

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-8>

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Published online on: 04 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Ambreen Hai. 04 Sep 2018, *Uses of humour in post-9/11 Pakistani anglophone fiction* from: The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-8>

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7

USES OF HUMOUR IN POST-9/11 PAKISTANI ANGLOPHONE FICTION

H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* and Mohammed Hanif's
A Case of Exploding Mangoes

Ambreen Hai

Humour is perhaps not the first thing most people associate with Pakistani fiction. This chapter will argue, nonetheless, that humour is an essential component, indeed a driving force, for a significant strain of twenty-first-century anglophone fiction produced by a new generation of Pakistani writers, central to the cultural and political work that they undertake, and to the formal aesthetic that structures their writing. Focusing on two novels as examples – H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009) and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) – I explore how, in a post-9/11 context of globalised Islamophobia, each deploys various strategies and forms of humour.¹ Humour serves multiple purposes in both novels: to contest the claim that Muslims do not have a sense of humour and to hence establish the humanity denied to Muslims by this logic;² to challenge oppressive forms of dominance or state power; to subvert by exposing and rendering absurd certain forms of authority; and, via the pleasure and bonhomie created by humour, to reach a broader audience and suggest persuasive alternatives to binary and prejudiced thinking. Naqvi uses humour to build trust and understanding, and to push back against racist or Islamophobic ideologies and practices in the US; Hanif to satirise and assert a lively resistance to, and refusal to be vanquished by, the deeply oppressive, corrupt nexus of military government and American involvement in Pakistan.

In Europe and America, minority or 'ethnic' comedians have long used humour to defuse tension, to challenge dominant discourses, and to present alternative non-normative viewpoints and frameworks. Since 9/11, Muslim comedians have intensified this cultural work. Sociologist Mucahit Bilici argues that:

Muslim ethnic comedy [in the US] is a form of code-switching in the face of situations where the language of reason is overtaken by a wrong common sense or a common wrong sense. [...] It redefines the common sense [...] to disclose the rock

bottom of our identities as 'human', to re-establish the humanity of those 'othered'.
[...] [It] is the world of Islamophobia turned upside down.

(2010: 207)

Humour does cultural work in multiple ways, and goes beyond simple reversal or inversion. Ideally, argues Rainer Emig (regarding the British-Asian television sitcom *Goodness Gracious Me*), hybrid humour can create an in-between 'third space' and 'double vision' to expose stereotypes and unsettle 'identities and authorities' in both majority and minority groups (2010: 178, 188).

It is important, however, to distinguish between malign and benign humour, for not all humour does the positive, constructive work of re-establishing humanity or undoing prejudice. Clearly, some negative kinds of humour reaffirm prejudice and social hierarchies: mean-spirited mockery and racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes are well-known examples of such 'punch-down' humour, where laughter asserts superiority over those laughed at. But humour is not always or only malign, though it does always involve some exertion of power. Benign or socially constructive forms of humour can engage in healthy pushback or punch *up*; or, by laughing *with*, not *at*, its target or audience, they can reach out, be inclusive, and create a sense of community or sense of connection even across lines of difference and inequality. Some non-Muslim audience members' responses to US Muslim stand-up comedians attest to these effects: 'You can't hate the person you've laughed with'; 'I didn't see you as a Muslim, I saw you as a human being' (Bilici 2010: 207).

Prominent theories of humour do not always acknowledge both malign and benign kinds of humour, though they can be used to explain both. The superiority theory of humour recognises the relations of power inherent in the act of evoking, and responding with, laughter. From Plato onwards, many thinkers and cultural traditions have regarded humour as derisive, as exerting superiority over others. But humour can be used both to reinforce and to challenge dominance and power. The 'marginal humor [of those in socially disadvantaged positions] may empower the powerless, may invert and subvert the status quo' (Gilbert 2004: xv). The superiority theory can thus also explain benign or socially beneficial humour: those laughing can push back against what threatens them, asserting resistance or refusal of defeat, and thus regain some psychological control over oppressive conditions. Authoritarian regimes often forbid laughter to the disempowered because they recognise it as a challenge to authority.³ Psychologist Rod Martin notes, 'Humor is inherently neither friendly nor aggressive: it is a means of deriving emotional pleasure that can be used for both amiable and antagonistic purposes. This is the paradox of humor' (2007: 18). Both Naqvi and Hanif use humour for benign purposes, either to assert resistance and push back against wrongful uses of power, or to reach out to more dominant groups to educate and enable better understanding of those who are maligned and disempowered.

Two other influential theories of humour explain different dimensions of humour and its psychological and sociopolitical functions.⁴ The relief theory, based on Freudian psychoanalysis, explains humour as a 'cathartic release from repression', a reversion to the 'pleasure principle' that allows escape from 'the reality principle' or 'the psychic cost of civilization' (Bilici 2010: 202). Humour can enable relief from repression in both malign and benign forms; malign humour can enable escape from social censors, allowing the otherwise unsayable to be said, even if it vilifies the weak and buttresses the power of the dominant; benign humour can enable resistance, coping, or healing for those experiencing disempowerment by allowing them to feel less oppressed by what threatens them. Laughing at a problem can reduce it by making it feel less overpowering, and demonstrate to others one's relative control over it. As I will show, this

positive psychic effect of humour works for both the characters and the readers of the novels discussed below.

