

**Humour as a Survival Tactic in Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues* and
Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful***

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Abstract:

Humour is often used as an important means of engendering positive emotions, preserving a sense of mastery, hope and self-respect in individuals, thereby enabling them to survive in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Studies of survivors of extreme adversity, such as the brutal conditions of concentration camps and war, indicate that a non-serious, ludicrous, or facetious attitude towards the oppressors as well as the hardships endured is often an important means of bonding and maintaining solidarity among individuals. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the use of humour in Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* and Neil Simon's play *Biloxi Blues* related to anti-Semitism, i.e., hatred against Jews. As methodology for the paper, Sigmund Freud's views on jokes and Jewish humour will be briefly analyzed. If literature is about human thought then Freud's theories about unconscious and its relation to jokes occupy an importance place in literary analyses. Freud believes that Jewish jokes point to the ability of the Jewish people to engage in a thorough self-criticism. The paper will ponder over questions such as: Has anti-Semitism ended? Or is it still haunting us in the form of world terrorism. Although the paper will specifically focus on the use of humour in the above mentioned texts, the study is also relevant in the present Indian context, for it would be fruitful to scrutinize the role of humour, not only in restoring world peace, but also in a democratic Indian set up frequently challenged by debates on intolerance.

Key Words: Humour, Intolerance, Anti-Semitism, World Peace, Self-respect, Positive Emotions, Sigmund Freud, Democracy

Introduction:

Although humour is a form of play, it serves a number of ‘serious’ social, cognitive, and emotional functions. Fascinating questions about humour and laughter touch on every area of psychology. Surprisingly, however, despite its obvious importance in human behaviour, humour and related topics like laughter, irony, and mirth are hardly ever mentioned in psychology texts and other scholarly books. Although there is a sizable and continually expanding research literature on this subject, most psychologists seem to have little systematic knowledge of it. Because humour is so familiar and is such an enjoyable and playful activity, many people might think they already understand it and do not need research in psychology to explain it. However, the empirical study of humour holds many interesting surprises. Although it is essentially a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, non-serious attitude towards ideas and events, humour serves a number of ‘serious’ social, emotional, and cognitive functions, making it a fascinating and rewarding topic of scientific investigation. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the use of humour in Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and Neil Simon’s play *Biloxi Blues* (1984) related to anti-Semitism, i.e., hatred against Jews. As methodology for the paper, Sigmund Freud’s views on jokes and Jewish humour will be briefly analyzed. Freud believes that Jewish jokes point to the ability of the Jewish people to engage in a thorough self-criticism. As Sarah Blacher Cohen puts it:

Jewish humour has been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness. It has helped Jewish people to survive, to confront the indifferent, often hostile universe, to endure the painful ambiguities of life and to retain a sense of internal power despite external impotence (qtd. in Konas 60)

Traditional Jewish humour often converts a joke into a form of social comment or criticism. However, the humour of the Jews is not only a weapon with which they subtly strike back at a bullying world. A great deal of their laughter is directed at themselves. Self criticism is one of the earmarks of Jewish comedy¹ (Konas 60). The field of comedy is unique in that eighty percent of its most prominent practitioners are Jewish, while Jews comprise three percent of the population of the United States. Ninety two percent came from families in the lowest socioeconomic class. Fathers were poor providers. The family struggle to survive economically was seen and felt acutely by the subjects, who equated poverty and despair as a condition of being Jewish in a gentile world (Koprince 65)

Discussion:

Humour is fundamentally a social phenomenon. We laugh and joke much more frequently when we are with other people than when we are by ourselves (Martin and Kuiper 355-384). The social context of humour is one of play. Indeed, humour is essentially a way for people to interact in a playful manner. During the course of a typical day, we encounter many different forms of humour communicated by different means and for different purposes. Television provides us with a constant diet of humour in the form of sitcoms, stand-up comedy, political satire, and humorous advertisements, and we encounter it also in newspaper comic strips and cartoons, comic movies, and humorous books. Humour is also often used in speeches, sermons, and lectures by politicians, religious leaders, motivational speakers, and teachers. Extensive classification system of spontaneous conversational humour was developed by psychologists Debra Long and Arthur Graesser. Based on their analyses, these authors identified the following 11 categories, which were distinguished from one another on the basis of their intentions or uses of humour:

1. *Irony*: the speaker expresses a statement in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning.
2. *Satire*: aggressive humour that pokes fun at social institutions or social policy.
3. *Sarcasm*: aggressive humour that targets an individual rather than an institution.
4. *Overstatement and understatement*: changing the meaning of something another person has said by repeating it with a different emphasis.

