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# LAUGHING THROUGH OPPRESSION: HUMOR AS A FEMINIST COPING MECHANISM IN SABA IMTIAZ'S *KARACHI, YOU'RE KILLING ME*

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***Abstract***
*This article examines the strategic deployment of humor as a feminist coping mechanism in Saba Imtiaz's novel Karachi, You're Killing Me. Through close textual analysis, it demonstrates how the protagonist Ayesha uses wit, irony, and self-deprecating comedy to navigate the intersecting oppressions of gender inequality, class privilege, workplace exploitation, and urban violence in contemporary Karachi. Drawing on feminist humor theory and concepts of subversive laughter, the article argues that Ayesha's comedic voice functions dually: as a survival strategy that makes unbearable realities psychologically manageable, and as a political tool that exposes the absurdities of patriarchal norms and systemic injustice. The analysis reveals how humor enables Ayesha to maintain agency in a male-dominated newsroom, deflect gendered moral policing, and critique elite disconnection from urban suffering. However, the article also traces the limits of humor, showing moments where laughter fails to mask underlying trauma and exhaustion. By positioning humor as both empowering and revealing of deeper wounds, this study contributes to understanding how women in oppressive contexts use comedy not merely to entertain but to survive, resist, and speak truth to power.*

***Keywords:*** *Humor, Oppression, Patriarchal Norms, Resist, Urban Sufferings.*

## Introduction

Laughter, when it is placed within the oppressive structures of patriarchal societies, is not in a frivolous or accidental position. To those women who find themselves in these hegemonic spaces, humor can be a complex survival tactic- a strategy of avoiding violence, evading authority and re-establishing narrative agency without fighting. Feminist writers in the world of literature have traditionally utilized comedy as a two-pronged tool: both to amuse and to disarm, to comfort and to unveil. From Jane Austen's razor-sharp social satire to contemporary women's writing across the Global South, humor has served as a vehicle for expressing what cannot be said directly, for making visible what power structures seek to obscure.

In the Pakistani environment, where the feminine voice in the public is fiercely censored and any demonstration of dissatisfaction may bring about serious social consequences, humour plays a distinctly crucial role as a form of feminist speech. Female writers in Pakistan are more and more relying on the use of comedy, irony and satire to criticize gender roles, hypocrisy in religion and class disparities, but still have to offer a facade of acceptability. The wit serves as a defense and a weapon at the same time- allowing authors to sneak radical criticism over the censorship of the outside world and the restrictions of the inner world.

A good example of such a strategic use of humour in Pakistani feminist novels is Saba Imtiaz 2014 novel, *Karachi, You're Killing Me*. It is a story about Ayesha Khan, a 28-year old reporter who

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works in Karachi amidst the pandemonium of the media industry and uses a mercilessly satirical style to recount her maradona with sexism at work, Karachi violence, family demands and the absurdity of high and mighty Pakistani society. The only difference lies in Imtiaz is able to percolate the humour deep down in to the text, be it in the inner world of Ayesha, where she talks to herself; or in the world surrounding her where she sees the intertwining of crises of terrorism, corruption and inequality in Karachi.

The humorous tone of the novel is manifold: it is self-deprecating when Ayesha recalls that she has turned her messy room into an installation piece that she has called *Where Journalism Goes to Die*; bitter when she sees that women who smoke is now pornography; dark when she fantasises about being kidnapped so she cannot work anymore. This unceasing use of humour poses a critical question: What role is played by laughter in this story? Is the wit of Ayesha just a character trait or does it have a stronger psychological and political implication?

This paper asserts that humor in *Karachi, You're Killing Me* works as a feminist survival tool through which Ayesha is able to survive various axes of oppression whilst she herself criticizes the same systems that breed that oppression. The novel displays the way through which a woman in a male filled occupation, in a violent city, under unremitting social scrutiny, metabolizes on comedy, repels gendered criticism, uncovers hypocrisy, and holds psychological integrity where she is broken. The humor of Ayesha is not the escapist one, it is a form of presenteeism, of working with the unprocessible, of talking when there is no speaking, of talking when there should not be any talking.

However, the boundaries and expenses of this coping mechanism are also followed in the article. At some moments, even the jokes Ayesha goes wrong, and inner pain can be found, and the laughter cannot cover the fatigue or the fear. These cracks demonstrate that humor, as a means of survival, may also hide the need to make changes in the system and solidarity. The structural safety nets of women workers are absent as demonstrated by the ever-present necessity to be witty.

Through analyzing humor as survival strategy and a form of political commentary, this analysis aims to respond to the following question: How can humor help Ayesha to negotiate systems of gender, class and urban precarity? In what ways is feminist humor manifested in this text? And what does the novel tell us about the potentials and constraints of laughter as resisting? A close analysis of excerpts illustrates the fact that the method Imtiaz adopts to tell the story is not accidental but is necessary instead the comic mode is the only possible tool with the help of which this very truth about the life of women in modern Karachi can be expressed.

