

well. Is it not time for women to face the future rather than gaze back in time, and create a specifically *feminist* theory, indebted to, but not fettered by its lineage?

COMEDY: THE MASTERY OF DISCOURSE

Susan Purdie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

by Susan Holbrook

The juxtaposition of the title, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, alongside a photograph of feminist performance artist Bobby Baker on the cover of Susan Purdie's book suggests that we are about to be offered, at least in part, an examination of how women negotiate and subvert the traditionally androcentric mode of comedy. This promise, however, proves false, as is illustrated most tellingly by the fact that Baker, while taking up a quarter of the space on the front cover, is relegated to a footnote in the text. I was heartened (though, at first, perplexed) to learn that Purdie herself suggested featuring the Baker photograph; if a cover, for an author participating in its design, marks a kind of end to a book's argument, then this first work's "last word" (or, in this case, last laugh) points perhaps to future work by Purdie that will involve a more thorough investigation of the practice and potential of feminist comedy.

Theorizations of the comic have traditionally emerged from the margins of a variety of disciplines, notably literary criticism and psychology, and previous attempts to synthesize these works manifest themselves in the compartmentalized form of anthologies such as Robert Corrigan's popular *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, which offers selections by people like Susanne Langer, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Baudelaire. I commend Purdie's ambitious move to offer a new theory which is both substantially informed by these diverse texts

and distinct from them, in its emphasis on the "discursive exchange at the heart of joking." Similarly ambitious is her announcement, in the introduction, that she is "seeking a unifying threat that can be recognized, to some extent, whenever any element of funniness is identifiable in our response to anything." Puns, social exchanges, comic drama, physical comedy—all these are subsumed under Purdie's definition of "joking"; but while this radical "unifying" gesture is initially attractive, it precludes any focus on comic transgressions, which would threaten to rupture the norm Purdie seeks to define.

Purdie draws on the theories of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and, particularly, Lacan, to formulate a thesis which links joking, characterized as the successful operation of the "Law" of language, with the experience of full human agency. Jokes, she argues, in their performance of a "marked transgression" of the Symbolic Law, simultaneously perform its observance. Purdie sets up a model of comedy as political conservatism, positing that "the formal confirmation of accepted discursive proprieties will tend to reinforce existing structures of exaltation and abjection." It is around the issue of the "abject," people discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexuality, that I find some problems in Purdie's argument. She asserts that "all joking objects, the apparently 'low' as well as the evidently 'high,' are perceived as holding a power of some kind over the jokers, and it is funny when they are suddenly perceived as not having it." What are we to make, then, of Purdie's subsequent statement that the power of the black maid in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon is "inherently comic [because] it does not frighten us, so it is funny that the cat has to be afraid of her"? This example would seem to suggest that it is the production of threat, not its mitigation, which renders the woman of colour humorous. Such contradictions in Purdie's thesis locate the issues that beg more questioning and examination: how does comedy operate differently when

the audience member or the butt of the joke is not a white male?

Furthermore, how do the "abject" joke? The word "transgression" recurs in this book, but it is always clipped to the qualifier, "marked," so that Purdie presents transgression as necessarily translating into maintenance of the status quo. She invokes the *Stallybrass* and *White text*, *Transgression*, in order to align the political (non)effects of joking with those of carnival; both acts can be viewed as reinstating, through sanctioned inversion, the laws they breach. *Transgression*, however, ultimately details the real political efficacy of carnival, its tendency to incite riots, for example. Acknowledging subversive potential in carnival, Purdie ends her comparative argument with the assertion that carnival and the comic diverge in this regard. Just when comedy was getting interesting, Purdie takes the carnival out of it, ignoring Bakhtin's significant identification of "the basis of laughter which gives form to carnival."

If Purdie were correct in her assumption that comedy tends to reinscribe existing power structures, then it would be in feminists' own interest to live out our mythical humourlessness. While I value her investigation of comedy's perils, she neglects to address the comics currently forging alternatives to conservative humour; what about American Kate Clinton, who, along with her primarily lesbian audience, reaffirms a different world-view? The footnote opening with a reference to Bobby Baker does go on to posit performance art as an alternative avenue, and Purdie notes that feminists have chosen to use it, though, she says, "not necessarily comically." Similarly, Purdie argues that a discourse of unmarked transgressions, as celebrated by Luce Irigaray and feminist theorist Regina Barreca, "would have nothing to do with definable 'comedy.'" It becomes clear, in reading Purdie's book, that in order to allow for politically transgressive comedy, we must allow for this mode's redefinition.

