

DIALECTIC

The Annual Newsletter of The Department of English, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi

STORIES: TELLING AND SELLING THEM

ISSUE VII
April 2022

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READING IN A DIGITAL WORLD: E-BOOKS, PIRACY AND ACCESS

BY AASHIMA PRASAD AND KHUSHI GROVER



AASHIMA PRASAD



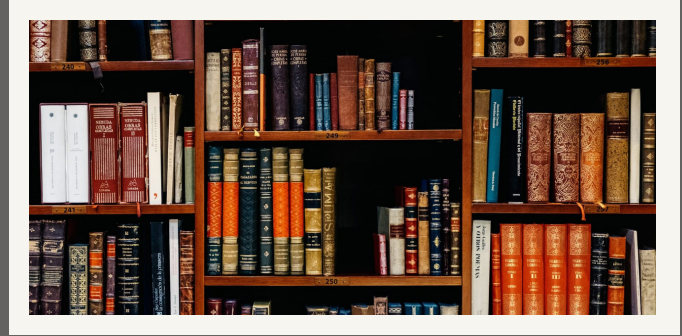
KHUSHI GROVER

“Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves.” wrote Aaron Swartz in his *Guerilla Open Access Manifesto*.

Libraries, often considered an entryway to knowledge and culture, are known to play a significant part in society. They allow readers to gain information and objectiveness through the documentation of lives and cultures other than their own. Their warmth welcomes every stranger without any sort of discrimination, which is supposed to be one of the prime reasons why avid readers often consider them to be their second home. Under the warmth, sometimes even gloss, an important question gets buried- who gets to read? In a country like India which lacks an extensive network of public libraries, reading can be quite an expensive hobby.

The internet, e-books, 3D printers, and other technologies have dramatically increased the availability of knowledge today. At the touch of a button, we have access to any information we require. The days of going to the library and skimming through hundreds of books until you find the one you need are long gone, whether you're brushing up on *The Tribes of Britain* or looking for a new and thrilling Jack Higgins adventure thriller. The onslaught of e-books has surely impacted the accessibility of books. People can carry many titles on their phones or Kindle.

However, everyone cannot afford e-books, some of which are priced the same as their physical counterparts. Many sites provide open access to books and articles that are otherwise paywalled. However, there is a constant debate on the ethics of reading pirated books. Aaron Swartz was an internet activist who went on trial for downloading millions of files from JSTOR, intending to distribute them for free and giving many people open access to these research papers and journal articles. He was ensnared in multiple trials that went on for too long and resulted in a lot of monetary losses in terms of the huge fines the courts imposed on him. This systemic torture and injustice led to Swartz's untimely death when he committed suicide at the age of 26. This tragedy opened a crucial conversation, that is still ongoing, about the democratization of the internet and dissemination of knowledge. You would be dismayed to know the peanuts thrown at the researchers and contributing writers in widely



acclaimed journals. Corporations and the publishing industry bag a massive chunk of the earnings from sequestered knowledge. But the people producing it hardly get enough money for sustenance. Take the 2012 raid on Rameshwari Photocopy Services, a tiny shop on the Delhi School of Economics campus that distributes binders of photocopied literature compiled from various textbooks. It is a common practice in institutes of higher education as students only require a specific reading from a textbook. Several publishers, namely the Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Taylor & Francis Group, etc. filed a lawsuit against the photocopy shop and Delhi University to stop the circulation of photocopied course binders. Three hundred authors, 33 of them being the authors of textbooks mentioned in the suit, penned an open letter to the publishers against the lawsuit. Aditya Nigam, a fellow of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), commented “No author writes to be hidden away in copyright laws.” When the money you're pouring into a paperback or paywalled article is not even going to the rightful person, that is, the author, piracy for access seems like an unavoidable choice to many readers.

Piracy is often the only way that information or content is available to people who cannot afford it or do not have access to it because the distribution of the information or content is restrictive. As opposed to America and Europe where there is the widely accepted ethical route of borrowing books from libraries, India and other so-called third-world countries with their dearth of public libraries are partly run on personal goodwill by exchanging books between friends or private libraries. The legal framework surrounding piracy does not ensure that there are enough resources on the ground to access information. This renders piracy to be a tricky area to navigate both ethically and morally.

