

**WIND OF CHANGE: EXPLORING THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF POST 9/11 AUDIOVISUAL SATIRE IN THE ARAB WORLD**

رياح التغيير: بحث أبعاد الهجاء السياسي في الإعلام السمعي البصري بعد أحداث 11

سبتمبر في العالم العربي

Abdelhadi Esselami\*

University of Aboubakr Belkaid, Tlemcen. Algeria, Abdelhadi.esselami@univ-tlemcen.dz

Prof. Faiza Senouci Meberbeche

University of Aboubakr Belkaid, Tlemcen. Algeria, senoucif@hotmail.fr

Dialogue Of Religions and Civilizations in the Mediterranen Basin Laboratory

Accepted: 09/09/2020

Received: 11/05/2021

Published: 01/06/2021

**Abstract:**

This paper aims to examine the role of post 9/11 audiovisual political satire in fueling the uprisings in several Arab countries. Since 2011, several Arab countries witnessed unprecedentedly coordinated reformist movements that condemned corruption; interestingly, various creative productions on digital platforms have popularized this insurgency, and the satirical content has undoubtedly promoted change by captivating the attention of increasing numbers of people. The issue at hand is that a substantial bulk of recent political Satire is an unaltered replica of its Western counterpart, which overlooks the cultural constraints in the region. While it equips audiences with substantial political knowledge, it rarely encourages them take actions. This paper shall investigate the substantial power of recent audiovisual political satire and its various implications in the Arab World.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual ; Satire ; Arab World ; 9/11 ; Reform

**ملخص:**

يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة دور الهجاء السياسي السمعي البصري الذي جاء بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر في تأجيج الانتفاضات في العالم العربي. منذ عام 2011، شهدت عدة دول عربية حركات إصلاحية منسقة بشكل غير مسبوق، حيث أدانت الفساد. ومن المثير للاهتمام أن من الإنتاجات الإبداعية لعبت دوراً هاماً في تعميم هذه الانتفاضة. ومما لا شك فيه أن المحتوى الساخر قد عزز التغيير من خلال جذب انتباه أعداد متزايدة من الناس. والمسألة المطروحة هي أن جزءاً كبيراً من السخرية السياسية الأخيرة هو نسخة طبق الأصل من نظيرتها الغربية التي تتجاهل القيود الثقافية في المنطقة. وفي حين أن هذا النوع من الهجاء يزود الجماهير بمعرفة كبيرة بالسياسة، إلا أنه يفشل في تشجيعهم على البدء في سلوك تصحيحي من شأنه أن يؤدي إلى تأثير إيجابي ملموس. سوف تتفقد هذه الورقة القوة الكبيرة للهجاء السياسي السمعي البصري وآثاره المختلفة في العالم العربي.

الكلمات المتاحية: السمعي البصري؛ الهجاء؛ 11 سبتمبر؛ الإصلاح؛ العالم العربي

\* Corresponding Author

### **1 .Introduction:**

Satire is any literary work denouncing human vices and follies via ridicule that involves incisive wit, irony, or sarcasm. This timeless art form has overlapped the early beginnings of democracy in the West, as it played a remarkable role in forging and promoting freedom of speech. Following the rapid and pervasive technological modernization that peaked with the industrial revolution, there were also political and ideological transformations that gave birth to idealistic democratic states with balanced power structures, and satire was one of the unlikely corrective measures to the shortcomings of prominent political figures and their decisions that forged modern history. This form of didactic entertainment, that enjoys significant constitutional protection in the Western World, has always been popular with the masses who embraced it as a means of purging their outcries, and one of the few cathartic outlets against corruption during classical and modern history.

Today, Western Political satire in audiovisual media employs virtually unrestricted witty humor on a number of digital platforms, mostly on television and the internet, as a means of exposing and undermining malicious political practices, giving the public an alternative, critical version of the political scene. This is an objective that a substantial portion of conventional news media sources seem to intentionally deviate from accomplishing. The recent advent of media technologies has considerably broadened the audiences of political satire, especially since the recent satirical programs are increasingly enjoying prime-time airing, giving them unprecedented popularity. Despite being degradingly labelled as “fake news” or “alternative media”, their statistical and financial success has enabled them to exceed their role of merely criticizing politics, into informing the public and condemning conventional media.

In the Arab World, the recent political satire on T.V. and the internet is exponentially similar to the one in the West, which raises intriguing questions about the reasons and implications behind such imitative works. This region had historically been subject to massive European colonization, and despite seeming formally independent, the postcolonial states are either poorly designed replicas of their former colonizing nations, or governments run by decrepit, or often, authoritarian regimes. This has rendered Arab countries into an immensely enticing subject matter for political satire. Despite the fact that healthy democracies rely heavily on freedom of speech, the appropriation of highly provocative Western style audiovisual political satire in Arab countries might be more of an exacerbating factor rather than a reformatory one. By examining recent digital political satire in Arab countries, focusing on the cultural, ideological, and religious restrictions in the region, the originally intended remedial function of satire might backfire. The fluctuating reactions about satirical programs in the Middle East, both in academic spheres and public opinion, have raised highly debatable inquiries that need academic attention.

