

## **SATIRE AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE: CRITICISM OF USA IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PAKISTANI TELEVISUAL POLITICAL SATIRE**

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**Abstract:** *The study observes that in the early twenty-first century different Pakistani comic televisual political satire shows started discussing current affairs and international relations. The United States of America remains one of the main targets of Pakistani televisual satire in the new century. The research finds that Pakistani televisual satire effectively exposes the flaws of the US foreign policy. Pakistani televisual satirists are very critical of America's exploitative neocolonial enterprise. The satire among other things condemns America's anti-Islam narrative and Islamophobia; invasion of other nations and violation of their sovereignty; lust for oil and power; utilitarian foreign policy; and false pretexts for the war on terror. The research analyses the relevant satirical content of two of the representative shows. The study argues that the twenty-first century Pakistani televisual satire may be regarded as a counter-narrative. Additionally, the study uses Arthur Asa Berger's classification of humour (1993) to explain the devices behind the satire making it effective. In this way, the study highlights the literary merit of Pakistani televisual satire. The research proposes that Pakistani televisual satire may be acknowledged as a subgenre of political satire.*

**Keywords:** *Satire TV, Political Satire, Counter-narrative, Arthur Asa Berger, Anatomy of Humor. Loose Talk. The Real News.*

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## 1. Introduction

Satire “exhibits or examines vice and folly and makes them appear ridiculous and contemptible. . . It uses laughter to attack its objects, rather than for mere evocation of mirth and pleasure” (Gray, 1992, pp. 255-56). The concern of the present study is with the genre of televisual satire. This study particularly considers the selected satirical content presented on Pakistani television. In the late twentieth century on Pakistani television, the international relations and affairs were discussed very rarely, generally and briefly. The study notes it as a major point of satire’s evolution that the twenty-first century Pakistani TV shows discuss the international relations more frequently, incisively and extensively. A significant part of the twenty-first century Pakistani televisual satire discusses various aspects of the Pak-US relationship. The research particularly foregrounds that the twenty-first century Pakistani televisual political satire is very critical of the United States of America’s oppressive role as a neocolonial power. Pakistani television uses satire as a means of counter-narrative. “Counter-narrative refers to the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized. The idea of ‘counter’ itself implies space of resistance against traditional domination” (Mora, 2014, Para 1). Moreover, the twenty-first century Pakistani shows use this platform to effectively project Pakistan’s stance on various international issues.

The study aims at exploring and explaining the twenty-first century Pakistani televisual political satire directed at the United States of America. It is also the objective of the study to explain the literary devices used in this satire

to make it effective. The satirical devices are analyzed from the perspective of Arthur Asa Berger’s glossary *An Anatomy of Humor* (1993). The research proposes that this satire may be a comic means to the serious end of projecting Pakistan’s national narrative to counter America’s narrative.

## 2. Literature Review

Abid and Zahid (2018) examine various comic frames used in the comedy shows on different Pakistani television channels. They argue that side by side entertainment, comedy shows have their political implications. The shows use satire, humor and comedy frames to target political issues, political parties and political leaders. In order to understand the pattern of political comedy in these shows, we need to recognize the classification of comic content, format, frame, political issues, parties and political leadership. The authors evaluate various comedy patterns in order to understand the way politics is represented on Pakistani television channels. For the purpose, the study conducts the content analysis of the selected number of representative segments from the political comedy shows presented on some of Pakistan’s main television channels. The study finds that more satire frames are used in the shows than humor or parody frames. It is also concluded that political issues are given more importance than the social or economic ones.

Hassan (2018) discusses the construction of ideology in the headlines on news bulletins, and its impact on the audience. She applies Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The research compares the headline news of three different Pakistani news channels. The research uses questionnaire as data collection tool. Moreover, the researcher conducts a detailed textual, intertextual and

sociocultural analysis of the selected news content. The research finds that the news mostly loaded with the content carrying ideology and power relations. The study finds that the viewers generally dislike the news which are exaggerated, entertainment-oriented, or unfair.

Zaheer (2018) explores the factors which influence the audience to watch the TV comedy shows. She uses survey method for the purpose. The research collects data from respondents belonging to different demographic backgrounds. The study concludes that it is primarily the interest in political humor which leads people to watch political comedy shows. The study finds age as a major factor developing the attraction for political humor. Monthly income is traced as another major indicator in this regard. The research suggests that the political comedy shows may not be regarded only a source of entertainment, they are a potential medium of political communication and a significant source of political awareness. In a low-literacy-rate country like Pakistan, such shows can serve as an alternate source of political education.