**Literature Review**

The relationship between humor and feminist resistance has received sustained scholarly attention, particularly regarding how women use comedy to challenge patriarchal norms without suffering the full consequences of direct confrontation (Kaufman, 1991; Walker, 1988). Feminist humor theory distinguishes between humor directed at women (often misogynistic) and humor deployed by women as a tool of critique and survival (Barreca, 1991). Scholars have argued that women's humor frequently operates through indirection, irony, and self-deprecation—strategies that allow women to express anger and frustration while maintaining social acceptability (Finney, 1994; Little, 1983).

The concept of subversive laughter has deep roots in feminist thought (Cixous, 1976; Russo, 1994). Comedy allows women to name absurdities in gender norms, to deflate male authority, and to create solidarity through shared recognition of oppressive conditions. Humor can function as what

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some theorists call "guerrilla warfare"—small, strategic strikes against dominant ideology that accumulate over time to shift consciousness (Crawford, 1995). In contexts where women's anger is punished, laughter provides cover, making critique palatable by wrapping it in entertainment (Gray, 1994).

Research on satire as a political tool has demonstrated its particular utility for marginalized groups (Hutcheon, 1994; Knight, 2004). Satire works by exaggerating contradictions within power structures, making visible what ideology seeks to naturalize (Simpson, 2003). When Ayesha notes the absurdity of policemen sexually harassing women they're supposed to protect, or bosses demanding unpaid labor while buying bulletproof cars for their families, she employs satirical exposure—using humor to strip away the legitimating narratives that make oppression seem reasonable or inevitable (Test, 1991).

In the specific context of Muslim women's writing, humor has emerged as a significant though understudied dimension (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Cooke, 2007). Contemporary Muslim women writers across South Asia, the Middle East, and diaspora communities have increasingly used comedy to challenge both Orientalist stereotypes and internal patriarchal structures (Amer, 2014; Kahf, 2008). This humor often operates on multiple levels—addressing Western audiences who expect Muslim women to be uniformly oppressed and silent, while simultaneously critiquing actual gender inequalities within Muslim-majority societies (Zine, 2002). The comedy becomes a way of refusing the binary between defending one's culture and acknowledging its problems.

Pakistani literature has a rich tradition of social satire, from the Urdu humorists to contemporary English-language writers (Asaduddin, 2012; Tariq, 2008). However, gendered dimensions of this humor tradition have received less attention. Pakistani women's writing increasingly employs irony and wit to navigate the contradictions of urban life, where women have unprecedented access to education and employment yet remain subject to strict moral policing and violence (Khan, 2018; Mahmood, 2011). The humor in these texts often focuses on the gap between official rhetoric about women's advancement and the daily realities of sexism, harassment, and restriction (Ahmad, 2016).

Studies of contemporary Pakistani English fiction have noted the emergence of what some call "Muslim chick lit"—novels featuring educated, urban women protagonists dealing with relationship and career challenges (Chambers, 2011; Procter, 2012). While sometimes dismissed as frivolous, these texts often contain sharp social critique delivered through comic observation (Ilott, 2015). The humor allows writers to address serious issues—domestic violence, workplace discrimination, religious hypocrisy—while maintaining narrative momentum and readability (Morey, 2011). The comedic packaging makes the political content more accessible and perhaps more palatable to conservative audiences.

Theories of emotional labor are relevant to understanding humor as coping mechanism (Hochschild, 1983; James, 1989). Women are often expected to manage not only their own emotions but those of people around them—to smooth social interactions, to deflect conflict, to make uncomfortable situations comfortable (Erickson, 2005). Humor can be a form of this emotional labor, where women use wit to ease tension, to make men feel at ease, to avoid being seen as "difficult" (Pierce, 1995). However, this same humor can simultaneously serve women's own psychological needs, helping them process stress and maintain sanity in untenable situations (Martin, 2007).

The concept of the carnivalesque, drawn from literary and cultural theory, offers another lens (Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass & White, 1986). Carnivalesque humor temporarily inverts hierarchies,

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allowing the powerless to mock the powerful, making visible the constructed nature of social order. In carnival, nothing is sacred, all authority is fair game for ridicule. While traditional carnival is temporary—order is restored afterward—the carnivalesque in literature can have lasting effects, planting seeds of doubt about hierarchies that claim to be natural or divinely ordained (Dentith, 1995).