VARDI KI AAN BAAN SHAAN: BOLLYWOOD'S PORTRAYAL OF POWER INSTITUTIONS

BY ARUNIMA BOURAI AND VAISHNAVI SINGH



ARUNIMA BOURAI VAISHNAVI SINGH

Mainstream Bollywood has a knack for glamour and larger-than-life characters. Its main purpose is to entertain audiences with musical numbers, action scenes, and whatever else it takes to keep millions of eyes glued to the big screen. One of Bollywood's primary obsessions is the theme of nationalism. People love to watch hegemonic masculinity presented by an array of strong muscular men, from Akshay Kumar and Salman Khan to the likes of Ranveer Singh. Cop movies occupy a special place in the morally black and white universe of hyper-nationalistic entertainment.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was formulated in the early 1980s to describe a position of dominance in terms of gender relations. It embodies a form of "manliness" that belittles other masculinities and overpowers femininity. The best example of this can be seen as represented by the male leads in Rohit Shetty's cop films. Stories like *Singham* and *Simmba* follow the same cliché narrative of an honest, brawny police officer involved in a sweet romance with the female lead, who is more often than not a damsel in distress, while singlehandedly fighting the city's evils. Their life purpose revolves around restoring law and order. Conversely, they always resort to the use of brute force. Police brutality, according to them, is a practical and necessary means to justice. Such films also usually base their storylines around alarming inciting acts that are later forgotten about. For instance, *Simmba*'s heroism is aroused by the rape of an innocent girl. A severely traumatic incident like sexual assault only serves to bring out our beloved hero's sense of justice, which is further equivalent to blood and vengeance. While a major chunk of the industry indulges in bootlicking the cop agenda, some often give these characters their due criticism. From sexual solicitation to the harassment of minorities, the cops have done it all in Bollywood. Amazon Prime's *Made in Heaven* accurately captures this aspect when the male lead, a gay man, gets arrested by the police for indulging in sexual acts with another man on the pretence of the draconian Section 377 of the Indian penal code.

The movie *7 Khoon Maaf* is another example of such criticism. In the movie, the main character, Susana, is a cold-blooded murderer. In a quest to find true love, she kills multiple men. One of them is inspector Keemat Lal, a corrupt lustful police officer who saves her from prosecution in exchange for sexual favours.

On a similar plot point, in *Made in Heaven*, Karan is harassed by the police and is subject to mockery, homophobic slurs and sexual solicitation at the station by the "officers". These instances foreground the basic problem of the institution that is supposed to persecute the perpetrators but indulges in shielding them for personal favours and often harasses the victims in the process.

According to Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, two major mechanisms ensure that the people of a state obey its rules, even when it is not in their best interest to do so. The first is the Repressive State Apparatus or RSA that enforces behaviour directly, for example, police and criminal justice systems. The second is the Ideological State Apparatuses or ISAs that generate the ideologies which we as individuals internalise and act in accordance with. Schools, religion, politics and media are some examples of these apparatuses. As impressionable young children, we are introduced to the idea of the justice system, the preconceived notion being that the police are inherently good and for the betterment of society.



As this idea is further cemented when we are constantly fed with media that further glorifies the status of police in our society. Media as an Ideological State Apparatus perpetuates the ideology of cops being righteous to such an extent that their visibly oppressive nature is painted as imperative to upholding order. The real world tells a different story as law enforcement has become an instrument of blatant racism and communalism.

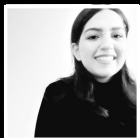
What is astounding is the fact that a lot of old Bollywood movies were more dedicated to showing the country's power institutions in a truer light, instead of aligning with an agenda that pleases the majority. Govind Nihalani's *Ardh Satya* (1983), starring Om Puri and Smita Patil, presents an excellent critique of Indian law enforcement. It follows the story of sub-inspector Anant Velankar, a man who desperately wants to be on the right side of the law, but ends up losing himself to the darkness of power politics. He falls in love with Jyotsna, a college professor who does not shy away from pointing out the hypocrisies of the system that Anant serves.