Thanks to diverse media technologies, Political Satire has rapidly spread around Arab countries, and despite amassing considerable numbers of viewers, a great deal of them still consider it as a new, unknown phenomenon with unpredictable outcomes yet to be

discovered. In the Arab World, when satirical criticism tackles certain political celebrities, sensitive religious matters, or cultural realities, the act turns into a media crisis, and Social Media becomes a battleground between those who advocate freedom of speech and those who believe in limiting the freedom of political criticism with consideration to cultural and religious ideals. The main issue here is the lack of research on the field in the Arab world that has left this type of media content an intricate subject that only engenders increasing concerns over its ambiguous dimensions. Further, the unstable state of Middle Eastern Media, which is still struggling to adapt to the latest revolutions in Media technologies, namely, the massive accessibility, multiplicity, freedom of broadcasting on T.V. and internet, have all perpetuated the already problematic state of digital media in the region.

## 2. A historical overview of Western satire

Satire has been undergoing an intricate process of forgery and transformation since the classical antiquity. The Greeks produced artistic works that encompass a substantial amount of the distinctive features of modern satire, though the term had not yet been invented. Aristophanes' plays are the most illustrious examples of such. In most of his works, he would create a character that is oblivious to the events happening around him while being ridiculed by the other characters for his views and naiveté. By juxtaposing the noble characteristics of his protagonist with the ominous and vile ones shared by the other characters, Aristophanes exposes the hypocrisies and maliciousness of Greek societies at the time (LeBoeuf, 2007). The ancient Romans provided a definition for the earliest form of satire, known as *Satura* at the time. The latter refers to a literary genre that is quite different from present day perception of satire. Despite containing scant amounts of humor and social criticism, they relied more on lecturing than giving implicit humorous social commentary; their prime purpose was not to trigger social change, yet the overtness of *Satura* works distances them from being associated with the modern conception of the genre (LeBoeuf). Horace, Juvenal, and Menippus were pioneers of the genre who produced *saturae* works that would later on dictate the classification of satirical works into Horatian, Juvenalian and Minnepien (Müller 92).

Clearly, not all works belonging to the genre of *satura* can be considered "satire" for missing some of the foundational traits of the latter. Though the works of Horace, Juvenal, and Minnipus may initially fall under the genre of "satire" when translated, these works lack irony, implicitness and social criticism (LeBoeuf, 2007). Furthermore, the most important feature of satire is lacking in *satura* works; which is the audience that only comprised small fringe elite Romans instead of appealing to the public; this is most apparent in Horace's *satura* (LeBoeuf). The combination of these factors deprive *satura* from the core objective of satire, which is criticism for the intent of ameliorating society (Richlin, 1992). Some Roman *Satura* works, however, bore a significant resemblance to modern satire, the ones that survived for centuries are being subject to academic research today. Petronius' *Satyricon* (Late 1st century) is one good example of such. The title itself is closer in meaning to satire, as it means "raunchy tales". In one of its sections, *Dinner with Trimalchio*, Petronius juxtaposes the demeanor of wealthy men to upper-class Roman citizens; the audacious criticism of greed and deceit is flagrant, especially with regard to Emperor Nero's merciless punishment to those who oppose him. Resembling Aristophanes works, tales in *Satyricon* show the goodness of

nature inherent within lower-class people by subjecting them to ridicule and mockery from the wealthy noblemen, while the latter are full of deviousness, arrogance, cruelty and exploitation (LeBoeuf).

Satire had gone through a remarkable evolution during the Middle Ages, during which the Catholic church and European monarchies were subjected to indirect criticism by renowned authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas More, and Jonathan Swift. *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400) is one of Chaucer's most studied works, a paragon of medieval literature that targets the inherent hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and the monarchy in England in several tales that mirror the direct causes that led to the dire living conditions during that period (LeBoeuf). Chaucer had strong opinions about the social status and the questionable practices of the Church and monarchy that he could not express openly; instead, he relied on wit, humor, and irony to evade punishment tactfully. Surprisingly, Chaucer did not only escape chastisement, but also received a generous treatment from the government, both serving king Richard II, Edward III, and Henry IV (Moore & Hulbert, 1913). Sir Thomas More was another masterful satirist who managed to convey subtle criticism discreetly in his works, a skill that he exhibits most eloquently in his novel *Utopia* (1515). Most scholars view it as a commentary or a criticism of the malpractices committed by the Catholic Church, which More blatantly presents in a sarcastic manner in Book I and eventually provides remedies for in Book II (Manuel & Manuel, 1979).