Research on trauma and humor has explored how comedy can function as a psychological defense mechanism (Freud, 1928; Kuhlman, 1994). Dark humor in particular allows people to acknowledge horrific realities without being completely overwhelmed by them (Moran & Massam, 1997; Oring, 2003). By making jokes about violence, death, or suffering, individuals create psychological distance that makes these experiences more manageable. However, this distancing can also indicate dissociation or unprocessed trauma—laughter that protects in the short term but masks needs for deeper healing (Ramachandran, 1998).

The intersectional dimensions of humor require attention (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Humor is never neutral; it reflects and reinforces power relations around race, class, gender, and other axes (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). Women from different class positions use humor differently and have different latitude for comedic expression (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981). Elite women may deploy irony about social conventions, while working-class women's humor might focus more directly on economic survival. In Ayesha's case, her class privilege affords her certain freedoms of expression—she can make sarcastic comments about elite culture because she's partly inside it—while her gender and precarious employment simultaneously limit her ability to openly challenge male authority (Skeggs, 1997).

Finally, scholarship on Pakistani media and journalism has documented the particular pressures faced by women journalists (Aziz & Waqar, 2013; Yusuf, 2009). They must navigate male-dominated newsrooms, harassment in the field, family and social disapproval, and the constant threat of violence in a city with high rates of targeted killings and terrorism (Khan, 2011). The coping strategies women journalists employ—including humor—have received less attention than the structural barriers themselves, yet understanding these strategies is crucial for comprehending how women persist in hostile environments (Nasr, 2014).

**Theoretical Framework**

The analysis relies on feminist theories of humor as a resistance, whereby comedy is not entertainment but a field of ideological conflict. By laughing at the patriarchal norms, women denaturalize them and reveal their artificiality and arbitrariness. Feminist humor works in few ways: it gives women solidarity because they are recognized jointly as women in the face of insanity; it defuses male domination by not taking it seriously; it creates psychic space where women can retain their selves under circumstances that would otherwise destroy them; and it creates a veil of concealment of anger or frustration which would otherwise be punished were it to be expressed outright.

The main issue of this analysis is the idea of the subversive laughter. Laughter itself may be conservative, supporting current relationships of authority by ridiculing those who oppose it, or it may be subversive, as part of the response to arrogance and hypocrisy in authority. Ayesha refuses to take the seriousness that power requires of her when she laughs at the hypocrisies of her boss or the asininities of gender policing. She refuses to give structures that are not just the respect that they claim to have. This rejection can be a form of political activity.

Based on the theory of the carnival, the analysis questions the way Ayesha humor brings about the reversal of hierarchies Ayesha lives under on a daily basis, however, temporarily. It is not a

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subordinate journalist, but in her internal monologue, she is an observant person that sees beyond all the roles that people play. Her social standing is above the social scene, although she negotiates it in a disadvantaged structural position. The inversion is mostly psychological, it does not change her material circumstances but provides her with the much-needed psychic relief and preserves her agency.

This framework also takes into consideration an insight into emotional labor and coping mechanisms. Humor is a piece of work - it requires mental and emotional resources to find the humorous point, to do wit on others, to keep the tone light in dark situations. This work is usually not taken seriously by women since it is more of a natural personality than a strategic performance. Nevertheless, the constant humor of Ayesha also suits her purposes: it helps her to work through her trauma, keep at bay the fear-inducing onslaught, and build narrative consistency in a fractured, violent urban world.

Lastly, intersectional analysis is important. The humor of Ayesha cannot be explained only in the terms of gender; it is the result of her unique location between the gender and the class and in the urban geography. The fact that she can portray some types of jokes, i.e. sophisticated, Anglophone, culturally literate, is her position in the classes. Her mockery of high culture is based on the fact that she is not too far off being an insider with enough knowledge of it and at the same time is an outsider who sees the absurdity. When she jests about violence in a rather dark manner, it is obvious that she is a journalist who has had a taste of the underbelly of the city, as well as she is somewhat privileged in that she could actually pull herself out of any potentially dangerous situation. The analysis follows the way humor articulates and bargains these complicated positionalities.

**Analysis**

**Section 1: Self-Deprecating Humor**

The mockery directed at herself is a preemptive measure on part of Ayesha towards being judged by others. She seeks narrative power by ridiculing herself before she prevents others of undermining her. This approach can be traced especially in her description of her place of residence: "My room resembles an installation piece entitled 'Where Journalism Goes to Die'" (p. 5). There is a humor in the line, the absurdist arts allusion, the melodramatic title, but there is disastrous weariness, too, revealed in the line. Ayesha turns her disheveled room into a piece of art, thus putting the seeming failure in her life in the perspective of society into the ranks of museum pieces.

This self-derision fulfills a number of purposes. It shields any criticism she might face on the part of her family members or friends who may be critical of her style of life. It also expresses her realization that her career as a journalist is not as ideal as it should be and in doing so, she points out the disappointment but does so in a humorous way instead of despondence. It also puts a gap between her own weaknesses- by making her troubles comic, she does not have to recognize them as something serious and in need of solutions that are unavailable.

