



HUMOR AND IRONY AS COPING MECHANISMS IN “HOME BOY”: PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES AND SOCIAL CRITIQUES

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Abstract

This research paper explores the role of humor and irony as coping mechanisms in H.M. Naqvi's "Home Boy." The focus is on the deployment of humor and irony in H.M. Naqvi's novel "Home Boy" as tools for psychological coping and as vehicles for social critique. By examining the protagonist's use of these literary devices, the study delves into the intricate interplay between personal resilience and socio-political commentary in the context of post-9/11 America. Through close textual analysis, this paper aims to uncover how humor and irony serve to navigate the complexities of identity, displacement, and marginalization faced by South Asian immigrants. By analyzing key passages and character interactions, this paper argues that humor and irony not only offer relief from the trauma and alienation experienced by the immigrants as posited by Sigmund Freud's Theory of Humor and relief, but also critique societal prejudices and cultural dislocation. This paper posits that these devices are not merely stylistic choices but essential tools for coping with psychological stress and for offering a critical lens on societal issues.

Research Objectives

To analyze how humor functions as a coping mechanism for the characters in “Home Boy,” helping them maintain psychological stability and resilience in the face of post-9/11 xenophobia and prejudice.

To investigate how irony is used in “Home Boy” to critique cultural stereotypes, societal changes post-9/11, and the concept of the American Dream.

Research Question

How do humor and irony function as coping mechanisms for the characters in H. M. Naqvi's “Home Boy,” and in what ways do these literary devices serve to critique post-9/11 societal issues?

Significance of Study

This study contributes to literary scholarship by providing a nuanced analysis of how humor and irony are used in contemporary immigrant literature. By focusing on “Home Boy” it expands the understanding of how these literary devices function beyond mere stylistic elements, revealing their deeper psychological and socio-political implications. The study highlights the importance of humor and irony as coping mechanisms for marginalized individuals. By examining the psychological theories underlying these devices, it provides a deeper understanding of how immigrants manage stress, anxiety, and identity conflicts in an often-hostile environment.

Insights from this study can be applied to the broader field of mental health, emphasizing the role of humor in promoting psychological resilience. Understanding how humor and irony help individuals cope with trauma and adversity can inform therapeutic practices and support. The study underscores how humor and irony function as tools of social critique, exposing and challenging societal hypocrisies, stereotypes, and power dynamics. By highlighting these aspects, the study raises awareness about the ongoing issues of discrimination and marginalization faced by immigrant communities in the wake of 9/11.



The findings of this study have broader implications for the representation of immigrant identities in literature. By analyzing the specific case of “Home Boy,” the study provides a framework for examining how other works of immigrant literature utilize humor and irony to explore themes of displacement, identity, and resilience.

Delimitations

Keeping in view the objectives, this study is delimited to an analysis of H. M. Naqvi’s “Home Boy” and does not extend to other works by the author or similar novels within the genre of post-9/11 literature. Further it is demarcated to instances of humor and irony within the text, excluding other literary devices and techniques that may also contribute to the novel’s themes and messages. The analysis is also confined to the main characters—Chuck, AC, and Jimbo—and their use of humor and irony. Secondary characters and their roles will be considered only insofar as they contribute to the main characters’ experiences and the overarching themes.

Methodology

A qualitative research design is adopted to deeply explore the textual and thematic elements of “Home Boy.” This approach is suitable for capturing the complexities and nuances of humor and irony in the novel. The primary method of analysis is close textual reading. This involves a detailed examination of the text to identify instances of humor and irony, understanding their context, and interpreting their significance within the narrative. The main source of data is H.M. Naqvi’s novel “home Boy.” The study involves a thorough reading of the novel, focusing on passages that exemplify the use of humor and irony. Freud’s theory of humor and are used to interpret the functions and implications of humor and irony in the novel.

Literature Review

Humor and irony have long fascinated scholars across disciplines, from psychoanalysis and psychology to literary and cultural studies. Both devices offer important insights into how individuals and communities navigate adversity, articulate identity, and engage in critique. In the context of post-9/11 immigrant fiction such as H.M. Naqvi’s Home Boy, humor and irony become more than stylistic choices; they emerge as coping mechanisms for diasporic subjects negotiating suspicion, alienation, and trauma, while also serving as rhetorical strategies that challenge dominant socio-political narratives. This literature review surveys key contributions from psychological, psychoanalytic, and literary theory to establish a foundation for analyzing the novel’s distinctive use of humor and irony.

