

***UNDERSTANDING VOICE BEHIND THE
VOICES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF
SELECTED STAND-UP COMEDIANS IN
INDIA***

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Abstract:

Stand-up comedy is an emerging model of expression to speak the truth. It is a mode where women find their voices and candidly speak about the experiences they have never shared or talked. The paper explores the dynamics of how women stand-up comedians talk about real-life incidents in a satiric and ironic manner in front of an unknown audience. It analyses the narratives and the need for strong and aggressive language to express their feelings. Further irony provides a better tool to critically analyse the implications of the woman comedians in their ideologies. It attempts to understand how our notions of ideology, function, and aesthetics change concerning socio-political movements. It tries to identify how women are constructed, why they are constructed, and how Stand-up comedy explores and explains ideologies. It will also explore how the platform will become a significant source of social change.

The researcher will analyse three stand-up comedians from various platforms (YouTube/OTT) to explore the Stand-up comedians in a different context and to engage in other aspects to understand the emerging trend of self-expression.

KeyWords:

Voice, Stand-up Comedy, Identity, Feminism

One of the popular genres of Oral Literature is an oral narrative. It records the events of places, people, and places based on personal experience or fiction. They are passed from generation to generation. The narration is transferred via word of mouth. As rightly said by Harold Scheub :

A performer of oral narratives utilizes the materials of his/her culture as a painter uses colour.

The oral narrative uses the concept of memory, agency and identity which are weaved are complexly. It connects with one's affairs and reconnect with the audience in a wider setting. In a world where voices are always unheard, narratives provide a scope and a podium for the speakers to express their views and their ideas. The narrators often try to delve into themselves and try to channel their inner voice.

A Stand-up Comedy is a new Oral Narrative form where the comic (the performer) stands in front of the audience and speaks through their personal experiences. They give an illusion to the audience that they are equally communicating with the audience, but they are offering a monologue, often termed a routine act or shtick. In a folkloristic approach, Brodie defines stand-up comedy as "a form of talk [that] implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking."

Stand-up comedy is trying to establish its roots in the academic discourse. There are very few works focusing on the rubrics of the subject. Nevertheless, one of the most focused pieces of literature on the subject can be found in *A Vulgar Art – A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy* by Ian Brodie, a professor of folklore at Cape Breton University.

Stand-up Comedy works with the interconnection between the audience and the performer. Brodie calls it "performed not to but with an audience" (Brodie 5)

The audience's enthusiasm, the humour created and appreciated, the laughter and the applauding are how one understands how successful the comedian is in her performance. The performer has to understand which issues would be appreciated by the audience and which would highlight by the audience present. Another technique used is Insult jokes, a common phenomenon to know how well the audience responds to the stimuli and which issues can be discussed.

The setting of the act also plays a vital role. It is seen that primarily urban areas would pay a considerable amount to watch the performance. Stand-Up Comedians have grown into the profession.

India, too, appreciates this form of Oral narrative. And in the generation of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Videos, Hot Star, and YouTube, these new artists are gaining popularity and fame along with a stage to express their voice and views on rarely spoken topics. It has become a platform for middle-class people to try to find their true selves in the course of narration in urban areas. It was a profession dominated chiefly by men discussing current political issues and scenarios. It was quite later that women started participating in this profession and claimed their worth in a true sense.

The paper focuses primarily on three Indian Stand-up Comedian women, namely:

Aditi Mittal – Things they would not let me say (Netflix Special)

Aditi Mittal is one of the first woman Stand-up comedians and has been rated amongst India's top 100 Comedians by The Times of India. CNNIBN.com named her "a witty, intelligent and hilarious" woman to follow her on Twitter. She has 38.3k followers on Instagram.

Sumukhi Suresh – Do not Tell Amma (Amazon Special)

Sumukhi Suresh is a Stand-Up Comedian from Nagpur. In an online article, Hindustan Times referred to Sumukhi Suresh as "India's Tine Fey." She is primarily famous for her dry-wit humour. She has 201K followers on Instagram.

