

Humour of Workers Protests and Economic Inequality in South Africa

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Abstract:

This study explores the intersection of humour and social activism in South Africa, focusing workers protests through the lens of Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theory. A live video recording of Trevor Noah's standup comedy serves as the primary data source, offering a unique perspective on the role of humour in reflecting and shaping social narratives. Using performance analysis, the study examines how humour is employed to critique and challenge social injustices, highlighting the complexities of power dynamics and resistance in South Africa. The analysis reveals how humour can be both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance, allowing individuals to navigate and challenge oppressive systems. The findings suggest that humour can play a crucial role in social activism, providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and amplifying demands for social justice. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between humour, power, and resistance, offering insights into the ways in which humour can be harnessed to promote social change and challenge systemic injustices in South Africa.

Keywords: workers, activism, stand-up performance, protest, inequality

Introduction

Stand-up comedy has long been recognized as both an ancient and modern performative practice, serving diverse roles across cultures and societies (Adekunle, 2009: 29; Adekunle, 2014: 68; Adekunle, 2017: 14; Adekunle, 2025: 82). Beyond its entertainment value, it is a communicative medium for peacebuilding and reconciliation among people of different nations, races, tribes, ages, and genders (Adekunle, 2024: 1). Its performance not only entertains but also addresses serious issues such as terrorism, kidnapping, and armed banditry, situating humour within global security concerns (Adekunle, 2025:40).

As a form of live theatre, stand-up performance offers its audience mirth and relief (Adekunle, 2020: 11), while functioning as a therapeutic tool in gender conflict resolution (Adekunle, 2020: 11; Adekunle 2021: 11; Adekunle 2023: 169). It equally critiques gender disparity across racial and cultural boundaries (Adekunle, 2019:135; Owen, 2022: 10),

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and operates as a corrective platform against police brutality (Adekunle, 2023: 12). Adekunle (2022: 80) emphasizes its linguistic richness, satirical power, and engagement with social ills, while also positioning it as a poetic oral art form rooted in cultural traditions (Adekunle, 2021: 39).

Stand-up comedy is not limited to cultural critique; it also intersects with tourism (Topler, 2022: 62), law (Alkiviadou, 2022: 50), and everyday social realities (Olson, 1988: 128). Scholars highlight its ability to reflect and refract contemporary society (Olson, 1988), to represent collective fears and hopes (Tafoya, 2009: 2), and to expose folly and irrationality through caricature and hyperbole (Holman, 2001: 36). In this sense, it is both a dramatic literature of amusement (Mintz, 1985: 71) and a stage performance grounded in visuals, histrionics, and social commentary (Onyerionwu, 2010: 3; Adekunle, 2017: 66).

Theories of humour further explain its social impact. Raskin (1985: 30) outlines three central frameworks – social-behavioural, cognitive-perceptual, and psychoanalytical – each linked to the suppression of depression in audiences. Kirkman (2006: 27) regards contradictions as the cognitive elements that provoke laughter, while Rutter (1997: 21) critiques the limits of incongruity theory in explaining comic structures. Adekunle (2014: 96) adds that hyperbolic humour lampoons societal weaknesses, while Limon (2000: 10) underscores the unique quality of laughter produced by live stand-up shows.

Physiologically, comedy contributes to stress reduction, blood pressure control, and immune support (Rutter, 1997: 13), making it both medicinal (Okon, 2010: 4) and stabilizing (Adekunle, 2009: 12). Afolabi (2002: 8) affirms that it embodies intellectual, physical, and spiritual human experiences in their most natural forms. Koziski (1984: 114) suggests that it addresses existential anxieties through laughter, positioning humour as a device for explaining human concepts of good and evil.

Scholars have also compared the stand-up comedian to historical figures such as the court fool, whose immunity permitted social critique (Ajayi, 1982: 13; Adeleke, 2001: 3). In Igbo culture, madness itself could serve as a mask for fearless truth-telling (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1999: 122), while Bodunde (2001: 95) reads this “madness” as an artist’s license to question authority. Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 195–196) interprets such performance as “permitted disrespect,” a balance of friendly and antagonistic expression.

At its core, stand-up comedy establishes a strong relational bond between performer and audience (Ross, 1988: 99), generates laughter in a relaxed atmosphere (Borns, 1987: 16), and functions as a painless way of acknowledging human folly (Grainger, 2010: 23). Katayama (2008: 217) even describes it as a levelling art form that transcends class, race, and culture.

While these critical perspectives have explored stand-up comedy's therapeutic, social, cultural, and political functions, little attention has been given to its role in labour struggles. This study, therefore, examines how South African workers deploy social activism to demand economic rights and challenge inequality as revealed stand-up performance below.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theory, which provides a framework for understanding the role of humour in social activism. Key concepts from Jung's theory that are relevant to this study include:

The Collective Unconscious

Jung's concept of the collective unconscious suggests that certain universal symbols, called archetypes, are shared across cultures and time. In the context of humour and social activism, the collective unconscious helps explain why certain types of humour resonate with people and inspire collective action.