“Where Journalism Goes to Die” is a particularly loaded phrase. It cites the demise of idealism, the corrosion of purpose into fatigue and disaffection. Whether with good intentions Ayesha entered journalism under the assumption that she is going to tell significant stories, be of service to the population, and make a change. The truth is of underpaid work, misogynistic coworkers, hazardous tasks, and tales which make no impact. The comedy recognizes this loss of life and makes it tolerable. As long as she is able to laugh at it, she could go on.

Ayesha also uses her self-deprecating style in describing her looks and behavior. As she comes to dinner she observes: "Wow, so you weren't lying about having spent the day at work. My kurta

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was wrinkled to the nth degree and I could swear that the body spray I had bought at the hospital pharmacy was not masking the antiseptic smell" (pp. 36-37). This perpetual self-satire may appear to strengthen patriarchal communications which female should be self-critical and apologetic. But in the hands of Ayesha, it turns out to be a denying of feminine perfection. Her frank admission of her messiness and imperfection allows her to renounce the tiresome act of feminine graciousness with ease required by Pakistani society.

This self-pity too is a way of creating intimacy with the reader. Ayesha is asking us to collude in her self-verdicts by letting us in on her personal assessments of herself. We laugh at her, and put ourselves on her side, instead of being judges. This closeness is a tactic- it creates an empathy of her stance and makes her further criticisms of other people less severe, since she is also severe to herself.

However, the perpetual self-depreciation also demonstrates the mental price of the life of being judged. Women internalize the critical gaze and learn to scrutinize and ridicule themselves, before other people can. Even though the humor of Ayesha allows her to preserve her agency, it also illustrates how ingrained she becomes in the messages telling her that she is somehow not good enough: messy, too tired, too cynical, not feminine enough, not professional enough. These wounds are covered by laughing, though not obliveded.

**Section 2: Satirizing Gender Norms**

The arbitrariness and oppression of gender norms are revealed by Ayesha satirically. When one of the policemen inquires about her smoking, she notes: "Clearly women smoking passes for pornography these days. A cop pokes out his head from the van. 'Can I have one too?' We smoke and he looks at me again. 'You seem like a nice girl. Why do you smoke?'" (p. 21). It reveals the ridiculous confusion of female independence and sexual perversion, of which she is sarcastically framed. The friendly concern of the officer is disguised in moral policing, according to his inquiry, it is the nice girls who do not smoke and the respectability of women depends on their ability to control their actions.

The comedy here crosscuts in various directions. The hyperbole, passes for pornography, is ironic about the sensationalism with which the women independence is discussed, as though a woman smoking a cigarette is as outrageous as graphic sex. The delivery of the contradiction of the cop with a cigarette too, but why she smokes leads to an understanding of the two-tiered approach to male and female smoking, the former being disregarded and the latter subject to comment and evaluation. Ayesha does not argue with the cop or justify her decision but through her sardonic narration makes him a foolish person, leaving readers to make their own conclusions as to whose actions may be actually problematic.

It is a passage also which shows how the bodies of women are taken as a place of the gaze and remark. The cop is justified in evaluating the personality of Ayesha on the basis of her cigarette smoking, to pass unsolicited judgment under the pretext of caring about her. His "You seem like a nice girl" provides the context: nice girls are obedient, bad girls are not. Ayesha takes the risk of being rebranded as a respectable to a disreputable woman through smoking. Her comment on this policing explains what she cannot call out in plain words, which is that it is not his business, that the division of women into nice and not nice based on insignificant behaviors is absurd, and that the male power to judge women is unfounded.

The analysis of marriage markets and fashion culture is a satirical way of Ayesha to highlight the gender norms that have become embedded in society. On the occasion of watching women in a clothing sale, she remarks:

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> There are tons of people there, which is unusual for 9 am on a Monday in Karachi barring some sort of clothes sale where all bets are off and you will almost certainly see women elbowing and clawing at each other. (p. 48)

The picture is both funny and sharp; it criticizes the process of socializing women into the competitiveness of appearance standards and consumer culture that directs the energy of the feminine gender towards shopping instead of intellectual or political activity. However, Ayesha is not judgmental, but she understands what pushes women to be that way even though she criticizes the act.