5. *Self-deprecation*: humorous remarks targeting oneself as the object of humour. This may be done to demonstrate modesty, to put the listener at ease, or to ingratiate oneself with the listener.
6. *Teasing*: humorous remarks directed at the listener's personal appearance or foibles. Unlike sarcasm, the intention is not to seriously insult or offend.
7. *Replies to rhetorical questions*: because rhetorical questions are not asked with the expectation of a reply, giving an answer to one violates a conversational expectation and surprises the person who posed the question. This can therefore be perceived as funny, and the intention is usually to simply entertain a conversational partner.
8. *Clever replies to serious statements*: clever, incongruous, or nonsensical replies to a statement or question that was meant to be serious. The statement is deliberately misconstrued so that the speaker replies to a meaning other than the intended one.
9. *Transformations of frozen expressions*: transforming well-known sayings, clichés, or adages into novel statements.
10. *Puns*: humorous use of a word that evokes a second meaning, usually based on a homophone (i.e., a word with a different meaning that sounds the same) (35-60)

Sigmund Freud on Humour:

Although there are many theories of humour, like superiority theory, incongruity theory, that investigate the mechanics of humour but the relief theory of humour will be of special interest to this paper as it views humour as a cathartic mechanism. John Morreall in his extensive work on humour views relief theory as a hydraulic explanation in which laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler. He notes that the theory was sketched in Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," the first publication in which 'humour' is used in its modern sense of funniness. In another version of the theory, Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* analyzes three laughter situations: *der Witz* (often translated jokes or joking), the comic, and humour. *Der Witz* includes telling prepared fictional jokes, making spontaneous witty comments, and repartee. According to Freud, the emotions which are most repressed are sexual desire and hostility. In

both cases, the psychic energy normally used to do the repressing becomes superfluous, and is released in laughter.

Morreall explains that Freud's second laughter situation, the comic, involves a similar release of energy normally devoted to thinking. An example is laughter at the clumsy actions of a clown. As we watch the clown stumble through actions that we would perform smoothly and efficiently, there is a saving of the energy that we would normally expend to understand the clown's movements.

Freud analyzes the third laughter situation, which he calls humour. Humour occurs if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing feeling. In this way, humour acts as a homeostatic mechanism for the body bringing a state of equilibrium for emotions and impulses.

Jewish Humour as a Form of Defense Mechanism in Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*:

American comic playwright Neil Simon employs humour as a therapeutic mechanism. *Biloxi Blues* is his twenty-first play to reach the Broadway stage in twenty-four years. In addition, almost all of them were genuine theatrical hits, a record impossible to match in modern times. His popular comedies represent the ethos of American middle-class. He began his writing career in television, writing *The Phil Silvers Show* and Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*. *Biloxi Blues* win the prestigious Tony Award for Best Play of 1985. When it opened in New York on March 28, 1985, critics from such diverse publications as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Women's Wear Daily* hailed it as the funniest play on Broadway and Simon's best play.

Ethnically, Simon's humour is Jewish, though not in the sense of dialect or in jokes. He is the master of the self-protective self-deprecating put down in which one makes a clown of oneself before anyone else does (Konas 59). *Biloxi Blues* continues to remind us of the anti-Semitism faced by Jews in the US, particularly during the 1940s. It focuses on Eugene Jerome's basic training experience in the army during World War II. John Beaufort noted in his review of the play that *Biloxi Blues* is traditional barracks-room comedy, replete with humour and one of those sergeants who insults, humiliates, and bullies his awkward squads into obedience. Eugene must contend with the crudity of the other soldiers, the miserable food in the mess hall and army

discipline, especially as it is imposed by his fanatical drill sergeant Erwin J. Toomey. Pictured as every soldier's nightmare, sergeant Toomey forces the soldiers to do one hundred push-ups for the smallest mistake, makes them go on a fifteen-mile hike through reptile infested swamps on the night of their arrival, and insists that they eat every bite of disgusting army food that is on their plate. Toomey brags:

When you attack a man, never attack his strong points. And my strong point is Discipline. I was weaned on Discipline. I sucked Discipline from my mother's breast and I received it on my bare butt at the age of five from the buckle of my father's Sam Browne army belt...And I loved that bastard for it...because he made me strong (87)

Although the play deals with a variety of hate-related topics ranging from homophobia to racism, the issue perhaps most relevant to Neil Simon was anti-Semitism. He remembers a friend's reaction to his Jewish ancestry while serving in the military during World War II. In several cases, reading material issued by military officials contained anti-Semitic remarks (Moss and Wilson par.5). In 1943, the government provided some 350,000 servicemen with an issue of the Bible that contained such phrases as 'Israel's Fall the Gentile's Salvation' and 'The Jews are a synagogue of Satan.' (Dinnerstein 138). Still, Jewish members of the military found themselves ostracized in more subtle ways. Anti-Semitic attitudes were prevalent among lower-ranking officers and soldiers. Sarcastic poems and songs with anti-Jewish messages rang throughout the military.

First and foremost to Simon's audience, *Biloxi Blues* is successful because of its comic element. The dialogue is filled with gags, puns, and one-liners. Another main focus of humour is Eugene's journal entries, through which he frames the play. In the opening scene, while everyone around him attempts to sleep, Eugene takes part in the dialogue, at the same time as he is chronicling his thoughts about his new colleagues. When Selridge puts his stinking leg in front of Wykowski's face Eugene says to the audience:

It was my fourth day in the army and so far I hated everyone...We were on a filthy train riding from Fort Dix, New Jersey, to Biloxi, Mississippi, and in three days nobody washed. The aroma was murder. We were supposed to be fighting Germany and Japan but instead we were stinking up America (4)

This device allows Eugene the opportunity to infuse the play with humour by commenting on the people around him. The play opens with Eugene's description of his fellow recruits, including Wykowski, who has what seems to be a permanent erection, Carney, who thinks he is a singer but really is not, Selridge, "who smells like a tuna-fish sandwich left out in the rain. He thought he had a terrific sense of humour but it was hard to laugh at a guy who had cavities in nineteen out of thirty-two teeth" (4) and Arnold Epstein, whose digestion problems lead to his often-noted flatulence. Wykowski fans his cap in front of his face and says to Eugene: "Someone let one go!...Holy Jeez. I need a gas mask. You writing all this stuff in your diary ? "Major fart in West Virginia" (4)

Often in his journal entries, Eugene mixes humour with essential truths. These truths would be mundane, even sentimental, if rendered in straight language. Rena Korb observes that Eugene's observation, while funny, also points out the more serious truth: these boys, none of whom is older than twenty years, are being forced to leave the safety and security of their homes and sent onto the dangerous field of war (par.4)

Role of Humour in Coping with Stress and Adversity:

Studies of survivors of extreme adversity such as the brutal conditions of concentration camps indicate that humour, in the form of joking about the oppressors as well as the hardships endured, is often an important means of engendering positive emotions, maintaining group cohesion and morale, preserving a sense of mastery, hope, and self-respect, and thereby enabling individuals to survive in seemingly hopeless circumstances (Ford and Spaulding 340-343). Over the course of human evolution, the cognitive play of humour has been adapted as a means of dealing with difficulties and hardships, contributing to the resilience and coping potentials that have enabled humans to survive and thrive. The importance of humour in coping with atrocities has also been emphasized by concentration camp survivors. In recounting his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, Viktor Franklⁱⁱ described humour as "another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation" (63). Recognizing the importance of humour in maintaining morale, he and his fellow prisoners agreed to tell each other amusing stories every day. Such uses of humour were also depicted in Roberto Benigni's 1997 film, *Life*

is Beautiful, in which a Jewish father engages in humorous antics to shield his son from the horrors of a Nazi death camp, denying reality by pretending that the Holocaust is nothing but a game in which the winner gets to ride in a tank. (Rod 288)

