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Is Humour Gendered? A Theoretical and Textual Analysis

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Abstract:

The comic terrain has been rather unkind to female comic writers, artists and performers. A number of socio- psychological barriers - “the preference for women’s tears over laughter” (Kathleen Rowe) and the perceived association between the discomposed female body shaking with laughter and lack (loss) of morality (Barecca) have made it a terribly difficult battle for women.

Laughter itself has become a site for gender debate- both in theory and practice. While theoreticians like Freud tend to view the production of humour as essentially ‘male’, a female critic like Helene Cixous asserts that a woman’s laughter is not a taboo. The study of comic texts from the classical to the contemporary times too reveals how humour is inseparable from issues of dominance and difference.

The paper renegotiates the contested gendered territory of humour and raises a very pertinent issue – whether gender asymmetry uses humour as a means of devaluation of women or are there any instances where female subjectivity: its anger, resistance, bonding and victorious laughter have found a meaningful expression in textual and other forms of representation.

Keywords: humour production, gender asymmetry, renegotiation, female wit and humour.

Comedy, in spite of being an extremely popular mode of expression across cultures and generations, has never been given the critical acclaim that has been bestowed upon tragedy. For female comic writers, artists and performers it has been a double bind as they need to confront yet another form of socio-psychological discrimination so that female humour itself has become a gendered territory- both in theory as well as in practice. Various theories related to women and comedy as well as the textual representations of women in comic texts and other visual media bear ample evidence to the fact that humour is closely related to issues of power and marginalization.

The discourse of humour like other forms of discourse, in general, has been controlled by men. It has been observed that the restrictions placed on female expressions of humour are a part of a larger system that discourages women from any form of expression in public. Social anthropologist Mahadev Apte too concludes that the traditional gender discourse discourages women from indulging in particularly those forms of humour which involve competing with or belittling others and thereby glorifying oneself¹. Therefore practical jokes, pranks and slapstick humour are scarcely reported for women as these are traditionally regarded as too impolite to be ‘feminine’. Similar cultural taboos have also been pointed out by Regina Barecca in her study of humour across different cultures wherein there is a perception of a close nexus between female humour and immorality:

“In communities throughout the world, women who tell jokes are regarded as sexually promiscuous”².

This cultural conditioning /bias stems from the fact that humour is essentially empowering –a fact borne out both by Hobbes’ Superiority Theory as well as Bergson’s Theory of Corrective Laughter and its controlling agency. Similarly, Freud’s Relief theory of humour projects women merely as passive receptors/even objects of humour which is essentially produced by the aggressive ‘superior’ male. Further, such humour provides a socially acceptable outlet for the repressed male instincts. The power of humour to question and destabilize the hegemonic authorities- social, cultural, political- is perceived as essentially male bastion. That women may be capable of such aggression and disruption has either been denied or ignored. For instance, Fanny Fern’s weekly columns in mid nineteenth century America or the immensely popular Marietta Holley whose fame rivalled that of Mark Twain are hardly chronicled in any of the histories of comic literature.

Helene Cixous, on the other hand, in her essay, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, challenges the taboos associated with women’s laughter where a woman laughing raucously is perceived as a cackling gorgon – “And she’s not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing.”³ This image of the triumphantly laughing woman is a direct challenge even to the feminist theorists who have tended to focus upon the stereotype of a victimized, suffering woman. Similarly, Kathleen Rowe, has observed a “cultural preference for women’s tears over laughter and imagining them as generators of comedy is seemingly at odds with the traditional notions of femininity.”⁴ The numerous physical manifestations of being a female comic artist- face contortions, loud sounds, discomposed female body, concomitant to a loss of self- control- all seem to shatter the ideals of beauty and romance projected on to women. Thus, theoretically, both the production as well as the reception of humour are closely intertwined with the gender issue.

The study of comic texts too reveals how humour is inseparable from issues of dominance and difference. That these sex related differences in the nature, dissemination, production and appreciation of humour are influenced by the normative behaviour patterns is reflected in literary texts produced in different cultures and ages. The skewed subject-object relationship in favour of men is evident from the classical Greek comedies, Medieval tales of romance through Elizabethan and Restoration plays to the present day sitcoms. The subversive and liberating power of comedy, barring a few exceptions, tends to reinforce gender stereotypes and societal norms.

Classical Greek drama with its origin in the exclusively male Dionysiac ritual, more or less, excluded women from the areas of dramatic performance and production as well as appreciation. The presence of women even as spectators is a matter of debate. While tragedies like *Antigone* and *Electra* display women with a wide range of personalities; from dutiful wives, sisters, queens to faithless, vengeful social climbers, the classical Greek comedies tend to relegate women to peripheral roles, an exception being Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. The eponymous female protagonist plays a key role in the political life of Athens with her resolution to bring an end to the long drawn Peloponnesian war by withdrawing sexual favours to the menfolk. However, their ability to execute their political strategy is doubtful as a number of women are shown to lack the self -discipline to practice abstinence. Moreover, their moment of glory is short lived as

their centrality in political life ceases once the war is over, they return to the domestic sphere. The play, replete with sexual innuendoes, does not generate the comic force which might have had the subversive power to transcend gender stereotypes.