Ardh Satya highlights the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. Anant's efforts to take down a local mafia boss are constantly wasted by his superiors. He tries to hold on to his manliness by indulging in alcohol and beating up criminals till they die. The film heavily criticizes police brutality. It persistently reminds the viewers that government institutions must be kept in check. They must be tested and reevaluated as per our evolving needs. *Ardh Satya* undoubtedly remains just as relevant in today's times. Entertainment media has a significant role in crafting our perception of our position in society against the role of power institutions. It dictates both the imaginations of the masses as well as patterns of normality. The way Bollywood's storytelling has shifted, from reflecting the country's filth at our faces to filling deadly cracks with sparkles, does indeed say a lot about our society.

WHEN MODERNISM INFORMED TALES

BY BHRUVI BHATIA

We yearned to simplify,
modernism scattered itself for us.
We craved pleasure,
beauty turned into tangible leisure.
Lord knows we took wrong pieces of
both just to attract moths,
altered a perfectly shaped scarlet cloth.
Is it a favourable discourse that
the word romantic kissed pretty
or eyes and society distorting coarse?
I never liked scarlet, too loud,
it was Celie's purple
that eventually made my heart sound.
Where dark and white made binaries,
mixed yellow inspired endings.
Perhaps I took the correct piece of
modern,
saw beauty in absurdity, art in nudity.
Is it a curse that my measures differ
or a sin, theirs only in vodka flutter,
undressing under dim lights,
hoping people always see them
from blurred heights?
Is it our blessing they saw everyone with
a tinted glass or their tragedy they
thought
everyone was as drunk on the same glass?



BHRUVI BHATIA

THE CHASE

BY ROSE MITTAL

Grew up listening to Arabian Nights and Fairy
Tales
Read books of all sizes, be it worms or whales.
Singing, dancing and painting was all I knew
“Focus on Science and Mathematics, it’s time
you grew!”
Acing every competition was my game
My fate was decided, only becoming doctors or
engineers could earn you name.
“Leave this silliness behind, get your head
straight”
Study and pass tests, there is no time to waste.
Who cares about gravity, my sky had become
starless
Festivals arrived, even sweet rice felt tasteless.
I wasn’t meant for it; it wasn’t meant for me
For I cherished ‘The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner’ more than Biochemistry.
I fought, no one else will roll the dice
I have got to savor my sweet, sweet rice.
Quitting the rat race, let me take my own
decision for God’s sake!
Like Frost, I’ve got to choose which road to
take.
At last, it was literature which put a halt to my
endless chase
Stories, poems and drama became the light to
my dark maze.
Finally, I won, I won, I won
Now I can relish anything I want
Sweet rice, sour berries or spicy bun.



ROSE MITTAL

STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE

BY DIYA KAISER & EISHITA



DIYA KAISER



EISHITA

What are we but our stories? It's stories that tell us where we are from and who we are. We are the sum of our experiences, the culmination of everything that has come before. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart* says: "It's the storyteller who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have – otherwise their survival would have no meaning." Storytelling is a crucial social tool to bring about change and keep history alive. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said talked about the misrepresentation of the Orient (East) by the West in various discourses. The self is constructed as a positive term and the other as a negative term. The colonizer in a position of power creates this image or representation of the colonized as "the Other" to justify the colonization in front of the world. The colonized are shown as strange, savage, unfamiliar, and primitive. This process is also called the Othering, by this, the colonizer dehumanizes the native. This is why it becomes very important to tell your own stories, especially for the natives living under a colonial power. Storytelling becomes an act of living resistance.