Psychological Theories of Humor

The psychological exploration of humor begins most prominently with Sigmund Freud’s essay *Humor* (1928). Freud conceptualizes humor as a defense mechanism, a psychic strategy through which individuals can gain relief from anxiety and pain. For Freud, the humorous attitude allows the ego to triumph over external difficulties by refusing to be overwhelmed by them. Laughter, in this sense, represents not frivolity but resilience, a refusal of despair in the face of suffering. This framework is particularly useful in understanding diasporic narratives like Home Boy, where humor is mobilized by immigrant characters to manage the stresses of discrimination and displacement. Freud’s psychoanalytic perspective highlights how laughter can mask, and simultaneously release, deeply felt anxieties.

Subsequent psychological research builds on and expands Freud’s insights. Lefcourt (2001), in *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*, situates humor within the positive psychology paradigm. He argues that humor fosters optimism and buoyancy, enabling individuals to withstand adversities without succumbing to despair. Humor is not merely escapist but adaptive: it allows people to reinterpret their struggles in ways that diminish their destructive



potential. In the stressful environment of post-9/11 America, where South Asian immigrants faced heightened surveillance and prejudice, Naqvi's characters embody Lefcourt's notion of humor as a buoyant strategy for enduring hostility.

Similarly, Martin's *The Psychology of Humor* (2007) offers a comprehensive overview of how humor functions across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Martin emphasizes that humor serves intrapersonally as a means of regulating negative emotions and interpersonally as a tool for bonding and creating solidarity. This dual function becomes particularly relevant for diasporic communities, where humor often builds communal resilience while also lightening individual burdens. In *Home Boy*, humor shared among the protagonists binds them together, creating a protective subculture that allows them to laugh in the face of discrimination and fear.

Further empirical insights are provided by Kuiper, Martin, and Olinger (1993), whose study on coping humor demonstrates that humor directly shapes cognitive appraisals of stress. They found that individuals who habitually use humor in stressful situations are more likely to view such situations as challenges rather than threats. This aligns directly with Naqvi's characters, who, despite facing the trauma of racial profiling and suspicion, frequently reinterpret their circumstances through humorous banter. Rather than succumbing to despair, they transform adversity into irony, preserving psychological stability. Taken together, these psychological frameworks illuminate humor as a multifaceted coping mechanism essential for survival in hostile environments.

Literary Theories of Irony

Parallel to psychological approaches, literary theory offers rich analyses of irony as a cultural and rhetorical force. Linda Hutcheon's *Irony's Edge* (1994) provides one of the most influential conceptualizations of irony in contemporary criticism. Hutcheon emphasizes that irony is fundamentally relational, dependent on shared cultural knowledge between speaker and audience. It is not merely a matter of saying the opposite of what is meant but a layered communication strategy that can expose, contest, and resist dominant narratives. In diasporic literature, irony often operates in this oppositional capacity, enabling marginalized authors to destabilize stereotypes and critique systems of power. In *Home Boy*, irony becomes a tool through which Naqvi critiques American multiculturalism, exposing its contradictions in a post-9/11 climate of suspicion.

Claire Colebrook (2004), in her study *Irony*, expands this view by situating irony within larger philosophical and aesthetic traditions. For Colebrook, irony is not only a rhetorical device but a way of thinking that destabilizes fixed meanings and unsettles ideological certainties. Irony reveals the contingency of all cultural truths, making it especially pertinent for diasporic narratives that inhabit liminal spaces between cultures. When Naqvi's characters deploy irony, they resist both American essentialisms and nostalgic versions of South Asian identity, thereby articulating a more fluid and hybrid subjectivity. Irony thus functions not just as humor but as a critical epistemological stance.

Both Hutcheon and Colebrook highlight irony's subversive potential, which resonates strongly in the context of *Home Boy*. Naqvi's irony punctures stereotypes of South Asian immigrants as either model minorities or terrorist suspects, revealing the absurdity of such reductive categorizations. At the same time, irony allows Naqvi to critique South Asian elites' own pretensions and contradictions, demonstrating irony's capacity to critique multiple cultural spheres simultaneously.

Humor, Irony, and Diasporic Literature



When applied to diasporic writing, the convergence of psychological theories of humor and literary theories of irony becomes particularly illuminating. Diasporic subjects often face dislocation, alienation, and marginalization, experiences that are mitigated through humor and irony. Humor allows for psychic survival, while irony destabilizes dominant discourses that perpetuate exclusion.

