HOW VOICE MATTERS: IDENTITY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER AND RACE ON 'Llate night' TELEVISION POLITICAL COMEDY SHOWS

by

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B. A. (Honors), University of Alberta, 2020

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF JOURNALISM

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Journalism)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2022

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

How Voice Matters: Identity and the Representation of Gender and Race on 'Late Night' Television Political Comedy Shows

submitted by Anusha Bhagavathy Kav in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Journalism

in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

This research assesses the influence of identity in late-night political comedy. Academic literature on the subject of political satire does not yet explore the significance of hosts or comedians' identity as an influential factor in the comedy they produce. Through analyzing how the gender identity of Samantha Bee and the racial identity of Hasan Minhaj influence the way they approach late-night political comedy, I showcase the importance of the host or comedians' identity characteristics and personal perspective in determining the way they frame a particular issue to the audience. Using a qualitative discourse analysis and John Oliver as a comparative case study, this research looks at what discourses and narratives are legitimized and reinforced by each comedian in their coverage of issues pertaining to their identities of gender and race respectively. For Minhaj, his identity as a Muslim of Indian descent influences his comedy through references made about South Asian culture and being a Muslim in India. For Bee, a key target of her comedy is a female audience. This research aims to contribute to this gap in existing literature, arguing that while each comedian's coverage covered a range of humour styles, Minhaj and Bee focus their attention on audiences who reflect communities that they are a part of, ultimately providing a more nuanced critique than that offered by that of a comedian not directly affected by the issue being covered on the late-night political show.

LAY SUMMARY

This research explores the importance of the identity of late-night political satire television hosts in their comedy when covering issues of race and gender. Political satire has long been the site of critique that challenges institutions of power. Yet, as television political comedy remains largely dominated by white men, previous studies have not explored the influence of hosts identities in the content they produce and disseminate. The introduction of hosts such as Samantha Bee and Hasan Minhaj in the genre has expanded the perspectives offered by satire television and allows for deeper and more nuanced engagement when discussing issues that pertain to their own personal identity. Through comparing Minhaj and Bee's work to comedian John Oliver, this project raises questions as to how these identities influence the content produced by each respective comedian, what narratives are prioritized and legitimized, and which ones are not.

PREFACE

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Anusha Bhagavathy Kav.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my supervisors for being instrumental to the success of this project. Dr. Kamal Al-Solaylee: thank you for your dedication, insights, and knowledge on this work, but especially for your constant support of this project and my vision for it from the start. Dr. Sunera Thobani: thank you for your advice, thoughtful feedback, recommended literature, and nuanced critiques that made my project much stronger. It was a pleasure and an absolute privilege to work with you both.

I would like to thank the UBC Journalism faculty and staff for their support throughout this degree. To Andrea Yan, thank you for your guidance. Thank you to Kathryn Gretsinger, for your boundless support, kindness, words of encouragement and mentorship in every one of my journalistic ventures.

To my undergraduate professors and mentors, who inspired me to undertake this journey. I am endlessly grateful to have learned from you.

To my friends: thank you for your support and validation when needed. It was always appreciated.

To my family, who have always cheered on my endeavours and believed in my success. A special thank you to my dad, who instilled in me from a young age that the plural of thesis is theses and that I would always have a place in academia.

Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful partner, Brandon, whose never-ending encouragement, and appreciation for my work has meant the world to me.

I am also deeply grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for granting me a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship to undertake this research.

DEDICATION

To the comedians of colour and feminist comedians who make me laugh—and more importantly, feel seen.

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Introduction

In September of 2019 Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi headlined an event at the NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas, entitled "Howdy, Modi," where he was joined by then-President of the United States Donald Trump. The event drew an audience of 50,000 people, many of whom were Indian American (Kapur 2019). Comedian Hasan Minhaj attempted to attend the rally, but when he showed up to the press booth, was told he had been denied due to comments he had made on his political satire show *Patriot Act* (Sebastian 2019). Days later, the Indian American Muslim comedian recounted the affair on *Late Night with Seth Meyers:*

> "I show up to the press table that morning and they're like, Mr. Minhaj. We are out of a space, and you have been denied because of some of the comments you have made…the comments you've made about Prime Minister Modi were not appreciated, and you've been blacklisted…So I'm in the parking lot, and I'm just watching this whole thing on live stream while I'm looking at the stadium…And during the program, they're honoring prominent Indian Americans *'Indian Americans have done so much in arts, music, even comedy,'* and then they show a photo of **me** on the Jumbotron, and people start clapping." (*Late Night with Seth Meyers* 2019, emphasis added).

This transnational political incident epitomizes the significance of political satire in the American context right now. Even by those who are the target of comedians' critique, the achievements made by political satirists, including comedians of colour, are lauded as shaping what we understand today as American politics, culture, and society. But the extent to which Minhaj's own place in his comedy affects the topics he chooses to discuss and analyze on his political comedy show *Patriot Act* have yet to be the subject of traditional academic inquiry. Thus far, existing literature is just beginning to account for the momentous importance of racial

and gender identities being part of the traditionally white male dominated late-night and political satire television space.

In this chapter I review existing literature on political satire and explore gender and race in satire and political comedy more broadly. I aim to define political satire, outline its significance and potential, and point to gaps in the literature which my research aims to contribute to. First, I overview a history of the genre and its proliferation. Next, I explore satire's potential as a form of cultural criticism. Then, I outline common themes in the existing academic literature, and I conclude with a review of literature that focusses on racial and gender humour.

1.2. Background

Satirical news coverage has become a crucial part of the political media landscape in the United States (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 280). Late-night political satire has proliferated during the 21st century, particularly since the emergence of television shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report.* But prior to this, there was a long and celebrated history of humour "as a means of actively engaging, challenging and unsettling social, cultural and political norms" (Holm 2018, 645). Political satire has been part of American political culture for centuries, with comedic news dating back to the 1600s with "travelling fools…bringing a satirical take on what might have been the only news people outside the cities received" (Fox and Steinberg 2020, 237). While the medium in which this satire is produced has shifted and changed overtime, comedians have long used political humour to "draw attention to the inconsistencies, incongruities, and oppressive practices of the [American] state and its representatives" (ibid., 642).

What does this proliferation mean? What impact does the increasing interest in satire have on politics and news dissemination? Jonathan Gray et al. (2009) argue that satire can

engage audiences through condensing complex political issues into humour (4). Research shows there is also an increasing number of people who receive their political news information through the medium of late-show or satirical television programming, such as *The Daily Show, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (Baumgartner and Morris 2008; Fox and Steinberg 2020). But beyond audience consumption and articulation of political issues, satire as a genre offers a greater opportunity to engage critically with the issues being discussed. Many scholars note political satire has often been used as a discursive tool to reflect on, and critique, prevailing systems of power (Gray et al. 2009, 11; Weinhold and Bodkin 2017, 520). But before these critiques can be discussed, a conceptual definition of what constitutes satire, its goals, and intentions, is required.

1.3. What is Satire?

At its root, satire is a form of cultural criticism. It is used as a "discursive practice that provocatively serves to challenge an existing political or social order in a playful manner" (Peifer and Lee 2019, 3). Key to satire is comedy, which is aimed at exposing "a folly, hypocrisy, and-or an absurdity" particularly in political institutions or actors (ibid.). Jason Peifer and Taeyoung Lee (2019) distinguish satire from general political humour, arguing satire's "judgemental impulse [serves] to challenge a sociopolitical policy, practice, or institution" (ibid.). While political humour *can* qualify as satire, not all political humour serves to undercut or challenge institutions, which is a necessary feature of satire in their view (ibid., 4). Therefore, not all political comedy constitutes satire. Satire's inherent asset is its ability to speak truth to power and challenge existing political order. Satire understands humour as a disruptive force that "unsettles convention and threatens politics as usual" (Holm 2018, 647).

Satire can contribute to discourse around race and gender in American society (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019). In simple terms, Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips define discourse "as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (2002, 1). Discourse is a theoretical framework that can have multiple meanings in various contexts (Mills 2004). Sara Mills (2004) states discourse is "groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence" (11). While discourses surrounding how we understand race and gender are constructed and re-constructed by many social-political-cultural institutions, mass media, including those discourses disseminated by comedy, can be a powerful site for discourse production and dissemination. Political satire offers the ability to both uphold these discourses or challenge them (Weinhold and Bodkin 2017, 521).

Much of the existing academic literature on political satire focuses primarily on audience relationships to political satire shows. Many authors explore what political consequences emerge from the consumption of satire, and answer whether these mediums of news dissemination increase or decrease audience news literacy (Fox et al. 2007; Peters 2013). For some scholars, satire "not only offers meaningful political critiques" but can promote critical engagement with news content to "examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information or 'truth' from authoritative sources" (Gray et al. 2009, 11). It offers the capacity to command public attention in a more convincing fashion than shows "with ten-times the audience" (ibid., 4). Research has also showcased "that viewers of late-night comedy were more likely to pay attention to the presidential campaign in traditional news coverage" revealing an increased level of political involvement (Peifer and Lee 2019, 11). This is due to satire's intertextual quality—or

its "[reliance] on a web of texts beyond the immediate context of the satire"—it requires a heightened level of audience engagement (ibid., 4). Audiences must have some degree of pre-existing knowledge of multiple societal factors, cultural contexts and have followed current events externally, so that when they consume satire, they will understand the jokes being told. Put simply, while satire television can operate as a source of news coverage and provide facts, it is more often used as a medium of deeper critique and commentary; consequently, it is implicitly understood that audiences of satire have a certain degree of existing knowledge of the subjects that are being satirized—enough to understand the critiques being levied against them and draw upon external news, texts, and mediums during their viewing.

1.3a. Satire versus Journalism

Throughout American history, comedians have used political satire to "draw attention to the inconsistencies, incongruities, and oppressive practices of the state and its representatives" (Holm 2018, 642). Nicholas Holm argues that this history of political satire offers a "promise of a properly critical form of popular culture" which "calls out and challenges the inequities and prejudices of the social, political and economic status quo" (ibid.). In comparison to journalists, satire is not bound by the conventions of objectivity, neutrality, or detachment. North American journalists distance themselves from subjectivity to construct an "'impartial' ethical stance and approach to method" which grants them an apparent authority to conduct knowledge-seeking and convey "the truth" to their audiences (Callison and Young 2020, 25). Only does advocacy journalism, which seeks to take a particular stance on an issue, "[draw] numerous parallels with the work of TV satirists" as they both tend to "speak for those who are denied a powerful spokesman and promote perspectives that are typically either under, or misrepresented" in mainstream media discourse (Kilby 2018, 1936). Thus, contemporary satire television can

benefit from a lack of conventional or institutional restrictions in formulating its critique. In fact, "satire—by definition— offers pointed value judgments, whereas journalism commonly (though not always) espouses values of neutrality and detachment" (Peifer and Lee 2019, 2). As such, audiences of satire expect sharper criticism from satirists than traditional journalists. But comedians who take a particular position and "fail to satirise that position" also "risk being implicated as no more trustworthy than politicians" (Bailey 2018, 209). Further, traditional journalists and the media system are also not exempt from satiric critique. For Gray et al. (2009), "contemporary satire TV often says what the press is too timid to say, proving itself a more critical interrogator of politicians at times and a more effective mouthpiece of the people's displeasure with those in power, including the press itself" (4). Satire's role critiquing political and social institutions, including the press, provide the avenue for a serious rethinking of political discourse through a mainstream medium. Scholars have also focused on comedy and satire as "tools for social change" (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 278). Indeed, Candis Callison and Mary-Lynn Young (2020) argue that journalistic objectivity as we understand it, is largely "a guise for the performance of a certain kind of white masculinity that claims its power through ignoring and denying its locatedness" (26). Instead of upholding this standard of "objectivity" feminist scholars have offered methodologies which forefront subjectivity (Haraway, 1988). It would seem, then, that satire would be ideal for comedians to critique discourses around race and gender and has been shown to be a powerful tool for feminists "who wish to challenge oppressive ideologies, to change the terms we use to conceptualize an issue, or to push otherwise niche issues to the mainstream" (Greene and Day 2019, 451).

1.3b. The Existing Satirical Stage

Television satire has proliferated in the twenty-first century, especially within the post-network era (Gray et al. 2009). Many scholars argue television satire's popularity is due to its position between traditional news media and entertainment (ibid.). But television satire also came up against its own set of limitations. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the television industry seemed to "tolerate" satire, "as long as it cloaked itself in traditional sitcom trappings or hovered on the fringes of late-night TV" (Gray et al. 2009, 23). It was not until years later, when shows like *Saturday Night Live* would begin to offer scathing critiques of those in power. During this era in the 70s and 80s, they had to "learn how to properly neuter political critique so as not to cross too many boundaries in upsetting the tastes of mass audiences" (ibid., 23-24).