The incongruity theory, proposed by Schopenhauer and others, argues that humour is a surprise reaction to the incongruous or absurd, the result of a cognitive ‘conceptual shift’ upon discovery of the mismatch between expectation and reality (Morreall 1987: 4). Perhaps humour brings pleasure because it occasions the recognition of something known but suppressed, the uncanny or (un)familiar, the unhomey that brings us home to ourselves. For malign humour, the cognitive shift can occasion reaffirmation of a desire for mastery over those targeted and laughed down, the pleasure of (re)discovery of what one wished for. For benign humour, the incongruity theory offers different benefits. If humour occasions a recognition of something unknown yet known, a discovery of one’s own misconceptions, then Bilici’s point about Muslim ethnic hybrid humourists becomes highly significant. Because such humourists inhabit two worlds, bridging dominant and minority groups, and can ‘code-switch’, they can speak the language of the majority, establish belonging in both groups, and translate from the ‘othered’ group to enable re-education of the dominant group. The ‘essence of humor’ is ‘the simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions’ or ‘bisociation’, when ‘two self-consistent but normally incompatible or disparate frames of reference’, ‘both X and not-X’, are seen or brought together (Martin 2007: 63). Incongruity theory thus explains how the benign humour of the oppressed can work to speak to the oppressor group(s), to bring about recognition of misconception, to redress misconception, and enable greater understanding and trust across difference. Incongruity theory explains how pushback humour like Naqvi’s and Hanif’s can be educational: by making explicit the absurdity of certain assumptions, preconceptions, or biases, it can provoke laughter at oneself for holding them, and promote the rethinking of those assumptions. Humour depends on and enables a shift in ways of seeing: ‘Applying humor to a situation is like applying lateral thinking – it allows you to see things from a new angle’ (Barreca 1991: 126).

Humour in Naqvi’s *Home Boy*

Scholars have rightly approached *Home Boy* as a counter-discursive critique of dominant American political and cultural responses to the events of 9/11, an ironic coming-of-age story where growing up involves the shattering of the American dream. Most view its young Pakistani Muslim narrator-protagonist, Chuck, as a casualty of racial profiling and Islamophobia as his early effervescent cosmopolitanism and sense of self declines – after he is detained by the FBI under wrongful suspicion of terrorism – into identity crisis, paranoia, and suicidal depression (see Heidemann 2012). Daily-Bruckner reads the novel as an ‘ethnic bildungsroman’ that disrupts and revises American literary tradition to present Chuck’s rejection of and disaffiliation from America when the ‘promise of America’ is violated post-9/11 (2016: 223, 219). Roy critiques it for focusing on a culturally hybrid figure ‘that may appeal to a white audience’ and failing to address broader systemic realities and forms of difference (2011: 14). No critic, however, addresses the novel’s multiple uses of humour, perhaps because humour is not understood as doing serious work.

To begin with, Naqvi uses Chuck’s colloquial, ebullient humour and first-person voice to establish this narrator-protagonist’s engaging, disarming personality and to win the sympathy of potentially suspicious Western readers. Chuck’s confidence, cultural conversance, and claim to belonging as a New Yorker, as a Westernised, secular, hybrid cosmopolitan, are established though his voice – peppy, funny, at times crude, and anything but threatening. However goofy or clueless he is, this style suggests, Chuck is not a terrorist (nor a potential one).⁵ At age twenty-one, just graduated from NYU, an English major turned investment banker, he has taken to

taxi-driving in New York since he was laid off in July 2001, unbeknownst to his widowed mother in Pakistan. Early on, when he introduces his cohort of 'home boy' Pakistani-American friends, Chuck suggests how top-down malign humour is used to stereotype, homogenise, and put down minorities, against which he pushes back:

Though we shared a common denominator and were told jokingly, *Oh, all you Pakistanis are alike*, we weren't the same, AC, Jimbo, and me. AC – a cryptonym, short in part for Ali Chaudhry – was a charming rogue, an intellectual dandy, a man of theatrical presence. [...] Jamshed Khan, known universally as Jimbo, was a different cat altogether, a gentle, moon-faced man-mountain with kinky dreadlocks and a Semitic nose which, according to AC, affirmed anthropological speculation that Pathans are the Lost Tribe of Israel. [...] As for me, they called me Chuck and it stuck. I was growing up but thought I was grown up.

(Naqvi 2009: 2–3)

This stylistic mix of knowing, self-ironising, intellectual sophistication, word-play, and jauntiness works to upend binary assumptions, to demonstrate control through mastery of language and humour, and to showcase the diversity and heterogeneity *among* Pakistanis, as well as their affiliations *across* national boundaries to various ethnic formations that have resulted from migrations and cultural exchanges over centuries.⁶

Chuck's feisty humour also exposes and pushes back against common white American misconceptions about South Asians. Soon after 9/11, Chuck and his friends go to a nightclub – they 'were getting cabin fever watching CNN 24–7' and 'there was something heroic in persisting, carrying on, in returning to routine, revelry', he explains – where a white American 'carrying on bombastically' at the bar mistakes them for Indians (2009: 7–8, 9): 'Turning around, the Bombaster asked, "So lemme get this straight: you guys aren't Indian?" "We're too handsome, chum! You can call us Metrostanis! Cheers! Skål! Adab!" (2009: 14).

Chuck's light, deft comeback is at once funny because it is silly (claiming that Pakistani men are better looking than Indian),⁷ clever (coining the portmanteau neologism 'Metrostani' from metropolitan/cosmopolitan Pakistani), and smart as it establishes his multilingualism, witty verbal ability, and intellectual superiority to the American he cornily dubs 'the Bombaster', whose mistaken assumptions and inferior language skills are exposed in his speech.

