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Humour in Media Discourse Reflective of Social Problems

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Abstract:

Taking family disintegration as a metaphor, the researcher investigates social disintegration of the American and Pakistani society in particular and postmodern humans in general. Family animated sitcom; "The Simpsons" is taken as a case study to answer the research question. Reflections on five episodes of the sitcom are taken from 50 students of Masters in Health Professionals in Education (MHPE) in Lahore and analysed by the researcher. One episode of each season (28 seasons in all, so 28 episodes) is analysed by the researcher under the theoretical framework of McDonaldization. The results of the analysis of the reflections of students and the researcher's own analysis are conflated under the emerging themes. The emerging themes, amongst many others, in this series are; depressed and dissatisfied postmodern human beings, insanity, incompetence and dreams, consumer society and globalization, projected by humour.

Keywords: Humour, Mc Donaldization, sitcoms, disintegration, media discourse

1. Introduction

The socio-political conditions of a country play an important role in shaping an event for individuals and for the society. Interpretation of literature belonging to another culture and another time requires an understanding of the plenty of philosophy, linguistics, sociology and historic conditions lurking behind that text. The era of 1970's in the USA and Pakistan was a troubling and a troubled time. The counter cultural movements; the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, economic conditions and the Middle East uncertainty created turmoil for the American citizens. East and West Pakistan was divided in this period. Inflation, rising crime and turmoil resulted in both countries, when people's idealistic dreams were crushed affecting their personal lives. They started taking refuge in materialism and consumerism, properties which define the 1980's decade, an era of cold and hot wars. The USA saw worst recession since Great Depression, causing unemployment, loss of business, loss of homes, lands and moral values under the raising slogans of globalization. For the rich, this decade's symbol was the "yuppie." People became self-centered and materialistic. During the nineties, although the American economy recovered from recession but Pakistani economy loomed further down. Medicine, industry and technology boomed up due to which the immigrants started pouring in both countries in bulk from everywhere in America and from Afghanistan in Pakistan. The era of 1992 was the worst rioting history of America, which gained worldwide attention. Only short time after the independence of Pakistan, there have been shortcomings not only in the democratic system of Pakistan but also in the political system and governance of the country which is in the hands of elite bourgeois society and the military army that is engaged in plundering national assets under the rule of suppression. The religious groups in the society have helped sustain suppression in the name of fate and god given circumstances. People have been trying to seek better lives either by migrating to the West or by adopting Western life-style in quest of being modern.

Social media has been playing an important role in shaping the attitudes of people and in depicting the social conditions of people belonging to a particular society, ever since its launch. The Family sitcoms such as; "Friends," "Seinfeld," "Married with Children" and "The Simpsons" etc., portrayed people full of self-doubt and anxiety. These television programs showed up in late 1980's and gained popularity not only in the West but also in the East, representing socially constructed view of harsh realities of all humans enveloped in the mask of humor. The characters in these shows symbolize postmodern man's dilemma and his "true self." The sitcoms gained popularity in East due to their "intertextual" and "interdiscursive" nature (Fairclough, 1992). The viewers can totally relate themselves with the depressed and emotionally distorted characters. Under this background the researcher raises the following research question:

Why does humour in the selected sitcom relate Americans with postmodern human beings living in Pakistan, despite differences in their cultures? The study aims to explore the relationship between humour and social attitudes represented in family sitcoms and generalize those problems to all human beings by taking the views of young medical students on selected 5 episodes. These results are then conflated with the common themes generated by the researcher's analysis in the 28 selected episodes.

2. Literature Review

More than print media, the lives of people all over the world have been influenced by the electronic media, because of its easy access. A major portion of how we act and behave is due to our interaction with television, print and computer mediated communication and the knowledge acquired by it. This is also known as cognitive approach to mass communication (Harris & Sanborn, 2013). Our realities are shaped by external realities. Television and media have become part of our reality that has been shaping our views, behaviours and knowledge. Television and media are not only the magic windows through which we see the world but they also serve the purpose of a door, through which our perceptions are made or changed as ideas enter our minds. Although behaviour of humans is mostly affected by media, however it is extremely difficult to measure. Television and media has been changing the lives of people over 60 years more than any other invention in human history (Harris & Sanborn, 2013). The Simpsons (Brooks, Groening, & Simon, 1989), the longest animated sitcom, became a cultural and iconic symbol not only in America but also in Pakistan. Societal changes affected lives of all characters during its progress. "The Simpsons" shows socio-political problems co-existing humorously. The sitcom exhibits dysfunctional families representing depressed American society. The humour in the later episodes of the sitcom is rather coarse and profane reflecting the shallow life of an average American citizen, which becomes a cause of his anxiety and depression. The humour in this show arises from communication crisis. The characters seem to have signed self-destructive Faustian pact (Bermel, 1996). The only intelligent person in the family is their son, Bud; a misfit and dysfunctional especially with women. It is surprising that despite his brains, he has no luck with females. Postmodern humans adhere to wrong values. They are dead bodies with no warm feelings and lost souls. The only thing they care for is money, power and good job obsession, which sadly Bud lacks. Al's daughter is dim-witted and promiscuous. I find the language of the show profane, especially Bundy's comments about fat women, his wife and his neighbour Marcy.

