

# Group and Female Solidarity: Humor in *Funny in Farsi*

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**Abstract** Firoozeh Dumas, an Iranian immigrant living in America, narrates her life story and inspires readers to laugh even at the most tense moments. She wrote her memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, in English. The article examines her humor as grounded in three major theories and analyzes different forms of comedic expression in *Funny in Farsi*. The article also seeks to establish to what extent humor used in *Funny in Farsi* is gender, ethnic and culture dependent. Dumas' humor, grounded in her unique social experience, develops positive social solidarity with other ethnic groups on the one hand and with her female readers on the other.

**Key words** Humor Theories; Ethnicity; Group Solidarity; Female Solidarity; Firoozeh Dumas; Funny in Farsi

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## **Introduction**

### 1.1 History of Iranian Female Humorists

In the early 20th century, Iranian women were not allowed to learn to write, although there were some families as exceptions. People believed that if women became literate they would write romantic letters to men and cause disgrace and shame to their families (GholamHosseinzadeh & et al). The growth of literacy and the formation of women's associations were among the measures that helped women become independent and gain a stronger sense of identity. Publications have had a major impact on the progress of women's equality during the past century. In addition to raising awareness of and emphasizing the importance of women's cultural contributions, advocating respect for women's rights at home and in larger society has had a positive role in promoting women's ability to express independent voices. These changes slowly provided a platform for the development of literacy and the acquisition of civil rights for women. On the other hand, in private and family settings, changing women's attitudes about gender changed their relationships with men as well.

Bibi Fatemeh Astarabadi (1858-1921) was the first female Iranian satirist, a writer of the Constitutional Era who wrote essays for influential magazines of her time, most of which were in defense of women's education. She was also the founder of the first women's school in 1907, attended by girls, mothers and grandmothers. She wrote *The Failings of Men*<sup>1</sup>, the first satirical book in response to *Edification of Women*<sup>2</sup>. The language in her book is harsh and derisive towards men who consider themselves civilized, ridiculing their attitudes and behaviors.

The bright and distinct presence of women humorists in Iran dates back to the 1940s which was the period of the social transition from traditional to modern life. In the years that followed, a handful of women satirists, in comparison to male ones, published their writings in magazines like *Tofiq* (Sadr). Contributions of two pages of *Caricature* magazine, gave independent identity to female humorists in the first decade of the 1950s but with the prohibition of sexual satire, the activity of the satirist women almost disappeared. In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, with morality review, sexual references became the red line in writing. Although, this opportunity seems to provide space for women's satirical literary expression, Iran's male dominant atmosphere restricts their works in this genre compared to other types of literature (Sadr). The social and cultural limitations play the most important and decisive role in inhibiting women's ability to develop and express humor.

## 1.2 Contemporary Female Humorists

In recent decades, Iranian women's humorous expressions have shown various

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1 Ma'ayeb al-Rejal

2 Tadeeb al-Nesvan published in 1288 by an anonymous prince in Qajar court

signs of changes, especially with women boosting their power by performing stand-up comedy. However this change and growth in humor are not significant for women living in Iran. Due to various obstacles in the way of female satirists in Iran, just a handful of them, such as Goli Taraghi and Mahshid Amirshahi, become significant figures. Zeynab Musavi, an Iran's taboo-busting stand-up comedian, explains the reason best. "Being a female standup comedian in Iran is like competing in a swimming competition whilst you are three meters behind the starting line and your hands and legs are tied," she told *The Guardian*, referring to a comparison one of her fellow comics has made. She continues: "The most difficult thing is to go on stage and tell viewers that I'm not [performing as] a woman, nor an Iranian, nor a Muslim, I'm not even pretty, nothing. I'm just a comedian, just watch my comedy" (*The Guardian*). In fact, humor for Iranian women is a method of resistance allowing them to shift oppressive scripts of discourse that discourage them from speaking to a context where they can speak on their own terms (Billingsley 20).

Those who have immigrated to and made their homes in other countries have made great fame worldwide. Some of them, most of whom are mostly second generation immigrants, perform as successful stage comedians, such as Shaparak Khorsandi, Zahra Noorbakhsh, Enisa Amani, and Negin Farsad. They speak to many issues through the lens of comedy, issues like American politics, Iranian culture, religion, race, humanity and Islamophobia. For them humor is a metaphorical masque and a device through which they negotiate the precarious position of immigrants' liminality.