Yet Jonathan Swift's satire remains the all-time exemplar of the genre, with canonical works such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *A Modest Proposal* (1729) drawing considerable inspiration from the notorious clash between England and Ireland and the general social and political issues in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. By employing irony and allegory in *Gulliver's Travels*, the novel is in a large part a genuine work of satire that denounces the politics and irrationalities of religious feuds in England, as well as a misanthropy that criticizes humankind's pettiness, violence, ethnocentrism, stubbornness, and the government. Swift arrives at such goal by tailoring exaggerated contexts that accentuate the defects of human behavior (Boyle, 2000). Further, as a response to the English landlords' dehumanization and cruelty towards the Irish, and accusing them of burdening the society by having too many children, Swift wrote his famous essay *A Modest Proposal*. Facing a crippling poverty, the Irish were struggling to feed their children during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England, so Swift proposes an overtly, yet effectively satirical solution. *A Modest proposal* begins with a sympathetic description of the horrid living conditions the Irish were undergoing, for which, Swift recommends selling the children at the age of one year old to the wealthy so they may eat them. Swift says this remedy is beneficial to both sides, as the parents would earn money for their families, and cater the wealthy a delicious delicacy and a possible clothing source from the skins of children. The tone of the essay is far from appearing ironic, as Swift seems very serious and provides scientifically based arguments, which makes it difficult for unseasoned readers of satire to decypher the true psyche and intents of the author.

Across the Pacific, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is emblematic of satire in American literature, where satire plays a major role in deconstructing several controversies related to racism, religion and the shifting American domestic politics of the mid nineteenth century (LeBoeuf, 2007). Following the example of Aristophanes, Twain places the protagonist Huckleberry Finn, an innocent child, in the racism-infested pre-civil-war American society, where he continuously questions irrational adult behaviors transpiring around him. Huckleberry's society regards his righteous behavior and reasonable questions with disdain and often rectify his actions harshly, especially when he decides to help a runaway slave, for which everyone tells him it will condemn him to hell. Mark Twain still receives credits for ushering a new breath into American satire; his works have inspired prominent satirical fictions that tackled all aspects of modern life. More American satirical fictions include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) that satirizes humankind's attempts to seek technological improvement that brings adverse outcomes, while George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) employs satire to expose the follies of a communism. Furthermore, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) fuses autobiographical experiences with elements of Science Fiction and delusion where the absurdity of the war and its psychological aftermath is subject to a uniquely satirical narrative.

On the visual dimension of satire, the art of caricature could only move to the forefront of public appeal with the wake of the twentieth century despite gaining noticeable popularity since ancient civilizations (Wright & Fairholt, 2014). Thanks to the remarkable technological progress and multiplicity of global sociopolitical vicissitudes, caricature grew into an immensely powerful tool for critique as it had the ability to instantly convey intricate notions. Though there were several noteworthy caricaturists with strikingly influential works such as Al Hirschfeld, Mort Drucker, and Ralph Steadman, Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (1970-present) received most accolades for political caricature. This comic strip was the first to receive a Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning in 1975, and has been adapted on T.V and theatre. The comic's provocative content was considerably powerful, exposing it to opposition campaigns and attempts of banning. In one of its editions, the strip satirized one of Florida's discriminative laws, which imposed a pass card on minorities, surprisingly, it did not take long for the law to be repealed after the publication of this strip, and the act was nicknamed the "Doonesbury Act" on McGill Tribune (LeBoeuf, 2007).

With the advent of telecommunication technologies during the beginning of the twentieth century, satire found a new visual medium that would not only give satire new creative tools, but also broaden its perspective and audiences. The British comedy stage revue<sup>1</sup> *Beyond the Fringe* (1960) that was performed in Britain and U.S.A is credited for ushering the successful period of televised satire in the 1960s. The latter is directly responsible for inspiring the late-night satirical show *That Was The Week That Was* (1962) which took aim at the government in an unprecedented way. Though it had only aired for two seasons, it provided important guidelines for later satirical shows on British television including *Not So Much a Programme, More a Way of Life* (1964), *Monty Python* (1969), *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (1979), *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (1993), and *The Day Today*

<sup>1</sup> A type of multi-act popular theatrical entertainment that combines music, dance, and sketches.

(1994). Similarly, there were several satirical shows on American T.V. following the lead of British style satire. Examples of which include an American version of *That was the week that was* (1964-1965) on NBC, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967), and *M.A.S.H* (1972). Yet Televised American satire shines brighter in cartoon versions where satire was uniquely shaped to reach a wider audience. *The Simpsons* (1989), *King Of The Hill* (1997), and *Family Guy* (1999) received increasing popularity and appealed to diversified audiences. Nevertheless, *South Park* (1997) remains the most audacious and most controversial satirical show; its severe criticism of religion, politics, and popular culture is unprecedented. According to LeBoeuf (2007), *South Park* has launched indiscriminate attacks on both liberal and conservative ideologies, which has resulted in frequent protests and boycotts, as well as a massive fan base that champion social critique.

### 3. History of Satire in the Arab World

A short overview on the development of satire in the Arab world shall clarify the historical differences between Western and Eastern satire. The Arab literary heritage is full of many satirical images, although satire in Arabic literature did not have a respective literary form, as it was related to other arts. It provoked humour by highlighting flaws and exaggerating them to the extent that makes the final satirical product a ridiculous magnification of the original image (Bouhadjem, 2004). Though there are numerous noteworthy works in prose, Arabs have predominantly been inclined to writing satire through poetry.