Neeti Palta – Almost Sanskari (Amazon Prime)

Neeti Palta is a famous Stand-up Comedian from Delhi. She is an Army kid and often talks about her experiences of being one. She has 81.1 K followers on Instagram.

It also considers other comedians such as Annu Menon, Kaneez Surkha, Prashasthi Singh, Supriya Joshi, Niveditha Prakasam, and so on. These are a few comedians who not only advocate upcoming and general issues of a woman in India but also slam the issue with wit and humour.

“YA SHVU V BOLSHOM DOME NA KHOLME”

The above lines are an episode in Marvellous Mrs Maisel aired on Amazon Prime on 17 March 2017 (Episode 2, Season 1). It was a remarkable episode since the protagonist Mrs Maisel leaves a messy house behind, walks to an open mic stage, bursts out her emotions and frustrations, and starts with the abovementioned lines. These are Russian lines roughly translated to ‘I live in the large house on the hill’. Furthermore, later on, she explains the context even though she is well versed in Russian literature, which has little or no significance in solving her on-hand marital problems. She is shown to be a stereotypical woman trying to impress her husband in every possible manner. However, to everyone’s dismay, her husband has an affair and decides to leave Mrs Maisel. She bashes her way out of the house where everyone is arguing for a better solution and goes to the bar to talk about her frustrated and miserable life. Her approach to such a hard life is through wit and humour. She breaks all her barriers and starts her unapologetic performance in an open mic set-up. This impromptu speech has marked a significant change in her tone and character. Let us understand how women Stand-up Comedians create a space for themselves to create an identity in society.

Voice of Women:

As a child, we are often asked not to do this, not to do that, and so on. Nevertheless, as age passes, we become more curious beings and try to explore and find out why we were not asked to see/say/hear/read some ‘X’ things. These wishes, thoughts, and ideas are constantly repressed, accumulating in our young minds. Once we hit the maturity age, we become the Indiana Jones of our life and try to explore societal rules, and the prevalent notion of “Lok kya kehenge?” is implanted in our minds. Moreover, this is where the Pressure Cooker Theory comes into the scene. According to the researcher’s conclusion, a woman is constantly refrained by societal and patriarchal rules that ultimately burst her emotions in front of a completely unknown audience. The most discussed topics of Woman Stand-up Comedians in India are the issues dealt with by women in patriarchy. The following things can be analysed from their narratives which ultimately contribute to the Pressure Cooker Theory.

1. Content:

The Stand-up Comedian generally deals with the “Shh” Topics: topics meant to be spoken in private and preferably never. Eve-teasing, Urinals, Age, Arrange Marriage, Divorce, Sex, etc.

These topics primarily focus on the current issues of women’s physical, mental and social health and are equally important to discuss. Such matters are dealt with utmost precaution but at the same time with the use of wit and irony. Several humour theorists such as Bergson, Freud, and Oring have noted that

humour is the revelation of (by the performer) or a reaction to (by audiences) a physical, intellectual, social, moral, or emotional incongruity that could just as quickly elicit feelings of terror. Both the context and manner in which the humorous observation is made differentiate the comic from the tragic.

(qtd. in Brodie 6)

Thus, it becomes challenging to understand the audience's demands and how they respond to the performer's views.

2. Use of Foul language:

Our history suggests that man’s language is always subordinate to women through generations. With a thorough observation of the narratives, it can be concluded that there is a significant change in woman’s language. More Deeply, women tend to use some language features, which according to some sociolinguists, is unacceptable because of their cultural background. It has become a norm and acceptable form of language, i.e., ‘Cool’ in the millennials of urban cities. Furthermore, such language is advocated by quoting “Women’s Rights” and using it as it pleases them. What we lack to understand is that a change in a woman’s language will not change ‘Indian thinking’; that is, it will not change the ideology of men in society.

Aditi Mittal is seen saying ‘Gand’ more than once. Whereas Neeti Palta quotes that once she told a *Gali* in front of her Grandfather, and her Grandfather instantly washed her tongue with Lifeboy Soap. Moreover, now whenever she says some slang, she can feel the taste in her mouth, but that has not refrained her.