Shifts in the media landscape allowed for television satire to benefit from streaming or paid programming models of television distribution, encouraging more and more shows that are entirely satirical or incorporate some satirical components (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 6). With the launch of the cable channel *Comedy Central* in the 1990s, the landscape drastically shifted. Unlike network television, satirical programs aired on cable networks or streaming platforms are not constrained by network funding (though they are at the mercy of advertisers), or Federal Communications Commission standards on objectionable language, which allow them to contain more profanities than those programs regulated by the FCC (Kaye 2020, 276). As such, traditional "gatekeepers" were no longer in charge of what content could or could not be distributed, and the emergence of more politically sophisticated critique was given a platform (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 6; Gray et al. 2009, 26).

Television political comedy can also include a broad range of programs, and not all of them constitute satire. Many scholars refer to satire television, and "late-night" interchangeably,

likely due to television satire's initial place during late-night hours on program such as late-night television shows, or *Saturday Night Live*. But Amy B. Becker and Letitia Bode differentiate traditional late-night legacy programs such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, Late Night with Seth Meyers, and A Late Show with Stephen Colbert,* from "satire institutions" like *The Daily Show* and what they call "new political satire" which are information-rich, longer format programs including *Last Week Tonight, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee,* and *Real Time with Bill Maher* (2018, 613). *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* would also fall into this category of new political satire.

Yet, despite the potential for satire to disrupt traditional narratives, satire television has been dominated by white men for decades. All late-night television hosts were men until 2016, with Samantha Bee becoming the first woman to host her own show (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 280). Bee was followed by Lilly Singh in 2019, with *A Little Late with Lilly* and a few others on streaming platforms such as Michelle Wolf on Netflix and Amber Ruffin on Peacock (Jarvey 2019; Framke 2020; Franich 2018). In 2015, South African comedian Trevor Noah took over *The Daily Show,* and in 2018 Hasan Minhaj led the political satire show *Patriot Act* (Forthun 2020, 2). While strides are being made to make space for women and non-white hosts in satire television, they remain marginalized in the genre and underrepresented overall (ibid.). Traditional legacy shows on ABC, NBC and CBS remain dominated by white men, except for Lilly Singh's short stint with NBC. According to Eric Forthun, there was a deliberate exclusion of women, people of colour and other marginalized voices in late-night writers' rooms (Forthun 2020, 2). Within the past few years legacy political comedy shows also hired more women and people of colour in their writers' rooms to "purportedly counteract the genre's historically overwhelming whiteness and maleness" (ibid.). At the same time, some moves to

include comedy that speaks to marginalized voices has been met with criticism. For example, Forthun critiques *Late Night with Seth Meyers* segment "Jokes Seth Can't Tell," a segment which aims to celebrate diverse comedians on screen, as reinforcing tokenism, essentializing and ensconcing Seth Meyer's whiteness and maleness (Forthun 2020, 2). He also argues hypervisibility of "diverse women on late night programming is an artificial fix to a system and entrenched issue" in both late-night comedy and U.S. television generally (Forthun 2020, 3).

The objective of my research will be to determine how the identity of Hasan Minhaj as an Indian American Muslim, and Samantha Bee as a woman, influences the narratives they construct in segments pertaining to race and gender respectively on their political satire shows *Patriot Act* and *Full Frontal*. But first, I will overview existing themes in academic literature on satire.

1.4. Themes in Existing Academic Literature

Academic literature only begins to account for the stark underrepresentation of women and racialized people in late-night and political comedy (Forthun 2020). Existing research analyzing *Full Frontal* does exist, but there does not appear to be academic research analyzing *Patriot Act* and its significance in the genre of political satire. As David Croteau and William Hoynes (1992) argue in the context of news media, an overwhelming male presence can influence the subject matter discussed (154). This overrepresentation of a particular type of televised masculinity in the news-media begs the question of who determines which narratives are legitimate and which are denied broadcast (Gregg 1987, 13). I will argue this identity factor can also be applied to the way political commentary is disseminated on political satire shows. Further, feminist theory questions who has access to constructing discourse, "since it is clear

women frequently do not have the same access as men to speaking rights, as has been amply documented by various studies" (Mills 2004, 97).

Additionally, most existing legacy satire television appears to tilt coverage heavily on domestic American politics, which is then reflected in the available academic literature. Much research has been done on how coverage of the Trump administration dominated the political satire genre during his election and presidency (Kilby 2018, Becker 2020). While international political relations have been the focus of American late-night satire shows, notably the critiques levied against the Bush administration and the war in Iraq by shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report,* these programs maintain an Americano-centric focus and seem to rarely analyze issues not directly related to American politics, or white-male American issues.

1.4a. The Daily Show: Mandatory Viewing

Large swaths of literature on satire analyzes the early 21st century, and the impact of Jon Stewart, the host of the cable-subscription television show *The Daily Show.* To many, *The Daily Show,* which gained widespread popularity in the early 2000s, epitomizes what constitutes American political satire (Baym, 2005). *The Daily Show* served as "a source of news and information" in addition to entertainment, and "rivaled that of traditional news programs" (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 9). The show attempts to parody a traditional television newscast, critiquing media institutions as frequently as political institutions. In analyzing coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign, Julia R. Fox et al. (2007) note that while *The Daily Show* prioritized humour above providing substantive news information, that the program was found to be "just as substantive as the broadcast networks' campaign coverage" (222). For Jamie Warner (2007), *The Daily Show* acts as a "political culture jammer"" challenging the transmission of the dominant political messaging (19). Media studies and political satire scholars

have generally lauded Jon Stewart's scathing critiques of the Bush administration during the early years of his leadership on *The Daily Show.* Most of the existing literature on political satire accepts Jon Stewart's era on *The Daily Show* shifted the genre of American televised political satire as a whole. Many studies looked at the show's impact on political knowledge and participation, evaluations of politicians, and attitudes toward the political system (Fox and Steinberg 2020, 238).

The Daily Show ultimately set the stage for numerous of its 'correspondents' to launch their own political comedy careers, including Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report,* Michelle Wolf, and all three of the subjects of this study, Samantha Bee, Hasan Minhaj and John Oliver, who went on to form their own political satire shows as well. However, while literature that analyzes *The Daily Show* is abundant, existing research fails to thoroughly consider the impact of the host's racial and gender identity on their dissemination of political comedy. Some news and culture articles explore Stewart's Jewish background on influencing his humour (Saunders 2015), but little discussion of his race, or the impact of either of these factors is on the subject matter of *The Daily Show*.

But just as political comedy can subvert dominant structures of power, it also can uphold gender and racial norms (Weinhold and Bodkin 2017). Existing research shows while Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show's* content has served as a "site of resistance to conventional media strategies," that "its comedy of the non-American aligns it with orthodox assumptions of American normativity" (Ross and York 2007, 351). For example, the show draws on ethnic and national stereotypes to elicit laughter from its audience (ibid., 355). For some of its coverage of Hugo Chavez *The Daily Show's* comedy stays "safely within the accepted limits of the current American perception of Latin America" and fails to challenge normative stereotyping (ibid.,

366). As a result, it should not be assumed that televised political satire will always undercut hegemonic discourses of race or gender.

With most literature focussed on *The Daily Show,* short-form satirical news programs have been the focus of academic commentary and critique. But the present-day digital era offers political comedy that has expanded to include long-form sketch programs, scripted TV sitcoms, streaming comedy stand-up specials, short-form online videos, documentaries, and podcasts (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 6). Some analysis of *Saturday Night Live* offers a look into sketch-comedy and parody (Weinhold and Bodkin 2017). More recently, shows such as *Last Week Tonight, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and late-night television segments such as *A Closer Look* on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* have made their way into academic study as well (Kaye 2020, Davisson and Donovan 2019, Forthun 2020). Literature analyzing these programs suggest there is a deeper investment by long-form programs such as *Last Week Tonight* in offering explainer-style news content and critique (Jennings et al. 2018; Becker and Bode 2018). John Oliver's work has received considerable acclaim, particularly around his decisions to platform issues that would otherwise not receive attention in American media (ibid.). *Last Week Tonight* has also been praised as changing the landscape of political comedy and explainer journalism, and engaging audiences in activism, with *Time Magazine* dubbing the series' influence on audiences as the "John Oliver Effect" (Kowitt 2015).

1.5. Hosts, Identity and Satire

As indicated, little has been written on the impact of a late-night hosts identity on the content of their commentary. Identity is a broad term that has multiple definitions depending on the context and discipline. For Peter Burke and Jan Stets in their book *Identity Theory* "an identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role

in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (2009, 3). Identity formation is complex and can involve "a process of stereotyping or 'cognitive simplification' that allows people to distinguish easily between self and other, and to define themselves and their group in positive ways" (Buckingham 2008, 6). For the purposes of this research, I use identity to refer to the key racial and gender characteristics that define the way in which the comedians analyzed perceive themselves, their position, and their perspective, and the way in which others perceive the comedian. Identity politics, according to David Buckingham, "entails a call for the recognition of aspects of identity that have previously been denied, marginalized, or stigmatized" and can involve issues of representation, particularly around "who has the right to represent, or to speak, and for whom" (ibid., 7).

Eric Forthun (2020) highlights the importance of late-night hosts' identity significance in the genre of satire. While the content distributed on satire television programs involves multiple components, such as writers and producers, late-night hosts have their points of view centered above all other voices on their shows, offering them a "distinct privilege rarely provided to marginalized voices," (Forthun 2020, 6). White male hosts are often seen as "central in these broadcast series and, thus, considered universal in their appeal" (ibid). As Forthun explains:

> "The universality of the late-night host was couched in the rhetoric of not being "political," which often meant that everyone and everything was a topic worthy of derision, even as that distinctly privileged certain (read: white and male) points of view" (ibid.).

As a result, centring Minhaj and Bee offers the potential for marginalized, racialized, and gendered issues to be at the forefront of coverage. Indeed, scholars have distinguished Bee's *Full Frontal* as distinct from her late-night male-counterparts, as she "quickly became a representation of feminist humour, bridging the gap between late-night comedy and women" (Drouin 2018, 6).

1.5a. Gender, Race and Comedy

Feminists have long been criticized as "killjoys," incapable of engaging in comedy, or too "angry" to be relatable, rational, or understood as entertaining (Greene and Day 2019, 457). Yet, Bee's anger and conviction are what sets *Full Frontal* apart from "anything else on American television" (ibid.). As Viveca S. Greene and Amber Day describe:

> "She self-consciously presents herself as an impassioned feminist and in so doing interpellates her audience as also already feminist, assuming that they will be as outraged as she at institutional sexism that negatively impacts women from a wide range of identity groups…Bee creates the feeling that viewers are all in the battle to right some wrongs together, united in our outrage against inept officials, sexist policy making, and outdated norms, and in our pleasure in using laughter to mock those who act against the public interest…Bee reclaims feminism and feminist anger, and in so doing educates her audience about feminist issues, underscores the importance of taking action and speaking out (for those in safe enough positions to do so), and demonstrates the power of satire to challenge oppressive institutions and ideologies" (Greene and Day 2019, 457).

In their book *A Comedian and Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice,* Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman emphasize the benefits of comedy for challenging hegemonic narratives and discourses. They argue comedy has the potential to "set a media agenda in ways that impact policy" which makes comedy a "powerful influencer in contemporary social justice issues" (2019, 5-6). Further, comedy's reach and popularity position it as part of entertainment media and popular culture which can ultimately "[reflect] and [shape] societal values and beliefs" (ibid.).