During the *Jahiliyyah era*<sup>2</sup> (Age of Ignorance), satire served the purpose of severe criticism among Arabian tribes, as poets belonging to rival tribes employed it to launch unrestricted verbal attacks on one another. Since this type of poetry focused mainly on exaggerating the physical defects of the satirized individuals, it was one of the most dangerous types of poetry as it could result in fatal retaliation against the poet (Al Dahhan, 1957). Hassan Ibn Thabit al Ansari wrote unparalleled satirical poetry in this style, with a clear distinctive feature of criticizing personal characteristics and lineage instead of the physical attributes of his opponents. The art had witnessed a remarkable recession with the coming of Islam in the sixth century AD, which strongly denounced all forms of conflict, a fact that would change soon after Quraych<sup>3</sup>, the predominant tribe in Mecca, encouraged poets to mock Prophet Mohammed and the proponents of Islam. The latter had no choice but to retaliate in the same manner, thus consolidating political satire in the region. Making a marvelous come back to the satirical scene, Hassan Ibn Thabit, being a devout convert to Islam, wrote diligently against the enemies of Muslims (Berquti, 1983). Political Satire had evolved noticeably during the *Umayyad era* (661–750 A.D), the first Islamic caliphate. The political turmoil that accompanied the rapid spread of Islam has given birth to *Al-Naqā'id poetry*<sup>4</sup> (lampoon poetry), where satirical content was heavily coupled with irony and

---

<sup>2</sup> An Islamic concept referring to the period of time and state of affairs in Arabia before the advent of Islam in 610 CE.

<sup>3</sup> The ruling tribe of Mecca at the time of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>4</sup> Umayyad Era poetry consisting in a series of invective poetic jousts, collected as *Al-Naqā'id* ("Flytings").

sarcasm, giving it unprecedented popularity. Djarir, Farazdaq, and Al Akhtal comprised the major pioneers and predominant practitioners of the genre, who transformed the various political problems amongst their respective tribes into captivating topics for their poetry, taking themes such as meanness, stinginess, and inhospitality as their central themes (Mouawad Abou Aissa et al, 1970). *The Abbassid Era* (750–1258), the third Islamic Caliphate, brought remarkable maturity to all Arab art forms, satire was no exception; which expanded to several branches and attracted more audiences, earning it a respectable position among other art forms. *Kalila Wa Dimna*<sup>5</sup> (Kalila And Dimna, Eighth century) stands as one of the most outstanding collection of fables in Arabic literature, where Ibn al-Muqaffa' anthropomorphizes human characteristics and issues to animals in order to convey the chaotic atmosphere of that period. Further, the *Maqamah* art form of the era had amassed notable popularity due to mixing rhymed prose with poetry. This literary genre consisted of entertaining anecdotes, written in an elegant, rhymed prose, which are then presented in a dramatic or narrative context that displays the author's rhetoric, wit, and knowledge. Al-Ma'arri's *Resalat Al-Ghufuran* (The Epistle of Forgiveness) is a leading example of the genre, in which Al-Ma'arri merges profound pain with satire. This is not to say that poetry has receded; for instance, Abu Nuass used his poetry to plead his people to break free from tradition and old forms of art (Faour 1994), while Ibn al-Rumi heavily criticized political corruption and economic decay of the era. (Bessedj, 1994)

Due to the severe censorship practiced during the colonial period, there were little instances of political satire denouncing the Western occupation of the Arab World, yet the few ones who dared to satirize colonial rule wrote some extremely influential masterpieces. In the first and second parts of his *Diwan Al Shawqiet* (1925-1930), the Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi mocks the reforms brought about by Lord Cromer<sup>6</sup> and his proposed policies that ruined the Egyptian political scene. Ibrahim Abdelkader Al-Mazni was another influential Egyptian poet at the forefront of erudite poets; his works are clearly influenced by Mark Twain, which was reflected in his early articles. In two of his most renowned works of this period *Qabd Al-Rih* (Catching the Wind, 1927) and *Sondouq Al-Dunia* (The Box of The World, 1929), the spirits of irony and sarcasm are vibrantly present in his stories and essays. Hafiz Ibrahim was another prolific Egyptian poet known for his use of scathing irony and sarcasm; in one of his most celebrated poems *Imtiyazet Ajnabiya* (Foreign privileges), he denounces the stagnation of the Egyptians and calls them to fight against colonization, earning him the title of "The poet of the Nile" and "The poet of the people".