### 1.3 Firoozeh Dumas, Life and Career

Firoozeh Dumas, born in Abadan, Iran, immigrated to USA with her family at the age of seven. She later attended UC Berkeley where she met and married a Frenchman. She has written two memoirs *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of Global Citizen* (2008) and a novel, *It Ain't so Awful, Falafel* (2016).

*Funny in Farsi* was on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times* bestseller lists. Jimmy Carter called *Funny in Farsi* "a humorous and introspective chronicle of a life filled with love \_ of family, country and heritage" (Steven Barclay Agency). *Funny in Farsi* has become part of the curriculum in junior highs, high schools, and colleges around the country and is now on the California Recommended Reading List for grades 6-12. Educators have found that Firoozeh's books are a gateway to many conversations, including shared humanity, immigration, language, family, and identity.

Firoozeh Dumas is a second generation immigrant and a careful observer of

her surroundings. She employs humor in her memoirs to communicate her concerns with her Iranian and American readers. She observes cultural difference between where she was born and the place to which she and her family immigrated while also finding the humor in and playfully portraying social interactions. Moreover, her intimate and peace-building language encourages readers to laugh in the tense moments that emerge from ethnic, gender and cultural differences. She currently traveling to different countries to convey the message represented in all her three books: “our commonalities far outweigh our differences” (Dumas Preface). In humorous narration of her life story she uses self-deprecation and gentle comedy and in doing so avoids attacking the people whom she depicts. She has a positive influence on the unity and solidarity of ethnic groups and female readers, by raising and reinforcing the already existing bonds. She introduces herself a citizen of the world and in her jokes does not differentiate between in-group or out-group members. At the same time, by adding an amusing tone in the conversation she conveys messages of solidarity. These qualities mark her as a strikingly distinctive and noteworthy memoirist.

### ***Funny in Farsi* and Three Big Theories**

#### 2.1 Superiority Theory

This is the earliest approach to humor, dating back to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and usually referred to as disparagement, aggression, or degradation theories. Plato stated that laughter originates in malice and we laugh at what is ridiculous in other people, feeling delight instead of pain when we see even our friends in misfortune (Morreall). Similarly, Aristotle saw comedy as the imitation of people who are worse than the average and viewed it as a “species of the ugly” (in *Poetics*, reprinted in Morreall 14). Later Thomas Hobbes advanced the general acceptance of the superiority view for several centuries. According to Hobbes humor is just play, a game that should not be taken seriously and is not intended to inflict actual harm. Individuals who tell ethnic jokes do not necessarily believe the stereotypes conveyed in their jokes. Gruner stated that “a stereotype is merely a very handy kind of shorthand to provide the essential framework for understanding the content of a joke” (qtd. in Martin 47). Gruner views humor as “playful aggression,” expressing a more positive perspective on superiority/disparagement theories than those held by traditional superiority theorists. Humor as “playful aggression” emphasizes feelings of well-being and success. Being able to poke fun at other people or situations that would normally be viewed as threatening or constrictive can create a sense of liberation and security (48).

Davies rejected the superiority/aggression theory of humor because it seems to confuse the playful aggression of humor with “real-world” aggression (Davies 326). Gruner argued that these objections reveal a misunderstanding of his theory (Martin 48). The aggressive side of humor is also evident in the merciless teasing that children often inflict on one another. A great many of the jokes that are so popular in our culture quite obviously involve the disparagement of others, including members of either sex (but most often women), various national or ethnic groups, or people of low intelligence. Sociologist Christie Davies described how people of every country and region make jokes about members of a particular nationality or subculture who are considered to be similar yet different enough from the cultural mainstream to be objects of ridicule.

