



## THE GALLOWS HUMOUR IN NEIL SIMON'S *THE GINGERBREAD LADY*

**Dr. B. SOUNDARY**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Palayamkottai,  
Tamil Nadu, India.

E-Mail: [soundaryram@gmail.com](mailto:soundaryram@gmail.com)



**Dr. B. SOUNDARY**

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### Abstract

It is not easy to say what happens in a person when humorous pleasure is generated; but we can obtain some insight if we examine the cases in which humour is communicated or sympathized with, cases in which, by an understanding of the humorous person, we arrive at the same pleasure as his. The crudest case of humour-what is known as Galgenhumor [literally, 'gallows humour']-may be instructive in this connection. (Sigmund Freud).

**Keywords:** Humour, Neil Simon, The Gingerbread Lady, Comedies, Galgenhumor

### Introduction

Humour is acknowledged and celebrated universally. A culture without the presence of it is doomed to be miserable. Life without humour is distasteful and gloomy. At the same time too much of it may become obnoxious because it may denote a symptom of psychological unrest. Alison Ross in the introduction to her book titled *The Language of Humour* says, "Humour has a high profile in our society" (ix). Philosophers, thinkers, researchers and scholars have been exploring the concept of humour for centuries and still it proves to be inexhaustible and all the more growing in meaning. The inexhaustibility and the context of humour asseverate the essential nature of it in society. Societies may be built by serious thoughts but many a time they are best understood by various humorous episodes. The role played by humour in the face of social life demands the attention it needs to be adorned with.

Originated from "the Latin *humor*" (5) as Noel Carroll has mentioned in *Humour: A Very Short*

*Introduction*, humour is claimed as a unique earmark of mankind. In his book, *Taking Humour Seriously* Jerry Palmer considers two things to define the term humour: things or events that are funny and the way the fun arises out of them. Its inevitability in "human communication" (1), in Jerry Palmer's words, is its standpoint of existence. He adds that humour may not be a serious context when considered aesthetically but culturally it is serious every bit. How and why humour takes place and the collective response to them emanates multiple layers of meaning in the cultural context of a group. If humour is not observed keenly, one may not be able to grasp the axiom of a particular culture.

### Neil Simon as a Playwright

A winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama and of the Tony Award for the best play, Marvin Neil Simon, a prolific playwright of America, has contributed a lot to the history of Broadway. He is one among the commercially successful American playwrights who has had more performances of his plays in the theatres. Neil Simon's plays have been

appreciated and lionized for the playwright's inimitable touch of humour and catchy dialogues. Besides their potential humour, the dramas also contain pensive predicaments, which is the dramatist's stamp of writing. He is a playwright, who is gifted with a natural ability of presenting humour through vivid characters and intriguing plot.

Neil Simon, a celebrity comic writer, has produced more than thirty plays, many radio and television scripts, screenplays and two autobiographies. He is popular among his audience as a comic playwright who can produce waves of roaring laughter through dialogues in his plays. At the same time, the serious aspects of life also hold a prominent place in his dramas. In fact, he is a skilful writer who can blend both comic and tragic aspects in his plays in such a way that the audience laugh loudly which springs out of painful moments: a style which Simon has adopted from his own attitude in life. In *Understanding Neil Simon*, Susan Koprince, an English professor at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, America, quotes Simon's reflection and states, "I think part of what has made me a comedy writer is the blocking out of some of the really ugly, painful things in my childhood and covering it up with a humorous attitude." (2)

Neil Simon's writing style is diverse in both form and in content. The dominant and mighty power of Simon as a dramatist lies with his skill of producing humour, particularly his mastery in finding humour in unbelievable contexts which he inherited from his Jewish background. He learnt to use humour as a tool of defense quite early in his life due to the turbulent relationship between his parents. The impacts of the unpleasant life realities were met by Simon in a typical Jewish way that is by clinging onto humour. He found immense joy in the movies, particularly in the funny movies of Charlie Chaplin. He even attributes his talent as a comic writer as the result of his ability to laugh at the truly hurting moments. He had developed the skill of seeing humour in most of his life events. He even believes that the best humour is the one which is born out of bitterness and pain. Many of Simon's plays illustrate the life ordeals of the middleclass people, mostly of the New Yorkers and predominantly of the Jewish Americans.

The characters in Simon's plays react humourously, at times absurdly, to situations which are sickly or deadly. They behave quite oppositely to what they feel. Now, taking this typical Jewish characteristic, the researcher strives to converge on gallows humour as expressed in Simon's dramas through self-deprecation, wit, and satire, which are some of the features of Jewish humour. These three Jewish traits could be identified and analysed in one of Simon's plays: *The Gingerbread Lady*.

### The Gallows Humour

In his notable work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud concedes that jokes are not given a deserved status in the world of Philosophy when observing its important role in the emotional life of people. He agrees upon the interconnectedness of psychological insights and events that develop in human beings. Freud's *Jokes* resembles any case study in the medical field which explicates certain hidden meanings. He differentiates humour from jokes and comics though the interrelatedness of these three forms are concurred by him. Of the three, Freud observes, humour has earned a special position among the intellectuals considering its utility towards the human psyche.

Believed to have been born of German origin, at the time of various revolutions of the 1840's, 'Galgen humor', the German term for the gallows humour persists to be a societal need for the dark dimensions of history. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the meaning of gallows humor as "jokes about unpleasant things like death" (527). If any humour happens in dark, death-like situations that shall be brought under this category. In his Preface to the book *Semites and Stereotypes*, Avner Ziv mentions, "Gallows humour is the attempt to be humorous in serious and even tragic moments" (ix). Unlike other funny or tickling jokes, this humour is embedded with deep meanings. The word 'gallows' itself is related to the serious meaning of a 'structure which is used to hang criminals.' When it comes to 'gallows humour', the meaning of joking even at the time of death, or while standing on the gallows is understood.

