

The Humour Conundrum

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Humour at times simply does not make sense. It usually does not have an ulterior motive, an underlying message or a profound meaning. But this seemingly “meaningless” phenomenon is highly prevalent in our everyday lives. It might be a political cartoon in the daily newspaper, or a pun our friend made, or perhaps one of the many memes showing up on our newsfeeds. Humour or attempt at humour is everywhere. But humour might not always be light-hearted. Sometimes there’s an edge to them that will amuse some while hurting or angering others. Something that is meant to be a joke, whose sole purpose is to bring out a smile, becomes a bone of contention. Therein lies the conundrum. Should it be acceptable to express statements that can induce varying reactions for the sake of humour? Should there be a limit when it comes to things one can make fun of? Is there such a thing called the “middle ground”? These are questions that can only be answered by going to the roots of it.

It can be argued that humour is always at someone’s expense. Someone has to play the fool. While there are some exceptions, this seems to be the general rule. There’s still no general consensus on why we laugh and what we laugh at. There are many theories behind it. The gist of them is that humour is the escape from the harsh realities of life. We laugh at the impossibility of a situation. We laugh at a fool because of the assurance of our own dignity being unscathed. Let’s take a look at a poem titled “Waste” by Harry Graham (2009):

*I had written to Aunt Maud
Who was on a trip abroad
When I heard she’d died of cramp,
Just too late to save the stamp.*

There’s a ridiculousness to this scenario which can be considered funny. The beloved Aunt Maud who was on a trip aboard had passed away but all that the writer is mournful about is the fact that he wasted a stamp writing a letter to her. If you look at this realistically, there’s nothing that one should find amusing

here. The tragic incident of one’s passing is never funny. And yet it’s the improbability of the situation that contributes to the humour. The whole ordeal seems farfetched and out of the norm in terms of acceptable behaviour.

The main conflict of interest is due to this. Every joke needs a fool. Whether you’re making fun of airline food or world politics, someone or something has to be the butt of the joke. The topic around which a joke is made can vary between anything and everything. However, just because it *can* be made fun of doesn’t necessarily mean it *should* be made fun of. But where does one draw the line? The opinion regarding this is varying. Asif Zaman, a well-known meme maker and humour enthusiast on Facebook, had a lot to say on this. When asked what separates a joke from hate speech, he had this to say: “What we have to keep in mind is that comedy is subjective; we cannot create a scale and say, oh, this is hate speech and this is joke, because the threshold varies from person to person.” But why is it that someone would make fun of a grave situation? “I think correlating tragedy with comedy is an age-old tradition. The basis is, in my opinion, helplessness. Sometimes there is nothing you can do except pray or laugh. Making jokes doesn’t change the helplessness, but it helps divert attention from terrifying thoughts so that we can carry on,” he says.

By looking into how we perceive jokes and why we do so, we can get an idea of why it can be crude sometimes. But the rationale behind it cannot always justify the discontent it may cause. One cannot and should not expect people, in general, to have nerves

of steel. We all have our moments of vulnerability. There are many things which might seem normal to others but nothing less than traumatising for some. Someone whose life has been deeply affected by a situation or a disease or a condition might not find attempted humour surrounding that to be funny.

The phrase “too soon” started off like this. As Gilbert Gottfried made a joke about a certain tragic incident that happened just weeks ago, he was met with a plethora of boos. A certain individual from the crowd shouted the now famous (or infamous) phrase. But how soon is too soon? How long does it take before a serious situation can be made light of? And does it mean that the seriousness of a situation deteriorates over time? There’s no straight answer to these questions. It can be interpreted in many ways. It’s moments like these when it’s better to use our sense of humanity instead of logic alone. Gilbert Gottfried justified his action by saying that he just wanted to see how much he can rile up the audience. And this is why I think Gottfried’s joke was a terrible attempt at humour.

Whether a joke is in bad taste or not depends largely on the context, the person behind the joke, and the audience it was delivered to. The context is important because if the only intention behind a joke is to cause division and discomfort then it’s a selfish attempt at humour that serves no one except the person making it. Hate speech hidden in the guise of humour is still hate speech. The second point is the person making the joke. If a misogynistic person makes a misogynistic joke then the odds are that person is spouting what he actually

believes in – in the name of humour. A “joke” like that is no different from any of his other bigoted opinions. According to Anupoma Joyeeta Joyee, a student of law, “It depends on the intent of the joke. For example, a joke of sexist nature from a sexist person won’t be funny to me. But coming from a liberal person, a sexist joke might be sarcasm.” The third point is the audience. If you are being ironic about something and you mould that into a joke or a meme or whatever, you need to know that the audience will get the irony behind what you’re saying. If they actually end up agreeing with the statement then you end up conveying the exact message you are against.

Moderation of content regarding humour is a double edged sword. Joyee found this to be a conflicting matter. She believes, “When you start moderating, unless you draw a clear boundary, it’ll impose arbitrary restrictions on freedom of speech. But on the other hand if you open up all topics for the purpose of comedy, you can’t limit anything.” The argument, however, is not about whether humour should be restricted or not. In the end, a person’s right to make a joke falls under the freedom of speech that he/she has; something that we have been striving for. But that does not mean humour should not be smart. As a rational human being, we should know how far we can go in the name of humour by using our own sense of morality. There should not be a written rule but at the same time we should be able to differentiate between what’s humorous and hurtful. It shouldn’t be moderation that keeps us from hurting others in the name of humour, but a mutual respect for others. It’s a sign of maturity to assess the gravity of a situation before making light of it. If what we say or post only becomes offensive to others then we are not respecting the true purpose of comedy. Because it’s not a good joke if you’re the only one laughing.

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