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## Recipe for Sweet-and-Sour Satire

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Panel: Satire's Global Reach

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### Recipe for Sweet-and-Sour Satire

Societies are both different from, and similar to, each other. Satire, as a built-in instrument guaranteeing the health of society, already comes as structurally universal; globalisation does the rest. And yet, satire is entirely dependent on cultural context. This is true both at the level of its encoding (its writing) and its decoding (its reader reception).

Satire is by now pretty universal. At a young age I noticed satire in many a woman's language use whenever she couldn't get through to her husband in patriarchal Mauritius. I further learned to recognise it in abridged versions of François Rabelais, whose *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* my parents got me to read, then Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and in *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. I will always remember Don Quixote, who, in a delusional state, decides to offer big Sancho Panza, sitting on a donkey, governorship of the Balears as if it was his to give, and proceeds to teach him a thing or two about being governor, such as how to eat with knife and fork. *Asterix* the cartoon from Belgium beckoned, whereby the resistance of Gauls to Roman Imperialism struck a chord in the hearts of all those who came from repressed cultures. I saw satire in the transsexuals in Bollywood movies, as they went, nasally: "Tayab Ali pyar ka dushman hai! hai!" ("Tayab Ali is the enemy of love!"). As I grew up I was exposed to Mauritian writer Bhishmadev Seebaluck, as he poked fun at Mauritian politicians every week in his newspaper column. Gaëtan Duval, the most famous and regarded Afro-Mauritian politician, he said was speaking English in Parliament with the most perfect French accent he could manage. And drawn caricatures of politicians were spilling out of the very free and insolent Mauritian press. After a Muslim wedding in Mauritius the Qawwalis would, in their songs, make the Laila and Qais (the Persian Romeo and Juliet) joke about religion with Sufi good humour. And then after a lifetime of watching Westerns and identifying with cowboys, I got to watch *Little Big Man*, Thomas Berger's 1964 novel given a new lease of life by Arthur Penn in 1970, which deals with the genocide of Native Americans in some way similar to Mel Brooks, who deals with the 1940s German genocide in *The Producers*, in that great year, 1968.

Satire dates right from Greco-Roman culture and in Ancient Egypt, as well as many other cultures where it wasn't recorded. It is still a staple of US television and film culture, whether in *The Late Show*, *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Harold and Kumar*, or most stand-up comedies. Empirically, in my own personal travels, which have been quite extensive, I encountered satire everywhere. The difference was minimal and was usually only related to varieties in literary and vital tradition as inspiration, to differences in cultural competency of readers, after Noam Chomsky's definition.

Satire is based on the juxtaposition of a double text – an original and a parasite (para: beyond, site: location). On the one hand is an object, on the other, satire caricatures and distorts that object, imposing its text as the final word. Remember how once a personality is

caricatured it is likely any perception you have of her/him/ is forever infected by it. Retrieving the original unscathed becomes impossible.

To me, the common underlying structure of satire throughout the world is a particular inside/outside viewpoint. A first commonality is the satirist's 'outsideness'. And this seems common to all satirists, whether Alexander Pope, persecuted for his Catholicism, or Salman Rushdie, the *mise-en-abyme* outsider/insider.

Satire is an old Gulf Arab tradition, but one of the greatest Islamic Empire satirists to theorise its value was Al-Jahiz. Now Al-Jahiz advocated and practised a satirical approach to such 'serious' academic fields as sociology, zoology, and anthropology and, from what I have read by him, was peculiarly successful at mixing science and satire, the second feeding the first with scepticism, with each one part of the same dynamics of scientific investigation.

Al-Jahiz was ethnically mixed: he was at least half ethnically African. Al Jahiz was thus an insider/outsider to the "Arab" culture of the Abbasid Caliphate as is exemplified by many of his writings. In *Superiority Of The Blacks To The Whites*, one of his more than 300 books, he argues, deterministically, that people of African origin are superior to other racial groups. As an early orphan and a poor autodidact who took advantage of the relative democracy of books in Basra under the Abassids, Al-Jahiz was socially an outsider to the intellectual classes.

You see, a certain distance is required from society for satire to become possible. The satirist is a humorous sceptic, standing far enough outside to be able to assess society instead of just inhabiting it, or living within it, whether physically, culturally, or otherwise.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the main character is a classic satirist in all but name, as Freud and Lacan hinted. For satire is based on a refusal to adjust to the world of the reality principle of a society, and is instead a play with the social signifieds in order to reduce them to signifiers. Satire is a leveller, like a form of death, abolishing, or at least eating at, hierarchy.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, "When you look long into an abyss, the abyss looks into you." Satire is a look into an abyss; it is, whether in one dose or another, a portal that leads to a grinning skull, humanity without its makeup. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* does just this: it starts with a degree of innocence about difference in size but then in the final chapter, places a harsh mirror to the face of humanity, which leads to misanthropy.

According to Martin Heidegger, we are so involved in our everydayness that we only focus on achieving things. He gives as example the hammer: while we need to use it we aren't even aware of its existence. It is just there. Only when it breaks or something goes wrong do we notice its existence. This is true of our own existence as well. Satire breaks our hammers, if you will, and acts as a disturbance to usher in lucidity about ourselves.