With the second half of the twentieth century, Arabic literature had gone through tremendous change during the period that became known as the Modern Era. A handful of factors contributed to the birth of new trends of satire in terms of form and content. The most notable reasons for such change are the outcomes of colonization which problematized the Arab identity, and with it, the cultural norms and political features in the Arab World. Further, with the end of formal colonization, Arab nations struggled to find healthy roles in a world

<sup>5</sup> Kalila wa-Dimna (Kalila and Dimna) is a widely circulated collection of Oriental fables of Indian origin, composed in Sanskrit, and translated into Arabic in the eighth century by the Persian Ibn al-Muqaffa.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl of Cromer was a British leading advocate of westernization in the Muslim world, stationed in Egypt from 1882 to 1906.

dominated with western ideals and dogmas; the decrepit postcolonial governments were highly unsuccessful in rejuvenating the economy and international relations, in fact, most of them were run by either dictatorial or oligarchical regimes that imposed rigid laws and regulations forbidding any attempt of reformation. The combination of these circumstances gave rise to some unique satirical content that prudently treaded though the prohibitions of Arab postcolonial regimes (Fouad, 1999). Examples of which include Nizar el Qabbani's witty works such as his *Diwan<sup>7</sup> al-Qibrit Fi Yadi Wa Doweilatokoum Min Waraq* ( A Match In My Hand, And Your Petty Paper Nations, 1989) where he expresses his profound love and sorrow for his homeland, Syria, as well as Ibrahim Abdelkader Al Mazni's thorough satirical prose, both fictional and journalistic; some of his most eminent works include a novel entitled *Ibrahim al-Katib* (Ibrahim the writer 1931) and two collections of essays and short stories under the titles *Khuyut al-Ankabut* (Spider Webs, 1935) and *Fi al-tariq* (On the Road, 1937), where Al Mazni criticizes the ambivalent Egyptian identity and the general political unrest in the country . Likewise, in several of his *Diwans* such as *Lafitet* (Signs, 1984-1999), Ahmed Matar is very critical of the Arab rulers' cruelty, greed, and complacency, which have led to lamentable conditions for the Arab societies. On the overall, Arab satire of the Modern Era was characterized by the strategic employment of severe criticism that could masterfully avoid impairing social, cultural, and religious norms, while maneuvering around the spikes of governmental constraints.

#### 4. Political satire after 9/11

In the recent two decades, the evolution of audiovisual satirical media has played a major role in attracting huge numbers of audiences across the globe. A substantial bulk of literature indicates that alternative media sources proved to be more reliable and popular than traditional ones; the former have drawn huge masses of varying age groups towards politics, both raising awareness and inspiring disillusionment in political systems and traditional news media, especially with the latter's minimal focus on important events. Stemming from postmodern school of thought, post 9/11 audiovisual satirical media has voiced the concerns and distrust of the general population via witty humor and masterfully executed sarcasm and irony. The events of 9/11 revealed the true state of western democracy and its manipulative, misinforming leaders who immediately waged a war on the Middle East right after the attacks. As McClennen and Maisel point out "Not only was it a low point in terms of the integrity of our government, it was also a low point in media coverage of politics as news increasingly turned toward spectacle and hype over information and critical thought". (2014, p. 6) News Media, the supposed providers of information and clarifiers of ambiguities engaged in evasive maneuvers around facts and bombarded the audiences with irrelevant, and often, false information. "—the news media—has become increasingly disconnected from information, so much so that satire has become a *source* of information rather than just a critic of it". (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, p. 7) Therefore, it was only natural that people switched

---

<sup>7</sup> In Islamic cultures of the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily and South Asia, a *Diwan* is a collection of poems by one author.

to consuming satirical content that handled important events with more sincerity and uncensored criticism, supplying the confused masses with cathartic outlets while adequately informing them. To further the point, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has conducted a study in 2007, which revealed that Jon Stewart, host of the satirical show *The Daily Show*, ranked higher than news anchors Peter Jennings and Wolf Blitzer in terms of popularity. (McClennen & Maisel, 2014) According to McClennen and Maisel (2014), a satirical comedian (Jon Stewart) had competed with a journalist for the first time in American history.

Nevertheless, owing to the recent remarkable advancements in telecommunications, most notably technologies, the emergence of social media platforms, satire has witnessed yet another phase of transformation. Political satire is now present on multiple new platforms including podcasts, vlogs, and live streaming, which contributed immensely to expanding the numbers of people consuming satire; yet such transformations are not always praise-worthy. As stated by Duffy & Page (2013), since satirists based their material on mocking the presidential candidates' personality and physical appearances rather than their political agenda, in an attempt to make their shows more appealing, they raised their relatability to the public as satire eventually humanizes them. These politicians seem to be aware of such outcomes, which is why many of them seem to intentionally indulge satirists with their desired material, or "put on a certain type of performance when appearing publicly" (Noelle, 2018, p. 19). Donald Trump has proven to be one of the most vivid example of such as Noelle points out:

At first, specifically in the early days of the election when Trump was just one of over a dozen candidates, his antics were the sort of material that a comic would kill for. However, as the crowded debate stage thinned out, and Trump was the only one left standing entering the general election, some satirists got wise to the fact that Trump could not be "joked" about in the same way that candidates had in years past. Many writers tried to put their finger on what exactly it was that caused even some of the most biting comic material to bounce off of him. (Noelle, 2018, p. 22)

Moreover, several American newspapers including *The New Yorker*, *Time*, and *New York times* suggested Trump was immune to satire; though Trump stood out as the perfect subject for ridicule and mockery during the onset of elections, which would otherwise put him off the race right there and then, he has not only survived, he won the elections.