Thus, political comedy as a genre has enormous potential to challenge dominant narratives and discourses around gender and race. Further, the present-day entertainment marketplace with its move into digital mediums like streaming "is embracing and reflecting new voices and cultural identities" in the genre, and also "embracing humour that includes social

justice challenges" (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 6). Programs such as *Saturday Night Live* now "skewer social issues such as race, gender politics and class," stand-up comedy specials such as Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* forefront the experiences of racism and immigration to a wide audience, through utilizing comedy as the medium to do so (ibid., 7). This shift demonstrates the potential for political comedy to truly subvert dominant understandings of racial and gender discourse in American popular culture, and American society. As Borum Chattoo and Feldman argue:

> "Contemporary comedians are using their voices and platforms to assert their cultural identities and call out oppressive power dynamics. In turn, as a partial consequence of the shifting comedy and entertainment marketplace in the digital era, the voices of traditionally marginalized people and groups—racial and ethnic minorities, women, and sexual minorities—are not just increasingly seen in comedy, but also are rewarded by critical acclaim, media coverage, and audience buzz. For instance, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the United States turned the page on a new chapter of Islamophobia, Muslim-American comedians took to their microphones" (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2019, 8)

For Rebecca L. Malhi et al., "expressions of ethnic identity tend to be acceptable to the dominant society mainly when restricted to the private domain or when viewed as entertainment" (2009, 261). Thus, the position of Hasan Minhaj as an entertainer of colour, entering a white-male dominated genre like televised political satire, offers a new type of political critique that contrasts the existing acceptable performance of race in public. Racial and ethnic humour has the potential to destabilize stereotypes and taboos and "reinforce or challenge notions of racial superiority and inferiority" (Islam 2020, 3). Racialized groups within America have turned to humour to engage with assumptions and stereotypes about their identities to address discrimination (Michael 2018, 65). In Minhaj's work on *The Daily Show* and his stand-up comedy special *Homecoming King,* he uses comedic strategies such as exaggeration and

inversion to "reveal the dubious premises of anti-Muslim bias and disrupt discourses meant to dehumanize and disempower Muslims" (ibid., 63).

David Gillota's book *Ethnic Humour in Multiethnic America* offers insights into the evolution of ethnic humour in the United States (2013). Gillota divides American ethnic humour into two main periods, first where ethnic humour serves to entertain the dominant white culture and reinforce racist and dehumanizing stereotypes about ethnic minorities such as Black people and Jewish people, followed by the second period which occurred predominantly following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, which saw ethnic minorities reclaiming humour to subvert or challenge these racist tropes and discourses (Gillota 2013, 7-8). As "racism continues to pose a problem in forms of media" there is a risk that ethnic-based humour can uphold these same stereotypes it seeks to challenge or contend with (Hirja 2009, 569). While ethnic humour can offer a space for discussing stereotypes about race and culture, in Faiza Hirja's analysis of the ethnic humour conducted by Canadian comic Russell Peters, the author notes the space is fraught with "the dangerous, constant possibility of legitimizing racist thoughts and discourse" (Hirja 2009, 568).

Gillota also notes that while humour opened the late 20th century to comedians from ethnic minorities, these comedians were generally male. Indeed "mainstream mass media has a long-standing history of discrimination against female humorists, for comedy is often thought of as a purely masculine realm" (ibid., 8). These circumstances placed women of colour in a further marginalized position, where even whilst comedians who were white women gained popularity on shows such as *Saturday Night Live,* the number of non-white comedians who are women who have gained mainstream success remains miniscule (ibid.). Indeed, neither subject of this study is a woman of colour, a decision made due to the sheer lack of women of colour in mainstream

political comedy conducting long-form satire segments. While in the past few years comedians such as Lilly Singh and Amber Ruffin have come to lead their own programs, the structure of those shows remains in a more traditional late-night comedy fashion, as short segments that inspect current events, rather than long-form pieces which "deep dive" into a particular issue or subject. Simultaneously, scholars have noted the men of colour who engage with "brilliant" humour on race, often remain "fairly conservative and two dimensional" in their approaches or discussions of gender (ibid.).

Feminists have also used humour to subvert dominant norms around gender and sexuality and cultivate political agency (Rentschler and Thrift 2015). Women comedians have long employed humour like political satire to collapse "long ingrained cultural truisms like rape myths" with women satirists acting as "part of a larger cultural battle" against rape culture and sexual violence, two deeply gendered issues (Greene and Day 2019, 450). According to Peg Brand (2006), "a feminist satire is a work of art that expresses a woman's point of view as it makes fun of prevailing artistic conventions and societal norms established by men" (180). For Linda Mizejewski (2014), women's comedy can be a "primary site" in popular culture "where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested" (6). For Greene and Day (2019), jokes and satirical performances which undercut aspects of rape culture are vital to challenging it (ibid.).

Scholars suggest Bee's contribution to the political satire environment offered a shift from traditional late-night media, with her performances on *Full Frontal* often centring issues that impact women (Nussbaum 2016; Greene and Day 2019). Since the debut of her show *Full Frontal,* Bee proceeded to hire writers through a "blind process" where the gender and experience level of applicants was hidden, which led to "producing the most diverse writers' room in late-night comedy: roughly half female and 30 percent non-white" (Greene and Day

2019). *Full Frontal* not only covers current events like other late-night political comedy shows, but also creates longform, in depth segments on more obscure issues which focus on injustice or are related to gender inequality (Greene and Day 2019, 455).

My research will specifically ask how the gender identity of Samantha Bee and the racial identity of Hasan Minhaj influence how they use late-night political comedy while covering issues that pertain to their own identity, in comparison to John Oliver, a white man, on *Last Week Tonight*. What discourses and narratives are constructed? What ends up being valued and legitimized?

2. METHODOLOGY

In this research, I look at three case studies to explore the phenomenon of identity's influence in political satire content. While each case study analyzed has a distinctive identity, they share many similarities that make for a natural comparison to be completed. As such, this research asks: How does the gender identity of Samantha Bee and the racial identity of Hasan Minhaj influence how they use late-night political comedy while covering issues that pertain to their own identity, in comparison to John Oliver, on *Last Week Tonight*? What discourses and narratives are constructed? What ends up being valued and legitimized? The following section outlines the rationale for why I chose to analyze *Patriot Act, Full Frontal* and *Last Week Tonight* to answer this question, my data collection techniques, and the discourse analysis methodology I use.

2.1. Case Studies Rationale

The decision to choose Hasan Minhaj, Samantha Bee and John Oliver as case studies was made for multiple reasons. First, there appears to be a lack of traditional academic literature that analyzes *Patriot Act,* despite its popularity and critical acclaim, and Minhaj's position as one of the few people of colour to host and lead a political satire show. Second, Samantha Bee was chosen due to her position as a woman, and the first woman to lead her own late-night television show. As the identities of each host is a central part of this study, John Oliver serves as the "control" case study. His identity as a white, American man—though he is a dual citizen of the U.K. and the U.S. and of English descent—aligns him closely with the existing identity norm within political satire. As such, comparing Minhaj and Bee's work to Oliver's can explore exactly how each of their identities can contribute to discourses around race and gender respectively in contrast to the hegemonic discourse constructed by white-male hosts, exemplified by Oliver.

While Lilly Singh, host of the short-lived *A Little Late with Lilly,* was also considered, the style of Singh's show did not mirror Minhaj and Oliver. Each show chosen operates in a long-form news explainer style, seeking to investigate one issue or one subject per segment, and dedicates several minutes to a single issue. Typically, the programs selected for this analysis touch on current events briefly, but the bulk of each segment analyzed is not intent on providing commentary on daily or current political affairs and celebrity interviews, unlike most other late-night political comedy shows. Finally, I took into consideration that each show is available via a streaming service (HBO for *Last Week Tonight,* TBS for *Full Frontal,* and Netflix for *Patriot Act)* and as such may not be constrained by the language conventions and political economy of non-streaming television, which would inevitably influence the content produced on Singh's NBC program, and NBC's *The Amber Ruffin Show,* which has *Late Night with Seth Meyer's* Amber Ruffin, who is a Black woman, in the host role.

2.2. Data Collection

To answer my research question, I analyzed three separate political satire television shows, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* on Netflix, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on TBS and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on HBO. I watched each specific episode for analysis a minimum of four times, first to complete an uninterrupted viewing, second to take live notes, third to transcribe the audio into a written transcript, and fourth to edit the transcription for accuracy. Following these viewings, I watched each episode several times to focus on specific jokes, their delivery and context, at the analytical stage of my process. I accessed the shows through YouTube for *Full Frontal* and *Last Week Tonight* and Netflix for *Patriot Act.* I transcribed each episode using the transcription software Otter, and manually edited the transcript for accuracy to ensure my transcripts picked up the correct words, phrasing, and

silences. Two separate topics were chosen to analyze, Indian politics to explore racial representation and abortion rights to explore gender representation. For Hasan Minhaj, I looked at his episode *Indian Elections,* as an Indian American, Minhaj was approaching the episode with an identity connection to the subject matter discussed. While Oliver has two segments covering Indian politics, I chose the episode that was closest in airdate to *Patriot Act.* As such, the segments analyzed for this chapter were *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Modi (2020)* and *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj: Indian Elections (2019).*

For the segments on abortion, I analyzed *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee: An Abortion Education (2019), Full Frontal with Samantha Bee: Abortion, Texas Style (2016), Full Frontal with Samantha Bee: What Texas's New Abortion Ban Means for Reproductive Rights Across the Country (2021)* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Abortion Laws (2016).* The decision to analyze three of Bee's segments instead of one was made due to the fact *Full Frontal* segments typically range between five and seven minutes long, compared to *Last Week Tonight's* segments ranging from ten to twenty minutes, and *Patriot Act's* sitting at fifteen to twenty-five minutes each. In order to ensure a fair comparative analysis, I chose to analyze three *Full Frontal* episodes instead of one as had been completed for *Patriot Act* and *Last Week Tonight.*

2.3. Data Analysis

I answered my research question through a deductive qualitative discourse analysis. I searched for how one defining facet each comedian's identity, Minhaj as a Muslim of Indian descent, Bee as a woman, and Oliver as a British American man, influenced the comedic decisions, language choices, delivery, and subject matter in each of their segments. Within discourse analysis, "the analyst has to work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of

different discursive representations of reality" (Jørgensen and Philips 2002, 21). I noted direct or indirect references to each identity category, and the context in which these references were made.

Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips define discourse as "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (2002, 1). Discourse can include written and spoken language, visual images, and the relationships between these factors (2002, 61). Critical discourse analysis aims to reveal how "discursive practices" maintain particular social orders and relations "that involve unequal relations of power" (ibid., 63). All discourse analyses operate on the understanding that "our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them" (ibid., 1). Discourse analyses seek to understand the ways these relations happen, and how they contribute to the larger narratives and reconstruct social reality in and of itself (ibid., 9). For critical discourse scholars, the intertextual nature of texts can offer a crucial point of analysis (ibid., 73). For Norman Fairclough, analyzing the way specific texts interplay with one another can lead to greater "insight into the role of discourse in processes of social change" (ibid.).

The textual component of discourse analysis looks at "formal features" of the analyzed subject matter (ibid., 69). These features can include vocabulary choice, grammar, syntax, and sentence coherence—or what is being literally conveyed. Discourse "fragments" that I focused on were metaphors, narrative structures, frames, ideological assertions and silences or omissions (Trimble and Treiberg 2017, 238). Metaphors were particularly apparent in my analysis, which operate to convey political messaging through "[drawing] on taken-for-granted and seemingly common-sense understandings of everyday concepts" and "[simplifying] abstract issues by activating pre-existing knowledge" (Trimble 2017, 150). Likewise, ideological assumptions such

as what it means to be “Indian,” “Muslim,” be a “woman,” or be an “American,” were all crucial for understanding the discourses which arose in my research (Trimble and Treiberg 2017, 238), Finally, silences and omissions revealed what subject matter was granted attention or deeper focus and what was not.

For critical discourse analysis to be successful, the analyst must look at not only what is being described by the text, but also the ways in which the text relates to the larger sociological and political context (ibid., 70). Critical discourse analysis occurs within the relationship between the text and the larger social practice (ibid.). Here, the analysis should include analyzing the discourses which are “articulated in the production and consumption of the text,” in addition to considering what discursive practices are reproduced or restructured by the text, and what “consequences this has for the broader social practice” (ibid.).

To code my data, I used a three-step process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Wesley 2017, 248). First, I used open coding to thematically categorize all the jokes made in each segment. Next, I applied axial coding techniques to tag jokes within each of the categories to showcase each theme with a corresponding example. My research asked several questions about how the comedic delivery interplayed with the identity components I searched for. What was being said through these jokes? What themes arose within each category of analysis? Who was the target of the joke? How does the joke fit within gender, racial and religious discourse, both hegemonic and counter hegemonic? What do the jokes reveal about dominant ‘American’ cultural discourse? Does the identity of the host influence the delivery? How does the joke connect to the host’s identity? What does the delivery of the joke reveal about their intentions, and the relation between the joke to their identity and the subject matter discussed? Additionally, *what* was being said constituted only a segment of this analysis—

indeed what was omitted, assumed, or granted as pre-existing knowledge was also taken into consideration. Finally, I used selective coding to search for additional and discrepant data to reinforce the reliability of my data collection and conclusions (ibid., 251).

