples of chaos and clamour as residents jostle to make their escape towards the car park.

> The clamour turns into howls. Stones came pelting by, along with bottles and containers. Instead of waking up to the vernal door of festivities, they trembled at the car park. Who knew what was happening? Roars came from outside. Beat them up! Beat the fuckers! On everyone's request, the secretary had made an attempt to reach the gate but, at that very moment, a mini bomb exploded at the gate. Crashing sounds. The secretary called the police — 'I am calling from Himgiri Apartments. Please send police force immediately.' (Bhattacharya 2020: 22).

The police force, who initially dismisses the SOS with the casual observation 'Brawls do happen on such days. Manage it' (Bhattacharya 2020: 23), stand by as mute witnesses as socket bombs explode, unwilling to intercede lest they hurt party sentiments before the encroaching elections. Nabarun Bhattacharya's protagonists of rebellion, the *fyatarus* and *choktars,* consist of social outcastes or mysterious members of the urban underbelly who resort to macabre mechanisms of subversion and sabotage, involving a brutal use of semantic assaults and invectives against the bourgeois to undo the matrix of power and legitimacy. The clarion call of revolutionary violence in Nabarun's works, which is described as '*chakti ka khel*' is accompanied by the justifying logic, '*Akas, alo, jal, bayu, char/ E shokole jadi thake adhikar/ sob manusher bhumite kebal/ Du char joner rahibe dokhol*?' (The sky, the light, water, air – if all are entitled to enjoy these four natural resources to survive, then why are they exclusively being usurped by the privileged classes? (Purakayasthya 2015: 9) sabotaging, subverting the elite canon, and normative codes so that a cognitive and epistemic tremor takes place.

Samuel Beckett and Nabarun Bhattacharya both indulge in an eccentric brand of humour in distinct ways, reflective of their ideological leanings and unique cultural contexts, which condition their humour. Whereas Bhattacharya's left-intellectual leanings and Marxist ideology are evident in the sharp political and social satire embedded in the socio-political landscape of Bengal, Beckett's humour is quintessentially existential, foregrounding the absurdity of human existence, its meaninglessness and uncertainty reflected in the repetitive nature of human actions. Deeply grounded in the tenets of existential philosophy, Beckett's humour is reflective of the isolation, absurdity, and desolate nature of human existence, thereby engaging with universal themes that transcend specific contexts. Bhattacharya's humour, on the other hand has strong revolutionary leanings challenging the bourgeois status quo and championing the cause of the downtrodden and the marginalised. While both Beckett and Bhattacharya use the mundane and the banal to generate a popular brand of humour, their approaches and contexts differ significantly. Whereas Bhattacharya's humour remains committed to social change through the revolutionary ploys of the underdog, Beckett's humour, which is minimalist in conception and universal in terms of applicability, focuses on the general state of the human condition. Despite their differential perspectives, both writers subscribe to a populist conception of humour to provoke critical thought, which translates into a commentary on the deeper truths of human existence.

Endnotes

1. Fyataru Bhattacharya's magic realist creation is 'uber-Bengali trickster with the power of fligh't. 'The fyataru is an agent of anarchy; a cackling saboteur who becomes the scourge of the bhadralok (bourgeoisie gentleman)' (Nabaraun).

Works Cited

Beckett, Samuel and Rónán McDonald. 2009. *Endgame*. London: Faber and Faber.

Bhattacharya, Sourit et al. 2020. *Nabarun Bhattacharya Aesthetics and Politics in a World after Ethics*. Bloomsbury, India.

Chattapadhyay, Arka and Sourit Bhattacharya. 2015. 'Nabarun Bhattacharya: An Introduction', *Sanglap*, 2 (1). (pages 1-15)

Chaudhuri, S. 2012. 'The Bengali novel', in Dalmia, V and R. Sadana (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, pp. 99–123. Cambridge University Press.

Cohn, Ruby. 1962. *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Connor, Steven. 2008. "'On Such-and-Such a Day . . . In Such a World": Beckett's Radical Finitude', *Borderless Beckett/Beckett sans frontières, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 19: 35–50.

Cunningham, Vinson. "Finding Laughs Amid the Gray, in Beckett's Endgame." The New Yorker, 6 Feb. 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/the-theatre/finding-laughs-amid-the-gray-in-becketts-endgame.

Dow, Suzanne. "Beckett's Humour, from an Ethics of Finitude to an Ethics of the Real." *Paragraph*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 121–36. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263774. Accessed 3 Dec. 2025.

Esslin, Martin. 1960. 'The Theatre of the Absurd', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4(4): 3–15, https://doi.org/10.2307/1124873 (accessed on 23 May 2024).

Purakayasthya, Anindya Shekhar. 2015. 'Fyataru and Subaltern War Cries Nabarun Bhattacharya and the Rebirth of the Subject', *Sanglap*, 1(2) (pages 1-14).

Colloquialisms and Humour in Select Short Stories of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay

Sohini Gayen and Arnapurna Rath

Abstract

The short stories of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971) represent an intersection of the everyday speech of rural Birbhum and the high classicism of early 20th-century Bengal. In his corpus of more than 190 short stories, the interplay of humour and high seriousness is a subtle undercurrent. *Apabhrangsha bhɪshɪ* (interpreted in this paper as the language of the people) that Bandyopadhyay has used in his stories have an intrinsic quality of colloquial expressions. Some of these stories often border on irreverence and 'inappropriateness' from the perspective of 'elite' *bhɪshɪ*-sahitya. Through a close reading of two short stories by Bandyopadhyay, 'Chor' (1940) and 'Jadukari' (1941), this research presents a comparative study of the semiotic and rhetorical devices that reflect freedom from the rigid constraints of 'official' conversations. In these stories, humour is present as a subtext of the narrative in the form of sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek devices. A close reading of the select stories opens dialogic possibilities to understand the intertwined and complex nature of caste and class discourses. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895–1975) concept of literary carnivalisation forms the focal theoretical backdrop of this research. Bandyopadhyay's stories render colloquial speech and verbal expressions that are sometimes light-hearted but often sharp and piercing, evoking the language of the 'people'. The literary carnivalisation, a characteristic of Bandyopadhyay's writing style, reveals deeper undercurrents of cultural uniqueness and peculiarities that showcase the charm of rural life and livelihoods in India.

Keywords: colloquialisms, humour, literary carnivalization, Mikhail Bakhtin, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, short stories

The earth of that place, its people and their aberrant language—all these things are very familiar to you. Their lifespirit's black hue and sensuous bumblebee hum are woven together with your images and songs of rural life. I don't know how the subject of these people will go down in educated society. I have put it into your hands.

(Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*, xxvii, tr. by Ben Conisbee Baer)

Stylistic Complexities and the *Apabhrangsha*

In his dedication to the poet Kalidas Ray in the novel *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1951), Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971) has brought the context of 'অপভ্রংশ' (*apabhrangsha)* as a core of rural language in Bengal, with its earthy texture and aroma of the land. Bandyopadhyay has discussed this word as an intrinsic element of his literary style that represents everyday life in rural Bengal.[1] This colloquialism in *apabhrangsha* depicts an intimacy between the speakers, listeners, readers, and the novelist. The author has indicated at the problem of the perception of 'educated society' (interpreted as 'elite *bhadralok*')[2] regarding the language and diction of the rural as being lopsided and biased against the colloquial and raw textures of these verbal utterances (Bandyopadhyay 2011: xxvii). In the analyses of languages for the study of fictional narratives, the speech that emerges from the heartlands of Indian villages has often been ignored.

Ben Conisbee Baer has translated the word '*apabhrangsha*' as 'aberrant' language in *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* (2011), the translated version of the novel *Hansuli Banker Upakatha*.[3] This word '*apabhrangsha*' is used in relation to phrases/words that tentatively indicate 'fallen away', 'collapsed', or 'disintegrated'. According to Baer, *apabhrangsha* suggests a 'subaltern or local language or style, one that is accessible to a particular, generally "nonelite group"' (Baer 2010: 623). This implies that the 'aberrant' or *apabhrangsha* in Bandyopadhyay's literary works refers to a language used by people positioned in the lowest strata of class and caste. However, a closer reading of the short stories of Bandopadhyay suggests that the earthy texture and rugged expressions of this 'aberrant language' (xxvii) are in circulation within the rural communities depicted in the narratives, irrespective of gender, class, and caste. The binary between elite and nonelite, high and low and man and woman dissolves in these short stories of Bandopadhyay in terms of their utterances and language. This research deals with the intricate language and expressions in select short stories of Bandyopadhyay. It aims to develop an understanding of the language in these stories, taking into account the tropes of colloquialisms and humour[4] as integral elements of *apabhrangsha bhɪshɪ* in the writings of Bandyopadhyay.

The analysis focuses on literary carnivalisation as conceptualised by the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and its various manifestations as *apabhrangsha* combining wit, humour and sarcasm. The paper builds on readings of two select short stories: 'Chor' (1940) and 'Jadukari' (1941). The English translations of these stories are not available, and in the interest of the research, key portions have been translated as part of the research methodology. In the story 'Chor', humour serves both as an escape from the socio-economic conditions of rural existence and as an act of defiance against the daily humiliations faced by the Dom community in the region. 'Jadukari' presents the wit and clever language

of the *jadukaris,* or gipsy magicians, to manipulate and influence the domestic lives of affluent rural women. The stories offer tongue-in-cheek allusions and telling imagery with commentaries on the social scene of rural Bengal.

Language possesses nuances that extend beyond mere communication. It becomes an integral part of everyday actions and existence when viewed through cultural specificities. To truly grasp the essence of the rural language, it is essential to consider the writer himself, who lived in Labhpur, one of the villages in Birbhum. Writing far away from the metropolitan centre of Calcutta, Bandyopadhyay took readers to the peripheries of the nation. He has documented this language and its dialects with their unaffected naturalness and spontaneity. The utilisation of dense semiotic and rhetorical devices ranging from abstract, visually charged forms to images, symbols, and linguistic markers such as sarcasm, abuse, slang, oaths, and even more stylistic complexities is a characteristic marker of Bandyopadhyay's writings. He does not perceive these linguistic expressions as vulgar or obscene but rather as the essence of the region. The language he employs is unadorned, reflecting the rawness and freedom from rigid constraints of polite conversations within *bhadralok* society. This *apabhrangsha bhɪshɪ* that Bandopadhyay has used in his writings has an intrinsic quality of colloquial expressions that often border on irreverence and 'inappropriateness' from the perspective of 'elite' *bhɪshɪ* sahitya. By the phrase 'elite *bhɪshɨ*sahitya', the implication here is towards a kind of linguistic and social hierarchy that emerges from within scholastic discourses that have a tendency to observe rural colloquial diction with a penchant for either exoticism or as an unbearable civilisational lapse. The tendency to create binaries between savage/civilised and caste and class emerges from such language-orientated discourses.

Devendra Kumar Shastri, in his classic Hindi research treatise entitled *Apabhrangsha Bhɪshɪ Sahitya Ki Shodh Pravritiyan* (1996), mentions the word *'apabhrangsha'* as pertaining to the 'language of people' (Shastri 1996: 12). He has further stated that the classification of *apabhrangsha* ideally should not be based on ancient, mediaeval and modern literature of India. Instead, the classificatory model of such languages may have a vernacular and region-based approach (Shastri 1996: 13). In this context, there is a dense complexity and intertextuality of languages even from the Vedic times. Discussing the literary cultures in ancient India, Sheldon Pollock, in his work *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (2006), has written,

> as literary idioms both Prakrit and Apabhramsha had highly restricted registers. They were by preference employed, at least in earlier epochs, to suggest rural simplicity and joyful vulgarity—all of course for courtly audiences. This makes for wonderful poetry, to be sure, but hardly provides a firm basis for an expanded literariness (Pollock 2006: 104-5)

According to Pollock, *apabhrangsha* is generally regarded as a transitional linguistic stage between Prakrit and Sanskrit and served as a spoken language that

was used for everyday communication rather than for literary purposes. On the other hand, Bandyopadhyay's short stories are remarkable for employing *apabhranghsa* as a language within the halos of high literature and deep human emotions. In his literary writings, the term *'apabhrangsha'* denotes the colloquial dialect of the 'rural', serving as a language of the 'popular', characterised by a rustic texture and abundant in coarse humour. These integral elements of *apabhrangsha* that intersperse colloquialisms with humour are a part of literary carnivalisation as conceptualised by Bakhtin in his works *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) and *Rabelais and His World* (1984). The central argument in this context is that the short stories of Bandyopadhyay are intrinsically carnivalesque in their form and essence.

The concept of literary carnivalisation offers a rich space to dialogically engage with the language and colloquialisms within the artistic prose of Bandyopadhyay. While discussing the idea of colloquialisms as part of the 'language of marketplace' (Bakhtin 1984b: 145), in his *Rabelais*, Bakhtin has written that 'the use of these colloquialisms created the atmosphere of frankness, inspired certain attitudes, a certain unofficial view of the world.' (Bakhtin 1984b: 188). The range of stylistic variations from rustic speech to the village customs, festivities and cultural and ritualistic practices in Bandyopadhyay's stories mark a carnivalisation of language and characters. Complex layers of language in the forms of 'insults', 'jokes', and other verbal expressions of sarcasm and ridicule recur in the stories. However, within the colloquial style of Bandyopadhyay, the bold humour of carnival is subdued in the writings. Unlike the bawdy Rabelaisian humour that forms the upper crust of Bakhtinian carnival, Bandyopadhyay's approach in the short stories has a Dostoyevskian streak characterised by subdued innuendoes and subliminal laughter. The short stories are written to present everyday rhetoric and restrained humour. The comic element here exists in the everyday speech of life. The dialogues and conversations within these stories evoke laughter, not so much through slapstick but with skilful twists of phrases, malapropisms, and exaggeration in the form of sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek. Some of these expressions have a definite relationship with caste and class discourses, and in these stories, they also work towards an inversion of such established stereotypes and binaries of upper and lower caste or class. The verbal expressions in the stories include swearing, lampooning of individuals and sensual impressions, and mocking laughter, sometimes light-hearted but often pointed, which are evocative of the colloquial 'language of the marketplace' of carnival squares (Bakhtin 1984b: 145). In his *Rabelais*, Bakhtin has written,

> Abuses, curses, profanities and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability. These elements of freedom, if present in sufficient numbers and with a precise intention, exercise a strong influence on the entire contents of speech, transferring it to another sphere beyond the limits of conventional language (Bakhtin 1984b: 187–8)

Bandopadhyay's use of colloquial speech that is comic, gross, profound and, sometimes, even sublime offers a rich experience of the rural. In her work *Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay* (1975), Mahasweta Devi noted that Bandyopadhyay has utilised the dialects of rural communities primarily as a means of localising realism. She observed that Bandyopadhyay has successfully employed 'the living language consisting of terms and orders of speech used by the common people' (Devi 1975: 67). In this context, it may be possible to see similarities between literary carnivalisation and the language of the 'rural' in Bandyopadhyay's stories in terms of the excessiveness of everyday speech and colloquialisms.

There is also the larger question of translation involved in the readings, and this points to an inadequacy in rendering the nuances of language and culture and individual and collective experiences within the rural landscape. E.V. Ramakrishnan points out that limitations of translations arise from the fact that they 'move away from the particular, from "local habitations" of words and their inherited meanings, and uproot from them their embedded and embodied formations' (Ramakrishnan 2017: 47). The number of translations of Bandyopadhyay's short stories is few. Words and phrases, especially those belonging to rural dialects in Birbhum, are challenging to render in the English language or other Indian languages, considering the rustic texture of the expressions and phrases. The polyphony of characters, social customs, and dialects in these short stories demands critical engagement.

In the following section, we have attempted a close reading of Bandyopadhyay's short story 'Chor', taking literary carnivalisation as a theoretical backdrop to analyse the nuances of language and expressions in the story.

Carnivalesque Subversion in 'Chor'

The concept of humour is deeply entrenched in the lived social realities of people that find representation in fictional narratives. Subversiveness is a characteristic identified by Bakhtin in his study of fools, rogues and clowns in *Rabelais* (Bakhtin 1984b: 4). The Indian context and its representative literary voices, such as Bandyopadyay's, are subtle and delicate in their expressions of human behaviour and attributes. The complexities are sometimes unique to geopolitical identities of individuals that are depicted in the stories. For instance, the short story 'Chor', published in 1940, centres around Sashi, who belongs to the Dom community. In the village where the tale unfolds, the Doms are presented with a stereotype that they are notorious for theft, particularly focused on stealing rice and paddy from affluent villagers. This necessitated labelling of these castes as groups with 'criminal tendencies'.[5]. Itis interesting to note that rice was the primary item for theft–reason being hunger and lack of resources.

In 'Chor', through the character of Sashi, Bandyopadhyay has indicated the unusual profession of the Doms: 'In this village lived a thief, an experienced one whose lineage boasted a long-standing tradition of thievery… For three generations the family has been devoted to stealing rice'. (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 303, *translation original*). In the story, Bandyopadhyay has noted that the Doms have

exclusively stolen paddy for three consecutive generations, refraining from any other form of theft regardless of its value. Their sole focus on stealing rice stemmed from the necessity of meeting their basic sustenance needs. Therefore, while the villagers secured their rice barns for three successive generations, they never seemed to bother about their iron chests (303). Bandyopadhyay has likely crafted this story against the backdrop of an impending famine in Bengal, anticipating a future where food scarcity had driven people to theft.[6]

The story opens with the villagers grappling with the thievery of their copper and bronze utensils instead of paddy. This unusual development of stealing utensils instead of paddy caused distress to the villagers, and they eagerly waited for the authorities to identify the thief. The officer-in-charge, Ramsharan Singh, confidently declares, 'The rascal's name is Topkeshwar' (302, *translation original*). The term 'Topkano' in Bangla means 'to leap over', and the officer cleverly coins the name 'Topkeshwar', signifying 'one adept in leaping'. (302) This name adds a touch of humour to the otherwise serious situation of thievery. The naming of the thief as 'Topkeshwar' elicits laughter from the readers as they recognise the traits being satirised or parodied through this name. The use of nicknames is often employed to evoke mockery and sarcasm. Bakhtin has talked about the nuances of praise-abuse related to nicknames in his *Rabelais*,

> This softening of the dividing lines between proper and common nouns has the goal of expressing praise-abuse in a nickname. In other words, if a proper noun has a clear etymological meaning that characterizes its owner, it is no longer a name but a nickname (Bakhtin 1984b: 459).

The nuances of abusive humour in the use of nicknames are symbolic of dense social customs and dissenting voices. The word 'Topkeswar' would also indicate an individual who subverts the existing status quo of communitarian living in a village. He marks the inversion of existing norms, thus bringing disruptiveness into the everydayness of life. The use of colloquial expressions like 'rascal' to ridicule also points towards a sense of entitlement and hierarchy that extends through the use of language.

Concerned about the escalating thefts, Ramsharan's mental state begins to deteriorate, resulting in amusing situations, including his eccentric remedies and addressing everyone as 'scoundrels' (302). In the story, Bandyopadhyay has used the clashes between differing socio-economic groups as a basis for humour. The inability to catch a petty thief who belongs to the margins of the rural community, coupled with elaborate but failed plans to find him, contributes to the humorous turn of events. Within this context, the use of terms like 'scoundrels' and 'rascal' for those who were subordinate to Ramsharan and belonged to the lower class is marked by inherent prejudices in the story (302). Caste, therefore, emerges as one of the sublayers within the intricate social fabric of this story. Here, colonial hierarchies and the intense objectification of humans through 'reputation management' play out as a subtext to the story.

The thief, later identified as Sashi, crosses paths with a villager, Amrit Ghoshal, one night. Despite Ghoshal's attempt to expose him, Sashi manages to evade capture. In an extremely comical manner Sashi escapes, leaving Ghoshal to face the bemused crowd alone,

> সাহস পাইয়া অমৃত এবার শিখন্ডী বিক্রমে আস্ফালন করিয়া উঠিল - একটা অতি অশ্লীল গাল দিয়া- কি বলিতে গেল; কিন্তু গালটা শেষ হওয়ার সঙ্গে সঙ্গেই অত্যন্ত ক্ষিপ্র সজোর আকর্ষণে হাতখানাকে মুক্ত করিয়া লইয়া শশী মুহূর্তে একটা প্রচন্ড চড় কষাইয়া দিল। ঘোষাল প্রানপনে আত্মসম্বরণ করিবার চেষ্টা করিল; চোখের সম্মুখে ছায়াবাজির মত কাল দীর্ঘ কি-একটা ধূসর আবছায়ার মধ্যে মিলাইয়া গেল, কানে আসিল লঘু দ্রুত একটা ক্রম-বিলীয়মান শব্দ। (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 305-6)

> Summoning courage like Shikhandi, Amrit began to unleash a barrage of nasty abuses at Sashi. Before he could utter another word, Sashi swiftly freed his hand and delivered a resounding slap to Ghoshal's face. Ghoshal struggled to maintain composure, but a looming, dark shadow blended with the haze. He only heard a faint, swift sound that soon faded away. (305, *translation original*)

In the story, Sashi's desire to satisfy the basic needs for him and his family is so strong that it clouds his rational thinking, leading him to defy the prevailing social hierarchy in the village.[7] Amrit Ghoshal is a Brahmin. Sashi's actions might thus have been interpreted as arrogant and daring for Ghoshal, for he slaps the latter as an act of pure desperation. On the other hand, Ghoshal's apparent failure to react in that moment, thereby allowing Sashi to escape, appears as a sign of weakness, especially to Ramsharan. (306). Bandyopadhyay has described Ghoshal's reaction at that moment, stating, 'A sheepish Ghoshal turned his left cheek towards the officer, admitting, 'I was taken by surprise and I could not grasp much at that moment' (306, *translation original*). The humour in the image of an 'imprint of Shashi's palm on Ghoshal's reddened and swollen cheek' (306, *translation original*) presents a critique of the caste system. The nuanced humour that is generated through this scene reflects the carnivalised potential of laughter to bring about 'the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts' (Bakhtin 1984b: 92). Here the carnivalesque lay in the momentary inversion of the socially constructed roles within the village. The subversive force of carnivalisation arises from the blending of elements of official 'high' culture with the 'low'.

Sashi reflects on his past, recalling how he feigned illness to avoid incarceration during previous legal proceedings (309). Despite ample evidence against him, his infirmity spares him from imprisonment. This act of deceiving the upper-caste members in the village may also be perceived as transgressive. The metaphor of the 'mask', as discussed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais*, offers insight into this deception and transgression. According to Bakhtin, 'The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nick-names' (Bakhtin 1984b: 39–40). In the story, the Dom community faces harsh treatment, being labelled as 'criminals'. The Imperial Police, aiming to control Dom activities, had arrested and imprisoned everyone for extended periods with B.L.

cases filed against them.[8] Once labelled, these castes faced suspicion and constant surveillance by the colonial administration, risking severe punishment if caught. Sashi's own son Phinge was beaten to death by the police (311). These labels depict a normative distinction between 'good' and 'bad' livelihoods, emphasising how individuals have been pitted against each other for an extended period. The tensions between village elites such as Amrit Ghoshal and Ramsharan and the marginal like Sashi Dom have possibly been orchestrated by the Imperial Police. The community of Doms in the story emerges as 'the other', and people like Ramsharan and Ghoshal may be perceived as the loyal colonial subject and 'respectable residents' who are responsible for 'protecting' the village from their own people of the so-called 'lower castes'. Consequently, in the story it may be observed that this intricate web of normative judgements has bound everyone within their own circumstances and linguistic confines. With most men imprisoned, their families, including women and children, endure hardship, leaving the elderly helpless. While Bandyopadhyay did not advocate for criminal impunity, he has shed light on the physical abuse and suffering experienced by marginalised communities and their families. The burden of providing for his family weighs heavily on Sashi, prompting him to resort to deception and theft for survival (309). In the story, Sashi manages to deceive and mock the affluent segments of the village, envisioning himself as a 'king',

> অমৃত ঘোষাল- বেটা বামনা! বেটাকে যে এক চড় কষাইয়া দিতে পারিয়াছে- ইহাতেও দুঃখের মধ্যে সে আনন্দ অনুভব করিতেছে! একটা কামড় দিয়া বেটার নাকটা অথবা একটা কান কাটিয়া লইতে পারিলে সে আরও সুখী হইত। ভুল হইয়া গিয়াছে। কিন্তু পেটের ভিতর সূচ বিঁধিতেছে। উপায়ে নাই। নদীর জল সে আঁজলায় ভরিয়া পেট পুরিয়া খাইলো। ব্যস! এইবার এক ছিলিম তামাক - নিদেন একটা বিড়ি হইলেই আর চাই কি? তাহাতে আর রাজাতে তফাত কি? আঃ--দারোগাবাবুর টাঙ্গির মত গোঁফ খানিকটা ছিঁড়িয়া আনিলেও পাতায় পুরিয়া বিড়ির মত খাওয়া চলিত। নিস্তব্ধ অরণ্যের মধ্যে সে আপন মনেই হাসিয়া সারা হইল। বিড়ির অভাবে দীর্ঘনিশ্বাস ফেলিয়া আবার সে শুইয়া পড়িল। (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 312)

> That wretched Brahmin, Amrit Ghoshal! He felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that he had slapped that man! It would have been even better if he had bitten off Ghoshal's ear or nose. It was a missed opportunity! He was now overcome with hunger, but there was no way to venture out. He settled for drinking some river water. All he craved at that moment was some tobacco, or at least a *biri*. Would there be any difference between him and a king then? Ah! If only he had plucked a portion of the officer-in-charge's massive moustache, he could have used it to roll his tobacco and smoked it. He smiled to himself. Then, with a sigh, he drifted back to sleep. (312, *translation original*)

Bandyopadhyay has brought the rustic language, the forbidden elements and the coarseness of physical existence in the rural spaces of colonial India into focus. His style of writing presents a non-glossy starkness of existence that relied upon a pure struggle for survival devoid of the luxury of financial and intellectual freedom. Sashi regrets his inability to inflict actual physical harm on Ghoshal, but the mere thought of it excites him (312). Bandyopadhyay's use of terminology mirrors the language of the margins, employed by communities like the Doms. Colloquial

terms such as 'bamna' are used as popular forms of mockery and derision to refer to a 'brahman' (312). Bandyopadhyay has employed such images to generate humour by transforming symbols of fear and authority into familiar, irreverent terms, creating a parody. In this context, humour can be identified on two levels. On one level, we superficially laugh at the indigenous substitutes arising from the dialectical differences between standard Bangla and the colloquial dialect of the characters in the story. On a deeper and more subversive level, we observe how it leads to an inversion of the hierarchical social structure. Bandyopadhyay has also illustrated that within the apparent rusticity of everyday speech, there may be an alternate meaning that is humorous and often offensive.

The inclusion of mockery, sarcasm, ridicule, and inappropriate behaviour is a part of narrative technique in Bakhtin's literary carnivalisation. Sashi's monologue in the above quote from the story embodies the clash between his desire to mock and abuse the higher authorities of the village and the practicalities of his socio-cultural meagreness. In Bakhtin's *Dostoevsky Poetics*, Bakhtin has discussed the carnivalistic act of 'mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king' (Bakhtin 1984a: 124). This symbolic role of a fool in literary carnivalisation allows them to debase otherwise exalted objects to the lowest possible level. This psychological gratification obtained through a process of imagining the crowning and decrowning of a 'sacred' character mirrors Sashi's humorous daydreams. Sashi imagines himself as the landlord chastising a mischief monger such as Ghoshal. It is his opportunity for a subversive act that challenges societal norms.

Similar to the carnival time when people engage in humour and subversive rhetoric due to the temporary suspension of hierarchical distinctions, privileges, norms, and prohibitions, the story also underscores the conclusion of the carnivalesque. In the final part of the story, Sashi is caught trying to escape from the house of Shyama Thakurun, which he had broken into to steal food (313). Trapped between people at both ends of the road, there was no way out for Sashi. Facing his fate, Sashi pleads for mercy, only to be met with laughter and a final act of humiliation from Ramsharan,

> শশী আর কোন চেষ্টা করিল না, সে হাত দুইটি বাড়াইয়া অগ্রসর হইয়া বলিল- মেরেন না মশাই - হেই দারোগাবাবু!
>
> দারোগা রামশরণ মহাকৌতুকে হা-হা করিয়া হাসিয়া শশীর বুকে ক্রেপসোল জুতার এক লাথি বসাইয়া দিলেন। (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 314)

> Sashi did not try to escape. Instead, he raised his hands in surrender and pleaded, 'Mashai, please don't hit me! Please Sir!' Bursting into laughter, the officer-in-charge, Ramsharan, aimed a kick at Sashi's chest with his crepe-soled shoe. (314, *translation original*)

This moment of finally 'nabbing' Sashi marks Ramsharan's vicious triumph at the end of a long hunt (314). Ramsharan's laughter and physical abuse towards Sashi signal the stark reality of the social context, where humour takes a sombre turn.

The punishment Sashi faces signifies the conclusion of carnivalesque freedom, marking a return to rules and customs. Bandyopadhyay perhaps aims to emphasise the harsh realities of the social fabric in the rural landscape, where, despite momentary subversions of hierarchies, the underlying realities persist.

In the story, Bandyopadhyay's use of *apabhrangsha bhɪshɪ* as the language of the 'popular' is characterised by its stylistic features of mockery, insults and verbal humour. Bandyopadhyay has demonstrated how the use of certain Bangla colloquialisms within the *apabhrangsha* as a humorous device may lead to a temporary subversion of the suffering and prejudice faced by the Dom community. The story presents a carnivalisation of language that momentarily reverses societal hierarchies. This reversal grants the Doms a fleeting sense of power and contentment from the socio-cultural oppression that surrounds them. These humorous expressions inherent within colloquial expressions in 'Chor' take on a more subtle form through witty and clever conversations in the short story 'Jadukari'.

Speech and Songs of Domesticity in 'Jadukari'

The short story 'Jadukari', published in 1941, centres around a character from the rural community of *jadukaris,* or gipsy-magicians. These *jadukaris* travelled across villages in search of better fortunes and performed tricks, dances, and songs to entertain people in the villages (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 366). In the story, the character is unnamed and is simply addressed as 'jadukari' or 'bajikari', which adds a touch of mystery to the figure of the *jadukaris*. The story delves into the everyday conversations of domestic politics. These are personal stories typically shared in the small, informal settings of homes and households. These stories reflect the microcosm of women's sexual and social aspirations. The challenges of realising these aspirations due to complex interpersonal relationships and larger socio-cultural events form the undercurrent of this story. Bandyopadhyay's story may have indicated that the *jadukari*, a magician, possesses the unique ability to not just perform tricks but also weave the magic carpet of words. The songs and speech of *jadukari*s in the story are characterised by wit and cleverness, enabling them to influence and manipulate the domestic lives of rural women. In the story, Bandyopadhyay has presented one such song performed by the protagonist,

পাড়ায় যত এয়োন্তীরি-- শাঁখা ফেলে পড়ছে চুড়ি -
লালপরী সবুজপরী- মাঝখানে হলুদ পারা-
ওগো চুড়ির বাহার দেখে যা, তোরা -
এবার যদি না দাও চুড়ি, ত্যজ্য করব
এ ঘর বাড়ি
নয়কো দোব গলায় দড়ি
তবু চুড়ি পরব গো
হাতের শাঁখা ঘাটে ভেঙে ফেলব চোখের
নোনা পানি।
উরর-জাগ-জাগ - (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 367)

In the neighbourhood the married women,
Discard their *sankha* to wear bangles
Red, green, and in the middle, a yellow so bright
Come and see the array, a dazzling sight.
This time if you don't buy me bangles, I will give up both
Home and household or else
In the ghats, I will hang myself
I will break my *sankha* with a tear
Yet these bangles, I will wear (367, *translation original*)

The colloquial expressions within the melodies performed by the *jadukari*s mirror the everyday lives of rural women. In Bandyopadhyay's story, the *jadukari* seeks alms through her performances, offering entertainment to household members in exchange for money and clothing (366). The focus of the song on encouraging women to forsake their *sankha*, a symbol of married women in Bengal, and wear colourful bangles suggests a form of freedom from the shackles of domestic boundaries which were advocated by these *jadukari*s. Through her song, the *jadukari*s encourage rural women to participate in choosing colourful sarees in shades of red, green, and yellow and adorning themselves with bangles of their choice, breaking away from the constraints associated with the domesticity symbolised by the *sankha* (367).

The frank and everyday exchanges, encompassing gossip, idle chatter, and discussions among rural women, serve as a source of livelihood for the *jadukari*s. In the story, the speech of domesticity plays a significant role in the narrative loop of the text. Such speech unveils insights into the affairs of women's homes and households. In the storyline, the *jadukari* arrives at the Mukhujjes' residence, where Rama, their daughter, had been recently married into the neighbouring Badujje family. After persistent coaxing, the family reveal the details of their personal lives to the *jadukari*. The *jadukari* learns of a family dispute arising from Rama's frequent visits to her parents' home, which are disapproved by her mother-in-law. Consequently, Rama separates from her husband and chooses to reside with her parents (368-9). Intrigued by the personal affairs of these two upper-caste families, the reputed *jadukari*, known for magical powers and remedies, is sought after for a resolution (369). The *jadukari*s with their sharp wit and cleverness play a role in influencing affluent women, as is evident in the interaction between the *jadukari* and Rama,

তোমাকে কাপড় পরতে হবে, কেশবিন্যেস করতে হবে, ঢলকো করে চুল বাঁধবা, কপালে সিঁদুরের টিপ্ পরবা। গায়ে গন্ধ লিবা। আলতা পরবা। খোঁপাতে ফুল পরবা, সেই ফুল কর্তার হাতে দিবা। ভ্যাবা দেখ, এসব পারতো এলাচ আন, আমি মন্তর দিয়া পড়ে দি।

স্থির দৃষ্টিতে বাজীকরির দিকে চাহিয়া থাকিয়া মেয়েটি বলিল - পারব।

- তবে আন, এলাচ আন, ছোট এলাচ, দারচিনি, বড় এলাচ; মন্তর পড়ে দিব, তাই দিয়া মোটা খিলি করে পান সাজবা, নিজে খাবা; খেয়ে কর্তাকে দিবা। কিন্তুক যা বললাম- তা না করলে খাটবে নাই ওষুদঃ, তখন যেন আমাকে গাল দিয়ো না। আর পাঁচটি পয়সা লাগবে, পাঁচ পাই চাল লাগবে, পাঁচটি সুপারী, সিঁদুর - আর পুরানো কাপড় একখানি। লিয়ে এস। (Bandyopadhyay 2021: 370)

> Wear suitable clothes, keep your hair untied, tie a loose bun, and apply *bindi* with *sindur* on your forehead. Don a pleasant fragrance and apply *aalta*. Place a flower in your bun and then present it to your husband. Think about it carefully, if you can do it, fetch me a cardamom, and I will chant a *mantra* into it.
>
> The girl gazed steadfastly at the *bajikari*, eventually responding, 'I shall do it.'
>
> Then bring me a small cardamom and a cinnamon; I will recite the *mantra*. Use these ingredients to create a *paan*, have one yourself, and offer the other to your husband. However, if you neglect any of my instructions, the *mantra* will be ineffective, and do not hold me responsible. For this, I require just five paisa. Bring five betel nuts, *sindur*, and an old cloth for me (370, *translation original*)

In this manner, *jadukari*s in the story employ persuasive techniques with rural women while suggesting ways to resolve personal conflicts and emotional complexities. The circulating personal stories and gossip about failed marriages and domestic conflicts serve as a means to influence women in their actions and decisions as well as a means to procure money. There is also a carnivalesque ambience to such conversations, similar to the verbal expressions and gossip of the marketplace described by Bakhtin in his *Rabelais*. Bakhtin has noted, 'This female cackle is nothing but gossip and tittle-tattle. The popular frankness of the marketplace with its grotesque ambivalent lower stratum is replaced by chamber intimacies of private life, heard from behind a curtain' (Bakhtin 1984b: 105). The speech and songs are characterised by abundant intimate details and frank conversation, disregarding social conventions. Frank conversations become the only means of perceiving the binaries between these upper-caste women and the *jadukari*s who belong to the margins of society.

In the story, Bandyopadhyay has illustrated that the wit and cleverness exhibited by *jadukari*s serve purposes beyond manipulating individual lives. Armed with cleverness and insight, the *jadukari* discreetly visits each family separately (372). In a masterful display of persuasion, she conveys to each family that the other is pained and sorrowful about the separation. Touched by this revelation, both families reflect on their misunderstandings and eagerly seek the *jadukari*'s guidance (372). In the final part of the story, we find the wife adorned in a colourful saree and blouse, her hair combed, with flowers in her hair as she offers a paan to her husband, who appears to be smiling (374). The 'magical remedies' lie in the *jadukari*'s wit, merely advising the bride to dress well and impress her husband to resolve their issues. With a blend of wit, empathetic conversation and strategic interventions, 'Jadukari' navigates the intricacies of their grievances.

In the story, women attempt to extend their sphere of kinship outside the household through frank and familiar conversations. Bakhtin has discussed such verbal expressions encompassing 'the free discussion concerning women and matrimony which is typical of such prandial conversations' (Bakhtin 1984b: 280), which establishes a space of kinship among women. Humour, therefore, in 'Jadukari' is not exclusively manifested in physical forms; rather, it emerges through the

colloquial expressions of the *jadukari*, characterised by her playful and teasing banter as well as witty retorts. This humour serves to both alleviate the seriousness of the narrative events and dissolve the social disparities between the village elites and those situated on the fringes of society.

The language and colloquialisms of the *jadukaris*, intrinsic to *apabhrangsha*, are expressed in the story through their playful speech and songs. The humour and wordplay in their persuasive techniques can have a comic effect on readers, even amidst the serious and grim domestic complexities addressed in the story. Despite being perceived as a marginalised community in Bandyopadhyay's narrative, the *jadukaris* demonstrate verbal strategies of persuasion and engage in unofficial 'speech acts' (Bakhtin 1986: 152) within domestic spaces of rural Bengal.

Literary Carnivalisation and Complex Intertextualities

In the Indian rural ethos, language holds a delicate space, reflecting the complexities that challenge rigid binaries between high and low, popular and classical, and moral and immoral. Bandyopadhyay's stories vividly depict everyday speech and employ rhetorical tools drawn from popular idioms, presenting an 'authentic' portrayal of the milieu he wrote about. In this sphere, characters hail not only from upper-caste Bengali zamindars but also from peasants, gipsies and the working class. Therefore, while delving into the ordinary and everyday, Bandyopadhyay's stories engender discussions on socio-cultural themes, fostering the intermingling of different social worlds. The linguistic techniques of slang, curses, profanities, and improprieties characteristic of the writings of Bandyopadhyay work towards an inversion of high and low speech. It breaks down the simplistic binary opposition between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' language by reframing the narrative within a wider and more complex set of conflicts within rural society itself.

The literary carnivalisation reflected in the stories 'Chor' and 'Jadukari' sheds light on the intricate nuances of language, utilising humour, abuses, parodies, mockery, and witty expressions to vividly portray the social landscape of the villages. These stories challenge the 'officialdom' (Bakhtin 1984b: 438) of villages in Bandyopadhyay's stories, weaving carnivalesque elements into the plot to subtly question social hierarchies. A close reading of the linguistic nuances in select short stories of Bandyopadhyay from the comparative traditions of Bakhtin's concept of literary carnivalisation unveils elements of pathos combined with laughter. There is a certain form of irreverence through these 'speech acts' (Bakhtin 1986: 152) that are found in the lives and livelihoods of rural India. Their language and verbal expressions present human follies and frailties and the ordinariness and everydayness of people. The language in the short stories of Bandyopadhyay presents a syntactic and artistic rhetoric much like the unrestrained 'free and familiar' (Bakhtin 1984b: 121) language of the carnival. The aspiration of this study has been to reveal fresh perspectives on Bandyopadhyay's stories, revisiting

them from the twenty-first-century readers' imagination. The contemporariness of these stories may be tested through the touchstones of new worldviews and changing socio-cultural orders. The past remains documented in the pages of these stories of Bandyopadhyay. The stories present the nuances of linguistic, emotive, and social levels of speech and rhetoric of several communities in the rural heartlands of Bengal.

Endnotes

1. A brief part of this paper was presented at *the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in India (IACLALS) Annual Conference* 2024 held from 15 February to 17 February 2024 at BITS Pilani, K.K. Birla Goa Campus.
2. S. N. Mukherjee in his *Calcutta: Myth and History* (1977) has observed, 'The bhadralok was an open de facto social group. Although the *bhadralok* was almost exclusively a Hindu group, caste had no part in the selection; men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living and received a similar education were considered as *bhadralok*.' (Mukherjee 1977: 26). The economic and political interests of men determined the social class of *bhadraloks*.
3. The authors of this paper have adopted the spelling '*apabhrangsha*' as per Bandyopadhyay's rendition in his novel *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1951). However, Baer's paper 'Creole Glossary: Târâshankar Bandopâdhyây's Hânsulî Bânker Upakathâ' (2010) mentions a different spelling, 'apabhramsa'. Our translation practice aligns with Bandyopadhyay's original usage as a standard approach.
4. The Elizabethan playwright, Ben Jonson, developed four humours: blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy. These humours were believed to determine a person's temperament and character. The term 'humour' is now used to describe both comic utterances, appearances or behaviours. Bakhtin, in his writings, views humour as a subtle undercurrent within the text and its verbal and physical manifestation in the form of laughter, comic behaviour, and sarcasm, where laughter is 'not just an external but an interior form of truth' (Bakhtin 1984b: 94).
5. British ethnographers studying the social structure of indigenous communities in the 19th century often categorised certain tribes and castes as prone to criminal behaviour. H. H. Risley, in his study *The Tribes And Castes Of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary, Volume 1* (1892), has written that 'The popular belief that all Magahiyé Doms are habitual criminals is, however, mistake. Burglary is followed as a profession only by the wandering members of that sub-caste. There seems, indeed, reason to believe that the predatory habits of the gipsy Magahiyas of Champaran are due rather to force of circumstances than to an inborn criminal instinct' (Risley 1892: 251).
6. In his work *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981), Amartya Sen has pointed out that the Bengal famine of 1943–44 was not caused by food shortages but by social disparities (Sen 1981: 45). The scarcity of rice, wheat and other food items in Bengal's villages from the late 1940s was a result of several factors, including inflation, hoarding of crops and paddy, and wartime mismanagement by the British. Bandyopadhyay, cognisant of the socio-political landscape in villages, might have published the story 'Chor' in 1940 to shed light on the Dom community's desperate efforts to steal rice.

7. In the story, Shikhandi is used as a metaphor by Bandyopadhyay and is a character in the epic tale of Mahabharat who was responsible for Bhishma's downfall. (Ganguli 1896)
8. B.L. cases involve legal proceedings against individuals categorised as engaging in 'Bad Livelihood'. To regulate the activities of these individuals, the government enacted specific laws. Radhika Singha in her study 'Punished by Surveillance: Policing 'dangerousness' in colonial India, 1872–1918' (2015) discusses in detail the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which empowered provincial governments to establish regulations for surveillance of 'hereditary criminal castes and tribes'. Additionally, the 'security for good behaviour' sections of the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC 1861) permitted the evaluation of vagrancy and unlawful livelihood based on general reputation or other evidence (Singha 2015: 243).

Works Cited

Bandyopadhyay, Tarasankar. 2021. 'Chor', in J. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Tarasankarer Galpaguchchha*, vol. II (16th edition), pp. 302–14. Kolkata: Sahitya Sangsad.

Bandyopadhyay, Tarasankar. 2021. 'Jadukari', in J. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Tarasankarer Galpaguchchha,* vol. II (16th edition), pp. 366–75. Kolkata: Sahitya Sangsad.

Baer, B.C. 2011. *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Baer, Baer Conisbee. 2010. 'Creole Glossary: Tɪrɪshankar Bandopɪdhyɪy's Hɪnsulî Bɪnker Upakathâ', *PMLA*, 125 (3): 622–896.

Bakhtin, M.M and Caryl Emerson (ed. and tr.). 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essay*s. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Devi, M. 1975. *Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Ganguli, K.M. 1896. *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translated into English Prose*. Calcutta: Bharata Press.

Mukherjee, S.N. 1977. *Calcutta: Myths and History*. Kolkata: Subarnarekha.

Pollock, S. 2006. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California, 2006.

Ramakrishnan, E.V. 2017. *Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature, Region and Modernity.* Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.

Risley, H. H. 1982. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat.

Singha, Radhika. 2015. 'Punished by Surveillance: Policing 'dangerousness' in colonial India, 1872–1918.' *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (2): 241–69.

Sen, A. 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shastri, D.K. 1996. *Apabhrangsha Bhɪshɪ Sahitya Ki Shodh Pravritiyan.* New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith Prakashan.

Humour, Carnivalesque and Counter-Memory in the Literary Works of Suniti Namjoshi

Srestha Bhattacharya

Abstract

This paper proposes to analyze how comic counter-memory operates in Suniti Namjoshi's autofictional memoir, *Suki* (2013). Humorous and yet infused with pathos, the story follows the author reminiscing about her recently departed Lilac Burmese cat, the eponymous Suki. However, instead of 'faithfully' recounting her memories with her beloved pet, Namjoshi, quite literally, endows the latter with her own voice: Suki is a talking cat who engages in both witty banter and deep philosophical conversations with the narrator. Playful and independent, Suki repeatedly questions the narrator's biases and assumptions towards her and her species in these conversations. Such deployment of humour allows Namjoshi to eschew conventional realism, including the faithful representation of time, space, and events, in a matter-of-fact way. This, I argue, enables Namjoshi to introduce in her narrative elements of what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed the "carnivalesque" — a topsy-turvy world order where conventional rules and hierarchies are subverted in favour of a more unrestricted spirit. By foregrounding the individuality of a non-human animal (who, notably, is female), Namjoshi encourages her readers to look past their own prejudices and acknowledge the perspectives of the 'other' as valid. As my paper will demonstrate, this is in line with what Namjoshi seeks to undertake in what is arguably her most famous work—*Feminist Fables* (1981)—where age-old myths, legends and fairy tales are retold in a way that questions their patriarchal biases.

Keywords: humour, carnivalesque, counter-memory, narrative empathy, autofiction

Disjointed, fragmented narratives and non-linear storytelling, qualities usually associated with postmodernism, have been frequently studied and discussed in conjunction with humour. In her book *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon helped to establish a particularly postmodern understanding of irony

by championing the 'subversive potential of irony, parody, and humour in contesting the universalizing pretensions of "serious" art' (2003: 19). Taking Hutcheon's argument forward, Roha Rafique attributes anti-foundationalist qualities to humour, citing its ability to challenge 'the established structures and hierarchies, be it political, historical, religious or artistic' (2021: 75).

In a similar manner, Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, in particular, his desire for a 'free human consciousness', has been commonly associated with an anti-authoritarian and, consequently, subversive spirit (Bakhtin 1984a: 49). In fact, as he lays down the characteristic features of what he understands to be the carnivalesque, Bakhtin himself underscores this idea. Citing the example of François Rabelais, Bakhtin argues that the works of the French author, in particular his pentalogy *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, use profane folk humour and chaotic laughter to create a topsy-turvy world order, where conventional social boundaries and dominant power structures are temporarily overturned in favour of a more unrestricted world order. Highly analogous to the postmodernist idea of free structural play, Bakhtin's carnivalesque 'celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984a: 10).

Bakhtin's concept has often been understood in a positive light, and is usually thought of as something that engenders 'the possibility for affirmative change, however transitory in nature' (Buchanan 2010: 77). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, for instance, argue that popular cultural forms, through their embodiment of the carnivalesque, can potentially become sites of resistance against structural repression (1986: 25). Robert Stam takes a similar stance, and suggests that cinema, in particular, has provided a suitable medium through which Bakhtinian carnivalesque is enacted (1989: 18).