Other academic speculations indicate hype-seeking politicians like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are well aware of the attractive force of their flaws, or perhaps in some cases they even deliberately generate some lampoon-worthy behavior to climb the political ladder to their goals. It is worth mentioning that Trump's questionable demeanor in public and in policy making, may be an extension of his reality T.V persona; the latter had been the star of *The apprentice*, a reality T.V shows that gathered a peak number of up to 20.7 million viewers during its first season (Brooks and Marsh, 2007). According to Lannucci. (2015/2016), Boris Johnson also benefits from a "symbiotic" relationship with satire; the latter has always been associated with controversial behavior that earned him substantial media coverage, which eventually helped him attain his political ambitions. On the other side of this symbiosis, satirical content on audiovisual media had to lower the standards in order to garner more audiences, since it predominantly prioritizes shedding light on the outer

appearances, mannerism, and personality of politicians over the manner they approach politics. (Lannucci)

We can discern the contrast between satirical content before and after 9/11 if we consider it from the citizens' political engagement standpoint. As demonstrated above, a considerable number of pre-9/11 political satire, and some of the early post-9/11 satirical shows, such as *The Daily Show* (1996-present) and *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014), had targeted sophisticated audiences, or rather helped make their audiences more sophisticated, with more in-depth criticism of politics, somehow urging them to act and react. This is alarmingly lacking in a significant number of recent political satire that focuses primarily on informing viewers about the current political dilemmas, but offers no feasible solutions and in most cases discourages them indirectly from taking any action. According to Nabi et al. (2007), the humorous intent in satire encourages viewers to be more attentive and process political information more efficiently, yet they are unable to make any practical use of it due to the "discounting cue"; a subconscious realization that the whole content is a mere joke that cannot be dealt with seriously. (Nabi et al, 2007) Fielding also shares similar views and goes further to posit that cynicism and apathy are the main byproducts of satire, which eventually undermine citizens' attitudes towards politics. (Fielding, 2012)

### **5. Political dimensions of satire after 9/11 in the Arab World**

Arab countries, for long being consumers of Western products, be it material or ideological, followed the same trend by producing strikingly similar audiovisual satirical shows, examples of which include *Joe Show* (2013-present) and Bassem Youssef's *El Bernameg* (The Program, 2011-2014). Gaining a peak momentum during Arab Spring, Youssef and many other budding Arab satirists subjected Arab governments to merciless ridicule and criticism for allegations revolving around corruption and authoritarianism. Stewart points out that *The Daily Show* had found global resonance, proving that even American news parody could find audiences in countries with clearly nondemocratic and highly conservative such as Somalia or Iran (Baym and Jones, 2012). Yet, scarce literature mentions the downsides of blindly adapting Western-style audiovisual satire, where democratic values such as freedom of speech and secularity go in line with the acutely subversive satirical discourse. In contrast, despite dubbing themselves as democratic systems, most Arab governments are highly conscious of the cultural and religious restrictions, making the existence of Western-style satire unpredictably problematic. Namely, mockery of such core values may lead to controversy and internal division, which would ultimately give more of a reverse outcome rather than the one originally intended with satire.

Perhaps the best examples of Middle Eastern satirical shows that take the form of Western style news parodies take place in Egypt, the most eloquent of which was Bassem Youssef's *Al-Barnameg*. Before gaining international fame and earning the epithet "The Egyptian Jon Stuart", Bassem Youssef had been a cardiac surgeon who ventured into the Tahrir square with his video camera during the Egyptian uprising of 2011. Youssef also hosted a show called *B+* (2011) on Youtube that earned 5 million hits and a huge popularity among the Egyptian and worldwide audiences (Gordon, 2016). Youssef's popularity would spike

exponentially with his TV show Al-Barnamig, a satirical news parody which bears an immense resemblance to Jon Stuart's *The Daily Show* in both from props and content, attracting Youssef around 40 million viewers, over a third of Egypt's population, a number which could be multiplied if we include worldwide viewership (Hall, 2019). In a gesture of mutual recognition and celebration of their huge success, both of Jon Stuart and Bassem Youssef attended each other's shows, with Youssef appearing twice on *The Daily Show*, while Stewart reciprocated in May 2013. Stuart had also defended Youssef after his indictment for insulting the president Morsi and Islam on his show. (Gordon, 2016) Youssef's accomplishments were met with prestigious rewards, as he received the International Press Freedom Award, and was nominated among the 100 most influential people by Time magazine in 2013.