Khan (2011), in his article “Humor and Satire in H.M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy*,” provides a direct application of these insights. He argues that Naqvi employs humor and satire as narrative strategies that both alleviate the anxieties of his characters and critique the socio-political realities of post-9/11 America. Naqvi’s protagonists cope with suspicion and hostility by deploying humor that renders absurd the very stereotypes used to marginalize them. For instance, their witty banter and playful cultural references reframe their marginalized status as a form of resistance rather than victimhood. Khan situates *Home Boy* within a broader South Asian diasporic tradition where humor and satire serve as modes of survival and critique.

Diaspora studies more broadly have recognized humor as a central strategy for negotiating hybridity and displacement. Humor allows diasporic subjects to re-narrate experiences of alienation in ways that generate resilience and even joy. Irony complements this by exposing the absurdities of nationalist and racial essentialisms that underpin exclusionary practices. In *Home Boy*, this dual function is vividly apparent: humor allows the protagonists to survive the hostility of their adopted homeland, while irony critiques both the American “war on terror” and South Asian elites’ complicity in reproducing hierarchies of class and identity.

The literature reviewed demonstrates the intertwined roles of humor and irony as both psychological and literary phenomena. Freud (1928), Lefcourt (2001), Martin (2007), and Kuiper et al. (1993) provide psychological frameworks that establish humor as a vital coping mechanism capable of sustaining resilience and optimism in the face of adversity. Hutcheon (1994) and Colebrook (2004) contribute literary frameworks that emphasize irony’s power to contest, destabilize, and subvert dominant cultural narratives. Khan (2011) bridges these domains by applying the insights of both humor and irony directly to *Home Boy*, situating Naqvi’s narrative strategies within the context of post-9/11 diasporic literature.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that humor and irony in *Home Boy* are not ornamental but essential. They allow Naqvi’s characters to survive psychological stress while articulating critiques of the social and political structures that marginalize them. The psychological theories explain the affective functions of humor as resilience, while literary theories reveal irony’s cultural and political dimensions. This synthesis underscores the novel’s distinctive contribution to post-9/11 immigrant narratives, where laughter becomes both shield and weapon, survival strategy and critique.

Theoretical Framework

Freud’s theory of humor is foundational in understanding how humor serves as a psychological coping mechanism. According to Freud, humor allows individuals to release psychic tension and gain pleasure from otherwise distressing situations. Freud considered humor to be a higher-level defense mechanism. Unlike more primitive defenses (such as denial or projection), humor allows for a healthy way to cope with stress, anxiety, and inner conflict. It helps individuals to confront difficult situations with a lighter attitude, thus reducing the emotional impact. In “*Home Boy*,” Chuck and his friends use humor to alleviate the stress of living in a post-9/11 world where they are viewed with suspicion and hostility. Freud’s notion that humor can act as a defense mechanism, helping individuals to confront and manage their anxieties, is critical to understanding the characters’ reliance on humor.



Building on Freud, Relief Theory posits that humor provides a release from psychological tension, anxiety, and stress. This theory is particularly relevant to “Home Boy,” as the characters frequently employ humor to mitigate the pressures of their marginalized status. The humor in the novel often emerges in situations of high tension or discomfort, serving as a way to diffuse these moments and maintain psychological equilibrium. In “Home Boy,” the characters’ humor not only helps them cope with their individual circumstances also functions as a critique of the broader social environment. Their jokes often highlight the absurdities and contradictions of post-9/11 American society, implicitly calling for a reassessment of cultural attitudes and behaviors.

Text Analysis

“Home Boy” follows the story of three Pakistani friends—Chuck, AC, and Jimbo—living in New York City. The novel explores themes of identity, displacement, and the impact of political events on personal lives. The use of humor and irony plays a crucial role in highlighting these themes and providing a means for the characters to cope with their realities.

According to Sigmund Freud theory of Humor and relief

“humor serves as a mechanism for releasing repressed thoughts and emotions. This release provides relief from psychological tension and is a way to express forbidden desires or socially unacceptable thoughts in a socially acceptable manner.”

The characters often resort to humor to mask their fear and anxiety, especially in the post-9/11 environment. Chuck’s witty observations and AC’s sarcastic remarks serve to lighten the mood in otherwise tense situations. In “Home Boy,” humor is a vital tool for Chuck and his friends to manage the psychological stress associated with being South Asian immigrants in post-9/11 America. One example is Chuck’s self-deprecating humor about his ethnicity and cultural differences. By making light of his own identity, Chuck reduces the anxiety that comes with societal alienation and prejudice.

“America is a bit like a cousin who gives you a ride to the dance and then steals your date.”

At time when Chuck refers to himself as a “brown boy in a white man’s world,” it encapsulates his reality with a mix of humor and resignation. This phrase, repeated throughout the novel, allows Chuck to confront his marginalization while simultaneously defusing its emotional impact.