The contrast between a wedding photograph represents high-end gender performativity: "Looking at it, him in sharp dark suit with boyish grin and JFK Junior hair - every inch the scion - smiling down at fragile willowy Sana decked out in fat emeralds and a green pink and gold gharara that must have cost as much as a small flat" (pp. 2-3). The image of Sana when she shows up at her wedding is depicted as an art piece or a valuable thing beautiful but objectified. The cost of the gharara compared to that of a small apartment is explicitly revealing the economic relations; her clothes are more rich than most Pakistanis throughout their lifetime to be used, and she is only wearing them to act like an elite woman. The exchange between women is revealed in the clinical description given by Ayesha, who neither envies nor admires; women serve as decorative evidence of family status.

With these satirical observations, Ayesha rejects the gender norms, although she has to maneuver around them. Her jokes produce the comic detachment, which enables her to see the absurdity of expectations she has to cope with anyway. Even this distance is a part of resistance, because she might have to play the game, but she does not have to internalize the rules of the game. Her inner freedom, which is limited by outer freedom, is maintained by the laughter.

**Section 3: Mocking Class Privilege**

The most acute satire used by Ayesha is the privilege of classes and the lack of concern by the elite to the plight of common people. Her account of the crowd in Islamabad shows how closed minded they are:

> The Islamabad set, five foreign journalists, three USAID staff and one think tanker with a penchant for eccentricity, look ecstatic that they have met someone they don't see over breakfast, lunch, dinner and drinks every day, as is the norm in the capital. We even have a mobile phone service which sends out alerts when the city goes up in flames! (p. 59)

The thoroughness of the listing, the repetition of eating meals daily, the thrill at a new experience all emphasize how small this world is; instead of knowing Pakistani people, the figures in question spread through a small echo chamber of privilege.

The ensuing coverage regarding the mobile phone service in Karachi, which sends notification when the city goes up in flames, heightens the criticism. Where Samya sees entrepreneurial innovation, Ayesha sees it as a symptom of urban crisis, the banality of violence, which has created a commercial service to track it. To the elite, the phenomenon is introduced as a cleverness and not a tragedy; they are intrigued by the exotic danger that they themselves never have to face. To individuals who experience the circumstance first hand, it is a form of trauma.

The observation made by Ayesha reveals the segregation concerning classes in the social imaginative in Pakistan: "For him, and for all of my other buddies, the public hospitals were the places that the 'public' went" (p. 35). The elite do not consider themselves as the public- this term reminds us of poor people, others, those who are dependent on government services due to lack of

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other options. The absurdity in this quotation of the word public in the narration of Ayesha clearly exposes the absurdity: these are the public institutions under name, basically abandoned by privileges classes who have chosen not to be provided collectively, but instead to choose options that are more personal.

The visceral description, which then follows, makes this abandonment tangible: "Cats wound around the patients' beds and I spent the afternoon sitting on bloodstained sheets watching women taking calls from their relatives asking for money to buy medicines" (p. 36). As the elite sips the cappuccinos and go to literature festivals, poor women in the government hospitals are sitting on blood stained sheets, unable to buy basic medicine. The horror is increased by Ayesha having a factual tone; because, by merely narrating what she observes, the injustice is self-explanatory.

Even her remarks of the Karachi Literature Festival reveal elite hypocrisy: "Every year, the organizers of these events schedule at least two, or even five, sessions on Afghanistan or Kashmir so that it becomes 'newsy'... the diplomats always put up a chunk of money" (p. 48). The satire is aimed at cultural events that claim to have political involvement but are mainly to provide elite networking and donor interests. The selection of the topics is to meet the expectations of Western donors concerning what Pakistan should talk about, regional wars, terrorism and Islam, but the real issues of real Pakistanis are seldom discussed in the program, unless they can fit into the donor-approved models.

The fact that "everyone's dressed to the nines" (p. 55) in what ought to be an intellectual meeting indicate how so-called meritocratic spaces, in fact, perpetuate classes based on cultural capital and display. The visitors are doing classiness in both the dressing and the speaking. It turns into another place of elite self-presentation as opposed to intellectual interaction. The ambivalence of her own position is revealed in his knowing observation, when Ayesha is able to see beyond the performance, she knows it is pretentious.

**Section 4: Dark Humor Post-Trauma**

The most acute application of humor by Ayesha appears in the consequences of violence, when the gap between her emotional experience and inappropriate reactions she gets is the most noticeable one. After having been assaulted, which has led to hearing impairment, she writes: "I tried to resist saying to him that a post-traumatic stress disorder can't be replaced by a polystyrene cup" (p. 60). This statement serves as a summary of her outrage in accepting a cappuccino as a way of compensating trauma. The particularity of the polystyrene cup provides emphasis over the dissimilarity of the gesture being both cheap and expendable, which is a symbolic manifestation of how the management approaches her wellbeing as being disposable.