All such theorizations locate the emancipatory politics of humour within its power to subvert the conventional structures. While this provides a useful method to understand the relationship between experimental storytelling and humour, these approaches nevertheless underplay the potentially regenerative role of playful storytelling. Thinkers like André Breton have already noted such possibilities, calling for a merger between the rational and the irrational into an 'absolute reality, a surreality' (1969: 14). However, this idea has remained highly understudied, especially in terms of its relationship with humour.

Taking note of this lacuna, this paper analyses how comic counter-memory operates in Suniti Namjoshi's autofictional memoir, *Suki* (2013). Humorous and yet infused with pathos, the story follows the author reminiscing about her recently departed Lilac Burmese cat, the eponymous Suki. However, instead of 'faithfully' recounting her memories with her beloved pet, Namjoshi, quite literally, endows the latter with her own voice: Suki is a talking cat who engages in both witty banter and deep philosophical conversations with the narrator. Such deployment of humour allows Namjoshi to eschew conventional realism, including the faithful representation of time, space and events, in a matter-of-fact way. This, one argues,

enables the author to introduce elements of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in her fictional memoir.

As a relatively newer addition to Namjoshi's oeuvre, *Suki* has received little critical attention. Critical studies on Namjoshi's other works, however, have taken note of the significant presence of carnivalesque in them. For example, Shalmalee Palekar (1996: 6) and Suhasini Vincent-Prabakar (2006: 78) suggest that Namjoshi's carnivalization of linear storytelling brings about feminist revisions of established knowledge systems; Meeta Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, on the other hand, argues that Namjoshi's extensive use of humour helps to highlight the absurdity of institutions like patriarchy and homophobia (2002: 66).

Unlike these works, this paper focuses on the role of the humour and the carnival in fostering what Susanne Keen has termed 'narrative empathy' (2006: 7). By foregrounding the individuality of a non-human animal (who, notably, is female), Namjoshi encourages her readers to look past their own prejudices and acknowledge the perspectives of the 'other' as valid. In equipping her readers to accept alterity, Namjoshi precludes the possibility of her humour being co-opted to promote prejudice. As the final section of the paper shall demonstrate, this is in line with what Namjoshi seeks to undertake in what is arguably her most famous work—*Feminist Fables* (1981)— where age-old myths, legends and fairy tales are retold in a way that questions their patriarchal biases.

Contextualizing Namjoshi's Autofiction

Born in 1941, Suniti Namjoshi is an Indian diasporic writer. Previously a resident of Canada, Namjoshi now lives in England with her partner, Gillian Hanscombe. While she has several novels and poetry collections to her name, Namjoshi is arguably best known for exposing how the didactic nature of fables has been used as a vehicle for propagating gender-based prejudice, and for undertaking their feminist revisions through literature. Some of her prominent works include *The Feminist Fables* (1981), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* (1994), *Building Babel* (1996), *The Mothers of Maya Diip,* (1989), *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) and *Suki* (2013).

Namjoshi's literary works are deeply intertwined with her personal life. As an author, she uses literature as a vehicle to articulate how her life has been shaped by her identity as a postcolonial lesbian feminist. In the words of Diane McGifford, 'Namjoshi has bravely, assiduously deconstructed her social assumptions and named them as a privilege, an insight that stimulated her politicisation as a feminist and lesbian' (1991: 291).

An experimental writer, Namjoshi has chosen autofiction as her preferred mode of expression in not just one but two of her literary works, namely, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, and *Suki*. Interestingly, while both these works feature the author as a character, Namjoshi's literary self-representations take on a subordinate role to the titular characters. Moreover, both the titular protagonists are significantly disadvantaged in comparison with Namjoshi in real life: while Goja is the author's

family servant, Suki is her pet cat. The structure of Namjoshi's autofictional narratives, therefore, facilitates a complete subversion of conventional hierarchy from within. Autofiction, according to Alexandra Effe and Arnaud Schmitt, 'heavily tips in favour of fiction, and obeys the following rule: an author projects a character very similar to her/his empirical person, an avatar in other words, into an imaginary world' (2022: 4). In Namjoshi's case, instead of indicating a lack of the author's individuality, the comparatively diminished presence of her projected character represents her overarching personal beliefs as a writer-activist, which, in her own words, is to 'question the values of the prevailing hierarchy [and] deal with [others] in an egalitarian way' (Namjoshi 2020).

In *Goja*, Namjoshi stages imaginary interactions between herself and the titular servant woman, who was, among other things, tasked with looking after the author when the latter was a little child. However, even as Namjoshi inverts paradigms of actual reality by depicting her powerless, silenced social subordinate as a poised, assertive individual, her entire premise is admittedly based on speculation. Harking back to the temporal nature of the carnivalesque, Namjoshi repeatedly reminds her readers that Goja the person and her (auto)fictional counterpart are two vastly different characters. Noting the 'difference in [her grandmother's and Goja's] condition' (Namjoshi 2000: x), Namjoshi recounts how her grandmother 'Ranisaheb', the wife of a powerful feudal landlord, stood in contrast to her humble servant: '[Grandmother] smells of jasmine, Goja, her servant, smells of common mud' (2000: 8). Namjoshi lists a number of what-if scenarios to highlight what is in reality, not possible:

> If Goja and the child could achieve kinship? If Goja could call the child daughter? If the child could call Goja mother? Or if they could be the same age? Slide their ages, use experience? If they could tell each other tales? Join and combine? (Namjoshi 2000: 10)

The author also makes it clear that the biographical 'details' of Goja are, in fact, almost exclusively conjectures on her part as she 'endows' Goja with a 'poor, kindly' mother (2000: 3). The carnivalesque in *Goja* is never allowed to sustain itself for long, as the author keeps punctuating the narrative with instances of harsh reality. This, in turn, denies Goja a coherent personality and reduces the chances of the reader identifying with her character.

Suki, in contrast, is not nearly as self-conscious about its fictional nature, and consequently, displays a more seamless blend of the autobiographical and the fictional. Unlike *Goja*, *Suki* is much more consistently humorous; in Suki, the carnivalesque spirit is never interrupted by elements of reality, except in the paratextual introductory verse in which Namjoshi admits that the purpose of the novel is 'to write a lie'. Subsequently, Namjoshi presents the conversations with her cat in a rather matter-of-fact way. Through these conversations, Suki's fascinating personality— in all its distinctiveness and eccentricity— unfolds before the reader.

Humour and Carnivalesque in *Suki*

Right from the beginning of the novel, the author posits herself and her cat as equals. The first chapter, named the 'Fearful Wight', is an adjective that the author

uses to describe both herself and her cat, as they talk about what makes them afraid (2013: 5). Namjoshi establishes parallels between her fear of 'floods, fires, giant crevasses, force nine gales, earthquakes that measured 7.9 on the Richter scale [and] human beings' and Suki's fear of the vet, without drawing any comparisons between their respective magnitudes or impact (2013: 5). Instead of depicting Suki as a mere object whose identity is constructed through her owner's gaze, the author also describes how her cat sees and thinks about her. 'I realised how much I mattered to Suki (and therefore she to me?) when we came back from America' (2013: 3).

This dismantling of species-based hierarchies continues in their interactions. Owing to Suki's ready wit and a strong sense of self, almost all of the humour in *Suki* is derived from the conversation between the eponymous cat and Namjoshi's first-person narrator. Most of these jokes, in turn, are at the narrator's expense. For instance, the narrator recounts how she had once lapsed in her vegetarian diet. In an attempt to justify her own choice, the narrator turns to Suki and tells her that the reason behind their friendship is the fact that they are both 'murderous animals' (2013: 7). Suki immediately distances herself from such an accusation and remarks that she spends her free time sleeping instead of 'killing' others. In order to further underscore her innocence, Suki lets the narrator know that even as a dreamer, she is benevolent, unlike her human companion: '[in] my dreams I am ten times bigger than you, but I don't bully you or pick you up by the scruff of the neck (2013: 7)'. In this way, Suki cleverly foils the narrator's plans of claiming any moral superiority.

Similarly, when the narrator asks Suki not to catch birds or mice, Suki wonders how it is any different from humans hunting animals. Suki further mocks the narrator by reminding her that the narrator herself went out and bought chicken for Suki. Suki once again calls out her companion's hypocritical stance, leaving the latter with no chance to protest. In yet another instance, Suki lets the narrator know that she, in fact, has been adequately 'trained' by her cat to be a good companion to her pet (2013: 28). Such a statement, while funny on the surface, also enables Namjoshi to invert the traditional owner-slave dialectic of a trans-species bond.

In some other cases, Suki's playful behaviour, mischief, and occasional silliness also become sources of humour in the novel. She remains completely unapologetic as she beats up other cats, kills field mice, forgets to retract her claws while jumping on the lap of the narrator, and bites people's noses. At other times, the narrator falsely accepts 'defeat' and insincerely apologises to trick Suki into carrying on their conversation. As a cat, Suki's personality is a mixture of a 'goddess' with the narrator as her 'high priestess', and a 'bumptious little cat, who talks too much' and 'spends all her time' with Namjoshi's fictional self (2013: 18). With her 'natural beauty and majesty' being 'just one tiny slip away from total humiliation', Suki shares the 'central predicament' of humans (Bustillos 2015).

That is, however, not to say that Suki is stripped of her 'cat-ness'. Rather, her feline self is repeatedly asserted in the narrative. Angry at the narrator, she once asks, 'Who knows more about being a cat — me or you?' (2013: 16) Suki's identity

as a cat, however, is most comprehensively brought up in two particular conversations. Curious as ever, Suki asks the narrator whether Indians like cats. The narrator replies by telling Suki that Indians are known to favour dogs as pets rather than cats. The reason behind it is perhaps brought up in another conversation. In Namjoshi's whimsical memoir, the author-narrator once retreats into a Vipassana[1] meditation centre with Suki, where they are joined by other verbal non-human animals. As the narrator introduces Suki to Princie the retriever, she lets her cat know that 'he fetches and carries. Does what he's asked' (2013: 85). Meanwhile, Suki, who stands in stark contrast to Princie, forges an organic bond with the narrator. As animal studies scholars like Heather Fraser and Nik Taylor point out, 'Stereotypically, "crazy cat ladies" are those women who place the needs of cats above humans, a move that is to be scorned and mocked' (2019: 198). Such stereotypes are constructed by patriarchal, heteronormative and pro-natalist discourses that place a woman's worth on her ability and desire to have children. However, as Fraser and Taylor further observe:

> The kind of reductive thinking that assumes women who have empathy for other animals are somehow "faulty," and/or that their inability to maintain productive (in both senses of the word) relationships with other humans closes down alternate ways of seeing, experiencing, and thinking about the world. (2019: 199)

As a lesbian feminist who chooses to live with her same-sex partner, Namjoshi strictly disavows many of her so-called 'feminine' duties, including entering into a traditional conjugal relationship and perpetuating her 'bloodline'. By foregrounding her relationship with her cat, therefore, she seeks not only to access these 'alternate ways of seeing the world' herself but also to enable her readers to do the same. Through this relationship, Namjoshi appears to question patriarchy's self-serving agendas attached to the traditional expectations surrounding women. It is also significant that Suki is herself a female cat. Much like Namjoshi, who defies common expectations surrounding women, Suki's independent, headstrong nature fails to fit within the narrow confines of femininity that seek to define meekness and absolute obedience as quintessentially feminine qualities; on the contrary, such a temperament is very much a characteristic feature of cats. Through Suki, Namjoshi seems to further demonstrate how femininity is a patriarchal construction. Unlike her human counterparts, Suki is under no obligation to '[become] a woman' (Beauvoir 2011: 283). Her 'cattiness' is a natural part of her being, and is accepted by the narrator, and everyone else around her, as such.

Incongruity and Narrative Empathy

Suki's humorous tone and carnival-like atmosphere are built upon a series of incongruities[2]. The titular protagonist's lofty sense of self, when viewed against her frivolity and her dependence on the narrator to survive, seems to be in complete inconsistency with itself. However, this incongruity, in turn, is based on the commonly assumed inter-species hierarchy in which humans are found at the top.

Owing to the fantastical premise and the non-linear storytelling in *Suki*, readers are reoriented from their active, agential role. The narrative structure of *Suki* completely rejects any semblance of a realistic plot, that is purposive in nature, has a singular intent and heads towards a clear resolution; the author not only writes about events implausible in real life, but also employs a rather fanciful way of documenting her time with Suki (she assumes that *Suki* keeps track of her days using the leaves falling from an adjoining tree).

In order to engage with such unorthodox and 'unrealistic' plotting devices, along with the narrative's intertextuality (including references to Buddhist philosophy, the poems of Ezra Pound[3] and the character Butch Cassidy[4]), readers have to abandon their normative mode of perception in favour of one that is more receptive to 'otherness'. This is 'strategic empathizing' on Namjoshi's part: a process through which she can '[employ] empathy in the crafting of fictional texts' in order to adequately address the realities of living as marginalised subjects (Keen 2008: 479).

Empathising in fiction involves 'taking up of the psychological perspective of a character' (McFee 2014: 185). The 'strategic empathizing' in *Suki* primarily works through the two primary characters: the narrator and Suki herself. On the one hand, both of them are disadvantaged by various metrics; Namjoshi is marginalised thrice over due to her race, gender and sexuality, while Suki is a pet cat in an anthropocentric world. While they usually share a loving relationship, there are also moments of genuine discord. Most of them stem from the narrator momentarily letting go of her egalitarianism to assert her superiority over Suki. At other times, her anthropocentric bias makes itself manifest despite her best intentions — for example, when she remarks that cats can be promoted to woman through reincarnation in Hinduism, or when she unthinkingly attributes human ideologies like socialism to a non-human animal.

However, in all such cases, she is immediately met with resistance from her cat. When the narrator praises Suki and calls her a 'good cat' (2013: 15), the latter is immediately put off by the tacit condescension. During another conversation, Suki vehemently expresses her displeasure against an inherently humanistic worldview:

> "Well, it's so – so –" and suddenly her eyes brightened as she found the right word. "So terribly humanist!" she concluded in triumph. I was startled. "But Suki," I protested, "that's not necessarily a bad thing." "Ummm." She turned away and began staring at the roses again. "It is," she murmured with her back to me, "if one has a more dispersed view of the universe." "Oh? And what is 'a more dispersed view of the universe'?" I mocked her. "Man (and women) not at the centre," she said tersely. (2013: 42)

Like the narrator herself, readers who identify with her repeatedly find themselves confronting their own prejudices. In one of her interviews, Namjoshi states, in the context of another work featuring a quasi-autobiographical character, that sharing her own identity with the character allows her to 'soften the satire against a well-

meaning lesbian feminist' (Namjoshi 2020). This remark seems to hold true for *Suki* as well. During the back-and-forth exchanges between the narrator and Suki, the reader, who is initially empathising with the narrator, has to immediately take account of Suki's wry comments and protests.

Moreover, the narrator's privileged position in relation to her cat is further highlighted when S*uki* points out how, as a voiceless non-human animal, she is ultimately dependent on the narrator to articulate her viewpoint. In one of the rare instances when the willing suspension of disbelief is challenged within the novel, Suki reminds the narrator that it is *the narrator* (emphasis mine) who is ultimately writing the book: 'I think you're just writing another book – the world seen from a cat's perspective – that sort of thing' (2013: 57). This reminds the reader that even the wisecracks by Suki are, in reality, creations of the author and essentially 'human' in nature, with the 'comic urbanity of the animal' (Critchley 2011: 31) assuming a 'pleasingly benign' (Critchley 2011: 33) nature. Even though this anthropomorphic privilege is almost impossible to shed completely, given that both the writer and reader are human, the empathy of the narrator is never allowed to turn into self-righteous patronisation.

Instead of a singular version of events, therefore, the reader encounters what Bakhtin has termed polyphony: 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses' of 'fully valid voices' (Bakhtin 1984b: 6-7). The two characters are, 'by the very nature of [the author's] creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse' (Bakhtin1984b: 7). The intersubjective empathy fostered by Namjoshi's narrative is thus dynamic and self-reflective in nature.

Counter Memory in Namjoshi

In a particularly fraught conversation, Suki tries to demand equal rights with the narrator, arguing that both of them, after all, are sentient beings. However, in the process, she extends her personal grievances to a much more generalised observation: 'anyway, if I can't represent my own species, it's because I've been colonized' (2013: 58). Soon after, Suki's comment on identity and colonialism makes way for her observations on gender dynamics, 'I'm not sure about the exact system of gradation. For instance, according to some people, males are superior to females. I don't agree' (2013: 61).

Suki's movement from the particular to the universal reveals the deeply political undertones of what is, on the surface, an elegy for a pet. Due to the intensely personal nature of the narrative, references to issues like gender discrimination and (non)human rights in *Suki* are sporadic and fleeting. That being said, owing to its autobiographical undertones, *Suki*, perhaps more than any other text in Namjoshi's oeuvre, claims a direct connection to her personal politics and activism. While Suki the character is indeed based on Namjoshi's real-life pet, her presence nevertheless opens up the possibility of a Foucauldian counter memory.

In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Michel Foucault defines counter-memory as something that "opposes history as knowledge' (1977: 160). Reclaiming counter-memory as a valid mode of narrativisation, Namjoshi intends to create, through literature, a counter discourse that questions dominant historiography with alternative modes of storytelling. All of Namjoshi's fables, in fact, aim to create a counter-memory that can accommodate 'other' voices that are not accepted by mainstream narratives. Namjoshi explores various tales from the *Panchatantra*, Aesop's Fables and Greek mythology, among others, with a feminist twist to harness 'the very power of language and the literary tradition to expose what is absurd and unacceptable' (Namjoshi 2012: 2).

Take *From The Panchatantra* for example. As the title indicates, it starts out like any story in the *Panchatantra*, with a sage undergoing penance for a male heir. Lord Vishnu listens to his prayers, but, for some reason, grants him a daughter instead. However, unhappy with the daughter, the sage reiterates the demand for a son. Unable to fulfil this request, Vishnu decides instead to 'form a committee' to look into the matter. The story packs several layers of irony. It shows how different power structures, including religion, politics and family contribute to the oppression and marginalisation of women. The sage is willing to let go of his reward for penance, namely, his only child, without any hesitation, just because she is not male. The sage and the Hindu god Vishnu, both powerful male figures and representatives of divinity, see nothing wrong with the fundamental discrimination. The fable ends with Vishnu suggesting the committee, thereby illustrating how an excessively rigid bureaucracy ultimately contributes to further silence regarding women's issues instead of helping their cause.

Namjoshi, however, maintains that such prejudices are not just confined to a single geographical location or culture. In the story *Nymph*, Namjoshi highlights how Daphne was punished by being forced to live as an inanimate object by rejecting the advance of Apollo. The author insinuates that even if the situation were reversed, that is, if Daphne were the one in love with Apollo, she would still be the one to have been turned into a tree. Namjoshi's black humour compares the mute laurel tree with women; irrespective of the desiring subject, Namjoshi contends, it is the women who would always be silenced and punished.

As Jack Zipes argues, progress is only possible by reinventing and justifiably modifying the traditional discourses in which we find ourselves entrenched (2009: 119). As the two instances of Namjoshi's feminist revision demonstrate, she intends to do exactly that: by shifting the focus to the women in her fables, Namjoshi seeks to bring about an overhaul of the reader's entire perspective and encourage readers to scrutinise what has been accepted as the norm throughout centuries.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed how Suniti Namjoshi's *Suki* serves as a narrative of postcolonial feminist humour. The use of the figure of the pet cat as an alternative protagonist, I have argued, serves two interconnected purposes. First, it endears

the reader to the 'catty' attitude: namely, independent, unapologetic behaviour which, while likeable when demonstrated by a nonhuman animal, becomes undesirable when those same qualities are associated with women, especially feminists. Second, it alters the frame of normative perception so that readers are compelled to question what they identify as given, including gender roles.

In her analysis of the structure of jokes, Rachel Giora argues that the incongruous juxtaposition of a joke's premise and its punchline encourages a reinterpretation on the part of the audience (1991: 470). In Namjoshi's novel, this structure of a joke is extended to the entire narrative, where the autobiographical premise soon gives way to fantastical narrative elements. This, in turn, is a narrative device to generate affective resonance in the implied reader. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida describes the autobiographical animal as 'the sort of man or woman, who, as a matter of character, chooses to indulge in or can't resist indulging in autobiographical confidences' (2008: 49). However, by introducing a non-human animal capable of articulation, Namjoshi encourages her readers to acknowledge and empathise with lived experiences different from their own. This, by extension, allows the reader to question the societal prejudices surrounding gender roles and identities.

Endnotes

1. A form of Buddhist meditation that demands complete abstinence from killing, lying, or stealing, among others. The fact that Suki, a cat, is participating in such a practice further underscores the carnivalesque nature of the text.
2. The Incongruity Theory of humour states that humour arises from the dissonance between the expected premise of an event and the actual outcome. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between incongruity and humour, see Noel *Carroll's Humour: A Very Short Introduction.*
3. Ezra Pound was known for his experimental Modernist writings, not unlike Namjoshi herself.
4. Used in the novel to refer to the close friendship between the titular characters in the 1969 American Western buddy film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, directed by George Roy Hill. Suki and the narrator share a similar friendship.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail, and Helene Iswolsky. 1984a. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, MN: Indiana University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail and Caryl Emerson. 1984b. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 2011. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage.

Breton, André. 1969. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Buchanan, Ian. 2010. 'carnivalesque', *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, pp. 76–7. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bustillos, Maria. 2015. 'How Cats Won Over the Internet', *BBC Culture*, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150918-how-did-cats-win-the-internet (accessed on 19 May 2023).

Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, Meeta. 2002. '"One Day My Cow Will Come": Dykonstruction in Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow*', *Humour in Indian writing in English: Three Novels by Women Writers: Namita Gokhale's Paro Dreams of Passion, Suniti Namjoshi's The Conversations of Cow, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. 2002. Unpublished Master of Arts (Hons.) thesis, University of Wollongong, pp. 65–86, https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/2241.

Critchley, Simon. 2011. 'Is Humour Human?', *On Humour*, pp. 25–40. London: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques. 2008. 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, pp. 1–52. New York: Fordham University Press.

Effe, Alexandra and Arnaud Schmitt. 2022. 'Autofiction, Emotions, and Humour: A Playfully Serious Affective Mode', *Life Writing*, 19(1): 1–11, DOI:10.1080/14484528.2021.2010594.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language Counter-Memory Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, pp. 139–64. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Fraser, Heather and Nik Taylor. 2019. 'Women, Anxiety, and Companion Animals: Toward a Feminist Animal Studies of Interspecies Care and Solidarity', in Gruen, Lori and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (eds), *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness,* pp. 190–205. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hutcheon, Linda. 2003. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

Giora, Rachel. 1991. 'On the Cognitive Aspects of the Joke', *Journal of Pragmatics,* (16): 465–8.

Keen, Suzanne. 2006. 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 14(3): 207–36.

Keen, Suzanne. 2008. 'Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy', *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, pp. 467–82.

McFee, Graham. 2014. 'Empathy: Interpersonal vs Artistic?' in Coplan, Amy and Peter Goldie (eds), *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives,* pp. 178–92. New York: Oxford University Press.

McGifford, Dianne. 1991. 'Suniti Namjoshi (1941–)', in Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook,* pp. 291–7. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Namjoshi, Suniti. 2000. *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.

Namjoshi, Suniti. 2012. *The Fabulous Feminist: The Suniti Namjoshi Reader*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Namjoshi, Suniti. 2013. *Suki*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India and Zubaan Books.

Namjoshi, Suniti. 2020. '"Not because I have wisdom, but because I care": An Interview with Suniti Namjoshi', Agents of Ishq, https://agentsofishq.com/post/suniti-namjoshi (accessed on 15 May 2023).

Palekar, Shalmalee. 1996. 'Ways of belonging: 'I belong with the lame ducks' (and lesbian cows)' Suniti Namjoshi's The conversations of Cow'. Unpublished Master of Arts (Hons.) thesis, University of Wollongong, https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/2208.

Rafique, Roha. 2021. 'Postmodern Laughter as an Anti-Foundational Agent', *Comedy Studies*, 12(1): 75–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2020.1850106.

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. 1986. 'Introduction', *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 1–26. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Stam, Robert. 1989. 'Introduction', *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, pp. 1–25. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vincent-Prabakar, Suhasini. 2006. 'Hybridity, Strangeness, and Foreigness in Suniti Namjoshi's Fabulist Imagination', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 29(1): 77–90.

Zipes, Jack. 2009. *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling*. New York: Routledge.

Madness, Humour, and Trauma in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

Deepanwita Dey

Abstract

Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom (2012) portrays the unusual relationships of the Mendes family living in a 1-BHK flat in Bombay. The fragmented and non-linear structure of the text depicts the struggles of the narrator grappling with an unknown mental disorder afflicting his mother, Em. Em's madness, her eccentric nature, suicidal attempts, and paranoia dictate the mood and atmosphere of the Mendes household, characterised by cyclic disruption of everyday life, alternating between episodes of sanity and insanity, stability and instability, and chaos and order. These disruptions also get mapped onto the narrative tone and structure of the text, oscillating between the comic and the catastrophic, the coherent and the incoherent, and the traumatic and the humorous. This paper seeks to examine the role of humour in articulating and addressing the everyday experiences of living with madness and trauma and how these traumatic experiences lead to the emergence of humour in unforeseen and unexpected ways in the narrative. While the text features various instances of humour ranging from Em's garrulous conversations laced with sexual expletives and innuendos, comic imagery and wordplay, and amusing situations arising from misunderstandings ensuing from Em's madness, this humour often uncomfortably intersects and intermingles with trauma, acquiring a disparaging tone and veering into the tragic. Drawing on various critical reflections on madness and humour, the paper examines the tensions between the comic and the catastrophic and the horrific and the hilarious, as the dissociative and disintegrating effects of madness and trauma are mitigated through humour in the text. Although madness, humour and trauma might appear as seemingly disparate elements at first glance, the paper contends that humour operates both as an instance of trauma enacting and embodying the disruptive effects of madness and as a defiant response to it.

Keywords: humour, madness, mental illness, trauma

Introduction

Madness and humour exhibit a complex interplay and intriguing interconnection. Andrew Scull, in *Madness: A Very Short Introduction* (2011), defines madness as

a subject that 'profoundly disturbs our commonsense assumptions; threatens the social order, both symbolically and practically; creates almost unbearable disruptions in the texture of daily living; and turns our experience and our expectations upside down' (2). Interestingly, these ambivalences, incongruities, disruptions, and inversions of social norms are also characteristics frequently associated with humour. Humour often originates in the unexpected, the absurd and the unconventional (Eagleton 2019: 4). It thrives on breaking societal norms and challenging established perspectives. This juxtaposition necessitates a closer examination of the dialectical relation between madness and humour, where humour borders on madness, and madness, in turn, provokes humour. Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) explores this complex interrelation between madness and humour and the intriguing ways in which they interact and intermingle in the narrative.

Em and the Big Hoom portrays the unusual relationships of a middle-class family living in Bombay. It revolves around the everyday life of the Mendes family consisting of the unnamed narrator, his sister Susan, their father Augustine (known as The Big Hoom), and their mother Imelda (Em of the title). The fragmented and non-linear structure of the text depicts the struggles of the narrator grappling with an unknown mental disorder afflicting his mother, Em.[1] Em's madness, eccentric nature, suicidal attempts, and paranoia dictate the mood and atmosphere of the Mendes household, characterised by cyclic disruptions of everyday life alternating between episodes of sanity and insanity, stability and instability and chaos and order. These disruptions also get mapped onto the narrative tone and structure of the text, oscillating between the comic and the catastrophic, the coherent and the incoherent and the traumatic and the humorous.

Through a critical analysis of the text, this paper explores the dialectical complexity between madness and humour and how they intersect in numerous ways in the narrative. While the text features various instances of humour ranging from Em's garrulous conversations laced with sexual expletives and innuendos, comic imagery and wordplay, and amusing situations arising from misunderstandings ensuing from Em's madness, this humour often uncomfortably intersects and intermingles with trauma, acquiring a disparaging tone and veering into the tragic. Drawing upon various critical reflections on madness and humour, the paper examines the tensions between the comic and the catastrophic and the horrific and the hilarious, as the dissociative and disintegrating effects of madness and trauma are mitigated through humour in the text. Although madness, humour and trauma might appear as seemingly disparate elements at first glance, the paper contends that humour operates both as an instance of trauma enacting and embodying the disruptive effects of madness and as a defiant response to it.

Humour is integral to a broad spectrum of experiences in individuals' everyday lives. In *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (2014), Noel Carroll traces the term's origins to the Latin humour, which refers to the strange and eccentric dispositions of individuals arising from imbalances in the composition of their bodily fluids (5).

Humour has thus been historically and traditionally associated with unusual utterances and modes of behaviour which provoke comic amusement and (sometimes) laughter in its perceivers (Carroll 2014: 7). Although humour is commonly defined as anything—an entity, object, action, event, or phenomenon—that elicits comic amusement, not all kinds of humour necessarily provoke laughter and intrigue in its percipients (Carroll 2014: 29–30). In fact, certain kinds of humour (as depicted in the text under consideration) originate unexpectedly and unpredictably from non-humorous circumstances and traumatic experiences of everyday life. In such scenarios, exploring how humour interacts with, intersects with, and even provokes other non-humorous emotions such as pain, grief, trauma, and madness in everyday life becomes pertinent.

Interestingly, madness and humour are both broad conceptual categories which are challenging to define and characterise. It is also difficult to pinpoint what exactly triggers and induces these phenomena. Scholars across various disciplines have grappled with the enigmatic nature of madness, acknowledging the impossibility of fully defining or understanding it (Abbott 18; Cross 2010: 2; Feder 1980: xi–xii; Porter 4). Similarly, those delving into humour studies have grappled with the complexities of defining its essence and characteristics (Carroll 2014: 37; Eagleton 2010: x; Morreall 1982: 243). According to Carroll, humour is provoked by 'a deviation from some presupposed norm — that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be' (2014: 17). Both madness and humour are, therefore, characterised by a sense of indefinability and deviation from conventional actions, thought patterns and behaviours and a subversion of normative expectations in society. John Morreall, in 'A New Theory of Laughter' (1982), further asserts, 'We live in an orderly world where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events, etc. When we experience something that doesn't fit these patterns, that violates our expectations, we laugh.' (244–5) These incongruities consist of deviations from conceptual, linguistic and even moral and prudential norms, social etiquettes and everyday commonplace expectations (Carroll 2003: 348).

However, not all forms of incongruity and anomalous behaviour necessarily lead to comic amusement and laughter. In fact, certain confrontations with incongruity and deviations from expectations are threatening occasions, fraught with anxieties, threats, and fear of the unknown and the unexpected, which then get labelled as madness (Carroll 2003: 349). Consequently, not all forms of madness are humorous in nature, and not all kinds of humour can be essentially categorised and classified within the purview of madness. By examining the role of humour in articulating and addressing the everyday experiences of living with madness and trauma as depicted in Pinto's text, the paper seeks to address some of these complexities. It examines how humour plays multiple roles within the narrative, serving both as a means of subverting and challenging prevailing social, gender, and religious norms and as a coping mechanism amidst the destabilising effects of madness and trauma.

Subversive Potential of Madness and Humour

The text begins with the narrator reading out a letter written by Em to his father, who is addressed as 'Angel Ears'. Written in a loving and amusing tone, the letter depicts the unusual language of Em expressing her love for the Big Hoom during their courtship period. As she writes in the letter, 'I miss you terribly. But if you are going to send me a postcard, I shall abstain… If your next letter is not to hand with heartwarming promptness, I shall declare you unfit for human consumption and throw you to the lions.' (Pinto 2012: 1) The narrative thus begins with a humorous tone depicting the strangeness and close-knit relationships of the Mendes family, with the narrator enquiring of his mother about these old exchanges and why she always addresses his father as 'Angel Ears' and other names such as Mambo, Augie March, or the Limb of Satan, but almost never by his given name, Augustine (Pinto 2012: 6). As Em responds, 'His ears are the sweetest thing about him. They look like bits of bacon curled up from too much frying,' depicting the unusual bonds, filled with love and affinity, that constitute the family (Pinto 2012: 2). This humorous tone is, however, soon undercut as the readers are brought back to the narrative present when they realise that the conversation is actually taking place in a psychiatric ward and that Em is presently recovering from another suicidal attempt following a manic episode. The narrator soon reveals that Em is afflicted with an unknown illness where thoughts, like electric currents, run uncontrollably, flashing and sizzling inside his mother's head (Pinto 2012: 10). The humorous tone of the letters and conversations between the narrator and his mother is undercut and interjected by the seriousness and traumatic nature of their lives and conditions catalysed by Em's madness.

A sense of amusement and humour marks the narrative tone of the text as the narrator depicts the family's everyday life. He says, 'It intrigues me, love. Especially theirs, which seems to have been full of codes and rituals, almost all of them devised by her.' (Pinto 2012: 2) The children refer to their mother as 'Em' instead of the ordinary mummy or ma, while they address their father as the 'Big Hoom', referring to the 'hoom' sounds he made when asked something (Pinto 2012: 6). Right from the truncated names of the characters to their unusual conversations over endless cups of tea, the everyday life of the Mendes family is characterised by these unusual codes, ordinary moments of laughter, and extraordinary moments of fear, anxiety and uncertainty arising from Em's madness. Interestingly, the humour embodied in these conversations often takes on a critical and subversive tone, interrogating the dominant power structures in society as enabled by madness.

The text weaves through a tapestry of such amusing letters, scribbles and notes penned by Em in the past. These writings are primarily filled with sarcastic remarks and derisory comments, melded with unique expressions of love, fear and anxieties about the prospects of her impending marital life. In one of her letters, Em expresses her apprehensions about marrying the Big Hoom, fearing the loss of her self and identity, she writes — 'I am no I. I am now part of a wee. Wee Wee Wee, I wanted to weep and run all the way home and bury my head in my mother's lap.'

(Pinto 2012: 107) In another letter addressed to the Big Hoom, Em similarly expresses her desire to marry but wishes for a marriage untainted by social norms. As she says,

> I know I want to marry you. But I wish we were the first to ever get married. I cannot help feeling that the institution has been somewhat corrupted and corroded by the misuse of others. We could show them, by a beayootiful and myoochooal respect for each other, how things must be conducted. (Pinto 2012: 127)

The playful language of the letter and the perplexity of Em's situation incite comic amusement in the readers. At the same time, humour here takes on a transgressive role, challenging and interrogating the dominant ideas of marriage, gender roles and identity in society.

While humorous, Em's eccentric language and anxious thoughts serve as subversive tools of assertion, enabling her to exercise agency and proclaim her doubts and fears regarding marriage and conjugality, turning laughter into a powerful means of questioning and redefining societal expectations. At the same time, Em's garrulous conversations, sexual exclamations and comic insinuations frequently take on a disparaging tone in the narrative while critiquing various gender, social and cultural norms. Owing to her vociferous nature, Em is often described as 'a wild animal with flecks of foam at its mouth' (Pinto 2012: 59). Their everyday conversations are marked by scatological expressions filled with sexual allusions and bawdy humour. She critiques the dominant ideas of shame, stigma and honour propagated by institutions of marriage and motherhood. As a mother, Em openly speaks about bodily temptations and sins, the 'cock and cunt business', and uses phrases like 'Oedipal-Shmeedipal', thus engaging in discourses that conventionally do not take place in normative Indian homes (Pinto 2012: 7–8). The unconventional nature of this discourse not only elicits comic amusement in the reader but also satirises the prevailing hegemonic norms in society.

There are also instances in the text when Em's subversive language, thoughts and actions take the form of indictive humour, interrogating and challenging society's fundamental patriarchal strictures and religious norms. As Carroll argues, 'Much humour is transgressive….Not only are "forbidden" ideas and emotions aired, thereby engendering amusement through the exhibition of incongruous improprieties but, at the same time, the attitudes underlying those transgressions may be, ironically enough, satirized' (2003: 361). Belonging to a Goan Catholic tradition, Em also critiques the rigid religious strictures governing the gendered bodies of women, where exploring one's sexuality and desires is considered a sin according to 'The Wholly Roaming Cat Licks' (a play on Holy Roman Catholics) (Pinto 2012: 4). She similarly talks about her attempts at aborting suspected pregnancies by consuming papaya seeds and jumping up the stairs 'to shake those little mites from their moorings' (Pinto 2012: 4).

Interestingly, these unconventional conversations also become alternative ways of educating and caregiving to her children, which are not commonly accepted

in society. Em advises her daughter against the papaya-seed method — 'But if you get knocked up, you come and tell me, and I'll come with you to the doctor…; you'll get a proper doctor to fiddle with your middle…No Back-street abortions for you.' (Pinto 2012: 4) The humour in this context emerges both from the provocative language used by Em, full of sexual allusions such as 'dick with a Thing and Tongue', but also from the incongruity of the context that it is a mother pedagogically instructing her young children to consciously infringe social, cultural and religious taboos, which is considered unconventional and unorthodox in middle-class Indian homes (Pinto 2012: 4). Em's madness thus defies expected norms of morality, parental prudence, and social etiquette. She goes on for weeks forgoing baths and smoking incessantly; her loquacious conversations with her children, coupled with reckless words and impudent behaviour, offer particular instances of humour, deviating from accepted norms of normativity, motherhood and socially governed behaviour that violates the boundaries of appropriateness.

However, while humour operates subversively in the text, it simultaneously marginalises the power and agency of the mad individual as their words are often disregarded and subsumed by the label of madness. As Eagleton has argued,

> beneath our more rational faculties there lies a darker, dishevelled, more cynical subtext which shadows our conventional social behaviour at every point, and which occasionally erupts into the open in the form of madness, criminality, erotic fantasy or an exuberant shaft of wit. (2019: 16)

In contrast, Em's madness enables her to occupy a subversive position and interrogate the dominant institutional structures of religion and gender. She critiques how the religious institution and the dominant patriarchal values of the society construct, valourise and idealise the institution of femininity and motherhood in India. Her conflictual attitude is reflected in how she utters the term mother as 'mud-dh-ha', filled with rage and contempt (Pinto 2012: 51). She explains her aversion to the naturalised idea of motherhood,

> I saw what children do. They turn a good, respectable woman into a mudd-dha. I didn't want to be a mudh-dha. I didn't want to be turned inside out. I didn't want to have my world shifted so that I was no longer the centre of it. (Pinto 2012: 133)

Despite the transgressive nature of this humorous language and actions, entailing the infringement of social and cultural taboos and disrupting the existing power structures, its subversive potential is paradoxically undermined because it emanates from a madwoman speaking. The narrator says, 'This was allowed by her "condition". She could say what other "normal" women could not.' (Pinto 2012: 55) Humour assumes a subversive quality by critiquing the prevailing ideas of marriage, motherhood and other heteronormative roles enforced on women. However, as madness is essentially associated with a loss of agency and disempowerment, the subversive potential of Em's language is paradoxically undercut as just humorous and relegated to the margins as something which

causes momentary amusement and laughter. As Shoshana Felman foregrounds—'quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation' (1993: 21).

Traumatic Experiences and Uncomfortable Humour

While the subversive potential of humour is paradoxically enabled and simultaneously undercut by madness, the text also depicts the challenges of distinguishing between intentional humour and humour stemming from Em's manic condition. There are instances in the text when Em's language takes on a derisory and denigrating tone, often hurting the emotions and sentiments of others. She would suddenly break into chants like 'Mother most horrible, mother most terrible, the mother standing at the door, mouth full of dribble' (Pinto 2012: 51). During such times, however, the narrator feels violated and hurt as he fails to acquire any words of affirmation and reciprocation of love from his mad mother. He writes, 'The mockery was apparent and hideous... but it reminded me that this was part of her illness.' (Pinto 2012: 138) He further says,

> We could always dismiss what she was saying as an emanation of the madness, not an insult or a hurt or a real critique to be taken seriously. We often did dismiss what she said, but more often than not, it was self-defence. (Pinto 2012: 135)

In such moments, humour acts as an instance of madness, as it becomes increasingly difficult to demarcate the boundaries between the two.

Moreover, madness is both constructed and performed by humorous subversion of language. The narrator indicates how Em would suddenly break into unexplained nursery rhymes, songs, riddles, and erratic articulations such as, 'Pain, pain go away, come again some other day. Little Johnny wants to play with himself,'— which is incongruent with the conversational context (Pinto 2012: 137). In one particular instance she freely glides through language stating, 'I hear the words of a song and the music of another. They play together like children. Like children entering the kingdom of heaven. How much chocolate can there be in heaven? The food of the Gods and the shit of the Gods.' (Pinto 2012: 141) These conversations are marked by their incoherence and free association of language, which occurs in Em's mind, making it difficult for others to understand her and grasp the meaning of her words. In 'Language and Madness' (2004), James Wilce explores how language constitutes madness and how the fragmentation of language and non-normative speech is both symbolic and symptomatic of madness. As he emphasises, 'Madness *appears* to be an objective label for deviant speech and related symptoms.' (2004: 422) The humorous puns, nursery rhymes and riddles in the text both enact and embody her madness and pain, conveying the incommunicable and incoherent thoughts and emotions to others.

The complexity of the situation is further aggravated when the narrator and the sister are not sure whether this humorous and derisory language serves as an

articulation of her pain and madness, whether it originates from a manic hallucination or is a part of her normative personality. The narrator writes, 'Sometimes it seemed part of her mental problem. Sometimes it seemed part of her personality.' (Pinto 2012: 135) For instance, Em's construction of puns such as 'Electro-Convulsive Throppy' (for Electric Convulsive Therapy) and other absurd associations might appear nonsensical to the sane other. Still, they constitute their own signification and systems of meaning specific to her. As Wilce asserts, 'In the case of madness, symptoms appear in the eye of the beholder.' (Wilce 2004: 423) In one of the hallucinatory episodes, Em asks the narrator, 'Am I a standing red pen?' (Pinto 2012: 73) The narrator and his sister struggle to decipher the vague signs and symbols, such as the associations with a red pen, in an effort to avert another potential manic episode or suicidal attempt. In other instances, Em believes that people are trying to poison her tea or that the municipal corporation of the city is digging up the roads to bury her family. Considering that the invisible people in her head or voices in the fan are trying to harm her family, she starts throwing things into the trenches in the middle of the night. The quotidian life of the family is characterised by such 'cross-connections and misunderstandings that happened when words went through the prism of Em's illness' (Pinto 2012: 73). Although these symbols and misunderstandings momentarily intrigue and amuse the readers by generating humour, they constitute a source of anxiety and trauma for the characters, especially in the moments of their occurrence in the narrative. The margins between humour and madness frequently blur with each other, as humour both embodies and enacts the madness of Em's condition. It, however, remains unclear whether this incongruity is a symptom of madness or the cause of it, whether it is Em's condition which is the cause of her fragmented speech and non-conforming thoughts and behaviours, or whether these peculiar and defiant acts are the very elements which construct her as mad.

Furthermore, while the text features various instances of humour ranging from Em's provocative language, this humour often uncomfortably intersects and blends with the disruptive chaos of madness and trauma and turns into the tragic. As the narrator says, 'Em was subject to microweathers; her manic phase could vary from cheerful and laughing to malevolent and sneering, and back again within an hour. In contrast, her depressive phases were almost unrelieved in their darkness.' (Pinto 2012: 148–9) In one of the instances in the novel, the narrator and Susan return home one afternoon after watching a movie, only to come home and find their mother drenched in blood. Their happiness and desire to 'go out and laugh, like all others' of their age is thwarted and punctured (Pinto 2012: 14). The children are forced to undertake the role of a caregiver tending to Em's injuries, cleaning her wounds and blood stains in the bathroom. The comic framing of the text so alternates between Em's conflicting and humorous past and a severely disruptive present. This oscillatory tone between the funny and the catastrophic corresponds to the alternating states of mind, moods and behaviour as suffered by the individual suffering from mental illness on an everyday basis. Pinto deliberately indulges in

a conscious contradiction of the comic as the humorous tone employed in the text does not relieve the readers of the tensions created in the narrative and instead forces them to engage with the pain and trauma of the characters instead of laughing at them. Madness therefore enables and elicits the co-existence of humour along with a range of other non-humorous emotions such as pain, anger, fear, anxiety, and trauma in the text.

During Em's manic episodes, the family can only become silent and helpless witnesses to her pain, marked by an intense desire to help but the inability to do so. As the narrator says,

> For two or three days, we will all live with the knowledge that one of us is gulping for air, swallowing sobs, and experiencing pain that will not let up. We will rearrange our lives so that someone is always with her. (Pinto 2012: 61)

At the same time, these traumatic episodes are also interlaced with moments of unprovoked jokes and laughter when the narrator and his mother joke about her condition. In one such instance, Em jokes about her madness, saying, 'Mad people are telepathic, clairvoyant and everything that should frighten you. Be afraid of me.' (Pinto 2012: 102) As evident from this, humour alleviates the severity of their circumstances, as both the narrator and his mother acknowledge the traumatic realities of their lives, recognising that 'it was a tradition: the joke, the smile' (Pinto 2012: 12). As Jacqueline Garrick notes, 'Humour is a human trait that is often summoned to combat a stressful situation, whether it be to enhance a sense of belonging in a social situation…or to diffuse tension.' (Pinto 2012: 173) In a life marked by constant instabilities and ruptures caused by madness, humour becomes a way of articulating the trauma of quotidian sufferings and ways of mitigating and coping with it, diffusing tensions and navigating discomforts.

The comic framing of the text also takes a sudden traumatic turn with Em's unforeseen death from a heart attack. Contrary to the family's profound grief and suffering, the pain and shock felt by the family go unperceived and overlooked by the rest of the world. As the narrator visits the coffin store, he notices the humorous signboards such as 'We can take your dead body, anywhere, anytime, anyplace', 'When you drop dead, drop in', and 'We're the last to let you down', 'Grave problems resurrected here' (Pinto 2012: 228). The use of humour here destabilises our experience of the narrative and the conventional socio-cultural norms. It evokes non-humorous responses in the readers, where amusement is experienced alongside other uncomfortable feelings of empathy, grief and pathos not characteristically associated with humour and laughter. In so doing, the text does not disavow the pain and trauma entailed by madness; instead, it seeks to reveal the intimate nature of humour in our everyday lives and how it helps navigate everyday discomforts and unexpected traumatic experiences. As Eagleton argues, 'The point is not to disown the pain, but to allow it to resonate through one's discourse, dredging the comedy up from a depth of affliction or anxiety, rage or humiliation to invest it with the authority of that experience.' (Pinto 2012: 141) Humour employed in the text

thus emerges as a powerful tool to combat the invasive and unexpected forces of madness.

Conclusion

The oscillation between humorous and traumatic tones in the narrative maps the everyday fluctuating emotional landscapes of the Mendes household caused by Em's madness. The narrative tone and structure of the text trigger a range of unsettling emotional responses in the readers, oscillating between the humorous and the non-humorous. At the same time, by evoking humour in seemingly non-humorous conditions, by laying bare and laughing at the dissociative and disruptive experiences of madness, the text provides alternative means of reframing and reinterpreting the quotidian experiences of madness and trauma. Although humour and laughter might appear to be an incongruous response to the distressful experiences of pain and trauma, the text demonstrates how humour offers alternative ways of framing, surviving, and interpreting these traumatic situations. As Pinto's text demonstrates, not all disruptions in everyday life act as sources of comic amusement and laughter. Rather, occasions of perceived incongruity and the absurd might result in feelings of threat, discomfort and harm to self or the other.

Moreover, through the use of humour, the text reframes and resituates the mad individual as a traumatic subject in various ways, who is not just a victim of their condition but exercises subversive and agential force in their lives. Humour provides an alternative way of negotiating with the disruptive and disintegrating effects of madness and trauma, enabling the afflicted individual and their caregivers to laugh at the helplessness and powerlessness of their situations instead of despair. Although Carroll argues that comic amusement must occur in contexts free of fear for ourselves and those we care about, Pinto's text demonstrates how, in a life fraught with constant instabilities and tensions, humour operates as both an instance of trauma enacting and embodying the disruptive effects of madness and as a defiant response to it (2014: 29).