With the rise of Mohammed Morsi, the fifth president of Egypt, Egypt seemed to have opened a new page of democratic life where satire would thrive in accordance with newly acquired freedoms. Yet, soon after establishing Morsi's government, various multidimensional confusions began surfacing rapidly, owing to the immense ethnic and religious diversity in the country, ultimately leading to inevitable clashes. The most relevant of which is Morsi's reaction to Youssef's boundless criticism, which escalated on every episode, appearing as if Youssef was testing the limits of his trade. Youssef's orientation is undoubtedly secular (Gordon, 2016), and having a country leader who based his legislature and possible constitutional reforms on religion would eventually represent a delicious topic for satire. Evidently, in a live show under the title *An Evening With Bassem Youssef* hosted by the *Enigma magazine* in 2016, Youssef said "you can't speak about politics, so I started to speak about God". Youssef's strategy for reaching such end consisted of accusing the demonstrators of being foreigners, enemies of the states, spies, Zionists, and being sexually motivated, and continued on saying "...this is an indirect license to kill. It is fine to kill them; they are disposable... because they are infidels, because they are against the country, because they are against Islam". (Kalil, 2016) This is not to say that Youssef is directly responsible for fueling the uprisings against the new government, yet he was certainly speaking against it and encouraged people's coming back to Tahrir square, which directly necessitated the intervention of the army. (Gordon, 2016) Youssef seems to have arrived to the conclusion that while satire strives to inform people about the rather repulsive political particularities, it fails to encourage any form of political activism (Hall, June 19, 2019). He is disappointed over the fact that complacency was the most prominent product of his work; as political satire only generates instantaneous laughter that is only ensued by inaction. (Hall, June 19, 2019) In a solidifying argument to his insights, Youssef says that satire in the U.S did not stop Trump from coming to power as "People don't win elections with satire...satire doesn't change things. People change things." (2019) While Youssef seems to have fixed his future insights on his personal growth abroad, he raises almost rhetorical questions over the future of Egypt that is drowning and having no hope in the foreseeable horizon, we can only put the future of satire in the region to question.

While Youssef himself had expressed disappointment in the governmental and public reaction to his content, we cannot deny the authenticity of his material, as well as its faithfulness to the dauntless Western post-9/11 satire. While several Egyptian satirists have vigorously undertaken the same path as Youssef, one may even argue *Joe Show* has surpassed Youssef's statistical success in terms of viewership and global coverage, we cannot overlook

the essence that defines a decent satirical work, namely, taunting all kinds of boundaries. It is worth mentioning that Youssef had been actively pushing constraints of freedom of speech since the onset of the Egyptian uprising in 2011, during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi and Abdelattah al-Sissi, meaning he had defied a pre-revolution authoritarian rule, a seemingly theocratic government, and a military coup-d'état, none of which would naturally take Youssef's content lightly. On the other hand, notwithstanding his unique subversive content that echoed the pangs of post-Morsi Egypt, Youssef Hussein, host of *Joe Show*, enjoys the convenience of recording his show outside Egypt, with virtually little risk of facing any harmful retaliatory actions.

While both shows aim to polemicize the Egyptian government, the differences between the circumstances during which they came to being and how they impact Egypt and the Arab World invokes an intriguing query surrounding the relationship between satire and Arab countries. *El Bernameg* and *Joe show* have irrevocably delivered their message, most of the shows' attentive viewers should be equipped with the knowledge around those particularities that rendered a considerable number of Arab governments inept, yet the lack of citizen's visible response may simply be due to the fact this type of satire seldom offers reasonable solutions. Besides, considering these works from an "imitation" standpoint; in their attempt to be faithful to the original, we cannot disregard the possibility that some Western style satirical content may be incompatible with Arab societies. This is clearly apparent in *El Bernameg*, where Youssef declared that his sole purpose was to push boundaries, an idea he had evidently shown during Morsi's presidency.

## 6. Conclusion

Satire is one of the few philosophical concepts that have not only survived the test of time, but also morphed accordingly with a plethora of historical and sociopolitical circumstances ever since the classical period. The tremendous adjustments applied over this genre had rendered it exponentially different from its contemporary counterpart, yet the core objective of audacious criticism for change, no matter how much it has historically expanded, has invariably been a constant common scope for satirists. Academic inquiry demonstrates the distinctive development of Western and Eastern satire according to each hemisphere's cultural and political characteristics, with narrow common ground related to the general purpose of the genre. Yet, both styles began converging gradually with the globalized spread of telecommunication technologies starting from the second half of the twentieth century, a process that climaxed with the wake of the twenty first century. The sum of global political fluctuations and the advent of social networks, combined with the remarkable progress in audiovisual technologies, has unified the scope of and modus operandi of satirical content, as the art form aimed its criticism at conventional media and corrupt government practices.

Nevertheless, while this style of satire can easily reach its audiences with relative impunity in the West, the outcomes are unknown at best in the Arab World, as most governments in the region are mostly characterized by instability and fierce competitions for power. In addition, it is quite clear that freedom of speech has not found a home in Arab countries yet, not only for the censorship of governments, but also for the centuries-old cultural and religious constraints in the region. Thus, the clash between the governmental

and popular restrictions and the overtly critical, and often vulgar, content of post 9/11 American satire have the potential of exacerbating the already problematic situation in the region. Since Bassem Youssef has amassed appalling statistical success on an international level, we can assume that his material should have shown some tangible outcomes. Yet, the unchanging political situation, coupled with the seemingly idle public reactions, point out the failures of Western style satire in both hemispheres. It is perhaps a bit early to judge the performance of Youssef's work, as it may either bring some latent, promising changes; still, for now, we can conclude that Youssef's adapted form of satire was relatively unsuccessful in the Arab World based on the seemingly aggressive governmental reactions and citizens' meagre responsiveness.