Under colonialism there is an erasure of indigenous culture; transposition of the colonizers' superior culture and customs, displacing native language with that of the colonizers. The only way to know the true history of a colonized land is through its natives and only its natives. Hence, storytelling acts as a form of resistance; a way through which the natives can tell their truth, their own story. Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* is set in the 1990s near the Line of Control (LOC) between India and Pakistan, on the Indian side of the border. The protagonist of the novel remains unnamed and narrates the story. He's a 19-year-old boy whose friends have gone across the border and taken up arms. The Indian Army Captain Kadian forces the narrator to work for him. He has to identify the militants that have been killed by the Army when they were attempting to cross the border. He collects IDs and other valuables from the dead bodies. In the novel, the people living near the border are being oppressed from both sides, not just once. The narrator acts as a symbol for the whole state and shows how the people have been dehumanized to the extent that even hundreds of dead bodies are termed as numbers now and don't seem to bother many people. It has a voice that tries to empower the truth in a fictional tale and is filled with melancholy and trauma. He tries to show the reality of Kashmir which is far away from the ironic statements of politicians and beyond their veiled promises. Similarly Farah Bashir's *The Rumors of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* is an account of the firsthand observations of the violence and colonial subjugation of the natives of Kashmir.

Bashir's book is an eyewitness to state violence as a tool to repress the insurrection. It highlights the extent of the disproportionate violence of the military and how every life is shackled. Kashmir has been showcased as a beautiful, exploited, and densely militarised open-air prison. It, for the first time, talks about the occupation from a Kashmiri woman's gaze. As a Kashmiri woman, it excavates part of your memory that had been long repressed and makes you feel represented. This is how important stories are, this is how important memory is.

In contrast, *Random Family*, by journalist Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, chronicles the lives of several generations of Puerto Rican women in the Bronx with whom LeBlanc developed long-term relationships. These relationships enabled LeBlanc to chronicle intimate details of their lives and motherhood in poverty while exploring double marginalization and failed institutionalism. However, the author perpetuates the myth that people live in poverty and legal troubles due to bad personal choices, blaming the women. Written by a white journalist, it highlights narrative journalism, where people from outside the communities control the narrative. Theresa Perry defines the African-American philosophy of education as the need to see storytelling as inextricably tied to who we are and how we see history. All tools of storytelling are constructs with underlying power dynamics- only those who have power get to tell their stories.

Returning to Bashir, her work shows how the history of personal shared traditions existed parallel to the political division of the same communities. She further shows the cultural trait by doing what Kashmiris call wadnass manz asun - laughter amid mourning. An open window reveals that Bashir's aunt saluted the patrolling soldiers. The reasoning is that the aunt thinks the next time soldiers search their house, they might be lenient because of her compliant gesture. Bashir illustrates the connection of flagrant state violence that interrupts all aspects of private and public life. In one such chapter, Bashir hears knocking sounds late into the night and fears midnight knocking from soldiers, preparing herself mentally for sexual violence and death. However, it ends up being her father's aunt having oranges without dentures. It ends with the line, "Since 1990, no midnight noises were worthy of laughter anymore."

INFOTAINMENT: THE SLOW-PACED COUSIN OF BREAKING NEWS

BY PRIYAMVADA SHARMA & MALAVIKA MANIKANDAN



PRIYAMVADA SHARMA



MALAVIKA MANIKANDAN

Many of us might recall watching products made on the maze of conveyor belts in *How It's Made* and the dramatic narration of Meerkat Manor on television. Infotainment is the reporting of information in such a manner that is entertaining, educative, and yet categorized as “soft news”. Along with television, the internet has made a storehouse of information available at the tips of our fingers. These include culinary shows, celebrity news, documentary chronicles, edutainment, quiz-format shows, political and cultural commentary shows, etc., that are built using intricate graphics, manual edits, and sensationalism.

Infotainment also provides space for climate activists and scientists to disseminate science-backed information. Acclaimed documentaries like *The Inconvenient Truth* and *Our Planet* shed light on the role of fossil fuels, CO2 emissions, and the scientific mechanisms in place which help in creating awareness regarding environmental concerns and finding sustainable solutions for them. TED Talks are inspiring a new generation of changemakers and leaders. In one of the most viewed TED talks by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” she expressed her concern for the under-representation of various cultures while advocating for a wider understanding of stories. She created the understanding that acknowledging only a single story leads to the misinterpretation of people, their backgrounds, and histories.