Endnotes

1. Although the paper employs the term madness and mental illness interchangeably, it is important to note that the latter term is strictly embedded within the fabric of biomedical psychiatry, while madness is an umbrella term used to classify any kind of social, cultural, political, and individual deviation from normatively governed behaviour. (Cross 2010: 2; Scull 2011: 2; Wilce: 2005, 414)

Works Cited

Abbott, H. P. 2018. 'What Does It Mean to Be Mad? Diagnosis, Narrative, Science, and the DSM', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, edited by Zara Dinnen, Robyn Warhol, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 17–29.

Carroll, N. 2003. 'Humour', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, pp. 344–65. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carroll, N. 2014. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cross, S. 2010. *Mediating Madness Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Eagleton, T. 2019. *Humour*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
Feder, L. 1980. *Madness in Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Felman, S. 1993. *'What Does a Woman Want?': Reading and Sexual Difference*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Freud, Sigmund. 1928. 'Humour', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9: 1–6.
Garrick, Jacqueline. 2006. 'The Humor of Trauma Survivors: Its Application in a Therapeutic Milieu', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 12 (1–2): 169–82.
Morreall, John. 1982. 'A New Theory of Laughter', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 42(2): 243–54.
Porter, R. 2002. *Madness: A Brief History*. Oxford University Press.
Pinto, J. 2012. *Em and the Big Hoom*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.
Scull, A. 2011. *Madness: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wilce, J. 2005. 'Language and Madness', in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology,* edited by Alessandro Duranti, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 414–430.

The Comic Mode in Jack Davis's Plays

Aleena Manoharan

Abstract

Humanity's greatest markers have been achieved through the indomitable spirit of conquest; conquest of foreign lands, their people and the natural environment. For Joseph Meeker, however, these heroic feats have been initiated and sustained by the Western civilisation, and are definably tragic as these signify human estrangement not only from their like but also from other forms of life. As an adaptive strategy, then, tragedy is neither a universal phenomenon, nor a natural one, but that which engages in the disruption of community life. Comedy, on the other hand, promotes communitarian living and survival, wherein the participating agencies, whenever possible, reduce the risk of engaging in conflicts of any sort that may disrupt the community. Seen in this sense, arguably, primal human communities, across the world, may said to have been modelled on the comic mode of life that integrated members of the community (both human and non-human) into an egalitarian whole. Humour, as an essential component of comedy, has always been a vital force in promoting a sense of community among primal people. With the advent, spread and challenges of colonisation, which itself marks a tragic mode of life, humour has become ever more pertinent in combating the disruption of communitarian life. This paper engages in a study of comedy and humour in the plays of the Indigenous Australian playwright Jack Davis, and argues that the comic mode is a significant survival strategy adopted within Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Comedy, Community, Indigenous literature, Jack Davis, Tragedy

Introduction

Contemporary Australian Indigenous literature, since its inception in the late 1960s, finds relevance as a subject in discourse for various reasons. Having particularly so evolved within the terrains of transcultural conflict, these writings underscore the fundamental ontological and epistemological differences that govern the worldviews of the people of Indigenous and non-Indigenous origins (particularly European) and the nature of conflicts such differences initiate. Indigenous writings

are, therefore, primarily reflective of the paradoxical indigenous experiences of belongingness and exclusion. Such postcolonial manifestations are marked by the ubiquitous reflection of the severe social and economic hardships faced by the Indigenous people, coupled with the political fights for equity, land rights and cultural expressions (Heiss and Minter 2008: 6). Functioning within the politics of cultural intersection, then, from the plethora of themes and events discussed within its framework, perhaps the most significant and pervasive theme in Australian Indigenous literature has been the restoration of a disintegrated Aboriginal community since the colonisation and settlement of Australia during the latter part of the 18th century. Indigenous writers have adopted various restorative strategies into their writings through the implementation of certain distinguishing cultural features that mark Aboriginality. The employment of humour, characterised as a salient feature of Aboriginal identity (Xu 2019: 1), is one such ingenious practice deployed at the service of community restoration. If, as Shoemaker notes, Aboriginal self-image is reliant upon laughter in the midst of adversity (1989: 233), it would be worthwhile to consider it in detail by posing two pertinent questions. How is comedy related to the concept of community? If, as in the Aboriginal context, humour, as an element of comedy, continues to survive despite the tragic background of colonisation and disintegration, how can one understand its paradoxical function, given that humour essentially contradicts tragedy? Drawing on Joseph Meeker's conception of tragedy and comedy as metaphorical tools for analysing post-settlement Australia, this paper examines how comedy is represented in the plays of an Australian Indigenous playwright Jack Davis. By engaging in a scholarly analysis of select texts, this paper argues that comedy is a quintessential factor that has sustained Indigenous communities despite the tragic impact of colonisation in Australia. While Meeker uses the term comedy primarily as a trait of biological adaptation and philosophical attitude, Davis, in addition to them, also represents comedy in his plays as a behavioural pattern in terms of humour, wit and jocular utterances. This paper demonstrates how such behavioural patterns have their roots in both biological adaptation and philosophical attitude that Meeker proposes, which ultimately aids in the survival of the Indigenous people.

Davis's plays portray the lives of the Indigenous Australians before and after colonisation. While the plays fundamentally highlight the numerous problems faced by the contemporary Indigenous population within a white-dominated society, the representation of comedy in Davis's plays is noteworthy as an essential characteristic of the Indigenous people, rather than as an intentionally juxtaposed feature for its own sake. To quote Davis, '[Aboriginal people have] a different attitude to humour. I mean, Aboriginal people are able to survive because of laughter' (Shoemaker 1994: 40). Davis does not represent comedy as a thematic expression in his plays but rather as a methodological approach that Indigenous Australians have adopted to counter the aftereffects of European colonisation and settlement. This paper analyses comedy in the plays at three levels: as a biological trait, as a philosophical attitude and as a behavioural pattern.

Colonisation of Australia as a tragic affair

To understand the relevance of comedy in Australian Indigenous life, it is important to first discuss how the colonisation of Australia was a tragic affair. Australia was relatively unknown to the Western world until the Dutch exploration of the continent in the 17th century. However, James Cook's claims of Australia for Great Britain, during the latter part of the 18th century, resulted in severe consequences for the original inhabitants of the land. Despite evidence to the contrary, the popular notion of Australia as *terra nullius*, that is, unoccupied land, prevailed until the Mabo case of 1992 recognised the existence of the Native Title in Australia. The damage, however, had been done, and contemporary Aboriginal writings evince how the Indigenous people still agonise under the pressure of white settler colonisation in Australia. In terms of both 'philosophical attitude' (Meeker 1996: 157) and consequence, the colonisation of Australia proved to be a tragic affair. It would be helpful to understand the tragic nature of colonisation from a philosophical perspective by dwelling on Joseph Meeker's conception of tragedy.

For Meeker, tragedy is basically optimistic, 'as tragedy shows man's potential strength and greatness' (1996: 158); therefore, it is associated with such notions as honour, heroism, idealism, and suffering (1996: 158–60):

> From the tragic perspective, the world is a battleground where good and evil, man and nature, truth and falsehood make war, each with the goal of destroying its polar opposite. Warfare is the basic metaphor of tragedy, and its strategy is a battle plan designed to eliminate the enemy. That is why tragedy ends with a funeral or its equivalent. (1996: 168)

In general terms, speaking of the historical roots of the first phase of modern colonisation that commenced during the latter part of the 15th century, it is possible to find similarities between tragedy and the philosophical proposition that sanctioned European colonisation of distant lands. The impetus for exploration, a by-product of Renaissance thought and learning, fuelled by optimism and the discovery of new sea routes to Asia and America, instrumentalised colonialism and the later settlement of foreign lands. Such feats can be said to have been inherently characterised by heroism and valour, which subsequently assumed a vicarious character in terms of the white man's burden. However, such heroic feats were not altogether met with non-resistance, and the conflicts that naturally arose within the intersection of cultural contacts in the host land were severely dealt with by the use of technologically advanced weaponry possessed by the colonisers.

In the case of Australia, the scenario presented a slightly different picture. While resource extraction and trade relations characterised the colonial enterprise in Asia and America, the Australian land was specifically comprehended as uninhabitable, suitable only for felons. The first European writers' impressions of Australia have been verbalised by such expressions as a land of 'strange

contradictions and eccentricities' (Clarke 1977: 154), with its 'fearfully vast and endless distances,' characterised by lack of water and offering no scope for cultivation whatsoever (Gerstaecker 1990: 23). However, the drive to conquer the seemingly unconquerable land was 'charged with heroism and idealism', albeit with 'tragic consequences' (Manoharan 2023: 80). Patrick White's famous novel *Voss*, based on the life of the inland explorer Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt, narrates the 'penalties of a heroic quest which attempted to conquer an unknown land' (Manoharan 2023: 80). To quote Meeker, then:

> Both as a literary form and as a philosophical attitude, tragedy seems to have been an invention of Western culture… It is conspicuously absent… in Oriental, Middle Eastern, and primitive cultures. The tragic view assumes that man exists in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is… The tragic man takes his conflict seriously, and feels compelled to affirm his mastery and his greatness in the face of his own destruction. (1996: 157)

Meeker's assertion that tragedy is, then, neither an adaptive strategy nor a universal phenomenon, but that which results in a disruption of community life, is evinced by the white settlement in Australia. While enduring the hardships faced by their own feats, the Europeans' eventual colonisation of Australia proved to be a tragic affair for its original inhabitants too. The implementation of the doctrine of *terra nullius* that led to the seizure of traditional grounds for settlement and pastoral purposes, eugenicist experimentation through forceful miscegenation, the introduction of the White Australia Policy in 1901 and the segregation, institutionalisation and marginalisation of the Aboriginal population were thunderbolts that struck on a peaceful Indigenous life. The consequence was the disintegration of an indigenous community, culture and land. Colonisation of Australia, thus, can be seen as a form of tragedy, which, while largely based upon fantasies that are 'likely to lead to misery or death for those who hold them' (Meeker 1996: 160), became more detrimental to the life of the Indigenous people.

Quite evidently, then, non-Indigenous belonging to the Australian land contradicts the ontological nature of Indigenous belonging. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues, it is this very sense of belonging, for Indigenous people, within the community that unsettles non-Indigenous belonging (2020: 24). Belonging is often characterised by interdependence among the members of the community. If, as Meeker's theoretical proposition maintains, '[c]omedy is the art of accommodation and reconciliation' (1996: 168), it would be worthwhile to consider how comedy has been instrumental in the survival of Indigenous communities in Australia despite the harsh realities of colonisation.

Survival through comedy

It can be argued that the comic disposition of Australian Indigenous people is not a deliberate attitude that developed after colonisation; rather, it is an inherent biological trait, philosophical attitude and behavioural pattern, which came of use as a survival strategy in community restoration.

Meeker suggests that the term 'comedy' could have originated from the name of the Greek demigod, Comus, the god of fertility, whose concerns included 'the general success of family and community life'. Meeker further observes that '[m]aintaining equilibrium among living things, and restoring it once it has been lost, are Comus's special talents…' (1996: 159). If the quality of balancing is what defines the well-being of the community, in all probability, it can then be proposed that the term 'community' itself, the origins of which can be drawn from such terms as *communitas*, meaning 'a particular quality of relationships' (Williams 1976: 75), can also be traced to the word 'Comus'. Comedy, therefore, is the propagation and maintenance of community life. Meeker's observation that '[w]herever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic mode seeks to return to normal' (159) is pertinent in the case of Indigenous society, which, through a comic mode of living, seeks integration, resilience and survival of the community.

Accordingly, as a biological trait, comedy in Australian Indigenous society centres around the notion of community life, which integrates human and non-human life in a continuous whole. Indigenous scholar Irene Watson argues that in Aboriginal society, humans, animals and plants are found to be in a 'relationship that links us to the past is a connection that is lived in the present and to be recreated in the future. This is the cycle of our ancestors…' (2015: 13). Accordingly, practices such as totemism found a prominent place in Aboriginal culture, particularly to ensure the maintenance of community life.

As a philosophical attitude, comedy can be explained through the essential difference in onto-epistemic ideologies that characterised Indigenous and European life. At the outset, the tenet of the humanistic tradition of the West, with its tragic implications, that 'human beings should try to accomplish whatever the human mind can imagine' (Meeker 1996: 162), was conspicuously absent in the consciousness of the Indigenous people, because of which they were often noted as 'indolent by disposition' (qtd. in Elkin 1964: 45). A.P. Elkin defends this behaviour as a sort of psychological adaptation of the indigene to his land, which in turn aids in his well-being. In fact, as a rule and code of conduct, the Indigenous people in the early days did not even attempt to venture out into territories that were not their own (Manoharan 2023: 52, 96) due to 'spiritual and totemic affiliations' (2023: 97). The latter's disinterestedness in attempting to venture into foreign territories, a character exhibited generally by Europeans, was decisively augmented in his belief patterns and regulated by the laws of his tribe. Also, unlike their Western counterparts, the idea of ownership, which entails absolute power, made no sense to the Indigenous people, who saw themselves as part of the larger cosmic continuum. This, perhaps, accounts for the Aboriginal Dreaming belief that humans evolved from the land, just as the fauna and the flora did, despite evidence to the fact that the Indigenous people migrated to the continent. While not attempting to venture into the empirical veracity of such claims, it can nevertheless be emphatically stated that these philosophical views have contributed much to the indigenous people's 'quasi-deliberate choice to reject…the centralisation of power

and authority, and violence' (qtd. in Paranjape 2010: 14), the primary requisite for a comic mode of life.

Finally, as a behavioural pattern, comedy exhibits itself in the form of humour among the Indigenous people. Indigenous writer Angelina Hurley, while analysing indigenous theatre productions, remarks that '[r]egardless of the situation, laughter always reigns. Humour plays an important part in our lives. Aboriginal peoples have been laughing at life and its circumstances for millenia' (2019). She continues to say that in these performances '[c]onflicting emotions of denial, blame, sorrow and loss [are] all redirected towards forgiveness and acceptance, through the warm embrace of humour'. This is a pertinent observation for the present paper, which addresses humour as a survival strategy among the Indigenous people.

Comedy in Jack Davis's Plays

Davis demonstrates all three distinct, yet interconnected ways in which comedy operates in Indigenous society and how it aids in the sustenance of the community. As a biological trait, comedy can be viewed in the sense Meeker uses it, as a process which encourages life and biological adaptation, ensuring 'the overall stability of the community' (162). Each of Davis's plays shows how the human community is integrated with the non-human natural environment, such that the survival of the former depends on the well-being of the latter. One way of ensuring such survival was to integrate the cultural aspect of Indigenous life with the natural surroundings. For instance, assigning names of animals, birds and plants to individuals, popularly referred to as totemism, was a significant method of ensuring the survival of that species. The practice of totemism acknowledged the fact that humans were a part of the ecological system. Though contemporary Indigenous Australians are far removed from the reality of their ancestors, Davis demonstrates that they do continue to follow and acknowledge some of the customs of their forefathers. For instance, in the play *Barungin*, Granny Doll explains to the younger generation how the Wallitch family got its name from Walitj, which means the night hawk (Davis 1989a: 36), and how '*Koolbardi'*, which is the magpie, was Shane's father's *Nyoongah* name because it was his totem (Davis 1989a: 34). Similarly, in *Kullark*, Yagan's name, which means freshwater turtle, designates his totem. Since each individual and Indigenous clan had different totems, such cultural practices imposed dietary restrictions (Manoharan 2023: 70) that decided which species could be killed for food, and which could not be, thus helping to maintain an equilibrium within the ecological system (Manoharan 2023: 70–1). In *The Dreamers*, Davis shows the relationship between the *moodgah* tree and the Nyoongah people, who live in the southwest of Western Australia. The tree holds a significant position in the Nyoongah household, as it houses the spirit of their dead ancestor, by virtue of which it is believed to possess supernatural powers (Manoharan 2023: 90–2, 101). The tree, for the same reason, cannot be cut down nor destroyed, as its survival is an essential aspect of Nyoongah cultural beliefs. The symbiotic process of survival is also mentioned in *Barungin*, when Peegun

explains how traditionally the didgeridoos were made by letting the white ants mate on wood, which increased their appetite and made them eat through the wood, a process that created the hollow in it (Davis 1989a: 15). In each of these instances, Davis demonstrates how Indigenous Australians made the survival of other species possible while 'contributing to the long-term maintenance of their environments' (Meeker 1996: 163–4). It can be said that Indigenous people also developed a certain philosophical attitude in tandem with the biological processes of the natural environment. Ensuring the stability of the community meant that individuals stayed within territorial borders while also safeguarding the territory from intruders. As mentioned earlier, this philosophy was in sharp contrast to the European worldview, which encouraged exploration into unknown territories. Davis illustrates the Indigenous philosophical worldview, rooted in the comic mode of life, through the character and chant of the Aboriginal warrior, Yagan, in *Kullark*. Yagan's chant emphasises the affinity of the Indigenous people to the land and their obligation to follow the laws laid by the ancestral beings to guarantee the well-being of the human and non-human community alike. His chant clearly delineates the fact that Aboriginal people were obliged to stay within the environmental limits as outlined by the Dreaming laws of the clan. This is why he is visibly intrigued, yet fearful, while encountering European explorers within his home territory.

Alternatively, Davis uses dialogues in his plays to showcase humour as an essential behavioural trait of Indigenous Australians. Davis argues that 'Aboriginal people are able to survive because of laughter' (Shoemaker 1994: 40). W.E.H. Stanner, who lived and worked with the Aborigines for many years, in his essay 'Aboriginal Humour', states that the underlying philosophy of Aboriginal humour can be baffling because '"humorousness" is first of all *in* the things', rather than in the manner in which an act is conducted and '[l]aughter is a sign of acknowledgement' (Stanner 1982: 40). In fact, the Aristotelian pre-requisites for tragedy, like 'the sentiments of pity and compassion are, on the whole, a little on the weak side…' (Stanner 1982: 42). Stanner does not seem to suggest that such sentiments are absent; rather, indigenous propensity for humour is primarily an acknowledgement of the absurdities and normal processes of life. Interestingly and paradoxically enough, humour, and not pity and fear, 'produce[s] the cathartic effect' (Xu 2019: 2). For instance, in Jack Davis's play, ***Barungin***, the solemnity of an Aboriginal funeral service is thwarted into a farce when the Aboriginal character Shane becomes restless and starts ridiculing the sermon of the American preacher:

> PREACHER. … I beg you as we are about to lay our brother Eli to rest, 'Repent'-*Repent*! I repeat, repent and then you will be saved…
> SHANE. For Christ's sake, put the man in his grave.
> PREACHER. And with these few words—
> SHANE. 'Few words'!
> PREACHER. … We lay—
> SHANE. That was a fucking marathon (Davis 1989a: 6)

Shane's unscrupulous utterance disregards all morality and seriousness needed to deal with a tragic event like death. Evidently his words completely contrast that of the American preacher, who is attempting to bring solemnity to the tragic event by evoking pity and fear through his long speech about the deceased's suffering in this world, stressing humans' innate sinfulness and the need for repentance by the onlookers. Shane's comic indulgence trivialises the preacher's sermon, deflating its 'noble idealism' (Meeker 1996: 158). A similar instance is seen in the play *The Dreamers*, when Alec voices, 'That weren't no funeral service. More like a flamin' sermon' (Davis 1989b: 8). That indigenous people view death as a universal phenomenon, and its acceptance as a biological and metaphysical sequel to life is quite evident in the plays. An instances of humour, induced through the use of disparaging words, is not uncommon in indigenous plays and 'deflates pretentions, especially those of White Australians and of "white-thinking" Aborigines' (Shoemaker 1989: 237). Laughter is also evoked when the Aborigines are trained into accepting rituals and beliefs that are in conflict with their own spirituality. Sitting down to a meal of roasted kangaroo, the Wallitch family have a light time, a moment of unsettling the serious demeanour one should possess while saying grace:

> DOLLY. Roy, you say grace
> SHANE. Do we only say grace when we are eating kangaroo?
> ROY. [putting his spoon back on his plate and swallowing] We thank you, Lord, for what—
> WORRU. You put some bacon in this?
> ROY. We thank you—
> WORRU. Bacon, wah?
> SHANE. SSH, ssh, Popeye close your eyes.
> ROY. We thank you, Lord.
> WORRU. What for? Can't eat with me eyes closed.
> ROY. We thank you, Lord, for what we have got.
> WORRU. [to SHANE, pointing upwards] I forgot about that fella up there. (Davis 1989b: 35)

Humour is also decidedly sarcastic when Eli who sings 'Onward Christian Soldiers', suddenly realises the paradox of the lyrics and hints at the double standards of Western spirituality: 'Ay? 'ow can you be a soldier an' a Christian? Lot a rot; soldiers used to chuck Christians to the lions' (Davis 1989b: 53). Similarly, teasing the vicar in *No Sugar*, Gran's humour is nevertheless inoffensive when she hints to the Sergeant that vicars are of no real help to the Aborigines:

> GRAN. [adopting a praying attitude] Yeah, when he come to Gubment Well he goes like that with his eyes closed and he says the Lord will help you, and now he prays with his eyes open, 'cause time 'fore last Wow Wow bit him on the leg…musta wanted a bit a' holy meat. (Davis 1986: 43)

Parody, which essentially functions as a comic element, is also presented in *No Sugar* to emphasise the poverty experienced by the Indigenous people. When

Neal, Neville, Sister and the other whites sing the hymn 'There is a Happy Land', intended to reveal prosperity that faithful Christians will achieve in the afterlife, 'the Aborigines break into full clear voice with a parody of the words' (Davis 1986: 98) of the original hymn, indicating the paradox of the situation in which they are forced to sing the song.

As is evident from the above excerpts, comic representations in the form of humour, wit, sarcasm and parody primarily function against the background of tragic events, like death, poverty or even general seriousness, implicating the need to reverse and survive through tragic circumstances. Apart from dialogues, humour is also implicated in mispronounced words, utterances of grammatically incorrect statements and the use of pidgins, creoles and patois, thus thwarting the standards of the English language. Such jocular utterances are indicative, too, of indigenous 'resistance towards Western modernity, appropriation of land by the colonisers, racism and deterioration of indigenous culture through mainstream contact, each of which has been made possible through the propagation and imposition of the colonial language' (Manoharan 2021: 5149).

Conclusion

As is evident from the above discussions, indigenous plays cannot be categorised on the basis of Western binary standards as either tragedy or comedy; neither do they fall into the category of tragicomedy, which is often characterised by a happy ending. Instead, they weave threads of humour into an essentially tragic representation of Aboriginal life. Characters are not fellows of noble or aristocratic lineage, whose hamartia causes their tragic fall. The representative characters are from among the common class, who, moreover, possess a minority status, and whose misfortunes are instigated not by their own acts but rather by the inherent inclination of the whites to subjugate them. It is also quite interesting to note that humour as such is never a thematic concern in Indigenous literature, which is fundamentally concerned with the more pressing issues of contemporary Indigenous people. However, the tragic situations represented in the plays are seldom conveyed in a sombre tone; rather, '[h]umour tempers the seriousness of these plays and concurrently enhances their impact; it rescues them from any danger of being oppressive in tone' (Shoemaker 1989: 234). As such, it wouldn't be preposterous to remark that humour always has a base in community and cannot be disseminated otherwise, unlike tragedy that can be instigated by and forced upon a single individual. What we, therefore, see in Indigenous Australian drama is how the innocuous use of humour becomes significant in strengthening family and community ties. By becoming 'relevant to the concept of Aboriginality' (Shoemaker 1989: 234), then, comedy, as a biological trait, philosophical attitude and a behavioural pattern, is an assertion of Aboriginality and a vital force against tragedy, especially the tragedy that eventuated out of colonisation.

Works Cited

Clarke, F.G. 1977. *The Land of Contrarieties: British Attitudes to the Australian Colonies 1828–1855*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press.

Davis, Jack. 1989a. *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*. Sydney: Currency Press.

—. 1982. *Kullark/ The Dreamers.* Sydney: Currency Press.

—. 1986. *No Sugar*. Sydney: Currency Press.

—. 1989b. *The Dreamers*. *Plays from Black Australia*. Sydney: Currency Press.

Elkin, A.P. 1964. *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Gerstaecker, Frederick. 1990. 'The Two Convicts', in Goodwin, Ken and Allen Lawson (eds), *The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature*, pp.23. Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty. Ltd.

Heiss, Anita and Peter Minter. 2008. 'Aboriginal Literature', in Heiss, Anita and Peter Minter (eds), *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Australia: Allen and Unwin.

Hurley, Angelina. 2019. 'Getting a Sense of Aboriginal Humour', *Witness. Performance. Discussion. Community*, https://witnessperformance.com/getting-a-sense-of-aboriginal-humour/ (accessed on 12 January 2025).

Manoharan, Aleena. 2023. *Bioregion and Indigeneity in Literary Imagination*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

—. 2021. 'Kim Scott: Articulation of Narrative Patterns', *Malayalam Research Journal*, 14 (1): 5145–60.

Meeker, Joseph W. 1996. 'The Comic Mode', in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, pp. 155–69. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2020. 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society', in Sara Ahmed et al. (eds.), *Uprootings/ Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, pp. 23–40. London and New York: Routledge.

Paranjape, Makarand. 2010. 'A Passage to Uluru: Rethinking Sacred Australia', in Makarand R. Paranjape (ed.), *Sacred Australia: Post-Secular Considerations*, pp. 1–20. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

Shoemaker, Adam. 1989. *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

—. 1994. 'The Real Australian Story: An Interview with Jack Davis', in Gerry Turcotte (ed.), *Jack Davis: The Maker of History*, pp. 22–47. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Stanner, W. E. H. 1982. 'ABORIGINAL HUMOUR.' *Aboriginal History*, 6 (1/2): 39–48. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045546 (accessed on 29 November 2023).

Watson, Irene. 2015. *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*. London and New York: Routledge.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press, 1976.

Xu, Daozhi. 2019. '"That Old Man Making Fun of Me": Humour in the Writings of Aboriginal and Asian Relationships', *JASAL* 19 (2): 1–13, https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/JASAL/article/view/13450 (accessed on 29 November 2023).

Locating the Carnivalesque and Public Laughter in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Sabreen Ahmed

Abstract

Public laughter is a crucial element of the carnivalesque that is satirically represented in Milan Kundera's literary corpus. The carnivalesque in Kundera is a coherence of the principles of carnival as embedded in the grotesque body, which may become a cause of public laughter. The dark humour of a political satire is the weaving thread of the seven narratives that unfold the novel's intertwining historical memory, laughter and forgetting in a political carnival of statelessness and subjective failure of the individual in the nakedness of bodily existence. The proposed paper would locate the functionality of public laughter as an infectious social disease with aesthetic, sexual and political ramifications transcending the domain of the personal in the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

Keywords: Body, Carnivalesque, Laughter, State

Milan Kundera is a starkly intrusive authorial figure in his narrative, where the autobiographical elements are blatantly reflective of provocative content shaded with humour and carnivalesque, representing the intractable culture wars of the Czech Republic. His was a literary mode of resistance to polarised cultural productions; it was a representation of the complex dynamics of the executioner and the victim. The connection between power struggle and public memory is aptly put in the first section of the novel *Lost Letters* through the statement of a character, Mirek: 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (Kundera 1996: 4). Just like a grotesque body, a grotesque political setup becomes a site for the complexities of the dark humour represented by the author through anecdotes, parables and sexual imagery, ending with the concept of merging laughter with death.

The focus and critical reception of Kundera's literary praxis as a whole heavily rely on the structural pattern of his novels' narrative style. This pattern is profoundly shaped not only by literary precursors 'like Diderot, Rabelais, Cervantes, Musil, [and] Broch' but also subconsciously by the cadence of the compositional principles of music (Novak 2023: 180); however, the focus on the formulations of the comic through the interstices of power, politics and body is the thrust of the discussion. The comical content of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is also reflected in its variations and polyphony of language and subject matter. The ideational content of the 'polyphonic novel' has already been formulated in literary theory following the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, who located and narrativised the presence of contrapuntal elements in the novels of Dostoyevsky. It has been rightly observed by numerous literary theorists like Chvatík, Kristeva, etc., who locate heteroglossia with the carnivalesque by drawing on Bakhtin's take on the exploration of the polyphonic principle in novels. Bakhtin's take on polyphony is enmeshed in patterns of language and linguistic deviations, which formulate 'the notion of heteroglossia' as the diverse variations of languages inside a singular core language. As such, novels can be considered as microcosms of heteroglossia that reflect the variations of higher and lower genres, dialogism, popular culture, and folk oration, which he locates as being rooted in the culture of the carnivalesque. On the contrary, Kundera's perspective on polyphony can be seen as emerging from his 'study of music, his thorough understanding of the principles of musical composition and his lifelong interest in the oeuvres of several major composers, including 'Janáèek, Schoenberg and Stravinsky' (Novak 2023: 183). However, from a broader literary perspective, the idea of consonance in the novelistic genre has a panoramic dimension and is not confined to the structural pattern of the Kunderan novel alone. Thus, Bakhtin and Kundera are connected through their representations of polyphony in their novels, linking it to both the visible and invisible aspects of popular laughter. In a similar vein to the Bakhtinian use of popular laughter, it can be said that Kundera's notion of the carnivalesque was also influenced by Rabelais and Gogol, but for the former, 'laughter is not so much a subversion of the dominant voice of power but rather a form of higher knowledge, a liberating insight' (Hodrová et al., 76). Kundera depicts that 'the art of the novel arrived in the world as an echo of divine laughter', and as such, humour has multifarious interpretations for Kundera notwithstanding its divine connotations.

While it is clear that other humorous writers exist besides Milan Kundera, Weeks convincingly argues that no seminal modern author of fiction has consistently explored the theme of humour and public laughter in their literary works, as Kundera has in novels such as *Laughable Loves*, *The Joke* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. (Weeks 2005: 130). Kundera's history and aesthetics of humour as reflected in his interviews cannot be separated from the authoritative pressures in his personal life also represented in the narrative: 'I learned the value of humor during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn't

fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humor was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since then I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humour.' (Kundera1996:232) Through this presumption Kundera offers autobiographical content to a 'Czech's experience of Soviet domination'. as well as a hint of his idea about the term 'humour', that which belies the hegemonic understanding of the political correctness of a novelistic discourse. It can be surmised that through this argument he shows a clear association of ideas with Mikhail Bakhtin, whose influential concept of the 'carnivalesque' modelled in the narratives of Rabelais was also subsequently operative in the context of Stalinist state oppression. (Weeks 2005: 131)

Besides the subversive models of laughter, Milan Kundera also considers laughter as the suprapersonal wisdom of a novel (Boryslawski 2020). Laughter is a tool for resisting conventions and the official jargon of institutionalisation. There are several manifestations of carnival laughter. If, on one hand, carnival laughter serves as a subversion to counter the fear of death, on the other hand, it is perceived as a threat to the established order. The Lukcasian ironical laughter of the novel has the same relative power as other forms of laughter suggested by Kundera and Bakhtin (Boryslawski 2020). Enmeshed in a genre between the *nouveau* roman and the expansive technique of magic realism, the border crossing of the narrative in looking at the act of writing and the act of looking at the world through laughter peculates the third space (Boisen 2007: 239). In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the authorial figure uncovers the risk of a delimiting narrative in general that suggests a rupture between the 'political orthodoxy' of deconstructing cultural memories with the literariness of 'critical orthodoxy' that persisted upon the disjuncture betwixt intellectual perception and interpolation of textual meaning (Straus 1987: 69). Kundera sensualises laughter in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (*1979*)* through a collection of seven discrete but propositionally connate short stories published more than a decade later than *TheJoke*. This opens up scope for analysing *The Joke* as a narrative, interpolating the variations of the comic. The comparative analysis of the mediums of orality and the written word in both of these texts is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the Kunderan craft of locating humour in the carnivalesque. It has been observed that the language in both these novels in the mutual 'textual and aural, or vocal forms' delineates the function of writing and orality in the narratives. In this regard, the character of Sarah is essential in the understanding of the comic and the idea of feminine jouissance incorporated in the statement: 'O laughter! Laughter of sensual pleasure, sensual pleasure of laughter; to laugh is to live profoundly' (Kundera 1996:79). Sarah serves as a comical disruption invalidating the presentation of the two sisters Gabrielle and Mitchell in the short story 'Angells' and thereby allows Madame Raphael to perceive their presentation of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* from her own perspective, independently from the sisters' aural presence (Hong 2012: 30). Fred Misurella, in the essay 'A Different World: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting'*, highlights that the postmodern version of the mediaeval poet

Boccaccio's uncouth humour posits him as 'a clear surrogate for Kundera himself', expressing views that counter the untainted vision of romantic poetry as a saga of unadulterated love (Misurella 1993: 35). Here Boccaccio becomes a critique of the ideals of romanticism in Kundera's narrative. Hong refers to (2012:30) Terry Eagleton's argument that 'the Kunderan text's carnivalesque impulse presses the existence of romantic idealism to the point of absurdity' (Eagleton 2003: 51). Eagleton further notes, "Stalinism cannot be opposed by romanticism…precisely because it has a monopoly of it" (54). The representation of the joke concocted by Ludvik and the repercussion of Boccaccio's jibe disrupt the fragile conception of the self via comic transmutation rather than through the transference of sentimentality. Hong argues that Ludvik's subjective splitting of self defies the ruling party's optimistic jargon of a politicised subject, juxtaposed to which Boccaccio's absurdist reflection of the comic dilutes lyric poetry's aesthetic pretext of love and beauty through romance (Hong 2012: 30). Thus, public laughter, which acts as an 'aural artefact' in the narrative content of Kundera, merits much critical acclaim in correlation to the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque.

The novel has an interesting and brief anecdote in which the devil laughs aloud to mock the benevolence of God. Since the laughter of the devil is presumably infectious, the inhabitants of the world start laughing at God's benevolent stature. In response to the devil's mockery, an angel breaks into hysterical laughter 'to rejoice over how good and meaningful everything here below was' (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* 87). The narrative incorporates a crisp reciprocation of this reaction: 'Seeing the angel laugh, the devil laughed all the more…because the laughing angel was infinitely comical… Nowadays we don't even realize that the same external display serves two absolutely opposed internal attitudes. There are two laughter, and we have no word to tell one from the other' (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* 87). Here, laughter becomes functional as a form of 'post-linguistic discourse', where the dominant norms of the sensible are dismantled by the nonsensical. An analysis of this devilish laughter is necessary for the critical positioning of the subject in Kundera's text and its significance within the discussion of the carnivalesque. It can be argued that the 'laughable laughters' of the banal in devils and sacrosanct in angels are a reflection of the narrative's endorsement of a post-symbolic order which dismantles the production of a monolithic meaning of humour, sex, identity and politics and the profane. Since laughter cannot be confined to a singular derivative, Ludvik's fractured self, along with his underlying dormant desires for narrativising the joke, eludes an authoritarian reading. The novel therefore provokes its readers to read beyond this post-symbolic order of locating a political content in the text through public laughter.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting incorporates a short narrative entitled 'Litost', which narrates about a congregation of influential local poets named after prominent canonical writers like mediaeval poet Boccaccio, Renaissance poet Petrarch, and pre-Romantic poet Goethe functioning as characters within the narrative. Amongst them Boccaccio is described as 'someone who is surely there

by mistake…it is obvious that poetry has not kissed his brow and that he does not like verse' (Kundera 1996: 177). The role of Boccaccio is distinguishably marked in his comical interruption of Petrarch, who was telling and enacting a story (181). Taking a cue from Boccaccio's rudeness, a hyperbolic exchange of abusive remarks between the poets is initiated in the narrative. Following this scene, it is seen that Petrarch condemns Boccaccio in a humorous line while explaining about his rudeness to a disciple who had witnessed the scene, 'Boccaccio is a jackass. Boccaccio never understands anyone, because to understand is to merge and identify with. That is the secret of poetry' (198–9). The narrative shows how Petrarch sentimentally accounts for Boccaccio's association with sarcasm and jokes: 'Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry… Boccaccio doesn't understand love. Love can never be laughable' (199). Boccaccio is placed in the text as a stringent critique of these lyric poets' uncouth notions about romantic optimism through a comic reflection of their behaviours. The comedy of Kundera's narrative lies in positing Boccaccio's comic presence as a foil to the lyric poets' unadulterated valorisation of the beauty and purity of love. Thus, it can be said that *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* foregrounds the progression of a comedy from the socio-linguistic and political frustrations of the author's subject position.

Kundera observes, 'If I were asked the most common cause of misunderstanding between my readers and me, I would not hesitate: humor' (Kundera 1996:6). He further refers to the view asserted by Octavio Paz that 'Humor is the great invention of the modern spirit' and claims that humor is 'absolutely fundamental to modern European culture' as it coincides with that of the birth of the novel. It is significant to note that Kundera's focus on the role of 'ambiguity' in humor is associated with what Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia' conforms to, the advent of the novel, as in Cervantes and Rabelais. These writers had to suffer state coercion due to their fundamental resistance to the authoritarian power structure of the aggressive state that forced them into censorship and internal exile.

It has been observed by Weeks that Kundera's literary corpus 'identifies three strategies' of control of power 'corresponding to three perceived phases in the modern history' of the perception and reception of humor and laughter. First of all, the controlling agency of traditional repression can be marked as the 'aggressive marginalization of humor under Stalin'; next, the strategy of applying humour as a recuperation in neo-revolutionary historical narratives earlier discerned in Bakhtin's use of the carnivelesque (Weeks 2005: 132). And finally, the interstices of humour and control are seen in the endless reproductions of laughter that operate as a signifying index and as a symbol of liberating significations in the postmodern spaces of public interpolation of humour.

The chapter entitled 'The Border', in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* locates the thin boundary between the historical and cosmic:

> It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, and history. Human life—and

> herein lies its secret—takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch. (Kundera 1996:206–7)

The demarcating border of the physical/geographical divide is 'so infinitely little' because laughter functions as a means of collapsing and disrupting meaning and temporality through the armour of nakedness, which is a leitmotif in the section. Further, Kundera establishes in *The Art of the Novel* that the emergence of the comic is 'inherently cruel' and offers a stark revelation of the absurdity of things with fatal consequences. Weeks rightly argues that '*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* goes beyond *The Joke* is in dissecting the 'willed' misinterpretation of laughter that allows it to be neutralized, and even turned against itself, through appropriation by narratives of historical purpose. Laughter is used, recalling Schopenhauer, to forget the horrors of Soviet domination, but it is also projected as a joyful herald of the future'. (Weeks 2005: 139) Earlier in the narrative Kundera draws upon his personal experience and voices the revolutionary poetry of Paul Éluard, who is represented in the novel's narrative amidst a circle of 'laughing, dancing Czechs', in a choral poetic rendition of rebellion: 'We shall flee rest, we shall flee sleep. We shall outstrip dawn and spring And we shall fashion days and seasons To the measure of our dreams' (Kundera 1996:67). The cheerful radicals react to these rebellious verses by 'speeding up the steps of their dance, fleeing rest and sleep, outstripping time . . .' (ibid). Thus, laughter is hereby correlated with a synchronic purpose, where time is infinitely compressed through the velocity of a joyfully purposeful movement (Weeks 2005: 140). Towards the end of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* the reader identifies a sexual orgy deployed in the image of laughter within a 'neo-erotic' mythic tradition which is 'eternally vigilant and infinitely demanding' (Kundera 1996: 222). Focusing on the fatality of laughter, it can be asserted that laughter and death, or *thanatos,* are formulated by Kundera as ends or antitheses of humour and erotic hunger percolating through the representation of the naked bodies in Daphnis Island depicted in the section 'The Border'. These bodies narrated in the last chapter failed to respond to arousal even in their nakedness, which is suggestive of the futile end of their existence. The ambivalence that emanates from this correlation of laughter with death is infused with a potential force transcending cultural visibility in the uncovered nakedness of his idea of misunderstood truth. The suggestion is clear when the same idea is explained in connection with other marginalised or victimised groups like the Jews: 'May be it meant that at that moment the Jews had also been on the other side of the border and thus that nakedness is the uniform worn by men and women on the other side. That nakedness is a shroud.' (Kundera 1996: 310) This ambivalently optimistic/pessimistic momentum of laughter is an impulse that Kundera executes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as well as equates the same with his conception of the birth of the novel. It is through this ambivalence that public laughter is interpolated in the interstices of sex, humour, politics, and socio-cultural transferences in the genre of a novel.

The novel begins with a description of a 1948 photograph of Vladimir Clementis and Klement Gottwald, from which Clementis was erased when he was obsolete for the politicians. The erasure of Clementis' photograph is an example of erasure of public memory through the sense of forgetting. He also includes himself – or, at least, an author called Milan Kundera – and each section incorporates tangents, anecdotes, fables, and parables. There is a section in the narrative that shows the binding together of events by the idea of *litost* – an untranslated Czech word used by Kundera to describe 'a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery'. The celebration of the body in all its oddities is an act of defiance against the existing norms of social behaviour and defies the political nature of collective memory in the lives of the characters in the novel. The political trauma of abandonment and revelation circumscribes their fate and future. For instance, the character of Andre Breton was still in stoic support of the failed state when the narrator in the section 'The Angels' wandered through the streets of Prague in rings of insane laughing amidst the dancing Czechs in a gigantic ring between Paris, Moscow, Prague, Warsaw, Sofia and Greece, symbolising the carnivalesque of suffering and death amidst a political dystopia. The paper, by locating the carnivalesque and public laughter, concludes that the flushing of the toilet intermingles with the sound of fear as the sexually potent body and the naked bodies in Daphnis Island, activating bowels and insidious bravery, essentially coexist in a state of being in an anarchic body politic seamlessly along the culturally visible/invisible momentum of public laughter.

Works Cited

Boisen, Jørn. 2007.'Piscines et plages chez Kundera', *Revue Romane,* 42(2):239–55.

Borys³awski, R. (2020). The Monsters That Laugh Back: Humour as a Rhetorical Apophasis in Medieval Monstrology. In: Derrin, D., Burrows, H. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56646-3_12. Accessed 29th January 2024.

Eagleton, Terry. 2003. 'Estrangement and Irony', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Milan Kundera*. Broomall: Chelsea House.

Hong, Joseph. 2012.'A Joke and Nothing More: Voice, Writing and the Kunderan Comedy of Failed Finitude', *The UCI Undergraduate Research Journal*, Volume XV, No. 12, https://archive.urop.uci.edu/journal/journal12/04.html. Accessed on 29th January 2024.

Kundera, Milan and Linda Asher (translator). 1986. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Grove.

Kundera, Milan and Linda Asher (translator). 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber.

Kundera, Milan. 1992. *The Joke*. New York: Harper.

Misurella, Fred. 1993. *Understanding Milan Kundera*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Novák, Radomil. 2023. 'Polyphony of form and ideas in the works of Milan Kundera', *Journal of European Studies*, 53(2):179–97, DOI: 10.1177/00472441231172059 journals.sagepub.com/home/jes.

Straus. Nina Pelikan. 1987. 'Erasing History and Deconstructing the Text: Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting'*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 28(2): 69–85, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.1987.9937831.

Weeks, Mark. 2005.'Milan Kundera: A Modern History of Humor Amid the Comedy of History', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28(3): 130–48.

Comedy and Crisis: Political Commentary in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

Yashvi Srivastava

Abstract

Sri Lankan literature has a rich tradition of employing humour as a means to engage with and comment on the pressing political and societal issues, including the works of Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai and Anuk Arudpragasam, to name a few. Among the contemporary Sri Lankan writers who employ humour and comedy aesthetics is Shehan Karunatilaka. His 2022 Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida,* is a noir fiction that envisions the afterlife as a system of bureaucracy that is as absurd as the real-life bureaucratic world of Kafka. The novel employs the tool of humour to not only deal with the violence of the civil war that engulfed the country during 1983–2009 but also as a means of political commentary and subversion. This paper attempts to examine the relationship between humour and political commentary in the novel, focussing on the ways in which Karunatilaka employs several aesthetics of humour and comedy to illuminate and critique the complexities of the country's political landscape. It looks into the utilisation of humour during a time of crisis to engage with mainstream political narratives to offer relief, provocation and action. It aims to demonstrate that humour serves not only as a reactive coping mechanism during crises but also as a significant vehicle for societal critique, thereby reclaiming humour from its perception as a benign form of expression to a powerful subversive instrument.

Keywords: Humour, Sri Lanka, comedy, crisis, subversion

Sri Lanka has a lengthy history of enduring ethnic conflict that lasted for a period of 26 years. The conflict between militant organisations such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan government and Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has caused a significant level of violence in the country. This

scale of ethnic violence 'required a response from nearly every Sri Lankan writer, resident or diasporic, in each of Sri Lanka's three languages. Sri Lankan writers sought to understand the roots of the conflict, foster dialogue and reconciliation, and bear witness to terrorism and repression by all sides' (Jayasurya 2016: 196). Some of the notable events in this course of history to which many writers and academics have responded include the 1983 pogrom, which saw mass killings of Tamils and destruction of properties in Colombo; the Sri Lankan government's role in press censorship and the targeted killings of journalists and activists; the terrorist activities perpetrated by the militant organisation LTTE; and the JVP insurgency during the 1980s and 1990s. A multitude of Sri Lankan authors have addressed the reality of this ethnic war via their narratives, poems, and fiction. Shyam Selvadurai writes about the anti-Tamil pogrom that took place in July of 1983 in his novel *Funny Boy* (2004). The government's premeditation of the pogrom became evident when the culprits were discovered in possession of election lists with Tamil addresses and identities. Selvadurai uses the protagonist Arjie as a means of documenting the atrocities endured by the Tamil community during the 1983 pogrom, as Arjie diligently records these events in his journal—'I stood at the gate, staring at the devastation in front of me. If not for the gate, which was still intact, I would have never been able to say that this had been our house' (Selvadurai 2004: 297). In addition to English, several authors have also addressed the issue of violence in Tamil and Sinhalese. Cheran Rudhamoorthy, the son of the renowned Tamil poet Mahakavi, has addressed the issue of ethnic violence in his poem 'The Second Sunrise'. During this period of political tension that persisted until 2009, there was a combination of state control of the press and unofficial self-censorship. As a result, protest writing in all three languages evolved as a means of condemning the political turbulence and expressing the sense of displacement experienced by individuals. Ranjini Obeyesekere, while talking about the Sri Lankan theatre, says, 'Protest Literature, poetry, fiction, or drama is neither an unfamiliar nor a new phenomenon. It comes alive most intensely in times of political upheaval and suppression. The 20th century has probably seen more of it in more parts of the world than ever before in history.' (1992: 131). Shehan Karunatilaka's novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida,* is not just another addition to this protest literature; it is an afterlife noir that blends not only the distinction between the genres but also the lines between life and death and right and wrong in a comedic fashion. The novel effectively portrays the ethnic violence and the role of the state, the citizens and the world at large, revealing the long-standing disputes and crises in Sri Lanka with a combination of humour and unfiltered honesty. Thus, this novel is not only a way to register protest but also to ridicule and to create a socio-cultural discourse when other forms of such political, social and cultural discourses are either not available or hidden from the public.