Similarly, the Medieval tales of romance with their apparent ‘veneration’ of women insidiously contributed to the commodification of women as objects of male gaze; with a complete denial of female subjectivity. Medieval Western literature, steeped in its dogmatic religious ideology is loaded with misogyny. Texts such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte D’Arthur* project an essentially masculinist world order. Pitted against this patriarchal worldview, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, a witty, outspoken performer who claims all the privileges of free and profane speech, dares to challenge religious orthodoxy and fossilized views about women, stands out. The location of a woman at the centre of a comic text has provoked contrary responses. While the contemporary 14th century viewed the Wife as a grotesque, monstrous creature, anti-feminists’ nightmare come true; a more liberal reading of the text has found Chaucer as “Venus’ own eclerke” giving voice to deepest female desires and aspirations⁵. She seems to embody the contrary perceptions of female humour that Helene Cixous’ Medusa image represents- it may seem monstrous to some but it is also beautiful.

The Medieval ideals of chastity, obedience, submissiveness continued to have their sway on Renaissance literary imagination in works such as Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. In Shakespeare’s plays such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Taming of the Shrew* the female characters are either structural subordinates lurking in the margins or shrews who need to be chastised. The world of comedies too in spite of its subversive potential, ultimately merely reinforces the societal status quo so far as issues of female identity and freedom are concerned. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick’s silencing of the witty, sparkling Beatrice- “Peace, I will stop your mouth”(with Hero’s recent narrow escape from a nearly fatal blow to her reputation and life) seems to set the tone for her future role in marriage. Even the mirthful world of festive comedies such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* with their Carnavalesque spirit, boisterous, obscene humour ultimately reassert social order after allowing for a brief period of humour arising out of mistaken identities, hilarious transformations and magical tricks. With limited options available to women in terms of action in the patriarchal set up, the ‘liberation’ of women is restricted to sparkling comic speech acts and brief intervals of empowerment as they cross-dress and take on male identities. In these texts comedy still operates within the normative patterns of gender behaviour.

While the marginalization and exclusion of women from the field of artistic production till the seventeenth century has played a significant role, even in the comic texts written later by women, the efforts to destabilize hegemonic powers are allowed only partial victory. In the comic world of Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*, the female protagonists are categorized as “woman of quality” and “meant for your diversion.”The most hilarious darts of Hellena can scarcely hide her insecurities in a rigidly patriarchal set up, an awareness that she shares with the breezy Millamant in *The Way of the World*. As Andrew Stott has succinctly put it: “Women are allowed their brilliance, freedom and power only because the (comic) genre has built-in safeguards against such behaviours”⁶

After a temporary subversion of traditional notions of woman and comedy, there is a re-establishment of order through the subjugation of women in marriage- the most common trope used by comic writers.

This truth is borne out even by the romantic/realistic comedies of Jane Austen who claims to be a realist trying to reject escapism and extravagance. The comic vision never loses sight of the minutiae of day to day living and, in fact, ensures happiness of characters in a successful marriage of romance and the material and social realities of their existence. In the later works, as well, the Victorian ideal of 'the angel in the house' is reinforced as the insipid but morally upright Fanny Prices are allowed victory over the rich Mary Crawfords and the ambitious Becky Sharps.

The political and social changes sweeping across the world around the turn of the nineteenth century towards greater democratization, demands for women's suffragette, a large corpus of writings by women, promised to usher in a new era. Great literature from the past (for instance, *Pamela*, *Anna Karenina*) was now being re-read from a new perspective. Shaw's plays such as *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Major Barbara* opened up the possibilities of looking at women not just from a gendered/ moralistic perspective but as creatures caught up in the vortex of socio-economic factors.

Coupled with this there were theoretical analyses of the debilitating material conditions of women in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*(1929), Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race*(1979) and Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's *Mad woman in the Attic*(1979). Post 1960's the demand for women's rights to self-determination and personal autonomy became vociferous. Simone Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*(1949) was often quoted to protest against the disempowering effects of gendered constructions of femininity. In works such as, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*(1969) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), there was also a strong denunciation of misogyny in male writers. The wave of feminism swept across the world and at least, in theory, challenged patriarchy as never before.

Despite a feminist re-writing of sexuality during the last few decades of the twentieth century (ideas ranging from plurality of sexual desire to radical lesbianism), the popular representations of female sexuality remained deeply conservative. While the visual media does reflect the changes in cultural codes vis a vis pre-marital chastity, divorce and live-in relationships, the presentation remains more or less voyeuristic(as in Broadway farces).The sexual content is presented more explicitly but comedy operates around the stereotypes of sex obsessed/ frigid characters, the male predator, or the female seductress (*Butterflies*, *Bottoms Up*). Even the popular TV sit com *I love Lucy* presented an adorable but a consumerist female lead.

The advent of mass media provided yet another platform to female comic artists such as Sarah Silverman, Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller in USA. However, for these female stand-up comediennes, their acceptance as producers of comedy also entails downplaying their femininity. Many women comic artists have addressed the same range of topics as their male counterparts rather than limiting themselves to specifically gendered topics. Despite frequent charges of profanity and an unfair gender bias against them, these artists have carved a niche for themselves in the world of comedy.

The presence of a number of female playwrights on the British stage such as Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, Judy Upton and Winsome Pinnock, to name a few, has brought the women's issue centre stage after being marginalized by the "Angry Young Man" phase. Similarly, many female fiction writers such as Erica Jong (*Fear of Flying*), Maya Angelou (*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*) and Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) have prioritized women's experiences. With a large number of contemporary female theoreticians, writers and comic artists, there is a greater acceptance of women in their roles as producers and receptors of comedy. Though a lot yet remains to be done to displace the deeply embedded misogyny with respect to women and comedy, there is a subtle shift in perception so that the comic terrain is gradually moving from a contested territory towards a place of peaceful cohabitation for all artists, irrespective of the gender.

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