But Chuck's persona is also self-undercutting, not set up as an infallible ideal. His flippancy city boy lingo accompanies a certain naiveté. 'In the four years I had been in the city, in the twenty-one and half years that comprised my life, I fell in love routinely. It went almost entirely unrequited', Chuck reports with bathos (2009: 15). Naqvi's own humour thus subtly invites (gentle) laughter at Chuck's expense, often via verbal play and plot twists. At the same nightclub, Chuck tries to pick up a Venezuelan (whom he dubs 'the girl from Ipanema', referencing the Brazilian international hit song) with whom he instantly imagines a future and shared immigrant American dream – 'if I married her, I too would become a bonafide American. In a sense, we were peas in a pod, she and I, denizens of the Third World turned economic refugees turned scenesters by fate' – until he hears her say, 'Jou haf a nice ass' (2009: 16). Realising he has misheard her accented English – her compliment turns out to be about his *eyes* – Chuck's gratification and notion of Third World solidarity are shattered by his discovery that they literally cannot understand each other, and by her rejection when she finds out that he is from Pakistan. This double-edged humour targets not the Venezuelan's accent, but Chuck's foolish idealism, and the prejudice that he faces; its effect is not to mock Chuck, but to render him endearingly inexperienced, vulnerable, and harmless. It also exemplifies Naqvi's double language, or

code-switching, as he uses the knowledge of the dominant group to speak to them about the injustices suffered by the non-dominant.

Naqvi's humour thus goes beyond Chuck's, and works with it to delineate and contest the increasing racism that Chuck and his friends face after 9/11. Right after the episode above, Chuck and his friends go to Jake's, their favourite nightclub and refuge, and have a run-in with two drunken white racists:

Brawler No. 1 hissed, 'A-rabs.'

Repeating the word in my head, I realized it was the first time I'd heard it spoken that way, like a dagger thrust and turned, the first time anything like this had happened to us at all. [...] 'We're not the same,' Jimbo protested.

'Moslems, Mo-hicans, whatever,' Brawler No. 2 snapped.

'I'm from Jersey, dude!' [replies Jimbo].

(2009: 30)

Significantly, Naqvi represents the three men of Pakistani origin as non-violent, even placatory in the face of open aggression, and the violent attack on Chuck as initiated by the 'brawlers'. (When they fight back, they get kicked out.) In fact, Jimbo is Pakistani-American, born in New Jersey, AC is the 'only immigrant', and Chuck is Pakistani, on a temporary H-1B 'work visa' (2009: 2, 116). In the humorous play on 'Moslems, Mo-hicans', Naqvi invokes James Fennimore Cooper to link nineteenth century-white supremacy and imperialism to the present day; he thus exposes the American ignorance or prejudice that, despite clarification, does not care about conflating Arabs and Muslims, or Muslims and Native Americans (or American Indians). In so doing, Naqvi strategically separates those he critiques from his potential American readers, whom he seeks to reach and educate. The comic presentation of this episode in Chuck's tongue-in-cheek style contributes to this positive effect. This humour is benign, I would argue, because it is not punching down those already disempowered; instead it pushes back and seeks to communicate and build understanding via the community-building work of sharing laughter *about* misconception (not *at* a stigmatised group).

This use of humour as pushback and relief intensifies as Naqvi highlights the increasing racial suspicion and danger that besets these young men because of their appearance and accents. As Chuck and his friends drive to Connecticut to check on 'the Shaman', a Pakistani friend they have not heard from since before 9/11, they are stopped by police officers who question Chuck for wearing the dark glasses that he is using (ironically) to cover up the bruise he got from the racist 'brawlers'. Suddenly aware that they are '*a bunch of brown men in a car, the night of heightened security in the city*', Chuck realises that his former sense of ease in America is gone, that he feels newly 'uneasy, guilty, criminal' (2009: 97). When AC tries to intervene calmly in fluent English, the officers act as if he is speaking a foreign language: '[Officer] Brophy processed the information slowly, as if AC had just gushed a verse of Urdu poetry' (2009: 97). Chuck's comical comment punctures the rising tension (for readers) as it suggests that the slow-witted American officer cannot understand the sophistication or language of Urdu poetry, and reverses assumptions of Western cultural superiority. This humour pushes back against and diminishes the power of the police officer, rendering it ridiculous; it demonstrates Chuck's ability to maintain control of the situation precisely because he is able to use humour; and it offers relief to readers who are thus nudged towards further good will and sympathy with Chuck and his friends and against alignment with the officers.

This dynamic is repeated in the crisis of the novel, when Chuck and his friends are wrongly arrested by the FBI under suspicion of terrorism, handcuffed at gunpoint, and taken to the

Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC), where ‘the worst abuses in the American prison system took place after 9/11’, and where many Muslim men were in fact detained and their civil rights suspended under the Patriot Act (2009: 133). Significantly, at this pivotal point of the narrative, located at its centre, Chuck’s humour disappears, as if he is overwhelmed by the terror of what is happening to him. Humour here seems reserved – as a malign, punch-down tactic – for the agents of power, who use it to establish their superiority. Chuck is stripped, humiliated, denied his rights, almost starved, subjected to Islamophobic verbal abuse (‘sand nigger’) and sexual mockery (for his circumcision), and thrown into a solitary cell (2009: 137). When he asks for a phone call, he is told, ‘You aren’t American! [...] You got no fucking rights’, and threatened with deportation to ‘Bumfuckistan’ (2009: 135). But even when Chuck is unable to use humour, and sensible enough not to try it, Naqvi uses humour to deflate the power of these officials, and to demonstrate Chuck the narrator’s retrospective control over the situation via his humorous retelling and deadpan style. When Chuck the character is afraid he will vomit in the police car, Chuck the narrator describes his captor, whom he could not see, as sounding ‘small and dumpy, like Mickey Rooney’, or (later at the MDC) his second interrogator as a ‘graying, fiftysomething grizzly bear of a man’, naming him ‘Grizzly’ (suggesting he is both bear-like and grey-haired) (2009: 143). This use of creative, comical nicknames punctures the power of these figures and the fear they induce, and asserts Chuck’s refusal to be conquered by that fear, even though with the interrogator he remains polite and cooperative.