Strangely, Purdie illustrates her

universalizing theory with examples rarely originating outside Great Britain. I had hoped that her postscript, "Cultural Relativity and Joking Structures," would address the ethnocentrism of her argument, but four of these final six pages are involved, instead, with a diachronic move, detailing the changes in European (primarily British) perceptions of comedy since the Middle Ages. Though this text can be geographically and ideologically confining, I do see why University of Toronto Press imported it as part of their Theory/Culture series; its engaging focus on joking as discursive exchange will surely prompt further explorations of, and arguments about, the dynamics of comedy.

Works Cited

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GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: WOMEN AND POLITICS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

Valentine M. Moghadam, ed. London: Zed Books and Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

by *Jacqueline M. Portugese*

The principle aim of this collection of essays is to illustrate the ways in which nationalism, national liberation movements, and the politics of identity are linked to social constructions of gender and gender relations in various Muslim societies. These include: Algeria, Bangladesh, Af-

ghanistan, Iran, and Palestine. Despite the book's promising and exciting subject matter, its actual content failed to meet this reader's expectations. The book opens on a high note with Moghadam's comprehensive and succinct overview of the central themes and issues at hand. For example, she describes how notions of femininity and women themselves become invested with national symbolic significance during times of political struggle and the consolidation of the state. Other themes include: the relationship between feminism, nationalism, and socialism; the connection between Islamic revivalism, notions of cultural imperialism, the symbolic value of women and their agency *versus* victimization; and finally, the connection between women's status and their participation in national liberation movements.

Unfortunately these themes are unevenly addressed and developed in the remainder of the book. Bouatta, for instance, in her chapter on Algerian women, analyses the psychological dimensions of the Algerian war of independence. Nowhere, however, does she link the implications of her study to the various themes mentioned above. The chapter is simply a description of women's participation in the war of independence and of their impressions and recollections thereafter. Also troubling is the fact that Bouatta bases her entire study on the testimonies of only two women. She herself acknowledges that the limited number of interviews "precludes any idea of generalization"; however, she maintains that they provide enough material "to determine and define some socio-psychological elements of this feminine participation."

Similar problems appear in Sobhan's article on the effect of religious fundamentalism on the Bangladeshi women's movement. The main problem with this chapter is its lack of a clear thesis. It too is primarily concerned with a description of Bangladesh's political history with little in the way of theoretical analysis. For instance, the first allusion to

any of the themes presented in the introduction occurs only at the halfway point in the chapter. This is a description of how Bengali women have been used to symbolize Bengali national identity during both its secular and religious stages. Interestingly, although the author claims to want to analyze the relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and the women's movement, it is only towards the end of the chapter that any mention is made of it. Moreover, when mention does occur, it is only to remark briefly upon the negative changes implemented by the Islamists and upon the lack of consensus within the women's movement as to their significance.

There are two additional weaknesses with this collection of essays. First, many of the points, analyses, and conclusions which the authors make have already been covered in various other publications. Thus, while the book may have some value to the uninitiated, it is relatively redundant for those who are familiar with either Middle Eastern women's studies, in particular, or the study of Third World gender relations, in general. Second, and more importantly, is the presentation of false or questionable data as fact. Tohidi, for instance, writes that women in Iran, "were prevented from conceptualizing their own answer [to imperialism, rising consumerism, and rapid socio-economic change], developing their own movement and defining their own identity independent of the national movement and the question of national identity" during the Pahlavi regime. This statement fails to account for the underground feminist network which came into existence following the Revolution, and for the massive women's rally which took place in response to Khomeini's decree that all women working for the government wear a headscarf.

Perhaps the most disturbing chapter is that written by Abdo concerning Palestinian women and the movement for national liberation. Anyone familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will quickly realize that Abdo's