Pamment (2017) explores the *bhand* tradition in the Punjabi popular theatre and contemporary TV satire. She considers such contemporary television shows as the revival of *bhand* tradition, where this *ranga-bighla* pairing is represented by a smug TV journalist/host and a funny common man/comedian (p. 173). She analyses Dunya News show *Hasb-e-Haal* (translated as *According to the Situation*, 2008-) for the purpose, and concludes that a number of other such shows may be viewed as the extension of *bhand* tradition. Her contention is that the

tradition of contemporary TV *bhand* continues by shaking the orthodox ideological binaries and giving multiple perspectives on the news. Nazir and Bhatti (2016) evaluate the effect of political satire TV shows presented on various Pakistani channels. They discuss the effect of these shows on political socialization, political awareness and voting behavior. The research assumes that the viewership of political satire TV shows is in positive relation with political socialization. The study also evaluates whether the political information spread through the political satire TV shows is considered trustworthy by the audience. The research also traces which Pakistani channel- among Dunya, Geo, and Aaj- has the most impact on the audience.

Several recent research projects have considered Pakistani televisual political satire shows. Most of the studies evaluate these shows either from a political or journalistic perspective. The present study analyses the satirical content particularly with a view to emphasizing the value of Pakistani televisual satire as a counter-narrative and highlighting its literary merit.

### 3. Research Design

The study is exploratory and explanatory in its nature. It uses the qualitative method for analysis. The study conducts the content analysis of satire in two of the representative twenty-first century comic political satire shows presented on different television channels in Pakistan. The following two shows have been selected for analysis: *Loose Talk* (2005, ARY Digital) by Anwar Maqsood; and *The Real News* (2006, Play TV, Aaj TV Network) by Saad Haroon. In order to explain the literary devices used in the satire, the research takes help from Arthur Asa Berger's

model of humor used in *An Anatomy of Humor* (1993). Berger offers a classification system of the devices used in humor. In its analysis of devices, the study largely uses the definitions of devices offered by Berger. According to Berger, the subject matter of a joke varies from one version to another. Therefore, the content of humor is not as important as the device or technique used behind it (p. 16). It is the device which makes the humor effective. In this context, the present study analyses the devices behind the satirical humor used in the selected shows. Throughout the discussion and analysis, the satirical devices are illustrated separately as single-spaced blocks under every heading. The language of the show *Loose Talk* has been transcribed wherever required.

#### **4. Discussion and Analysis**

##### **4.1 Aftermath of 9/11 and Islamophobia**

The way Pakistanis were treated in America soon after the 9/11 becomes a part of discussion in a *Loose Talk* episode. One America-returned Pakistani shares that if you exchanged Muslim greetings in America, the people would first stare at you angrily, and then would start beating you. He also says that after the 9/11 it became impossible to wear traditional Pakistani dress in public. He adds that whenever anything happened in America, Pakistanis are held responsible. It is a direct satire on Islamophobia.

**Comparison:** The show host explains that the 9/11 incident was the worst in American history, as so many Americans were not killed on a single day in the history of America. The comic character responds that the people killed in Baghdad were “the thieves of Baghdad” (Muhammad Sagheer Khan, 2017).

Berger (1993) defines the technique of comparison as thus, “Some comparisons are

not humorous; it is only when the nature of the comparison is ridiculous or there is another technique at work that comparisons are funny” (p. 29). The comparison in the example above is not primarily humorous. The satirist aims at serious satire. The nature of this comparison is not amusing, and there is no other device used with the comparison. The satiric technique of comparison is used to suggest that like the victims of the 9/11, the people killed in Iraq War too were innocent. Through this comparison, the satirist stresses that it would be unjust and exclusiveness to sympathise with the 9/11 victims and be indifferent to the victims of the Iraq War. Furthermore, this device of comparison helps bring forth the counter narrative that there was no justification for Iraq’s invasion.

##### **4.2 American Drone Attacks**

In a *Loose Talk* episode, the satire becomes harsh and sarcastic as a protest against the recurrent American drone attacks in Pakistan’s area of North Waziristan. The comedian says that America should bomb the Lower House of the Parliament of Pakistan because the Pakistanis need new faces in their parliament. He adds that the Pakistani Prime Minister condemns the American drone attacks daily. There is a further element of suggestiveness. The satirist says that the PM condemns the attacks, what the satirist does not say is even more important to consider. He implies that the Pakistani PM is simply helpless to stop such attacks and all he can do in response to the drone attacks is lip service (*Loose Talk*, 2016a). This bitter satire is balanced when in the same episode, using the lighter tools of allusion and suggestiveness, the comedian says that it would be better for Pakistan if John McCain had become the US President instead

of Barack Obama because in such a situation Sarah Palin would become the Vice President of the United State. It is implied that the comedian is interested in Palin because of her beauty and feminine attraction.