3. Culture:

All three performers were open about their cultural backgrounds. Aditi Mittal is half Sindhi and half Punjabi, Nidhi Palta is Punjabi, and Sumukhi Suresh is Hindu Malayali. Moreover, the first language of the performers and the cultural background they grew up in played a significant role in shaping their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. Their views are self-deprecating, often seen as the technique in women's Stand-up Comedians.

Since all the selected comedians are bi/multilingual, we often find references or phrases in their first language. They often see Code Mixing and CodeSwitching in their narration. This helps them identify the rapport with the audience and creates a sense of attachment toward the audience. A creative technique in narration makes it more realistic and instantly attracts the audience's attention.

4. Use of Non-Verbal Communication:

The excessive use of Non-verbal language is one of the techniques used by the performers. If we analyse them carefully, we may notice that the use of facial expressions is more than hand gestures. This marks the uniqueness of the performers, but, at the same time, it clarifies the ideas, develops a rapport with the audience, and a trustful relationship is developed in the process.

5. Identity:

A considerable amount of screen time is given to Age, Gender, and Physique. All three primary performers talk about how a woman in her 30's', 'woman and her clothes, 'fat shamming' and so on. One of the crucial aspects of the creation of an identity and self-worth is the body. A woman already othered is asked to introspect themselves through the narratives. The self-deprecating continues to be essential for the performers to get the audience's attention.

In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, John Morrell explains different theories on the recreation of laughter. The oldest of these is the theory of superiority, which assumes that people laugh in mockery of the misfortune of others to mark their superiority (Moreall 4-13).

To be precise, Identity is created by self-deprecation. The self-expressions used in the acts are positive as well as harmful. Positive because they accept the fact as it is and is partially feminist to accept ourselves as we are but negative because the speaker induces humour and expects laughter from the audience. The motive behind the acceptance is somewhere lost. Indeed, the purposeful marginalisation of the performer and constant showcase of the flaws ultimately contribute to their identity.

CONCLUSION:

As proposed above, the constant burden on women, be it physical, social, moral, or psychological, creates pressure resulting from a blast. It can be concluded that Stand-up Comedy is an art, and it requires the gut to present on a topic never spoken of and self-deprecate ourselves in front of an unknown audience. To be a part of a male-dominated profession and create a mark in that profession is highly appreciable. It still holds some considerable talents, but over time, Indian Woman Stand-up comedians will make a mark in the field globally. What is interesting further is that women today are finding a voice and a platform to express themselves in front of an unknown audience who are financially self-reliant. The years of silence have finally been spoken. Women are finding a way to express themselves. They finally accept the fact they are and the problems they share is a mutual feeling. When Neeti Palta talks about her arranged marriage, one instantly connects to the struggle to the confusion faced by the performer. Even when Aditi Mittal talks about her experience of Eve-teasing and the way she reacted is what most of the population today feels.

What singles out the voice of the comedians against the voice and noise of the other women is their inner relationship with the voice. The narration is narrated from self-experience, making it even more acceptable and, more importantly, relatable. The feeling that we are not the only surviving victims of the situation and that it is a shared experience boosts the speaker's confidence. The voice thus becomes, according to Mladen Dolar in *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006:15)

The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal.

The stage becomes a mode, and the voice becomes a vehicle to talk about the performer's experiences.

In 1996, Stuart Hall (1996:1-17) underlined a universal need for having an identity. The fundamental fundamentalism of identity starts from “Who am I?” and “What am I concerning the Society?” These Stand-up comedians strive hard to express who they are and what they concern society. The self-expressive voice of the women talks about not just the traumas and problems they face in their daily life but also brings forth the ‘Self’ or, more precisely, the ‘Aaham’ (Sanskrit word for I but used philosophically to indicate the Self in the speaker) which was a missing key element in a woman’s life.

A world where a woman voice are rarely heard and are often manipulated are chanelized through new-gen media platforms. The life narratives which often delves into the innate and minute experiences of the speaker and thus giving a VOICE. THE platform also provides a great strength and spirit to perform and voice the challenges faced by the narrators. Such attempts empower the listeners and the speaker. IT opens a door for new challenges and research in the field of Stand Up comedy where the humor will be understood beyond it comic relief.

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