3. ANALYSIS: HASAN MINHAJ AND PATRIOT ACT

3.1. Introduction

Political comedy has the potential to disrupt and challenge existing discourses and narratives around race. Comedians of colour working in this genre have showcased political comedy has the capacity to re-construct these narratives and forefront the experiences of people of colour within their humour. This chapter will explore exactly how Hasan Minhaj's identity as a Muslim, Indian American man influences the way he covers the issue of Indian politics on *Patriot Act* and contrast his commentary with that of John Oliver on *Last Week Tonight.* As discussed in the literature review, Minhaj's work has long used comedy to undercut messaging around brown people, Indians and specifically Muslims, particularly when these discourses relate to anti-Muslim bias and Islamophobia (Michael 2018, 63).

Earlier in this thesis, I discussed the role of Minhaj's racial identity as a brown man of Indian descent factoring into his role as a comedian. However, Minhaj's racial identity is not complete without acknowledging how his identity as a Muslim functions within the way he is racialized. Racialization is the process of ascribing a racial identity to a person or group. It can carry "changing meanings of race within different political, social, and economic contexts producing a more expansive and complex discussion of race" than previously accepted understandings of "race" as isolated from the social structures that enable its construction (Selod and Embrick 2013, 648). As Steve Garner and Saher Selod describe it, "it was not 'race' per se that was the object of study, but the processes by which 'race' became salient in social relationships" (2015, 14). After 9/11, the Muslim identity became increasingly scrutinized, particularly within the United States. Still, "situating anti-Muslim experiences within race scholarship has been difficult" writes Selod and Embrick (649). "Attempting to fit the Muslim

experience into the existing paradigms of race becomes hard to do because Muslims are not a monolithic group racially, ethnically, or economically. Thus, they do not comprise one racial category but are members of many existing racial groups," (ibid.). Yet, scholars argue that the Muslim identity is one that should be conceptualized as a racialized identity; since Muslim cultural traits are racialized, "this enables the understanding of how Muslim experiences with discrimination are racial in nature" (ibid., 650). The racialization of Muslims ascribes "sets of characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits" (Garner and Selod 2014, 15). These sets of characteristics do not have to be limited to skin tone and can "include a myriad of attributes including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices" (ibid.). As a result, these characteristics become racial "as an outcome of the process" and ultimately allows for "the language needed to discuss newer forms of racism that are not only based on skin colour, as well as older forms" (ibid.). Muslim can then be understood as a "de-facto" racial classification due to this essentialization of Muslim cultural traits and identities, and the association of Muslim men with terrorists in the post 9/11 context (Selod 2015, 80).

In this chapter, I will compare Hasan Minhaj and John Oliver's political satire in their respective coverage of Indian politics during a similar period. First, I will outline the background context for this discussion, exploring each comedian's career trajectory, comedic style, and political satire show. Then, I will provide a brief history of the Indian political context, as it is fundamental to the segments discussed later in this chapter. Next, I will break down common themes that appear within each comedian's coverage. Specifically, this chapter seeks to describe the role of Minhaj's identity, as a Muslim of Indian descent, and how it offers a contrast from Oliver's coverage which remains largely aimed at a white American audience presumed to not

have prior knowledge or attachment to the subject matter discussed. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to explore the identity of both Minhaj and Oliver and the ways in which it influences, or doesn't influence, their comedic styles and jokes which end up in their political comedy shows.

3.2. Background and Context

3.2a. Hasan Minhaj

Hasan Minhaj is a Muslim, Indian American comedian born and raised in Davis, California, to parents who immigrated from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, a state in central India (Ali 2015). Throughout his career, Minhaj's comedy has primarily centred American politics, Indian culture, and popular culture, weaving in personal experience with political commentary. Beginning in 2014, Minhaj worked as a correspondent on *The Daily Show,* and was the last correspondent hired by then-host Jon Stewart (Arora 2018). Minhaj's identity as a visibly racialized Indian American, and a Muslim, has long been a feature of his comedy; he even attributes an Islamophobic dispute between Ben Affleck and Bill Maher factoring into his audition for *The Daily Show* (Lewis 2015). In 2017, Minhaj released a stand-up comedy special *Homecoming King* on Netflix, which served as a personal memoir of his life growing up as an Indian American Muslim, and the impacts of 9/11 on his life and his family. *Homecoming King* skyrocketed him to mainstream success and independent recognition, with academic scholar Tameea Islam characterizing Minhaj's humour in the special as "theatrical and introspective" (Islam 2018, 17). Unlike many racialized South Asian comedians who work within the realm of Indian politics and rely heavily on stereotyping and accents, in my opinion, though it can be debated, Minhaj's comedy generally does not. He does use an Indian accent on occasion, but primarily uses imitation of his subjects, shifts between English to Hindi, and engages in parody to convey characters other than himself, usually his parents, friends, or extended family.

These components of comedic style were carried over into Minhaj's following endeavour, *Patriot Act,* a satire news show released on Netflix in 2018, and the subject of this analysis. *Patriot Act* was released each week with one 20–30-minute segment that usually broke down one issue in depth and ran from 2018 until its cancellation by Netflix in 2020. Though the format and subject matter of *Patriot Act* differs from *Homecoming King*, as it is a news satire show and not a stand-up comedy special, Minhaj's identity doesn't entirely fade into the background. Each episode, which aims to both explain and commentate on political and social issues in current events, sees Minhaj front-and-centre, in both the literal and metaphoric sense. A typical segment on the show is performed to a live audience, in front of a triptych of digitized screens that display data and animation of the references and statistics he shares during the episode. Minhaj's identity is often tied into each segment, making references to his personal life, politics, and interests, while exploring political and social issues. He often turns to the audience to interact with the fans' live reactions to a joke or statement.

Patriot Act received critical acclaim and was awarded many accolades within the genre of political satire, and on television broadly. The show's sharp criticisms of corruption, anti-democratic and authoritarian states made it the target of criticism in several countries whom they analyzed. In 2018, due to an episode covering Saudi Arabia, *Patriot Act* received heavy criticism from the kingdom, including reports that Netflix removed the episode from Saudi Arabian circulation (Kreps 2019). Finally, the episode of focus for this study, *Indian Elections,* was the recipient of heavy criticism and anger from Indians within the country, and in the Indian diaspora. These responses to Minhaj's commentary reveal the complexities of studying race and Indian politics from the U.S., as it intersects with other aspects such as religious identity, nation or national origin, and who is perceived as having the "right" to speak on matters of Indian

interest. For many Indians, the fact Minhaj is read and understood as a brown man, and a South Asian in the U.S. was irrelevant. To those who levied these critiques, being American-born, and a Muslim, which will be discussed in detail later on, both undercut Minhaj's identity as a person of Indian descent who was qualified to speak about Indian politics.

3.2b. John Oliver

John Oliver is a British-American comedian who has hosted the HBO streaming show *Last Week Tonight* since 2014. According to Ian Crouch, Oliver "established his comic voice in Britain by pillorying conservative social values and entrenched institutions" (2014). His comedy has long targeted "the pompous and powerful" (ibid.). Like Minhaj, Oliver was a correspondent on *The Daily Show* from 2006 to 2013, where he established his popularity in the United States. His British identity, accent and persona became a key aspect of his comedic style, and contributed to his success in the U.S. After leaving *The Daily Show* Oliver began hosting *Last Week Tonight,* which has been praised for its journalistic qualities, explainer style segments and in-depth analyses. Unlike his comedic contemporaries, Oliver's show "stands out for its investigations into topics as varied as the militarization of the police state, net neutrality and Argentina's debt crisis," topics which typically had not received mainstream American media attention (Luckerson 2015). Critics have praised Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* as engaging in political activism to galvanize support for lesser-known issues. *Last Week Tonight* typically includes a call to action at the end of each segment for his viewers to engage further in the issue discussed. In 2016, a segment on net neutrality saw *Last Week Tonight's* viewers crash the FCC's website (Garber 2016).

Stylistically, Oliver's comedy has been compared to Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, though *Last Week Tonight* operates as more of "explainer journalism" consisting of "long

explanatory and investigative pieces," than a daily-news commentary show (Crouch 2014; Wilkinson 2017). Crouch characterizes Oliver's comedy as urgent, with him "[leaning] eagerly over his desk, as if in a hurry to fit all of his amused outrage into the half hour. Ironic images flash in the top left of the screen, either amplifying or jarringly contrasting what Oliver is saying" (2014). Oliver seems "aggrieved by the necessity of the task at hand, as if to remind the audience that, in a better world, it wouldn't fall to a comedian to straighten out all these serious issues for us" (ibid.). Often, the humour in Oliver's political satire is heavily reliant on his delivery of each joke. His tone and volume gradually become more urgent and grows louder with passion at the end of each joke. His delivery appears as more of a tangential rant, with each joke feeling almost unrelated to the subject being discussed.

TIME magazine dubbed Oliver's influence as the "John Oliver Effect" (Kowitt 2015). For Alissa Wilkinson, *Last Week Tonight* went on to influence several other long-form comedy shows, including *Patriot Act* (2017). The show has received critical and audience acclaim, include Emmy and Peabody awards, and is largely acknowledged by traditional academic literature as one focal point in shifting the culture of political satire on television. Many scholars believe that Oliver's focus on explaining one issue in a longer format established a shift from the short-form news satire that was popularized by *The Daily Show* (Jennings et al. 2018; Becker and Bode 2018).

3.2c. Episodes of Analysis: Indian Elections/Modi

As explained in my methodology, this chapter will analyze two segments that cover Indian politics: *Indian Elections,* on *Patriot Act,* a 23-minute episode released in October 2019 dedicated to exploring the political context of India's 2019 federal election, and *Modi* on *Last Week Tonight* a 13-minute segment released in February 2020 which primarily centres around

India's Prime Minister and leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi. In order to fully understand the discourses and narratives constructed by both segments, a recap of some aspects of the Indian state and politics as it pertains to the place of Islam within the nation is required.

3.2d. Indian Political Context

The Republic of India as it presently stands is a relatively young post-colonial state in South Asia, gaining independence from the British Empire in 1947. Prior to this, territorial understandings of what constituted "India" were understood as "enclosed between the Indus River, the Himalayas, and the Seas," (Varshney 1993, 234). Indian history dates to the Indus Valley civilization, and is richly diverse in culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and race. After colonization by the British Empire, "British India" constituted land which included present day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. As Gyanendra Pandey describes, "partition and independence…was the moment of establishment of the two nation-states of India and Pakistan" but also served as the moment of "the congealing of new identities, relations, and histories" for those in both jurisdictions (1999, 612). India today is home to every major religion, boasts over twenty-five regional languages with hundreds of dialects, and has a vastly diverse culture spanning from the northmost states of Manipur and Mizoram to the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Before the partition of India, Muslims made up twenty-five per cent of the population; today they constitute about ten per cent (ibid., 622; 614). They remain India's largest religious minority group today (ibid.).

In the fight for independence from the British, there were two key conceptions of nationhood circulating amongst those leading the movement. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru espoused a secular, independent state, that would promote religious tolerance and

pluralism between the many religions within India, including Muslims, and Mohammed Ali Jinnah advocated for an independent Muslim state (Liu and Khan 2014). As Muslims constituted a sizeable minority within India, Jinnah perceived Gandhi's vision as merely a moderated form of Hindu nationalism, and worried for the safety of minority Muslims within the state (Varshney 1993, 239). Hindu nationalism also emerged around the same time, with nationalists such as Vinayak Sarvakar and M.S. Golwalker seeking to establish a Hindu nationalist state that would include the removal of non-Hindus from its imagined nation (ibid.). Ultimately, two states were initially established, with Pakistan looking to provide Muslims with a homeland in South Asia, and Gandhi's secular vision of India succeeding, without its full original intent and original borders. India became a constitutional secular republic, largely due to the advocacy and vision espoused by Gandhi during its fight to gain independence. Commonly dubbed the "Father of India," Gandhi's values of secularism and pluralism were foundational in the creation of the nation in 1947. Many scholars agree that Gandhi, and his vision for India, played an enormous role in the construction of Indian identity and nationhood at the time, and in decades that followed; ultimately it was his and Nehru's vision of India that prevailed as the foundation in post-independence India (Liu and Khan 2014; Mukherjee 2010; Debs 2013; Pandey 1999; Varshney 1993).