Further, some other techniques are also incorporated.

**Wordplay and Repetition:** The comedian says that there are three persons of the same name in the US who are very important: Hussein Obama (the then American President), Hussein Haqqani (the then Pak Ambassador to the United States) and Hussein Haroon (the then Pak Representative to the United Nations). (added emphasis)

The satirist, for the purpose of light humor, uses the coincidence of the presence in the US of three people sharing the same name and holding some of the important offices. Here the humor is produced using the techniques of wordplay and repetition. This wordplay is witty because the word ‘Hussein’ comes before the last name of all three. The satirist skillfully avoids the first name of Obama (Barack) to keep the repetition smooth.

There is a frequent use of wordplay in one of the episodes. An impersonation of a scientist plays on the words like Clinton, Pentagon, and Bush.

**Neologism and Amalgamation:** The Scientist says that when he was in the US, he invented a large ‘pant’ and ‘gown’ (referring to Pentagon). Then he invented a detergent: ‘clean’ ‘ton’ (suggesting Clinton); later on he invented a ‘bush’ that he named ‘Push Bush’ (implying Bush). He adds that he opened a washing factory named ‘Washing Ton DC,’ he explains that DC stands for Dry Cleaners.

Berger is of the view that as audience we like these neologisms and amalgamations (p. 45).

The audience is encouraged to amalgamate various pairs of words: pant-gown sounds like Pentagon (the headquarters of the American Defense Department); clean-ton suggests Bill Clinton (American President, 1993-2001); Push-Bush is used to imply G. W. Bush (American President 2003-2011); washing-ton-DC is used to sound same as Washington DC (capital of the United States). It is a lighter piece of humor which aims at tickling the audience, with no satirical bite in it. After that the Scientists narrates a far-fetched story:

**Exaggeration:** The comedian narrates that he married an American woman. They had a male child whom he named as Osama. He named him Osama because only one person in the world can scare the Americans that is Osama (Bin Laden). On Osama’s birthday cake, the candles were shaped like Twin-Towers. Osama destroyed them. At this point, a relative of his wife announced the end of their marriage. He says that if he had another male child, he would give him the name Saddam. The host reminds the comedian that he is a Scientist. Comedian responds that to scare the US is not an art, but a science (Loose Talk, 2017a).

In the example given above, the satirist develops a fictitious tale that describes a fantastically exaggerated situation. So, the device of exaggeration is used here. From Berger’s point of view (1993), “Exaggeration in not necessarily humorous . . . exaggeration must be tied to something else if it is to be seen as comic” (p. 33). In case of this tale, exaggeration is linked to allusion. The narrator himself is symbolic of America’s then enemies (Afghanistan and Iraq), while the narrator’s wife represents the US itself. The satirist proposes through the idea of marriage that the

individuals like Saddam and Osama, whom the US now calls terrorists, are the creation of those nations which were once America's close allies. The action of demolishing the Twin-Tower-shaped candles is a reference to the 9/11. The announcement of the end of marriage suggests the Bush's declaration of War against America's friends of past. The plan of naming the other son as Saddam is a strong reference to (Iraq's former President Saddam Hussein) America's next enemy after Osama. Through the techniques of exaggeration and political allusion, the satirist ridicules America's selfish foreign policy. He implies that till the US has its interests, it supports the persons like Osama and Saddam; once its goals were achieved, the US turns against the same people and declares them as terrorists. However exaggerated and far-fetched the story might be, a strong satire is directed on America's neocolonial designs.

#### **4.3 Pakistan as an Inferior American Ally**

The then American President George Bush's visit to Pakistan (March 2006) has been used to satirize Pakistan's subaltern and inferior status as American ally, and the US utilitarian foreign policy.

**Reversal:** The host asks the personification of a US President Security Personnel as to how he liked Pakistan. He answers that Pakistan is a "Good transit between India and Afghanistan." (Loose Talk, 2017b)

This brief piece uses the technique of reversal to highlight that Pakistan's status is not that of an equal American ally, but as little as a mere transit route that suits the political and economic interests of America in the region. According to Berger (1993), reversal lies in the resolution of something which turns out to

be the exact opposite of what is expected. The irony is that the audience expects that the American would call Pakistan as a great friend or at least an ally. However, quite reverse to the expectations, the American personnel calls Pakistan a "good transit." This reversal shows Pakistan's second-rate position is its relationship with the US.

