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Satire, Humor and the Construction of Identities, Massih Zekavat. [Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. pp.viii + 206, index. ISBN 978 90 272 0233 8 (Hb); ISBN 978 90 272 6550 0 (e-book)].

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Scholarly study of satire and humour is a burgeoning albeit minor academic pursuit that crosses disciplines such as politics, philosophy, literature, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and management, to name a few. It crosses disciplinary boundaries, which can be a benefit but also a burden since it can't be easily categorised and boxed.

Accordingly, scholars of these different backgrounds often coalesce around the cognitive, social and psychoanalytic theories that have accreted over time as the central tenets of the field before striking out onto new terrain. 'Theory' is sometimes too strong a word when applied to the scattered remarks of Plato about humour cultivating superiority through malice. Although humour was an incidental consideration in his book on rhetoric, Aristotle had more to say on the reputational damage or uplift that an orator may achieve using it with an audience and against a target.

Scholars still work with the fine distinctions between laughing *with* a person and laughing *at* a person which can tip into aggression and ridicule. Amongst other methodological concerns, such rhetorical stratagems bequeathed Quentin Skinner with the means of unearthing Thomas Hobbes' sophisticated

understandings of these Aristotelian ideas and Michael Billig with the placement of derision and ridicule at the heart of social relations. Humour is not necessarily subversive but can in fact be enlisted to patrol social mores and punish the deviant through shame and guilt. As a current scholar, though, Billig comes a century or so after the pioneering works of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson which raised such concerns and merit the application of the word theory.

So Massih Zekavat started his book with these traditional starting points in mind but then added a considerable theoretical array with postcolonialism, structuralism, poststructuralism and sociological insights by using Derrida, Wittgenstein, Salvatore Attardo, Edward Said, Julia Kristeva, Simon de Beauvoir, Gayatri Spivak, and Jacques Lacan, to name just a few.

Clearly, Zekavat has followed the ‘linguistic turn’ that begun in the 1960s and did so with the aim of explicating how satire “can construct the identity of social subjects” in very conflicted and political ways. Here he has found a little explored area of scholarly inquiry into satire, which is why Zekavat brings such a theoretical array to bear on nation, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Moreover, he did so because such contentious topics are at the heart of globalization and global contention. One need only remember the Rushdie affair and the Muhammad cartoons as reminders of this, he says, and of the ‘us-versus-them’ divisions and exclusions that straddle the world.

This is the political necessity that requires a comparative literature approach to this question of identities, he says. Hence, Zekavat explores cherished British and Iranian classics of the past that still spark continuing fascination but which are at a safe distance from contemporary furores and conflagrations that are often too close for scholarly distance.

Now this may seem paradoxical. Such divisions are at odds with Zekavat’s desire to soothe the world, but incongruity, opposition and othering are at the centre connecting all his theories of satire and identity. They are the “common denominator”, even extending to Freud’s tripartite model of ego, superego and id, and are of course articulated through language.

Accordingly, in one chapter, Zekavat deftly uses Jonathan Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters*, with brief excursions to the infamous *Modest Proposal* and other works,

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to explore not only the complexities of colonized Irish identity under the rapacious colonialist British but also Swift's odd and tormented allegiances as an Irishman who lived most of his life in London and benefited from a church income. For the postcolonialist this situation and the humour raised the conundrum of whether the subjugated can ever truly have their own voice if they are using the colonialist's discourse, even if the situation is given a hearing by a sympathetic member of the elite like Swift. When the colonialist has constructed the colonised as an Other which is an aberration from a culturally solipsistic and arguable 'norm', then this conundrum has meaning.

Zekavat found 'Ubayd-i Zākānī to be in similar knots as a Qazvini at the Shirazi court who joked mercilessly about the wayward tendencies of the Qazvini, Qumi, Khorasani, Lur, Arab and Turkish groups. Through humour, then, Zākānī reinforced Shirazi sense of identity and superiority over others and the inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries that go with it. Billig's ideas are particularly pertinent here.

A Google search revealed for this non-Iranian reviewer that jokes about Qazvini and homosexuality still abound. To my mind, this chapter connected to Christie Davies' work on contemporary ethnic humour and the attribution of stupidity (for instance, by the English to the Irish, by the French to the Belgians, or by Australians to Tasmanians). However, Christie and such examples did not get this comparative regard.

In the next chapter, Swift's *Tale of Tub* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is juxtaposed with the works of Zākānī, "Iran's supreme satirist, who has addressed many of our contemporary concerns back in the fourteenth century" [emphasis added]. While separated by four centuries, both authors were concerned with sectarianism and hypocrisy in their respective religions and, in Zekavat's eyes, the construction of religious identities through the dialectical oppositions between Catholic and Protestant and between Sunni and Shiite.

This is apparent in in *Ethics of the Aristocrats* while in his other work *Persian Anecdotes* Zākānī explored hypocrisies and the gap between heavenly ideals and grubby human reality - the usual gap that satire works across all human endeavours - across Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zarathustrians, and unbelievers.

Both Swift and Zākānī feature again in the chapter on creation of gender identity through satire with, respectively, *The Lady's Dressing Room* and *Ta'dīb al-Nisvān*. But in the course of the chapter Swift's sexism is confronted by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mary Leapor while Astarābādī's *Ma'āyib al-Rijāl*, and qā Jamāl Khānsārī's *Kulsūm Nanih* or *Aqāyid al-Nisā'* add to the Iranian tradition. They line up in battle over the reinforcement or subversion of patriarchy while throwing humorous volleys at women or men. Again, the issue is whether women truly have a voice when they are confined by patriarchal language.

Zekevat is on to something with this question of social identity and satire but I think he places too much weight on the identity of the central concepts he uses. After all, incongruity is not necessarily the same as othering and opposition but they are placed in the same basket so as to provide that "common denominator". As a member of the cognitive branch of humour theory, incongruity may be at times just a surprising or ludicrous contrast. It may be a simple juxtaposition of two ideas not normally placed together that causes cognitive dissonance (like an elephant being scared of a mouse or of a very tall man being placed next to a very small man), rather than an us-versus-them standoff involving all the complexities of othering.

On this same note, othering in postcolonial theory is not the same as the opposition in Freud's tripartite model of superego, ego and id because in that there is no issue of the dominant discourse subsuming the voice of the colonized, which is a recurrent concern of the book. The three elements are in a constant, unconscious, unspoken, fluctuating struggle between them.

Moreover, after previous discussion of identity theory, chapter 5 delves deeper into all the intricacies and disputes of post-colonial and post-structuralist theories without connecting all the insights to the satire of Zākānī in the latter part of that chapter. One wonders why that level of detail was needed. This is indicative of the problem of the book sometimes having to bear the weight of so much theory.

Having said that, it is understandable that Zekavat is exploring a range of theories because he is rightfully pursuing the complexity of humour that

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undermines the common, simplistic notion that all political humour is subversive. The book pulls through in the later chapters where the satire is allowed to shine and demonstrate the comparative political point that Zekavat wishes to make. There is much about satire in this book for Zekavat and the reader to ponder in future years.