The film was partially inspired by the book *In the End, I Beat Hitler*ⁱⁱⁱ by Rubino Romeo Salmoni and by Benigni's father, who spent two years in a German labour camp during World War II. Set in fascist Italy, the film recounts the story of the Italian Jew Guido Orefice, who is deported to a Nazi concentration camp together with his son Joshua and his Christian wife Dora. Ruth Ben Ghiat holds the view that Guido is an endearingly hapless buffoon whose world is shaped by a combination of coincidence, both felicitous and unfortunate, and by his belief in love's abilities to sustain and transform. Both of these things mark his life in the camp, where he dedicates himself to shielding his son from all knowledge of the ghastly surrounding reality by telling him that they and the other prisoners are really competitors in an elaborate game. Although Guido is ultimately killed, he saves the spirit as well as the life of his son, who, following the fiction his father has created, exalts that he has won the game when he is reunited with his mother at the end of the film (par.1) Guido creates fictitious worlds for those around him. He calls Dora 'princess' and claims to be a prince himself. Though both of them know the truth, they are willing to entertain the fantasy and play the game. In this way, Guido's fictions are a form of escapism, a way for him to cope with reality and imbue it with beauty. Guido also cultivates a series of coincidences so that he can appear to have manipulated fate or performed magic. Though he knows that he is simply manipulating someone else, he is not reveling in the deception, he is interested in creating another world for someone else. This underscores the idea that a person's perception is intrinsic to his reality. Guido changes the way those around him perceive the world with his manipulations, and thus he affects how they deal with the rest of the world. When Guido rides up on a horse to rescue Dora, he is entertaining the fantasy of the knight rescuing the damsel in distress. However, he actually is rescuing her from her surroundings and actually is whisking her away on a horse. Similarly, when he tells Giosue that everything in the concentration camp is a game, he is creating a fiction to keep Giosue's spirits up. However, at the end of the film, Giosue has survived the concentration camp with

perseverance and bravery, and his life and the lessons he has learned are very real. In the film, it appears, fantasy can become reality.

Has Anti-Semitism ended?

Although hatred against Jews has ended but the world still witnesses its horror in terrorist and fundamentalist attacks across the world. Devil of hatred and intolerance raises its poisonous hood again and again in different incarnations i.e in racial hatred, in American neo-colonialism, in right-wing and pseudo left-wing Indian politics and in Islamic fundamentalist groups. In the discourse of sports, media and television, America has portrayed itself as the benevolent ‘world saviour’ and the most democratic nation who will rescue the world from terrorism and intolerance. These discourses show the impact of intolerance and incursion in ‘other’s’ way of life where the American nation, under the dazzle of technology and military power, intrude into the economic resources of another nation ending into cultural wars, hatred, retaliation and terror attacks.

Conclusion:

After a brief discussion of humour in selected texts, we may say that the future of world peace lies in laughter as it is not only an indispensable component of democracy but also proves a long way in embodying the concept of ‘vasudhaiv kutumbkam’, i.e. the world as one family. Although the paper has specifically focused on the use of humour in texts close to Jews, the study is also relevant in the present Indian context, for it is fruitful to scrutinize the role of humour, not only in restoring world peace, but also in a democratic Indian set up frequently challenged by debates on intolerance.

Endnotes:

ⁱ In his book *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Lawrence Epstein notes that beginning with vaudeville, and continuing through radio, stand-up comedy, film, and television, a disproportionately high percentage of American, German, and Russian comedians have been Jewish (n.p). Jewish humour, while diverse, favours wordplay, irony, and satire, and its themes are highly anti-
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authoritarian, mocking religious and secular life alike (*Encyclopedia* 552). Jewish humour simply being self-deprecating also contains a dialectical element of self-praise, which works in the opposite direction.

ⁱⁱ Recognizing the importance of humour in maintaining morale, he and his fellow prisoners agreed to tell each other amusing stories every day. One favorite form of humour involved joking about the ways their experience of imprisonment might affect them after their liberation. Their jokes also included a good deal of mockery of the guards, which gave them a feeling of superiority over their captors (Rod 287)

ⁱⁱⁱ On Salmoni's death in 2011, The Central Council for Jews in Germany called Salmoni's death a 'great loss' to humanity, while Rome's mayor, Gianni Alemanno, hailed him as 'a great man' who with his courage and determination managed to save himself from the hell of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As Salmoni wrote of his life, "I'm still here, hale and hearty. I came out of Auschwitz alive, I have a wonderful family, I celebrated my golden wedding anniversary, I have 12 splendid grandchildren – I think I can say I ruined Hitler's plan for me."(Silverman par.4)

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