Humor also serves to strengthen the bond between Chuck and his friends, AC and Jimbo. Their shared jokes and playful banter create a sense of camaraderie and solidarity, essential for psychological support in a hostile environment. For example their interactions often include humorous exaggerations and mock-serious discussions about their predicaments, which help to create a supportive network where they can collectively navigate their challenges.

“And so, we walked down Fifth Avenue, trying our best to look inconspicuous—an exercise in futility, I realized, as we were the only brown men wearing jackets and ties on a Sunday afternoon.”

Humor in “Home Boy” serves as a buffer against the stress and trauma the characters face. For instance, Chuck’s frequent use of self-deprecating humor reflects his struggle with identity and belonging. By making light of his situation, Chuck manages to maintain a semblance of control over his life. This aligns with psychological theories suggesting that humor can help individuals reframe their experiences and reduce the emotional impact of stressors .

Jimbo, on the other hand, employs humor to diffuse tension and foster camaraderie among his friends. His witty remarks and playful banter act as a social glue, reinforcing their bond amidst



external pressures. This use of humor highlights its role in enhancing social support, which is crucial for psychological resilience .

Jimbo's playful humor, while fostering social bonds, also hints at his underlying anxiety and need for acceptance. His jokes often deflect serious conversations, suggesting a reluctance to confront the deeper emotional impact of their experiences. This use of humor aligns with psychological findings that humor can serve both as a means of social connection and as a defense against painful emotions (Freud, 1928)

"In the meantime, we comfort ourselves with the knowledge that while we might be invisible to the White Man, at least we were legends in our own minds."

In this passage, Chuck and his friends use self-deprecating humor to deal with their feelings of invisibility and marginalization. By joking about their own perceived insignificance, they reduce the stress and emotional impact of being overlooked and underestimated in American society. This also satisfies what Freud psychoanalytical theory states suppress desires. Freud believed that humor allows unconscious thoughts to surface. Jokes and humor often reveal hidden desires, fears, and thoughts that are typically repressed. The pleasure derived from humor comes from the temporary liberation of these repressed elements.

"In a world gone mad, we laughed at our own misfortune. It was the only way to stay sane."

This passage illustrates how humor serves as a tool of empowerment for the characters. By laughing at their misfortunes, they assert control over their narratives and find a way to cope with the madness around them, maintaining their psychological resilience. This highlights overall situation of the immigrants who try to cope with the psychological distress. Laughter provide them the strength to face and accept their misfortune.

Mikhail Bakhtin's states, "Irony is used to critique cultural and social structures, revealing the contradictions and absurdities within dominant ideologies. Irony in literary texts is, sometimes used to expose and challenge power dynamics."

In "Home Boy," irony permeates the narrative and dialogue, often highlighting the absurdities and contradictions faced by the characters. For instance, the irony in Chuck's nickname, "The Kid," juxtaposes his actual experiences and maturity. Similarly, ironic situations and statements in the novel expose the characters' disillusionment with the American dream and the harsh realities of post-9/11 racial profiling and xenophobia. Naqvi's use of irony effectively underscores the characters' alienation and critiques the sociopolitical environment they navigate.

Irony in this novel serves a dual purpose: it reveals the characters' disillusionment with their environment and critiques societal prejudices. The ironic tone often underscores the absurdity of their situations, such as the invasive security measures and racial profiling they encounter. For example, AC's ironic comments about the "land of the free" juxtapose the ideals of American freedom with the reality of discrimination and surveillance, thus critiquing post-9/11 sociopolitical dynamics.

Irony in "Home Boy" is also used to reveal the contradictions and hypocrisies in American society, especially in the context of post-9/11 attitudes towards immigrants. Naqvi uses irony to underscore the gap between the ideal of American multiculturalism and the reality of discrimination and exclusion faced by immigrants.

For Example: A corporate diversity event where Chuck's company celebrates multiculturalism ironically exposes the superficial nature of such gestures. While the event is meant to promote inclusivity, it starkly contrasts with the everyday xenophobia and suspicion Chuck experiences.



Irony also serves to critique and subvert stereotypes about South Asians. The characters often mock the stereotypical views held by Americans, turning these stereotypes on their heads and revealing their absurdity. For example, Chuck's ironic commentary on being mistaken for a terrorist reflects a critical stance on the pervasive and reductive stereotypes that label all South Asians as potential threats. This irony not only critiques the stereotype but also empowers Chuck by allowing him to reclaim the narrative.

"We were a 'melting pot,' they said, as they handed out samosas and spring rolls. But it felt more like a salad bowl to me, where everyone was tossed together yet remained distinctly separate."