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida, winner of the 2022 Booker Prize, is set in the middle of the Sri Lankan civil war. The year is 1990, and Maali Almeida—a war photographer and a gay man—wakes up dead in a bureaucratic office. He has

seven moons, i.e., seven days, to 'enter the light'; otherwise, he will forever remain in purgatory, which seems to mean perpetually hovering in the 'in-between'. This 'in-between' is the setting of Columbo, where he was murdered. When he awakes from the dead, he can neither remember who killed him nor where his body lay (Beira Lake). Now before his seven moons get over, he has a personal mission—to somehow make his friend Jaki and his lover DD get the negatives of his war and political photographs and exhibit them to the world before they are destroyed. The story then unravels in the form of a whodunit mystery where the readers discover the political turmoil of Sri Lanka and the violence that engulfs it from all factions—including the suicide bombers, the hired goons, the corrupt ministers, and army chiefs. There seem to be many allusions to real-life people in the novel, like the character of Cyril Wijeratne, who seems to be modelled after Ranjan Wijeratne, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and State Minister of Defence in 1989. He is known for his tough position regarding LTTE and JVP, and it is alleged that the government's death squads reported to him. He was assassinated by the LTTE in 1991, using a car bomb. Another character in the novel—Major Raja Udugampola, who in the novel runs the 'torture palace'—seems to be modelled after General Premadasa Udugampola. Shekhar Gupta in his article in *The Print* (2019) notes, 'On the Sinhala side, nobody personified that cycle of killing and revenge more than the DIG of police, Premadasa Udugampola, then 46, and widely hailed as Sri Lanka's Dirty Harry'. And Dr Ranee Sridharan's character seems to be based on Dr Rajani Thirangama, who was a Tamil human rights activist and a feminist and was assassinated by the LTTE for critiquing the militant organisation (LTTE) for their atrocities. While Maali's character, who is also the protagonist, is based on Richard de Zoysa, who was a popular journalist, actor and activist whose death brought on widespread resentment in the country. The essence of the narrative of the novel is therefore based on real people and real events in the history of Sri Lanka. The gaps arising from this intermingling of fiction and reality are filled through humour—Shehan's punchlines and one-liners serve as moments of awareness, shock, or provocation. The novel invokes various aesthetic forms of humour to closely observe the subjects and individuals at play during the conflict. Shehan's prose is excessively whimsical, irreverent, and counter-cultural to conform to any conventional political objective. Shehan concentrates on confounding his readers by examining essential identitarian conceptions such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, while also reevaluating both the horrific past of Sri Lanka and the global politics and humanitarian problems that contribute to collective trauma.

As Davies and Illot (2018) articulate, 'Comedy is an ambivalent mode of expression', which can range from 'reactionary and conservative to the radical and subversive'. (1) The novel uses this ambivalence to engage its politicised humour in ways that are not definite and uniform. Shehan employs not only the popular theories in Comedy Studies like Incongruity Theory credited to Kant and relief theory linked with Freud but also the contemporary forms of humour like absurdity, provocative humour, and pithy one-liners to comment upon the violence engulfing

Sri Lanka, colonialism, hegemonic standards of sexuality, military occupation, Islamophobia, religion, apathetic politicians, marginalisation of the indigenous population, etc. The novel's humorous dimension is transversal and operates on numerous levels, addressing both the prolonged violence that afflicted the country and interacting with the theme of coloniality. His humour is intersectional, approaching the text through several entry points—history, contemporary politics, violence, crisis, identity wars, and homosexuality. Nicholas Holm (2017) describes how 'political aesthetics' of humour can 'do political work' by interceding in the 'negotiation, contestation and distribution of power' (12). Shehan's novel can be essentially categorised within this humourous political aesthetics framework, as not only does the subject matter of the novel concern the political background of Sri Lanka, but also the form of its humour is elementally political in its nature. The premise of the novel establishes its humourous intent with Maali, the protagonist of the novel, waking up after his death in a bureaucratic office that claims it is 'not a government office' (Karunatilaka 2022: 2) but works exactly like one. The people who are responsible for processing the dead don attire reminiscent of Christian holy leaders, clad in white garments, and encourage the departed to proceed towards 'The Light', which promises to erase all memories and prevent succumbing to despair, so avoiding eternal purgatory. Shehan uses comedy to bring to light the colonial history and baggage of Sri Lanka by using 'biblified' tropes and its colonial annotations for describing the afterlife office. The surreal elements of the afterlife also undermine the European colonial notion of privileging only objective forms of knowledge over others. The novel's examination of the nation's tragic history may lead the readers to presume that it would be lacking in humour; however, the novel's language and concept are predominantly comedic, frequently referencing the Incongruity Theory of Comedy Studies associated with Kant and Schopenhauer. The theory establishes humour arising out of unexpected events and occurrences that deviate from regular anticipation and expectations. Subsequent to Maali's demise, various entities, including CNTR, which endorses the LTTE, Major Udugampola, and the government, represented by Justice Minister Cyril Wijeratne, engage in numerous conspiracy theories regarding his death, all aimed at recovering the negatives of his war photographs. There are other conjectures concerning his death, including the possibility that he was assassinated by the JVP, the government, or the LTTE. Some assert that he was ejected from a helicopter into the Beira by the government while discussions on his alliances are taking place in the Indian High Commission. Only for the readers to discover that Maali was murdered by his boyfriend's father due to his homosexuality and not due to any conspiracy related to his war photographs. The anticlimactic revelation of his demise is incongruently humorous, since the inquiry into his death leads readers to anticipate that his war photographs are the cause, only to realise that they are entirely unrelated. The text also deals with the garbage men, or the hired goons for murders, with incongruous humour. The readers expect such serious subject matter to be dealt with with detailed strategies and schemes; instead, they

get foolish bickering from the goons. This incongruity and discrepancy places these men not as simple enemies but as everyday people who are entangled in the violent regimes and discourses, thus making the commentary politicised.

The novel's premise explores Maali's afterlife, employing a carnivalesque manner to examine and reveal Sri Lanka's terrible history. Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal work on carnivalesque is often invoked while talking about the subversive and liberatory aspect of humour, which posits that the anarchic nature of the carnival allows the common masses to utilise laughter as a way to overcome fear, authority and class oppression (Bakhtin 1984: 90–91). Shehan's construction of the afterlife can be construed as a carnivalesque interjection to deal with the serious matter of the novel. In the afterlife, there exists no hierarchy, and the mutilated dead bodies represent the 'comedy of the body' (Bhaktin 1984: 248) with all its grotesque details. There is a constant push and pull between the wish for death and the wish for life—Maali is generally pessimistic about life but occasionally erupts into, 'It's [Life's] not nothing.' (363) This 'ambivalence of being' (Bhaktin 1984: 248) that marks the carnivalesque experience permeates the lives of the people in the afterlife. The people who die by suicide comically keep jumping off from the buildings to re-kill themselves, while others like Sena (JVP member) are too busy meddling in the lives of the living. The carnivalesque premise of the afterlife does not prevent Maali from engaging with his past and the history of his country. He hovers over the real world, and his ghost can be interpreted as an alter ego through which he situates himself within his past rather than running away from it. This ambiguity between the dead and the living is used as a means of overcoming the violent trauma of the past rather than accepting it as is.

Even though the larger framework of the novel is didactic in nature, where his political commentary turns preachy at moments, his humour brings relief. Karunatilaka's objective of disrupting the institution of history through comedic relief is apparent in his 2022 interview, where he states, 'That's the way I naturally write…because otherwise…all the grim stuff becomes quite a depressing commentary, so you temper it with a bit of glib humour.' Karunatilaka's fiction is not just a comedy but a comedy during a violent crisis when humorous political commentary becomes a necessary tool of protest literature for subverting institutions and governments. The political intention of the novel is doused in humour to make it more palatable. Thus, Karunatilaka attempts to break through the detachment and catharsis caused by the serious matter through comedy. Here, Karunatilaka's text can be said to be drawing on the Relief Theory of humour linked to Freud. Drawing from Freud's notion of the 'tendentious joke' in his 1905 work *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, this humour theory posits that jokes facilitate the expression of otherwise unarticulated sentiments, serving to alleviate repressed emotions of anger and resentment directed at individuals or institutions (Lionis 2023: 19). His succinct one-liners bring moments of relief during serious discussions, while he makes comments on the inefficacy of the institution, like the UN, the police and the army. For instance, upon the discovery of many bodies in the Beira

Lake, the reactions of the local populace, law enforcement, Europeans, and onlookers are characterised by shock at the survival of fish in such polluted water. At another instance, Major Udugampola chides the police officers for not properly disposing of the murdered dead bodies and mentioning rumours of the remains being given to cats. In response to which, one of the policemen hilariously claims ignorance of the cats and says nothing about the murdered bodies. On another occasion in the novel, Karunatilaka alleviates the stress experienced by readers by likening the heightened regularity of curfews in the country to the routine occurrence of Poya holidays. Poya holidays are Buddhist holidays in Sri Lanka observed every month on the full moon day. This humorous connection necessitates that readers possess an understanding of the cultural practices and customs prevalent in Sri Lanka. Through this familiarity and jocular participation, Karunatilaka jolts his readers from complacency and ignorance. Consequently, Karunatilaka's humour does not elicit uproarious laughter from readers; instead, it fluctuates between the serious, ludicrous, and mundane, serving as a significant intervention in the nation's primary political dynamics. The relief from the novel's humour is not long-lasting; it quickly gathers pace by means of provocation. Just when the readers start to get comfortable and participate in the shared relief, Karunatilaka invokes provocation to bring them back into awareness and shame. Therefore, the relief is momentary and fleeting. Nicholas Holm (2017) points out how provocative humour 'mobilise[s] a mode of humour that explicitly demands, even dares, the audience to find humour in sites of horror and social conflict' (119). Maali, who is politically didactic, suddenly breaks into a monologue with his boyfriend DD about how 'circumcision at birth instils rage in the subconscious and makes men violent' (Karunatilaka 2022: 31). The humour is in the breaching of the political, social and cultural rules established by the text that was until now revelling in its political correctness. The readers are invited to partake in the political stance of the text and then suddenly realign themselves to the breach of that contract. The stereotypes that surround the Muslim men confront the readers suddenly with the provocative humour and invite them to partake in the shame of those stereotypes with humour.

Shehan's humour, although political in content, is not always politicised. There are moments in the novel where the humour breaks into bodily attacks and apolitical mockery. This strategy sometimes leads to a departure from the text's main concern of critically contesting the political norms and authorities. For instance, the police officers – Detective Cassim and ASP Ranchagoda – are ridiculed for their body proportions. Cassim is described as having a 'rice belly' (Karunatilaka 2022: 62), while Stanley, who is a Minister of Youth Affairs, is mocked for his 'dramatic pauses' in his long speeches (Karunatilaka 2022: 104). The Minister of Justice Cyril Wijeratne's speech is mocked as well as labelled 'hisses[ing]' (Karunatilaka 2022: 214), and his laughter as 'cackling' and the 'ugliest music' (Karunatilaka 2022: 219). Mockery that targets the ridiculing of the criminals' embodiments diverts the intent of humour from political critique to the reinforcement of expectations for leadership.

This results in the reaffirmation of prevailing social behaviours and physical norms that politicians and law enforcement are compelled to follow, rather than scrutinising their ideologies and political stances. While Karunatilaka's writing employs a humorous approach that diverges from political discourse, such instances are infrequent and limited. The comedy is predominantly politicised, serving as a vehicle for comedic critique that confronts political conventions and transforms the political arena from a sanctimonious realm of untouchability into one of comedic mocking.

Major Udugampola, a figure inspired by Premadasa Udugampola, who served in the police from 1957 to 1992, is humorously critiqued for his violent behaviour throughout the novel. The core concept of his comic critique revolves around his interactions with knowledge, authority, and assessments of the ethical implications of real-world actions. The comedic nature of such instances is not just based on the analysis of the politics surrounding such characters but also illustrates how humour may potentially influence political discourse in ways that extend beyond merely mocking their behaviours and bodies. Karunatilaka illustrates Major Udugampola's inclination to employ violence as the primary resolution to all challenges he encounters, therefore critiquing violence on an ideological level. Major Udugampola's frequent threats while disposing of the murdered corpses, admonishing his subordinates to expedite their efforts or face incineration, along with his dialogue with Jaki, wherein he threatens her with slaughter should she contact him again, exemplifies Karunatilaka's comedic artistry in critiquing formal violence by transposing it into informal discourse and conversations. Sena, a deceased JVPer, strives to liberate the nation from violence and avenge his own murder, as well as that of others, yet ironically resorts to violence himself. He assembles a legion of deceased individuals to eliminate politicians and law enforcement, disregarding the multitude of innocent lives that will be lost in the endeavour. His scheme to attack the Palace of Torture presents a humorous contrast between two distinct motivations for violence. His approach to implementing this strategy involves humorously enticing the malevolent spirit that protects the Minister of Justice with a performance by a dancer spirit.

Karunatilaka's humour also punctures the identity politics and opens up conversations on crucial subjects and geopolitical positions. Maali's homosexuality is approached from a perspective of humourous criticism of hegemonic standards of sexuality rather than victimhood. The absurdity characterised by dominant ideological and identity discourses is mocked repeatedly in the novel through satiric attacks. When the ASP asks Jaaki who Maali was, she caustically replies, 'His father was Sinhalese. I am Burgher. We are Sri Lankans. Is there an issue?' (Karunatilaka 2022: 49). The protagonist even shunned the queer identities as part of his being. He says, 'You considered neither "faggot" nor "homo" nor "queer" as slurs because you were none of these things. You were simply a handsome man who enjoyed beautiful boys. Nothing more, nothing less and no one's business' (Karunatilaka 2022: 106). For Walter Michaels (2010), 'Identity Politics has no

quarrel with economic inequality and it brilliantly represents the interests of those who benefit from that inequality…' (11). Matthew Lange (2009), in his study of the impact of British colonialism in creating ethnic conflicts, talks about how missionary schools created a divide between the people of Sri Lanka based on who would get the white-collar jobs. Communities of Christians, Burghers and Tamils who got English education eventually found their way to civil services and white-collar jobs like 'medicine, law, engineering, and the sciences' (23). Sinhalese, on the other hand, had limited access to this English-medium education and therefore became the 'most poorly educated' (24). So while it may be inferred that ethnic conflicts are typically not just about ethnic differences but rather revolve around issues such as community representation, power dynamics and resource allocation, ethnoreligious differences often become the symbols of war because of identity politics. Karunatilaka, by his humour, seems to be criticising this insidiousness of identity politics through his contempt for identities—be they religious, ethnic, national or queer. Karunatilaka, while expressing his satirical contempt for religious identities that have exacerbated the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, comments on the character of Sena through Maali, 'Like all purveyors of religions, Sena has wisely chosen to prey on the weak' (Karunatilaka 2022: 150). Karunatilaka appears to be continuing in the tradition of religious satire by not singling out any one religion or adopting a stance, but rather by challenging the concept of God itself and referring to him as 'whoever' (Karunatilaka 2022: 142). He comments quite humorously on the exploitation of the masses' religious beliefs by the political parties for their benefit—'Evil is not what we should fear. Creatures with power acting in their own interest: that is what should make us shudder. How else to explain the world's madness? If there's a heavenly father, he must be like your father: absent, lazy and possibly evil' (Karunatilaka 2022: 19).

In conclusion, examining the political aesthetics of humour is a pressing endeavour to enhance and broaden the current theoretical framework of Comedy Studies. Although much of the framework suggests that humour is subversive, this paper examines the mechanisms and rationale behind the assertion that comedy is subversive. The distinction between fiction and reality is frequently obscured, and the novel maintains its connections to actual events and individuals inside its fictional framework. The story oscillates between the present, past, and future, enabling readers to comprehend the historical and political context. The various forms and aesthetics of humour—comedy of relief, provocative humour, pithy one-liners, absurdity, content incongruity—albeit in the political realm, undercut the gravitas and the seriousness of the subject matter, and instead of catharsis, the readers are left with several political entry points through participating in the humour of the text. In Karunatilaka's novel we see a comprehensive portrayal of the struggle, with its intricate interplay of economic, political and physical injustices, which are committed not alone by one party but by both and all of their puppets. It rightly leaves the reader wondering, 'If The Light is heaven…and if the In Between is purgatory filled with the Lost, then what does that make the Down

Below?'— 'Hell!' (Karunatilaka 2022: 92-93), the novel humorously answers. Detailed histories integrate these many forms in a humorous disruption that reveals the ideological structure responsible for the violence that afflicted the nation for several years. Through many aesthetics of humour, Karunatilaka not only entertains but also educates and enlightens his readers about the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, prompting them to transition from complacency to a mode of critical engagement that necessitates participation. Karunatilaka's novel embodies a revolt under catastrophe, and via its comedy, readers participate in this insurrection.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. 'Rabelais in the History of Laughter', *Rabelais and His World,* pp. 59–145. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

—. 1984. 'Popular Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais', *Rabelais and His World,* pp. 196–278. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Davies, Helenand and Sarah Ilot. 2018. 'Mocking the Weak? Contexts, Theories, Politics', in Davies, Helen and Sarah Ilot (eds), *Comedy and the Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak,* pp. 1–24. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gupta, Shekhar. 2019. 'Dead men Talking', *The Print*, https://theprint.in/opinion/dead-men-talking/238391/ (accessed on 5 January 2024).

Holm, Nicholas. 2017. *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Jayasuriya, Maryse. 2016. 'Terror, Trauma, Transitions: Representing Violence in Sri Lankan Literature', *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies,* 3: 195–209, https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/indialogs.48 (accessed on 3 January 2024).

Karunatilaka, Shehan. 2022. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida.* Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

—. 2022. 'Exclusive Interview with 2022 Booker Prize Winner Shehan Karunatilaka', *The Federal*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VY4FX70Q7lI (accessed on 4 January 2024).

Lange, Matthew. 2009. 'An Education in Violence: British Colonialism and Ethnic Conflict in Cyprus and Sri Lanka', *SSRN,* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1459716 - paper-references-widget (accessed on 6 January 2024).

Lionis, Chrisoula. 2023. 'Laughing in an Emergency: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art', in Chrisoula Lionis (ed.), Comedy in Crisis: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art, pp. 15–35. Palgrave Macmillan.

Michaels, Walter Benn. 2010. 'IDENTITY POLITICS: A Zero-Sum Game', *New Labor Forum*, 19(2): 8–11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25701482. (accessed on 3 January 2024).

Sevadurai, Shyam. 2004. *Funny Boy*. Penguin Books.

Obeyesekere, Ranjini. 1992. 'The Sinhala Theatre of Sri Lanka: A Form of Political Discourse', *TDR (1988-),* 36(2): 126–37, https://doi.org/10.2307/1146202 (accessed on 3 January 2024).

The Cult of Baul in Contemporary Times

Sanjukta Naskar

Abstract

Baul is one of the most popular genres of folk culture performed by itinerant singers, troubadours or minstrels of Bengal. Emerging from the Bhakti movement Baul, songs and singers have carved out a niche for themselves and continue to maintain their popularity even today. For Tagore, the Baul represented one of the most authentic representations of an innocent and untouched Bengali culture, untainted by contemporary influences. This was naturally aligned with the nationalist agenda of cultural nationalism. Tagore was also one of the foremost advocates of Baul among the intellectual class and used Baul tunes, images, and metaphors in his songs and compositions. Baul is one of the important living traditions of Bengal based on the mystic and the devotional. Songs composed by Baul singers, usually lonely figures, aim at divine love. Despite the influence of Tagore, the Baul's reputation has, over a period of time, been denigrated due to neglect and abuse by the intellectual mainstream. In contemporary times, however, Baul has reinvented itself through commercial activities and due to its interaction with the milieu it has become an important part of cultural tourism. The article intends to analyse the historical and social importance of Baul and specifically to probe into the means and manner of its revival in recent times. By looking at songs by Bauls I will try to identify the possible areas of corruption or retention (as the case may be) of the cult of Baul. In fact, contemporary reinvention of this dynamic oral culture will also probe into the question of corruption and commercialisation, the latter being necessary for the survival of Bengali esoteric songs from the past.

Keywords: Bauls, Tagore, spirituality, folk performance, cultural tourism

Introduction

As one of the earliest forms of music that tracks the rhythm of its composition with a direct mystical connection with God, Baul songs combine sacred spaces of the mind and people. Bengal's religious landscape has been a melting pot of sorts that echoes a strong communion between mystical philosophy and music since the

medieval period. Devotion through music is a journey of the soul and of the mind and Bauls, who were traditionally wandering minstrels, have impacted the soundscape of Bengal with their sonoric renditions, uniting emotions across borders between West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Baul form emerged during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century with strong bonds to the Sufi tradition that called for Fana or the 'ultimate annihilation of the self.' This state of Fana is achieved through meditation, songs and dances. A Baul performer typically is adept in the knowledge of the rhythms and religious aesthetics of the form and, in the course of the performance, surrenders to the complex cadences, lyrics and patterns of intricate tempo, dancing to the escalating moods and beats. The word 'Baul' has, over the centuries, referred to a group of mendicant and itinerant singers who aim at a divine state of madness or spiritual intoxication with God. Just like the Magh songs and singers of Himachal Pradesh, Jangams of Haryana, Golla Kalapam art of Andhra Pradesh, Bangari art of Hyderabad, Barahmasi of Chhattisgarh and even the English ballads, Baul songs are transmitted through oral tradition. Bauls invoke their Divine Beloved by calling Him Allah, Ahad (the One), Moner Manush (the Man of Heart), Sahaj Manush (the Natural Man); Sonar Manush (the Golden Person); Adhar Manush (the Intangible Beloved); Achin Pakhi (the Unknown Bird); Shai/Sai (the Lord), Krishna, so on and so forth. It is a unifying folklore in another sense as it works like a catalyst that makes a strong bond between Muslim and Hindu peasants. It also shares a common thread of cultural and religious thought with Nepalese Buddhists' lyrics and Jainism. The entire philosophy of Baul centres on the philosophy of Dehattaya (Truth in the Body). That is why Baul philosophy is human-centric just like other Tantrik sects (Sharma np).

The convention of Baul performance is a collaborative and egalitarian process which embraces the *Sadhak Baul* who is the practitioner and the *Gayak Baul* who is the performer. Sadhak Bauls practise a reclusive life containing themselves to a life of meditation and contemplation. Performative singing and dancing by Bauls (which continues to be a more visible form) are deeply ecstatic in nature and the songs represent a direct correlation between the self and the creator. These songs are not necessarily composed by Bauls themselves and on many occasions are composed by regular composers or village poets. In recent times Baul songs and Baul performances do not possess any religious or devotional tenor or temper, thereby gradually emerging as a symbolic representation rather than a deeply personal and contemplative practice. Baul has also emerged as the most popular face of the folkloric art form from Bengal and has superseded other performing arts from this region. The devotional nature of Baul songs is also its essential character and the image of the wandering minstrel who sings songs of devotion and lives by the alms collected is the established cult figure of the Baul. However, Bauls are clearly divided into two separate wings: one is the *bastubadi,* or those who pursue material benefits and gains, and the *bartaman panthi* who are followers of a reality that can be experienced by the senses. The latter continues to seek liberation and enlightenment and sadhana remains central to their collective conscience. It is,

however, crucial to realise that most of the Baul performances that is visible on the social media are commercialised and target at a more populist approach.

Historically, the idealised concept of the Baul is that of a lonely minstrel, a stereotype that gained heights of popularity with Tagore's embodiment of the figure of the Baul in the early years of the twentieth century. Within this search for authenticity and the production of a vast corpus of Baul songs, one cannot ignore the overwhelming impact of cultural tourism, which has emerged as potential contender for revenue generation. Baul songs are produced for a primarily urban, elite and sometimes diasporic audience for whom the melodious renditions uphold an emotional significance. These renditions are often stigmatised as fakelore by intellectual opinion, as they lack the authentication that Baul songs are expected to endorse. Cultural mixing and the dynamic nature of all folklore forms contribute to the evolving nature of Baul's music and performance. Baul singers, however, have over long periods of time been neglected by history and are usually considered as immoral and antisocial, mainly due to their body-centric yogic practices, ritualised sexual practices, which have led Baul practitioners to be socially ostracised and persecuted by practitioners of orthodox Hinduism and Islam. Public persecution in the form of bodily attacks has resulted in practitioners of Baul feeling socially ostracised, adding to their existing woes. However, considerable social awareness and sensitisation have led to the acceptance of the Baul way of life.

Historical Movement of Baul

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a global revival and scrutiny of the indigenous cultures among communities which evolved as a means of creating a national identity by regenerating through an examination of folktales. This phenomenon impacted Baul songs and performers as well. This aligning of folklore with the national movement resulted in the search for an idealised Bengal's past, reminiscing its carefree rural life, and a simple and contented peasantry which found its representation in Tagore's recalling of indigenous folktales and with the image of the Baul. For Tagore, Baul represented the quintessence of the nostalgic Bengali folk culture.

> They appeared as the living embodiment of his humanist, universalist religion of Man, in a non-intellectual, naïve way. (Lorea 2013: 419)

Tagore made extensive use of Baul tunes, images and metaphors in his songs and musings, which earned him the title of 'the greatest Baul of Bengal'. For Tagore, the Bauls represented a combination of the devotional and mystical in their cult, segregating it from the scandalous elements connected with their socially objectionable sadhana. For Tagore, the figure of the Baul was essentially that of a wandering minstrel whose sonorous voice and tinkling music capture the serene and calm spirit of the villages of Bengal. Tagore's involvement was in uplifting and rehabilitating the lonely minstrel of divine love into a figure of Bhakti in Bengal. The complex overlaps of the body, musicology, religiosity, and the secular are

generated within the urban context. The importance of auditory abilities is revived, creating a sonorous, immersive envelope of music.

The idealised image of the Baul as the absolute renouncer finds echo even in a post-partition consciousness. Even so, in the 1940s, the Bauls helped in the revival of a Bengali culture, language and national unity, scripting a desirable reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims in the turbulent decades of communal conflict. Though folklores and folktales were gathered and postulated with the alienated urban middle-class in their search for Otherness, the Bauls interestingly emerged as an insular representation of a Hindu-Muslim unity. The cult of Baul practices established the priority of the Baul or *grihi* as a social structure rather than as a renouncer and as a materialist Baul or *bastubadi* rather than as a mystic ideal. The Baul festivals that happen across the year have led to consolidating the *guru* or the *murshid* as the torchbearer for leading the *shishya* to the path of liberating enlightenment through *gurubad*. The importance of the guru is deeply emphasised in these gatherings and is the only way to attain salvation of the self. The belief that the body is a complete representation of the macrocosm and that it is through the body one can experience the path of self-realisation, this emotional space allows for the 'man of the heart' or *moner manus*, who is the divine Man, to be realised in his union in love (Lorea 2013:421). The term Baul has over the years been subject to multiple interpretations, however, in the early years the term Baul was mostly rendered as an imaginary construct reflective of an experiential encounter. It was during the early phase of the nationalist movement in the twentieth century that the term Baul extended its meaning in the popular and academic circles to denote a heterogeneous community of musical performers who celebrate the human existence through an esoteric path of experience, adopting the concept of the Universal Man. The more sophisticated Bauls of the district of Birbhum who benefited from the proximity and influence of Tagore's Shantiniketan have become more economically and socially acceptable.

Categories among Bauls

The life of a Baul is not universally unanimous and may reflect the various ways in which a Baul's life reveals the choices of lifestyle in accordance with the norms transmitted according to lineage, which could be a stage of self-realisation or due to personal inclination. *Udasin* Bauls, or lonely wanderers, who were recognised during the time of Tagore were those who renounced mundane life and accumulation of wealth, living in poverty and isolation after receiving *bhek*, which is the ceremony that formally initiates a person into an ascetic life. It is this tradition that is most appealing to the concept of Baul. The *grihi* or householder Bauls, are those who live with their families and sustain their livelihoods through singing and performances in public and private functions. Fabrizio Ferrari has categorised the Bauls as *sannyasi*, referring to one who has successfully completed all stages of sadhana and has completely withdrawn from evocative singing and dancing; the *grihavasini* are those Bauls who continue to engage with household activities,

living with their spouse and children, while earning their livelihood through their performances, and continue to maintain their relationship with society, and the third category is the wealthy urbanised Bauls, who are compelled by the pressures and rules of the market and the music recording industry and who project a bohemian countenance in order to define their Baul lineage. The market, which sees the potential of a market-driven popularity of the Bauls, also sees the appearances of improvised Bauls with long hair, beards and patchwork clothing. These are what we can refer to as fake Bauls who survive primarily to perform for a wealthy audience of folkloric tourists, and who have become something of an iconic folk hero. The conundrum of multiple influences has produced a new imagined fake Baul from the vignettes of the city spaces and alternately created the revived rural Baul who emerges as the authentic Other and is considered to be the true practitioner of Baul. This dichotomous relationship co-exists in the larger context of authentic and non-authentic and evolves as part of urban legends.

In contemporary times, the most original and authentic Baul composer and practitioner, as well as the most celebrated, is Lalon Fakir, or Lalon Shah who continues to reign in the commercial market and the blockbuster industry. The image of Lalon as a poverty-ridden, miserable and isolated beggar is far from the truth. According to Carol Salomon, Lalon who lived in his akhara, mentions that Lalon Fakir maintained his regular living standard throughout his life (Lorea 2013:427). Bhaba Pagla (1903–1984) is another popular Baul whose songs are part of a large corpus of contemporary popular Baul songs. Like Lalon, he did not call himself a Baul, but he did address himself as Fakir in many of his songs. The creation of this new identity as Baul and Fakir is a clear indication of reinventing the self by embracing and identifying oneself with the mythical Baul Fakir. Bhaba Pagla was originally born as Bhabendramohan Ray Choudhury in a Hindu zamindar family, but was known through his long career as a practitioner of Baul. Bhabha Pagla was responsible for composing several songs in order to transmit his religious message. Bhabha himself did not confine himself to a 'Baul identity'; in fact, he considered himself to be a '*bohurupi*' (polymorphous) defying any categorisation of his identity (Lorea 2013: 427).

> In this respect Bhaba Pagla reflects a major concern of the bauls, who generally do not like identities, as identities only intend to separate the bauls from the rest of humanity while bauls tend to re-unite what other human categories like caste, religion and sects do that is, to divide. (Lorea 2013: 427–8)

Abdur Rahman Boyati, Bapi Das Baul, Parvathy Baul, and Kangalini Sufia are some of the popular names in cross-border Gangetic Bengal. All Bauls aim to dissolve all barriers that separate humanity from each other and, through their soul-rendering songs, propagate a social structure that transcends the duality between *apan* (own) and *par* (other). Baul practitioners and performers are all emotionally mad or mad for love, much like Sisir Kumar Ghosh's 'mad lover'. Their sadhana may vary, but their intention is the same.

Cultural Tourism and Creation of Cultural Spaces

Living in a globalised world, it is hardly possible to loosen the grips of commercial production, media synthesis and the rise of ethnic and folk tourism. Shantiniketan allows for a growth of cultural artefacts that promote Baul performances which are recorded for several reasons, like capitalising on authentic Baul experience, which again is reflected in social media posts. Nearby markets also provide sufficient spaces for the Bauls to display their colourful robes and their singing acumen to the visitors in exchange for monetary benefits and social media exposure. The skilled singers may attract the attention of a potential producer of a record company or a tour of concerts abroad, or a TV advertisement, along with the possibility of opening up a self-controlled YouTube channel. The commercial agency for utilising the songs of sadhana or the mad pursuit of knowledge or how knowledgeable they may be in the doctrines of the microcosmic body, or how strongly they are against the conventions of society, their harbouring of a commercial venture will eventually lead to losing the tag of a *Sadhak Baul*. Tourism industries bank heavily on selling identifiable localised identities in order to provide distinct tourist products which are deeply rooted in the indigenous localities. Debates around the advantages and disadvantages of tourism on local communities have led to analysing the 'tourist gaze' as being detrimental due to its demonstration effect. These kinds of experiences have led to arrangements of folkloric displays of pseudo-events for the purpose and promotion of cultural tourism, which are responsible for an economic boom in pure commercial terms. Such tourism, even though it brings in substantial financial support, poses a looming danger of over-exposure which can lead to corruption of Baul songs and performances. The constant danger of market-dominated musical performances and its subsequent adulteration can massively impact Baul in irreversible ways. Such kind of tourism can lead to a cultural voyeurism in which the local and regional populations are reduced to a human zoo, performing in order to authenticate a particular cultural identity.

However, the tourist success of Baul songs also allows singers and composers to sustain themselves and awaken interest in the Baul performers and help revive and continue a centuries-old tradition which is part of our intangible heritage. This sort of social acceptance of Bauls has led to reduced assaults and persecution of the Bauls by fundamentalist agencies. Within the context of whether cultural tourism is an essential evil for sustainability it continues to be a debatable topic, which brings us to focus on the material that is available and popularly passed off as Baul. The UNESCO tag of intangible heritage has brought a certain amount of attention towards the revival of this folk form, but this designation also enables us to divert our attention to the 'form' itself and the essential historical conflict that is central to its past. The voice of the Baul has always been subverted and relegated to the margins, and their voices are 'historically delegitimised' by hegemonic upper-caste dogmatic religious communities (Dutta and Dutta 2019: 3). Due to its basic non-conformist nature, Bauls have withstood the test of time, as their songs spoke

about socio-economic concerns like poverty, injustice and social discrimination. For Bauls, their songs and musical instruments are the medium of communication and liberation. Everyday concerns of sustainability often become a theme or subject matter for singers deeply rooted in the land. However, songs relating to economic disparity, worldly affairs with a universal approach to life and its destination are inherent among Baul singers. With an overwhelming growth in cultural tourism, identifiable folk performers like the Bauls have gained popularity, thereby leading to a degeneration of the folk form due to its excessive tilt towards performance and less towards personal redemption. Baul tunes have gained emphasis too, with Baul tunes being designed to create public awareness and to have a far outreach among the masses. The overall economic position of the Bauls is impoverished, and the primary practitioners of Bauls are people from the lower-castes who have always faced oppression and marginalisation. Within this landscape of cultural commercialisation and a need to create an environment of sustainability and also to ensure protection of cultural forms, it is important to understand the vehicles of social change and adaptation of a plurality of world views. Even though Bauls clearly steer away from a quasi-religious manifestation, certain hegemonic religious concerns continue to tap at the boundaries of the voices and narratives of Baul singers. Historically, Bauls are among a larger group (Aul, Baul, Sain, Fakir, Nera-Neri, Sahebdhani, Kartabhaja and Kishorbhaja) who have been part of a non-conformist protesting sect who have raised their voice against the oppression of the upper-caste Brahminical Hindu and Islamic society, thereby carrying a long tradition of creating protest music upholding the concerns of the marginalised (Dutta and Dutta 2019: 3). Needless to say, the consistent population of the Bauls is the scheduled castes residing in rural Bengal, and these sects divergent sect groups usually, through their music, questioned and challenged the praxis of religious dominance, relating it to economic dominance among the upper-castes. The Bauls have produced an alternative means of communication, and the Bauls singers are seen freely criticising and demolishing the structures of dominance. However, such audacious steps will be countered by the utilisation of state and individual mechanisms of control and arrest.

> Such scepticism and protests in lower societal strata, specifically by the Bauls, came under heavy criticism and attack by both the dominant Hindu and Islamic authorities. For instance- 'Baul Dhangsher Fatwa' (a fatwa for destroying Bauls and their tradition) was published by Maulana Riyajuddin Ahmad of Rangpur, Bangladesh at the end of the twentieth century. Likewise, in Kolkata, India, satiric songs were performed and processions were organised to denigrate Bauls and their practices under the patronage of Hindu orthodox leaders. (Dutta and Dutta 2019: 3)

Irrespective of religious affiliation and boundaries across nations, forces of dominance gather in familiarity and rise to the occasion when the need arises to suppress the voice of counter-narrative. In this context, it is essential to consider whether this voice of protest still persists in contemporary voices of narrative or

whether the impact of cultural tourism diverts and dilute the core nature of Baul music? This inevitable progression of protest music into entertainment music nevertheless dilutes the earlier nature of sectarian music but upholds the core value of economic disparity and social injustice through its characteristic nature of satire. A song by Nakshatra Das Baul speaks volumes about the looming inconsistencies in society:

> Some go to the market and stare,
> While some buy honey and sugar,
> Azure-throated God (Shiva) buys cheap vegetables and gourd,
> I cannot even buy a single thing. (Folkpick 2010) (as quoted in Dutta and Dutta 2019: 3)

The lyrical verse aptly resonates with of living in a society that is rampantly discriminatory, reflecting the market forces. The open narrative of poverty and the continuing economic violations clearly state the unchanging nature of the poor over the years. The reference to Shiva, an important God in the Hindu pantheon, mingles the voice of spirituality with everyday struggles and mundaneness. The lines also reveal the gap between a privileged society and a deprived one within a neoliberal space where avarice and possession drive the social space. The most visible sartorial form of the Baul singer is the appearance in a patchwork cloak-like gown, this is emblematic of a discarding of worldly affectations, since the patches in the gown are supposed to have been derived from clothes which are discarded or clothes of the dead. This complete annihilation of the self through a non-conformist and selfless existence furthers the abolition of the needs of the body and a sacrifice of the individual's pride. However, in the mainstream landscape, the patchwork gown is consistent with the image of the Baul singer without carrying the central idea, and the clothes themselves would be of an expensive variety. This is the way in which the culture is interpreted and disseminated to the uninitiated mass, a folk form is now a product rather than a continuous flow of a tradition.

Baul is by far the most popular folk form in West Bengal, often identified as a cultural marker of the state, this helps in creating an awareness of certain folk forms and an unfamiliarity with lesser-known folk forms like *leto*, *alkap* and so on. However, between a question of survival and commercial popularity, of these lesser-known folk forms find it difficult to sustain themselves, and it is only with the help of local bodies and the organisation of fairs like *Rarh Utsav* and *Joydeb Kenduli Mela*, along with group and individual enthusiasts, that such folk forms find a platform for survival. Thus, by far one can identify a clear lacuna between practitioners of Baul for an inner personal journey as opposed to one that clearly aims for a populist and a commercial venture. Shifting between two polar opposites of existence, Baul music has made its compromise and space for a newer version in a shape-shifting world which balances between the popular and the profane.

Conclusion

The aim and purpose of this paper have been to highlight the ways in which existing traditional folk forms, in response to a changing social and economic

circumstances, necessarily have to diversify in order to become sustainable. Having looked at perhaps the most popular of folk forms, Baul singers and Baul songs foreground the voice of the lower castes and lower classes of Bengal. The increasing popularity and national and international level visibility has allowed Bauls to become the most identifiable form emerging from the villages of Bengal. The wandering minstrel is not all that wandering anymore, with the appearance of the 'Baul' singer in televised versions and popular shows which cater to the 'imagined' version of the Baul. The Bauls are traditionally known to be advocates of religious harmony and convey the essential values that celebrate the teachings of spirituality. According to Bauls, the almighty is not a contentious religious figure rather a figure of inclusivity irrespective of the identity of the individual. The current social conditions allow for a comprehensible bifurcation of 'fake' Bauls (the commercialised versions) and the indigenous soul-searching practitioners of the Baul form. Discourses relating to folk forms in the growing modern and digitised world will realise that it becomes necessary to keep the two forms separate and exclusive, which is perhaps the road to sustainability. Bauls therefore exist and co-exist in society, but the essential nature, keeping the intent of looking at critiquing institutions of oppression and social injustice will keep appearing in the lyrics of Baul songs. Whether fake or authentic, Bauls have indeed become the most identifiable emblem and continue to garner huge crowds celebrating the essence of life and spiritual freedom.

Works Cited

Dutta, Uttaran and Mohan Jyoti Dutta. 2019. 'Songs of the Bauls: Voices from the Margins as Transformative Infrastructures', *Religions 2019, 10, 335*, Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Lorea, Carola Erika. 2013. 'Playing Football of Love on the Field of the Body: The Contemporary Repertoire of Baul Songs', *Religion and the Arts, (416-451)* 17, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden.

Sharma, Sandeep. 'Baul Songs: Beginner's Introduction', https://www.academia.edu/40588683/BAUL_SONGS_BEGINNERS_ INTRODUCTION_BY_ SANDEEP_ SHARMA np.

Humour in Marriage Folk Songs of Bundelkhand Region

Anshika Niranjan

Abstract

India is a composite of different regions and every region has a particular culture of folklore. Bundelkhand is among such regions. Folklore represents the socio-cultural aspects, knowledge and experiences derived from a particular region. Folklore of any region has a limited reach but somehow it possesses a universal appeal. It presents common and daily life through its contents. Agricultural context, seasons and geography of a particular region, turmoil and psychology borne out of it and many more aspects also find their representation in folklore. This paper aims to focus on folk songs pertaining to the occasion of marriage and having mainly three sub categories, namely, 'Banna/Banni', 'Gari' and 'Dadra'. 'Banna/Banni' are pre wedding songs which are sung to tease the bride and the groom. 'Gari' songs are sung during marriage rituals and Dadra is sung after the marriage. All these songs contain joy and humour and make the marriage function lively. The paper will try to discuss socio-cultural elements and characteristics of these songs sung particularly in District Jalaun and Hamirpur.

Keywords: Bundelkhand Marriage Songs, Dadra, Folk Rituals, Regional Oral Culture, Socio-cultural Expression in Folklore

Indian society is a rich ensemble of traditions and cultures. A Hindu marriage ceremony in India spans several days in almost every region. Traditional lyrical singing forms an integral part of the ritualistic stages involved in a marriage ceremony. The songs are sung by women of the families of groom and bride, and neighbours. The primary function of such traditional songs is to liven up the marriage ceremony. Women usually gather around the bride and groom to be and sing while they are being anointed with *ubtan.* Or, they hold a singing session to relax in the evening after a day's work is finished. These songs are, in a way, what makes everything ceremonial inside the house. The songs sung during the course of a marriage ceremony are collectively referred to as 'marriage songs' in this paper.

Although two given traditions may appear similar at a broad level, each possesses its own unique intricacies (Ramakrishnan 2017). The singing tradition also varies from region to region in terms of the rituals, songs, or performance practices (Bhattacharya 1978). Differences can sometimes exist even among families living in the same locality. The singing tradition is, therefore, highly nuanced.

The Bundelkhand Region falls in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In this region, a marriage ceremony extends over several days before and after the wedding. This paper focuses on the *Dadra* songs sung in the districts of Jalaun and Hamirpur.

The Ritual of Dadra

Dadra songs are sung once the bride reaches her in-laws' home. They play a crucial role in easing the bride's transition to a new environment. The general purpose of these songs is to make the new home lively for the bride.

Usually, after a day or two of the bride's arrival, a barber is sent to invite the ladies from the neighbourhood for Dadra. This invitation is called '*Dadre ka Bulauva*'. The ladies who accept the invitation to participate in singing are traditionally expected to bring something for the barber. Earlier, it used to be wheat or paddy, but nowadays cash is also in vogue. Women assemble in the house; those who have not yet seen the bride do so while the songs are being sung. Typically, one woman leads the singing, and the chorus follows her. While singing, they also play musical instruments like *dholak*, *jheenka* and *manjeera* while singing, or alternatively, just clap. They sing in a high tone, with all the women, including the bride, taking turns to lead. The veiled bride sits beside the gathering and greets anyone who goes to see her. The songs carry on; the barber serves refreshments in intervals. When the songs have ended and people leave, everyone is given some sweets.

The Nature and Objective of Dadra Songs

The origin of Dadra songs is untraceable. It is unclear how they became a tradition or even when they were set in their present rhythm. The metaphors, similes and motifs used in the lyrics belong to village life, mostly concerning women. They revolve around the world of women, reflecting their fantasies, dreams, joys, disappointments, suffering, and difficulties pertaining to a typical *Bundelkhandi* life. They talk about the dynamics and emotional intricacies of women in a humorous way to make them laugh in their otherwise mundane life. These songs are learned usually by memorising. This tradition exists across the nation, though with certain differences or variations (Dorson 1963).

Though most of the Dadra songs feature lyrics written from the newly-wed bride's perspective, some are written from third person's perspective, too, but the subject of the songs is always the bride. These songs can be categorised into different genres (Lomax 1959). Didactive songs are in the form of advice from elder women to the bride. Emotional songs represent the state of the mind of the bride who has just left her family and entered a new one. Some songs express the bride's

gratitude at finding good in-laws. When it comes to humorous songs, most of them convey her anguish or dissatisfaction or even difficulties she may face while adjusting to the new family (Porteous 1989). Although these songs do not target anyone in the family or the surrounding community, humour provides a safer way to convey certain emotions without causing personal offence (Kline 1907). These songs seem to aim to present the bride's real challenges and suppressed emotions in a humorous manner.

The *mukhra* (opening verse) of a Dadra song goes like this:

तगड़िया गुच्छेदार मेरी तो तगड़ी खो गई रे!
ऊपर से उतरी सासो 'बहुआ क्या बनाया आज'?
बनाए हड्डे चार मेरी तो तगड़ी खो गई रे!

Tagadiya guchchhedaar meri to tagdi kho gai re!
Upar se utri saaso 'bahua kya banaaya aaj'?
Banaaye hadde chaar meri to tagdi kho gai re!

It says that the bride has lost her favourite keychain and is stressed about it (probably busy looking for it, too). Meanwhile, she is asked what is there for dinner tonight. Frustrated, she cannot tolerate her mother-in-law asking this question and replies that she has cooked wasps.When we think what this song does, the first thing which comes to mind is, it validates the age-old perspective that the daughter-in-law should be active in the kitchen so that the mother-in-law gets enough rest. Second, it represents a disrespecting daughter-in-law.

But on thinking more, the lyrics do get beautiful. One deeper understanding is that here the bride expects her mother-in-law to understand her situation that she has lost something dear to her and needs her support to look for her key chain. It is obvious that she needs more time and would be relieved if her mother-in-law cooks today, but her mother-in-law considers it the duty of the bride to cook and does not offer to cook. This makes the bride frustrated and she replies inappropriately (Lowe 1986). On the other hand, the song presents to the new bride one of many situations she may face in the next few months, and it does so not to frighten her, but on a lighter note, or, with a humorous touch. Now that the bride is living with people who she knows very little about, the very meaning of 'home' is going to change for her. Adapting to a complete newness would certainly take its toll on her mind. She could get highly irritated by trivial things, for example, by her mother-in-law asking her about dinner while she is completely absorbed in herself. Her reply contained in the lyrics is not suggestive, rather humorous. Concerning the reply, the song tries to make the listener understand that the intention of the song is just the opposite of what is meant literally. In other words, the song ironically suggests the newly-wed bride how exactly not to deal with such a situation.

Another song goes like this:

जीना चढ़त गिर गओ मीना,
नथुनिया को गिर गओ नगीना,
ससुरा कहे बहू हमईं बनवा दें,
सासो कहैं नइयाँ नइयाँ

Jeena chadhat gir gao meena
Nathuniya ko gir gao nageena
Sasura kahe bahoo hamai banwa dein
Saaso kahe naiyaan naiyaan

Here, the daughter-in-law has fallen on a staircase and lost her nose pin. Her father-in-law pacifies her by saying she could get another but her mother-in-law opposes it.

The song continues in a similar fashion, with the brother-in law proposing to bring her a new one while the sister-in-law opposes. This song reflects the stereotypical notion of a woman being jealous of another woman's jewellery or of her husband showing support to other women.

The song guides the bride, suggesting that such situations would occur at some point and she does not need to take them to heart. However, it also conveys the power a woman holds in a Bundelkhandi household, particularly when the matter primarily concerns women. Jewellery, makeup and similar matters typically fall within the purview of women. Although the men in the house may propose solutions to problems in this domain, it is the women whose decisions ultimately prevail. Thus, this song can also be interpreted as subtly delineating the new bride's territory and the hierarchies within the family.

Some Dadra songs engage with socially dominant perspectives, such as the notion that 'fair complexion is better'. They reflect the insecurities and despair that arise from this mindset. One such song goes as follows:

मेरे घर में टोटो होतो मेरो कारो बलम न होतो,
कारे से भई सगाई मैंने डेढ़ फुलकियाँ खाईं,
गोरे से भई सगाई मैंने सोला फुलकियाँ खाईं,
कारे से भए मोड़ी-मोड़ा जैसे भूत प्रेत का जोड़ा,
गोरे से भए मोड़ी-मोड़ा जैसे राम लखन का जोड़ा

Mere ghar me toto hoto mero kaaro balam na hoto,
Kaare se bhai sagaai maine dedh phulakiyan khaain,
Gore se bhai sagaai maine solaa phulakiyan khaain,
Kaare se bhaye modi-moda jaise bhoot pret ka joda
Gore se bhaye modi-moda jaise Ram Lakhan ka joda

It can be interpreted thus: Had her father been richer, the bride would not have been destined to marry a husband with dark complexion. Engaged to a dark-complexioned man, she would be in such despair that she would lose her appetite, whereas engaged to a fair complexioned man, she would be so happy that she could eat even more than her hunger requires. Her children, fathered by a dark-complexioned man, would appear dark like ghosts/demons, whereas if a fair-complexioned man fathers her children, they would look fair like Rama and Lakshamana.