The Shadow

Jung's concept of the shadow refers to the repressed or hidden aspects of the personality. In the context of social activism, humor can be used to confront and challenge the shadow, bringing attention to issues that are often ignored or suppressed.

Compensation

Jung's concept of compensation suggests that the unconscious mind can compensate for the one-sidedness of the conscious mind. In the context of humor and social activism, humour can be used to compensate for the powerlessness and marginalization experienced by certain groups, providing a means of resistance and empowerment.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach, using performance analysis to examine the role of humour in social activism. The methodology includes:

Data Collection

A live video recording of Trevor Noah's standup comedy serves as the primary data source. The recording is analyzed to identify themes, patterns, and meanings related to humour and social activism.

Performance Analysis

The study uses performance analysis to examine how humor is employed in Trevor Noah's standup comedy to critique and challenge social injustices. This involves analyzing the language, tone, and delivery of the comedy, as well as the audience's response.

Data Analysis

The data is analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, identifying patterns and themes related to humour and social activism. The analysis is guided by Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theory, which

provides a framework for understanding the role of humour in social activism.

Interpretation

The findings are interpreted in the context of the theoretical framework, highlighting the ways in which humour is used to promote social change and challenge systemic injustices in South Africa.

Results and Discussion

In South Africa, Trevor Noah comments in the excerpt below on the maladministration of top governmental functionaries, the nation's political gladiators' acts of corruption, and nonchalant attitude of the nation's government workers. Top government functionaries and the nation's political gladiators have sabotaged the economy of the nation; and letting the masses suffer a great deal, from the hardship of the economic perils. This effect has greatly affected every sector of the nation's economy. It has also led to insistent strikes of the National Union of Workers in South Africa. There is total showdown in the nation. Every sector is going down the drain. The end product of this economic hardship has made the workers unproductive and nonchalant to their work. Everyone work under tensions and loses interest in their work. The nation's political leaders lack frugality in expenditure of money and resources. They spend extravagantly on themselves, leaving the masses to suffer. They go scot-free without anyone serving as a check on their authority. Gould (2014:1) testifies to this that "the state was deeply corrupt at all levels, and those who held positions of power, whether as politicians or functionaries, were very seldom called to account before a court for acts of corruption or the abuse of power." Gould further reveals that the corrupt government officials appear to act with impunity, or cynically, by using the criminal justice system to dodge very serious allegations of their abuse of power and mismanagement of the state resources. By so doing, many of the South African citizens lack respect for the rule of law.

Trevor Noah:

Something I feel we have lost in South Africa, is part of our culture, we used to be a friendly nation. We used to be people of smiler, people of talkers, now, we got that thing, that anger,that distrust when we look at one another. I know what happens; we just lost it you know. You see workers in this country; they are so angry. All the workers, they are on strike, you know. We have 99 strikes this year alone, 99 strikes, costing us billions. All different sectors: National Mining Workers, Union of Metro Workers, Petrol Attendances, yea, they are threatened to burn petrol station down [say]: "we come into the crowd with our petrol bomb. We just need someone to pour petrol for us, because we are on strike". Refuse law [lampooning the Unions of Workers]. Everyone was on strike, but there is one strike in particular that occurs to me, City Power. You see that, the illegal strike of city power that left thousands of households in Johannesburg, without electricity. One household in particular occurred to me, the House of

Nelson Mandela. In the mid of the night out of nowhere, you know now horrible that must have been. Nelson Mandela does not need electricity for his Big Screen TV's people. Nelson Mandela needs that electricity "because he has machines keeping him alive" That Is Critical but Stable. I don't know, what that means. The government told me, is in oxymoron, Critical but Stable. How is Bafana doing? They all losing, but dwindling. But no electricity in the house of Nelson Mandela, guys. You, I said, this the second time we let him down, second time. The first time was with the ambulance, you remember that, yea. Nelson Mandela got lung infection; he needed to go to the hospital. Ambulance picked him up from his home and then got stuck on the side of the highway for Four Hours, Four Hours...Many people in Parliament have four to seven cars everywhere they go, causing chaos on the road. Many people have been killed by them, crushing into cars, because they are always in a hurry. Why are you given bodyguards? I don't understand? Yes, some people here, like President, yes, giving bodyguards, Minister of Finance, keeping our money, yes, bodyguards. Why some Ministers are just wasting money? Minister of Agriculture, why are you even in a hurry? You have a lowest portfolio. Why are you going? Nothing happens in Agriculture hurry. Why are you in a hurry? Why do you have bodyguards? Who is trying to kill you? The cabbage Mafia, eh, no guys, just be in the traffic and shut up, stop wasting our money (Trevor 2015 (Appendix SA)).