The Youtube channel *Ronnie and Barty* has been active in showcasing the vibrant and untold stories from Lahaul and Manali, one of them being about the masked festival of Choppda. Some channels such as *CodeWithHarry*, *CommerceBaba*, and our childhood favourite *Mad Stuff With Rob* specifically focus on teaching a skill or an academic subject by making it enjoyable yet informative. ‘Studytube’ is a subculture on Youtube that has created a space for students to share stories of their academic lives with like-minded people.

With the growth of free edutainment on social media, Ed-tech unicorn organizations like Byjus and Unacademy have come up with specific courses catering to certain exams and have monopolized the field of education. Media is an essential, accessible and well-recognised tool of social conditioning. Now that its reach has expanded exponentially, we need to re-think the impact it has on us as an audience. A clip from a session for UPSC aspirants regarding ‘Jhum’ cultivation across Northeast India of an Unacademy educator surfaced online, in which racist remarks were made (translated):

“Tribal people are stupid. They also lack legal documents related to land and property.” Hengam Riba, who was among those who first flagged the clip on Twitter, wrote that “the remarks made reflect the systematic social, cultural and structural bigotry in regards to that of the tribal communities in India.”

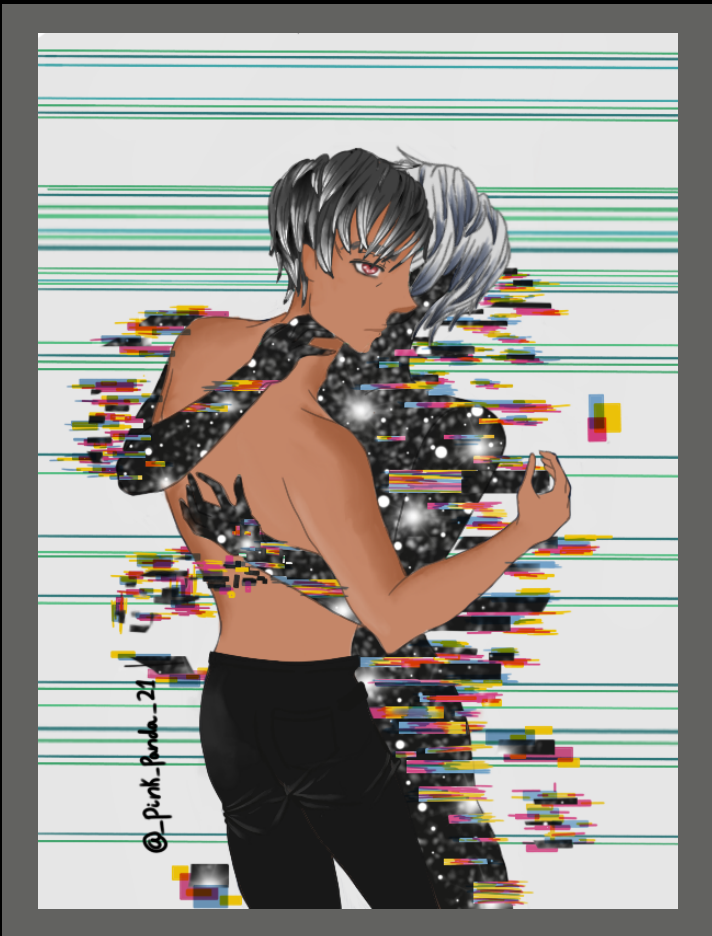
With such an enormous amount of information at our disposal, it is to be wondered which stories would make their way through the viral chaos. If you were to scroll through shorts or reels, the algorithm would keep you glued and you are sure to come across someone trying to sell their fad diet or miracle superfood. Social media has become the primary medium of infotainment which allows anyone, regardless of their expertise to disseminate information, but there is no accountability for the facts presented. This has led to the democratization of voices, providing a platform to everyone, however, also sparing a corner for conspiracy theories and fake news about events like the Covid-19 pandemic, putting people at risk.