This song reflects on various social aspects and notions. The concepts of preferring a fair complexion and dowry are shown to be intertwined. The preference for a fair complexion is so dominant that the amount of dowry depends on it—the fairer the man, the higher the dowry demand. This has long been a major issue in the Indian system of arranged marriages. The richer the bride's father, the larger dowry he can afford, increasing the chances of securing a groom with a fairer complexion. The voice in the song is that of the bride, who laments her father's economic condition. She wants a fair-complexioned, handsome man, but must compromise due to her father's inability to provide a large dowry (Stirr 2010). The song also explains why the bride is so desperate for a fair-complexioned husband. In society, people's complexion is rhetorically tied to their character or personality: fair-complexioned children are expected to grow into ideal men like Rama and Lakshamana, while dark-complexioned children get compared to evil ghosts or demons.

Another song has the following *mukhra:*

मैं अंग्रेजी पढ़ी लिखी मेरी कदर बिगड़ गई मम्मी जी,
सास कहे बहू खाना बना लो, खाना बनाओ मम्मी जी,
खाना बनातन साड़ी जल गई, पल्लू रह गओ मम्मी जी

Main angreji padhi likhi meri kadar bigad gai mummy ji
Saas kahe bahoo khaana bana lo, khaana banaao mummy ji
Khaana banaatan saree jal gai, pallu rah gao mummy ji

In this song, the bride is a highly educated girl, implying that she has limited practical experience, particularly in the kitchen. She encounters numerous difficulties while adjusting to her in-law's kitchen. Although she is expected to cook—and does attempt to do so—she ends up burning her saree in the process.

The song satirises the modern, relatively urban perspective of providing higher education to women. Especially in rural contexts, there is a perception that educating girls poses a threat to traditional practices. The conservative view holds that focusing on higher education diverts women from learning what they are expected to master, i.e., managing the household.

Although exaggeration is employed in the song to create humour (Lowe 1986), it also points towards a possible situation arising from the bride's lack of experience in this domain. The song can be interpreted as hinting to the bride the amount of

hard work she is expected to manage on her own, without much assistance from her mother-in-law. It draws upon the stereotypical image of a conservative, domineering mother-in-law to instil in the bride a sense of apprehension about the absence of cooperation. Although the bride may know that such an exaggerated figure is unlikely to exist in modern society, she is still unfamiliar with these new people. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the song succeeds in planting a fear of an unhelpful, overbearing mother-in-law.

Another interesting song begins with the following verse:

सैयाँ मिले सिलविल्ला री, मेरो ऐसो नसीब,
जैसे तैसे मैंने बाज़ार पठायो,
छोड़ आए झोला कटा आए जेब

Saiyaan mile silvilla ree, mero aiso naseeb,
Jaise taise maine bazaar pathaayo,
Chhod aaye jhola kata aaye jeb

In this case, the bride has a foolish husband and feels frustrated with her fate. She tries to teach him basic worldly skills, but he keeps making blunders. When she teaches him how to shop, he ends up losing his bag and getting his pocket picked.This song reflects the social division of labour—what men are expected to do and what women are not. In the song, the husband is portrayed as lacking practical intelligence in worldly affairs, and the wife is shown trying to teach him these skills. A pertinent question that arises here is why she cannot go shopping herself. The answer lies in the traditional, conservative social structure, where women are not expected to engage in activities outside the domestic sphere. She refrains from going herself because doing so would invite criticism; instead, she tries to train her husband to manage such tasks.

Another song goes like this:

राजा की ऊंची अटरिया, मिलन जाने कब होएगा,
पैर दबाए मैंने सासो लौटा दई, इतने में आ गई जिठनिया,
पैर छुलाये मैंने जिठनी लौटा दई, उतने में आ गई बहुरिया,
हिस्सा बटाय मैंने बहुआ लौटा दई, उतने में आ गई ननदिया,
ननदेऊ बुलाय मैंने ननदी पठाई,...
पैर ओढ़ जब मैं मोटर में बैठी, राजा जी झाँके खिड़कियां

Raja kee oonchi atariya, milan jane kab hoyega
Pair dabaaye maine saaso lauta dain, itne mein aa gai jithaniya
Pair chhulaye maine jithnee lauta dain, utne mein aa gai bahuriya
Hissa bataay maine bahua lauta dai, utne mein aa gai nanadiya
Nandeu bulaay maine nanadi pathaai...
Pair odh jab main motar mein baithi, raja ji jhaanke khidkiyan

In this song, the husband's room is on the top floor of the house, and she has to reach it by climbing the stairs. As she goes, she first attends to her mother-in-law; by the time she is free, her sister-in-law comes to her. Similarly, whenever she manages to get rid of one person, another appears. Finally, when her brother arrives to take her to her parents' house, she leaves with him, while her disappointed husband—who had been waiting for her—watches her go from his window.

The song represents a joint family system, highlighting how difficult it is for the bride to find time to spend with her partner, as she remains constantly surrounded by members of the household.

In a subtle way, the song also conveys a material dimension—what matters more and to whom. For the mother-in-law, taking rest is important; for the elder sister-in-law, it is feeling respected by the bride. The lyrics seem to have been written with these sociological and psychological aspects in mind, subtly instructing the bride on how she might pacify figures such as the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law within the household (Kline 1907).

> All the songs discussed above are from the bride's perspective. Some Dadra songs, however, are narrated from a third-person perspective, where the bride is not the speaking subject. For example, consider the following stanza: सासो कहे बहू खाना बना लो, बर्तन कर लो,
>
> राजा कहे मेरी कुसुम कली कैं छाले पड़ जैं
>
> *Saaso kahe bahu khana bana lo, bartan kar lo,*
> *Raja kahe meri kusum kali kain chhale pad jain*

The narrator observes the new dynamics that emerge in a household after marriage. The mother-in-law asks the bride to take part in household chores, as is traditionally expected, but the husband, deeply in love with his wife—whom he regards as a delicate, beautiful flower—is reluctant to let her work. Although the husband is clearly being mocked here, the lyrics nonetheless validate the notion that the wife, however cherished, remains the husband's possession, and that it is his duty to take care of her.

Another example of lyrics written from a third-person perspective is:

> रंडी पतुरियन को शाला, दुशाला, घर की महरिया को लहंगा फटो
> *Randee paturiyan ko shala dushaala, ghar ki mahariya ko lahanga phato*

This line suggests that the husband brings fine clothes, such as shawls and other expensive items, for the woman with whom he is having an affair, while his own wife is left wearing torn garments. The song openly mocks the extramarital affairs of men. It may also be interpreted as advising the bride to keep an eye on her husband's behaviour, implying that when he becomes indifferent toward her, she should look closely for the underlying cause, lest their relationship deteriorate completely.

Conclusion

It is evident how the tradition of Dadra contributes to a strong beginning for a marriage. The purpose of these songs is to make the bride aware of various aspects of married life. They are designed so that she is not frightened or overwhelmed by the imminent changes, but rather can approach them with humor. This allows the bride to prepare calmly and adapt to the changes more easily.

These songs do not explicitly impose moral responsibilities on the bride, but they indicate their existence either directly or indirectly. They incorporate motifs drawn from Bundelkhandi traditional life, such as making *kanda* or washing dishes with ash. It is through such localized motifs that Dadra establishes a unique presence within the vast diversity of India's regional cultures.

In a subtle way, Dadra songs offer a glimpse into several socio-cultural aspects of the region, particularly highlighting how women navigate difficult situations. These songs serve as excellent examples of female narratives, representing women's voices and the experiences they encounter, whether in general or in specific circumstances (Lowe 1986). The choice of metaphors and similes reflects their cultural knowledge (Vatuk 1970), while their humorous use demonstrates wit and intelligence.

References

Bhattacharya, Asutosh. 1978. *Folklore of Bengal*. India: National Book Trust.

Dorson, Richard M. 1963. 'Current Folklore Theories', *Current Anthropology*, 4(1): 93–112.

Kline, L. W. 1907. 'The Psychology of Humor', *The American Journal of Psychology*, 18(4): 421–41.

Lomax, Alan. 1959. 'Folk Song Style', *American Anthropologist*, 61(6): 927–54.

Lowe, John. 1986. 'Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing', *American Quarterly*, 38(3): 439–60.

Porteous , J. 1989. 'Humor and Social Life', *Philosophy East and West*, 39(3): 279–88.

Ramakrishnan, E.V. 2017. *Indigeneous Imaginaries*. India: The Orient Blackswan.

Stirr, Anna. 2010. '"May I Elope": Song Words, Social Status, and Honor among Female Nepali Dohori Singers', *Ethnomusicology*, 54(2): 257–80.

Vatuk, Ved Prakash. 1970. '"Malhor"': A Type of Work Song in Western Uttar Pradesh, India', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 29: 251–74.

Rethinking Humour, Licence and the Carnivalesque in the Indian Context, with Reference to Kumaoni Holi

Meghal Karki

Abstract

Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque has been one of the most significant contributions towards studies of festivities and has enabled us to understand celebrations and the inversions and suspensions that accompany them in great detail. Research on the festival of Holi in particular has been conducted through the lens of the carnivalesque. However, as Bakhtin's ideas about the carnivalesque have been shaped by a certain socio-cultural context and milieu, uncritical applications of the same are inadequate to capture the nuances of the festival and are often detrimental to research. The profanation, free interaction between people and the carnivalistic mésalliances that are vital to understanding the carnivalesque are often missing in Indian contexts, or even when they do exist, they are bound by certain regulations. While Holi certainly has incidents of role reversals and elements of licence and is framed by the spirit of burying the old and starting anew, hierarchies in caste, class and gender roles exist and are maintained during the festival. Even wit and humour in the licentious space of Holi, which are radically subversive, are often restricted to the traditionally defined joking relationships, such as the *devar-bhabhi* and *jeeja-saali* relationships. However, this does not mean to argue that there is no possibility of resistance and subversion. This paper will make an attempt to highlight the pertinent need to adapt ideas about licence and the carnivalesque to the Indian context, through Holi celebrations and folk songs in the Kumaon Himalayas, and engage with Holi's subversive space that is not openly confrontational, but is still temporally distinct in its expectations, demands and norms of behaviour and has radical potential that has been actualised in several settings. The ideas put forward will be supplemented by personal interviews and participant observation, conducted during the years 2022 and 2023.

Keywords: Holi, carnivalesque, joking relationships, licence, folk songs

Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has been one of the most significant contributions towards studies of festivities and has enabled us to understand celebrations and the inversions and suspensions that accompany them in great detail. It presents radical possibilities and alternatives, which have yielded significant academic contributions across the globe. At the same time, Bakhtin's ideas have been critiqued on several aspects, particularly because they present an idealisation of the 'people' as 'anti-absolutist, pro-universalist and anti-war' (Clark and Holquist 1984: 310–1, cited in Taylor 1995: 36), a neglect of the 'institutional context of feudalism' (Gardiner 2002: 1992) and ambivalence towards gender (Taylor 1995: 42), to name a few. Perhaps one of the most significant critiques of the carnivalesque has been by Terry Eagleton, who argues that the carnival is a 'licenced affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off' and functions as a safety valve and is 'disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art' (Eagleton 1981: 148). Henri Bergson, M.N. Srinivas and Ranajit Guha have also significantly expanded on Eagleton's ideas in their works (Bergson 1956; Srinivas 1952; Guha 1984). Additionally, Bakhtin's ideas about the carnivalesque were framed by a certain historical context and need to be adapted to the context in question before using them as a conceptual lens and a theoretical framework. Hutcheon succinctly sums up criticism of Bakhtin's vision of the carnivalesque by asserting that, despite his assertions of ambivalence, 'his focus is always on the positive, ultimately to the detriment of the complexity of the popular forms' (Hutcheon 1983: 85). Buoyed by the potential that the carnivalesque hints at, the theory has been, to use Graeme Turner's term, 'carelessly adapted', and it is this criticism that this paper will concern itself with, through the festival of Holi. (Turner 1993: 219).

Research on the festival of Holi has always been conducted through the lens of the carnivalesque. McKim Marriott's essay, 'The Feast of Love', describes his experience of Holi in 1951 and 1952 in the village of Krishna Garhi and attempts to make sense of the violence of Lathmaar Holi, its connection to Krishna, and the concept of love (Marriott 1966). His lens is anthropological and analyses the festival through the theoretical apparatus provided by Emile Durkheim and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown and focuses on how nature and social bonds are simultaneously renewed through the rituals of role reversals. The lens of the carnivalesque is also invoked by A. Whitney Sandford while researching the Lathmaar Holi celebrations in Baldeo to highlight the flexible space of alleviating social tension, which is argued to still have a bound axis that is not restricted to time and space but also hierarchy, as the women know just how hard to hit the upper-caste men (Sanford 2010). Sunthar Visuvalingam, in his article 'Carnival and Transgression in India: Towards a Global Spring?', also asserts that the carnivalesque has been interwoven through Holi and other Hindu rituals through a semiotics of transgression and mediates on its potential to inaugurate a 'global spring' modelled on the carnival (Visuvalingam 2018). Girija Pande, while working on the folk expressions of Holi in Kumaon, also draws parallels to the carnivalesque

(Pande 2011: 230). While Holi certainly has significant elements of licence and is framed by the spirit of burying the old and starting anew, hierarchies in caste, class and gender roles do exist and are maintained during the festival.

Role reversals are a significant part of Holi, and they offer a momentary space for enacting ritual subversion, which is necessary and cathartic, even if it may not threaten existing relations of dominance and subordination within society (Jassal 2007: 10). However, the rituals and celebrations of Holi vary greatly according to region, and the presence of role reversals in some cultures is not necessarily found in others. In certain regions, the subversion comes out in the form of physical aggression and assault through the celebration of Lathmaar Holi, wherein the residents of the villages of Barsana, Radha's village, and Nandgaon, Krishna's village, wherein women from Barsana travel to Nandgaon with sticks and hurl abuses at them as punishment because Krishna abandoned Radha. Smita Tiwari Jassal highlights that the abuse can also be verbal, through the obscene folk songs sung in congregations by women in the Bhojpuri-speaking belt (Jassal 2007: 10). Jassal has conducted exhaustive fieldwork and documented and analysed these folk songs and argues that this ritual singing helps women release 'pent-up tensions and defuse resentment and animosities besides allowing for the rejuvenation of collectivities and cathartic healing' (Jassal 2007: 14–5). These congregations are called *baithaks*, and they are a prevalent practice in Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttarakhand. While some celebrations do take place in the marketplace, they are usually among men, and most baithaks are organised within the private sphere of the home or the semi-private sphere of the courtyard. This paper will highlight the pertinent need to adapt ideas about licence and the carnivalesque to the Indian context, through Holi celebrations and folk songs in the Kumaon Himalayas, and engage with Holi's subversive space that is not openly confrontational but is still temporally distinct in its expectations, demands and norms of behaviour and has radical potential that has been actualised in several settings. The arguments will be framed by Radcliffe-Brown's conception of joking relationships and will be supplemented by personal interviews and participant observation conducted during the years 2022 and 2023.

Barriers and Hierarchies in Holi: Reflections from the Kumaon Himalayas

In the Kumaon Himalayas, the festival of Holi begins on the first Sunday of the month of *Paush* and goes on until the day of Holi, which is also called *Chhaladi* by the community. A three-month-long festival is certainly an unusual occurrence, especially for a festival which is associated with licence and a certain form of inversion of social hierarchies. The idea of the carnivalesque is strongly associated with the festival by several prominent sociologists and anthropologists, which may clash with the temporal longevity of the celebrations in Kumaon. Both of these concepts are associated with reversals for a limited period and are followed by a return to daily life and its associated strictures and hierarchies as we know them. We need to adopt a different approach while researching Kumaoni Holi,

which is celebrated in stages, and the emotions, atmospheres and folk songs performed in each stage are gradually unlocked and unveiled over time. The first phase, also known as Nirvan ki Holi, begins in the month of December, and only *bhajans* and songs that weigh on devotion and the nature of being are sung. The next stage is inaugurated on Makar Sankranti when songs that focus particularly on *viraha*, or love in separation, and nature are sung. The third stage begins on Basant Panchami, which marks the early onset of spring, and the songs also bloom to include references to the love that Radha and Krishna share. The fourth stage begins on *Ekadashi,* when colour is applied to the body and also to the songs, and references to *gulal*, *abeer,* and *pichkari* colour the songs as they turn raunchy. *Holyars*, or those who sing Holi folk songs, come together in groups called *tolis* and visit the houses of people and communal spaces like the temple and the marketplace. The emotions associated with each stage are distinct, and any attempts to introduce songs about love and viraha during the first stage are not tolerated. The performer who does so is denounced as someone who is unaware of the nuances of Holi, and the missteps follow them for decades to come. There is an atmospheric pressure for the performer to adhere to the rules of singing Holi folk songs, a normative compulsion and pressure that directs the mood and atmosphere of a baithak. It is only in the final stage of the festival that the performers finally loosen up, and the license that Holi is known for emerges. A few pertinent questions thus arise: is licence completely absent in Holi? Is there no possibility or space for critique and subversion within the space of Holi? No, but the licence is framed differently than most academic work on Holi, through the lens of the carnivalesque, which has led us to believe.

The temporal longevity of the festival is unique and creates barriers for the theoretical and conceptual framework of the carnivalesque. There is a gradual dilution of licence in the content of the folk songs through the three months of celebrations, and each stage presents a thawing of winter and the gradual arrival of spring. The licence of the "*rang daalna*" stage is also restricted, and does not extend to any and all directions. Rather, the licence extends to certain spheres and aspects of everyday life and relationships. Moreover, instances of role reversals in the form of the tradition of Lathmaar Holi are restricted to the villages of Nandgaon and Barsana, and one cannot find any equivalent rituals in Kumaoni Holi. The closest ritual one can think of is the ritual of *cheer bandhan*, wherein each neighbourhood ties a branch of the *paiyan* tree in a compound and adds scraps of cloth called *cheer* that either must be stolen or fetched from Mathura. The other neighbourhoods then proceed to make attempts to steal the *cheer*, and if stolen, they attempt to get their *cheer* back through various methods. This ritual has often turned violent, resulting in significant strife that lasted for generations; however, the acceptance and expectation of theft are moderated by the relationships within the neighbourhood. This leads us to a critical juncture toward this paper's critique of the use of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque to analyse and approach Holi, and Kumaoni Holi in particular.

Wit and Humour in Joking Relationships during Holi Celebrations

The dynamics of licence in Kumaoni Holi, as well as in Holi from other regions, are influenced by specific relationships and kinship patterns. There are recurring patterns and boundaries informing family and kinship relationships that can be found across most areas. Anthropologists have analysed relationship patterns across cultures and have developed the idea of joking and avoidance relationships, which can be succinctly summed up as 'highly stylized, positively valued, behavioural routines associated with particular social relationships' (Fleming 2020: 5), which are 'characteristically continuous but apt to be especially marked on ritual occasions at which both referents are present' (Parkin 1993: 252). These relationships are often among 'particular kin, affines, and marriageable categories in prescriptive marriage systems' (Guyer 2013: 321) and are carefully delineated in folk traditions across regions, particularly for married women.

At one end, we have relationships of avoidance, where 'individuals avoid direct physical, sensorial, or discursive contact' (Fleming 2020: 5). The woman's in-laws are typically characterised as strict and often borderline hostile in most cases across India. The older brother-in-law, or the *jeth*, is also often aloof, and there is a relationship of avoidance that is often described as 'second only to the father-in-law in degrees of avoidance' (Jassal 2007: 25). Radcliffe-Brown, whose works on the joking relationship are foundational for this paper, cautions us by highlighting that avoidance must not be mistaken for a sign of hostility, as it is a relationship of extreme restraint (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 197), and Jassal adds that it is actually a matter of respect and reverence (Jassal 1940: 25).

On the other hand, we have relationships of free access, where individuals have 'privileged licence to impose upon the person and property of the other', which are 'partly verbal, with much sexual innuendo, or it may be also physical, involving pushing or tripping up the other person, throwing ashes or cowdung or water at him or her, trying to expose the other person's lower body by pulling off their clothing' (Parkin, 1993: 252). The younger brother-in-law, or the *devar,* is often closer to the women in age and the only source of comfort in their lonely lives with strict parents-in-law. The devar-bhabhi relationship is one of the most commonly found joking relationships across India, wherein 'one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195).

Smita Tiwari Jassal opines that women's relationship with the devar is 'less restrictive, much more congenial, familiar and requires no symbolic avoidance such as veiling' (Jassal 2007: 25) and acts as a foil for the avoidance exercised with the other kin. While kinship patterns vary significantly, married relationships across the country exhibit similar patterns of avoidance and licence. Wit and humour in the licentious space of Holi, which are radically subversive, are often restricted to the traditionally defined joking relationships, such as the devar-bhabhi and jeeja-saali relationships. Here is an example of a Holi folk song depicting the devar-bhabhi relationship:

Chaar din ki bahaar bhabhi, mai toh chala jaunga *Gaalon ko tere mai, aise raangunga* *Kardunga laal mai laal, bhabhi mai toh chala jaunga* *Chaar din ki bahaar bhabhi, mai toh chala jaunga* *Angon ko tere mai, aise raangunga* *Kardunga laal mai laal, bhabhi mai toh chala jaunga* *Haathon ko tere mai, aise raangunga* *Kardunga laal mai laal, bhabhi mai toh chala jaunga* (recorded at Joshi Bhavan, Haldwani on March 15, 2022)	Bhabhi, the winds of spring will only last four days, and then I will leave I will colour your cheeks And make them red bhabhi, and then I will leave Bhabhi, the winds of spring will only last four days, and then I will leave I will colour parts of your body And make them red bhabhi, and then I will leave Bhabhi, the winds of spring will only last four days, and then I will leave I will colour your hands And make them red bhabhi, and then I will leave (Translated by Meghal Karki)

In the above song, there is a tinge of flirtatiousness wherein the devar is teasing his bhabhi by inviting her to play Holi with him before he goes away and leaves her alone. In Kumaon, men often migrate to the plains in search of employment, for the mountains hold scant opportunities for socio-economic advancement, and the women are often left behind as the men make their fortunes. In the absence of their husbands, who migrate to work in the city, women increasingly rely on their devars, or brothers-in-law, for companionship, support and friendship. In return for the support, the devar is expected 'to take liberties with and enjoy favours from his elder brother's wife' in the form of teasing and jesting to form what Jassal calls 'a mutually advantageous bond, easing the difficult transition for a woman into her marital home, often facilitated and earned by the bestowing of affection and "indulgences" on the husband's younger brother' (Jassal 2007: 25). This relationship is symmetrical, with both parties deriving equal benefits from it. Radcliffe-Brown argues that the only obligation in a joking relationship is not to take offence at the disrespect within the bounds defined by custom and not to go beyond them (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 208). He further argues that the default in the relationship is like a breach of the rules of etiquette, and the person concerned is regarded as not knowing how to behave themselves (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 208–9).

The joking relationship between a devar and a bhabhi is socially sanctioned and legitimised through folk traditions, and Jassal, along with several other academics, has argued that the devar was also expected to marry the bhabhi in the event of her husband's untimely death (Jassal 2007: 25–6). This statement has also been verified and affirmed by several participants who I have interviewed. Rita Pande, an avid *holyar*, adds that these practices were followed in Kumaon as well but have faded away over time. However, the remnants of these facets lie in the form of the joking relationship and continue to acquire new shades even today. The song below highlights the subtle sexual undertones of teasing and joking:

Kholo rang devar khelo hamse Holi *Bhar pichkari hmaathe pe maari* *Bindiyan bachao devar khelo humse Holi* *Bhar pichkari muh pe maari* *Laali bachao devar khelo humse Holi* *Rang manga lo devar* *Bhar pichkari gale mein meri* *Haaro bachao devar khelo humse Holi* *Bhar pichkari haathon mein maari* *Kangan bachao devar khelo humse Holi* *Kholo rang devar khelo hamse Holi* *Bhar pichkari angon mein maari* *Saree bachao devar khelo hamse Holi* *Bhar pichkari paairo mein maari* *Bichuve bachao devar khelo humse Holi* *Kholo rang devar khelo hamse Holi.* (Pande 23)	Bring out the colours and play Holi with me, my devar Fill your pichkari and drench my forehead But make sure to shield my bindi, while you play holi with me, my devar Fill your pichkari and drench my face Shield my laali Order the colours my devar, Fill you pichkari and drench my throat But take care to shield my necklaces, while you play holi with me, my devar Fill your pichkari and drench my arms But take care to shield my bangles Open the colours and play Holi with me, my devar Fill your pichkari in my yard But make sure to shield my saree, while you play holi with me, my devar Fill your pichkari and drench my feet But take care to shield my toe-rings while you play holi with me, my devar Open the colours and play Holi with me, my devar. (Translated by Meghal Karki)

In the above song, the woman invites her devar to play Holi with her and to drench different parts of her body in a sexually suggestive manner, while consistently reminding him of her marriage through the various jewellery and symbols associated with it, as well as emphasising her chastity. The song unveils the deep complexity that inhabits the devar-bhabhi relationship. While the sexual undertones of the relationship are socially sanctioned, a boundary persists nevertheless, and through the song, the woman seems to be reminding her devar about the existence of these boundaries and finding a way to navigate the thin, socially sanctioned line. The *jeeja-saali* relationship follows a similar pattern of teasing and jokes that are sanctioned by society, but I have not come across any equivalents in the form of folk songs in my fieldwork. It is only through banter in the private sphere of the home, after the baithak, that one sees it. An intriguing question for further research comes up at this juncture: why hasn't this relationship been explored as sufficiently as the devar-bhabhi relationship?

While most of the license is within the realm of the joking relationship, this ritual subversion is nevertheless critical and plays an important role in providing momentary relief and space for the articulation of problems, complaints, and the seductive call of socially sanctioned transgression. Ranajit Guha, in his seminal work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency,* adds that Holi, being a calendrical festival, carries an element of predictability in its nature, and its 'prescriptive inversion' is anticipated, and 'affirm(s) the general legitimacy of spiritual and social sanctions against nonconformity by condoning the latter on one prescribed occasion' (Guha 1984: 34). Guha further proceeds to critique McKim Marriott's Western gaze on the festival of Holi and argues that his status as a stranger ensured that only he was surprised by the ritual, and the others had rather spent a month coordinating the event (Guha 1984: 35).

A famous saying accompanies Holi: '*bura na maano Holi hai'* (don't be offended, it is Holi). This saying has been relentlessly exploited, but this spirit of license provides

some relief from the relentless toil of everyday life. Every participant I have interviewed so far has agreed on one thing: they look forward to the months of joy that accompanies Holi, and the temporally staggered licence it brings. Holi beckons enticingly to them every year, and they assert that they eagerly await its arrival every year. Holi brings freedom, an opportunity to interact and sing with their peers freely, without judgement and guilt, or any household chores weighing them down or occupying their concerns. The atmosphere of Holi is thus characterised by a temporary suspension of household demands and status-quoist norms of appropriate behaviour according to gender.

I now return to the question posed earlier: is there no possibility of licence in Kumaoni Holi? Yes, possibilities for licence and subversion exist. One of the most interesting forms of licence and subversion that I have been fortunate enough to observe is when, during a Holi *baithak* in Haldwani, the hostess sang the line, '*Beta beta mat karu saasu, tera beta mera hai*' (stop saying, 'My son, my son,' mother-in-law; your son is mine now). The relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law does not fall within the scope of a traditional joking relationship and is traditionally characterised by avoidance at best and hostility at worst. It was discussed after the baithak, and the women highlighted that these kinds of jokes also come up periodically, and no one really minds, as the mood of the baithak and Holi permit it. Additionally, this baithak was held during the final stage of the festival, when the rules are relaxed, and possibilities of transgression are higher. This one-lined quip thus represents a radical act of subversion within the socially sanctioned and licentious space of Holi. Holi's licence and permissibility are not carnivalesque in a Bakhtinian sense: it is a permissibility, to use Vidya Rao's expression, deeply subversive but not openly confrontative (Rao 1999: 476). Folklore research, particularly on women's traditions, demands significant comfort with paradoxes, and this paper has tried to highlight one facet of the same through the concept of the joking relationship.

Conclusion

The rituals and celebrations of Holi are heterogeneous, and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as a theoretical framework, while crucial to understand the idea, is not necessarily adequate to capture the vagaries and nuances of Holi and its entangled permissibility. There is a pertinent need to develop alternate theoretical models to highlight the multiplicity of celebrations that emerge during the festival. Jack Santino, an eminent folklorist, recognised the need for this and came up with a concept called 'ritualesque', as the carnivalesque qualities of public performative events are recognised, but 'their seriousness of purpose, the intention to raise awareness, change opinions and even the hearts and minds of spectators, has remained unremarked upon and has not been analyzed as a constitutive dimension of the event' (Santino 2011: 62). Finding the concept of the carnivalesque insufficient and other alternative methods, concepts and terms inadequate, he consequently came up with this new term to provide 'an experiment in alternate visions of the world' (Santino 2011: 62). He does not see the 'carnivalesque' and the 'ritualesque' to be mutually exclusive terms but rather believes

that the 'carnivalesque' is the modality of the 'ritualesque' through which norms are questioned and alternatives suggested (Santino 2011: 67).

While a valuable and critical intervention, Santino's ritualesque does not sufficiently capture the nuances of joking relationships and the persistence of the hierarchies of caste, class and kinship relationships during Holi. Interventions from anthropology in the form of ideas about joking relationships and licence are crucial and need further development and work. This paper has attempted to shed light on the need to develop new models to prevent an uncritical application of a concept to study the nuances and regional variations that accompany celebrations and festivities in India. It needs to be emphasised that the paper makes no attempt to denounce or debunk Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque but rather makes a humble appeal to caution against the irresistible temptation to buy into the concept and the potential it presents.

Works Cited

Bergson, Henri. 1956. 'Laughter', in Wylie Sypher (ed.), *Comedy*, pp. 61–190. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Eagleton, Terry. 1981. *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism.* London and Brooklyn: Verso.

Fleming, Luke. 2020. 'The elementary structures of kinship interaction: corporeal communication in joking-avoidance relationships', *XVII SALSA Proceedings,* https://www.academia.edu/43117397/The_elementary_structures_of_kinship_interaction_Corporeal_ communication_in_joking_avoidance_relationships.

Gardiner, Michael. 2002. *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology.* London and New York: Routledge

Guha, Ranajit. 1984. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Guyer, Jane I. 2013. 'Translator's Preface: An introduction to "Joking relations"' by Marcel Mauss', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* 3(2): 317–20

Hutcheon, Linda. 1983. 'The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic', *University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 53(1): 83–94.

Jassal, Smita Tewari. 2007. 'Taking Liberties in Festive Song: Gender, New Technologies and a "Joking Relationship"', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41(1): 5–40.

McKim, Marriott. 1966. 'The Feast of Love'. In Milton Singer (ed.), *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, pp. 200–212. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.

Parkin, Robert. 1993. 'The joking relationship and kinship: charting a theoretical dependency', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 24(3): 251–63.

Pande, Anju. *Mahila Holi Sangrah*. Almora: Dharmik Pustak Vikreta.

Pande, Girija. 2011. 'Folk Expression and Imagination in a Himalayan Festival: Diversity as Reflected in Kumaoni Holi Festival', in Chetan Singh (ed.), *Recognizing Diversity: Society and Culture in the Himalayas,* pp. 226–245. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Radcliffe Brown, A. R. 1940. 'On Joking Relationships', *Africa*, 13(3): 195–210. https://doi.org/10.2307/1156093.

Rao, Vidya. 1999. 'Thumri as Feminine Voice', in Nivedita Menon (ed.), *Gender and Politics in India*, pp. 475–93. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sanford, A. Whitney. 2010. 'Don't Take It Badly, It's Holi: Ritual Levity, Society and Agriculture', in Raj, Selva J. and Corinne G. Dempsey (eds), *Sacred Play: Ritual Levity and Humour in South Asian Religions,* pp 37–56. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Santino, Jack. 2011. 'The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque'. *Journal of American Folklore*, 124(491): 61–73, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.124.491.0061.

Srinivas, M.N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Ben. 1995. 'Bakhtin, Carnival and Comic Theory'. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Nottingham.

Turner, Graeme. 1993. 'British Cultural Studies: An Introduction', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 44(2): 350. https://doi.org/10.2307/591231.

Visuvalingam, Sunthar. 2018. 'Carnival and Transgression in India: Towards a Global Spring?' in Bandlamudi, Lakshmi and E. V. Ramakrishnan (eds), *Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture: Pluralism*, pp. 37–53. Singapore: Springer.

The Humour of the Absurd: Roy Andersson's 'Living Trilogy'

Amandeep Kaur and Jagvir Singh

Abstract

This paper examines three films that constitute Swedish director Roy Andersson's 'Living Trilogy'—*Songs from the Second Floor* (2000); *You, the Living* (2007); and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014). Our objective is to trace how the absurd can be represented through humour and its philosophical relation to the aesthetic of 'trivialism' that Andersson has employed in his cinema. The absurdist humour consists of two essential fields: the brute irrationality of the universe and the absurd rationality of the mind. We build on this dialectic to show how Andersson's films subvert traditional cinematic linearity and become 'characters' in their own right. Drawing on the theories of the absurd, the paper explores how the trilogy portrays the confrontation between transcendental illogic and empirical logic, a discord rooted in the very atmosphere of the film rather than in the logical actions of the characters. Finally, we argue that the trilogy addresses the conundrum of human identity by showcasing the absurdity of grand narratives, which fail to offer respite from the mundanity of everyday life.

Keywords: Humour, Absurd, Cinema, Trivialism

I

> The longer and more carefully we look at a funny story, the sadder it becomes.
>
> Gogol, *Dead Souls*

This paper examines three films that constitute Swedish director Roy Andersson's "Living Trilogy"—*Songs from the Second Floor* (2000); *You, the Living* (2007); and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014). Our objective is to trace how the absurd can be represented through humour and its philosophical relation to the aesthetic of 'trivialism' that Andersson has employed in his cinema. The absurdist humour consists of two essential fields: the brute irrationality of the universe and the

absurd rationality of the mind. We build on this dialectic to illustrate how Andersson's films subvert traditional cinematic linearity and become 'characters' in their own right. Drawing on the theories of the absurd, the paper explores how the trilogy portrays the confrontation between transcendental illogic and empirical logic, a discord rooted in the very atmosphere of the film rather than in the logical actions of the characters. Finally, we argue that the trilogy addresses the conundrum of human identity by showcasing the absurdity of grand narratives, which fail to offer respite from the mundanity of everyday life.

Rooted in an auteurist approach, marked by a distinctive filmmaking approach that combines *trompe l'oeil*[1] and *tableau vivants,* Andersson's trilogy becomes an exposition of the human condition. In the first film, *Songs from the Second Floor,* a character poignantly declares, 'It is not easy being human' (Andersson 00:17:43–00:17:45), encapsulating the shared essence of the trilogy, wherein the characters struggle to make sense of their world in a rational capacity; yet their actions evoke humour for the observer, evoking Kierkegaardian conception of humour[2] when viewed within the grand scheme of things. Andersson's cinematic world is composed of vignettes using repetitive movements and static camera shots to foreground a detached perspective. Even the titles of films in the trilogy suggest an elevated vantage point, reinforcing the idea of observing human existence from a higher, more reflective space. In this respect, the filmmaker chooses to depart from conventional storytelling by structuring the trilogy in a way that advocates abstraction over realism and encompasses both the banal and the absurd, thereby creating a tension between the grand and the trivial which creates humour. Of all the factors that set this trilogy apart, it is the way this humour is disposed towards the absurd. The humour of the absurd, as noted by Will Noonan in the *Encyclopaedia of Humour*, comprises two main strands: the rational absurd and the existential absurd (Noonan 2014: 1), which closely correspond to Albert Camus' reflections on the 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (2000: 27). While the rational absurd is 'concerned with the breakdown of logic and exemplified in the technique of reductio ad absurdum, in which a logical proposition is led to a nonsensical or contradictory conclusion', the existential absurd, on the contrary, deals with 'the apparent meaninglessness of the world' (Noonan 2014: 1). Noonan posits that both the strands provide a platform for humour, often intertwining with 'the rational absurd tending towards formal playfulness and nonsense, and the existential absurd towards dark humour' (2014: 2). In this context, humouristic absurd also adheres to the norms of incongruity, as it also subverts what John Morreall contends are 'the standard mental patterns and normal expectations' (1983: 54). It fosters expression and an innate desire for ultimate meaning while concurrently rejecting the possibility of an ultimate resolution. In what follows, we try to expand this philosophical proposition with Andersson's aesthetic of 'trivialism' to show how his cinematic and aesthetic choices are deeply tied to creating humorous responses to the absurd condition. The paper includes three vital components—indifference and passivity, the repetition of dream sequences and death—that are

pervasive throughout the trilogy to analyse and theorise the relation between humour and the absurd.

II

Trivialism and the Humour of the Absurd

The form of 'trivialism', for Andersson, is a 'natural successor to neo-realism and the cinema of the absurd while drawing richly from both' (Lindquist 2010: 207). He develops further his theory in one of the interviews, 'the entire history of art is filled with trivialities because they are a part of our lives, our premises in life,' and his 'trivial cinema' seeks to give 'a voice to the small human being … (who) symbolizes all of us.' (2014: 5; Ratner 2015: 36) He expands the range of 'trivialism' in three ways. First, he offers an unconventional cinematic perspective within the otherwise traditional landscape of Nordic cinema by juxtaposing the most pertinent social and existential inquiries of contemporary society with the mundane and absurd incidents. Second, he pairs 'trivialism' with the construction of a 'complex image'[3] to elevate the sense of reality from an aesthetic viewpoint. In the director's commentary of the DVD version of *Songs from the Second Floor,* he adds the following details about trivialism:

> One describes the world and our existence in their little trivial elements, and in that way, I hope that one can also get to the big, enticing, philosophical questions. But how life is, life is of course trivial, we must button buttons, we must zip up zippers, and we must eat breakfast. It is exceedingly concrete and trivial, the whole of our existence. Even for those who are in positions of power. I like this very much, emphasising this triviality, because it pushes people down to earth to that place where one actually belongs. (Andersson quoted in Lindqvist 2016a: 23–24)

Third, his concept of 'trivialism' is deeply tied to the fundamental egalitarianism that endorses the principle of equality for all human beings within a social structure fraught with hierarchy and class divisions. Framed in this context, trivialism also curates a new perspective on humouristic absurd within a cinematic space, where human inadequacy converges with the persistent effort to reinforce human consciousness in a seemingly meaningless universe. 'Humour is actually born of human inadequacy,' Andersson stated in a 2010 interview. 'You laugh at your own inadequacies and others' inadequacies.' (Lindquist 2016b: 555). The systematic and conscious crafting of this ironic juxtaposition is evident in almost all the films. For instance, in the third film, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (henceforth, *Pigeon*), two middle-aged salesmen, Sam and Jonathan—modelled after characters from cultural history: Laurel and Hardy, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and Vladimir and Estragon—make a concerted effort to peddle novelty items, which include vampire teeth, a grotesque mask and a laughing bag, to a store owner. 'We want to help people have fun,' Jonathan murmurs softly, while Sam talks like a salesman but does so in a deadpan manner, creating a humorous incongruity (00:25:33–00:25:40). With a Beckettian influence, the scene exposes the futility of their task as the storeowner remains indifferent to their

antics. Jonathan puts on a sample pair of vampire teeth with 'extra-long fangs' to demonstrate their functional value; the ensuing moment of prolonged silence between the salesman and the storeowner is wholly absurd. Meanwhile, Sam advertises another product—'the laugh bag'—which provokes artificial laughter when squeezed. However, the artificial laughter exposes the palpable absence of pure and sincere joy in the room, which adds to the humouristic absurd. Likewise, in the second film, *You, the Living,* all the characters embody the modern *Sisyphus,* weighed down by social duties and the propulsion of fulfilling them regardless of their personal crisis or emotional turmoil. Here, the subjective expectation of these characters is rendered insignificant within the broader objective and transcendental frame, which elicits humour. However, it is imperative to note that Andersson aims to broaden the outlook of his viewers to perceive existence as an objective spectacle rather than a merely crude representation of unhappiness; that is why the absurd turns humorous not from mocking their failure, but from the futility of human efforts to find meaning. The captain, the caretaker, the bar attendant, and the dancer in *Pigeon* appear tragic when considered from their immediate experiences, but from a distance, they appear comical. Uffe and Mia—the barber and the professor—in *You, the Living,* are similarly trapped in the vicious cycle of triviality, and all their thoughts—whether happy or sad—are futile attempts to escape their present predicament.

As stated earlier, the aesthetic sphere of 'trivialism' becomes more pronounced when viewed in the light of the profound indifference that the characters exhibit towards others. Given that the ordinary individuals are trapped in a claustrophobic 'burden' of capitalism, their sole reaction to their situation is extreme indifference and passivity, often resulting in the absurd. There is an utter lack of agency or initiative; rather, the characters remain in a state of waiting for the most part. In the long static frames, the dichotomy between the onlookers and the observed becomes more conspicuous. For instance, in *Songs From the Second Floor,* when a young man is fatally stabbed on the road, the bystanders remain totally passive, devoid of any inclination to either save him or confront the assailants. Likewise, in the third film, *Pigeon,* a monkey is strapped to a machine to conduct an experiment, while a lab assistant stands by the window talking to someone on the phone, exhibiting absolute indifference and insensitivity. The apathy takes enormous proportions in the next scene, when a group of people are burnt in a gas chamber, while the others watch them, with wine glasses in hand. This also depicts the claustrophobic state of human existence, which has undoubtedly surpassed the animalistic and primal state but has utterly failed in achieving higher objectives. Consequently, they are stuck in nihilism, where the quest for meaningfulness only results in the absurd. The strategic crafting of the trivial and the complex images creates an aesthetic of passivity, encouraging the viewers to critically reflect on the given situation over any identification with the characters. In several vignettes, people cry in public, while others around them remain totally indifferent. In another vignette, Lasse, a clerk, is expelled after thirty years of service at a firm. Located within a huge corridor encircled by partially open doors, behind which stand his co-workers, who passively observe the predicament that Lasse has to undergo. He desperately clings

to his boss Pelle's legs to escape his termination, which elicits a comic effect because Pelle begins to distance himself to avoid embarrassment, accidentally dragging Lasses halfway across the corridor.

The state of indifference and passivity extends to sexual activity as well, wherein the trilogy reveals a disjunction between the mind and the body. The weight of 'living' and 'stagnant' relationships is so overwhelming that people attempt to surmount it through a mechanical indulgence in sexual acts. However, they fail to elicit a desired level of ecstasy or solace. For instance, in *You, the Living,* a musician indulges in mechanical sexual activity with his wife. The humour stems from his mechanical response, which seems incongruous with the whole situation; rather than immersing himself in the present moment of intimacy, he remains utterly passive and prefers to fixate on his financial losses and shrunken investments.

Andersson deploys the mode of repetition to place greater emphasis on the incongruous responses of the individuals, who are mired in listlessness and fatigue. The repetitive dream sequences in *You, the Living,* are punctuated with both humour and absurdity. In one such dream, a plumber is sentenced to execution for breaking the crockery of a family of Nazi sympathisers. Within this absurd setting in the court, the judges hold huge glasses of beer, while the prosecutor, who is supposed to present arguments in his defence, breaks into tears. His imploring tone reflects the destiny of human reason when it is completely disconnected from the universal reason. When the plumber is to be electrocuted, people become mere observers holding popcorn and witnessing the scene behind the glass. Their listless response is highly incongruous in an otherwise dismal situation, thereby facilitating their transition into humorous figures. The difference between the dream and the real worlds seems blurred, as the observers can discern the similar illogical events in both the worlds. The repetitive dream sequences also depict the void between human longings and the grave silence of the universe. Human desires and fantasies have no place except in a madhouse, as revealed through Tomas in *Songs,* who seeks to overcome the triviality of the world through poetry and eventually turns insane.

While the lives of people, such as Tomas, Sam, Jonathan, and Mia, take a tragic turn, the trilogy collectively becomes comedic, reflecting Nell's opinion in *Endgame* that 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness' (Beckett 1992: 11). This motif becomes prominent in the trilogy through the repetition of dialogues or a particular act that 'contributes to the comic' (Cohn 1962: 61). In the second film, *You, the Living,* people desperately proclaim, 'Tomorrow is another day' across different vignettes; their response is incongruous to their empirical reality. Similarly, in *Pigeon,* a CEO, almost on the brink of suicide, stands with a gun in his hand and converses repeatedly on the phone, 'I'm happy to hear you're doing fine' (00:58:24–00:58:34). The dialogue recurs multiple times within the film; each recurrence reveals a deep crisis underscoring the desire to be (or at least appear) happy, thereby echoing Camus's assertion that *one must imagine Sisyphus happy.* The repetitive rhythm of these words harnesses the principle of incongruity to elicit humour while augmenting the contradiction between care and indifference.

The humouristic absurd, coupled with trivialism, becomes more emphatic as Andersson consciously decides to draw his comic figures by ascribing them the matching physical features and characteristics. Almost all the characters have pale white faces; they walk listlessly with stooped shoulders; they have no facial expressions, and they respond to life with a sense of resignation, helplessness, and desperation. This is a deliberate strategy on the part of the filmmaker to accentuate the triviality and mundaneness of everyday life. Their pale faces symbolise death. Bergson, in his essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* perceives life as mechanical if it is regulated by repetition, sameness and routine. He expands it thus: 'Analyse the impression you get from two faces that are too much alike, and you will find that you are thinking of two copies cast in the same mould' (2014: 34). Andersson's comic figures lack both emotions and dreams, eventually leading to a collective state of existential immobility. Given the fact that the characters bear resemblance, with their white make-up and pallid appearance, their own individuality and subjectivity experience erosion. When people lose their individuality and turn identical, they begin to resemble machines. Here, Bergson's concept becomes increasingly relevant, indicating that when existence shifts towards the mechanical, it elicits humour.

Echoing Elie Wiesel's sentiment in *Night,* which asserts, 'We are all brothers and share the same fate. The same smoke hovers over all our heads', Andersson's characters struggle to make sense of their lives, yet their responses and body language are no different, signifying a sense of extreme collective alienation in society (2006: 41). In *Songs,* reclusive and disconnected individuals strive to find solace in a world, wherein cafés and bars are empty while the streets are packed with crowds. In *You, the Living,* halls and houses contain sufficient vacant space, yet people are forced to navigate their lives within enclosed quarters and elevators, resulting in a state of homogeneity.

III

Rejection of/Search for Grand Narratives

As stated earlier, the failure of human rationality to face transcendental irrationality creates a condition of absurdity. In such a state, how would human beings respond to the existential crisis? Would the conventional rational, cognitive responses suffice? The trilogy seems to contend that it is not always the case; rather, it prompts resorting to humour, art and poetry as an alternative remedy to partially bridge the gap between human rationality and the ubiquitous irrationality of the universe. The trilogy, however, draws attention to a curious paradox: many characters express their hatred for the artistic expression. For instance, in *Songs,* Kalle bemoans that his son 'wrote poems until he went nuts', while in *You, the Living,* music and cacophony are perceived as similar. And yet, Andersson's filmmaking is contingent on the intermediality of poetry, music and art as the only available means to respond to irrationality. While Vallejo's poem 'Beloved be the ones who sit down' remains a continual presence in the first film, the second film employs Goethe in the very beginning: 'Therefore rejoice, you, the living, in your lovely warm bed, until Lethe's cold wave wets your fleeing foot' (00:00:20–

00:00:42). The third film is no different; it features a poem named after its title. The duality of rejection and inclusion of art and poetry exemplifies the basic contradiction of the universe. The subjective outlook is so fixated on the cognitive and rational process that it obstructs any genuine appreciation of beauty and aesthetics.

