

Humour as Self-Deprecation in *Born a Crime: Stories from South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah

Sandiso Ngcobo*

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Abstract:

Born a Crime: Stories from South African Childhood is a captivating memoir penned by a globally acclaimed South African comedian, Trevor Noah, delving into the hardships he and those around him endured during the oppressive Apartheid-era government and colonialism. This article analyzes instances where the comedian author employs a self-deprecating humour style to add depth to his narrative of stories from South African childhood. To conduct this analysis, we adopt cognitive and incongruity theoretical frameworks. Our methodology is qualitative, involving the analysis of selected texts to present thematic data. The findings reveal that the author's transparency about his life, from the title of the book to his relationships with others, delves into painful details of his childhood experiences during the traumatic history of the nation in which there was oppression. However, he presents these experiences with self-deprecating humour that simultaneously entertains and educates readers about the socioeconomic issues prevalent in South Africa at the time. Noah's storytelling strategy can be understood within the context of comedians' freedom to explore sensitive matters about themselves to entertain their audience.

Keywords: Apartheid, communication, self-deprecating humour, South Africa

Introduction

Humour in the literature serves as a powerful tool to address sensitive subjects (Untarini et al., 2022). Humour is so powerful that it can serve as a coping mechanism not only to deal with a difficult childhood but also to heal the past suffering of the whole nation (Ngcobo & Roya, 2023). It offers a means to alleviate the weight of stressful or traumatic situations through a more lighthearted approach to communication (Ellithorpe et al., 2014; Meyer, 2000; Sorensen, 2008). By skillfully presenting inconsistencies, authors aim to elicit amusement from their audience (Baisley & Grunberg, 2019; Sorensen, 2008). This

* Associate Professor PhD, Department of Communication, Mangosuthu University of Technology, South Africa, sandiso@mut.ac.za

technique effectively captures the attention of readers, directing it towards the core message in the hopes of influencing their future behavior and attitudes. Authors can employ humor to raise awareness of social or political issues, encouraging the audience to reflect on and contribute to societal transformation (Sorensen, 2008). In pursuit of this objective, comic authors may even employ humor at the expense of their personal lives and those of others around them.

However, not everyone has the skill to express humor in communication. Achieving the status of a comedian requires great effort to ensure that the audience finds amusement in their words. In the process, it is not uncommon for comedians to tackle sensitive topics head-on, even those considered taboo by society. They may poke fun at politicians, religion, racism, tribalism, sexual orientation, and gender inequality. Surprisingly, the audience would not complain about these jokes but rather find humor in the unexpected remarks. Furthermore, comedians often go to the extent of making jokes about themselves, a style known as self-deprecating humor or self-putdowns (Russell, 2002). Self-deprecating humor involves joking about oneself as an individual or as a member of a group, embracing stereotypes and accepting one's shortcomings to alleviate tension (Ellithorpe et al., 2014; Rawlings & Findlay, 2013; Shaikh & Vyas, 2022). Comedians may use satire or criticism against themselves to achieve humor (Kallergi, 2020). However, it is important to note that these self-assignments do not indicate self-hatred or self-censorship. Instead, they serve to diffuse tense social or political situations, accommodate others' perspectives, and gain favor by sacrificing themselves (Russell, 2002; Tsukawaki et al., 2019). Furthermore, self-deprecation is encouraged because it promotes positive humor that contributes to friendship, tolerance, and self-affirmation (An et al., 2023; Dynel & Poppi, 2020). Sharing self-defeating humor is a sign of positive self-esteem, as it allows people to laugh with others at stereotypes rather than being laughed at (Brown et al., 2019; Rawlings & Findlay, 2013; Shaikh & Vyas, 2022). Ask and Abidin (2019) content analysis of student memes in a Facebook group found that self-deprecation humor was used to avoid displaying a perfect appearance but to share real daily struggles as they went through life.

As simple as it might sound, humour is paradoxical. This is because, while it is easy to recognise and appreciate, it is at the same time difficult to describe analytically and empirically in a satisfactory manner (Alm-Arvius, 2010). However, this has not prevented studies on humour. Humour has been studied across different disciplines and in multidisciplinary studies such as philosophy, business, marketing, linguistics, anthropology, intercultural studies, leadership, health, psychology, linguistics, and sociology. However, research that examines humour in literature and linguistics is underdeveloped because of the

tendency to focus on serious writing. Humour or comedy in literary studies suffers from the perception that it lacks value, status, seriousness and is lightweight when compared to tragedy that is considered deep, dark, and heavyweight (Cheetham, 2003). This ignores the value of humor as a means of communication that is essential to human life and a crucial competence for a successful social life (Borisova, 2019; Harakchiyska & Borisova, 2020). It is no wonder that when people are asked about the preferred characteristic in a communicator or their partner 'a sense of humour' often receives a mention and admiration. Indeed, a sense of humour is essential in establishing and sustaining social networks and social groups (Zeigler-Hill et al. 2013).