Quoting Richard C. Marius, a writer and an academic specialist from Harvard University in Expository writing, will be relevant here to expose the emotions behind the gallows. In his article, "On Laughing All the Way to the Gallows" he highlights, "Confronted by the gallows, our anxieties soar before the inescapable, and laughter suddenly saves us and may even make us brave" (229). His insight on the function of the gallows must be remembered, for it acts as a relieving mechanism. To the person to be executed, it acts as the last defensive tool to turn the same structure of the gallows against the oppressors through sarcasm. When the executioners expect the criminal to suffer, weep and wail, the latter, instead, seems as bold as brass which is intolerable to the former. And the victim's satiric comment, uttered at the peak of his emotions, serves a dual purpose of relieving the mounted stress of the prisoner and undermining the efforts of the capturers. Gallows in the history has innumerable tales to tell.

### ***The Gingerbread Lady***

Simon wrote *The Gingerbread Lady* in 1970 as an effort of changing his stamp of writing from a playwright of light and romantic comedies to a dramatist with serious intention who can portray not only the comic side of life but, the dark part of it as well. In this play, the use of wit and satire render heavily to the seriousness of the plot. The play depicts Evelyn Meara, an Ex-singer, who returns home from a Sanatorium for drunks after ten weeks. After returning from the sanitarium for the drunks, Evy expresses her detestation for the place by saying, "I hated that place so much I used to save up matches, planning to burn it down" (*The Gingerbread Lady* 1.1.156).

Her friend Toby Landau, after seeing Evy's anxiety about returning home after the treatment, eases her by saying that she has to give time for adopting to the place. And that she has to begin again fresh in life to become an amazing person like herself. Toby touches her face with some cream and Evy asks her what it is. The former responds that that is the cream for protecting the skin from pores. When Toby asks her whether she has seen any pores on her face, Evy comments sarcastically on her

obsession with make-up thus: "I've never even seen your face... who are you, anyway?" (*ibid*) Though living amidst sullen ambience, Evy never runs out of witty, satiric remarks throughout the play, even if the situation turns out to be an emotional one. For instance, in Act I, as soon as her arrival from the Sanatorium, her daughter Polly comes home with her suitcase. Evy does not allow her to stay with her but Polly is unbending and asks, "You can't throw me out, I'm your flesh and blood" (*TGL*1.1.169) to which Evy replies, "I just got rid of my flesh, I'm not sentimental." (*ibid*)

In the end of Act I Lou Tanner who used to sponge on Evy for necessities, visits her. Evy remembers the previous bitter experience with him as he left her for a young girl of eighteen, and has returned with a hope that Evy may house him again. She, on the other hand, gets a clear picture of Lou as a musician who uses people for his everyday needs. As the eighteen-year-old-girl runs away from him, Evy asks Lou whom he has been staying with and whether he leaves anything to eat. Lou says, "Musicians don't eat, Evy, you know that. We live on "Soul"(1.1.176). Evy comments strikingly, "whose?" (*ibid*).

Lou continues to beg her to be taken in and says that he wants to come back to refresh the relationship. Evy enquires whether it is with meals, or without it. Lou replies that he can survive with the minimum but without the stimulation from their relationship, it is getting hard. Evy says mockingly, "Try a vibrator" (1.1.178). Not giving up, Lou attempts to convince her by asking if she thinks he has talent, or not. The response is positive but he answers negatively. Lou asks unbelievably why she has never said so. Evy remarks, "I'm sorry your ego is hurt posthumously" (1.1.179). Lou comments that she is a tough woman who humiliates often but he has been enjoying being with her, and he has written nothing worthy when they have not shared for three months. In the play, they converse:

"Lou. .... Come on Evy. The truth is, while I was here, I functioned. And when I functioned, you functioned.

Evy. Evy and Lou functioning: one of the great love stories of all time." (1.1.179)

In Act III, Evy is found missing one night, leaving her daughter Polly to worry who makes calls to all of her mother's friends. When she comes home the next morning, her face looks swollen and beaten up. Her friend Toby asks whether she knows how she looks, Evy replies, "Compared to you, what difference does it make? ..." (3.1.210). Evy is well aware of the fact that Toby's husband has asked for divorce irrespective of the latter's attempts to maintain her beauty, and comments, "The only effort you make is opening your compact. If you powdered Marty once in a while instead of your face, you'd be wearing his pajamas now instead of yours" (3.1.212). At the end of the play, Polly who is on her way to meet her father at a restaurant, supposedly with her mother Evy who has denied accompanying because of the swollen face, returns home to take her purse. She finds Evy in darkness and turns on the light to see a liquor bottle, half of it already emptied by Evy. She takes the bottle and holds it up expecting an answer from her mother and the latter even amidst firmness and pain comments wittily and humorously, "well, if that's your wallet, take it and go" (3.1.223). Polly, a more witty and strong character in the play replies, "It's not my wallet. It looks like yours". (*ibid*)

### Conclusion

Neil Simon is identified with his hilarious comedies but he is mostly overlooked for the fact that most of the humorous moments spring from inevitable malaise. In his plays the characters never lose sight of humour however serious or ugly they may find themselves in. Thus, gallows humour offers to elevate the characters from their dingy atmosphere. Freud has analysed this very feature as a survival technique of the people who undergo unbearable pressure. Thus the article has dealt with the power of gallows humour and how it has lifted the characters up in their moral life and how the gallows humour becomes a tool that mends the pain in the life of the characters and takes them towards reconciliation.

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