The partition of India into the independent nations of Pakistan and India came with years of violence, displacement, and loss. Many Hindus and Sikhs living in what would become Pakistan, fled to northern India, while many Muslims living in India fled to Pakistan. Estimates suggest that the death toll of partition left around a million people dead, with up to 14 million people displaced, some with families broken up on either side of the border (Debs 2013). The

collective trauma from partition was frequently suppressed by political leaders, in hopes to not further escalate communal unrest within India (ibid., 644).

In the decades following Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu nationalist, leaders and news media discourse emphasized national unity around the ideals of secularism and ostracized the Hindu nationalist sentiments that were still present in the country. Hindu nationalist groups "were banned five days after the assassination, 20,000 of their members were thrown into prison, and were only released eight months later after they agreed to give up violence and pledge loyalty to the Indian constitution and flag," (Debs 2013, 641). Mira Debs argues that the partition of India in 1947, and the assassination of Gandhi in 1948 effectively "cemented his representation as an Indian icon, part of a broad project to develop unifying and hence secular symbols for the new nation" (ibid.). But she importantly notes that the marginalization of Hindu nationalism would only last two decades, before re-emerging in the 1970s, and as we know today, claiming a government supported majority stronghold in 2014.

Despite a constitutional and political commitment to secularism, India has faced deep issues of religious conflict prior to and after gaining independence, including several periods of violent riots. Hindu nationalists have also attempted to "use partition as a division narrative of trauma to separate Indian Muslims from the nation," though it would not be until years later in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the Hindu nationalist factions of society would see a substantial increase in popular support, once again due to religious tensions (ibid., 645). This historical religious tension between Hindus and Muslims is crucial to understand how Hasan Minhaj and John Oliver construct each of their segments. It speaks to much of the narrative commentary Minhaj attempts to convey, as a Muslim of Indian descent, an identity which experiences present-day and historical marginalization within India.

The episodes done by Minhaj and Oliver on Indian politics must also be read with an understanding of the present political situation, as they seek to commentate on current tensions. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi won a majority vote, taking over power from the Indian National Congress party. Under the reign of Modi, India has experienced a backsliding in democratic freedoms (Biswas 2021). This has included crackdowns on journalists who dissent against the BJP, increased religious tensions, the introduction of laws that would effectively disenfranchise large swaths of the population, specifically targeting Muslims, and an increase in hate-motivated attacks against minority groups. Muslims, and lower-caste Hindus such as Dalits, are often the recipients of such violence. Modi has also openly aligned himself with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant Hindu nationalist organization, and with many Hindu nationalist state politicians (Frayer 2019). Many have defined his political positions as Hindu nationalist and anti-democratic, which ends up being central to both Minhaj and Oliver's commentary (Taseer 2020; Joshi 2020).

3.3. Analysis and Discussion

3.3a. Bringing in the Host

Oliver and Minhaj establish their identity in relationship to Indian politics right at the start of each respective segment. As a British American comedian, Oliver states that India "just narrowly beats out America as the country where a 20-minute lecture in this [British] accent is the least welcome," referring to the colonial history of British imperialism in the Indian subcontinent. Yet despite this glaring identity connection, Oliver does not directly refer to British colonialism again in his segment, which differs immensely from the way in which Minhaj constructs his identity in relationship to Indian politics.

The significance of Minhaj's identity is immediately established as the episode begins with Minhaj discussing with his family his decision to do an episode dedicated to the upcoming Indian election. Family members chastise him, stating "you are an NRI [non-resident Indian]. You are an ABCD [American-born confused Desi], you're an American born Desi. You don't know the Indian politics." For Minhaj, he doubles down that as both a comedian and political satirist, he wants to cover the election, but that as an Indian he feels an increased obligation to do so. Unlike Oliver, Minhaj's work relies much more on jokes centred on what I themed broadly as "Indian culture." Within this category, Minhaj refers to a multitude of cultural markers, such as food, entertainment including sports and media references, broader stereotypes around Indians and employment, and references to the political, social, and religious make up of Indian society. Minhaj makes references to politics being like a "jalebi," a confection which is characteristically swirled with seemingly no beginning or end, he quotes the Bollywood hit *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai,* he refers to Indian network television channels like ZeeTV, all markers that would be commonplace in a South Asian household. Here, Minhaj chooses references that would resonate with a multitude of audiences: not all his South Asian fans are Indian, some may be Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan, nor are they all in the American diaspora. Additionally, Minhaj must also contend with having to appeal to a broader audience than just his niche of South Asians, without ostracizing either one, a challenge Oliver does not face, which requires him to draw onto general American culture as well in his humour.

Minhaj draws on American popular culture to break-up the serious tone of his political satire and position himself as an Indian American. Generally, these jokes pull in references to music, film and television, celebrity culture, social media, and American politics. Despite the episode centring on India, several times, Minhaj uses his references to American politics to target

the United States. He criticizes the average—assumed white—American's understanding of South Asian politics, stating "Americans couldn't even find Kashmir even if it were on a map," and that despite India's vast cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, "the only thing Americans know about India is henna tattoos, Gwen Stefani's bindhi phase, and goat yoga." After playing a campaign advertisement by Donald Trump's campaign targeted at Hindu Indian-Americans, Minhaj draws attention to Hindu stereotypes. "I love the way Trump says Hindus," he says. "It's like he doesn't know what they are, but definitely thinks they have powers."

In contrast, the bulk of Oliver's comedy roots itself in American popular culture references, not explicitly in his own identity. Oliver refers to music, celebrity, and media culture in the United States, weaving in current popular culture into his segment. Oliver uses metaphors to operate as points of interest for the audience to relate to or better understand the issue he is trying to explain. Unlike with Minhaj, whose audience expects cultural references to his Indian and Muslim identities, Oliver approaches his segment on Modi with the assumption that most of his audience does not have the prior knowledge of Indian culture to understand the issue deeply. As such, the metaphors he uses are primarily situated within American popular culture, and American politics. He refers to a recent Adam Driver *NPR* interview, Kermit the Frog, and Marie Kondo, all cultural references that were popular at the time for an American audience. Each of these references allows an unfamiliar audience to associate familiar segments of popular culture to help understand Oliver's jokes better and relate to a subject they may not have a direct stake in.

Central to Oliver's commentary on Modi is Donald Trump's first official presidential visit to India, which was, at the time, gaining much public attention and worked to familiarize American audiences with the political positions of Modi. As such, Oliver begins his segment by

criticizing Trump. He plays a clip where Trump discusses his opinion of Modi and breaks down why the former president's opinion on the Indian prime minister raises alarm bells regarding politics in India. Oliver thus showcases a likeness between Trump and Modi, analogizing the American president with the Indian Prime Minister, to create a familiar set of political positions for an American audience to understand.

Oliver's metaphors are less enshrined within the politics of Indian identity. By contrast, for Minhaj, his popular culture references make his Indian and Muslim identity a central component of his political comedy. In the simplest of terms, John Oliver's segment frames himself as an American comedian—who happens to be British—commenting on a political issue that it is assumed he does not have a personal stake in. His identity quickly fades into the background, re-emerging only to made self-deprecating jokes about himself, his family, or his appearance—he discusses his pet peeves, makes jokes about his appearance and his poor relationship with his father. For Minhaj, he frames himself *as* a Muslim, Indian American, who personally struggles with the political divisions that have worsened because of the rise in Hindu nationalist sentiment across India. Thus, the audience is meant to understand Minhaj's commentary as intimately connected to his personhood. In many ways, this framing is also unintentional: as a Muslim and racialized man in the United States, audiences will position certain assumptions regarding his authority and legitimacy to speak on certain subjects, especially ones that relate to Indian politics or religious tensions. Minhaj must confront these aspects to ensure the narrative by which his satire is understood is created by himself. Further, a substantial majority of the content of Minhaj's segment and political comedy relies on identity and the interplay between those two identities: being Muslim and Indian at the same time. The next section of this analysis will explore this key component of Minhaj's work.

3.3b. Hasan Minhaj, "Mussalman Ladka, and a Spy for Pakistan"

"Muslimness" is central to Minhaj's entire segment. From the start, each member of his family warns against Minhaj wading into Indian politics, questioning him as an effective outsider. In the following interaction with his uncle, he sets up his identity in the context of how he expects to be perceived as a Muslim criticizing India:

> UNCLE: Do you know your name?
> MINHAJ: Hasan means nice in Arabic.
> UNCLE: India is not Arabia; your name rings a bell that you are a terrorist. Period.
> AUNT: You may be Pakistani agent.
> MINHAJ: I'm a Pakistani agent?
> UNCLE: Yeah. Could be.

Here, Minhaj pulls apart the religious tensions within India's political and social culture, using his own name and identity as the fodder to do so. His identity as a Muslim, who are often stereotyped as terrorists in the United States as well, is also understood by his generally left-leaning white American audience, making it a joke that appeals to both those living in the South Asian diaspora, and those who are not. As a Muslim, and person of Indian descent living in the diaspora, Minhaj draws attention to the ways in which his loyalty and association to India is under constant scrutiny. These concerns are reproduced by Minhaj, but through adopting the identity of the exact security threat that he acknowledges his critics would attack him with. Throughout the piece Minhaj refers to himself as a spy from Pakistan, Qatar and Iran, predominantly Muslim countries, to tackle head-on questions regarding his loyalty and the intentions behind his critiques of Indian politics. "I know what you're thinking," he tells the audience. "Of course, Hasan Minhaj would say that about Mother India, for we all know, he's a spy for Pakistan."

In the article aptly titled “Can a Muslim Be Indian?” Gyanendra Pandey argues that for many Indian Muslims, these tests of loyalty root back to the partition of India, when many Muslims remained within India and did not migrate to Pakistan. During partition, “there was never any question, however, that the ninety million Muslims of undivided India—spread out all over that territory, with Muslim- majority regions existing in northwestern and northeastern India and in pockets (towns and subdistricts) elsewhere—would all be accommodated, or even wish to migrate, to the areas that became Pakistan” (ibid., 612). For Hindu nationalists, Muslims became the primary adversary, “in part because of their numbers,” but also due to the perceived feeling that “a Muslim homeland in the form of Pakistan caused India's partition in 1947” (Varshney 1993, 231).

As such, due to the Hindu nationalist discourse, those who remained within India had their intentions, loyalties and beliefs scrutinized. Pandey describes the national anxiety that followed partition: “those who reversed an earlier option in favor of working in Pakistan, and decided to stay on in India, needed to be watched even more carefully, for this reversal might well be part of a plot hatched by the Muslim League and the leaders of Pakistan *to plant spies in the corridors of power in India”* (618, emphasis added). While Hindus were understood as coming from a diverse background of cultural practices, religious, and political beliefs, “all Muslims were, however, *Muslims.* And the matter of political inactivity or inertia made little difference in this instance” (Pandey 1999, 610). All Muslims within India were presumed to “still harbour sympathies for Pakistan” after some supported the creation of a Muslim homeland prior to the partition (ibid., 613). Many understood Muslims as “suspect people,” whose previous open support of Pakistan required increased surveillance to ensure their loyalties to the Indian nation (613). Whether they deserved to remain in India remained a hotly contested issue,

particularly as looming fears of conflict between India and Pakistan escalated throughout the following decades. Would Indian Muslims be willing to fight against Pakistan in war? Muhammad Qasim Zaman argues for some Hindu nationalists, "Muslims not only exploited the Hindus, they never even thought of themselves as 'really' Indian and should not consequently be considered as such" (1998, 59).

Minhaj attempts to reclaim this narrative by challenging questions about his loyalty directly. He openly embraces his Muslim identity and doesn't shy away from highlighting the existing negative perceptions of Muslims, and his complex identity in commentating on a subject like Indian politics. "Talking about politics in India can get you in a lot of trouble, especially because I'm Indian, and Muslim," he says. "It's very weird to be something that people love, and then also be something that people do not like…it's like if one half of you was Oreo cookie, and then the other half was Muslim."

For an American audience, media representations of Muslims in American media post-9/11 heavily relate to discourses of security, terrorism and constructs them as threats to the nation (Lajevardi 2021). As a result, for his white American audience members who may not be familiar with these broader contexts of India-Pakistan tension and the treatment of Muslims within India, they are still familiar with the anti-Muslim rhetoric espoused in the United States. As Minhaj so seamlessly showcases, his identity as a Muslim is under constant surveillance. While this phenomenon has roots that go beyond the American constructions of Islamophobia, and War on Terror narratives which emerged after 9/11, it also relies on those narratives created and supported by the United States to continue their function. Even the title of Minhaj's show, *Patriot Act* is a direct reference to this constant surveillance, referencing the 2001 U.S. law that

facilitated increased suspicion and targeting of Muslims by the United States government in the name of post 9/11 security (Embrick and Selod 2013, 650).