Chuck the narrator’s humour returns as Grizzly begins to soften (upon discovering that Chuck majored in English literature and was an investment banker). Asked to explain ‘why Muslims terrorize’, Chuck uses humorous analogy to expose (to his readers) the absurdity of the very premises of such a question:

As a Muslim, he figured, I would have special insight into the phenomenon [...] just like a black man, any black man, should be privy to black-on-black violence [...] But like everybody, I figured the hijackers were a bunch of crazy Saudi bastards.

(2009: 146)

If it is not clear to readers that the question is essentialist and racist because it lumps all Muslims and Arabs together and assumes they have insider knowledge of terrorism, the analogy to similar assumptions about black men makes it clearer. Chuck’s colloquial language and youthful slang further expose the question as ridiculous, as he distances himself from the 9/11 attackers and points out, through his casual generalisation about what ‘everybody’ knows (except, apparently, Grizzly), that the hijackers were Saudi, and that most Muslims do not condone terrorism.

But Chuck is careful not to use humour on Grizzly, for in such a fraught situation, it would only be understood as non-cooperation, or a challenge to authority. Only when Grizzly rephrases his questions (‘why the hell did they have to blow up the Twin Towers’), showing that he is less hostile, Chuck pushes back with increasing gutsiness (‘Your guess, sir, is as good as mine’; to Grizzly’s question, ‘Can’t you put yourself in their shoes?’ he responds, ‘No, can you?’) (2009: 147). Chuck challenges both Grizzly’s alignment of him with terrorists and the assumption that he can imaginatively understand them any more than Grizzly can himself. Rhetorically, he switches roles, turning the question on the interrogator, as if turning the mirror upon him to see himself. Chuck is the only one of his friends to be released from the MDC without outside intervention, as if his cooperative demeanour, ready tongue, use of logic, knowledge of history, and exposé of the incongruity of Grizzly’s assumptions together undo Grizzly’s suspicions and effect Chuck’s release. However, while in this situation Chuck the

character maintains a tone of deference and cooperation even as he questions his interrogator's questions, Chuck the retrospective narrator continues to use humour for his readers (continuing to describe his interrogator as 'Grizzly', inserting editorial remarks), splitting the narrating from the narrated self, and separating his readers from the suspicious mindset of the detention officials, realigning himself, through the use of humour, with the former against the latter.

As the rest of the novel describes Chuck's return from detention, his budding romance with Jimbo's sister Amo, his successful negotiation of a new job offer, and his ultimate inability to stay in an America that has traumatised him, humour remains an important tool that serves to lighten grim moments and maintain sympathy with Chuck without diminishing the seriousness of the critique that Naqvi presents. For American readers, it also serves to make more receivable the dark counter-narrative *Home Boy* presents of American prejudice and official and unofficial mistreatment of Muslims after 9/11. This is not to say that Chuck's (or Jimbo's or Naqvi's) use of humour is not at times distasteful or puerile. It is not above targeting women or working-class individuals: Jimbo's overweight American girlfriend is dubbed 'the Duck' because she waddles; Jimbo claims she wants marriage and children because her ovaries are 'drying up'; the Moroccan who helps Chuck as a fellow Muslim says, 'I brayed for you' (2009: 6, 70, 258). But perhaps this is precisely the point: that Chuck and his friends are not perfect or even admirable human beings, but they are not deserving of persecution or relegation to the category of potential terrorist. As if speaking for Naqvi, at a key moment in the novel Chuck addresses a gathering of 'Puppies' (a humorous play on Yuppies, for children of Pakistani Urban Professionals): 'We're not model citizens – I'm not a citizen at all – but I can tell you this much: we've done nothing wrong. This is no way to treat human beings, and this is no way to achieve security' (2009: 172). These claims to humanity and efforts to educate, in the hope of ameliorating hostility and misconception, are the basis for the humour in *Home Boy*. Humour serves to establish the humanity and intelligence of the youthful Chuck and his cohort, and to *appeal* (in every sense: to please; and to make an urgent request or plea) to readers, not to pander, but to arouse sympathy and empathy, and to prepare readers to be more open to the counter-story it tells, to be able to hear the debunking of the pernicious myths and prejudices that have been used to dehumanise and demonise Muslims and Pakistanis after 9/11. In this sense, humour in Naqvi's work acts as a bridge-builder, not to appease or placate, but to do the important cultural and political work of reaching out to those who might otherwise see only through the dangerous frameworks of a single story – I refer here to Adichie's famous TED talk, 'The Danger of a Single Story' (2009).

A comparison with *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

As yet, only a handful of scholars have attended to this dazzling first novel, and fewer even mention Hanif's humour.⁸ In alternating chapters, the novel follows two narrative threads – the story of Junior Under Officer Ali Shigri, a trainee in the Pakistani Air Force, who is imprisoned and tortured by the military and secret service when his gay friend and lover disappears in a stolen airplane; and the story of the historical figure President Zia-ul-Haq (Martial Law Administrator and President of Pakistan, 1977–1988) and his associates in the months before Zia's plane mysteriously exploded on 17 August 1988 – that converge on the day of the crash. The title itself puns on 'case' as a mystery to be solved (the cause of the explosion remains unknown) and a container of fruit (the mangoes that were later suspected of containing explosives). Though set in a pre-9/11 world, the novel looks back with a post-9/11 geopolitical understanding to a time when the US supported a military dictator in Pakistan to train the Taliban to fight Russians in Afghanistan – the very Taliban who would later turn against the US.