Humour is man's potent weapon against the despair of human condition (Wuster, 2017). For Freud (O'Connell, 1976), humour and laughter heal psychological trauma. Context becomes important, as what is normal in one culture can be absurd for others. (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985) demonstrates that, humorous texts often transcend national boundaries having roots in man's disillusioned views of idealism. Humour and satire have close link (Ezell, 2016). Satirists put their mockery in a form that is recognizable to the people (Simpson, 2003). Satire ridicules dominant genres, using parody to criticize society at large (Plaza, 2006). This becomes a root cause of humour by which authors can highlight the serious problems in society.

3. Methodology

To explore how social media deals with socio-political problems through humour and its effects on the cultures other than the ones depicted in the shows; emerging themes in the selected family sitcom were examined by using the theoretical lens of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2009). For this purpose, "The Simpsons" is selected as a case study. The Simpson is the longest animated family sitcom having 28 seasons, which means that it has been on-air for 28 long years. This provided the researcher with the solid grounds to explore the emerging socio-political conditions of America over a period of nearly three decades. Reflections on five episodes of the sitcom were taken from 50 students of Masters in Health Professionals in Education (MHPE from now on) of University of Health Sciences (UHS) Lahore, to examine how they relate these themes within Pakistani society. The selection of the episodes was random. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the 50 students, giving representation of population belonging to diverse socio-economic strata. The rising popularity of the sitcom in Pakistan amongst youngsters justifies the selection of sample from Pakistan. One of the medical teachers was requested to assign the selected students a task to watch the episodes at home and bring back their reflections after two days. To keep them focused, they were instructed to watch the selected episodes with a critical eye by comparing and contrasting the events and characters of the show with Pakistani families. A total of 28 episodes of the sitcom were chosen randomly by the researcher, watched and analysed to find out the themes. The results of the themes generated in MHPE students' reflections and the themes found by the analysis of one episode of each season (28 seasons in all, so 28 episodes) were conflated by the researcher. The socio-political conditions of America (from 1980 to 2017) were researched from online newspapers and forums that talk about such issues. This not only led the researcher to have a clear understanding of the context in which the particular events took place but also reduced her bias and gave a more detailed and objective interpretation of the text. Both spoken and visual texts were analysed and interpreted.

4. Results

As mentioned in the methodology section, the researcher watched twenty-eight episodes of "The Simpsons" serial, which were chosen randomly from twenty-eight seasons. The themes that emerged from the sitcoms by the researcher were compared with the themes generated in students' reflections. This resulted in an enormous amount of data. The predisposing factors identified were; loss of tradition, culture and religion. The limitation of space allowed the researcher to quote only a few examples. Amongst a number of other themes that emerged from the data collected, some are as follows:

4.1. Dissatisfied, Depressed Postmodern Humans

In the first season, Homer is disappointed by his family, when they misbehave at his boss's party. Homer says: "There's no disgrace like home."

But it is he who becomes a symbol of dismay for Marge, she utters:

I'm married to Homer for ten years but part of me wants to kill him.

Homer is mostly shouting, lamenting and forgetful; he suffers from insecurity and memory loss. Lisa, a grade 2 student and daughter of Simpsons, is sensitive about miseries in the world. She is administered ignorant pills to help forget ills of the society. She says:

How can we sleep at night when there's so much suffering..... I'm a saddest kid in grade 2.

Even little Maggie chooses to hug TV on her siblings.

Grandpa is never treated right. He habitually uses politically incorrect language with everyone. Postmodern man has disregarded the concept of joint family and has thus abstained himself from all responsibility by putting old parents in "retirement house." Mr. Burns, Homer's boss loves money and exercises power whenever he gets a chance. His frail, weak body represents his flimsy and retired soul.