3.3c. Audience Familiarity: What Knowledge is Centred?

As discussed in the previous chapter, as an intertextual entity, political satire relies on audiences to have a certain pre-existing knowledge of cultural and political tropes. Consequently, it can be inferred that Minhaj's target demographic is of South Asian descent, granted the use of historical, social, and political contexts around Muslims in India as a central framing device for his humour, and the multitude of metaphors that only audiences of Indian or South Asian descent would understand. Metaphors operate as a literary device that "draws on taken-for-granted and seemingly common-sense understandings of everyday concepts" (Trimble 2017, 150). The use of metaphors can "simplify abstract issues by activating pre-existing knowledge" (ibid.). They "tap into social myths and popular understandings" and ultimately reveal "cultural values resonant in the society within which media texts are produced and consumed" (ibid., 151). In addition to the simpler metaphors and references to Indian culture, Minhaj makes complex references and metaphors that subversively critique the ongoing corruption and violence within Indian politics. One of his relatives warns if he offends any religious groups within India that they would "kill him." "You will be no more," she says, with complete seriousness. "There will be an accident, you will be burned to death. You're gone." For an outsider without the existing understanding of Indian politics, corruption, and media culture, the metaphor is jarring. For a primarily South Asian audience, the reference recalls not only the understood volatility of Indian politics and corruption, and potentially relating to the lynching of Muslims, it also recalls to mind a multitude of plot points in Indian film and television that dramatize this exact situation. Thus, Minhaj's

usage of metaphors which are reliant on tropes and references within Indian culture centres the South Asian audience member as the primary recipient of his comedy.

For Oliver, while his segment certainly explores the religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, what it means to be Muslim and Indian is not the central focal point in his discussion. Rather, the treatment of Muslims represents the larger democratic backsliding caused by Modi's election and tenure. Furthermore, Oliver repeatedly assumes that his audience is unfamiliar with the context of the Indian political system. For example, he prefaces a discussion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindu nationalist military organization the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with an apology for "throwing a lot of letters at you there." He goes on to emphasize the one thing the audience should know about the RSS and Modi is their connection to Adolf Hitler:

> The founders of the RSS admired Hitler for ensuring the purity of the race, which is just not a chill thing to admire Hitler for. There is one and only one thing that it's okay to admire Hitler for, and it's the fact that he killed Hitler. Look, everyone talks a big game when it comes to killing Hitler, but to be fair Hitler is the only one who stepped up and got it done. For that I say, way to go Hitler, all the other Hitlering that Hitler did, thumbs down, but that very last bitler of Hitler? Thumbs up.

This section is emblematic of the style of Oliver's commentary. He approaches the segments with a broader picture and more generic metaphors that would be received by a wider audience who would have existing knowledge about Nazi Germany. Oliver assumes that even if the audience is unaware of the historical context of Hindu nationalism, they are aware of Nazi Germany and the sentiments espoused by Adolf Hitler. In comparison, Minhaj doesn't rely solely on the association to Hitler in his commentary on the RSS. While both comedians flesh out the RSS's backstory, Minhaj goes further, satirizing one of the founder's books for its seemingly innocuous title "A Bunch of Thoughts." While Minhaj does acknowledge a

relationship between the RSS to Hitler as he states that A Bunch of Thoughts gets "pretty Mein Kampf-y in a few parts," he brings his identity as a Muslim of Indian descent back into the satire almost instantly. Minhaj explains the book says, "there are three major internal threats: Muslims the Christians and the communists," and pauses before sarcastically taking pride in being one of the top three targets, "once again you guys, Muslims, we're number one, baby."

Furthermore, the picture that Minhaj paints aligns more accurately to the ongoing, historical tensions within India. He discusses the ongoing territorial disputes between India and Pakistan regarding Kashmir which ignited the most recent wave of military tensions between the two nations. For Oliver, his isolated focus on Modi detracts from the decades of religious tensions and rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments across India, and that religious conflict and Hindu nationalist factions of Indian society were contemporaries with Gandhi. The most glaring example of this reductive discourse occurs at the end of the segment, where Oliver states that Modi may indeed be bringing India together, in unity against his discriminatory policies. To demonstrate this, Oliver pulls up a photo of the Taj Mahal, saying "because India, home of this enduring symbol of love, frankly, deserves a lot more than this temporary symbol of hate." For Oliver, Modi resembles the root cause of much of the present-day division—but for many Muslims within India, the tensions witnessed are merely the culmination of decades of festering political and religious tensions, only presently harnessed by the BJP. Even the Taj Mahal has come under fire by Hindu nationalists who have sought to see it play less significant of a role in India's national image, as the site was built by a Muslim, Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan (Akins, 2017). Indeed, "the foreignness of Islam in India is a familiar theme in the rhetoric of contemporary Hindu fundamentalists," even going so far as denying the historical significance of places like the Taj Mahal (Zaman 1998, 59). In a way, Oliver seems to be buying into a

mythologized version of India where Hindu nationalism is an affront to much of the population. While it is true *many* people within India oppose Modi and Hindu nationalism, to suggest Modi's popularity is temporary, rather than highlight how it is emblematic of years of religious tensions over Indian identity politics and Hindu-Muslim relations, Oliver fails to take seriously the severity and popularity of Modi, Hindu nationalism, and risks downplaying Modi's capability to fundamentally shift Indian democracy for decades to come. Ultimately, to cast Modi as a "temporary symbol of hate," undermines truly how deeply rooted the issues of Hindu nationalism, national identity, national anxiety, and anti-Muslim sentiment are in Indian politics.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter explored the significance of Hasan Minhaj and John Oliver's identities when commentating on the issue of Indian politics. I argue that Minhaj's identity sits front-and-centre in his political comedy; it is not hidden or sidestepped, and it is crucial to the commentary he offers on the political, social, and religious context of India. Minhaj's comedy reveals itself to be self-reflective, self-deprecating, and self-aware, understanding that his identity as a Muslim, Indian American will inevitably factor into how audiences, and his targets, perceive his commentary and critique. Being Muslim and Indian at the same time is essential to his jokes, and Minhaj's segment would not function without this identity component. Minhaj does also acknowledge the harm of Hindu nationalism on other religious and ethnic minorities within India as well, using his position as a Muslim to elevate the plight of lesser-known minorities such as Dalits. His identity as an Indian in the American diaspora sets up the issue for both a South Asian and an American audience, where he straddles between the two cultures and cultural references. As a result, Minhaj's segment assumes the audience has pre-existing knowledge of

certain cultural attributes or signifiers and spends less time offering a basic history into the political context of India.

In comparison, Oliver's identity sits further back in his discussion, and within his humour. While he establishes his positionality at the outset of the segment, recognizing his British identity in relationship to British colonialism, there is no further reference to British colonialism explicitly in the segment, nor is there deep engagement with the decades of religious tensions that have characterized Indian politics since before gaining independence and beyond. Instead, his American identity takes the forefront, through popular culture and political references, hoping to translate a complex, decades long conflict to more familiar political contexts such as Trumpism and nationalism in Nazi Germany. For Minhaj, while colonialism is not the centre of his discussion, he makes a point to draw attention to the post-colonial context in which Indian politics are situated. When commenting on their parliamentary system, he says it is "the nerdiest thing that we took from the British," and in his closing statement, he recounts the tensions driven by partition which play out today between India and Pakistan in a multitude of forms. To finish off the episode, he brings back this context when discussing India-Pakistan cricket wars, "India won, Pakistan won, India won, no Pakistan won and I'm like, nah, dude. The British won." Finally, he states "when it comes to this election, India shouldn't allow itself to be divided again," acknowledging that there are ongoing political consequences of partition that persist today. Ultimately, this chapter aimed to showcase the importance of Minhaj's identity in political satire, and what it offers for nuanced discussions of Indian politics, through centring an Indian voice.

4. ANALYSIS: SAMANTHA BEE AND FULL FRONTAL

4.1. Introduction

Feminist comedians have long used humour to challenge existing narratives on gender and sexuality and undercut gender norms or injustices. Feminist humour in political satire can subvert cultural understandings around gender, destabilize perceptions of women, men, and gender broadly, and challenge the function or normative discourse of gender in society. As established in the previous chapter, I showed Hasan Minhaj's racial identity contributes substantially to the political commentary he offers on Indian politics, offering greater engagement with Indian politics, and centering a South Asian audience with his metaphors and references. This chapter seeks to analyze how gender influences the narratives, comedy and critiques put forward by Samantha Bee in her political satire show *Full Frontal*. Like last chapter, I will contrast Bee's commentary with that of John Oliver on *Last Week Tonight,* looking at how Bee's commentary compares, since it has been lauded for offering a female voice to the genre of political satire, which has long been dominated by men.

In this chapter, I will specifically compare Samantha Bee and John Oliver's coverage of abortion laws and abortion access in the United States. This chapter follows a similar trajectory to the chapter completed for Minhaj, as first I will outline the background context for this discussion, exploring Bee's comedic style, and political satire show. Background context for John Oliver's comedic style and show *Last Week Tonight* were provided in chapter three. Then, I will provide context for the abortion debate in the United States, and the key flashpoints that both segments aim to address and satirize, such as the Texas bill restricting abortion providers put forward in 2013. Following this, I will breakdown the themes that appear in each of the two

comedians' coverage and describe the role of Bee's gender identity in her political satire in comparison to John Oliver's.

4.2. Background and Context

4.2a. Samantha Bee

Samantha Bee is a Canadian American comedian from Toronto, Ontario. Like John Oliver and Hasan Minhaj, Bee was also an alum of *The Daily Show* where she spent a decade working as a correspondent covering a range of issues in Canadian and American politics. Bee joined the fold of late-night political satire with her show *Full Frontal* in January of 2016, where her work on the show explicitly highlighted women's issues, a unique feature in an all-male late-night political comedy scene on air at the time (Sims 2015).

Feminist scholars and critics have praised Bee's work on *Full Frontal* for its centring of women's voices and women's issues (Framke 2016; Nussbaum 2016; Greene and Day 2019). From covering issues of women's objectification to abortion laws, Bee has made a conscious choice to frame her commentary as "decidedly feminist" (Green and Day, 2019). In my own viewings of the show, I noticed Bee has consistently attempted to ensure her feminist commentary is intersectional and acknowledges the multilayered experiences of women of colour, trans women and immigrant women, and makes note of her own privilege as a white woman in these conversations. However, as I will expand upon later, Bee's approach to abortion policy and abortion rights roots itself in a white feminist understanding of what makes up reproductive rights.

Typically, segments on *Full Frontal* are shorter deep dives into a single issue or current event, running about five to seven minutes per segment. Bee's style of humour is targeted at people in positions of power, using her platform to vocalize a political position and advocate for

that issue. A key facet of this portion of her comedy sees Bee levy verbal attacks at politicians. Her humour is often ridden with insults, curses, and language that has come under criticism as being uncivil (Martinelli 2018). For example, in 2018, Bee targeted Ivanka Trump in a segment criticizing President Donald Trump's policy of putting children at the U.S.—Mexico border into cages. During this segment, Bee called Ivanka Trump a "feckless cunt," an insult that received criticism, predominantly by conservative media and politicians, and even led to a denouncement by Donald Trump himself (Bradley 2018). But *Full Frontal* has also received extensive praise for its commentary, receiving several Peabody and Emmy nominations since its debut in 2016.

4.2b. Episodes of Analysis

This chapter will analyze four segments that cover abortion politics in the United States: *Abortion Laws,* on *Last Week Tonight,* a 16-minute episode released in February 2016, *Abortion, Texas Style* on *Full Frontal* a 7-minute segment released in March 2016, both dedicated to exploring the consequences of Texas's HB-2 law that sought to close several abortion clinics in the state for not meeting irrelevant building code regulations. In addition, I looked at two more 7-minute segments from *Full Frontal*: *An Abortion Education* from May 2019, and *What Texas's New Abortion Ban Means for Reproductive Rights Across the Country* from September 2021. Each segment analyzed narrowly focusses on abortion policy and policy makers. I will now describe some key moments in the context of abortion regulation and policy in the United States to set the stage for the discussion of Bee and Oliver's segments.