In the above excerpt, Noah is seriously calling his fellow South African people to order, through communal consciousness and social enlightenment. He wants them to be patriotic citizens of the nation. This is a clarion call to nation building, and unselfish interest of individuals. The people have lost trust in one another. They are bitter in carrying out their responsibilities, to their nation, and to one another "all the workers, they are on strike, you know. We have had 99 strikes this year alone, 99 strikes, costing us billions. All different sectors: National Mining Workers, Union of Metro Workers, Petrol Attendances, yea, they have threatened to burn petrol station down". Therefore, Noah Trevor sees the industrial action as a "refuse law". It means that "the industrial action" is unrecognized and illegal. Apart from this, "the 99 strikes" and "industrial action" are connotatively referred to as obstacles that decline the nation's growth, development and capacity building.

The economy has been sabotaged, through insistent strike, and corrupt practices of the top government functionaries. The nation's workers went on strike for 99 times in a single year. The workers were not paid; and all the money and the resources that are meant for the nation's capacity building and development are diverted to their own personal purses, and used for their selfish interest. This has caused insistent power failure in South Africa, across every nook and cranny of the nation. The illegal strike of the electric power workers has left thousands of households in total darkness, especially the house of Nelson Mandela, the country's national hero and freedom fighter, and the former President of the country. Mandela fought for the nation's freedom, at the expense of his life.

However, Mandela was highly disappointed, when he needed the nation's help. There was no electric power supply that was needed to keep his life-support machine working, to keep him alive: "everyone was on strike, but there is one strike in particular that occurs to me... the House of Nelson Mandela. Nelson Mandela needs that electricity because he has machines keeping him alive". In this critical moment of Nelson Mandela's life, things became worse for him. He was completely neglected to his fate. The only consolatory message the country's higher authority gave to her citizenry is that Mandela's condition is critical, but stable. Noah ridicules the South African Government for such a statement issued on Mandela's health. He sees this expression as an oxymoron; as a way of playing pranks on South African citizenry. It is a way of dodging governmental responsibility towards Mandela, and, at the same time, using it to hide their weaknesses for not being able to act on time, for his rescue "that Is Critical but Stable. I don't know what that mean".

In the same vein, when Mandela has lungs infection problem, he needed an ambulance to take him to the hospital. Ambulance picked him up from his home, and, then, got stuck on the side of the highway for four hours. There was no escort to pilot the ambulance to the hospital. He suffered for several hours in the traffic jam. Mandela was held up for several hours. This is to show how inhumane the higher authorities of the nation are towards their fellow citizens. They do not care for the safety of lives of their fellow citizens. Mandela was abandoned in the critical moment of his life "Nelson Mandela got lung infection; he needed to go to the hospital. Ambulance picked him up from his home and then got stuck on the side of the highway for Four Hours, Four Hours". This is a high level of inhumane and degrading treatment of Nelson Mandela, and the entire humanity. To support the view of Trevor Noah, Brodie (2014: 5) asserts that "if this was done it would go a long way to empowering communities to better understand and respond to safety issues. Access to information would promote a more active citizenry to become involved in contributing to public safety as envisaged in the National Development Plan".

Moreover, instead of the Parliamentarians showing concern about the welfare of their people, they keep on acquiring wealth for their own selfish interest, and leaving the people to die in abject poverty. Some of them have four to seven cars as escort everywhere they go. They are wasting the nation's money and resources. Some of their cars run into the crowds and kill several people. They are always in a hurry. They keep bodyguards around. According to Noah, some Ministers, like Minister of Agriculture, are not meant to be given bodyguards or be in a hurry when going to their duty posts, or going for their official assignments. There is nothing urgent in the Ministry of Agriculture, so, why should the Minister of Agriculture be in a hurry, or have many bodyguards? These are the

interrogative questions that the stand-up comedian, Trevor Noah, is asking “many people in Parliament have four to seven cars everywhere they go, causing chaos on the road. Many people have been killed by them, crushing into cars, because they are always in hurry. Why are you given bodyguards? I don’t understand? Why some Ministers are just wasting money? Minister of Agriculture, why are you even in a hurry? You have a lowest portfolio. Nothing happens in Agriculture hurry”. This is to show the extent of decadence in the South African nation. The political leaders are uncaring, inhumane, and absolutely corrupt. They see themselves as larger than the entire society. They are completely rulers not leaders. Rulers are dictators, while leaders lead by examples.

In conclusion

Gould (2014:1) confirms that “we thus entered our new dispensation with impunity entrenched, and so it has remained for those who hold positions of power and influence”. The ruling classes hide under impunity to perform their nefarious activities. They do whatever they like without anyone restraining them. This is the main reason why Trevor Noah uses this stand-up to conscientize his audience, the South Africans, about their rights. He wants them to fight for their rights and also liberate themselves from the hands of the ruling class.

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