In the context of this article, Trevor Noah writes about himself and the people around him during the traumatic period in South African history when there was Apartheid and colonialism. This period was associated with racial and tribal tensions. Since he is a world-renowned stand-up comedian, his writing makes an interesting case of examination of how he uses self-deprecation humour about his life and the people he interacted with (trevornoah.com). Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to outline the extent to which Trevor Noah employs self-deprecating humour to entertain the readers whilst sharing his story and that of many South Africans during his childhood.

Theoretical Framework

Humor is multidisciplinary and is hence studied drawing from various theories. Similarly, this paper draws from two theories to tackle the use of self-deprecating humour as a style in literary work. The two are incongruity and cognitive theoretical frameworks.

Various competing scientific theories are used to study different ways in which humour occurs. The three prominent are the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. Firstly, the superiority theory asserts that the audience would laugh when the joke is about superior people or subjects reduced to inferiority by joking about them, such as politicians or religion. Second, the relief theory views humour as the moment when we laugh to release tension caused by fear, anger, and stress. This would include the humor created during and after the period of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) to release stress and cope with its severity (Zahoor, 2020). Lastly, and widely accepted, is the incongruity theory which portrays humour as emerging when what we understand and expect about the world is suddenly presented in an inconsistent, illogical, or unexpected manner to trigger amusement or enjoyment (Cheetham, 2003; McGhee, 1979; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). The incongruity theory entails the presentation of political, social, family and religious situations, concepts, or ideas in an inconsistent, unrelated,

or incongruent manner to evoke laughter in the audience (Mohamed & Bnini, 2020). However, when humor is in written form, it is not the same as when it is communicated in person, where the punch line would be clear in the ending of the story. As such, the reader might just smile or be in good spirits without necessarily laughing loudly (Cheetham, 2003).

Humour is cognitive in that as the audience listens or reads, they already build the possible outcome of the story in their minds from what they are used to (Canestrari & Bianchi, 2013). However, when the build-up of the storyline presents an unexpected shift or incoherent punch line, also known as the closing element, the audience finds the incongruity or the contradiction humorous (Canestrari & Bianchi, 2013). At the same time, humour is a creative product that is not accidental. Comedians think and prepare these punch lines in their minds and present them in written text or person using language, whether verbal or/and nonverbal (Azeez & Al-Bahrani, 2019). It is in this sense that humour involves sudden changes in perceptions, thoughts, and expectations that it is regarded as a cognitive phenomenon (Morreall, 2009). Moreover, humour has cognitive benefits for patients and ordinary people (Menekli & Doan, 2021).

Methodology

The methodology is qualitative and descriptive, in which Trevor Noah's autobiography is a case study that is subjected to analysis. It is a desk-top study in which the literature is reviewed and data are collected from the electronic copy of Noah's (2016) book. The collection and analysis are, however, limited to the first part of the book that has eight chapters. The collected data are presented in three themes that are consistent with the objectives and questions of the study.

Findings and Discussion. Suffering

The story opens with a near-rape and death incident in which Noah, aged nine, is thrown out of a speeding minibus taxi by his mother, Patricia, who also has to jump out with her little child, Andrew. Once they are safe after running, Noah sees humour in the whole experience because he was half asleep when it happened. He says the men chasing them would have woken him up before killing him, unlike his mom who just threw him out of the vehicle in his sleep. They argue with his mother saying 'Thanks to God' that they were safe and Noah asserts that it was a punishment from God for not staying home when his car would not start. This exchange of words ends with them 'laughing together through the pain'.

Noah writes about gender-based violence (GBV) within his extended family as if it were a small matter. Dinky used to physically abuse Noah's aunt, who would retaliate by chasing Dinky with a pot of

hot water just “to teach her man a lesson” rather than ending it with ‘hot cooking oil’.

Joking about yourself

Noah describes his relationship with his mother as similar to that of the “Tom and Jerry” cartoon because his mother was always chasing him when he misbehaved. When she could not catch him, she would shout ‘Thief’ to draw the attention of the community to help. Since the community was intolerant of crime, they would not hear his pleading that “I am her son!”.