The absurd, as noted by Nietzsche, is an intermediate state between the given meanings and the ones that are created, characterised by restlessness where chaos reigns. Ironically, the third part of the trilogy, *Pigeon,* concludes on a similar note, with one of the characters proclaiming, 'If you don't keep track of time, chaos will reign' (01:36:05–01:36:08). This chaos does not resolve the existential meaninglessness; rather, the characters find no one with whom to share their inner turmoil. They adopt various coping mechanisms in a world where God has become a commodity, the priest is preoccupied with petty matters, and the psychiatrist is bogged down by depression.

Fredric Jameson captures the mood of the postmodern era by illustrating the failure of cognitive mapping[4], indicative of the fractured connections that link the human mind to future possibilities. Human beings are not merely biological or geographical entities; rather, they find meaning through their relation to various narratives. The collapse of these narratives results in a sense of dislocation and existential crisis. This condition is distinctly visible in the trilogy, where characters repeatedly express their confusion with phrases such as 'Where are we?' or 'I cannot get up from here' (*Songs*) or 'Does anyone know how to get out of here?' (*Pigeon*). This internalisation of a state of being lost and stuck in a deep abyss exemplifies the repercussions of *a killed God* or *dead tradition*. In the first movie, *Songs,* the collapse of grand narratives becomes explicit in two cases. First, the failure of religion and the subsequent sacrifice of an innocent child for the anticipation of a better future are juxtaposed against an apocalyptic setting, wherein hundreds of citizens are frantically trying to leave the city before 'the end' strikes. However, their miserable failure indicates 'baggage' of the past, which weighs them down as they never manage to reach the check-in counter, and the incongruity between their static rational response to the dynamic irrational situation creates humour. These people have rejected the old city (grand narratives), but their frantic search for new gods remained (new narratives) the same. This is evident in *You, the Living,* wherein the depressed psychiatrist becomes equivalent to God, who is exhausted when he says, 'People demand so much. That's the conclusion I've drawn after all these years. They demand to be happy, at the same time they are egocentric, selfish, and ungenerous' (01:02:57–01:03:13). Second, the dark comic representation of Christ on the cross entwines with the philosophical notion of the 'death of God' when an entrepreneur desperately tries to sell icons of crucifixion to the main lead, Kalle. While he is still trying to persuade the latter, a life-size statuette of Christ unclips and hangs loosely in the air. The prolonged shot that portrays the gap between the intention and reality also corresponds to the contemporary society's ambivalence between preserving and rejecting the institutionalised religion. The recurrence of the same iconography in the final scene of the film, when the entrepreneur, unable to secure profit from the business of selling crucifixions, discards the 'unsold' statues onto a huge garbage heap, becomes the very image of collective

guilt and suffering in a society, echoing through their existence and representing their disconnection from any sense of coherent reality or future.

IV

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has attempted to explore the humour of the absurd from three distinct angles: passivity and indifference, the repetition of dream sequences, and suffering and death. It has shown how the trilogy portrays the confrontation between transcendental illogic and empirical logic, a discord rooted in the very atmosphere of the film rather than in the logical actions of the characters. In the final part, we have tried to address the conundrum of human identity by bringing to light the absurdity of grand narratives, which fail to offer a respite from the mundanity of everyday life. In the first film, one notices a complete rejection of the grand narratives, which is God, while in the second film, people seem to find solace or replace God with psychiatrists. The third part conveys the repercussions of nihilism, culminating in death. Unlike the Nietzschean metamorphosis, wherein the realisation of the 'burden' of the grand narrative results in freedom and creation, people in the 'Living Trilogy' seem to be stuck in the second stage. They come to the realisation of freedom, but the suffering that accompanies it is so overwhelming that they find no respite from it, resulting in absurdity and humour.

END NOTES

1. Trompe l'oeil denotes a technique of optical illusion—mostly used in art and painting—wherein the artist strives to transform the two-dimensional space into three-dimensional space by using different techniques to create more depth.
2. Kierkegaard defines humour as primarily arising from the contradiction of expectations. In his work *Either/Or,* he expands on this, 'When I was very young, I forgot in the Trophonean cave how to laugh; when I became an adult, when I opened my eyes and saw actuality, then I started to laugh and have never stopped laughing since that time. I saw that the meaning of life was to make a living, its goal to become a councillor, that the rich delight of love was to acquire a well-to-do girl, that the blessedness of friendship was to help each other in financial difficulties, that wisdom was whatever the majority assumed it to be. This I saw, and I laughed' (Kierkegaard 1987: 34).
3. Andersson has worked to define it by calling his shots 'the complex image', which bears resemblance to the slow cinema movement along with an additional emphasis on deadpan acting, camera lighting, props, and reflexive analysis.
4. In his work, *Postmodernism,* Jameson introduces the concept of cognitive mapping in relation to understanding the complexity of the postmodern society wherein capital threatens to consume all aspects of human life. To map that sense of absorption, Jameson reinforces the need of a 'cognitive map' that offers new insights on the historical reality of the present. According to him, the notion of 'cognitive map' enables 'a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole' (Jameson 1991: 51).

Works Cited

Andersson, Roy. 2010. 'The Complex Image', in Larsson, Mariah and Anders Marklund *(eds), Swedish Film: An Introduction and Reader*, pp. 274–8. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
Beckett, Samuel. 1980. *Endgame*. New York: Grove Press.
Bergson, Henri. 2014. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. CT: Martino Press.
Borbás, István. 2015. 'A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence – An Interview with Cinematographer Istaván Borbás', *Fourthreefilm*, https://fourthreefilm.com/2015/06/a-pigeon-sat-on-a-branch-reflecting-on-existence-an-interview-with-cinematographer-istvan-borbas/ (accessed on 12 May 2024).
Camus, Albert. 2000. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New Delhi: Penguin,
Cohn, R. 1962. *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*. New Jersey: Rutgers.
Gogol, Nikolai. 1997. *Dead Souls*. London: Vintage Books.
Iñárritu, Alejandro G. and Darren Aronofsky. 2014. 'Interview with Roy Andersson', http://www. magpictures.com/resources/presskits/pigeon/PIGEONfinalnotes.doc (accessed on 25 May 2024).
Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. 1987. *Either/Or*. New Jersey: Princeton.
Lindqvist, Ursula. 2010. 'Roy Andersson's Cinematic Poetry and the Spectre of César Vallejo', *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, 19: 200–29.
—. 2016a. *Roy Andersson's "Songs from the Second Floor": Contemplating the Art of Existence*. Washington: University of Washington Press.
—. 2016b. 'The Art of Not Telling Stories in Nordic Fiction Films', in Hjort, Mette and Ursula Lindqvist *(eds), A Companion to Nordic Cinema*, pp. 547–63. New Jersey: Wiley.
Morreall, John. 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. New York: SUNY Press.
Noonan, Will. 2014. 'Absurdist Humor', in *The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, Salvatore Attardo (ed), pp. 1–4. London: Sage.
Ratner, Megan. 2015. 'The 'Trivialist Cinema' of Roy Andersson: An Interview', *Film Quarterly*, 69 (1): 36–44.
Wiesel, Elie. 2006. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Straus and Giroux.

Filmography

Songs from the Second Floor. Directed by Roy Andersson, Studio 24, 2000.
You, the Living. Directed by Roy Andersson, Studio 24, 2007.
A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence. Directed by Roy Andersson, Studio 24, 2014.

The Carnivalesque of Queer Historicity: Horror and Wit in *Plain Bad Heroines*

Asmita Kundu

Abstract

The aesthetic overlappings of horror and comedy have been rather everlasting and intrinsic. As the genre of horror comedies began to gain prominence, works categorically deemed as exclusively horror could reveal their proximity with elements of comedy. Alfred Hitchcock had famously remarked about *Psycho* being primarily a comedy, as there 'is a fine line between getting someone to laugh and getting someone to scream' (Gordon: 1992:84). Despite this alleged immanent connection, commonsensically speaking, horror and humour seem to be emotions largely antagonistic to one another. This presumption is perhaps what gives works that conspicuously synthesise horror and comic elements their curious character that has the propensity to challenge notions of normativity and genre-based expectations. Noel Caroll, in their essay 'Horror and Humour', remarks that since humour aims for sensations of rerelease, lightness and expansion and horror invokes heaviness, pressure and claustrophobia, it might appear 'initially implausible that such broadly opposite affects can attach to the same stimulus' (1999: 146). This counterintuitive merger can be instrumental in expanding the restraints of a genre by making the 'initially implausible' rather comprehensible and revealing the inherent naturality of the same. A similar driving force is also what defines any narrative of subversion— especially those which aim at centring alternate and under-represented voices by challenging the notions of accepted history. Emily M. Danforth's *Plain Bad Heroines* (2020) is a comic horror novel that weaves various narratives of queer romance and existences to ultimately expose the bizarreness and absurdity of queer exclusion across history, to simultaneously express the horrible and the laughable. The blend of horror and comedy ends up becoming a crucial vehicle for uninhibited celebration or a carnivalesque of queer retelling of narratives. This paper seeks to explore the aesthetic relationship of wit and horror as an indispensable element in stories of marginality with a close analysis of the narrative tactics deployed in *Plain Bad Heroines.*

Keywords: Horror, Horror-comedy, Wit, Queer, Queerness, Carnivalesque

Introduction

The intersection of humour and horror in literature and art, especially following the rise of horror-comedy as an independent genre, has given rise to newer possibilities for subversive creations. This has prompted readers and spectators to rethink the sensory overlapping of these seemingly incompatible categories to find liminal spaces in human emotions where such possibilities can be explored and understand new ways of deconstructing established norms. When Hitchcock posits that *Psycho* is mainly a comedy (Gordon 1992: 84) or McDonald asserts that 'functional comedies' such as *Catch 22* would propel us to 'look back in horror' (McDonald 1973: 18), one is reminded of these often-ignored genre paradoxes. Emily Danforth's *Plain Bad Heroines* (2020) can be an important intervention in this respect, as it is primarily a horror novel that heavily relies on wit, satire, occasional slapstick humour and numerous genre transgressions as narrative devices. By doing so, what it achieves is a celebration of the histories of queer existence and pays an homage to the universe of horror cinema. This essay argues that the profusion of queer voices across the narrative occasionally unfolds as a 'carnivalesque', especially as it conveys the overlap between horror and humour. This is achieved through the subversion of the societal, mainly heteronormative expectations where invisibility, violence and alienation are simultaneously horrific as well as comical.

The novel moves around two timelines—one in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in a girls' school called Brookhants, where students come together to form an (impliedly Sapphic) book club to read the controversial autobiography of the author Mary McLane— *The Story Of Mary MacLane* (1902)[1], where the spectral presence of the book haunts its readers as they face tragic ends. The second timeline is where queer characters who happen to be actors in present-day Los Angeles start shooting for a movie in the said cursed studio location of the Brookhants School to retell the story of the Plain Bad Heroines Club, where the ghost of Mary MacLane's book wreaks havoc in their lives. The title 'Plain Bad Heroines' is inspired by one of the phrases in MacLane's book, which serves as a satirical nod to the tragic escapades and heroic struggles of rather mundane or 'bad' socially marginalised women, which gets affirmed in the interlocking of both the timelines. This essay analyses the narrative techniques utilised in Danforth's novel to first, understand how the paradoxical merger of horror and wit becomes an important narrative device in queer storytelling and secondly, how the implicit transgressive quality of the same *queers* our established modes of reading and perceiving the genre of horror as such.

Carnivalesque and Queering the Narrative

When Bakhtin discusses the concept of carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) while describing mediaeval carnival traditions, he puts forward some defining aspects that would eventually make carnivalesque a cultural and literary space that celebrates polyphony of voices, centres disorder and embraces freedom. These would include inversion of social hierarchies, blurring of the sacred and profane and thus creating liminal spaces where norms will be challenged, creating an

atmosphere of festivity, a focus on grotesque realism where physical forms such as the corporeal are exaggerated to connote the absurd or the bizarre, and proclaiming unabashed freedom of expression. Something that is central to the carnivalesque is how rigid structures are *temporarily* broken down so that the marginal voices can reclaim their spaces. It can be argued that historically, any form of queer assertion has aligned itself to some aspect of the carnivalesque. Whether it is expressed through pride parades or exists in the realm of narrative that challenges or subverts, festivity, celebration and proclamations of freedom are central to it. The next section talks about how queer representations in cinema, at least when it came to Hollywood, had an interesting history of being coexistent with horror movies and their usual tropes of heightening the macabre. Danforth's novel sets out to do three important things which let the readers perceive queer narratives through the lens of the carnivalesque. First, the storytelling consistently tries to situate itself in the tradition of banned feminist narratives to highlight the centrality of queer history[2] and also in the history of horror storytelling in Hollywood. In doing so, the novel is riddled with allusions to texts in both literature and cinema, which centres multiplicities of voices across modern history to create an almost heterotopic narrative. Secondly, the interdependence of horror and comedy (through wit, sarcasm, satirical remarks, etc.) is used as a political tool for queer assertion and reclamation. This, on one hand, inverts one's expectations regarding either of the genres, and on the other hand, the peculiar merger becomes a powerful metaphor for narrativising queer existences. Thirdly, narrative choices like the breaking of the fourth wall and occasionally using carnival scenes to exude feelings of fear, uncertainty and absurdity deconstruct normative ideas of clear categorisation. Collectively, both in form and in content, the novel destabilises notions of hierarchy by creating an atmosphere of an uninhibited sense of freedom and experimentation, which becomes imperative in its celebration of queer historicity. The secret society formed by the Brookhants students, the life and struggles of the Brookhants' teachers, Alex and Libbie, and the joys, dilemmas and tragedies that befall Heather and Audrey as they try to portray the cursed characters of the Brookhants story in its modern-day cinematic retelling as they navigate being queer celebrities all revolve around the creation of liminal and temporary spaces of reclamation and subversion, not unlike Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

Comic Horror and Horrific Comedy as Queer Narration

Caroll, in his essay 'Horror and Humour' (1990), claims that one way to dismantle our initial impulse to perceive horror and humour as diametrically opposite is to acknowledge that they both can aim to destabilise, problematise or deconstruct the normative. While horror might be associated with 'heaviness or claustrophobia' and humour might be associated with 'lightness and release' (155), they often have similar stages in how they achieve their end goal. In other words, horror is often arrived at after a sense of entertainment or amusement which progresses into a tense atmosphere, and humour is the release when the tense atmosphere is deflated. Both, however, usually deal with the grotesque or the absurd or anything non-normative,

and they only approach it from different directions to get the desired effect. *Psycho* novelist Robert Bloch claims:

> Comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin. ... Both deal in the grotesque and the unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different physical reactions (1985: 22).

Historically, there have been many significant contributions, in literature and cinema alike, which have worked on this merger. Movies like *Young Frankenstein* (1974) or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) transgress genre expectations by seamlessly weaving the elements of horror and comedy alike. Edgar Allan Poe's or HP Lovecraft's wit-infused macabre horror has created a legacy of narratives that blend in the eerie with the comical. In more recent times, Grady Hendrix's novel *Horrorstor* (2014) is set in an amusing atmosphere where furniture store employees encounter paranormal occurrences where the dark secrets that are unveiled blur the lines of bizarre, laughable and terrifying. Even the escapades of K in Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) as he navigates the stifling and nonsensical cobwebs of bureaucracy can be read as horror comedy. If the grotesque, absurd or non-normative emerges as one of the prominent ways where horror and comedy converge, then queer stories can be an ideal arena to explore such convergences, and they can be further utilised as tools for reclamation and assertion. Historically, queerness had begun to be visible in horror and comedic genres, albeit for caricaturist and prejudiced reasons. Lambert, in her thesis, mentions that Hollywood movies from 1934 to 1968 were regulated under the Hays Code which prohibited LGBTQ+ representations under the pretext of being sexually deviant or offensive; however, the same was accepted in horror movies if they were coded as 'monstrous, predatory, or weak', which made queer representation 'accepted' when presented as horror (Lambert 2023: 9). On the other hand, Rupali remarks:

> In terms of representation, we see historically, the only space where queer bodies and non-heteronormative desires were allowed to exist without immediate violent backlash was in cracks of comic relief and as a subject of ridicule. The use of comedy by those in power to maintain and reiterate existing power relations while further deriding and subjugating the marginalised 'other' is nothing new. It's the kind of humour that works on the principle of 'laughing at', making a clear distinction between the subject and object. The spectator becomes the subject here, laughing at the object who is someone 'other' and separate from them (Rupali 2023: 3).

This initial problemat of queer representation in the domain of both horror and comedy in fact makes it instrumental as a key element of reclamation by inspiring queer re-readings where queerness could be given more unprejudiced and celebratory representations. Under the queer gaze, therefore, movies like *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) or *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) cease to be narratives that perpetuate negative stereotypes and, in turn, can rather emerge as sites that expose such extant prejudices and power relations and pave the way for alternate retellings. This also makes cinematic history, dealing with horror and comedy, a crucial area of queer storytelling. Danforth's use of Mary MacLane's autobiography as a consistent motif in the novel

emerges as pertinent in this logic of reclamation. The maligned reputation of the autobiography as being immoral is incorporated within the narrative, where its readers are exposed to a plethora of hauntings. The story centres on the students of the Brookhants School, who stumble upon a copy of MacLane's diary, who form a secret reading group. Aside from reading and discussion of MacLane's ideas, the book gives them an opportunity to express freely the thoughts and opinions which their 1900s boarding school and the society in general did not allow them to. The two students who start the group, Flo and Clara, also happen to be in a secret romantic relationship, which also gets validated both through MacLane's ideas and the sanctuary created by the book club. The narrative implies that participants of the book club, as they continue to cultivate the suppressed parts of their identities, get entangled in a mysterious and eerie web of the unknown, and they meet tragic ends. Characters like some of the conservative teachers in the school deem that MacLane's diary was 'haunted' and carried the spectres of the 'polluted' ideas that they spoke of. However, despite these 'hauntings' causing their tragic demise, the haunting in itself is symbolic of societal stigmatisation. It is implied that the readers of MacLane's diary are not cursed by the so-called deviancy of the text but it makes the readers gradually understand their true selves as either queer individuals or women who are at the margins of the society, and the burden of *this* realisation of their peripheral being is what causes their eventual departure from the world. In the twenty-first century timeline of the novel, the characters who come across MacLane's autobiography inevitably have to confront the still extant hypocrisies and internalised prejudices that they inhabit, and this knowledge compels them to accept the tragedy of their existences. This is explored in the novel through the lens of horrific absurdities, which at times pokes fun at the queerphobic nature of society, which is both deemed as horrifying and comically ridiculous. For example, when a character, Eleanor[3], a student of the Brookhants school, is found dead after allegedly coming under the tragic influence of MacLane's book, a self-righteous and morally uptight teacher, Leanna Hamm, remarks that the girls won't let go of the 'wickedness' of the book. Immediately following this, the narrator remarks in a footnote: 'She spoke this last bit with hushed alarm lacquered over her words…It was almost as if Leanna didn't want the book to hear what she was saying about it' (111). The sheepish caution exercised by Leanna, who was otherwise fashioning herself as the brave protector of values and morality, comes across as comical, as it simultaneously heightens the horrific potential of MacLane's book. Here it achieves the dual purpose of turning the comic gaze from the queer subjects to the ones who represent prejudice, and the horror lies not in queerness itself as being dangerous and morally reprehensible but in its powerful and transformative capabilities. The novel also places itself in the historical legacy of horror movies. In the 21st century timeline, a director named Bo wants to make a horror movie based on the lore of MacLane's book in the cursed location of the Brookhants School because he is also portrayed as a character obsessed with haunted movie locations. His obsession is presented as comic and rather absurd:

> Carlos Burr's review of Big Yard, Quiet Street happened to contain Bo's personal favourite summary of his style: "Think Wes Anderson directing a remake of *The Shining,* only set in suburbia and ask Shirley Jackson to consult" (296).

The homage to the horror movie legacy is played off as light-hearted and mischievous as a deliberate acceptance of comic readings of horror, which plays with genre expectations and also can be understood as a trope of queer retelling. Therefore, queer themes become an important tool to showcase the liminal spaces where horror and comedy can not only converge but also intensify and affirm each other.

Narratorial Intervention: The Breaking of the Fourth Wall

Danforth repeatedly breaks the fourth wall by abruptly commenting on the writing of the novel, directly addressing the reader, and most prominently through the use of footnotes to either inform the readers of events that happened outside of the immediate timeline or give insights from the narrator or additional historical information that is true even outside the novelistic universe. Her tone is reminiscent of gossip, where she occasionally urges the readers to shed judgement alongside her. This playful relationship thus established between the narrator and the readers works as an efficient comic stance, as it creates a sense of nonchalant camaraderie even when horrific incidents are taking place. This, however, is not without a more devious purpose, as the same gossipy tone lulls the readers into a false sense of security, which then is disrupted to deliver unexpected plot points that stand out as especially shocking and terrifying. The gossipy tone also becomes a suitable instrument to depict alternate histories that are decidedly outside the standardised allegedly impersonal, normative historical voice. In describing the relationship between Miss Trills and Mrs Brookhants (whose love for each other, despite being obvious, gets invisibilised by the homophobic gaze), Danforth says, 'In the language of the day, Mrs Brookhants was a young widow and Miss Trills was her devoted companion. Her *very, very* dear friend. Her confidante' (111). The narrator then adds a mischievous footnote to this saying, '*But, like, with benefits' (111). On one hand it satirises the invisibilising tendencies of heteronormative culture, but on the other hand the same carefree tone is soon punctured with the horrific incidents of the supernatural that engulf the lives of the same characters. The invisibilisation then becomes both comedic and horrific and becomes a potent device of political commentary. This also is reminiscent of what McDonald calls 'functional comedy' in his reading of *Catch 22*:

> The comic form and technique of the book, then, are functional, designed to make us laugh and then… "look back in horror" at what at the time seemed funny but which was, all along, hideously destructive (1973: 18).

Danforth's narration plays the dual functionality where both horror and humour are strategically used to deliver a specific sentiment at a given time only to make the readers 'look back' and rethink the nature of the atmosphere thus created.

The Absurd and Terrifying in Queerphobia

The novel constructs numerous scenarios that elicit a perplexing range of emotional responses that leave the readers oscillating between sadness, terror, and amusement. This is positioned as a strategy to portray the coexistence of the absurd and the terrifying in systemic prejudice and inequality. One of the ways it is exemplified in the novel is through the characters of Harper and Alex[4]. Both are brought up by their grandparents, and eventually, when their respective grandparents find out about them being gay, they are shunned and eventually disowned. Following the death of her grandfather, Alex would remark in a wry manner that the best gift her grandfather could give her was 'being dead'. The alienation faced at the hands of their families becomes a source of consistent dry wit and sarcasm in their characters. They would also hold on to this immense hurt and gradually become susceptible to dark supernatural forces, which would be symbolic of the grief that they carry. Alex and Harper, therefore, would be embodiments of dark humorous dismissal as well as internalised hatred and fear that arise out of being the victims of sustained discrimination. The same confusing admixture of emotions is also occasionally portrayed through the usage of a more blatant or slapstick brand of comic comebacks. For example, while describing Harper and her friend Eric's encounter with a homophobic classmate, Amber, the narrator remarks:

> A girl named Amber Blakenship had, to the great amusement of her friends, called Harper a *man-dyke*. Harper responded simply enough with "That's an oxymoron". And that might have been that, but Eric then turned to the girl and offered this: "See, Amber, you're such a fucking moron that even your insults fall under that category" (101).

This oscillation between rage, grief and comic relief is an indication of what Berenstein calls horror as an especially queer genre where simultaneity of difference plays a crucial role as horror 'invites spectators to play out, temporarily and differently, roles and responses that sometimes contrast with those they adopt or are asked to adopt on a day-to-day basis, offering a simultaneity of multiple identifications and desires as well as interplay between difference and similarity' (1996: 58). Similarly, the incongruity theory ascribed to humour suggests:

> The basic idea behind the incongruity theory of humour is that an essential ingredient of comic amusement is the juxtaposition of incongruous or contrasting objects, events, categories, propositions, maxims, properties, and so on (Caroll 1999: 153).

It is such unexpected simultaneity of seemingly contrasting elements that become proficient in highlighting the absurd and the terrifying that also brings together horror and comedy as political genres of efficacious destabilisation of norms and critiquing inequalities. In this regard Caroll remarks:

> '…the recognition that horror is intimately and essentially bound up with the violation, problematization, and transgression of our categories, norms, and concepts puts us in a particularly strategic position from which to explore the relation of horror to humour,

> because humour-or at least one very pervasive form of humour-is also necessarily linked to the prob- lemmatization, violation, and transgression of standing categories, norms, and concepts' (152).

The Carnivalesque as Form and Content

The novel's alignment with the notion of Bakhtin's carnivalesque (1965) is deployed in a unique fashion where the carnival is both implemented as a consistent theme in the structure of the novel and also placed as an actual event. The carnivalesque nature of the profusion of queer voices existing and also retelling queer histories indicates the Bakhtinian concept of a celebratory universe where the (hetero) normative is upended. Moreover, when it comes to the coexistence of queerness and horror, Benshoff suggests that a horror spectatorship would be more likely to be willing to welcome queer reading strategies, as queer relatability thrives on identification with the marginalised (Benshoff, Griffin 2004: 98). However, such is only true for the early 20th century timeline of the novel where the Brookhants girls celebrate the subversion of social norms only temporarily where the Plain Bad Heroines club become their carnivalesque space. In the 21st century timeline, queerness is portrayed as being relatively normative and accepted, and here the carnivalesque is reinstated when the characters involve themselves in the filming of the movie involving the Plain Bad Heroines club. Therefore, in the structure of the novel itself, the carnivalesque undergoes a variety of literary subjections. More interestingly, however, the carnival becomes a more direct literary metaphor as it is depicted as an event within the narrative. It takes centre stage in a specific scene featuring Alex at a late nineteenth-century literary fair. Alex's comical isolation from her girlfriend, Libbie, due to the meddling of mean friends gradually morphs into a terrifying incident. As Alex wanders through the fair in search of Libbie, she encounters a bizarre woman selling Russian dolls. The woman is initially friendly, but she, along with her dolls, slowly morphs into monstrous entities, while Alex remains utterly perplexed, disoriented and horrified. The isolation Alex faces within the carnival, which until some moments ago was also the only place Libbie and she could openly celebrate and express their desire, becomes a realm of absolute chaos and impending doom. The temporariness of the carnival as a space therefore achieves a dual layer where not only is it a space for temporary celebration, but within the same time frame it gets punctured to represent horror. This symbolises the unfortunate duality of queer existences, where desires have to go through simultaneous masking as well as unwanted exposure and disruptions for survival. The carnival becomes metaphorical of Alex's life, where she would get stolen moments of pleasure with Libbie only for them to be comically shattered and her identity to be perceived in the domain of absurdity and terror. Alex simultaneously becomes the monster, signified by her societal isolation (and isolation in the carnival), and also encounters the monster of the woman selling Russian dolls, which in turn is the monster of heteronormativity.

Conclusion

Emily Danforth creates a carnivalesque narrative that celebrates queerness through the complex horror, wit and absurd. This essay was an attempt to understand

how the narrative elements intertwine with each other to subvert norms, celebrate marginalised identities and provide social and political critique. The initial discussions centred around how what the novel is trying to do can be aligned with several traditions of horror and comedy narratives and subsequently be instrumental in challenging common perceptions regarding the effects of certain genres by foregrounding tendencies which have been part of alternate histories of peripheral voices in both literature and cinema. The analysis of how the novel gives place to different dualities and breaks binaries, like in the presence of the dual timelines, revealed how 'carnivalesque', in this aspect, functions as a formal as well as thematic device. The novel places queer experiences in liminal spaces that provides temporary moments of subversion and empowerment but operate under the looming threat of erasure and tragedy. The centrality of Mary MacLane's diary continues this trend of fraught duality where the carnivalesque joy of queer love is both validated through its ideals and also tragically suspended because of its doomed and haunted afterlife. The exploration of the interesting coexistence of horror and comedic elements in the narrative was to comment on the efficacy of the genre of horror-comedy as an important tool for queer assertion. Finally, examining the narrative interventions highlighted the playful yet intentional use of fourth-wall-breaking and meta-narratives. These showcased how the novel continually invites the readers to engage with its critique of invisibilised histories of systemic inequalities in a polyphonic and self-reflexive atmosphere.

These analyses raise some questions for future enquiries. If the carnivalesque and its various literary and aesthetic effects are indeed suitable and sometimes inevitable for works of queer assertion, how might they extend to questions of assertions for other marginalised identities? Will that in turn reshape our understanding of the theme in itself? In recent examples of horror-comedy, do we see a continuation of this tradition of breaking binaries and reshaping genre expectations? And most importantly, when present scholarship talks about 'queering' our reading, does it pertain to cases of reading-between-the-lines or formulating alternate histories, or, like Danforth's novels, does one place queer assertions in extant traditions that both highlight the horrific as well as the comical in the silencing and reclamation of queer voices?

Endnotes

1. *The Story Of Mary MacLane* was banned shortly after its publication, and the fictional presentation of the book within Danforth's book utilises this anecdote as a plot point to highlight the subversive and polemical potential of the book as an important motif in the narrative.
2. Mary MacLane's diary is not explicitly known for any queer undertones; however, the importance it attains in the novel is how it inspired young women to challenge social norms. Additionally, a lot of initial examples of what can be deemed as works dealing with homosexuality in a pronounced manner are known for facing censorship. Hence,

MacLane's ideas are shown to render a spectral presence throughout the novel and have affirmative capacities for queer voices, which can be understood as the author deliberately placing the narrative in the long history of censorship and queerness.

3. Danforth's choice of character names often seems symbolic, as they seem to be based on significant characters in horror literature: the name Eleanor over here can be a reference to Shirley Jackson's Eleanor Vance from *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), which is an important narrative strategy to place the story as a part of the horror legacy, which is also a consistent trope throughout the novel.
4. In the novel, Alex is a character in the early 20th century and Harper is from the 21st century and is an actor who is supposed to play the role of Alex in the movie about the Plain Bad Heroines. Consequently, a lot of their fates and identities are depicted as mirroring each other.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1965. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. USA: First Midland Book.

Benshoff, Harry, and Sean Griffin. 2004. *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. New York and London: Routledge.

Berenstein, Rhona. 1996. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bloch, Robert. 1985. "Interview with Robert Bloch." In *Faces of Fear*, edited by Douglas Winter, 22. New York: Berkley Books.

Bride of Frankenstein. 1935. Directed by Bill Condon.

Carroll, N. 1999. 'Horror and Humour', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57(2): 145–160.

Danforth, Emily. 2020. *Plain Bad Heroines*. London: The Borough Press.

Dracula's Daughter. 1936. Directed by Lambert Hillyer.

Gordon, Stuart. 1992. "Interview with Stuart Gordon." In *Dark Visions*, edited by Stanley Wiator, New York: Avon, 84.

Hendrix, Grady. 2014. *Horrorstor*. Quirk Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1925. *The Trial*. English Translation by Idris Parry, 2015. Penguin Modern House.

King, Claire Sisco. 2010. 'Un-Queering Horror: Hellbent and the Policing of the "Gay Slasher"', *Western Journal of Communication*, 74(3): 249–68.

Lambert, Makenna N. 2023. 'Queer Representation in the Horror Genre: An Analysis of Queer Stereotypes'. Unpublished Honors dissertation, Eastern Kentucky University.

McDonald, W. R. 1973. 'Look Back in Horror: The Functional Comedy of *Catch-22*.' *CEA Critic*, 35(2): 18–21.

Rupali, Rupali. 2023. 'The Complexities and Necessities of Queer Humour.' *PlainSpeak*. May. https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/author/rupal-rupali/

The Rocky Horror Picture Show. 1975. Directed by Jim Sharman.

Young Frankenstein. 1974. Directed by Mel Brooks.

Andaaz Apna Apna: Dolly Alderton, John Kennedy Toole and the Misogynist Joke

Ishita Gautam

Abstract

"...life is neither comedy, nor tragedy all the way through; it's tragicomic," says artist Krishen Khanna in his painting exhibition The Bandwallahs. This paper attempts to look at the tragic potential of comedy in text and film by analyzing Dolly Alderton's autobiography *Everything I Know about Love* (2018), John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* and the Hindi cult comedy film *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994). The paper looks at how the tragic elements in life give way to humour, how laughter is evoked at somebody's misery and problematizes the 'object' position of a joke: how the subject position of the person at whose expense a joke is cracked goes on to decide whether the joke may be read as racist, sexist, anti-caste or plain misogynistic. It thus looks at how complex an individual's 'subjectivities' might be and how enmeshed these are in intersectional (Crenshaw) matrices of class, caste and gender and how being sensitive to these can engender better jokes. The mental health concerns that jokes garb cannot be understated; John Kennedy Toole died by suicide years before his novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published and posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Jokes are often reflective of the societal pressures of the age in which they are conceived and this paper attempts to dive deep into their sociological origins. Ignatius Reilly, the protagonist of Dunces "swivels the random thoughts of his demented mind" even as he muses on his erratic employment, on what is on TV and on the cultural artifacts of his age. Academic Katie Kadue looks at "rape jokes" in 17th century poetry and how these underlie the unquestioning prevalence of misogyny and its omnipresence. The paper also attempts to read Rajkumar Santoshi's popular film *Andaz Apna Apna* in the light of Kadue's research on misogyny and argues that the gendered nature of jokes is not lost even in translation as a joke is delivered with comic timing on the screen, transforms and acquires new sociological contexts as it is consumed by the masses in a cinema hall.

Keywords: Tragedy, comedy, John Kennedy Toole, Dolly Alderton, *Andaaz Apna Apna,* comic novels

'Life is neither comedy, nor tragedy all the way through; it's tragicomic,' says artist Krishen Khanna in his painting exhibition The Bandwallahs. This paper attempts

to look at the tragic potential of comedy in text and film by analysing Dolly Alderton's novels and her autobiography *Everything I Know about Love* (2018), John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) and Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout* (2015). The paper looks at how the tragic elements in life give way to humour, how laughter is evoked at somebody's misery and problematises the 'object' position of a joke: how the subject position of the person at whose expense a joke is cracked goes on to decide whether the joke may be read as racist, sexist, anti-caste or plain misogynistic. It thus looks at how complex an individual's 'subjectivities' might be and how enmeshed these are in intersectional (Crenshaw) matrices of class, caste and gender and how being sensitive to these can engender better jokes.

The mental health concerns that jokes garb cannot be understated; John Kennedy Toole died by suicide years before his novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published in 1980 and posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Jokes are often reflective of the societal pressures of the age in which they are conceived, and this paper attempts to dive deep into their sociological origins. Ignatius Reilly, the protagonist of *Dunces,* 'swivels the random thoughts of his demented mind' even as he muses on his erratic employment, on what is on TV and on the cultural artefacts of his age.

Academic Katie Kadue looks at 'rape jokes' in 17th-century poetry and how these underlie the unquestioning prevalence of misogyny and its omnipresence. The present paper attempts to create a compendium of contemporary tragicomic works and reads popular comic media in the light of Kadue's research on misogyny, arguing that the gendered nature of jokes is not lost even in translation. As a joke is delivered with comic timing on the screen, it transforms and acquires new sociological contexts as it is consumed by the masses in a visual medium.

How do jokes come about? What are their sociological origins? 'The evolutionary origins of laughter are rooted more in survival than in enjoyment,' says Jordan Raine in a paper of the same name. Making a joke or sharing a joke is an inherently social phenomenon where laughter is poked at a shared social misery, at a social evil demanding collective action or at the inevitability of the biting inequities in the world. In his novel *The Sellout* (2015), Paul Beatty jokes eloquently about racism, about how 'The Lost City of Male White Privilege' is beyond redemption. The narrator is a 'sell-out' who attempts to reinstate slavery after his hometown Dickens is wiped off the map (presumably for attracting shame). Interlaced with its satire on race, the novel also lacerates its sexual dimension. Being Black or a racial 'other' is conflated with a kind of emasculation, of having the reins but being incapable of handling them.

> 'I can think of a more despicable word than 'nigger'…'
>
> 'Like what?'
>
> 'Like any other word that ends in –ess: Negress. Jewess. Poetess. Actress. Adultress. Factchecktress. I'd rather be called 'nigger' than 'giantess' any day of the week.' (Beatty 2015: 98)

In a world where you can be shot down for being non-white, where racial stereotyping is a never-ending tunnel, being non-white and a woman is a doubly disadvantaged subject position. Women are the easiest target of jokes, with wife and mother jokes being too many to count. Forwarded on messaging apps and spiced with (one's) ethnic privileges, and after several casteist convulsions, these jokes seem to be having their day; they seem to circulate endlessly in chatboxes and in one's circles and are incredibly difficult to call out. Do you call out the friendly bloke at the neighbouring restaurant joking about his wife's friend being 'too feminist'? Do you call out an elderly man who happens to find your sloppy dressing funny? Where does one draw the line between the ignore-all 'live and let live philosophy' of life and calling out triumphant bullshit (Eliot) that demeans women and minorities?

Most jokes are directed at women and minorities. It, at times, takes a university degree to recognise most teenage slurs ('motherfucker', 'sisterfucker', et al.) as insults to women, to understand where they come from and why they perpetuate. Incest is still the most reviled thing socially, and it takes some soul-searching to see that the disgust for incest stems from patriarchal control and a revulsion for the female body rather than from biological necessity. In John Webster's 17th-century revenge drama, *The Duchess of Malfi*, there is widespread academic contention that the Duchess' brother Ferdinand harbours incestuous feelings for her; the Duchess' brothers eventually kill her in order to prevent her from marrying again, in order to stall her marriage to her steward Antonio, a social inferior. Language is sociologically constructed, and the misogynist joke is an example of the violence that is easily sublimated (or even concealed) within language. Where does misogyny originate?

Etymologically, the term 'misogyny' was coined in the middle of the 17th century, fusing the Greek 'misos' (hatred) and 'gunç' (woman) (Oxford English Dictionary), but the systemic hatred of women precedes this by several centuries. J.W. Roberts argues that older than tragedy and comedy was a misogynistic tradition in Greek literature, reaching as far back as Greek poet Hesiod.

According to *Wikipedia*'s summary of Nickolas Pappas' *Routledge Guidebook to Plato and the Republic* (2013), he describes the 'problem of misogyny' and states:

> In the Apology, Socrates calls those who plead for their lives in court 'no better than women' (35b).
>
> The Timaeus warns men that if they live immorally they will be reincarnated as women (42b-c). The Republic contains a number of comments in the same spirit (387e, 395d-e, 398e), evidence of nothing so much as of contempt toward women. Even Socrates' words for his bold new proposal about marriage... suggest that the women are to be 'held in common' by men. He never says that the men might be held in common by the women... We also have to acknowledge Socrates' insistence that men surpass women at any task that both sexes attempt (455c, 456a), and his remark in Book 8 that one sign of democracy's moral failure is the sexual equality it promotes. (563b) (Wikipedia)

> Cicero says that misogyny is caused by gynophobia, a fear of women.
>
> It is the same with other diseases; as the desire of glory, a passion for women, to which the Greeks give the name of philogyneia: and thus all other diseases and sicknesses are generated. But those feelings which are the contrary of these are supposed to have fear for their foundation, as a hatred of women, such as is displayed in the Woman-hater of Atilius; or the hatred of the whole human species, as Timon is reported to have done, whom they call the Misanthrope. Of the same kind is inhospitality. And all these diseases proceed from a certain dread of such things as they hate and avoid. (Cicero 113)
>
> Fear lies at the root of misogyny, the fear of being othered. One fears what one doesn't understand and ridicules what one fears. Men fearing women's bodies, their autonomy and their contributions at home and in the workplace seem to be making one too many jokes; 'Be nice to your wife; the restaurant is closed today,' goes one. 'The funny thing about misogyny is it's structured like a joke,' writes literary scholar Katie Kadue in her article of the same name. Woman becomes a *container* for man; language engenders gender subordination.
>
> Misogynist jokes seem frozen in time and seldom age well. 'But still I see the tenor of Man's woe/ Holds on the same from Woman to begin,' Adam says in *Paradise Lost*. Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) seems to have reduced his girlfriend Myrna's involvement in the sexual liberation movement to a joke, even as he relentlessly writes an invective against his age. In a picaresque novel critiquing the capitalist, consumerist power structures of the 1960s, women seem to be located at the lowest level; rape and the act of raping are discussed in frivolous terms an appalling number of times. 'Ignatius is not an anachronism, but a prediction, a godfather of the Internet troll,' muses Tom Bissell in an article about the uneasy afterlife of the novel.
>
> Misogynist jokes see women as a joke themselves, a 'woe' to man; or construe them as humourless, as lacking the ability to take a joke on themselves; or enclose women within socially predetermined roles and mock their inability to escape. 'How many feminists does it take to screw a lightbulb,' goes a classic.

How are women taking these jokes, and what kind of jokes are they cracking? Dolly Alderton, in her novels *Ghosts* (2020) and *Good Material* (2023), devises comedy with the social rituals of modern-day courtship and anxieties about ageing. She makes biting observations about the way we live and love now and offers advice and suggestions to people as they navigate the vagaries of their lives. Her novels are suffused with self-deprecating humour and poke fun at the shenanigans of adult life in the 21st century. In *Ghosts*, the protagonist Nina is ghosted by a charming guy she meets online; she spends a large part of the novel attending hen-dos/ bridal parties of her friends and describes the flakiness of our times in hilarious terms. The caprices of online dating and the world of social media become good material for Dolly's jokes as she draws on years of experience as a newspaper columnist and an 'agony aunt'. She has answered years of readers' queries about their love lives, careers and so forth and recycles them into jokes. What jars is that women comedians and comic writers seem to be using a disproportionate amount of self-deprecating humour, often joking about their bodies and their insecurities

about how they are perceived by the male gaze; it often defeats the liberation purpose and causes stereotypes to perpetuate. Comedians like Amy Schumer seem to be cracking questionably ethnicist jokes that lose their punches when translated to a postcolonial context.

One is reminded of Judith Butler's idea of *gender performativity*, how gender is something 'performed' and how women are conditioned to perform a role that makes them look desirable to a socially sanctioned other. In Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout*, Hominy says,

> I'm a slave. That's who I am. It's the role I was born to play. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. But being black ain't method acting. Lee Strasburg could teach you how to be a tree, but he couldn't teach you how to be a nigger. This is the ultimate nexus between craft and purpose, and we won't be discussing this again. I'm your nigger for life, and that's it. (Beatty 2015: 77)

The dark underbelly of comedy cannot be underestimated; humour often derives from misery, from tragedy if you will. Jokes often garb mental health concerns, especially jokes by men who are socially conditioned to man up and bottle their emotions. In Alderton's novel *Good Material*, the protagonist Andy is a stand-up comedian trying hard to get his comedy career on track. He is heartbroken and obsessed with his ex-girlfriend Jen; even as he scours the world for good material to deliver on stage, the comedy arises from his inability to move past Jen and how he constantly garbs everything he feels with incongruous jokes that seem a travesty to the situation as it stands. Andy believes Jen broke up with him because he is financially unstable or because of her therapist; he seems to lack self-awareness (for the most part), and his lampooning seems laboured, even unnecessary. The book is narrated from the male point of view. Andy is not written by a man and has more insight than he gives himself credit for.

> And I want to say: We can just talk about being sad if you like. You don't have to make the sad thing funny for me. There will be no conversational tokens system in place here. Because I'm starting to think that talking about the sadness might be the same thing as processing the sadness. And if we're not doing that, then we only have our thoughts for company, and our thoughts are unreliable and they invent things and they lie to us and give bad advice. Not talking about the sadness is what leads us into The Madness.
>
> But I don't know how to say any of this without sounding like an advert for online therapy, and I don't want to embarrass myself or him (you) with my emotional illiteracy. (Alderton 2023: 217)

Alderton says, 'Men are not socialised to process the difficult emotions arising from heartbreak the way women are.' In *Good Material,* as in life, their first response to fear or to sadness is to distract themselves, to look for a solution and see if it can be upcycled as a joke to be told at the bar, if it is material warranting a drinking spree. This emotional repression harms and seldom helps. The propensity to bottle difficult feelings can give way to mental health concerns.

Jokes, thus, may also address underlying social concerns and the sociological evils that go unnoticed. The comic caper that *Dunces* is, it is also an attempt by the author to sensitise one to the state of the job market in the 1960s, its capitalist agenda that looked down upon art as non-utilitarian. Ignatius is forever writing an invective against his generation and journaling his days as a worker. 'Apparently, I lack some particular perversion which today's employer is seeking,' Ignatius says of his erratic employment. The job market (and the world) not being a level-playing field is also a recurrent theme in Rajkumar Santoshi's cult comedy film *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994). Amar (played by Aamir Khan) and Prem (Salman Khan) are two wastrels from 'middle-class' families who go to the city in search of a better life and launch a comedy of errors in trying to win over a millionaire's daughter. Comedy is often a burlesque where one or the other inappropriate/untoward/unseemly situation(s) is exaggerated for comic effect, but jokes are also interesting in their erasures, in the realities they gloss over, and in the violence they conceal. The casual sexism in *Andaz Apna Apna* and other comedies of the 1990s is hard to ignore.

Humour also often sublimates violence, and violence itself becomes humour in some instances; sample the slurred language of any teenager or the way teenage angst is humoured in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Humour can also become a vessel for anger and a site for protest; it is often a tool deployed to register protest against majoritarian states and to dissent against fascist/narcissistic ideologies. Poet Trivarna Hariharan says in an interview, 'Comedy is a great place to put your anger because it can hold it.' The lightness of comedy can hold the weight of anger. 'It is a great way of turning anger inside out; laughter, no one will believe, can be an expression of anger.'

Stand-up comic Vir Das cracks socially conscious jokes, most of which land on an unsuspecting audience, even as he courts trouble with the ruling party and other majoritarian actors who become detractors.

> If you bury a body in Mumbai, there will be laundry hanging on it the next day, 'cause death is no excuse for unemployment.
>
> We have always aspired towards pure-blooded rulers. It is not history, it is basic Harry Potter.

As far as jokes go, there is no limit to how much one can push the envelope. It does help to see them as social or sociological spoofs and not just self-conscious ones and to err on the side of caution while creating them; in an age of cancel culture, the boundaries seem to blur even more between what constitutes a defence and what a conscious offence. David Bowie says in *Hunky Dory* (1971)*:* 'Don't pick fights with the bullies or the cads/ 'Cause I'm not much cop at punching other people's dads.' This is probably how the sociological comic feels in a world that is funny in its repressions.

Works Cited

Alderton, Dolly. 2018. *Everything I Know about Love*. Penguin.