4.2. *Dreams, Incompetence and Insanity*

The postmodern human being (PMHB from now on) is faithless. The only exception is Flanders who is always made fun of. PMHB denies the existence of both rational and irrational faith. Homer is denied acceptance in society when he sounds reasonable (Season 12, 2001). To survive, he gets the crayon fixed in his brain again and goes back to his unreasonable, forgetful and self-indulgent past. Flanders is religious and teaches his boys good values, while Homer detests going to the church and has no rational or irrational faith. He tells Flanders:

I have calculated, there is no God

He sucks in technology, buys a computer and utters:

Don't worry head. The computer will do thinking now.

The story is full of incidences where the couple either day dreams to get rid of the shackles of married life in pursuit of fake happiness or is nostalgic of the good old days. Dream restrains their clear sightedness and fills in the emptiness of their married lives. Characters live in a balance between realism and surrealism. Dream is a divorce between life we experience and a life we would like to live (Freud, 1961). It is symbolic of an enormous gap between our practices and our discourses. Homer's dreams depict insecurity and a way out of responsibility, while Marge dreams mostly for a better life. Homer says: I'm replaced by a younger person.

Homer's attitude draws the couple to marriage counsellor time and again. Marge's cause of depressive illness (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007) is his carelessness, but it is she who has kept the home together in 28 long years. Marge puts up with Homer in odds such as when she acknowledges that he (as a drunkard) had once married a floozy in Las Vegas. This is also very typical of post-modern human beings degraded to core and without many values left in store.

The therapist tells Homer in his dream:

Your family sees you as an ogre and an un-authoritative figure who doesn't listen. This marriage is rotting with a stench of death.

Homer sleeps during the session and exclaims:

I don't believe in therapy, it breaks family.

The characters in the sitcom are mostly incompetent. It is strange that Homer is given the job as a manager of nuclear plant, where he just sleeps or eats doughnuts. Bart is a low scorer. Police officers are ill observant and misfit for their jobs. The mayor and Mr. Burns are just good at exploiting others. Principal Skinner and school teachers are good for nothing. They have made the education system boring and dull for the children, who are just turning into ill disciplined, impatient technologized humanoids who fail to concentrate. Homer becomes jealous of almost everything that others have. His arguments with Flanders are an example. Homer is bipolar; he can be incredibly depressed at one time, but the next moment really happy and giggling. He is shown mostly unable to fit in his clothes, which represents his inefficiency and lack of ability to fit in the society.

4.3. *Consumer Society and Globalization*

The head of the family works very hard to meet the needs of his family. Children have become more demanding. The luxuries of yesterday have become necessities of today. In quest of these luxuries, the postmodern human is reduced to a working machine, a soul-less unemotional and insensitive beast who has sacrificed his happiness in pursuit of mad craving of materialism.

Homer utters:

I want something to solve my money vows.

5. Discussion

The family sitcom, "The Simpsons" is a real portrayal of typical middle-class families all over the world. Although it is meant to represent American culture, its themes are equally applicable elsewhere. Although the sitcom was meant for the children, it is equally popular amongst the adults. The characters with their yellow complexion, distorted bodies and bug eyes are representative of twisted human nature; jealousy, lack of intelligence, mean spirits, ignorance, incompetence, depression, dissatisfaction, power abuse and loss of values (Kwast-Greff, 2013). Humour and irony presented in social media play a crucial role in shaping those who watch it (Meyrowitz, 1986). Due to the rapid growth of technology and wide social networks in the globalized world, distances between people and cultures have reduced (Gitlin, 2003). Television programmes meant for a

particular culture at a particular time, now more than ever before, are accessible to common man located anywhere in the world, effecting his life (Gitlin, 2003).

America is an ethnically and culturally diverse state. However, (Negre & Rosenthal-Sabroux, 2015) assert that the culturally diverse America has assumed the image of a salad bowl rather than a melting pot. Salad bowl (Kuran, 1995) is a metaphor for tolerance; where there is coexistence of different races, ethnic groups and cultures, retaining their individuality, instead of getting assimilated by the dominant culture. The researcher contradicts with this and places her thesis that due to globalization at large and with the increasing freedom of media, that salad bowl is being converted in to a melting pot (Akiner, 1997) or in other words melting pot is salad bowl's cauldron. It is against human nature not to get influenced while living in a multicultural and multilinguistic society. Adaptation, transformation and development of culture are natural in the age of multiculturalism and globalized world. Apu, an Indian migrant in "The Simpsons", e.g., is confronted with an identity conflict in season 22 (Feltmate, 2013). The Mayor orders to banish all immigrants from America. Apu could not choose between his Indian and American identity. His condition is like an old rotting salad bowl, where the juices of each ingredient are melting into another, not giving a very pleasant sight. Hence in this state of anxiety, he emerges as confused, depressed and a lonely person nostalgic for his true "self" which he has given away in the pursuit of being "other."