The irony used in this case is caustic and self-defensive. Ayesha imagines delivering this line, yet she ends up not doing so, she instead writes down her unarticulated reaction to the reader. The contrast between what she thinks and what she can say aloud is a demonstration of the limited role she has in the organization. She is excruciatingly conscious of the ridiculous lack of response of her boss: "When I came back to work and informed Kamran of what had happened, he grunted something about it not being his idea and offered to buy me a cappuccino" (p. 60). The casual way Kamran gets out of the issue by saying that it was not his idea clearly shifts the burden of responsibility onto him to authorize employees to work in dangerous areas. But the fact that she has no leverage does not allow her to seek a more significant remedy. The black humor thus records a kind of injustice, which she must internalize.

The visibly confusing effect of trauma is beautifully described by Ayesha: "Once again, and for the first time, I realized how noisy Karachi is" (p. 60). The seeming dichotomy of a familiar and a

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new experience is one of the examples of how trauma can turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. The sounds of the city which she never took much notice of before are now attacking her damaged sense of hearing. Karachi, which she considers to know well enough, plays its bloody undertones. Her gentle irony in the wording, the admittance of the logical impossibility of once again and first time concomitant, adds to the psychological acumen.

Ayesha in her fantasy imagines perverting the story: "I think briefly of taking a hotel room for the night and letting everybody think I've been kidnapped or something" (p. 4). This observation uproots traditional priorities. Kidnapping is usually seen as a danger; in this case, Ayesha sees it as better than the further adherence to the external requirements. The comedy recognizes the absurdity of a fake kidnapping and at the same time points out how the oppressive her daily life is making any form of reprieve near impossible.

Even in the most extreme situations, Ayesha is shown to have the privilege of a hotel room as opposed to a literal disappearance, which indicates that she has access to the same privileges as she does to a hotel room. She is able to purchase privacy and safety (temporarily) which is a privilege that is mostly unavailable to the general female population of Karachi. However, even this privileged way unscathed escape involves a gross subterfuge. She can no longer say I want to rest and have my way; she would have to have a verisimilar excuse, a kidnapping, to excuse the fact that she is more concerned with her own wellbeing than any other. Therefore, the comedy warns of privilege and limitation at the same time.

After the shooting, Ayesha describes asking people to help her: "A cup of tea and five cigarettes down the road I was hysterical and called Saad who advised me to calm down and go home" (p. 68). The hysterical term is a gendered, pathological zing connotation with a historical meaning. It is used by Ayesha in a self-depreciating way, but the situation makes it clear she had just gone through a very intense and life-threatening situation; hysterical responses are normatively appropriate. Although the advice by Saad to calm down has the best intentions, it is a good example of how the trauma of women is often dealt with by suppressing emotions instead of structurally. The comedic appeal is seen in the fact that Ayesha knows that this kind of guidance is not effective, yet it is the only support she is getting.

**Section 5: Limits of Humor**

Though its usefulness is undeniable, humor has its limits, especially to Ayesha, who on the one hand can no longer use humor to obscure the pain and on the other hand, the weight of continuous wits is noticeable at some point. The description of the newsroom gives a picture of the true sadness: "They all wear white kurtas, and there is the constant reminder of better times: when we used to get paid on the first of the month, when Kamran actually cared about the paper" (p. 68). The nostalgic theme has little humor. The faded present state is revealed by the collective memory of good pay and nurturing supervision. The comedy of the white kurtas as grieving clothes is overshadowed by the sincerity of sorrow that it carries.

The disconnect between the professional commitment and publicity of Ayesha comes out in her self-observation of her looks: "Wow, so you weren't lying about having spent the day at work. My kurta was wrinkled to the nth degree and I could swear that the body spray I had bought at the hospital pharmacy was not masking the antiseptic smell" (pp. 36-37). This remark indirectly doubts the truthfulness of her argument that she was working and also takes into doubt that she was actually doing her job. Her unclean looks turn out to be against her not her work. The sadness of

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this self-defense story-telling is felt. Ayesha is in need of confirmation of the difficult labor that she engages in; instead, she finds skepticism.

An ominous picture cannot be easily deciphered: "I could see a woman hanging her clothes on the roof of the building, dupattas flying in the wind, with a carefree look on her face" (p. 60). It is still unclear whether this is resilience or numbness, beauty or tragedy. It is simply narrated in a factual manner by Ayesha, but the weird insistence of the image is due to its resistance to the reductive ability of humor. The woman goes on with the domestic chores as bullets fly; this is not funny or trite. Life continues, and the laundry should be done. Such inability to process it by means of comedy highlights the poorer facet of humor as a coping mechanism.

The hesitation of Ayesha is an expression of emotionally draining calculus: "I am torn between texting him and asking what station or just trying to figure it out myself. Kamran sometimes goes into an expletive when you ask him an elementary question" (p. 16). It is not comic any more, but grating. It exhausts her with the endless struggle to ascertain the value of the information that comes at the price of verbal abuse. This reality cannot be reconciled to any amount of wit.