Alderton, Dolly. 2020. *Ghosts*. Penguin.
Alderton, Dolly. 2023. *Good Material*. Penguin.
Alderton, Dolly. '#PouredOver: Dolly Alderton on Good Material', *YouTube*, uploaded by Barnes & Noble, 1 February 2024, https://youtu.be/KghD9Lyas8I?si= FdRak Me4WadZz2gC.
Andaz Apna Apna. Directed by Santoshi, Rajkumar. 1994.
Beatty, Paul. 2015. *The Sellout*. Oneworld Publications.
Bissell, Tom. 'The Uneasy Afterlife of *A Confederacy of Dunces*'., *The New Yorker*, 5 January 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/the-uneasy-afterlife-of-a-confederacy-of-dunces (accessed on 22 May 2024).
Bowie, David. *Hunky Dory*. RCA Records, 1971.
Cicero. *Tusculan Disputations*. Book 4 (sometimes numbered Book 5 / 5.25–26 in translations), translated by J. E. King. In *Cicero On the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, Hackett, 1997.
Hariharan, Trivarna. 'Recommendations on Impatience with Vaani', *YouTube*, uploaded by Kitaabi Cabins, 7 July 2022, https://www.youtube.com/live/tyL-FP8Jvyc?si= MW4kuYUPejTC-Mdh.
Kadue, Katie. 'The Funny Thing About Misogyny', *Los Angeles Review of Books,* 25 September 2023, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-funny-thing-about-misogyny/ (accessed on 10 October 2023).
Khanna, Krishen. *The Bandwallahs,* October 2023, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi.
'Misogyny'. *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misogyny (accessed on 10 October 2023).
Schumer, Amy. 2016. *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo*, HarperCollinsPublishers.
Schumer, Amy. *Growing.* Netflix, 2019.
Toole, John Kennedy. 1980. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Louisiana State University Press.
Das, Vir. *Landing.* Netflix, 2022.
Webster, John. 2017. *The Duchess of Malfi*. Worldview Publications.

Goan Rhapsody: An Analysis of Carnival, Wit and Humour in Select Films Set in Goa

Maziah Shaaz

Abstract

Cinema as a visual art has a lasting impact and lucrative appeal to the masses. The cinematic experience is a cumulative effect of the internal elements and the locale where a movie is set and shot. It is crucial to the process of filmmaking. It is not merely a setting but an integral part of the storytelling, character development, historical context, visual aesthetics, cultural significance, and narrative symbolism. It adds authenticity to the vision of the director. Goa, a state in India stretching across the shoreline of the Arabian Sea, stands as a true testament to the spirit of carnivalesque. With its long and clear beaches, beautiful churches and vibrant nightlife, Goa becomes a safe retreat for people looking to escape from routine life. It has been a perfect setting for Indian filmmakers to capture the spirit of Goa's festive and free life and use it to foreground the narrative in the movie. Goa's multifaceted appeal, from its natural beauty to its cultural diversity and alternative lifestyle, continues to make it a sought-after location for filmmakers in India. They have often preferred the colourful and catchy ethos of Goan culture not just as a template to make a commercial success but also as an inextricable part of the narrative where it might accentuate the disparities between the established norms and a spirit of defiance. The concept of carnivalesque, as understood in literature, stems from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (trans. 1984) and 'parallels the flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted during a season of carnival'. The diverse social levels in the literary narrative mock the dominant authoritative rules to flout social sanctions. Regarding movies, several cinematic elements are combined to create a diverse microcosm within the main discourse that effectively counters the imposing dictates. Goan locale has proved to be one of the major modes of subversion in films to the effect that it becomes an integral part of the plot. This paper explores *Go Goa Gone*, *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* and *Finding Fanny* to analyse the spirit of carnival, wit and humour in these films set against the beautiful backdrop of Goa.

Keywords: diversity, humour, subversion, society, cinema

As a concept in literary studies, carnivalesque emerged in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic who revolutionised the ethics of criticism and philosophy of language. Carnivalization of literature refers to the reciprocation of the carnival elements of the world to literature, which can also be understood as the transposition of the literary elements into the carnivalesque world. A carnival, thus, is a representative trope where multiple independent voices exist that work cohesively against the orderly chaos that emerges as the result of strict conventions and regulations of the authorial forms and figures. It is also understood as the literary mode that flouts authority and temporarily invert social hierarchies by 'introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert the authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct' (Abrams & Harpham 2012: 8). Subversion, liberation, and turning the world upside down became key factors in the carnivalesque style, offering renewal and opening new possibilities by tearing down old forms. Free interaction between people from all social rungs, acceptance of eccentricity and quirkiness, coexistence of the two opposite variables, like the notion of good and evil, something which Bakhtin called 'carnivalesque mésalliances', and profanity are the four categories that unite carnivalesque elements in literature. Therefore, inhibitions are lowered in a carnivalesque world, and transgression is permitted. It draws on playfulness and mockery, using the body as the site of defiance and a pinch of laughter as aiding tools to embody the spirit of carnival amidst a world where order is purposefully enforced.

As a cultural text, cinema can be explored as a microcosmic world where the interplay of themes and characterisation brings out the nuanced narrative of a created social order within the ambit of the general social order. The ensemble cast, selective soundtrack and background scores, a conceivable plot, and the directorial vision add to the cinematic experience of creation. Cinematic language uses symbols and codes of the language system and includes visual imagery and metaphors to accentuate the plotline and create a contrasting effect. It serves as the dynamic backdrop that enhances the storyline ('Importance of Choosing the Right Film Location'). More importantly, the location is specific to the director's vision and certainly plays an essential role in the movie's progress. Thus, it must be chosen carefully by the director, as it has the potential to add layers of meaning to the story.

Goa adorns the western coastline of India, stretching along the shores of the Arabian Sea, and stands as a true testament to the fusion of customs, traditions, cuisines, attire, history, and heritage, while simultaneously offering a glimpse into the modern Western world. It represents a breathtaking celebration of life, with its picturesque scenic beauty, vibrant nightlife and abeautiful connection to the sea, which serves as a metaphor for eternity, 'Goa is undoubtedly one of India's favourite travel destinations. Home to picturesque places, pristine beaches, magnificent cruises, historic locations, casinos, and churches' (Punjabi). Due to its rich cultural

heritage, it is one of the most sought-after tourist locations in the country. The Goan Carnival, an annual festival held sometime in the middle of February and March, is one of the most anticipated events in India. Colourful ceremonies, lively processions, foot-tapping music, and exotic dance performances are some of the main elements of this carnival that draw travellers from all over the world. Due to the ease and efforts offered by the state government, Goa has been one of the most famous film locations in the country. As the Chief Minister of the State observed, 'Goa is a filmmaker's paradise as it offers a mix of scenic, historic and modern settings' (*Navhind Times* 2023).

Several Indian films owe their backdrop to the visually scenic, and sometimes darkly sensuous, locations of Goa. But with representation comes the sad reality of misrepresentation. If Goa is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country, it is also one of the most critically stereotyped places in India. Many films, like the classic *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) by Farhan Akhtar—a standing metaphor and a running joke amongst a group of friends who yearn for a trip like that—symbolise the feeling of freedom, rejuvenation and rebounding. At the same time, a movie like *Dum Maaro Dum* (2011) by Rohan Sippy aims to bring out the dark side of a society that differs in following rules from other societies. In both these films, Goa as a film location plays a significant role. Locals find the stereotyping of the place exaggerated and exceedingly biased:

> Bollywood has a certain mindset about Goa. Goa is a happening place no doubt about that, but we need to focus on the real treasures of Goa like food and the ambiance one may experience on a visit. Goa has a rich cultural heritage and boasts about its scenic beauty. The thing that makes Goa unique is its scenic beauty. (Shetty)

Some films, like *Dear Zindagi* (2016), *Finding Fanny* (2014), *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* (2007), and the laughter-riot *Golmaal* Series, break the stereotypical mould that mistakenly defines the place as the hub of corrupt and immoral practices. These films do not vilify the liberating and evolved vibe of Goan culture. Shyam Benegal's *Trikal* (1985) is a cinematic wonder that captures in sepia tones the spirit of domestic Goan life in the small village of Luthari. It paints a poignant picture of Goa during the pre-liberation years when the city was still a Portuguese colony. Told through flashback narration, it explores the pathos and situational irony experienced by the Suarez family after the man of the house dies. Another delightful rom-com, *Shaukeen* (1982) by Basu Chatterjee, chronicles the witty and charming escapade of three sixty-year-old veterans, whose lust for life and wish to recreate and relive the stamina of youth takes them to Goa. The beautiful Goan sea and beaches stand as a metaphor for the desires of the three sexagenarians seeking the attention of a lovely, young and vivacious Goan girl. It is fascinating to observe the changing cinematic takes and metaphorical understandings of Goa through its representation in films. For movies like *Shaukeen* and *Trikal*, it serves as merely a humble background, whereas the bigger breakthrough came with the release of *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), which redefined the representational lens. The trajectory

gradually shifted to Goa, becoming young India's favourite and affordable honeymooners' paradise, as in *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* (2007). Later, with films like *Go Goa Gone* (2013), it became more about the nightlife and rave parties, thereby resonating with the demands of the millennials. The pastel palette of films like *Finding Fanny* (2014) and *Dear Zindagi* (2016) brought back the undermined and underrepresented peaceful side of the place.

Despite being misrepresented in the media as India's hedonist retreat, Goa has come to be associated with a sense of liberation and comfortable ease for many who wish to go beyond the humdrum of regular life. Especially in a traditional society like that of India, Goa is often the most sought-after location for newly married couples on their honeymoon because of its easy-going vibe, colourful atmosphere, and, most importantly, the perceived idea of freedom. Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* (2007), set in Goa, is about honeymooners trying to find themselves by the sun and sea. Told by an unnamed narrator, the story follows an assortment of newlyweds who go on a package honeymoon from Mumbai to Goa, courtesy of the eponymous tour company, whose bus bears the image of a Goan beach engraved on the logo of the company name. This movie is set in the drama-comedy genre, but it does not give out guffaws; instead, it makes the audience smile at the foibles of people who have just entered matrimony. The six couples on their honeymoon are a diverse group comprising people of different ages and genders; therefore, it looks like a mini carnival within the Goan landscape. 'Mr. and Mrs. 55', as introduced by Oscar Fernandes (Boman Irani) and played by Boman Irani and Shabana Azmi, is a couple united by unfortunate events, seeking love at lost places. The perfect Aspi and Zara (Minisha Lamba and Abhay Deol) make everyone believe in soulmates and gush over their impeccable love story. Bunty (Vikram Chatwal), an NRI and a closeted gay man, settles for an online match in Madhu (Sandhya Mridul) to avoid getting married to the daughter of his parents' family friends. On the other hand, Madhu is a woman dejected in love and finds Bunty to be an easy-going husband, unaware of his gender preferences. Partho and Milly (K.K. Menon and Raima Sen) are college-time sweethearts turned married couple, a quintessential case of opposites attracting, but are chained down by familial pressures of outsmarting each other. Pinky and Vicky (Ameesha Patel and Karan Khanna) hail from Delhi, where Pinky is the dreamy Delhi girl and sees her introverted husband as her prince charming. Hitesh and Shilpa (Ranveer Shorey and Dia Mirza) are another recently married couple who join the group on this trip, whose honeymoon journey ends before beginning, as Shilpa runs away with her lover Jignesh (Arjun Rampal) from before the marriage.

The introductory scene evokes a soft corner for poor Shilpa, who is crying inconsolably when her parents drop her off for her honeymoon, assuming she is apprehensive in the new marriage and feels strongly for Hitesh when he consoles her father, '*Chinta nahi karo Mangesh bhai, haste hue wapas aayegi*' (Don't worry father, I'll keep her happy) (*Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* 01:57:02–01:56:59), only to realise that she is utterly miserable in this forced marriage and is

in love with someone else. The gentle hilarity and dumb innocence of Pinky's character are highlighted throughout the film through her obsessive love for Vicky. A quintessential image of a desi Barbie girl who is perpetually dressed in bubble-gum pink clothes, Pinky calls her husband a lollipop, much to the embarrassment of her husband. Partho Sen is a strict and traditional Bengali man whose interest gets piqued every time something unusual happens, like when the *angrez* tells the story of how she was saved from thugs by someone from the sky or when Shilpa runs away with Hitesh; he, with all the wisdom of a know-it-all, tells him, '*Hitesh bhai, hota hai, hota hai*' to a visibly disturbed Hitesh who kept laughing and saying '*bhaag gayi, meri biwi bhaag gayi*' (01:27:23–01:27:01). The flashback to Partho and Milly's life is surprisingly hilarious and described as 'Mahabharat', or an eternal battle of sexes in which they are also embroiled and are seen in a wrestling ring with their mothers egging them on for domination and supremacy over each other. The narrative style is coloured by over-the-scene narration and sepia-coloured flashback scenes explaining every character's backstory. The superhero couple has a funny start to their love life. Aspi and Zara were strange kids whom other children bullied, but as fate wished and comets collided, the crooked-toothed young girl and sleek-haired good boy were destined to be together forever. Their story entails elements of magic that work as the canvas of light-hearted humour for the more serious parts of the story. Oscar's thoughtful attempt at impressing Naheed with an Urdu couplet is adorably mushy. It leaves you smiling when Naheed, awestruck, asks for a repeat performance, saying, '*Muqarrar*', and Oscar confidently replies, '*Muqarrar nahi*, Ghalib' (01:41:51–01:41:17). The movie takes one through the beautiful Dona Paula beach, Aguada Fort, a famous church, Dolphin Beach and the scenic ferry ride. It is against these gorgeous Goan landscapes that one finds pathos and comic relief related to the characters' lives. The voice-over takes a funny turn even in the dramatic scene where Shilpa's father sends goons, more like 'supari without paan', to kill his daughter and her lover. For the shy and quiet Vicky, this honeymoon to Goa becomes life-altering when he meets Bunty for the first time. The realisation of being bisexual comes as a wave of shock, confusion, dilemma and fear. At the same time, the funniest transformation is also seen in Partho's character when some young roofies let him drink a drugged cold drink. He breaks into one of the craziest dances and promises his wife her dream of living a life separate from their parents. Shilpa's impatient and honest cry for help, '*God, please is ek baar meri madad kar do, iske baad zindagi me aapse kabhi kuch nahi mangungi*' (God, please help me this one time; I swear I'll never ask for anything again) (01:30:06–01:30:02) in the face of adversity stirs up empathy for her the first time, but in her innocence appeal to God she manages to swing the situation in her favour thrice, and that leaves one smiling at the ingenuity of the director to give faith a witty touch. The movie offers a new form of quirkiness in the portrayal of the characters. Each one of them carries the load of life lightly. Kagti's carnival is peppy and bumpy, with a 'few leaden emotional scenes, but are crowded out by the non-stop fun and games' (Chopra 2022). The movie is a drama steering towards humour

and heartbreak and carries a lightness to this proceeding. Goa is chosen to highlight the inversion of cliches and the transformative and subversive nature of modern-day marriages. It is meant not only for icebreaking but also symbolising the revelations each character endures. Naheed and Oscar get a moving moment when they are asked how they got together, and they string up some wild talk about being in planes flying near one another and floating down in a parachute when, in reality, they have been brought together by a tragic series of events. The scene is played for a laugh, but there is also romance in the air, thanks to the soaring French music and the lapping water of the sea against the beach in the background (Ranjan 2014).

Go Goa Gone (2013), an Indian movie credited for being the first zombie movie, or 'ZomCom', of the Hindi cinema, starring Saif Ali Khan, Kunal Khemu, Vir Das, Anand Tiwari, and Puja Gupta as the main leads. The movie is about three friends and how their lives change after they plan a trip to Goa. Although one-third of the movie is shot in Mauritius, the name of the coastal state in the film's title and plot stands significant. The city has been used as a character, integral to the storyline. Luv (Das), a heartsick young 'corporate slave' who is 'dumped by' his girlfriend and vows to leave the life of boredom and live on the wilder side of the spectrum, and Hardik (Khemu), who is a pothead and a typical Casanova who also gets fired from his job due to his prowling decide to take a trip to Goa along with their uptight and unromantic friend Bunny (Tiwari). The idea of going on a trip to Goa in a bright red car against the lush green background prepares the readers for the fun that awaits. But their worlds turn upside down when Luna (Puja)'s invitation to a rave party goes awry. The characters end up getting caught in a zombie apocalypse, and the story tackles their antics in the situation.

The film's opening scene, where the characters are introduced to living in the urban landscape, barely managing their survival, is graphically descriptive. The background *song* '*Khoon Choos Le*' presents a montage of people in the city hustling and bustling on a Monday morning, offering a parallel world of urban zombies, drudging along to the corporate lifestyle. Sexual humour is a part of the character arc, as seen in the banter between the three friends. Sexual innuendos, especially jokes on the sexual parts and sexual acts, are aligned with the humour on the grotesqueness of the human body; for instance, the swimming pool where Hardik takes away Luv's swimming boxers, leaving his private parts exposed. Politically incorrect jokes abound in the movie. In one scene, Hardik is seen smoking in the office and with a long drag, he says:

> Life's simple pleasures. No smoking office, *me* smoke *karna*. *Mera na* life *me ek hi* goal *hai*. *Har* no-smoking *wali jagah pe ja ke* smoke-up *karna*. Imagine parliament *me* smoke-up *karna kaisa lagega*? *Hum log Bhartiye* Joint Party *banayenge*. (Life's simple pleasures. Smoking, in a no-smoking office. I have just one goal. To smoke up in every no-smoking area. Imagine! How would it feel to smoke up in the Parliament? We will form a Bhartiya Joint Party) (*Go Goa Gone* 00:07:25–00:07:40)

The movie builds its humour on sexist jokes and jokes about the female body, like using a squeezing breast toy as a stress buster and telling the female employee to

open the buttons of her shirt to distract the boss from their indiscretion. On the other hand, the humour lies in Luv's love-life situation, where he is left heartbroken by the girl who is double-dating him. This shows two sides of the same frenzied world. The change in Vir's character, Luv, reflects the decision to live with carefree abandon with 'Full party. Full booze. Full on high…and girls' (00:14:18–00:14:22), for which they zeroed in on Goa because stereotypically that's what the place offers.

The nightlife is legendary in Goa with beautiful sunsets and cocktails, live music and psytrance raves. Rave parties are not legal in India but are organised with profuse enthusiasm and thronged in great numbers. Rave parties are a modern interpretation of the medieval carnival:

> …contemporary rave scene through its precious scope as a carnival-like demonstration, where bodily suggestions in an unrestricted, non-official space are taken into account from the point of communal grotesque body. Within a rave, the dividing line between performer and audience is blurred, everyone participates. Rave constructs a utopian sphere, a second life for change and renewal through 'laughter' created by music and ecstasy. Rave serves as a temporary liberation from the official seriousness to 'bring down to earth' anything ineffable or authoritarian to the bodily material level that is ecstatic trance dancing in this context. (Burcu 2003)

The rave party becomes the perfect replica of the carnival where rules and social conventions are flouted. The plot twist comes from this chaotic scene of merry-making when people start consuming the red pills, sold for five thousand rupees each. The pill churns the wheels of frenzy and turns everyone into zombies. Using the 'Russian Mafia' as a trope of an external agency involved in abetting the rule-breaking is similar to Bakhtin's 'carnivalistic mésalliances', where Saif's character plays the good devil. The craze for the rave party is highlighted by their incessant insistence on the fact that this Russian Mafia organises it and it is supposedly an underground party. The lure of secrecy adds intrigue to the anticipatory fun. In the latter half, the suspicious red pill turns people into zombies, and the movie builds humour on the fear evoked by the disfigured grotesque bodies of the zombies. The scene where Luv, Hardik and Bunny guess at who they are is the most well-written scene of the film. It is witty, intelligent and a political tongue-in-cheek remark on the Russians. They count all possibilities of what those people could be, from vampires to witches to Catholic and non-Catholic ghosts and even Stalin, to whom Luv refers to as the 'God of Russians'. They dwell on the existence of zombies in India, '*Hum* zombies *ke bare me jante kya hain*? *Aur ye* India *me bhoot pret hote hain*, zombies *kab se hone lage*' (We have only ghosts and spirits in India. Where did zombies come from?) (00:36:02–00:36:11). Hardik instantly remarks, 'Globalisation', and blames the foreigners for bringing HIV and zombies to India. The zombies become metaphorical outcasts of society, as they are a part of the raving madness and fall outside the social boundaries of civilisation, which is represented by the characters who do not consume the red pill. The imagery in the grotesque bodies of the zombies highlights the element of profanation and eccentric behaviour central to the

carnivalesque style. Their hunger and rage symbolise retaliation against those who have excluded them from society. The concluding half hour of the movie escalates the laughter riot in the chase and run between zombies and humans, eventually causing the humans to win the day.

Finding Fanny (2014), a satirical road film directed by Homi Adajania starring Naseeruddin Shah as Ferdinand 'Ferdie' Pinto, Pankaj Kapoor as Don Pedrò Cleto Colaco, Dimple Kapadia as Mrs Rosalina 'Rosie' Eucharistica, Deepika Padukone as Angelina 'Angie' Eucharistica, and Arjun Kapoor as Savio Da Gama, is set in the little picturesque village of Pocolim in Goa. The comical tone of the movie is set at the very onset through the disclaimer that reads— 'None of the following characters actually exist. Apologies for any unforeseen similarities. Because parts of the story are true. Those are probably the stranger parts' (*Finding Fanny* 01:33:38–01:33:43)—and the acknowledgement note for Ranveer Singh, 'for a short-lived performance', literally. Singh's character, Gabo, dies on the day of his wedding by choking on his wedding cake after swallowing the plastic figurines of the couple, which were supposed to be made of sugar, but Gabo's mother, Rosie, saved money by ordering a cheap one and lost her son. Ferdie's character is introduced with jazzy background music in line with his Konkan Casanova image. The other main character of the story is the undelivered letter Ferdie receives 46 years later, which he had sent to his lady love, Fanny, pouring his heart out to her. It is funny and ironic that the postmaster's letter doesn't get delivered. Ferdie decides to go looking for his unrequited love. For that, he needs a car, and the only person in the village who owns one is the nutty painter Don Pedro (Pankaj Kapur). But the only person who can drive the car is the one who sold the car to Pedro — Angie's ex, Savio (Arjun Kapoor). Now, for Savio to drive the car, Angie must go. And for Don Pedro to let his car be used, his muse Rosie (Dimple Kapadia), the first lady of Pocolim and Angie's mother-in-law must come along. The five oddballs get into the vintage Dodge Plymouth and set out to find Fanny. The self-proclaimed international artist Don Pedro is a connoisseur of women's bodies. Once he lays his eyes on the voluptuous Rosie, he cannot stop lusting after her derriere. Savio is Angie's brooding childhood friend and secret lover who could not express his love, for he was too proud to do it, and later regrets missing the chance when he had the time. Rosie, on the other hand, is a socially busy village body who likes to keep everything under check and loves to look young. She comes with her pet cat Nereus, who 'provides the first of many indications that life is incredibly sweet, often silly, and endlessly entertaining, but also sometimes bitter' (Ramnath 2014), as she suffers from narcolepsy and often ends up sleeping in her milk bowl. Pocolim, as the setting of this movie, is a place where change is not the only constant. It is a small hidden village that no one can find; here, time is in a perpetual state of inertia, and things are not easy but manageable, as Angie declares. 'The idea of Pocolim as a beauty spot that can also be a scar doesn't figure in the conversation. If there is any sadness at being stuck in nowhere—an admittedly gorgeous—place, it is tucked away as safely as Angie's virtue' (Rai 2022). The colour, styling and scenic views of Goa allow us

to sit back and enjoy the hilarious ride. The five eccentric characters are flawed fools on a mission. They are the true reflection of the place. Ferdie is the hopeful romantic, the Romeo of the Romeos, as Pedro taunts him; Pedro himself is one of the vaguely unsavoury characters and is an undiscovered artist whose vision is unfolded in the grotesque picture he draws of his much reluctant muse, Rosie. Rosie 'is a desperate, fragile, funny, wise, and the most rounded person' (Ramnath 2014) in the movie. Angie is an angelic, breezy, small-village girl orphaned at a young age, exuding the spirit of Goa, left untarnished by the outside world, just like Pocolim. She married at 18, and that was the only time she encountered romance, the first and last wedding kiss. Despite working in Mumbai, Savio does not lose the village boy charm and seamlessly gels within the village life. The humour in the movie follows the long-lost tradition of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films, which have a hint of innocence and are not bawdy:

> On the surface, it appears as nothing more than absurd humour highlighting the eccentricities of five Goans caught in a time warp. But as the wrap unravels, Homi delivers the bitter uncertainties of life in the form of a sweet pill without letting us know what he is up to. Like a seasoned magician, he takes the carpet off our feet when you least expect it. (Kumar 2014)

The undercurrent of humour in the movie is subtle and intended for a niche audience. It can be best described as quirky, with layers of dark humour that leave one laughing in profound moments.

In the scene, Pedro asks a local church father about Rosie, who tells him to be patient and wait; in response, Pedro delivers a satirical remark in his raspy voice, saying, 'Wait kis cheez ka? Second coming ka? Tum wait to 2000 saal se kar hi rahe ho, nahi? Hua kuch?' (Wait for what? Second Coming? You have been waiting for 2000 years. Has anything happened?) (*Finding Fanny* 01:25:00-01:24:53). Keeping in line with the carnivalesque idea of mockery derived from the humour on body parts, the camera angle caters to Pedro's gaze and pans to Rosie's round, ludicrously padded bum. Pankaj Kapoor's Picasso-esque Pedro and Naseeruddin Shah's star-struck lover embody the Shakespearean urgency of playing their part, and their comic timing makes them even more believable. In one of the most hilarious encounters in the movie, where Pedro attempts to woo Rosie and sees Ferdie as a potential competitor, Pedro influences Rosie with his finest brandy. He annoyingly asks Ferdie, 'Are you mad? Tum aise hi aa gaye,' to which Ferdie innocently replies, lost in his Fanny world, 'Ghanti bajata, par darwaza nhi hai.' (00:32:07–00:32:03) Hearing this, Rosie bursts out laughing and in turn asks Ferdie to join the drinking party, much to the displeasure of Pedro. One of the less decent sexual jokes is credited to the character of Rosie, where she explains to Ferdie why drinking is not good for her, 'Meri tango pe asar hota hai…kyuki wo phail jaati hain' (00:27:40-00:27:28), hinting either at the bold personality of Rosie or the social criticism of promiscuity she endures as a woman whose husband has died. Apart from that, the witty sexual innuendo in the post-coital scene where Angie

and Savio lie down under the beautiful star-laden Goan sky describes the tough spirit of Angie, where she unknowingly puts Savio in his place on behalf of all the women when she compares the sexual performance to better and not best as per Savio's imagined standards.

The movie features adventure, high spirits, lowered inhibitions, and the coming together of diverse individuals under one car roof, all pursuing a common goal, which creates a subtle carnivalesque atmosphere set against an authentic portrayal of Goa. The movie becomes the extended metaphor for finding the ending to one's story, for which Goa became the perfect place. Pocolim, evocatively described as 'a puppet show as large as a village', is caught in the picturesque and photogenic time warp that overwrites the stereotypical assumptions of Goan life (Kumar 2014).

Visually kaleidoscopic, these films mash together contrasting styles and jarring images, as in *Go Goa Gone*, intentionally violating accepted rules of perfect cuts, like those in *Finding Fanny* and *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited,* to enhance the comic timing. These films move beyond the standard lighting technique and conventional storytelling with the instrumentation in the form of a narrator. In real life, people behave irrationally, succumbing to madness and sometimes self-destruction while pursuing their desires, as portrayed in the characters Luv and Hardik, who jeopardise their existence in their pursuit of life's freedom. Carnivalesque Films acknowledge these desires by exploring them as complicated literature. Sometimes, these complicated desires are told from a character's point of view; other times, the desire itself is the story, as in Basu Chatterjee's *Shaukeen*. Despite being shot mostly in Mauritius, *Go Goa Gone* serves as a cautionary tale for the audience, emphasising that not everything is as it seems. Finding Fanny, set in the elusive town of Pocolim, serves as a metaphor for the stereotypical nature of the place. Goa is the young honeymooner's paradise, where shy and coy brides, clad in sarees and ceremonial 'chhoodas', breathe the air of a very different life. The question of identity for these characters aligns with the ongoing debate about Goa's true nature as a place. Goa is a carnival incarnate where 'personalities, in that moment, are allowed to take in a little more oxygen than they normally would or be allowed to exhibit, to reverse to some extent the opiatic symptoms due to the oppression and regression induced by a culture that seeks to marginalise its subjects' (Atunwa 2016). It functions as an outlet for dreams and desires, as seen in the characters of Milly and Vicky and even, to some extent, in Partho. The allegiance formed in a space like these shapes and strengthens human dependency and bonding because all are sailing in the same boat. In the face of the worst situations, a group of friends stuck together to fight zombies. In helping a lovelorn postmaster, those who never agreed on anything combined efforts to find his love interest, and in a group of strangers, they took a stand for the love hounded by society's vicious goons. The rave party in *Go Goa Gone* is not a typical party, the road trip to Tivoli in *Finding Fanny* is not a social event, and the honeymoon is not a tourism sponsor. These are the mini carnivals where masks are shed, laughs are shared over the loss, and a sense of comfortable camaraderie develops between people who no one thought could enjoy the sundowner under the same umbrella.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. 2012. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* Cengage Learning.

Atunwa, Yao. 2016. 'The Psychology of Carnival', *I am Grenadian*, http://iamgrenadian.com/iamgrenadian/the-psychology-of-carnival-the-psychology-of-carnival/#:%20~:text=Carnival%20was%20created%20with%20such,be%20it%20religious%20or%20secular.

Burcu, Gündüz. 2003. 'Rave as Carnival' ("Karnaval Olarak 'Rave'"), *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, https://www.proquest.com/openview/.

Chopra, Anupama. 2022. 'Movie review: Reema Kagti's Honeymoon Travels Pvt Ltd', *India Today*, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/your-week/story/20070312-film-review-of-honeymoon-trav els-749010-2007-03-11.

Finding Fanny. 2014. Directed by Homi Adajania, Maddock Films, *Disney Hotstar*, https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/finding-fanny/1000050129.

Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited. 2007. Directed by Reema Kagti, Excel Entertainment,

Netflix, http://iamgrenadian.com/iamgrenadian/the-psychology-of-carnival-the-psychology-ofcarnival/#:%20~:text=Carnival%20was%20created%20with% 20such,be%20it% 20religious%20or%20secular.

Go Goa Gone. 2013. Directed by Raj Nidimoru and Krishna D.K., Maddock Films, *Amazon Prime*, https://www.primevideo.com/region/eu/detail/0OJWK04S8UOPR3TTQE0Z9MGG8Z/re =atv_sr_fle_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1 1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN& pageTypeId=B08JPQDK4G&qid=1715101093833.

'Importance of Choosing the Right Film Location'. *Ovation Square.* https://www.ovationsquare.com/blog/importance-of-choosing-the-right-film-location#: ~:text=A%2 0good%20filming% 20location%20goes,symbiotic% 20relationship% 20that%20captivates%20audiences.

'It's Carnival time in Goa!. 2012. *Indiatimes*, https://www.indiatimes.com/travel/its-carnival-time-in-goa-11834.html.

Kumar, Anuj. 2014. 'Finding Fanny: Lost and Found', *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/finding-fanny-review/article6404665.ece.

Punjabi, Sony. 'Revisit Goa Based On These 9 Bollywood Movies That Were Shot', *Holidify*.https://www.holidify.com/pages/movies-shot-in-goa-3123.html#:~ :text=Home%20to%20pictures que%20places%2C% 20pristine, view%20the% 20location%20in%20person.

Rai, Aditya. 2022. 'Angie and her quest for love in Finding Fanny', *Film Companion*, https://www.filmcompanion.in/readers-articles/finding-fanny-hotstar-angie-and-her-quest-for-lov e-in-finding-fanny.

Ramnath, Nandini. 2014. 'Lots of sweet, not enough bitters, and one great Dimple (Film review-Finding Fanny)', *Mint*, https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/jqVuyG0TaQ4ikpYY4oqD4K/Film-Review—Finding-Fanny.h tml.

Rangan, Bharadwaj. 2007. ''State of the Heart' Review: Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd', *WordPress*, https://baradwajrangan.wordpress.com/2007/02/25/review-honeymoon-travels-pvt-ltd/.

Shetty, Priyanka. 'Stereotyping of Goans in Bollywood – Is it right, 'man'!!?', *It's Goa*, https://itsgoa.com/stereotyping-of-goans-in-bollywood-is-it-right-man. 'We will make Goa a heaven for filmmakers. 2023. *The Navhind Times*, https://www.navhindtimes.in/2023/11/29/goanews/we-will-make-goa-a-heaven-for-film-makers/

'What is Carnivalesque Films?'. *Carnivalesquefilms*, https://www.carnivalesquefilms.com/about.

Wit and Humour in Amul Advertisements

Neenu Kumar

Abstract

A deft writing technique called 'wit' is employed to make viewers or readers laugh. It is perceptive. Wittiness is often described as the ability to speak or write the perfect thing at the most appropriate moment. It can also mean having the natural ability to combine concepts and phrases in a clever way to produce humour. The tendency to combine observations/incidents/events and words in a way that makes people laugh and feel entertained is known as 'humour'. Another way to define it is as the 'quality of being comical or amusing.' 'Humour' and 'wit' are frequently seen to share similarities. Both are meant to be humorous and make people laugh. In contrast to the latter, wit uses comedy to draw attention to knowledge, and it requires expertise. Humour always leads to joyous laughter. A person with wit can see an instance from a different angle and respond with a statement that fits the context. 'Wit' might be witty, intelligent, ridiculous or facetious, but 'humour' is always witty and makes people grin, laugh aloud, or both. This research examines the use of the small girl in 'Amul' advertising as a representation of 'utterly-butterly' sweetness. These commercials have an eternal impact in addition to being pertinent to the eras in which they were produced. The photo of the girl, the words and the tagline are the most noticeable elements of the advertisements. The catchphrase alludes to the occasion and its participants, yet the girl is the picture of gentleness. This is cleverly connected to butter through words.

Keywords: fun, laughter, 'Amul advertisements,' catchy slogans, text.

Introduction — 'Wit and Humour'

'Wit' is the potential to utilise language in a witty and humorous way, and 'humour' is the trait that makes someone or something funny or amusing. The frequency with which an ordinary occurrence takes on a funny quality that makes one laugh uncontrollably is a quality of humour. However, it is challenging to understand humour as a distinct and well-defined idea. The old physiological theory of the four humours, which dates back to Galen and Hippocrates, is where its current use originated (humour *Brittanica*). According to Chamber's *Cyclopædia*, humour originates from the Latin term for 'liquid' (1728 rpt. 1748).

> From it, a medical meaning stems, which comprises both the old Galenian and a new sense: that liquid is any juice, or fluid part of the body, as the *chyle*, blood, milk, fat, serum, lymph, spirits, bile, feed, saliva and pancreatic juices [...] The four Humours, so much talked of by the ancient physicians, are four liquid substances which [are] suppose[d] to moisten the whole body of all animals, and to be the cause of the divers temperaments thereof' (p. 1005). Chambers goes on to point out that 'the moderns do not allow of these divisions, the Humours they rather chuse to distinguish into nutritious, called also elementary, as *chyle* and blood; those separated from the blood, as bile, saliva, urine, etc. and those returned into the blood (p. 1005).

It illustrates how the concept of humour has changed over time, moving from the Hippocratic idea of the body-mind interaction to a psychological theory of character that still maintained a metaphorical connection between the physical origins of human attitudes. 'Thus we say', the *Cyclopædia* continues, 'a bilious, or choleric Humour; a melancholic, hypochondriac Humour; a [...] gay, sprightly Humour, etc' (p. 1005).

It is known that there are multiple definitions of the word humour. Chambers also writes:

> *Humour* is usually considered by criticks, as "a fainter or weaker habitual passion peculiar to comic characters, as being chiefly found in persons of lower degree than those proper for tragedy" [...] Every passion may be said to have two different faces, one that is serious, great, formidable, and solemn, which is for tragedy; and another that is low, ridiculous, and fit for comedy; which last is what we call its *Humour*. (p. 1005)

The *Cyclopaedia* offers a subtle difference between wit and humour, even though they are combined in the same item. This distinction symbolises the transition from the acerbic and more sardonic features of the former to the more inclusive qualities of the latter.

> Wit only becomes few characters; it is a breach of character to make one half the persons in a modern, or indeed in any comedy, talk wittily and finely; at least at all times, and on all occasions.—To entertain the audience, therefore, and keep the dramatic persons from going into the common, beaten familiar ways and forms of speaking and thinking, recourse is had to something to supply the place of wit, and divert the audience, without going out of character: and this does *Humour* [i.e. *humour* keeps a character together, and a story organic]; which is therefore to be looked on as the true wit of comedy. (p. 1005)

The salient features of humour include the capacity to recognise or articulate comedy, an understanding of what is ridiculous or hilarious, and the ability to appreciate or express what is funny or comical. According to Chambers, the only thing that possesses true wit is humour, as it seems to embody all of the qualities of wit. Richter writes that 'humour's descent to hell paves its way for an ascent to heaven' (1973: 91). Humour influences the relationship between reality and language, context and creativity, conventional ethics, and doubt about human dispositions. Rather than acting as a tool for discrimination and supremacy, comedy can foster acceptance and homogeneity. Humour and wit 'are corroborative … and promotive…' (Jonathan Swift quoted in Klein 1994: 159).

According to Stuart M. Tave, '… comedy showed an ever-increasing interest in a compassionate view of man … and transformed … pungent wit … into a more amiable humour' (Tave 1960: 44–59). With the passage of time, wit and humour did converge, but Tave opines that 'the latter progressively replaced the former' (1960: 217–20). He says, '… we can consider "humour as a form of wit" as personality, endowed with a social pathos' (1960**:** 221–43).

Considering how challenging it is to distinguish between wit and humour, Michael Billig is correct to say that 'eighteenth-century theorists viewed "wit" and "humour" as distinctly different phenomena, wit referring to "clever verbal saying" and humour denoting a "laughable character"' (2001: 62). But the difference was so subtle that it was quite hard to distinguish the two ideas.

In the beginning of the 18th century, the word 'humour' started to take on its current meaning, and the laughter that went along with it started to become less judgemental and friendlier. It was the outcome of a sort of contradictory concept known as 'progressive anachronism'. '[The earlier idea of humour] was retained as a semantic convenience in distinguishing personality and character types [...] and it was only in this distinguishing of personality types that the humour theory of wit survived' (Milburn 1965: 97). The words 'wit' and 'humour' were more commonly used together at the start of this approach and could be used interchangeably. It is challenging to fully distinguish it from *humour*, even though the latter derives from and differs from the former in that it retains wit's capacity to compile disparate concepts, meanings, and traits and combine them in novel, intriguing, and paradoxical ways. '…the disturbing truth was that "wit" and "humour" contained obvious similarities which tended to confuse them. [Too many subtleties exist between *wit* and *humour* to characterise one in terms of the other.] … yet we may go near to show something which is not Wit or not Humour, and yet often mistaken for both' (Milburn 1965: 202).

Corbyn Morris presents a very likeable definition. He says that a 'humourist' advocates for rationality and freedom while uncovering tyrants' unjust actions. The humourist, in his perspective, is a person who braves to speak out against injustice. He endorses

> for using humour as a harmless and friendly way of depicting human flaws as common traits of our nature. He believes in laughing together with people at their defects as if they were our own rather than mocking their faults. It is He that watches the daring Strides, and secret Mines of the ambitious Prince, and desperate Minister: He gives the Alarm, and prevents their Mischief. Others there are who have Sense and Foresight; but they are brib'd by Hopes or Fears, or bound by softer Ties; It is He only, the Humourist, that has the Courage and Honesty to cry out, unmov'd by personal Resentment: He flourishes only in a Land of liberty. (Morris 1744: 20-1)

This could be referred to as a compassionate sort of comedy, in which humorous items can elicit empathy as well as simple laughter. Comedy/wit/humour was often characterised by its lack of compassion for the subject of its 'raillery' or ridicule. Wit and humour, though similar in many ways, are/were yet different and are/were treated differently.

History and Creation of the Amul Girl

Millions of Indians have fallen in love with Amul Girl thanks to her clever and humorous cartoons. Sylvester daCunha, her creator, died on June 21, 2023. His death was mourned by all. Pavan Singh, the brand's general marketing manager, called daCunha a 'legend of Indian advertising world' and credited him with designing 'one of longest continuously running advertising campaigns in the world. This campaign scaled new heights, moved seamlessly from OOH (Out-of-home advertising) to print, TV and then digital and social media, enhancing its reach and popularity across multiple generations' (Sylvester daCunha). In a similar vein, Shashi Tharoor said, 'An era has passed. RIP'(Tharoor). However, daCunha has left behind a lasting impact in as far as the creation of the 'iconic' Amul girl is concerned. Pan India, people are still entertained by this famous masterpiece.

The first Amul ad (Image 1) appeared as a hoarding at strategic points for it to be visible to all.

Image 1

The history of this amazing creation is equally fascinating. In the 1920s, the Polson company had come out with an advertisement featuring a young girl with brown hair promoting the Polson products (Image 2). The company 'even supplied butter and coffee to the British India and American troops during the first World War'(Sylvester daCunha). Polson had to close the business and the company was forgotten.

Image 2

Despite losing business, the idea for the little girl was derived from this advertisement of *Polson*. The tale of India's most adored advertising icon began in 1966. Dr Verghese Kurien, who essentially made India the world's greatest milk producer, was seeking an advertisement programme for Amul butter, which was produced by the Amul dairy co-op he had founded ten years previously. He assigned the work to Sylvester da Cunha's 'daCunha Communications' in Mumbai. The agency chose to attempt 'billboards', which featured a 'blue-haired girl in a "red polka-dot outfit" that would go on to become the most well-known advertising character in India' (Nudd 2019), because during that period, advertising on TV and in magazines in the nation was extremely costly. Art director Eustace Fernandes drew the Amul girl. The beginning was with an advertisement, which referred to butter as 'utterly butterly delicious'—'a delightfully goofy phrase coined by Sylvester's wife, Nisha da Cunha, and a sign of pun-ny things to come'(Nudd 2019).

Image 3

The initial 'billboard' (Image 3) was an instant hit. It said: 'Lovely lovely lovely/ Fresh cream Amul Butter/ I promise to be good/ If I can save it every day'(Nudd 2019).

The company soon realised that they had a very likeable and a very saleable 'mascot'. The chubby young girl became a 'proto-meme' for the brand. Billboards, featuring the Amul girl, could be seen all across Mumbai. Soon, she travelled out of Mumbai and became a pan-India feature. 'She became like the Michelin Man, that kind of character' (Nudd 2019), Sylvester's son Rahul mentioned in an interview.

Very quickly Sylvester daCunha began to understand that mere butter talk would not last very long. He thus came up with the concept of societal critique. The line of

advertising changed from discussing a single topic once a month or once every two months to essentially examining a topic nearly every day.

Rahul daCunha and his team, comprising 'copywriter Manish Jhaveri and illustrator Jayant Rane' meet on the first day of every week and decide on the topics to be tackled. 'We list all the potential topics we feel have relevance and resonance and durability for the week. Let's say the U.S. Open is on—who's likely to win? Trump and China are talking about trade tariffs. A Bollywood film has been launched—how's it going to do? Then, what deserves mention first? We work on possibilities for the headline. Jayant starts painting, Manish starts writing. Three or four hours later, we meet and see where we're at. By evening, the first ad is out on digital. By night-time, it's out on billboards'(Nudd 2019).

Some of the Amul advertisements are as follows:

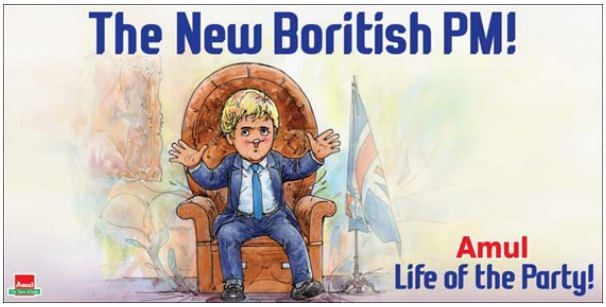

Image 4: Boris Johnson becoming the Prime Minister of UK

Image 5: Final season of *Game of Thrones*

The Amul girl appears in most of the advertisements. Many times she herself becomes the character. She transforms into a Bollywood actress or becomes Trump's daughter. She is an animated character with the ability to change into anything, including a 'chameleon', and metamorphose into the subject of her commentary. The topics range from football to cricket and Bollywood to politics, both national and international. The idea is not only to keep people smiling but also to bring awareness about the current national and international events.

Rane, the illustrator, first sketches the idea in pencil, in three/four options, and colours them by hand. The idea is then discussed by the team, and the subsequent actions follow.

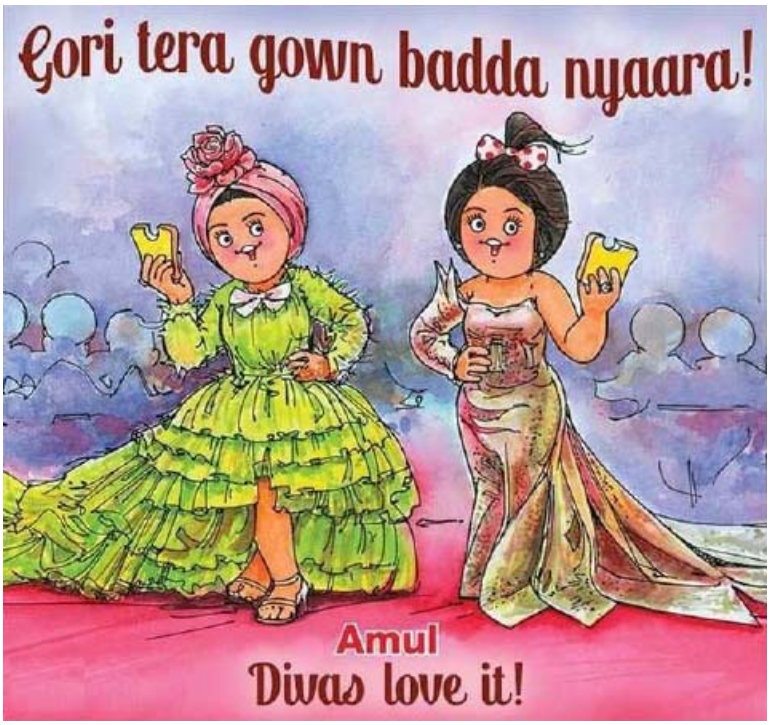

Image 6: Deepika Padukone and Aishwarya Rai at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival

Topicality of the Amul Advertisements

The 'blue-haired' little girl, wearing a ribbon in her hair and a 'polka-dotted' dress, has become the face of Amul worldwide. She is cute, witty, simple, naive and sweet, appears to be mischievous and is a warm, cartoonish girl; everyone would love to take her home. And, home/s she has been taken to, having been welcomed by all and sundry. She has, therefore, developed a strong conceptual relationship with Indian history and culture. The Amul advertisements have taken into account various societal developments and incidents that took place during the development of India. From athletic triumphs to national disasters, the Amul girl has been a constant presence, both as a friend and an observer of the Indian social ethos. She has become an established fixture in the typical environment of the middle class everywhere, not only within India but also in India's political/cultural exchanges with the world. There are many billboards on the roads of India these days that draw the eye, but the Amul Girl and her hoardings have left a deep impact on the populace of the country. The ability to seize the prevailing contemporary vibe and mirror it back on enormous advertisements

that are put up nearly instantaneously is what makes these advertisements so well-liked. From the beginning, Sylvester daCunha was given a free hand to create and present the advertisements however he and his team deemed appropriate. Even now, with Rahul daCunha having the freedom to showcase the ads as he thought fit, the Amul ad campaign has resulted in the longest-running initiative in advertising history.

Not a single issue lies outside the purview of the Amul Girl. Social turmoil, which includes the Delhi High Court's ruling on the right to privacy in 2017 (Image 7); the overturning of section 377, which penalised homosexuality, by the Supreme Court of India (Image 8); or the schemes of elected officials which include the failure of political collaborations, resulting in India having two prime ministers in a four-year period (Image 9); the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA); national and international sporting events; and international political changes, all have been written about using wit and humour and presented in visually appealing hoardings. The daCunha Advertising agency termed them as 'Amul Topicals' (Chopra).