The socio-political conditions of a country, depicted in the media and literature of that time, create a specific mode of discourse. "The Simpsons" is ripe with such agendas. It is easier to raise issues in humorous tone rather than presenting the crude and harsh realities directly (Kahane, 2004). This show is a satire on the consumer society and political issues of that culture. Humour is used to subvert the dominant ideologies of capitalism and Christianity in America (Gournelos & Greene, 2011). It represents postmodern men living in postmodern society (Keller, 2009). Homer, lazy, drunk, childish, boorish, irresponsible and absent minded, delusional iconic character signifies inefficiency at work and at home. He is the symbol of postmodern man who gets distracted easily and is unable to concentrate. Depressed and unsatisfied with his job, he finds relief in drinking beer and eating ravingly. The simple pleasures of life such as enjoying food and living have transformed Homer into a gluttonous beast, which even restrains his ability to think. Homer suffers. His tormented fat body and excessive drinking are signs of his melancholy, alienation from his family, from society and from logical thinking. His depressed brain restrains him from healthy sleep.

His son Bart, though an under achiever at school, is witty, a postmodern child, who is good at his boyish charms and at exploiting others. Lisa, his opposite is intelligent, sensitive and is highly idealistic in supporting social progress. She provides moral and ethnic balance to Bart's subversive deviousness. Until 2005, Lisa was a smart eight-year-old. However, in 2006 she became an intolerant technologized PC hippie, who believes that her views are better and superior to anyone else. Marge is Simpson's opposite. She is a typical house wife, caring and a voice of reason of all time. She tries to be "cool" in pursuit of social acceptance by the rich and influential women, but all her efforts go wasted due to either Homer's silly behaviour or because she cannot afford luxuries of the rich.

The characters do not age is related to their emotional thermic death (Zelinka, 2014) and is a symbol of immaturity of the postmodern human being in general. All characters have snobbish, shrill and creaky voices; they sound like shouting most of the time in an effort to be heard and recognized, which has become a paradox in this postmodern world (Elliott, 1994). Most simple matters are often given unnecessary importance by Homer, whose speech at times become fragmentary. Humour is not created in a vacuum. "The Simpsons" has its roots in a family sitcom "Married with Children," which also represents a dysfunctional family, worse than Homer's. Both programmes have subversive and edgy content. Al Bundy is a misanthropic women shoe salesman with a miserable life, as he detests his low paid job and his wife. His wife Peggy is a lazy, insensitive, shopaholic, careless woman, who fails in seducing Bundy. All characters in the show are representative of postmodern melancholic, alienated, aloof human beings.

Television is the cheap and dominant mode of entertainment in Pakistan. Majority of people prefer to enjoy their meals in front of TV. Consistent with (Ezell, 2016) the researcher believes that although animated sitcoms' post modernity leads to slippery interpretation, it is valuable and stringy than usual American sitcoms, which abstains from making serious commentary on social problems. The researcher concludes that not only media but McDonalidization in each aspect of life has helped transform salad bowl effect of nations, culture and people into a melting pot. Hence people watching these shows anywhere else in the world are affected according to their own interpretation of the world, as (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2008) demonstrated. Our society is full of melancholic, depressed, insane, incompetent McDonalidized people who live in their dreams. Reflections of MHPE students reveal that 43 out of 50 students relate the characters of these shows with their family members. The break with tradition, culture and religion due to modernization has led a tremendous change in our society, especially the lives of middle and upper class families (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Our postmodern dilemma is that we are reduced to dehumanized credit card users, consistent with the analysis of (Poster, 2018), consuming more than what we produce leading to dissatisfaction, depression and loneliness of PMHB as a family member, politician or a professional (Featherstone, 2007).

6. Conclusion

Despite the cultural differences of East and West, it is clear that the researched case represents American society in particular and postmodern human being living anywhere in the world in general. Due to the rhetoric of globalization and the proliferation of media all over the world, people relate characters and events with their true selves. The idealistic slogans of

globalization triggered through media have significantly been successful in spreading McDonaldization leading to dehumanization in globalized ways (Chua, 2009). It is surprising that how media plays a significant role in enhancing our hermeneutic horizons by depicting the problems of a particular society through humour and satire.

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