Given the limited space of this essay, I will highlight some brief comparative points. To begin with form: unlike *Home Boy*, which is narrated throughout by one first-person narrator (Chuck), *Exploding Mangoes* alternates between a first-person male narrator-protagonist (Ali Shigri) and a third-person omniscient narrator (unnamed). These two alternating voices together offer more varied modes of humour and a range of humorous effects. Shigri's voice, like Chuck's, is young, insouciant, and similarly uses verbal humour (wit, jokes, puns, word-play, irreverent comments, comic rhetoric such as understatement and exaggeration) to debunk authority, to undercut the oppressive force of power, and to establish Shigri's resilience, his refusal to succumb to the horrors that afflict him as he is (also) wrongly imprisoned and tortured. The third-person narrator's voice is different, however: satiric, deadpan, reductive, more knowing; in addition to absurdist narration and commentary, it uses free indirect discourse (and the liberties of historical fiction) to describe the inner thoughts and emotions of General Zia-ul-Haq, his wife (described as the 'First Lady'), and their subordinates. This narrator's humour includes Bakhtinian scatological references, a sardonic tone, comic description, ridiculous analogy, and absurdity of detail that all serve to deflate the pompous stature of powerful officials, to demystify their power, and to expose the corruption of his network of allies and rivals. Beyond these two different narrative voices and their different modes of humour, I would distinguish the humour of the author, who deploys absurdities of plot and symbolism, and comparative juxtapositions (of event, scene, character, voice) to bring out incongruities that produce comic effects.

The Prologue opens with Shigri's irreverent voice, describing himself as 'the one who got away', the only one to have boarded the doomed plane and survived (because he was 'off-loaded' to make room for more important passengers), audaciously addressing the reader as 'you', pulling us in to participate from his perspective (Hanif 2008: 5, 309). Claiming a brief background presence in the last TV clip showing Zia alive, Shigri presents the great man walking to the plane as follows:

For a brief moment you can see General Zia's face in the clip, the last recorded memory of a much-photographed man. The middle parting in his hair glints under the sun, his unnaturally white teeth flash, his moustache does its customary little dance for the camera, but as the camera pulls out, you can see that he is not smiling. If you watch closely, you can probably tell that he is in some discomfort. He is walking the walk of a constipated man.

The man walking on his right is the US ambassador to Pakistan, Arnold Raphel, whose shiny bald head and carefully groomed moustache give him the air of a respectable homosexual businessman from small-town America.

(2008: 3–4)

With the 'middle parting' (a possible allusion to Rushdie's description of Indira Gandhi in *Midnight's Children*, suggestive of the divisiveness of these tyrannical rulers), Shigri begins by breaking down Zia's face into its component parts – hairstyle, teeth, moustache – all of which are disaggregated and rendered somewhat ridiculous. The moustache dances as if to appease onlookers, the teeth flash unnaturally as if again to reveal Zia as insecure, trying too hard, putting undue effort into his appearance. The description next uses Rabelaisian humour, focusing on Zia's bowels and dysfunctional digestive system (suggestive of Zia as a blockage himself, an obstruction to the nation), a known strategy of bringing the high low.⁹ Such descriptions reduce the mighty and dispel awe (for readers as well as for the narrator). Shigri similarly describes the US ambassador as comically hairless (perhaps signifying reduced virility or manliness), equally 'carefully groomed', focused on maintaining a public façade, and, with the

unexpected combination of 'respectable' with 'homosexual businessman', as absurdly incongruous. Via inversion, the joke also calls out American homophobia, especially in 'small-town America', and commercialism, that lies beneath the diplomatic exterior and interference in other nations' autonomy.

The Prologue thus sets up this tongue-in-cheek style and attitude that undercuts the powerful and establishes Shigri's humour and verbal dexterity. 'There is poetry in committing a crime after you have served your sentence', Shigri remarks: 'punishment before a crime does have a certain singsong quality to it. The guilty commit the crime; the innocent are punished. That's the world we live in' (2008: 6). With such wit and aphoristic brevity, Shigri begins his story, how he woke to find his roommate Obaid gone: 'the buggers would obviously suspect me. You can blame our men in uniform for anything, but you can never accuse them of being imaginative' (2008: 7). Hidden in this obvious put-down of army officials is perhaps an ironic reference to Hanif himself, who was trained in the Pakistani Air Force, and, contrary to expectation, has written this brilliantly imaginative novel (Filkins 2016).

Hanif's own humour is evinced as he juxtaposes for comparison, in the next section, Shigri's controlled official 'Statement'. This is addressed to Shigri's military superiors, and though also in Shigri's voice, presents an entirely different persona. Shigri turns banal detail into subversive, hilarious absurdity as he recounts the minutiae of his day to claim that he knew nothing of his friend Obaid going 'AWOL'. Performing dutiful subordination, quite unlike his voice as narrator, Shigri writes: 'As I was inspecting the second row, I realized that the sash on my belt was loose. I tried to tighten it. The sash came off in my hand. I ran towards my barracks to get a replacement' (2008: 9). The simple, factual sentences combine with mundane detail to poke fun at army discipline and dress: 'I noticed that Cadet Obaid's cupboard was open. [...] I didn't notice anything unlawful in the cupboard' (2008: 9). Humour creeps in as Shigri connects the official term 'unlawful' with 'cupboard', parodying the surveillance he is under and is required to enact. Noting the absence of the poems Obaid often taped inside his cupboard, Shigri again covertly makes fun of military regimen as he asserts his own innocence:

Since the Academy's standard operating procedures do not touch upon the subject of posting poetry in dorm cupboards, I had not reported this matter earlier. I arrived back at 0643, to find that the entire squadron was in Indian position. I immediately told them to stand up and come to attention and reminded Cadet Atiq that the Indian position was unlawful as a punishment.