4.2c. An Abortion Education: Abortion Politics in the United States

Abortion continues to be a hotly contested and political issue in the United States and abortion access varies greatly dependent on what state a person lives in across the country. While the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade* legalized abortion, individual states and strong

pro-life coalitions across the U.S. have sought to ensure that abortion access remains highly restricted. Since Republican electoral gains in 2010, legislative efforts to restrict abortion have "ramped up" (Cohen and Joffe 2020, 10). Most politicians and governments who are Republican are pro-life and promote or support legislation that further restricts abortion access through laws and the promotion of medical misinformation through crisis pregnancy centres. Typically, Democratic states and politicians are pro-choice and advocate for increased access, with some vocalizing intent to protect access to abortion at the state level in the event *Roe v Wade* is struck down (ibid.). Presently, "more than 1,200 restrictions of various kinds have been passed by the states since 1973, but over one-third of them have passed since 2010," with some research institutions that track abortion access in the U.S. categorizing twenty-one of fifty states as either "very hostile or hostile to abortion" (ibid.). Often, states enact legislation that makes it more difficult for clinics and physicians to provide abortions, commonly called "Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider" or TRAP laws (Gerdts et. al. 2016, 857). In Republican-controlled states such as Texas and South Dakota, laws have been enacted on the state level that directly flout the decision made in *Roe v Wade* which established the constitutional right to an abortion. In 2013 Texas introduced an omnibus bill, HB-2, that created a multitude of new TRAP laws that would force the closure of eight of the 41 abortion clinics in the state (Gerdts et. al. 2016; Gomez 2016). TRAP laws restrict abortion through forcing physicians to have "admitting privileges" at a hospital within 30-minutes of the facility, restricting how the abortion medication mifepristone can be administered, banning most abortions after 20 weeks, and constraining the building requirements of abortion facilities (Gerdts et. al. 2016, 857). Studies have shown that the introduction of HB-2 decreased legal abortions provided in Texas by 13 per cent, impacting mostly rural and poor women who could not access clinics many hours away from their home

communities (Goyal et. al. 2018). Doctors and advocates argue that without legal and accessible abortion services, abortions will still occur, but become more unsafe and dangerous, leading to thousands of preventable deaths each year (Oberman 2018). Many legal scholars and feminist advocates warn that TRAP laws are purposefully seeking a legal challenge of *Roe v Wade*, to re-open the abortion legality debate to a reliably conservative Supreme Court, and consequently overturn *Roe v Wade* and legalized abortion (Ziegler 2021).

Abortion access is a key feminist and women's issue which is central to bodily autonomy. Feminists argue that without abortion, women cede the right to a critical part of their own bodily agency to the state, rather than being in full control of their own reproductive capacities. However, Bee's depiction of abortion rights follows the narratives and discourses of mainstream, white feminist activism of the 1970s and 1980s, primarily focussed on a legal right to abortion. In response, Black feminists created what is called "reproductive justice," which is constituted of three main goals: first, "the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing," second, "the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence," and third, "the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state" (Ross 2017, 290). As Bee's focus surrounds the legal restrictions on abortion access, her commentary remains isolated to the right to access an abortion and does not fully engage with the myriad of other components impacting the reproductive health and safety of those who wish to parent, or not. Additionally, her episode's focus does not consider the trauma that forced abortions and forced sterilizations have caused for predominantly Black and Indigenous women, or barriers to access contraceptive care or family planning. Whilst some of this commentary is not mentioned due to the purview of each episode, Bee's choice to centre all

three episodes on the legal right to abortion reveals her understanding of gender and reproductive rights are informed by her perspective as a white person.

In recent years, feminists and queer activists have also sought to include a broader range of voices in the abortion debate, as not all people who require abortion access identify as women, as many are non-binary or transgender. Still, the issue remains one of a highly gendered nature (McCargar et. al. 2021). However, the dominance of cis gender white women remains within the abortion debate, and both Oliver and Bee refer to abortion as affecting "women," alone in most of their coverage. Notably, in 2021, Bee updated the language of her segment to interchange between "women" and "people who need abortions." Oliver's segment, like Bee's earlier work, understands abortion as a solely women's issue. He clarifies his stance as a person who "believes that *women* should have the right to choose," and throughout the episode references the duress created by these laws for exclusively *women*. For example, Oliver challenges the notion that *women* could simply travel further to access an abortion if their home state does not offer one, and stresses that "women can be forced to either take multiple trips or plan the shittiest three-day weekend imaginable."

With this political context in mind, the next section of this chapter will further explore the influence of each hosts' identity in their approach to explaining and providing commentary on the abortion debate in the United States. How does Samantha Bee's position as a woman differentiate from John Oliver's as a man? How does gender function in Bee's commentary?

4.3. Analysis and Discussion

4.3a. Bringing in the Host

At the outset of each segment neither host makes a direct verbal reference to their own identity in relation to the topic of abortion—though it is apparent that in a literal sense the

audience is tuned into the fact Oliver is a man and Bee is a woman, and that both are white. Both Bee and Oliver speak directly to the audience, with Oliver apologizing for the heavy but important nature of the subject of the episode, and with Bee mentioning to her audience they shouldn't "schedule [their] cervical cancer" just yet, as the latest abortion laws in Texas would seek to close several clinics that provide predominantly women's health services such as cancer screenings and contraception services, alongside abortions. While neither host directly references their own identity within the first few minutes of each segment, it becomes clear who the intended target audience of each segment is, and how Bee's gender identity in particular influences the context of her comedy.

For Oliver, he starts the segment with a recognition of the "polarizing" nature of the topic of abortion access and implores his audience not to "change the channel" and instead listen to the segment at hand. Oliver does acknowledge the 19 per cent of Americans who believe abortion should be illegal in all circumstances and states they "are frankly excused from watching the rest of this." Oliver's segment then continues, assuming that the remaining audience watching his segment believe abortion should be accessible in all or some circumstances, which sets the stage for a deeper analysis into the legal discussion around abortion, rather than a moral or religious discussion of abortion. Oliver's goal is thus to have his segment appeal to the largest portion of the American public, people who all agree that abortion restrictions are concerning and should be addressed.

Bee takes a narrower approach in who she targets as the primary recipient of her political commentary. She presumes her audience is either part of two groups: one, women or people who need to access abortions, or two, the politicians who seek to restrict abortion access further. Consequently, much of Bee's humour is directly attacking her imagined audience of specific

legislators who have put forward laws that restrict abortion access. In *Abortion, Texas Style,* Bee sits down with Texas lawmaker Dan Flynn and directly challenges his policy HB-2. “I'm not a doctor, I don't know,” Flynn admits to Bee after she challenges his misconception that doctors “cut” women during an abortion. “I listened to many doctors tell me about the procedures that happen when you do an invasive surgery.” Bee then openly mocks Flynn to his face, challenging his credibility as neither a woman nor a medical expert, in constructing a bill that would impact women’s reproductive health. “You don't seem to know anything specifically about abortions,” she says, “really at all. And yet you did all this building regulations.”

It is here that Bee also invokes her identity as a cis gender woman when verbally sparring with Flynn, and uses it to speak to her credibility on the issue of abortion:

> BEE: I speak with the authority **of one who has a uterus**. I guess that's why I think that you're the wrongiest, wrong headedness, wrong person.
> FLYNN: Well, I can tell you some things about a man that you wouldn’t understand. I need to do a better job of educating you.
> BEE: That's an awesome pep talk. Next time I need to regulate men's bodies. I'll be sure to get in touch.

It is clear in this example that Bee aims to position those with uteruses as the most knowledgeable about the issue of abortion, taking back ownership of the debate from the many male lawmakers who do not seem to know about basic aspects of abortion services, or reproductive health. This focus becomes clearer in her segment *An Abortion Education,* where Bee aims to educate senators and state lawmakers on women’s reproductive health. She begins by berating their existing knowledge on abortion services and sexual health broadly, stating “Welcome to class you fucking idiots. Time to learn about vaginas, cycles and why Charlotte from *Sex and the City* was sad for two whole seasons.” Here, Bee attempts to teach senators about quintessentially “feminine” things. She then goes on to criticize multiple male politicians,

on both the Republican and Democratic side, for believing and promoting abortion misinformation around contraception, pregnancies, and miscarriages, and follows up each attack with an explanation of each stage of reproductive health in detail.

4.3b. Sexual humour: Vaginas, Uteruses and Penises

Both Bee and Oliver use a considerable amount of sexual and bodily humour during each of their segments. For Oliver, his jokes tend to centre sex and sexuality, and brings in popular culture references as I described in chapter three. In one example, he calls into question the suspicious nature of state legislators who insist that abortion laws are enacted for the benefit of women's health and safety saying, "It's like having a folder on your computer called definitely not porn." When discussing the width of the hallways required by Texas's HB-2 law, he uses sexual humour again, "I'm not saying width isn't important," says Oliver. "In fact, in some circumstances, it's far more important than length is a thing that I have heard. Penises. I'm talking about penises." Some sexual jokes use popular culture tropes to connect the audience with a familiar point of reference. In response to HB-2's requirement that abortion providers should always have surgical privileges at hospitals within the region of their abortion clinic, he calls into question the gender-based double standard: "You wouldn't want an entire surgical team scrubbing in every time Larry King needed a boner," Oliver says.

For Bee, one key feature of her humour is the usage of harsh language, bodily references, and tendency to not mince words. Throughout each segment, Bee references to biological body parts, specifically ones that are related to gynecology and pregnancy. In each of the clips, Bee uses the term "uterus" on multiple occasions. She sardonically calls male politicians who restrict abortion access "uterus experts," and in following Antonin Scalia's death on the Supreme Court that the "court will now have to dive up your uterus without him." This reference to

gynecological terminology also continues with references to vaginas, vulvas, fallopian tubes, and other parts of the female sexual and reproductive system. In one instance she suggests male politicians "wouldn't recognize a vulva if it bit them in the face," and sarcastically adds that vulvas "all bite."

Bee also references menstruation and periods, bringing up her own cycle as a way to describe the harm of cutting off abortion access at six weeks:

> Texas's Senate Bill eight, which contains no exceptions for rape or incest, effectively bans abortion after just six weeks of pregnancy. At six weeks, many people aren't even aware that they're pregnant because doctors count pregnancy from the first day of your last menstrual period. Technically, you're six weeks pregnant just two weeks after you miss a period, which is a nightmare, because periods can be irregular for all kinds of reasons. I skipped a period when I started this job and at the 2018 People's Choice Awards when Willem Defoe looked at me too hard. That was before he became Willem de-friend.

Clearly, this joke would not have succeeded with a cis gender man in the role of host. Bee's tongue-in-cheek humour allows for the normalization of menstruation, while also establishing again who she seeks to target her political commentary toward. Young women who experience menstruation can relate to a missed period, and to Bee's reference to menstruation cycles and physical attraction. Bee's primary intention here appears not to be to fully educate a person without knowledge of these processes, but to emphasize the ridiculous nature of the legislation in question to an audience of people who understand female reproductive health through personal experience.

By no means did *Full Frontal* invent or popularize the usage of vulgar language in political satire television. Indeed, *Last Week Tonight* is also notorious for being laden with expletives, as is the case in Oliver's segment on abortion laws. Yet, despite the segment being one related to female sexual and reproductive health, Oliver does not mention the term uterus,

vagina, or vulva at any point in his segment. Curiously, even without these references to female reproductive organs and genitalia, Oliver still manages to use the word penis three times throughout a segment that is aimed at highlighting the harm of restrictions on the female reproductive system.

Language choice thus functions as a key differentiating factor between the two comedians, who otherwise share similarities in their humour style. The insistence of Bee to "reclaim" gendered language and gendered insults such as "bitch," "pussy" or "cunt" differentiates her humour from that of Oliver's who does not stray into the territory of gendered language, let alone gendered curses or slurs. For example, in one instance Bee states:

> Doctors calculate how far along someone is by counting from the first day of their last period which can be up to five weeks before conception that bet you didn't know uteruses were also time travelers. That's science, *bitch*.

In this example, the term "bitch" is targeted at the male politicians seeking to restrict abortion access with little knowledge of how pregnancy works. In Bee's response to the Ivanka Trump "feckless cunt" controversy, she expressed that her intention in using gendered insults like "bitch" or "cunt" was to reclaim them as she is a woman, and thus the target of such a slur. Reclamation of slurs occurs when a pejorative once used by oppressors is redefined and used by the intended target group (Jeshion 2020, 107). The phrase 'bitch' appears throughout *Full Frontal* and in this segment and is a word that "has overwhelmingly been used as a gendered slur: applied to women whose actions, attitudes, demeanour, or social standing defy misogynistic norms, particularly those governing assertiveness and self-satisfaction" (ibid., 120). The context in which Bee attempts to reclaim the term is through targeting *men* with an attack that has been typically levied against women.