## 7. List of references:

- Abou Aissa, F. Humor in Arabic Literature: Humor in Arabic Literature to the End of the 3rd Century AH. (Algeria, The National company, 1970), p.34
- Al Dahhan, M. S. Al Hidjaa [satire] (3rd ed.). (Egypt, Dar Al Maarif, 1957), pp. 9-11
- Baym, G, & Jones, J.P. News Parody in Global Perspective: Politics, Power, and Resistance, Popular Communication. Popular Communication: *The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 2012, pp. 2-5
- Berquti, A. Explaining Hassan bin Thabet Al-Ansari's Diwan. (Lebanon, Al-Andalus press, 1983), p.27.
- Bessedj, A.H. Explaining the Diwan of Ibn Roumi (1st ed.). (Lebanon, Scientific books publishing house, , 1994), p. 189.
- Bouhadjem, M.N. Satire in modern Algerian literature. (Algeria, Heritage Society, 2004), pp.22-29.
- Boyle, F. T. Swift as Nemesis: Modernity and its satirist (1st ed.). (U.S.A, Stanford University Press, 2000). p. 26-77.
- Brooks, T., & Marsh, E. F. The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-present (9th ed.). (U.S.A, Ballantine Books, 2007), pp.1243-1260
- Duffy, M. E., & Page, J. T. Does political humor matter? You betcha! Comedy TV's performance of the 2008 vice presidential debate. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 46(3), 2013, pp. 545-565.
- Egypt. (2019, October 12) How Joe Show responded to a warning of withdrawing citizenship from him?. <http://khaleej.online/P3VjEA>. <https://khaleej.online/P3VjEA> (consulted on 12/04/2020).
- Faour, A. Explaining the Diwan of Abou Nouass (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (Lebanon, Scientific books publishing house, 1994), p.35.
- Fielding S. (2012, September 9). Why The Thick of It is safe comedy. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/09/thick-of-it-safe-comedy> (consulted

WIND OF CHANGE: EXPLORING THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF POST 9/11  
AUDIOVISUAL SATIRE IN THE ARAB WORLD

Abdelhadi Esselami / Prof. Faiza Senouci Meberbeche

---

on 11/03/2020).

- Gordon, J., & Arafa, H. "Stuck with Him": Bassem Youssef and the Egyptian Revolution's Last Laugh. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 48(1-2), 2016, pp. 34-43.
- Kalil, S. (2016, April 21). An audience with Bassem Youssef. *Middle East Monitor*.  
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160421-an-audience-with-bassem-youssef/>
- Iannucci A. (2016, June 11). From Trump to Boris, I wouldn't write *The Thick of It* now—politics already feels fictional enough. *The New Statesman*, 11 June.  
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/trump-boris-i-wouldn-t-write-thick-it-now-politics-already-feels-fictional> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- Iannucci A. (2015, April 20). It's time for a very British revolution. *The New Statesman*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/04/armando-iannucci-it-s-time-very-british-revolution> (consulted on 20/04/2020).
- LeBoeuf, M. *The Power of Ridicule: An Analysis of Satire. Senior Honors Projects*. University of Rhode Island, 2007, pp. 6-14.
- Manuel F.E & Manuel F.P. *Utopian Thought in the Western World*.(U.S.A, Belknap Press, 1979), page
- McClennen S.A, & Maisel R.M. *Is Satire Saving Our Nation? Mockery and American Politics*. (U.K, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.6-7
- Moore, S., & Hulbert, J. R. Geoffrey Chaucer, esquire. *Modern Language Notes*, 28(6), 1913, p. 189.
- Müller, R.A. *Komik und Satire [Comedy and satire]*. (Switzerland, Juris-Verlag, 1973), p.92
- Nabi, R. L., Moyer-Gusé, E., & Byrne, S. All joking aside: A serious investigation into the persuasive effect of funny social issue messages. *Communication Monographs*, 74(1), 2007, pp. 29-54.
- Richlin, A. *The garden of Priapus: Sexuality and aggression in Roman humor*. (U.K, Oxford University Press on Demand, 1992), pp. 164-209.
- Smith, Jamie Noelle, "No Laughing Matter: Failures of Satire During the 2016 Presidential Election". *Honors Theses and Capstones*, 381, 2018, p.22.
- Tarrad, M. (n.d.). *Explaining Al-Akhtal's Diwan* (1<sup>st</sup> edition). (Beirut, Al-Djil publishing house, 1995), p.227.
- Wright, T., & Fairholt, F. W. *A history of caricature and grotesque: In literature and art*. (U.S.A, CreateSpace, 2014), pp. 1-23.
- Youssef, B. (2016, April 21). An audience with Bassem Youssef. Interview. [middleeastmonitor.com](http://middleeastmonitor.com).

---

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160421-an-audience-with-bassem-youssef/> (consulted on 23/03/2020).

Youssef, B. (2019, June 19). Bassem Youssef live in London. Interview by Hall, L. MARSM and AlHudood. <http://marsm.co.uk/event/bassem-youssef-live-in-london/> (consulted on 20/03/2020).