(2008: 10)

As a subordinate empowered to exert discipline on his own subordinates, Shigri sends up the Pakistani military's disciplinary regime and its paranoid rivalry with India, and ridicules the ritual violence and humiliation enacted upon junior trainees: 'I caught one first-termer with a slice of French toast in his uniform shirt pocket. I stuffed the toast into his mouth and ordered him to start front-rolling' (the first-termer subsequently vomits the toast all down his uniform) (2008: 11–12). This debunking humour at the minute tonal and verbal level is augmented by our knowledge that Shigri is performing subservience, as he is required to do. The contrast Hanif sets up with Shigri's voice as narrator makes evident that underlying this façade of subservience is a comic subversion of the very regime Shigri purports to uphold.

Shigri's humour later also becomes a tool for relief (for himself and readers) and a sign of his resilience when he is imprisoned and subjected to starvation and torture. After an excruciating night spent dozing standing up locked in a toilet full of excrement, for example, he sees the graffiti left on the walls by previous prisoners with nails and possibly in blood: 'I think about

contributing my own two bits. Something like [...] “On a very hot evening, Under Officer Shigri had a flash of brilliance.” Not enough space on the wall’ (2008: 97). The third-person self-description and the droll, offhand, understated thought of adding his ‘own two bits’ is paired with the laconic comment that cuts it off; both suggest Shigri’s irrepressibility and refusal to be cowed. Later, threatened with a hot iron by two interrogators, Shigri uses witty obscenity to brace himself: ‘Don’t listen to him, I tell myself. It’s the same old good cop/bad cop bullshit. They are all sons of the same bitch’ (2008: 116). Even when Shigri’s humour disappears at terrible moments, when he is truly overwhelmed, such as when a general describes how he allowed a train full of Hindus to be massacred during the 1947 Partition, it returns, if only in retrospect, ‘I have quietly pushed my plate away, the bird intact except for one half-chewed leg’ (2008: 210). As in *Home Boy*, the occasional disappearance of humour intensifies the horror faced by the young narrator, and its reappearance suggests his resilience and effort to recover.

The humour of the third-person narrator, by contrast, works consistently throughout the novel, and deploys different strategies. It targets the powerful, and produces an overall tonality of the absurd, even when describing the horrific, as if to help readers cope with that horror. The second chapter opens with the narrator’s deft, satiric portrayal of Zia as insecure, absurd, even pathetic. Zia hesitates over a translation of the Qur’an, rattled by Jonah’s admission that he ‘was wrong’ (2008: 31). This reference to Jonah inside the whale inaugurates a network of bodily tropes of containment and rupture – including bulging bellies, intestinal disorders, and the case of exploding mangoes itself – that structures the Zia narrative. We see Zia ‘Absent-mindedly, he [...] scratched his left buttock on the prayer mat’, undercutting the religiosity he zealously self-advertises (2008: 31). Later, we learn, Zia’s ‘itsy-bitsy itch’ is diagnosed as an intestinal system riddled with tapeworms (2008: 91). The narrator’s incongruous coupling of deadpan, matter-of-fact tonality with a Rabelaisian focus on bottoms and bodily detail induces laughter, and serves both to deflate this presidential figure’s self-importance and to suggest metaphorically that the nation (as body politic) too is riddled by parasites eating it from within, working their way out. Through ironic humour, Hanif also suggests Zia’s extraordinary self-delusion, hubris, and hypocrisy in imagining he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize, as Zia uses the Qur’an to ‘prepare for his acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize presentation ceremony’ (2008: 31).

Hanif’s third-person narrator uses multiple humorous tactics to diminish Zia and render him absurd: verbal choices to describe humiliating details, such as Zia’s failed masculinity on his wedding night, when he could not ‘kill the cat’ or dominate his wife (2008: 37), or his weeping during the mosque prayers, which is attributed to ‘another tongue-lashing from the First Lady’ (2008: 43); absurd analogy (‘like a child taking a peek, [...] General Zia could not resist the temptation’) (2008: 34); deflating symbolic descriptions (‘startled’ by the thump of a salute, he stumbles (2008: 35). Zia’s more Westernised, snobbish generals look down scathingly on him and his religiosity, revealing class differences between them: ‘A country that thinks it was created by God has finally found what it deserves: a blabbering idiot’ (2008: 40). All this is compounded by the narrator’s droll voice, which is also used to describe the army and Zia’s associates. Sprayed with a rose-scented air freshener, an important conference room ‘smelled like a freshly sealed coffin’, ironically undermining the army takeover of democracy (2008: 37). In a bilingual pun, a sycophantic general is named ‘Beg’ (pronounced to rhyme with ‘vague’) (2008: 37). Soldiers joke that another sycophant, General Akhtar, ‘could wipe out a whole enemy unit by kissing their asses’ (2008: 41).