Her humour also does not mince words when describing the harm of abortion restricting legislation. In her segment, she reminds one activist of a time in history when women stuck "knitting needles up their vaginas" and points out to Dan Flynn that abortions would continue with or without legal access, occurring in "back alleys." Further, in an animation that showcases the state of abortion access across the country, coat hangers are used to represent states that restrict abortion access, alluding to the dangerous process of self-inducing an abortion undertaken by many people without access to legal abortion services.

4.3c. Sympathy and the Perfect Victim

Oliver's commentary aims to make his audience reach a common ground about when abortion should be allowed and invoke empathy towards those accessing abortions. As a result, the examples he uses to emphasize the severity of the situation rely heavily on sympathetic individuals who fit into the narrative of those who "deserve" an abortion:

> Say hypothetically, a young girl has been the victim of sexual assault. Well, thanks to these laws, this hypothetical girl might have to travel a long distance because there were no clinics close to her. And again, thanks to these laws, the girl might be approaching the point where her state won't let her get the procedure at all. Well, sadly, none of that is hypothetical.

Here, Oliver relies on characterizing a "deserving" person who has not irresponsibly got themself pregnant. Unlike women who choose to have sex, this hypothetical person is sexually assaulted, making the choice of pregnancy no fault of their own. While the unfortunate circumstances Oliver describes are certainly a key issue in the debate surrounding abortion access, feminist theorists disagree with characterizing certain women as more or less deserving of an abortion based on the circumstances under which they became pregnant (Allen 2014; Taylor and Morgan 2020). As Axum Taylor and Ian Morgan describe:

> The Perfect Victim trope is characterized as a young cis gender woman (usually in her late teens to early 20s) typically white, heterosexual, and commonly pregnant due to sexual assault or casual "irresponsible" unprotected sex and undergoes great emotional anxieties as a result of the pregnancy and abortion. This kind of narrative is perceived to be the 'safe' way to represent abortion to a divided nation because these stories are perceived to be the most worthy of compassion and empathy from a general audience (Taylor and Morgan 2020).

Here, Taylor and Morgan seamlessly describe the harm of Oliver's example. Unlike someone who engages in consensual sex, using a survivor of sexual assault aims to create a greater sense of pity— in Oliver's example it is an innocent child "sentenced to motherhood" without access to abortion. Through highlighting a "perfect victim" Oliver is able to draw "sympathy from people who, even if they are otherwise opposed to abortion, understand not wanting to carry an abuser's child" (ibid.). Though Taylor and Morgan accept it is crucial to protect those most vulnerable in the context of abortion, they argue this narrow positioning of the "perfect victim" detracts from many who do not fit into this characterization who still deserve access to abortions. Oliver's example also reinforces Mallary Allen's findings that pro-choice "narratives in the United States situate acceptable approaches to abortion decision-making as consistent with contemporary middle-class values regarding personal responsibility, sexuality, and motherhood" (2014, 43). For Allen, this type of language and narrative construction fails to recognize the reality of abortion demographics: many women seeking an abortion in the U.S. are more likely to be poor, racialized, have had a previous abortion, and more than half have existing children—circumstances which Allen describes as having the potential to make "sympathetic narratives difficult to craft" (ibid.). Oliver's choice to platform the "perfect victim" of abortion restrictions thus falls into this very pitfall, compromising the reality of most people who need abortions and functions to prioritize his goal of finding common ground amongst his audience.

Oliver is not alone—in fact many within the pro-choice movement "invoke an ideal patient who conveys reverence for the abortion issue, has certain compelling reasons for terminating her pregnancy, and can therefore accomplish a 'good abortion.'" (Allen 2014, 44). While Oliver's example is not *inaccurate* by any means, as he even showcases a circumstance with a patient in Texas in which this is exactly the case, the harm of painting a "perfect victim," can contribute to a discourse that separates acceptable and unacceptable reasons for an abortion. In reality, many feminists argue the right to abortion services should remain regardless of the circumstances under which the person became pregnant. Without this understanding, access to reproductive choice, and thus bodily autonomy, is undermined.

4.4. Conclusion

As was demonstrated in chapter three, this chapter also showcased that identity in comedy does *matter,* and directly and indirectly influences the discourses constructed by political comedy show hosts. This chapter explored the ways in which Samantha Bee's gender substantially affects the way she approaches her comedy on an issue directly related to gender politics—abortion laws in the United States. Unlike Oliver, who takes the approach of having his segment resonate with the largest proportion of people, for Bee, her segment aims to centre the biological functions of reproductive health, debunk some of the myths around abortion, and centres a female audience as her target demographic. Additionally, Bee uses her platform as the opportunity to verbally eviscerate the politicians who seek to undermine abortion access. Many of the jokes she makes, and points she references, function only because it is a woman delivering them, from language choice around menstruation, uteruses, and vaginas, to gendered insults like "bitch" which cannot be reclaimed by someone in Oliver's position as a white man. Bee's work, however, is also informed by her position as a white woman, where she does not discuss the

critiques of pro-choice narratives that fail to include the considerations offered by Black feminists who offer reproductive justice as an alternative.

By contrast, Oliver aims to explain abortion laws to an audience who he assumes has little to no prior knowledge about the issue. His intention is to instil a feeling of concern into his audience regarding abortion restricting legislation. As such, the examples he uses or the reference points he draws attention to are not as directly invested in explaining women's reproductive health as is explored in Bee's commentary, but rather tangentially related popular culture points which seek to underscore the hypocrisy of abortion mandates on women's health. Without a doubt, Oliver's intention to highlight the danger of TRAP laws and further abortion restricting practices across the U.S. is fundamental in bringing public attention to an issue that predominantly affects women. Still, my analysis showcased even with the same subject matter, the gender of each host inevitably plays a foundational role in the resulting commentary provided.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this research I have demonstrated that gender and race play a crucial role in the comedy offered by Hasan Minhaj and Samantha Bee when looking at topics directly related to their respective identities. While each comedian's coverage covered a range of humour styles and American popular culture references, both Minhaj and Bee focus their attention on audiences who reflect communities that they are a part of. For Minhaj, his identity as a Muslim of Indian descent influences his comedy through references made about South Asian culture and being a Muslim in India. For Bee, while a key target of her comedy are the politicians restricting abortion access, she also aims to prioritize a predominantly female audience in her work. In contrast, John Oliver approaches the subject matter with a more removed perspective—his identity does not play as strong of a role in his comedy, but rather he aims to explain the subject at hand to an unfamiliar audience.

The first chapter of this research established how existing literature situates identity in comedy. While existing literature takes into consideration the potential for political satire to challenge and disrupt dominant systems of power such as those which uphold gender and racial norms, there appeared to be a lack of academic research which granted weight to the significance of the political satire hosts identity in their commentary. I argued that this connection was crucial, using the examples of Samantha Bee and Hasan Minhaj as two case studies, comparing their work on issues that affected their respective identities to John Oliver's commentary. Chapter two explained my methodology framework and choice of case studies.

Chapter three explored how Hasan Minhaj's identity as a Muslim of Indian descent influenced his comedic approach while covering the 2019 Indian election, and the rise in popularity of Narendra Modi in India. Specifically, this chapter looked at how Minhaj's identity,

particularly as a Muslim, made its way into his choice of critique, and differentiated himself from that of John Oliver in his *Last Week Tonight* segment on Modi. While both Oliver and Minhaj shared similar conclusions — that Modi's rise to power and the popularization of Hindu nationalism has led to India's democratic backsliding — Minhaj speaks to the audience from the perspective of a Muslim of Indian descent, at the heart of the debate occurring within the nation. My research showcased how Minhaj centred not only his own voice as a Muslim of Indian descent but approached his comedic style with metaphors and references understood and related to the South Asian or "desi" cultural experience. Furthermore, the discourses constructed by John Oliver reinforce his position as an outsider to the subject, upholding the national myth of Hindu nationalism as somehow foreign or incompatible with Indian values, neglecting to acknowledge the significance of a long history of Hindu nationalist sentiment in the country.

Chapter four highlighted the role of gender in Samantha Bee's commentary looking at restrictive abortion laws throughout the United States. Here, the role of Bee's identity was not asserted as often as Minhaj's identity was in *Patriot Act*, but still is without a doubt central to her humour on *Full Frontal.* When compared to John Oliver, Bee's language choice, and in particular her usage of biological terms which relate to the female reproductive system, stand out as a key differentiating factor between her comedy and Oliver's. Further, Oliver's intention to appeal to the widest proportion of Americans in his discussion of abortion sees his commentary fall into the pitfalls of promoting the "perfect victim" narrative, which can harm the feminist goal of establishing access to abortion regardless of the circumstance under which the person became pregnant. Both Oliver and Bee, however, generally describe those affected by abortion laws as women, until Bee's most recent 2021 episode which seems to take into consideration that not only cis gender women are affected by abortion regulations.

Through analyzing the commentary provided by each host, I discerned identity plays a foundational role in the comedy done by underrepresented comedians. Indeed, as whiteness and maleness have functioned as assumed norms within the genre, the identity of John Oliver is not politicized to the same degree as that of Minhaj and Bee. Whiteness is often an invisible category, an assumed default that sees only those in relation to it as racialized entities. Thus, I believe for Bee and Minhaj to use their identities within this genre to personalize, confer relatability, and re-centre marginalized groups within the subject matter covered, allows for greater engagement with the nuances of gender and race, and normalizes seeing and hearing about gender and race in political comedy. Since the genre of political satire is inherently an intertextual entity, the references made by political satirists deeply rely on the targeted audience understanding the intricacies of a multitude of cultural and political tropes. As such, the use of metaphors or references that centre an audience who is, in Minhaj's case, Indian, South Asian, or Muslim, and in Bee's case, people who menstruate and can get pregnant, grants legitimacy and voice to those often marginalized by the dominant discourse around race and gender on these respective subjects.

Additionally, there are several other factors not explored in this research that are worthy of future study. The intersectional nature of identity structures could offer a deeper more nuanced analysis, particularly if the same subject matter was explored for each of the three comedians studied in this analysis. How does Hasan Minhaj's position as a racialized man influence his commentary around gender, and his lack of further exploring Indian politics from a gendered perspective? How does Samantha Bee's whiteness structure her understanding of what empowers women, and her approach on discourses of abortion access in contrast to discourses on reproductive justice? Reproductive justice perceives access to abortion as only one facet in a

larger system of rights and responsibilities of the state to ensure the right to *pregnancy* as well, as many Indigenous mothers, Black mothers and mothers of colour are often discouraged from having children or have experienced outright forced sterilization. Furthermore, all three of the comedians analyzed were cis gender and straight. How does their sexuality influence the way they approach each subject, and what they prioritize or assume to be true? Finally, Both Bee and Oliver are comedians who were not born in the United States, but Minhaj is the only one born in the United States. Would a comedian of colour not born in the United States share similar perspectives as that offered by Minhaj? Or perhaps would Bee offer a different approach if she were not Canadian, and similarly for Oliver if he were not British? These questions raise more questions, and ultimately showcase the endless possibilities within further research in this genre. The field of identity in political satire has much to offer to further break down and understand not only the importance of representation, but the significance of identity in the final subject matter produced and disseminated to the public.

Furthermore, since the beginning of this project, I have been intrigued by the notion of objectivity and personal engagement with storytelling. With political satire as a genre offering its satirists the opportunity to critique, engage and openly state their political positions, they are not obligated to uphold the standards of objectivity as is expected by traditional journalists. Thus, the appeal of political satire for satirists of colour, for women satirists, offers a position within the journalism, opinion, and satire community that's fundamental goal is to position and prioritize one person's opinion above all else—that is, the opinion of the host. Therefore, the natural inclination for many marginalized comedians to use political comedy as the medium of critique and agency within the genre, is one that will continue to appear, shifting and evolving overtime and requiring further critical analysis as it happens.

Finally, understanding that identity is not a static component, nor that it will always lead to progressive or beneficial coverage for the communities represented is crucial. My research in this thesis aimed to showcase it is not the identity alone but the *operationalization of identity* in each of these individual comedians' work that really functions as the more crucial point of analysis, and the most intriguing place to begin looking deeper.

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