#### **4.4 Labelling as Terrorist**

In one of the fake news, the US and other Western nations are criticized for labelling people as terrorists.

**Catalogue:** The host says, "The Foreign Office in a follow-up statement to Western powers now says that Osama Bin Laden is hiding in Pakistan. He is hiding in a tent with Hitler, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez ... Chemical Ali, Yasser Arafat, and any other people you made into monsters and can't control anymore." (danlali, 2007a)

The comic technique of catalogue (Berger; p. 27) is useful to know that there are several people who were once installed by the US, and the US labeled them as terrorists after their utility ended. The host and the correspondent consider a short video clip. The host informs that the movie *Rambo-III* (1988) was in shot Afghanistan. It is an indirect criticism on how once the US created and romanticized the Afghan fighters as Mujahedeen. But, after using them, the US labelled them as terrorists (danlali, 2008a).

#### **4.5 US as Responsible for 9/11**

The *Rambo-III* video clip is used to give a view on the 9/11.

**Repartee, Analogy and Allusion:** The host says that *Rambo-III* is just a movie. "Saad, so was the World Trade Center," says the Correspondent. (danlali, 2008a)

Here the tools of repartee, analogy and allusion are used with the purpose of highlighting that the 9/11 was pre-decided and scripted like a movie. In the correspondent's prompt response to the host, there is repartee. As the 9/11 is compared to a movie, it is analogy. The discussion on the World Trade Centre introduces a political allusion. This piece serves as a counter-narrative to show that America itself staged the 9/11, so that it could further use it as a pretext for attacking different countries.

#### 4.6 America's Lust for Oil

Alan Greenspan's (2007) book *The Age of Turbulence: Adventure in a New World* by, comes as a reference is one of the *Real News* episodes.

**Truism:** The host says that the book shows that the Iraq War was all about the US greed for oil. The correspondent thinks this as saying something as, "The air is for breathing." (danlali, 2008b)

He proposes that it is only truism to say that the Iraq War was all about oil because it is already a recognized and established fact. The ability of satirist is in the irony that he seems to be ridiculing Greenspan's idea, but actually he takes it very seriously, rather approves of it, in the process exposing the US Iraq War pretext.

#### 4.7 Modus Operandi of War on Terror

In one of the *Real News* episodes, the news of the American President addressing a Climate Change Conference is conveyed. The American President says that he will try to save the environment by taking steps against the greenhouse gas emissions. The satirist considers this pledge as like the President's other pledges of protecting Iraq and other countries against the so-called threats. This

analogy is used by the satirist to expose the typical American mode of action to neo-colonize the poor third world countries.

**Exaggeration:** The host says that the America would protect against greenhouse gas emissions by accusing the gases of keeping the WMDs, then it will insert a puppet gas-leader to split the gases into different weaker groups that would later on fight each other. After that a Hollywood film would present a US Army of only 300 soldiers beating an army of greenhouse gases. At the end the US would justify that war. (danlali, 2008b)

The technique of exaggeration has been used here. The host devises an exaggerated story to show the reality of the US neocolonial enterprise. Allusion is used as a satirical tool as well. This apparently absurd story hints at the US invasion of Iraq. This is a harsh and biting satire on the US invasion of different regions of the globe. It particularly exposes the design behind the American War on Terror. It exposes how the US initially uses unfounded allegations as pretext for entering a country; then it introduces a rubberstamp administration there in the name of democracy; after that it weakens the natives by dividing them into different smaller groups; and thus it gains the complete control of that country. Finally, it tries to justify the occupation in the name of peace.

#### 4.8 Bush and Cheney, the Two Asses

In one *Real News* episode, the then US President George Bush and the Vice President Dick Cheney are criticised for their policies.

**Insult and Analogy:** The host Saad says: "A group of Indian villagers presided over the marriage of two donkeys at an ancient Hindu temple in Southern India in a bid to promote

world peace. While this might sound strange, this is actually the second time in recent history that two asses have come together to try to bring about world peace.” (danlali, 2007b)

The moment he talks about the two asses, the pictures of Bush and Cheney flash on the television screen. To Berger (1993), “Insults, by themselves are not seen as funny; there has to be a comic play frame established and there have to be other techniques involved, such as comparisons, exaggeration, ridicule, etc.” (p. 50). In the above-given example, it may be noted that there is an element of insult in referring to someone as donkey. In Berger’s sense, the technique of insult does not work alone, it involves analogy: the way, in the Hindu ritual discussed above, two asses are brought together for global peace, Bush and Cheney worked together for peace. One can notice the element of irony here as well. Bush and Cheney used the idea of world peace as an excuse only to follow their neocolonial plans. It is noteworthy that ‘insult’ is one of the harsh tools of satire. Its use shows the intensity of anger against the Bush administration policies.