In addition to these two narrators’ voices, Hanif’s own humour in this novel deploys symbolism, folktale, and absurd plotting. Blind Zainab (based on an actual case of a blind pregnant woman who was sentenced to death by stoning for fornication because, under the infamous Zia-authorized *sharia* law, the Hudood Ordinance, she could not identify her rapists), is one of

the few women in this novel. Sentenced to death for being gang-raped, she curses Zia: 'May worms eat the innards of the person who is taking me away from my home' (2008: 169). Unknown to her, her curse has the power to destroy her destroyer. Hanif's plot, as if to offset and critique Pakistan's explicitly male-dominated world, centres on this blind woman's curse, delivered to Zia by the crow that ultimately flies into his plane, and leads to his death. The third-person narrator first describes curses as folkloric and ridiculous, known to work only 'if a crow hears a curse from someone who has fed him to a full stomach and then carries it to the person cursed' (2008: 188). But Hanif as author turns the joke upon such urban scepticism via a plot that achieves precisely this improbability, validating the wisdom and power of this demotic belief. Through the hilarious success of Zainab's curse and the angry First Lady's absurd domestic manoeuvres, Hanif both highlights the disempowerment of women under Zia's 'Islamic' regime and suggests the covert ways that women can deploy power in response. In Hanif's narrative logic, Zia's misogyny and gender discrimination comically come back to bite him. This undoing of Zia too is rendered through the serious use of humour and absurdity. The crow that carries Zainab's curse to Zia is ready to burst from over-feeding on ripe mangoes; it literally becomes a container of exploding mangoes that crashes into, and explodes, the plane.

Yet another tactic of Hanif's humour is the use of ribald symbolism, such as the farcical situation when Zia is caught literally with his pants down, as he bends over so that the Saudi's prince's personal physician can inspect his bleeding anal cavity. Submitting to the discomfort of this undignified posture (suggestive of the disease and homoerotic relations between Saudi and Pakistani rulers) while 'the Royal Dick Doctor' probes his 'private things', Zia places his head on a table and realises he is stuck 'between two flags' – Pakistan's green and white national flag 'on one side' and the flag of the Pakistan Army on the other (2008: 93–94). In this powerful, comical moment, Hanif uses multiple symbolisms, not only to ridicule the figure of Zia and to suggest his damaging, divided loyalties, but also, more importantly, to suggest the conflictual relationship between the nation and the army designed to keep that nation safe, when martial law and dictatorship suspend democracy.

Sadia Abbas describes the humour in Hanif's work as an 'ethical and destabilizing tool' designed to create an overall distancing effect and to disallow easy identification or sympathy:

The absurdism, farce, and humor in the novel are part of Hanif's mechanisms for describing the phenomenological encounter with horror too difficult to assimilate. [...] These features work with the anger, restrained and tightened in Hanif's work [...] Comedy in Hanif's work enables an alienation effect that allows a critical distance from the characters and events [...] without too sentimental and morally paralyzing an empathy.

(2014: 168–169)

While this is true of the third-person Zia narrative, I would add, as demonstrated above, that Hanif's humour works in multiple ways, and has multiple effects. We need to separate the two narrators' voices and distinguish between their different modes of humour, which are in turn separate from the tactics of Hanif's authorial humour. Shigri's first-person narrative (like Chuck's in *Home Boy*) invites empathy through its engaging first-person narrator, whereas the third-person narrative voice invites alignment with its critical perspective and disalignment from the powerful figures it debunks. I would argue instead that the *combination* of Hanif's two narrators, their different humouristic modes, and different narratives works *contrapuntally*, to produce *both* distance and closeness, *both* horror and engagement, inviting readers into both a critical and caring relation with what is described, and, by enabling them to cope with the

horror of what is described, to continue reading. In the face of grim horror and abuses of power, humour serves to take that power down a notch, not to vanquish it, but to diminish its force, to undercut it. Without humour, the horror would be unrelenting, leading to readers' disengagement; humour serves to pull readers in, to build community through shared laughter; it does not alleviate the horror, but enables learning, and engagement with, rather than disengagement from what it describes. Hanif's humour thus also reaches out to a broad audience to enhance understanding and critique of the difficult geopolitical, national, and cultural problems he takes on.

Unlike *Home Boy*, which focuses primarily on benign humour, *Exploding Mangoes* also explores more fully the workings of malign, punch-down humour. Official superiors and powerful men often use negative humour to put down and further oppress those below them. General Zia and the Saudi prince, for instance, joke about the 'huge organs' and 'huge derrières of their women' (Hanif 2008: 34). Or, in his 'Statement', Shigri reports how his superiors use sexual jokes to mock him: 'the 2nd OIC [officer in command] did not return my salute and made a joke about my sword and two legs. The joke cannot be reproduced in this statement' (2008: 10). By noting what he must leave out of his statement, marking the gap that signifies enforced self-censorship, Shigri both demonstrates his own conformity with military decorum and reports on the violation of that decorum by the officer who victimises him. Later, Shigri repeats this move when he describes the response to his question of whether he was being placed in detention: '[the OIC] laughed and made a joke about the cell mattress having too many holes. The joke cannot be reproduced in this statement' (2008: 13). Hanif thus engages in a broader exploration than Naqvi of how humour works with power: it is used both as a weapon by the powerful to further empower themselves and abuse those below, and as a tool of resistance by the disempowered against oppression or aggression.