The second chapter is titled ‘Born a crime’ to poke fun at the fact that he was born a racially mixed child during apartheid. At the time ‘one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race’ because it was ‘worse than treason’. Yet, he is quick to point out the irony of the whole thing because the same Dutch people who created this law were the first to have sexual intercourse with black people. After all, racially ‘mixed children’ were observed just ‘nine months’ after the arrival of the Dutch. To further complicate it, when the police caught them they would only ‘beat them, arrest them’ if they are black and ‘charged them with rape’. However, the white partner would get away with a warning and an excuse that they ‘were drunk’.

Part of the reason he was born to a twenty-four-year-old Xhosa woman is because most ‘prostitutes in town were Xhosa’ tribes that slept with white foreigners who were Portuguese or German, like his father. His birth certificate neither says he is Xhosa nor Swiss, but states that he is ‘from another country’. He describes himself as a ‘proof’ of his parents’ “criminality”. As such, he could not freely interact with his parents in a public space. His father would run away if he called him “Daddy” and chase him thinking “it was a game”. His mother also had to ask a coloured friend, Queen, to ‘act like my mother, and my mother would walk a few steps behind, like she was the maid’. This made his black mother look like ‘photobombing the picture’ when they took one together.

He describes the township of Soweto where his mother’s relatives stayed as designed so that the military could easily ‘bomb the shit of everyone’ in case ‘the monkeys’ tried to rebel against apartheid. When visiting Soweto he was not free to roam the streets because his “family could have been deported, my gran could have been arrested”, leaving one wondering where they would have been deported from their native country. When his cousins were playing with other black neighbors, he had to stay alone and had ‘to remember to be with people’.

Noah writes about the practice of witchcraft, ‘Mother Nature’, in South Africa to have your enemy killed. He exaggerates that ‘there are no tall buildings, few tall trees, nothing between you and the sky, so



people are hit by lightning all the time'. Should you be arrested and tried for murder, your 'attorney' argument cannot be 'Witchcraft is not real'. No, no, no. You will lose".

Noah likens family feuds among black poor people to the 'Game of Thrones', a popular television series based on a book series. He narrates that his mother would warn him not to eat anything when visiting the other family. Knowing that his mother was 'very Christian', he would ask her 'Why don't I just pray to Jesus and Jesus will take the poison out of the food?'

Politically Traumatic Experiences

The old racist government system was officially called apartheid to emphasise that it was based on keeping citizens apart from each other and treating them unequally by giving them different rights and privileges. However, Noah describes it as 'genius' because it promoted 'apartheid hate' not only across racial lines but also among black people who turned against each other based on tribalism. Thus, when democracy or freedom came with the release of political prisoners, it was described as a 'bloodless revolution' because no white people were killed. Instead, it was black people turning against one another that their "blood ran in the streets".

The Dutch were the first colonizers to enslave black people until they were stopped by the British. However, Noah describes the Dutch as 'the white tribe of Africa', because they later called themselves Afrikaners after developing a new culture and Afrikaans language made of a mixture of Dutch and African languages.

Noah illustrates apartheid for 'any American to understand' by comparing it to the treatment of natives in America who experienced forced removals, black people who were subjected to slavery and segregation. However, he says that all these three things happened to black people in South Africa 'at the same time' during apartheid.

Noah is surprised to learn that there was an option to go into exile to escape prosecution during apartheid. However, he fears that black people trying to sneak out of the country would have been 'thrown out of an airplane' and fractured all their bones and after healing from the hospital will be shocked to learn that they could have carried 'parachutes' to save themselves from this ordeal.

Naming/Identity/Apart-hate

The painful history of South African politics is centered on the system of government that was designed to keep people of different races and tribes apart in what became known as apartheid. However, Noah humorously uses the word 'apart-hate' to refer to the separation of people according to racial and tribal lines. He unexpectedly described

this system as ‘genius’, as it helped the white rule ‘divide and conquer’ the black nation that came to hate each other instead of focusing on the white enemy. This has gone beyond freedom, as tribal wars and hatred have continued.

Conclusions

To downplay the past traumatic history, Trevor Noah uses his skills as a comedian by bringing humour to his storytelling, even to the point of self-deprecating. In narrating his personal experience and how Apartheid impacted his upbringing, he also tells stories about people he interacted with whilst drawing attention to the socio-politics of that painful historical period.

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