

# The Coalescence of Humour and Humiliation

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Why do we laugh? What makes us laugh? What are the implications of laughter? What are the physiological and psychological reasons for laughter? Is it merely physiological and psychological phenomenon? Does it emanate— so to say—from the social and the political? If yes, then what in the socio- political triggers laughter in an individual or a group? What role then humour has to play in the socio-political? Is humour innocent? Humour is a quintessential component of our daily life and these are some of the questions that arise when I think of humour, and when I do humour. I take it given, that, humour doesn't happen, it is rather done. It is a tool with certain purposes. And as a complex phenomenon, it needs series and levels of unraveling for it to be understood. With these beliefs I delved into the explanations which different paradigms can provide me. I acknowledge that it's much difficult a task to get the know-how of each and every framework which puts forth the exegesis of humour, and the way it is inscribed in our socio-political lives, yet I have tried to outline more or less the fundamental elucidations that can fuel our quest to further excavate in this rather intense subject, forming and impacting our daily lives. Advancing from that, I have attempted to trace the synthesis between humour and humiliation. With an expectation to uncover the 'enveloping' companionship between humour and humiliation, I have argued that humour envelopes humiliation and humiliation envelopes humour. In this article, section I figures out the different physiological, psychological, and philosophical explanations to the query concerned. Section II draws the map of various debates and dilemmas surrounding the subject, and section III narrates the role of humour as tool of resistance.

## I

Gelotologists (Laugh researchers) explain that laughter reduces the release of stress hormones, lowers the blood pressure and oxygenates the blood flow. It releases cognitive energy, which can also be understood as 'Comic relief'. Humour—according to gelotology—can be used for therapeutic purposes. Parallel to physiological, the psychological says that it can facilitate a reinterpretation of a given situation or event. Tension release occurs as a type of rebound effect following the increase in arousal that accompanies much humor, such as during the build up of a joke. Reinterpretation occurs as a result of an incongruity within the humor stimulus. Incongruity refers to that unexpected association of two normally unrelated or even conflicting contexts or circumstances. Humour has several psycho-psychological impacts, but when it comes to defining humour, it is difficult to get to know what exactly humour is, especially through mere definitions. There are—more than definitions— many aspects of humour. At times we may be talking about sense of humor, appreciation of humor or generation of humor. Sense of humor is seen as a characteristic of an individual, and in some cases is measured as a propensity to laugh at certain things of oneself. Appreciation of humor refers to the ability to see humor in the environment, whereas generation of humor is the tendency to make humorous comments or act in a humorous manner in a situation. Sense, appreciation, and generation of humour is different in, say, a child and an adult. In the child, they are—what psychologists refer to as— involuntary, while in an

adult, it is generally voluntary, given the fact that the adult is coated with a peculiar social construct that formulates and drives her sense, appreciation, and generation of humour.

Kant extends the psycho-physiological into the philosophical. His line is that laughter is induced by an agreeable play of sensations that does not amount to thinking. Music is similar in this respect. The gratification afforded by music and the humorous is primarily physical, involving movements of the intestines, which lead to other bodily movements (vibrations of the diaphragm when we laugh) that are re-creative and conducive to health. In music certain auditory sensations provoke aesthetic ideas, which in their turn provoke further sensations. In humour, however, it begins the other way round, with absurd or incongruous ideas provoking sensations. Hobbes, on the other hand, along with Henri Bergson, would have sharp disagreement with Kant. For Hobbes, humour is the rather disagreeable business of self-congratulation and reassurance in face of the misfortune of others. Hobbes and Bergson's superiority theory—for me—rides over the incongruity theory of Kant, especially when it comes to understanding humour enveloping humiliation. However, it is noteworthy that Hobbes and Bergson stand far away from Kant, if not opposite to him, they do not stand together, or even close.

Hobbes makes a distinction between 'glory' and 'sudden glory'. For him, glory is joy, arising from the thought of one's own power or ability. And sudden glory is a passion that causes sudden laughter by recognition of one's sudden act that pleases them, or (emphasis), by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof one suddenly applauds oneself. Bergson, on the contrary, believes that humour is not exactly one's glorying over the unfortunate, rather it is a matter of the free spirit soaring triumphantly over the determined, the inflexible, the mechanical. Satre, here, is close to Bergson. If we take a fusion of Hobbes' and Bergson's stands—without being concerned about the point from where they part—we receive a framework which can help us understand humiliation through humour. For instance, If a person falls on a banana skin, one is laughing on him/her—in Hobbsian understanding—because of that person's misfortune and one's own fortune that one didn't fall. In Bergson's understanding, one is laughing on that person taking cognizance of the determined, the inflexible, the mechanical nature of that act. In other words, on the 'normative'. Hence, if we look at humiliation through these lenses, and take example of heinous crimes like rape, torture, murder, harassment, that directly or indirectly—through *gali*, rape jokes, etc—become matter of humour, we can recognize the pattern of humour emanating, in these cases, from humiliation—which is either misfortune or normative—of or for the victim, who is the object of laughter. This is frightening. It simply kicks us out from the physiological and psychological, through the philosophical, to the socio-political of humour. And forces us to question the kind of society we are; containing humour that floats on serious humiliation—which constitutes sheer brutality punching humanity in its face—promoting it further using humour as the very tool, as the envelope.