Image 7: Delhi High Court's ruling on the right to privacy in 2017

Image 8: Overturning section 377, which penalised homosexuality, by the Supreme Court of India.

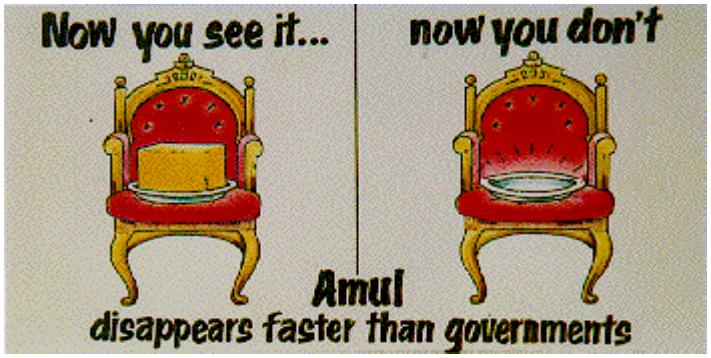

Image 9: India having two prime ministers in a four-year period.

The hoardings have served as historical markers along the road, pointing to current problems, occasions and concepts that are changing Indian culture today. Observing these markers is akin to digging in the past because the various hoardings serve as chronological markers indicating that we have arrived at a specific social and temporal location.

The 1970s was a period of extremes for India. In 1975, Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, imposed a state of Emergency in the country. Sanjay Gandhi, her son, resorted to mass sterilisation to control the population. The Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) was also mandated, under which many leaders of the opposite parties were jailed. Amul came out with two apt advertisements (Images 10 and 11)), which were lapped up by the nation.

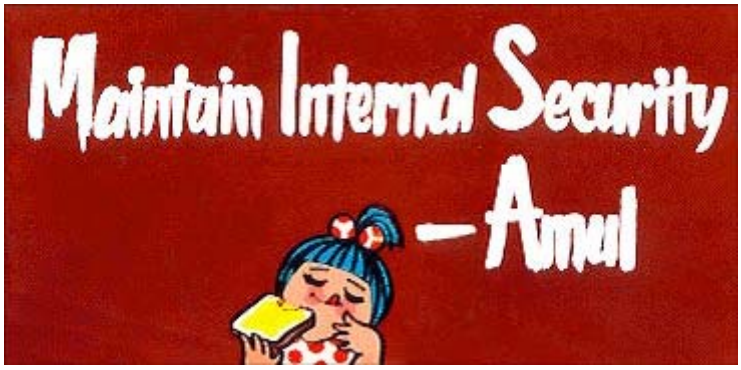

Image 10

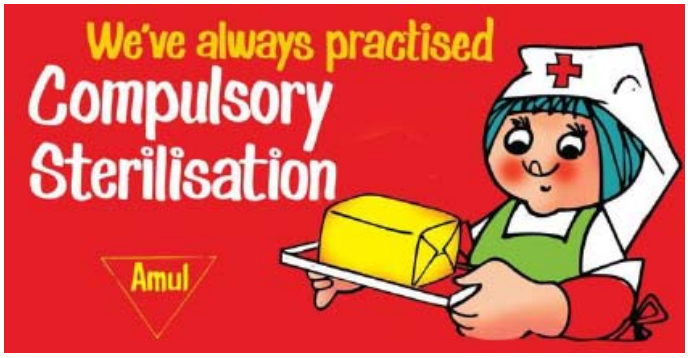

Image 11

This advertisement was not only an allusion to Amul's use of reliable and professional production methods but also to the compulsory widespread sterilisations of reproductive organs of men that were taking place all over the country, frequently on members of lower social strata and people with lower populations.

There was a series of advertisements on the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 (Images 12, 13, 14, and 15).

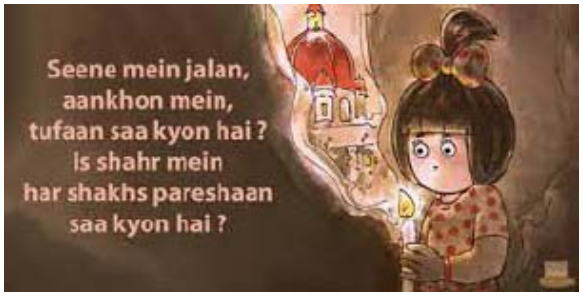

Image 12: 'Why is there a burning in the chest, why is there a storm in the eyes? Why is everyone in this city so worried?'

,

Image 13: We will not tolerate any more. No more Kasab!'

Image 14: This *Taj* will not bend anymore.

Image 15

Nobody could deny the seriousness of these ads which shook the city as did the terror attack.

Image 16

In the wake of the terrorist attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan in 2014, the billboard read: 'Let us bloom … Study … Fly … Grow' (Image 16).

The topicality of Amul advertisements is universally appealing. From writing about freedom of the press in France to Salman Rushdie; Trump to Putin; Kim Jong Un to Singapore; the European Union to Brexit; and Shashi Tharoor in 2017, Amul has been there, in its own inimitable witty and humorous style. These advertisements cannot be ignored. They make the audience sit up and take note of the contemporary events across the globe.

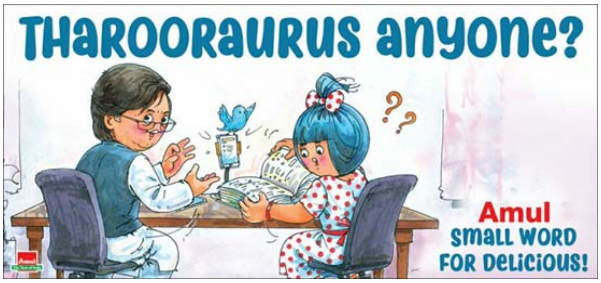

Image 17: #Amul Topical: MP's fondness for tweeting big words like 'Rodomontade'! December 16, 2017

Tharoor's response was equally sporting: 'Butterly honoured. But I feel like a Tharoorosaurus Rex, an ancient creature soon to be extinct, snuffed out in a cloud of incomprehension....' (Tharoor).

Conclusion

The Amul Girl is an integral component of a fantastic realm of humanised figures that represent many companies. There is 'Bibendum', referred to as the 'Michelin Man' (Image 19), who is a Frenchman; 'Ronald McDonald' (Image 20), an American; and the 'Air India Maharaja' (Image 21), of Indian origin. The Amul Girl (Image 18) stands apart from her contemporaries due to her ability to connect with a wider range of cultures and leave a lasting impression on her audience. Her billboards can be seen at key vantage points, and the messages change very frequently, giving her appearance more energy.

Image 18

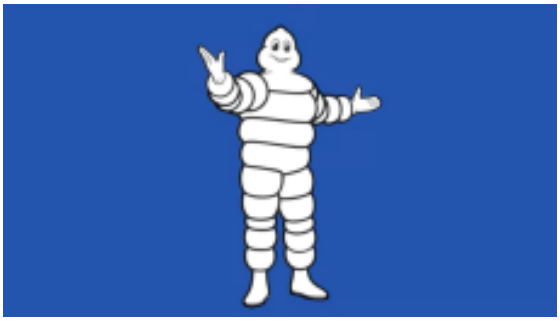

Image 19

Image 20

Image 21

The people are excited to watch what she will reveal next. Even if she is not shown in them, the audience easily recognises her hoardings thanks to the distinctive graphic style and layout of her ads. Consequently, she is more prominent than the product, and she 'inhabits a semantic paradigm that operates above the simple consumer-product

relationships, but unlike other brands, [there is no] schism from the product itself' (Manning 2010: 36). Her ads also serve as unique items, appearing briefly at specific locations before being replaced. As a result, each can radiate a distinctiveness that enables it to exist in what Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'here and now' (Benjamin 2008: 20) and have broad accessibility without needing to be replicated. This indicates the Amul Girl's appeal as well as the fact that, in contrast to the other mascots stated above, the Amul Girl does not truly characterise her commodity but rather the custom of an Indian corpulence in which the association with milk and butter is permanently and profoundly ingrained in the national psyche. Of course, there were ads (Image 22), which were mildly erotic, which the company ran.

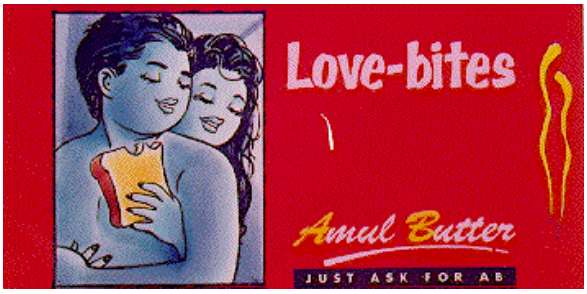

Image 22

However, there have been controversies/ problems. Sylvester daCunha says, 'We ran a couple of ads that created a furore. The Indian Airlines one really angered the authorities. They said if we didn't take down the ads they would stop supplying Amul butter on the plane. So ultimately we discontinued the ad'(Amul Topical). Another controversy arose when the Amul cutie was wearing a 'Gandhi cap'. The political leaders did not take kindly to it. In spite of the daCunha Company's reluctance, the ad had to be removed. 'Then there was an ad during the *Ganpati* festival which said: *Ganpati Bappa More Ghya* (*Ganpati Bappa* takes more). The *Shiv Sena* people said that if we didn't do something about removing the ad they would come and destroy our office. It is surprising how vigilant the political forces are in the country. Even when the *Enron* ads (Enr On Or Off) were running, Rebecca Mark wrote to us saying how much she liked them' (Amul Topical).

One of the ads made fun of the renowned artist M. F. Hussain. He called the daCunha office. Rahul says: 'He said that he had seen the hoarding while passing through a small district in U. P. He said he had asked his assistant to take a photograph of himself with the ad because he found it so funny' (Amul Topical). Despite the bumps, which were few and far between, the Amul girl has continued to entertain the people over decades. The reason is that 'People tend to remember the mascots because of their uniqueness' (Naqvi 2007: 199).

The above mentions indicate the ubiquity of the Amul Girl as well as the fact that, in contrast to the other mascots, the Amul Girl does not truly stereotype her commodity, but rather she represents the customs of an Indian corpulence in which the cultural association with butter and milk is firmly ingrained in the public psyche.

In one of his interviews, Rahul daCunha says:

> 'She is 50 years old, so that's a challenge. The 40- and 50-plus person already knows us. There's a lot of memory and affection, and a nostalgic sense for it. But digital has helped a lot. We're able to tackle issues that stay digital—that perhaps wouldn't go up on a billboard because they wouldn't be relevant to the common man. But that's one of my concerns. How do we stay relevant to a millennial audience who has a shifting appetite and a shifting fascination with different media vehicles almost on a daily basis?'(Nudd 2019)

To cater to digitisation, the Company went digital in 2016 by name of *Amul World*, which contains all the Amul advertisements. In 2022, they started their twitter account. Of course, there is concern but the Amul campaign is still running strong even after 58 years of its conception.

Sylvester daCunha attributes the success to the mascot:

> 'You might say that the ads represent a history of modern India acted out by a little heroine, healthy and confident about the future … The story of Amul's India is also one of a country coming in touch with itself, even as it transforms beyond recognition. From a somewhat disconnected class living in a world of its own, we see a country create its own narrative, with its own distinctive language, its own set of heroes, its own set of issues, and do the battle with its weakness. The river that is India flows on, and the brand that is Amul continues to give us a running commentary on what it sees, feels and experiences as it accompanies us on this glorious ride' (daCunha 2012: 21).

The magic lies in the cuddly girl, the size of a thumb, who has climbed to the hoardings and cast an enchanting spell on the masses. The appealing topicality of the lines and the wit and humour with which all events/subjects are tackled have given rise to straightforward, uncomplicated, daily enjoyment, which brings a smile to the face. This allure has withstood shifting public perception and continues to do so in its appeal to everyone.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other writings on Media*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Billig, Michael. 2001. 'Humour and Embarrassment: Limits of 'Nice-Guy' Theories of Social Life', *Theory Culture & Society*, 18(5):23–43. DOI: 10.1177/02632760122051959 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240708537_Humour_and_ Embarrassment_ Limits_of_Nice-Guy'_Theories_of_Social_Life

Chambers, Ephraim. 1748. *Cyclopædia*, Or *An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (Fifth Ed.)*. London: D. Midwinter et al. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125011113772/page/n7/mode/2up p. 1005

Chopra, Virien. n.d. 'Utterly Butterly Iconic: Study of an Indian Milk brand mascot',https://www.academia.edu/37434629/Utterly_Butterly_Iconic_Study_ of_an_Indian_Milk_brand_mascot.

DaCunha, Sylvester. 2012; rpt. 2021. "The 'Utterly Butterly' Story." *Amul's India*/ *Amul's India 3.0*: *concept and creation by DaCunha Communications based on 50 years of Amul advertising*. Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins Publishers.

'humour'. *Brittanica*, https://www.britannica.com/science/humor-ancient-physiology

'This Amul ad on Shashi Tharoor is hilarious; Congress MP's response even better'. 2017. *Financial Express*, December 16, https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/this-amul-ad-on-shashi-tharoor-is-hilarious-congress-mps-response-even-better/976647/.

Klein, Lawrence E. 1994. *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*: *Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manning, Paul. 2010. 'The Semiotics of Brand', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39: 33–49.

Milburn, D. Judson. 1965. *The Age of Wit*, *1650–1750*. London and New York: Macmillan.

Morris, Corbyn. 1947. 'An Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule [1744]', in James L. Clifford (ed.), *Essays on Wit*, No 2. Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society.

Naqvi, Hena. 2007. 'Mascot In The World Of Advertising', *Journalism and Mass Communication*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan.

Nudd, Tim. 2019. "The Story of the Amul Girl, India's Ad Icon Who Was Ahead of Her Time"—Rahul da Cunha on 53 years of witty, timely executions. https://musebycl.io/advertising/story-amul-girl-indias-ad-icon-who-was-ahead-her-time

Richter, Jean Paul F. and Margaret R. Hale (ed.). 1973. *Horn of Oberon*: *Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics*. *Vorschüle der Ästhetik* [1804]. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. https://www.proquest.com/openview/9830af5ac5e0b29d48d913a2a88dadd5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y (Dissertation 1970).

Sethi**,** Vaamanaa. 2023. **'**Story of Amul Girl: This is how Sylvester daCunha Came up with the Most Iconic Ad Idea', https://english.jagran.com/business/story-of-amul-girl-this-is-how-sylvester-dacunha-came-up-with-the-most-iconic-ad-idea-10084065.

'Sylvester daCunha: Tributes for creator of India's iconic Amul girl ad.'. 2023. BBC, June 22, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65981967.

Tave, Stuart M. 1960. *The Amiable Humorist*: *A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

#maidturnedcomedian: Deepika Mhatre's Stand-up Comedy as Life Narration

Tara Sonali Saldanha

Abstract

The title features a hashtag used by Deepika Mhatre, a domestic worker-turned-comedian, on social media platforms. Mhatre begins her performances by introducing herself as a 'stand-up comedian, ex-maid'. This, along with the hashtag, underscores the interest of this paper in the possibilities of stand-up comedy as a life narrative mode, especially for marginal subjects. I examine how Mhatre mobilises her life trajectory, from her years employed in domestic work to her engagement with stand-up comedy, in her performances. It proposes that Mhatre's self-representation through stand-up comedy is poised to entertain, but also uses comedic strategies to implicate her audience in her experiences, prompting a reconsideration of the culture and practice of domestic work in India. Upending conventional comedic rhetoric about Indian maids, Mhatre's stand-up comedy trains the comedic gaze towards her employers, turning critical observation and commentary to the unaccustomed ear of mainstream audiences.

Keywords: Stand-up comedy. Domestic work, India, automediality, life narration

The title features a hashtag used by Deepika Mhatre, a domestic worker-turned-comedian, on social media platforms. Mhatre begins her performances by introducing herself as a 'stand-up comedian, ex-maid'. This, along with the hashtag, manifests the interest of this paper in the possibilities of stand-up comedy as a life narrative[1] mode, especially for marginal subjects. I examine how Mhatre mobilises her life trajectory, from her years employed in domestic work to her engagement with stand-up comedy, in her performances. It proposes that Mhatre's self-representation through stand-up comedy is poised to entertain, but also uses comedic strategies to implicate her audience in her experiences, prompting a

reconsideration of the culture and practice of domestic work in India. Upending conventional comedic rhetoric about Indian maids, Mhatre's stand-up comedy trains the comedic gaze towards her employers, turning critical observation and commentary to the unaccustomed ear of mainstream audiences.

Deepika Mhatre, who lives in Mumbai, began performing stand-up comedy in 2018. In multiple interviews, Mhatre mentions that she always had a flair for comedy, but she first performed publicly at an entertainment programme for domestic workers. Subsequently, Mhatre performs regularly within stand-up comedy circuits in India. This unique instance of an Indian domestic worker performing comedy based largely on her experiences of work caught the attention of the media in India. For the analysis ahead, the sites of inquiry include recordings of her performances and interviews available online, as well as her live performances and public appearances where possible.

This paper's analytical impetus reflects recent scholarly discussion on 'automediality', which studies the function and implications of form and medium on life narration. In India, low levels of literacy are prevalent among domestic workers.[2] As such, expectations of written autobiographies by domestic workers are almost always disappointed. However, according to Christian Moser, automediality acknowledges that life narration is not exclusively done in writing and 'takes into account the full range of artistic and technological media applied to the task of self-representation' (2018: 247). Alternative forms, like comedy via digital media, are accessible and allow Mhatre to somewhat sidestep the socio-cultural hierarchy of legacy media while promising a wider reach. However, this paper also shows how these forms and mediums are forced to broaden on encountering the domestic worker's life narrative. The first section describes the landscape of stand-up comedy in India, situating Mhatre and her comedy against this. The second section explains how Mhatre's comedy can be described as autobiographical. The construction of Mhatre's comic persona in relation to her audience is illustrated in the third section. This sets up the discussion of the final, fourth section, which concerns the effects Mhatre's autobiographical comedy has the potential to cause among her audience.

Stand-up Comedy in the Indian Context

Before we look more closely at her comedy, let us consider the context within which Mhatre performs. Lawrence E. Mintz (1985) describes stand-up comedy as 'an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience' (71). Though limited, this definition positions the interaction between comic and audience as central to stand-up comedy. Recent scholarship suggests stand-up comedy has a rather homogenous audience in the Indian context. Subin Paul (2017) traces its beginnings in India to the early 2000s, when performers began borrowing from the Anglophone American tradition. Stand-up comedy is fast becoming a part of popular culture, particularly among educated, young, urban audiences (Paul 2017: 122). The mainstream stand-

up comedy circuit within which Mhatre performs is dominated by young (approximately aged 20–40 years), urban, male rather than female comics, often with privileged socio-economic backgrounds. This trend creates a comedy culture in India that scholars find is exclusionary, especially in terms of caste and class. Despite its democratising potential, Kavyta Kay (2018: 4) finds the online space often mirrors social anxieties about caste, class, race, and gender. The dearth of critical engagement with caste stems from a scarcity of Dalit comedians and the neoliberal logic within which comedy operates, observe Neelima Mundayur, Juhi Jotwani and Shubda Arora (2024: 111). Stand-up comedy circuits demand a degree of social capital from performers: Mhatre herself was only able to break into the mainstream scene in 2018 after an established comic, Aditi Mittal, featured her in her *YouTube* series. Further, stand-up comedy culture in the 21st century India has a predominantly Western-oriented middle-class audience (Paul 2017: 123). Based on Paul's (2017) analysis, I find international politics, immigration, competitive exams, and internet trends are prevalent themes of stand-up comedians in India, eliciting resounding laughter, signalling recognition, from their predominantly middle-class audiences. It is unsurprising, then, that Zubin Miller describes Indian stand-up comedy, the performers, and audiences as having a distinctly middle-class character (2020: 447).

An especially popular theme among Indian comedians in both stand-up and long-form digital mediums is the domestic worker. Even a preliminary search of *YouTube* using the keywords 'comedy', 'maid', and 'India' throws up numerous results. These comic sketches are almost always staged from the point of view of the employer. Further, most comics profess to basing their acts on their own experiences as employers. Comedians often parody confrontations between a cunning 'maid' and her harried employers over cliches such as the former constantly asking for leave. This aligns with observations made by Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora (2024) that the changing nature of domestic service in the late 20th century, characterised by diminishing feudal powers for employers, has influenced popular culture depictions of domestic workers. There is a perceptible shift from the depiction of servants as loyal to them as conniving or lazy (Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora 2024: 109). Comedy across various forms consistently replicates and reinforces stereotypes about domestic workers prevalent in contemporary Indian culture and society.

Mhatre's Personal Comedy

Mhatre performs what Laurie McNeill and John D. Zuern refer to as 'personal comedy', which includes 'comedy acts that are explicitly autobiographical' (2022: 226). The central theme of Mhatre's stand-up comedy is her experiences as a domestic worker. She stages her jokes as anecdotes from her work life. Further, Mhatre almost always uses the personal pronoun 'I' while she performs. This use of 'I' as an identifier in autobiographical effects of comedy contributes to the construction of the comic persona, i.e., the personality the comic constructs for

themselves and exhibits to the audience while on stage or off. This persona is important for all comedians and is usually distinct from their real-life self. However, in the case of autobiographical comedy, the persona is constructed as one and the same with the person of the comic, in a version of the autobiographical pact (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 229). By employing the first-person pronoun while gesturing to herself, alongside her use of observational humour (that which comments on daily life), Mhatre explicitly aligns her off-stage self with her onstage persona. With this understanding, the hashtag #maidturnedcomedian illustrates how Mhatre constructs her comic persona. Mhatre uses this hashtag in her social media posts, and it also features in her Instagram biography alongside the phrase 'Once a maid, Now [sic] a stand-up comedian' (Mhatre @dipikathestandupcomedian). The social media hashtag and 'bio' serve as autobiographical sites, allowing Mhatre to craft herself online to influence how she appears offline. Her comic persona is not divested from Mhatre's former work. Instead, both online and in her performances, she deliberately accentuates these overlapped identities. As the discussion ahead shows, the success of her comedy hinges on this dual identity.

Emphasising her off-stage self as a former domestic worker functions as an 'authenticating strategy', which is important for the effectiveness of any autobiographical comedy and entails the use of evidentiary devices to convince the audience that the experiences recounted are autobiographical (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 229). In an interview in 2023, Mhatre emphasised the genuineness of the experiences she recounts by referring to the diaries she kept over fifteen years about her life as a domestic worker, which now serve as documentary sources for her observational humour (Sit-down 2023). Thus, Mhatre presents herself as an 'authentic' voice of a domestic worker in India. However, in repeatedly evoking her domestic work in her stand-up comedy, Mhatre blurs the distinction between her real-life self and her comic persona. This manipulation of the autobiographical pact is uniquely available to and strategically employed by stand-up comedians (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 229). Echoing the hashtag above, Mhatre frequently introduces herself by saying, '*Namaste, mein Deepika Mhatre. Main maid ka kaam karti hu, aur stand-up comedy bhi*.' ('I am Deepika Mhatre. I work as a maid and do stand-up comedy'.) Though on stage she is not a domestic worker, she repeatedly invokes this identity while performing. In the blurring that such repeated evocation generates, the effect of Mhatre's personal comedy is fully deployed and realised. The analysis ahead characterises this entanglement of her off-stage self with her onstage, comic persona, going on to note how the reaction it produces in the audience bolsters the effects of Mhatre's performances.

Constructing Mhatre's Comic Persona

In the manner she appears on stage, Mhatre sets up a clear dichotomy between herself and the cosmopolitan, urban, middle-class audience and world of stand-up comedy. Her repeated evocation of her domestic work widens this gap. Mhatre jokes that '*amir log*' ('rich people') will bargain with roadside vendors but not at

a mall (Aditi 2018: 01:32–39). She makes it a point to say '*Sirf amir logon*' ('only rich people'), adding '*garib logon nahin*' ('not poor people') as she points to herself (Mhatre 2022). As already demonstrated, mainstream stand-up comedy in India privileges performers with social and economic capital. Mhatre is aware of such prejudices but still marks her incongruity via her on-stage persona. Mhatre, especially in her early performances, does not dress in Western outfits as Indian comedians overwhelmingly do. Instead, she performs in traditional attire, including ceremonial jewellery (such as a *nath* and *mangalsutra*), a bright saree, and a large red *bindi*. She seemingly makes no effort to seem relatable to her audience, who can be seen in recordings dressed in modern, urban attire. Instead, Mhatre's blurry comic persona allows her to perform the distance between herself and her audience, as well as mark her incongruity with mainstream stand-up comedy in India.

Mhatre's complex comic persona is also constructed by her strategic employment of codeswitching, a performance strategy whereby comedians move rapidly between languages or language variants. While Mhatre primarily speaks in Hindi, her particular use of colloquial language and slang upon the cosmopolitan stage of stand-up comedy produces a striking effect. In one instance, Mhatre uses the colloquialism '*khajoor*', meaning 'foolish', to describe her employers (GodrejHIT 2018: 00:46). Elsewhere, she uses exclamations like '*aai shapath*' (literally, 'mother promise'). Such language is easily understood by an audience in Mumbai, or even a more general Indian audience. However, it is often denigratively characterised as '*tapori*'. This term is a classed characterisation of popular culture generally associated with unemployed youth and street gangs. It is also called *Bambaiya* or Bombay Hindi and is known to be the language of the working classes. Such language is seen as the antithesis of Urdu and Hindi in mainstream Indian popular culture (Mazumdar 2001: 4873). By speaking this way, Mhatre rejects the limited cultural ethos of mainstream Indian stand-up comedy, bringing onto its stage an alternative, otherwise marginal, language and way of life.[3].

In using such language, Mhatre foregoes the deference expected of her, characterising her employers and conversing with her audience using casual slang. Such use of code-switching by comedians produces a heightened sense of intimacy with the audience through mutual recognition (Miller 2020). However, Mhatre's use of language also has the effect of disrupting the relationship of deference between herself and the audience, as a stand-in for her employers.

This dichotomy with the audience is reinforced explicitly by Mhatre in her performances. She says that all day she must listen to '*madam log*' but then goes on to say, '*phir jake rat ko main in madam logon ko sunate hu*'. ('Then at night I go and make these madams listen to me'), referring to the performance itself (GodrejHIT 2018: 0:13). Mhatre gestures to the audience when she says this, foisting this 'madam' figure, a frequent object of her comedy, upon the audience who cannot but accept this interpellation. The entangling of her person with her comic persona confronts the audience with the inescapable fact of Mhatre's experiences as a domestic worker. However, it also enables Mhatre to blur the

boundaries between her audience and her employers. The idea of the audience is mutable, especially in the case of stand-up comedy. Alice Rayner (2012) writes that the audience as a unitary, predetermined body is an assumption of the performer rather than a fact. As such, the comedian can create their audience using jokes to identify them in certain ways. Mhatre uses this tactic substantively in her performances. As noted above, though the audience members may not all be women, or from the middle class, or even employers themselves, Mhatre turns them into a locum for her employers. We can conclude that the specificities of how Mhatre constructs her blurry comic persona are important elements of her personal comedy. We also note how Mhatre creates and delineates her audience through this persona as a vital corollary to the impact that her comedy will have upon the audience, mainstream stand-up comedy circuits, and popular cultural representations of domestic workers in India, as the next section examines.

Mhatre's Comedy at Work

The potential behind Mhatre's comic persona is better understood considering the humorous rhetoric Indian audiences are primed to expect about 'maid' characters. There are gaps in our understanding of how domestic workers are depicted in Indian popular culture, including comedy, according to Sreela Sarkar (2023: 42). She notes the significance of such characters in films, TV shows, and on social media to middle-class identity making (2023). Though Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora (2024) focus on an OTT series titled 'Maid in Heaven', they illustrate the comic discourse surrounding domestic workers in India today. A significant source of humour in the show is the trope of the cunning and manipulative maid set against her 'seemingly benign' employers (Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora 2024: 108). The comedic treatment of the domestic worker character in this show is purely figurative: she is made to enact the actual anxieties and preoccupations the audience members have about domestic workers (Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora 2024: 121). Consequently, the figuration of domestic workers in mainstream comedy is entertaining to audiences, as it is relatable and seemingly validates their supposed victimisation at the hands of cunning maids (Mundayur, Jotwani and Arora 2024: 121). This skewed figuration tells of the balance of power in comedy, operating across its various modes. Typically, representative power is held unequally between those who make the joke (here, the stand-up comedian) and those who laugh (the audience) on one hand, and the object of the joke on the other. There are significant personal and collective costs to consistently being the object of comedy, and these are exacerbated for those who are already marginalised (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 232). As established, the mainstream comedy circuit in India is dominated by comedians from privileged socio-cultural backgrounds and caters to a largely middle-class audience. As such, Indian stand-up comedy, as it derives from and replicates the culture of servitude in India, is a particularly inimical site of representation for domestic workers in India.

Ironically though, Mhatre's choice of performing personal comedy offers a potent means of disrupting this entrenched comedic treatment of domestic workers and its real-world reverberations. The devices available to the comedian at the intersection of life narrative and comedy present an opportunity for 'unexpected testimony, for amplifying subjects and experiences from the margins' (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 226). Testimony is an outward-facing autobiographical posture in which the speaking 'I' seeks to bear witness to their experiences before a presumed audience (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 233). This public function of life narratives may be well exercised by those on the margins via stand-up comedy, where an audience is always present. In the case of Mhatre's comedic oeuvre, the unexpectedness of her testimony has two related but distinct aspects. First, Mhatre's reliance on her own life experiences presents her audience with the point of view of a domestic worker, unprecedented on the comedic stage. This shifting of perspective contrasts the longstanding depictions of domestic workers as formulaic objects of comedy. Existing scholarship and my own observation of Indian comedy confirm that it is chiefly the person of the domestic worker, her character, physical features, mannerisms, speech, and lifestyle that are lampooned to produce humour. Mhatre is acutely aware of this rhetoric circulating around domestic workers within stand-up comedy. During a televised performance in 2018, she made the following comment: '*Maine dekha hain ki stand-up comedian hamesha apne maid ka story bolte hai, tho mein aaj bolegi*' ('I have seen that stand-up comedians always tell stories of their maids, so today I will speak') ('On Breaking Class Barriers': 00:20–25). Mhatre poses her comedy as a deliberate interjection in the cultural discourse surrounding domestic workers, particularly in the realm of stand-up comedy. This tongue-in-cheek introduction speaks evocatively of the reversal in the point of view that the jokes she performs, and the very comic persona she constructs, enact.

Following from this, Mhatre repeatedly makes the female employer, who she refers to as 'madam', the object of her humour. She portrays this madam character with a note of sarcasm, often using paralinguistic cues to caricature her mannerisms and ways of speaking. Mhatre mimics the supposed speech of the 'madam' by switching to a wheedling, sing-song tone with a high-pitched voice (CHAKNA 2024: 04:19–25). She accompanies these vocal cues with simpering facial expressions and exaggerated hand gestures. This directly contrasts how other stand-up comedians often adopt an indecipherable, guttural tone and utter rude colloquialisms in exaggerated attempts to depict domestic worker characters.

Consequently, by way of her unexpected testimony, Mhatre perceivably disavows and dismantles the representative authority inherent in stand-up comedy. After introducing herself during performances, Mhatre often jokes that as a comedian she has many '*bade bade log*' (a colloquial expression meaning 'important people') following her, emphasising her growing fanbase and recognition. However, she quickly adds that as a domestic worker too '*bade bade log*' followed her around, except then they were interested in—and here she often mimics the 'madam' character—if she swept the floors properly or burnt the *rotis,* playing with the

double meaning of the word 'follow' (CHAKNA 2024: 00:39–55). By remarking that those who once employed her now make up her audience, Mhatre marks the dissolution of the unequal relationship between herself and her employers. She also emphasises her new role as a stand-up comedian and the promise of self-representation and expression it holds for her. Elsewhere, Mhatre recalls how one day while washing clothes in a vegetarian household, she discovered a receipt for non-vegetarian food in her male employer's pocket. She took it to her 'madam', feigning ignorance of its implications (Mhatre 2022). As a result, the angry woman reprimanded her husband, but Mhatre says she enjoyed her own work that day. In this instance, Mhatre directs the employer's own anger away from herself to produce an instance of quiet and otherwise impossible laughter and enjoyment for herself. Typically, it is the employer characters and the audience in mutual recognition who laugh at the domestic worker's missteps. The employer plays the role of the 'straight man', a stock character who feeds the main object of comedy with their lines and stands by and laughs. Here, both onstage and in the real-life anecdotes she recounts, it is Mhatre who laughs, as she rejects being made the object of humour and turns her laughter and that of the audience towards her employers instead. Additionally, note that Mhatre does not indulge in self-deprecating humour, often common in personal comedy, perhaps conscious of how representative authority can quickly shift to make her the object of humour again.

The effect of Mhatre's unexpected testimony extends beyond the comedic treatment of the domestic worker to critique the extant culture of servitude[4] in India as well. During one performance, Mhatre deliberately misinterprets the practice of installing separate 'servants' elevators in apartment complexes by sarcastically telling her audience that this is evidence of her special regard in the building ('On Breaking Class Barriers': 01:38). Counterposing the reliance on her work against the boundaries set up to regulate her person, Mhatre produces a sense of irony that lays bare the perverse logic behind these cultures of servitude and surreptitiously critiques her employers before an audience. This extended effect of blurring her person and comic persona permits Mhatre to play out scenarios on stage that would be impossible in real life. Appearing on stage in the character of a domestic worker, Mhatre does not simply build her comic persona; rather, she enacts an incisive parody of the practices of servitude in India.

Secondly, the unexpectedness of Mhatre's testimony is in the comic strategy she uses and the effect it has on her audience. Whether deliberately or not, Mhatre's comedy has the effect of 'pranking the audience', presenting scathing critique through auto/biographical testimony in the guise of a comedy performance (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 230). As Mhatre constructs her comic persona, the audience in turn finds themselves mapped onto the 'madam' figure. As such, they are unexpectedly confronted with testimony that implicates them, as Mhatre satirises the culture of servitude that they (or at least the social class they belong to) help sustain. Reading Mhatre's stand-up comedy this way, we witness her 'turn the master's laughter into a methodological tool to understand the servant's tragic

situation', which Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha observe in other cultural texts too (2019: 15). While she garners laughter from the audience, Mhatre's comedic strategies startle and discomfit the audience into understanding and realisation. As such, Mhatre's comedy is poised to not simply entertain but also implicate her audience in her experiences of domestic work.

Perhaps how audiences react indicates the success of this comedic approach. Her strategic rejection of the norms of mainstream stand-up comedy, exacerbated by her deliberate evocation of domestic work, leaves her vulnerable to negative comments on her YouTube videos. Multiple commenters state that they do not find her funny, variously describing her comedy as '*tatti*' (shit), '*bakwas*' (nonsense), or '*ghatiya bakwass*' (cheap/inferior nonsense). One commenter responds to Mhatre's satire of her employers by saying, 'In joke there should be humor and not sense of hatred-ness [sic]' (GodrejHIT 2018). Evidently, genre expectations exert a burden of comedy on Mhatre. Even accounting for the excess of language in social media comments, there is no mistaking that her audience is conditioned to a certain brand of comedy; aware of the transgressive nature of Mhatre's persona and humour, they respond by disavowing her comedy altogether. Audiences expect to see domestic worker characters configured in comedy in certain ways. Her entrance onto the stage of mainstream stand-up comedy puts Mhatre in an uncomfortable situation: while witnessing her own painful experiences, she must bear the burden of comedy expected of a 'maid'.

However, by presenting personal comedy, Mhatre manages to transfer this discomfort onto the audience. The audience is primed to expect certain kinds of comedy about domestic workers, but Mhatre frustrates this expectation. Further, she inverts the representative authority of comedy to effectively satirise and critique her employers, alongside the culture of domestic service in India. When accompanied by the identification of the audience with her employers, this prevents the audience from claiming a sense of victimisation, inducing instead a sense of discomfort. This uneasiness stems from the audience questioning their right to laugh at her experiences. Perhaps these statements appear speculative, given they are not based on responses from actual audiences. However, given what we know of personal comedy, as well as of the scene of stand-up comedy in India, it is not so unreasonable to suspect that Mhatre's performances would have this effect. It is an especial ability of autobiographical comedy to exert just such an unsettling effect upon an audience (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 234). Mhatre's performances evoke laughter. Yet, her autobiographical comedy and the audience's assumed or actual complicity in her experiences of domestic work make laughter seem inappropriate. The manner in which she brings the domestic worker to the stage of stand-up comedy ensures recognition and contemplation on the part of the audience of the extant practices of domestic work they help perpetuate.

Deepika Mhatre and her stand-up comedy carry much significance for how domestic workers represent themselves and their lives. This analysis finds that Mhatre mobilises the possibilities of stand-up comedy as a life-narrative medium,

undermining the representative tropes that overwhelmingly circumscribe domestic workers in comedic discourse in India. By countering the depiction of domestic workers in stand-up comedy via her personal comedy and comic persona, while simultaneously identifying the audience with her employers, Mhatre indicts them in her experiences, producing a sense of discomfort and then recognition and nervous laughter from her audience. As such, Deepika Mhatre's stand-up comedy illustrates 'the capacity of auto/biographical comedy to advance counternarratives' (McNeill and Zuern 2022: 235). Her personal comedy and her comic persona are primed to entertain but also shock and evoke contemplation in the audience about the prevalent culture of domestic service in India. Reading through automediality, this paper also observes Mhatre's stand-up comedy counter long-standing figurations of domestic workers and their lives and autobiographical forms in general. Automediality lends us the analytical and methodological apparatus to observe how new and non-written mediums and forms of representation offer unique affordances for domestic workers' life narration. However, following the encounter with domestic work, I observe that it is not just the self which emerges differently, but the form of stand-up comedy is challenged and must broaden to allow new subjects to emerge and tell their stories. Taking stand-up comedy as life narration serves to proliferate sites from which other marginal lives, who also do not find their way into writing, might be read.

Endnotes

1. The term 'life narrative' here includes but goes beyond auto/biographical *writing*.
2. The ILO overview of domestic workers in India finds that most have received very little education.
3. The language of the *tapori* character has the effect of shocking the mainstream culture of the city while depicting his sense of alienation within it. (Mazumdar 2001: 4872)
4. The phrase 'culture of servitude' and its connotations are borrowed from Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum's book *The Culture of Servitude* (2009).

Works Cited

About domestic work. n.d. International Labour Organization, https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/areasofwork/WCMS_141187/lang—en/index.htm (accessed on 11 January 2024).

GodrejHIT. 2018. 'Every Maid During Diwali, by Deepika Mhatre, a Real Maid Turned Stand-up Comedian', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a038O90nrvU.

Kay, Kavyta. 2018. *New Indian Nuttahs*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. 2001. 'Figure of the "Tapori": Language, Gesture and Cinematic City', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (52): 4872–80.

McNeill, Laurie and John D. Zuern. 2022. 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to This Issue: Comedy and Life Narratives', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies,* 37 (2): 225–42, DOI: 10.1080/08989575.2022.2136823.

Mittal, Aditi. 2018. 'Bad Girls with Aditi Mittal| Ep 2| Deepika Mhatre', *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZddcQEtV9Gc.

Mhatre, Deepika. 2022. Performance at 'The Laughter Hour'. Cafe Arpan, Mumbai.

CHAKNA. 2024. 'Ameer Log | Standup Comedy | CHUCKLES & CHAKNA with Dipika Mhatre,' *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3lI89E_kB4.

Mhatre, Deepika (@dipikathestandupcomedian). n.d. 'Posts', *Instagram*, https://www.instagram.com/dipikathestandupcomedian/ (accessed on 4 April 2024)

Miller, Zubin. 2020. 'Stand-up Comedy and Young India: The Expression and Construction of Identity', *Changing English* 27 (4): 446–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2020.1764839.

Mintz, Lawrence E. 1985. 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', *American Quarterly,* 37 (1): 70–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712763.

Moser, Christian. 2018. 'Automediality', *Handbook of Autobiography/ Autofiction*, *Vol. 1*: *Theory and Concepts,* pp. 247–61. N.p.: De Gruyter.

Mundayur, Neelima, Juhi Jotwani and Shubda Arora. 2024. 'Figure of the Domestic Worker in "Maid in Heaven": Study of Digital Untouchability in Contemporary Media', *The Digital Popular in India: Mainstreaming the Marginal*, 105–25. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Paul, Subin. 2015. 'A New Public Sphere? English-language Stand-up Comedy in India', *Contemporary South Asia,* 25 (2): 121–35, DOI: 10.1080/09584935.2017.1321618.

Ray, Raka, and Seemin Qayum. 2009. *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rayner, Alice. 2012. 'Creating the Audience: It's All in the Timing', *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, 28–39. South Carolina: Parlor Press.

Sarkar, Sreela. 2023. '"How Crazy is Your Maid?" Domestic Workers in the 'New India', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 16: 41–8.

Sinha, Nitin, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha. 2019. 'Introduction', *Servants' Pasts, Vol. 1*, 1–87. N.p.: Orient Blackswan.

Sit-down with the Stand-up, Interview with Jahnavi Samant. 2023. Mumbai.

Stand Up Comic Deepika Mhatre on Breaking Class Barriers. 2018. N.p.: NDTV Profit, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lU39IlrLHDk.

BOOK REVIEW

Hindi Cinema and Pakistan: Screening the Idea and the Reality (Oxon: Routledge, 2024) by Meenakshi Bharat

Kamayani Kumar

Meenakshi Bharat's book *Hindi Cinema and Pakistan: Screening the Idea and the Reality* is a rich and significant address of a subject whose connotations run deep. Using cinema as a lens, Bharat astutely delineates how the Indian collective psyche is yet to come to terms with the problematic 'reality' of Pakistan. As her prefatory essay delineates, India and Pakistan had a complex trajectory carved out for them in 1947 – with India struggling to come to terms with its new reality as a 'truncated' nation and Pakistan trying to 'carv[e] a credible niche for itself on the world map'. Simultaneously, escalating hostilities coexist uneasily with a profoundly nostalgic sense of shared common heritage. This paradoxical nature of the relationship between the two countries has also affected the cinematic tradition of both the countries for over 75 years.

Bharat, by tracing the cinematic tradition and how it has been influenced by the estranged relations of the two countries, has put forth a significant question – has the Indian cinematic tradition tended towards 'delimiting' the representation of Pakistan as a distinct entity? Through a critical exegesis of films made on either side of the border, Bharat covers a span from 1948 to 2018, and in her comprehensive review of films, she elaborates on how, in the early cinematic responses to Partition, communalism was a trigger point for the devastation that Partition entailed, and the thematic mainstay was the psychological violence it generated. Bharat cites M.S. Sathyu's *Garam Hava (1973)* as the foundational film on Partition for its extremely sensitive handling of the rupturing of the syncretic relationship between the two communities and an honest reckoning of the Muslims who chose to stay back in India. Bharat points out that much of the cinematic discourse on partition comes from the adaptation of literary narratives, be it *Dharamputra*, *Tamas*, *Earth*

1947 or *Pinjar.* It is with the release of *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* at the turn of the century that a shift in the narrative can be observed. From lamenting the violence the partition caused, the narrative shifts towards a well-defined 'loud jingoistic dialogue and strident anti-Pak sentiment', a sentiment that becomes more and more pronounced in the years to come. Bharat reveals the 'polytemporal' nature of Partition trauma and shows how many films used sport events between India and Pakistan as a metaphoric proxy war to confront the seismic underpinnings of partition.

Bharat elicits that much of the cinematic output after the turn of the century focuses on men in uniform, with army men and policemen portraying 'Pakistan and Pakistanis as the enemy'. While films like *Black Friday*, *Haseena Parkar* and *D-Company* use the terror nexus to critique Pakistan as a 'terror-mongering domicile' of the terrorist, films like *Roja* (1993) and *Baby* (2015) constitute what Bharat astutely terms 'Hindi post-terrorist cinema'. Bharat traces how within the ambit of post-terrorist cinema, Kashmir's representation as a contentious territory of desire also undergoes a sea change, for while Mani Ratnam in *Roja* made veiled references to terrorism in Kashmir as being sponsored by the 'nearby nation', films like *Mission Kashmir* () categorically refer to Pakistan as the trigger for terrorism in Kashmir. Insightfully, Bharat traces how, post-9/11, the K question becomes a central trope in films like *Kabul Express (2006), New York (2009) and Kurbaan (2009),* thence taking the Kashmir issue and Indo-Pak animosity beyond the subcontinent, a trajectory that culminates in the discourse developed in satiric comic films like *Tere Bin Laden* (2010) and *Bangistan (2015)*. Moving on from tracing the dominant metaphor of terrorism in Hindi cinema, Bharat goes on to examine the nexus between Hindi sports films and Pakistan. Taking into account films made between 2007 and 2021, the book provides a rich commentary on how the problematic hostility between India and Pakistan has been translated into war on the sports field. Echoing the thawing or escalation of Indo-Pak hostility, films like *Chak De! India* (2007), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* and *Gold* (2018) are rich cultural texts deeply imbued with political agendas and bringing the nationalistic fervour and anti-Pakistan angst into the public sphere.

Bharat points out how, besides testifying to Indo-Pak animosity through the genre of sports films and spy thrillers, a host of films were also broaching the theme of cross-border love. In her chapter titled 'Loving *the Other: Cross-border Love' in the film* Bharat points out that the two most definitive cross-border love films – *Henna* and *Veer Zaara* – were made by directors born in undivided India who had migrated from Peshawar and Lahore, respectively, and celebrate a sense of shared cultural and linguistic past and generate 'liberatory discourses' and are prototypical examples of 'celebratory love'. These cross-border films problematise the testy theme of cross-border love through the spy, thriller, and comic romance subgenres in a manner that has developed a significant subtextual discursive space exploring ramifications of Partition and its aftermath. Working as a palimpsest and a tool for enabling cultural mourning, these films have developed a

counternarrative to official historiography and political discourse vis-à-vis the Indo-Pakistan relationship. Through an in-depth and critical exegesis of the cinematic oeuvre focusing on the Indo-Pakistan relationship, Bharat has written a powerful work that will definitely help in understanding the complex, tumultuous nature of Partition's legacy, its impact on public memory and its reconstruction through the cinematic lens.

Bharat's book offers a detailed, nuanced and rich overview of the trajectory of post-terrorist Hindi film and insight into the ideological apparatus that informs acts of terror. The very breadth and novelty of the project and the in-depth analysis are striking.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

EDITOR

Amitendu Bhattacharya is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani – K K Birla Goa Campus.

CONTRIBUTORS

Aleena Manoharan is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at CMS College Kottayam, Kerala.

Amandeep Kaur is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab.

Anshika Niranjan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies at the University of Delhi.

Arnapurna Rath is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar.

Asmita Kundu is an Academic Fellow at the Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Baroda, Gujarat.

Deepanwita Dey is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Liberal Arts at the Indian Institute of Technology Bhilai.

Ipsita Sengupta is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Bankura University, West Bengal.

Ishita Gautam is an independent researcher with a degree in literature from the University of Delhi.

Jagvir Singh is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at SR Government College for Women, Amritsar, Punjab.

Kalplata is Assistant Professor in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Kamayani Kumar is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Aryabhatta College, University of Delhi.

Maziah Shaaz is an independent researcher with a Ph.D. from the University of Lucknow.

Meghal Karki is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Letters at Ambedkar University, Delhi.

Mohd Aqib is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Neenu Kumar is Professor in the Department of English at Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi.

Sabreen Ahmed is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Nagaon University, Assam.

Sanjukta Naskar is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi.

Sohini Gayen is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar.

Srestha Bhattacharya is an independent researcher with an M.Phil. from the University of Delhi.

Sukriti Bhukkal is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Post Graduate Government College for Girls, Chandigarh.

Swatee Sinha is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Swami Dhananjoy Das Kathiababa Mahavidyalaya, Bankura University, West Bengal.

Tara Sonali Saldanha is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Yashvi Srivastava is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English and Modern European Languages at the University of Lucknow.