Ironically, Heidegger's own "hammer" would be broken by Jacques Derrida who, in 1987, wrote a meta-satirical article entitled *De L'Esprit: Heidegger et la question*. Derrida's

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own neologicistic concept of deconstruction was directly inspired by [Heidegger](#)'s notion of *Destruktion*, but in *De L'Esprit*, he uses the flippant, playful French word *esprit* to unhinge Heidegger's own serious German use of *Geist*, both of which translate as spirit in English but carry such different concepts. *De L'Esprit* is ultimately like Derrida drawing a moustache on Heidegger's serious face--perhaps an Adolf Hitler moustache!

Rose-tinted glasses are of course necessary for society to work, but culture tends to coalesce so much that it will end up initiating opposition to dynamics of transformation. Instead much of satire works at scratching away at the rosy tint. Since all belief systems are constructed, and since one isn't normally aware of the very fact that they are constructed, tools like satire are responsible for uncovering that truth which we miss in our focus on everydayness.

Politically iconoclastic, satire nibbles at power from within, tickling the ribs of the powerful until they bend over, in *flagrante delicto* of being human for all to see. Voltaire uses this abundantly in *Candide* to strip everyone from the politician to the aristocrat to the priest or the philosopher, alienating them in turn so the reader can see each for what s/he is.

Perception is, by its very nature, distorted. All our perceptions of things are in caricatures; In other words, the belief that we see persons and other objects and events as whole, as accountable, as having integrity of some sort, is illusory. The ambiguity of the language of satire, on the other hand, reflects the existential ambiguity of being, which is masked by society. The potency of satire and the source of the laughter it provokes lie in its recognition by those who read it, as uncovering truths they had been aware of all along. Satire thus confronts humans with that naked reality which can lead to either better understanding or resistance.

It is in this undressing of reality that lies the power of satire, and in the same breath why it is feared by those with agendas to hide. For although satire has universal dynamics, its reception isn't consistent across the world. In much of my continent, Africa, for instance, satire is seen as threatening by governments. Satire becomes an act of courage. Indeed, how satirical writers are treated in a country can very often serve as a more-reliable-than-most litmus paper test of democracy in a country.

It is no coincidence that, with Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard's Almanack*) and Mark Twain, few countries have had their nation-building so influenced by the satirical as the United States. Satire is the language of subversion and part of the mythology of renewal for a country that has sought to reinvent itself so often.

Jewish humour, a woman's power-behind-the-throne, Hamlet's double-entendres, or even the animated film *Shrek*, Avant-Garde Congolese writer Sony Labou-Tansi, extreme right-wing or extreme left-wing caricature, all have something in common: they are born of a certain powerlessness, whether actual or perceived. For satire can be used to justify any variety of moralities; it exists beyond societal ethics, as an ontological cry. Bill Maher, who is admirable for setting records straight, will also use his platform of healthy scepticism to vehicle less nuanced assumptions, especially about Islam. But extremes are the nature of the satirical beast.

Satire can achieve but a temporary victory at best. For satire, like caricature, is never original, but a parasite: it depends on an original text, written or otherwise, to make sense. Take the original text, which generally means the *context*, and the satire doesn't make sense anymore. It falls flat. When othered in terms of time or geography, the impact of the satire can only be understood with reference to context retroactively or trans-culturally. Yet the basic universal human power underlying all satire makes it an easily retrievable language enough.

Satirical ink is a fertile inspiration for my writing. For satire is a practice of seeing, and it keeps the perceptual muscles working, fearing they get atrophied by society.

I conclude with the ending to a short-story of mine, "Compass: Or how Grandpa Conquered the West" about a young Mauritian man of Indian origin who is warned by his grandfather not to bring back a white woman as he goes off to study in Europe, gets involved with a white woman, but finally returns to Mauritius, satirically, the "moral centre of the world":

[...]

I could see a crescent, large, grey, proud, slicing the sky with gusto. Suddenly, it knelt down as the fanatical cross of a sword plunged into the bull's back, and the proud crescent dug into the soft arena. I shook the image off my mind: where I came from had never anything to resolve. How could it? It simply did not exist: it was neither Oriental nor Occidental, neither North nor South. They called it African and it wasn't ever too certain. In fact, no one knew where it was. In fact, it wasn't sure where it was. Indeed, as I was walking down the Place D'Armes in Port Louis, I suddenly saw the palms of the Avenida Maritime del Norte. I saw Carmencita. I called her. She replied, in Morisyen, in only one composite, writhing exclamation:

*'Mwamo Yildis!'*

'Your name is Yildis?'

I scanned a smorgasbord of human languages. Should I say Hajime Mashite, but no she wasn't Japanese. Or ask: you Ashkenaz or Safarad? Halwein caste? Shona or Ndebele? Why was I complicating matters? In fact, it was all kismet, Bollywoodish and we followed the Script: Turkish name, dark face, Mauritian, Muslim, no wedding rings [...]. I winked up at God the Great Matchmaker and she thought I was winking at her. She smiled timidly, concentrating on her open sandals and hennaed toes, every inch ready for fertilisation. An older self, sitting inside me melted into grainy Urdu poetry, delicate, like listening to a beautiful dream.

'Will you marry me?' I asked.

*Here's how we do things, I thought, satisfied. No complications. No sitting in bars feeling lonely and rejected. No uncertainties. No adultery. No drugs. I'd returned to Mauritius, the moral centre of the world [...]. I was back full circle. Having sought for magnetic Norths, I was back where I started: with my true North.*