Infotainment cannot simply be dismissed as something that is detached from the real world. Infotainment platform BuzzFeed is infamous for its quizzes like, “What pizza topping are you?” However, an investigation by BuzzFeed exposed enormous irregularities in rape drug testing procedures all over the continent of America which rendered extremely unreliable outcomes. Another such investigation revealed the truth behind Amazon’s two-day delivery service that covers up the condition of overworked and underpaid Amazon workers and how the system is purpose-built to allow Amazon to wash its hands off any responsibility when innocent people are killed or maimed by errant drivers.

From Bella Hadid’s rants about not having Louboutins to investigations to edutainment, people are quite familiar with the range of infotainment which has become an inseparable part of our viewership diet. It impacts the ways we perceive ourselves and the world, the way we choose to tell our stories, and the kind of life we wish to have. Slow-paced and well-researched documentaries and videos provide an insight into pressing issues, skills, and stories of culture alike, which the breaking news fails to do. Thus, the question arises: Can infotainment be disregarded as soft news because it is highly delectable even though it has made so many unheard voices heard?

THE PERFECT BLIP

BY ARTI LUGUN



@Pink_Panda_21

BEHOLD THE POWER

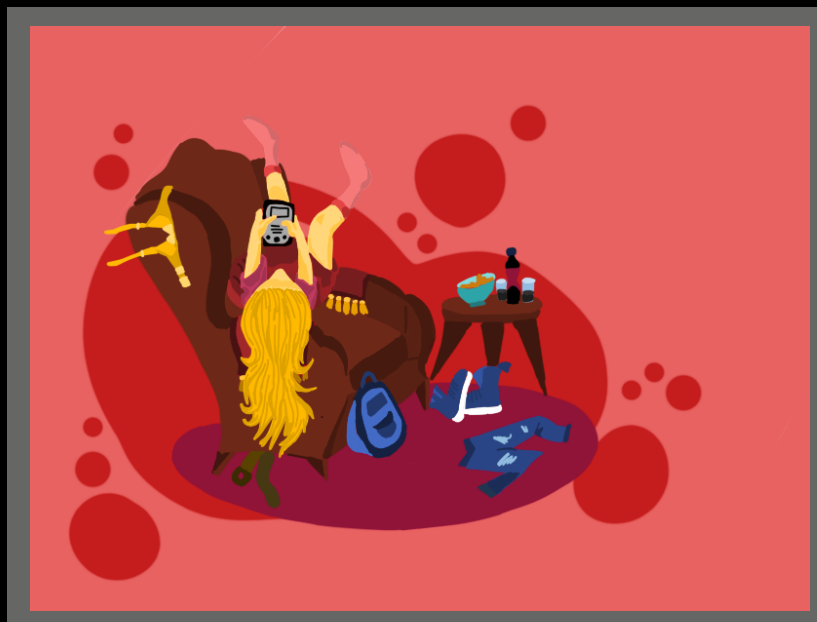
BY GURLEEN SONDH



ARTI LUGUN

THE SAFE SPACE

BY ARTI LUGUN



GURLEEN SONDH

THE ROOTS OF LAUGHTERS: HOW STORYTELLING INFLUENCES STAND-UP COMEDY

BY DEBANGI KASHYAP AND KRITIKA GHAI



DEBANGI KASHYAP



KRITIKA GHAI

The transcendental culture of storytelling exists to educate and entertain. In this journey, humour has always been an integral part of the narrative. As Horace would have us believe, instruction and delight go hand in hand, and what instructs and delights more than stand-up comedy? Stand-up comedy is one of the oldest and most basic forms of entertainment. The core of this art form is essentially a conversation. The presenter talks about their experiences or someone else's experiences altered to suit the audience, with additional punchlines to generate laughter.

In a literal sense, every other person can be called a stand-up comic; be it the “funny guy” in your office or the coveted “class clown” but, in practical terms, there is a huge difference. The form of narration in stand-up not only requires a well-written script and confidence but also sustained wit to keep the audience on their toes at all times. The subject of stand-up can vary from comedian to comedian and show to show. Yet most of the material of stand-ups is drawn from real-life experiences of a person and their social, familial, and cultural relations. The comedian usually sets up the stage with a question that is very relatable to the larger group and addresses a very familiar issue. The answer that they give cracks up the audience because of their wit and timing. The comedians dabble with the hit and trial of relatability. If they cross the fine line between relatability and offensiveness, they might run into a hurdle.