The dismissal of the cameraman shows how humor can be ineffective as a defense mechanism. "What's this guy's name again?' Ali's cameraman asks me while he persists shoving the camera in my face. I glare at him. Uff ho, attituuuude,' he says - in a sing-song voice" (p. 20). She reacts to physical invasion and disrespect by giving them a look; he turns her rightful indignation into a female weakness, or something to laugh at. Her voice is infantilized, and she is sacked by the sing-song voice. The narration of Ayesha does not make this passage comical; the absurdity is too painful, the injustice too crude, to have been put in comedy.

The efficacy of humor is also extinguished by economic precarity. The dismissal of her complaints by her superior proves the weaponisation of assumptions: "You of all people shouldn't complain. After all, you never have to pay rent, and you don't have to pay back any debts. And how can I be not having any money?" (p. 68). This remark reconstitutes justifiable labour claims into personal rights by using the supposed family backing to nullify her wage claims. The control at workplace becomes worse: "Not only do we go unpaid, but Kamran has ordered the IT department to block Facebook in the newsroom with the exception of lunch hour" (p. 68). The non-payment and tedious surveillance allow conditions in which humor does not offer sufficient coping any longer.

At the end, the mounting of unpaid paychecks, risky duty, bullying, and work overload come to a point of breakage to the Ayesha habitual wittiness. Even in scenes where she is just being put through it, appearing, living, waiting until money that is not coming does, the comic charge of the first part fades. It is more silent than the jokes. This silence indicates that humor as a coping strategy is not an unlimited resource: no wit can be a replacement of real safety, respect and financial stability.

**Discussion**

The discussion has shown that humor in *Karachi, You're Killing Me* works in a two-way manner, on the one hand, humor allows Ayesha to survive, and on the other hand, humor criticizes the systemic state of affairs which caused Ayesha to survive. This two-sidedness is not oppositional but interactive. Humor helps Ayesha to digest everyday encounters with sexism, violence, and precarity otherwise psychologically devastating. She invents cognitive distance with trauma through the recognition of the comic point, and as a result, she maintains psychological continuity despite the discontinuity of the situation.

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However, it is this same sense of humor that shields her but hides the extent of her pain as well as that of her surrounding people and herself. By making the PTSD and cappuccinos joke, Ayesha is able to express the unsuitability of her support networks, but the comedy structure makes her suffering easier to digest and therefore easier to ignore. When she is able to laugh about it, then it is not so bad, this is the paradox, whereby, humor makes situations unbearable, yet, at the same time, it would not allow them to be considered as intolerable by those who have the power to change it.

The feminized aspects of the humor of Ayesha are relevant. Her incessant joking is even a kind of emotional labor, work done to put other people at ease, to ease social situations, to not look like a pain in the neck or a humorless presence. Women who complain without humor are termed as shrill or whiny; humor makes complaint acceptable. But this palatability has its own need, which is another form of oppression. Ayesha is forced to make her pain entertaining so that she can be listened to.

Her self-depreciating approach is, in particular, a gendered socialization. Women are conditioned to make fun of themselves before others can, therefore, deflecting the criticism before it hits the mark. This is a strategy that shields against external judgment and internalizes the judgment. The way Ayesha keeps on putting herself down is funny in many ways but it is also a way of showing that she has internalized much about how unsatisfactory she is in some way. Humor is both opposing and supporting patriarchal discourses.

Class dimensions of the humor of Ayesha are not less important. Her high-culture embroiled wit is an indicator of learning and privilege of class. She is able to refer to art installations, identify elite hypocrisy, and use English-language satire because she has a background of the class. Her humor relies on a specific type of cultural capital that working-class women cannot obtain, which leads to asking the question of which resistance is readable and appreciated. Working-class women are also people who deal with oppression, and their approaches might not have the forms that can be appreciated by the elite as witty or subversive.

In addition, Ayesha often focuses on people beneath her on the hierarchy in the classes, she teases saleswomen, bad comments about poor women at hospitals. Although conscious of class injustice, her satirical look occasionally recreates class orders in the process of criticizing gender ones. This shows that humor as resistance is never in an absolute position but is always relative, as it is a complex way of locating the humorist in between systems of power that are intersecting.

Humor has a political role in the novel which works by exposure. The contradictions and hypocrisies reflected in Ayesha are witty and are the ones power structures strive to hide. She creates cognitive dissonance when she writes about police escorting boys that harass women, bosses purchasing bulletproof vehicles when no one is compensated on the job or when elite feminists go abroad to literary festivals in expatriated clothes and poor women sit in blood-stained rags. Such observations are not consistent with the official discourses about the Pakistani society, gender equality and meritocracy. Humor makes one acknowledge the difference between the rhetoric and reality.