#### **4.9 Iran-US Relations**

America’s baseless accusation of Iran’s proficiency of nuclear weapons is criticized in another example.

**Irony and Absurdity:** *Real News* Correspondent, Danish Ali reports, “They [the Americans] haven’t found any weapons-growing nuclear material yet” but “they haven’t looked under any pillows!” He declares it “a huge oversight.”

The devices of irony and absurdity are used in the example above. According to Berger the strength of irony lies in the fact that audience quickly gets the irony (pp. 40-41). In this

example, the audience quickly understands that the nuclear weapons certainly are not to be found under pillows. So, the US failure to find the nukes is highlighted. The reporter then brings to notice another such incident that no WMDs could be found in Iraq because the US did not look for them under the pillows. It is stated that the idea of Weapons of Mass Destruction is as fictitious as the idea of the Tooth Fairy. The satirist then uses the tool of comparison to emphasize Iran’s right of nuclear enrichment. Iran’s case is compared with that of Israel’s. It is explained that Israel is also pursuing nuclear enrichment. The idea is to highlight that the superpower of the world is silent on Israel’s nuclear enrichment programmed. By this comparison, the double standard of the United States of America is exposed.

#### **4.10 Arab as US Allies against Iraq**

Pakistani TV satire of the twenty-first century expresses the sentiments of Pakistani public on various international issues. Pakistanis were angry with the Arab countries for being the American allies against Iraq. *Loose Talk* targets the conduct of the Arab rulers. The character impersonating Saddam Hussein, the then Iraqi President, appears in the show. The host asks him why the Arab countries did not support Iraq when the US invaded Iraq.

**Sarcasm:** Saddam Hussein replies that the Arabs did not support Iraq because the Arabs consider the US as their ‘father,’ therefore they could not oppose their father and support Iraq. (Loose Talk, 2017c)

The technique of sarcasm has been used here to show that the Arabs are obeying the US like children obey their father. It is to satirise the pro-America policies of the Arab nations.



## 5. Conclusion

After the analysis of selected satirical content, the study concludes that out of the early twenty-first century Pakistani televisual satire emerges a striking, concrete and effective retort to the United States of America as a neocolonial power. It is concluded that the satire, by means of ridicule, exposes the flaws of America's neocolonial enterprise. The research has explained that soon after the 9/11, the Americans jumped to the conclusion and held all the Muslims responsible for the attack. Pakistanis being Muslims also became a victim of their intolerance and Islamophobia. The satire criticises the American attitude towards Muslims soon after the 9/11. The research suggests that it was not fair holding all the Muslims or Pakistanis responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The satire also makes us realize that the people killed after the US invasion of Iraq equally deserve our sympathies.

The research explains that the satire makes a statement that the American drone attacks on Pakistani territories are a violation of the country's sovereignty. It also exposes the pathetic attitude of Pakistani heads of the government who cannot do anything beyond condemnation. The study also concludes that the Pakistani televisual satirist is aware of America's utilitarian policies. An individual or a terror group is supported, established and glorified; but when they outlive their utility, they are labelled as terrorists. It is also exposed that the USA does not consider Pakistan as an equal partner in the war against terror, nor an ally. Pakistan's role is not that of a friend, but that of a slave.

The study also concludes that Pakistani satire is used as a successful medium to promote counter-narrative. Like the satire refers to the idea that the 9/11, for which the USA blames Islam, itself was scripted like a Hollywood movie. It is suggested that the USA later on used it as a pretext for its invasion of Afghanistan. The satire has also exposed the mode of operation of America's war on terror. The research traces the example of Iran: that the US blamed Iran of gaining the capability of making nuclear weapons, while practically there was no likelihood of Iran gaining that capability for years. The satire also condemns the Arab countries for supporting the US against their own brotherly Islamic country Iraq. Moreover, the research explains that the Pakistani satire is an expression of Muslims' indignant displeasure at America's foreign policy. It is manifested by the fact that when an Iraqi journalist hurls shoes at the US President, Pakistani satirist approves of that.

The study establishes the literary value of Pakistani televisual satire. Soft devices like wordplay, irony, analogy, and allusion, etc. have been used for tolerant criticism; while rather harsh devices like sarcasm and insult, etc. are used where the satire is meant to be bitter. The study argues that Pakistani televisual satire is worthy of international recognition as a subgenre of political satire.

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