Humour is an essential element of life that breaks the monotony and opens up spaces to embellish mundane routines with moments of relief. The tension in the storyline is released through the administration of the ultimate weapon of comedy, the punchline. The essence of stand-up lies in the ability to use humour as a protective shield while addressing socially important issues which are either ignored or deemed unimportant by the privileged society. Comedy as a medium is a conducive outlet to express a range of issues and emotions, blunting the rough edges of life and infusing it with levity.

Comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Bo Burnham have been able to create both active and passive comedy. Their content not only makes a person laugh as a response to the joke (passive) but also demands introspection (active). Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* questions jokes and their contribution to bringing a change in society. She calls the relationship between a comedian and their audience “abusive” because a comedian not only provides the solution to a problem but creates the problem in the first place.

Gadsby who based her jokes on her childhood trauma of coming out as a lesbian has claimed that storytelling through jokes doesn't always allow the necessary space to relay the story correctly. The focus shifts from the story to the fast laughs and witty anecdotes. But at the same time, the silver lining of humour helped her find an audience consisting of people belonging to all walks of life, creating awareness through her set as more people engage with her story, learn through her struggles, and acknowledge these differences.

Bo Burnham, another very talented artist, has given stand-up a different taste by narrating his story of struggles with depression and anxiety through humorous songs in his Netflix show *Inside*. This hilariously striking but innovative narrative helped millions of people stuck during quarantine relate and laugh a little in those dire times. The unconventional methods highlight yet different ways of storytelling through humour and stand-up and provide comic relief to the audience while simultaneously raising questions about mental health, stability, and the contemporary problems of virtual socialising.

Looking a bit closer home, stand-up comedy has been a vehicle to stimulate laughter and provoke thought in India. The provoking part is mostly misread as an “attack” on the socio-political atmosphere of our country. Stand-up comedy has become the new “it” spot for the upper-caste population but in the same space, there's a dichotomy of undoing efforts through insensitive remarks in the disguise of comedy, at the same time there's a constant effort to stir up conversations. From the *Great Indian Laughter Challenge* to the same format being used on OTT comedy reality shows, it is very evident that Indians love their jokes but can't seem to take them with a pinch of salt. The farce, mimicry, and satire that the comedians present might be deemed offensive by some but one should always remember that comedy's first rule is to create an exaggeration of the truth itself.

Stand-up comedy is in many ways the art of observation. It is a reflection of the culture from which it germinates. It then becomes a very important art form, the chief object of which is to share stories and sell them in a way that inspires conversations.

Department Activities and Events 2021-22

18th August 2021- A **General Body Meeting** was conducted and Eishita (President), Aashima Prasad (Vice-President), Khushi Grover (Cultural Secretary), Rose Mittal (Treasurer), Arunima, Diya Kaiser and Priyamvada (Committee Members) were appointed to the Council.

30th September 2021- A **Dead Poets Society Meet** on the theme 'Coming of Age' was organised and participants from all over the University recited their poems.

22nd November 2021- The Department conducted an **Orientation Program** to familiarize the newly admitted students with its functioning and faculty.

15th January 2022- The English Department welcomed its first-year students by organising a **Freshers' party**. Kaivalya Jayanti was selected as Miss Freshers.

5th February 2022- An **Open Mic** with an open theme was organised and participants from all over the University performed their poems and music. Tithi Roy (1st), Muskaan Rajpal (2nd), Charuvi Demble (3rd) and Rudranshi were awarded.

11th February 2022- **Dhiti's Annual Lecture** was delivered by Prof. Susan Visvanathan on 'Autobiography and Autoethnography: Creative Exercises in Documenting the Past'. The audience included students and scholars from national as well as international universities.

16th February 2022- **Avgaahan**, an international interdisciplinary academic fest. Several students from the Department in the international E-conference organised under it.

16th April 2022- The Department organised **Ekphrasis**, its annual fest under which several competitions were conducted.

EDITORIAL BOARD

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