Exposure is however, a narrow strategy politically. The wit of Ayesha increases awareness of the reader about injustice, but it does not always mean a change. The and the elite audiences who happen to come in contact with her story are most probably isolated against the effects of the story; they are able to laugh at it, experience slight discomfort and go back to their comfort zones. The impoverished women whose plight Ayesha is capturing do not have access to the novel. This poses interesting questions of who feminist humor is actually serving and whether comedy can ever

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escape being a safety valve that lets out tension that would otherwise be directed to collective action.

The boundaries of the humor in the text represent that Imtiaz herself is aware of these questions. Instances where the humor fails Ayesha, when fatigue is shown, where the absence of humor defeats humor all these are the extremes of comedy. They are indicative that humor helps women to survive but that is not enough. The structural forces that cause the need to adopt these coping mechanisms do not go away. Even the most amount of laughter will not be able to destroy patriarchy, eliminate workplace exploitation, or make cities safe.

To wave off humor however as simply a coping mechanism would be to overlook its true subversive potential. The wit of Ayesha creates a counter-narrative to the official versions, documenting wrongs of history in a style easy to share and remember. It fosters a solidarity of women readers who feel their own lived experience in what she observes and that of creating a very specific feminist consciousness, one with a highly analytical eye that cannot simply take unjust authority at face value. These lessons are not empty, as they express a form of opposition that is situated between agency and dissent.

**Conclusion**

Humor in *Karachi, You're Killing Me* is neither purely liberatory nor purely accommodating; but somewhere in between resistance and survival, criticism and coping, it is situated in a complex liminal space. The impossibility of her situation, with the lack of pay, the constant harassment, the violence in the city, the gender suspicion, all these and more practices, do not disintegrate Ayesha because of her wit. The jokes do give the psychological space to breathe and do maintain the agency and selfhood in the face of external conditions that attempt to extinct both, thus placing a significant emphasis on the necessity of humor in her survival as a woman journalist in modern Karachi.

At the same time, it is the humor of Ayesha that carries out fundamental political tasks. Her ironical remarks are reflective of gender contradictions in Pakistani norms, classes and institutional breakdowns. She exposes what the power structures hide on purpose: the hypocrisy of the elites, the arbitrary imposition of gender policing, and the systematic character of the oppression of women. Through enveloping these criticisms in a comedy, she builds an open and communicative conversation, which may speak to audiences who are otherwise un-receptive to overtly political feminist communication.

However, the analysis has a lot of limitations. The comedy of humour on the protective role may hide the depth of damage done, making it simpler to disregard the suffering of women by people in authority. The unspoken expectations of women making their oppression entertaining is another form of emotional labor that supports the existing gender hierarchies. Besides, the learned aspect of advanced satire means that this type of feminist comedy is limited to the educated, urban women, and thus does not encompass the working-class women or rural women who could have a significantly different approach to resistance.

The scenes when Ayesha loses humor are the most stating. In cases where the jokes are no longer effective to conceal weariness, when the silence overwhelms the wit, when the distance between laughter and pain becomes apparent, these are the points of demarcation of humor as a defence-mechanism. According to them, nothing can substitute structural change, true safety, economic security, and workplaces that can be respectful of women and pay them fairly. To survive is vital but that does not equate to flourishing.

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The novel by Imtiaz thus provides a fine sketch of the role of humor in the lives of women who have been oppressed. It does not romanticize laughter as easily subversive, nor does it reject humor as just a position of accommodation, but it is instead a overtly contradictory strategy that women adopt because the alternative - silence, despair or open confrontation, is even more costly. Ayesha laughs because she has to, and because she is able to. Her child is a sword and a dart.

The novel shows that comic modes must be taken seriously in terms of feminist literary studies. Humor is not light, it is an elaborate machine of processing and questioning oppression. Examining the manner, timing, and purpose behind the use of different kinds of humour: self-deprecating, satirical, dark, absurdist, scholars can learn more about the way women operate within the complicated power structures. The comedy brings out emotional billings that a simple realist account may miss: everyday survival, micro-resistance strategies, the psychological scaffolding of feminist consciousness on the verge.

Finally, the idea of feminist humor in *Karachi, You're Killing Me* is that it is not a panacea of patriarchy but a needed reaction to it. Laughter is not a way of demolishing the oppressive systems, but it helps women to work in and against the systems without becoming completely lost. It leaves room to criticize, ally, and reason in situations that are meant to deprive all these. In this regard, the wit of Ayesha is not just in personality, but the wit of ordinary resisting, worthy of scholarly attention, despite the fact that we are still conscious of its boundaries and making the process of such defensive comedy unnecessary by creating circumstances in which those defense is unnecessary.

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