Hanif also describes how powerful men use jokes to build camaraderie, to perform to each other their sense of ease with each other, especially when that is in question. Ominously, as Zia and the American ambassador walk arm in arm towards the doomed plane, Shigri notes that 'There is an air of important men sharing a joke, spreading goodwill' (2008: 312). Earlier, the Saudi prince and Zia joke with each other to establish their (male) bonding. The prince presents Zia with a prayer mat, saying, 'This will point you towards Mecca even if you are in space', and Zia replies 'with humor characteristic of their relationship, "if wishes were Aladdin's carpets, sinners like me would always be flying to Mecca"' (2008: 31). In reporting these jokes, Hanif adds another layer of satiric irony: Zia will soon die in the 'space' of an airplane pointed anywhere but Mecca, and Zia is indeed a sinner, more than he acknowledges. Hanif's humour undercuts Zia's, as he delineates both Zia's understanding that joking is a sign of confidence, power, and intelligence, and Zia's failed, anxious efforts to tell a joke. Zia mishears the American ambassador as saying that Zia would be remembered as 'a bit of a bore' (2008: 311). In a 'panic', he tries to tell a joke, struggling to remember the 'hundreds of one-liners' he has painfully rehearsed but, aware that 'jokes are all about timing', he cannot recall or understand a joke he has heard (about himself in paradise with seventy *houris*, who are thus condemned to a hellish eternity) that in fact ridicules Zia himself (2008: 311). Hanif thus uses a range of modes of humour and abstains from others, as he explores broadly how humour can be used for both constructive and destructive purposes.¹⁰

Humour has been used by a new generation of Pakistani anglophone (predominantly male) writers, especially since 9/11, for a range of important purposes: from satire, pushback, demystification, and relief to assertion of humanity, resilience, and intelligence, to building community and fostering rethinking. Salman Rushdie is an important precursor, especially in his comic satire of Pakistan's politics in *Shame*. Hence it is important to consider how the use of humour

is itself gendered. Muslim women writers certainly can and do use humour – Firoozeh Dumas from neighbouring Iran is an important example – but Pakistani anglophone women writers seem to use it less. Perhaps this is because deploying humour involves a certain cultural privilege and room to take risks. Since women’s humour is perceived differently from men’s, and is more fraught with the danger of being misread, women writers who use humour face arguably greater, different risks and gender biases. The uses of humour in women’s writing and their implications are thus very different, and will be the subject, I hope, of future exploration.

Notes

- 1 I understand Islamophobia as not just a fear of Islam or Muslims, but as ‘a new form of racism, based on assumptions about (and attributions of) inherent characteristics linked with national origin, or other markers such as names, forms of dress’ (Naber 2008: 303), and as a new mutation of orientalism, ‘an ideological formation’ emergent from post-Cold War politics, that has accompanied and enabled the rise of US imperialism and globalisation (Sheehi 2011: 31).
- 2 For example, the Danish cartoon controversy showcased Western assumptions that Muslims lacked a sense of humour; the inability to generate or laugh in response to humour supposedly signified Muslims’ ‘cultural inferiority’ and lack of humanity (Bilici 2010: 195–196).
- 3 In many patriarchal systems, for instance, women’s laughter has been seen as threatening or irreverent (Parvulescu 2010: 17, 26). Since 9/11, ‘making jokes in the security check area at the airport is strictly prohibited and punishable by law’ (Bilici 2010: 206).
- 4 For a fuller account of these theories, see Morreall (1987: 3–7), (1983: 4–37), Martin (2007: 20–26), Bilici (2010: 201–203).
- 5 While I agree with Roy that this tactic of seeking belonging is risky, because it asks for understanding on the basis of sameness, not difference, I disagree that Naqvi fails to address the complexity or variety of Muslims who are against both terrorism and ‘the Americanized worldview’ of Chuck (Roy 2011: 12). First, to assume a singular ‘Americanized worldview’ is to risk homogenising all Americans; second, Chuck and his friends are themselves heterogeneous and over the course of the novel change and learn from each other and their experiences; third, the novel includes a variety of Muslim figures from different classes and nations, who manifest varying degrees of devotion, and an array of positions (Old Man Khan, Abdul Karim, the Moroccan well-wisher, etc.). I would argue instead that Naqvi uses Chuck’s putative sameness as a bridge to difference, and thus to invite non-Muslim American or global readers to start to see as human the range of figures that Chuck sees as human. Thus, Naqvi seeks to reduce distrust by starting with the engaging figure of Chuck, and then inviting readers to move to others.
- 6 It is important that Chuck begins by emphasising the cosmopolitan, national, and gendered (but not religious) aspects of his identity. Identities are intersectional; identity categories are interlocking and mutually constitutive – Chuck is at once Pakistani, male, middle-class, Muslim, post-adolescent – but it is not until after 9/11 that his Muslimness is thrust upon him, that he begins to recognise religious affiliation as a dimension of his identity. His religious belief, in contrast with his religious identity, is minimal when the novel begins; by the end he turns to prayer when he learns of a friend’s death in the Twin Towers, but whether he has now become a full-fledged believing ‘Muslim’ (whatever that means) is an open question.
- 7 Of course, it is funny on many counts: as an absurd self-compliment; as patently false; as evoking the rivalry between the two countries on the ridiculous scale of masculine looks.
- 8 For an important exception and account of the novel’s politics, critique, and formal strategies, see Chapter 5 of Abbas (2014). Mukherjee (2009) and Shamsie (2009) discuss the novel briefly in comparison to two others (regarding, respectively, the use of global postcolonial English and US-Pakistan involvement in Afghanistan). Waterman (2015) discusses the novel as historical fiction.
- 9 Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque humour describes the laughter that diminishes the pretensions of the socially powerful by focusing on the (often naked) bodies they share with all humans and animals, and on their lower bodily functions (sex, excretion): ‘Festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts’ (1968: 92). The grotesque body, and the nether regions, are key to this ‘debasement [which] is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque

realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images' (Bakhtin 1968: 370).

- 10 Hanif's humour in his second novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, is equally powerful and important, but uses different strategies, which cannot be elaborated upon within the scope of this chapter.

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