This passage employs irony to critique the superficial celebration of diversity in corporate America. The irony lies in the contrast between the ideal of the melting pot and the reality of continued cultural separation, highlighting the emptiness of tokenistic gestures of inclusivity.

"I was the American Dream gone wrong. A brown boy in a white man's world, straddling the hyphen between the motherland and the homeland."

This ironic statement captures Chuck's struggle with his dual identity. The humor in referring to himself as the "American Dream gone wrong" and the ironic observation of "straddling the hyphen" reflect his complex negotiation of his cultural heritage and his place in American society.

"America wanted us to assimilate, but only on its terms. We played along, but with our fingers crossed behind our backs."

The irony in this statement reveals the characters' critical engagement with the pressures of assimilation. By playing along with a sense of irony, they create a psychological buffer that allows them to engage with American society while retaining their cultural integrity and resisting full assimilation.

While humor allows the characters to cope with external pressures, irony provides a means to resist full assimilation. Through ironic detachment, the characters can critique and distance themselves from the aspects of American culture that they find problematic, maintaining a sense of cultural integrity. Example: Chuck's ironic observations about American consumerism and the superficial pursuit of the American Dream illustrate his resistance to wholly embracing these cultural norms. His irony acts as a buffer, allowing him to engage with American society critically and selectively.

Through irony, Naqvi exposes the contradictions inherent in the characters' experiences as immigrants. The characters' ironic detachment serves as a defense mechanism, allowing them to navigate a world that is often hostile and unwelcoming. This aligns with literary theories that view irony as a means to cope with existential anxieties and critique social inequities.

Humor and irony are key indicators of the characters' emotional resilience. Their ability to find humor in dire situations and to view their circumstances with an ironic lens demonstrates their mental fortitude and adaptability. Despite the constant threats and racial profiling, the characters' humor shows their refusal to be completely defeated by their circumstances. Irony and humor are employed to critique post-9/11 policies and their impact on immigrant communities. The characters' ironic observations highlight the injustices and irrationality of these policies.

Findings

The study focused on psychological implications of humor and irony. The characters' frequent use of humor helps them maintain psychological stability amidst post-9/11 xenophobia. Their



witty exchanges, such as Chuck's playful self-references as "brown boys" and "three musketeers", provide a sense of normalcy and control.

Through this research it was discovered that humor in this novel acts as a defense mechanism, allowing the characters to confront distressing situations with detachment.

The study explored that humor reinforces the characters' shared identity and sense of belonging. Inside jokes and cultural references, like AC's quip about being "the Ethnic Avengers" strengthen their bond and provide emotional support.

It was observed through in depth analysis of text that Naqvi had used irony to expose the absurdity of cultural stereotypes and racial profiling.

The paper delved into the fact that Irony deconstructed the idealized vision of the American Dream in Home Boy.

Conclusion

Through the close analysis of H.M. Naqvi's "Home Boy," it is clarified that humor and irony are pivotal coping mechanisms for the characters, reflecting their psychological resilience and serving as potent tools for social critique. The main characters, as South Asian immigrants in post-9/11 America, use humor to manage the psychological stresses imposed by xenophobia and prejudice. Their witty exchanges and playful banter not only alleviate stress but also reinforce their social bonds and shared identity, aligning with Freud's theory that humor releases psychic tension and serves as a healthy defense mechanism against stress and anxiety. Irony in "Home Boy" functions to expose and critique societal prejudices and cultural stereotypes. Through ironic observations and statements, the characters deconstruct the idealized vision of the American Dream, highlighting the contradictions and hypocrisies within post-9/11 American society. This use of irony empowers the characters and provides a critical lens through which they resist the cultural pressures of assimilation, aligning with Bakhtin's view that irony can reveal and challenge power dynamics.

This study of "Home Boy" underscores the significant roles humor and irony play in immigrant literature. These devices go beyond mere stylistic elements, functioning as essential tools for understanding characters' inner worlds and the broader social context. Humor offers relief from psychological stress, fosters social connections, and helps maintain identity amidst adversity. Irony, meanwhile, facilitates social critique, allowing characters to navigate and resist the cultural and societal pressures imposed on them. By examining the multifaceted roles of humor and irony, this research enhances our understanding of Naqvi's work and immigrant literature as a whole. It reveals how these devices address themes of identity, displacement, and resilience, emphasizing their importance in promoting psychological well-being and social critique. "Home Boy" thus provides a profound commentary on the immigrant experience in post-9/11 America, illustrating the enduring power of humor and irony in navigating complex personal and socio-political landscapes.

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