## II

Humour is a pervasive part of human experience. If you watch people in social groups, they spend a lot of time laughing. Many popular forms of entertainment are focused on creating humorous situations. A lot of the links, pictures, and videos that people share on social media are also funny. Despite the importance of humor in people's lives, it has been remarkably difficult to understand the conditions that make something funny. And above all, what is funny? What is humour? Is humour innocent? Can we

have ‘clean’ humour, free from and not propagating sexism, castism, etc.? It is important to identify the source, form, and impact of humour, and to trace who is comically treated by whom and with what consequences. A distinction has to be kept intact between the speech and the speaker when a rather ‘positive’ humour is perceived. A separation between meaning and the being has to be maintained. One should not laugh on the person delivering humour. A moral minimum, here, has to be ensured to prevent humiliation. Another distinction which reflects the positiveness of humour is its driver, whether, the mind is driving humour, or the heart. Heart should emanate humour, and face should not wear any *mukhota*(mask). Authenticity of the face and moral sensitivity in the skin are the elements of the moral minimum through which humour should qualify itself.

It is also pertinent to confirm whether humour is based on the act or the belief. Is it originating from agent or the structure? For instance, take a case of a so called upper caste child, who has a friend from a lower caste. She wants to invite that friend to her birthday party, but she is aware that inviting her shall disappoint several members of the family. Taking that into consideration she rejects this idea. In this situation, the act is discriminating, but the belief of that child aren’t. The act has been accomplished by the agency of that child but the driver of discrimination was the caste structure functioning with subtlety. But in case of, say, an adult upper caste person not allowing advancement of a Dalit in a select sphere or domain, the believes and the act have fine congruency. Although even in this situation one might argue that the agency is in active and full control of the structure—and that the responsibility of the impact on the victim should be of the structure—but one should note that the agency, in this case, can take the cognizance of the moral minimum, by acknowledging the human worth of the person being dealt with—who is equal to him. By not doing so, the agency loses its defense. It is liable for condemnation on very basic ethical grounds, and is thus rendered responsible for reinstating the humiliating structure. Similarly, in case of humorous acts, the agency-structure and act-belief dilemma has to be prevented from being projected as a dilemma, or rather a defense argument for the tormenting structure to carry out its fundamental function with precision. In other words, a spade has to be called spade, because of the meaning it gives to the victim.

### III

Human’s unique ability to laugh even at times of disappointment is the basis of humour. Humour has been regarded by sociologists as a form of spontaneous behavior and expression of sub-cultural norms which reinforces social controls within the group and expresses its members' shared resistance to the social pressures and tensions created by the formal organization of the wider environment with which the group interacts. Humour in the most formal of organizations, far from being an unremarkable and superficial froth on social relationships, is symptomatic of the most profound inter-subjective needs of group members who employ humour to make sense of and to control the tensions in their social relationships. While talking about Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Kamalakanta*, Sudipt Kaviraj describes humour as a characteristic weapon, a way of attacking without being attacked, a way of criticizing without entering into a dialogue. Humour—he says—is a way of inverting the world, a way of escaping from what is undeniably and intolerably true. According to him, humour precisely allows us to break the grammar of reality and history. And that is why the job of the comedian—of articulating the dark side of reality—attains sheer importance for the society. Defying the grammar of reality has some implications which ought to be clearly stated. Humour has a more open structure than other types of

discourses because it regards more possibilities as admissible than real life does. That is why humour is critical and subversive, and particularly effective against those assumptions of social life which pretend to some kind of self-evidence. Dalit and black autobiographies—for instance—are full of humour. Humour is hopeful precisely because in ridiculing the reality of social relations it asserts the important fact that the world that exists is always short of, is a travesty in a sense, of the world that ought to be.

Humour certainly becomes a liberating force—if not in a final, then in an interim sense—that soothes the wounds received through constant assault of humiliation and harassment. But the elucidation of humour in this aspect is not in any way intended to blur or erase the other side of the coin. When humour envelops humiliation, it is the method of oppression. It becomes the instrument used by the tormentor to control, even corporeally. In public spheres, and even in private ones. It has the capacity to captivate knowledge by inverting truth, for instance, in the intellectual arena. Humour can have devastating effects on soul, on the motivation of a person. It is a cannon that can bombard a person's inside, and establish control of the outside. But can this cannon be rotated 180 degrees? Can it be inverted and made to back fire? What ought to be the intensity of the backfire? What happens when a wife starts laughing at the husband, ridiculing him while he is beating her? What happens when the clown in the circus throws away his *pinocchio nose* and 'ugly' dress at the audience and stands still?

Humour when functioning as a cope up mechanism—as explained in the above paragraph—is often misunderstood as resistance mechanism. The meaning has to be translated from 'cope up' to 'resistance', and finally to 'giving it back', simply because coping up is insufficient to result into resistance, and besides—many a time—'giving back' turns out to be a necessity. Humiliation breathes from the structures that underlie and renew the need for inequality, subordination, and servility. Functionality of humiliation illustrates that its methodology is well defined and tools well refined. How to not let humour become the tool of the tormentor, becomes the question? How to retrieve humour, and besides use it against the oppressing structure? In order to arrest the functioning and halt the growth of humiliation, dismantlement, redemption, resignification of the methods and tools is requisite.

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