In her vacation accompanying with other children of almost the same age, Dumas is questioned by a boy who poke fun on her appearance:

“Well,” he said, “do you look down a lot?” “No, why?” I asked. “Well, your nose points downward so I figured that’s because you’re always looking at the ground or something.” Upon hearing this, all the kids around me burst out laughing. (Dumas 46)

This account can be analyzed from a gender and ethnic point of view. Cantor found that both female and male college students showed greater appreciation for disparagement humor in which a male had the last laugh at a female’s expense, as compared to jokes in which a female disparaged a male. Furthermore, subjects of both sexes preferred disparaging jokes in which women (rather than men) were the victims of both men and women. Thus female, being perceived as the inferior and weak figure is made the target of fun. Furthermore, if we look at this event through an ethnic lens, the boy who is a member of an assumed superior ethnicity banter and laughs at the one assumed inferior.

However, Dumas’s expresses humor in a more measured tone. In Freudian theory there is a positive correlation between the amount of hostility present in a joke and its perceived funniness. Gruner stated that “usually, everything else being equal, the more hostile the humor, the funnier” (110). However, some researchers challenge this claim, arguing that “a moderate amount of hostility or aggression in humor is funnier than either too little or too much” (Martin 50).

Gruner argues that even jokes involving nothing more than a clever play on words can convey a sense of superiority (qtd. in Martin 54). Most of Dumas’s comedy in *Funny in Farsi* derives from superiority theory. This “humor involves a

pleasing realization of one's superiority to some other being" in which the "laughable person is one who exhibits some vice but is unaware of this flaw" (Shaw). When Dumas describes her childhood experience in Disneyland's Lost and Found place, waiting for her parents, another lost boy came in:

A few minutes later, the door opened and in came a screaming boy who looked to be a few years younger than I. As Team Comfort rushed to his side, it became ... In desperation, one of the employees turned around and started walking toward me with a big I-have-a-great-idea smile on her face. I knew what was coming. "Is that boy from your country?" she asked me. "Why, yes," I wanted to tell her. "In my country, which I own, this is National Lose Your Child at Disneyland Day." (Dumas 20)

She writes in detail about Americans' ignorance about Iran. When her classmates ask stupid questions at school, enquiring if they had camels in Iran, she delights in bantering with them, replying yes, they had camels.

"A one-hump and a two-hump the one hump belonged to my parents and the two humps was our family station wagon. His eyes widened "Where do you keep them?" he asked "In the garage of course told him" (Dumas 33)

## 2.2 Incongruity Theory

Incongruity theory refers to cognitive components of humor. "Humor occurs when there is a mismatch or clash between our sensory perceptions of something and our abstract knowledge or concepts about that thing" (Martin 63). According to incongruity theories, the comicalness of a joke depends on the unexpected or surprising nature of the punch line. The incongruity in Dumas' is what Bergman called a "hidden moral incongruity" behind which there is always a moral point to the joke. She amuses readers by enhancing the fun through both the expression of humor and its hidden moral.

While vacationing in the Bahamas with her husband and asking locals for directions, the only response would be offers to purchase coke. "They weren't talking about the fizzy drink" (Dumas 168). Later she asked the security guard of their hotel:

Why the police didn't do anything about all the people trying to sell coke on every corner. "The police are often in on it," he told us. "We have a lot of

wealthy cops in the Bahamas.”(Dumas 169)

This incongruous joke with a funny punch line encourages readers to laugh at the unexpectedness of characters’ statements and behavior, while she is highlighting the systemic corruption. Dumas’ jokes about her father conveys affection as well as respect for his hard work. The incongruity in Dumas comedy is represented mostly by unexpected though funny comments. Along with skillfully drawing on the humor of the unexpected, Dumas practices Bergman’s theory by consisting expressing veiled moral sentiments in a witty manner.

Throughout the school year, my father studied on weekdays; on weekends, he studied some more (Dumas 91).

### 2.3 Tension Relief and Coping with Adversity

Witty humorists “make fun of stupidity, incompetence, laziness, or other failings of the people who frustrate, irritate, and annoy them” to transform the threats and discomforts and “to minimize the feelings of distress that these others might cause, and derive some pleasure at their expense” (Martin 20). This aggressive form of tension relief humor helps individuals to cope with their adversity and it functions as “highest of the defense mechanisms” (Freud 216).

Firoozeh Dumas writes about being lost in a park as a child, retrospectively commenting humorously about the stressful experience.

“I’m lost,” I told him. “Okay,” he said in a kind voice. “Can you tell me what your parents look like?” I told him. “Now can you tell me what your parents are wearing?” he asked. No seven-year-old, except maybe a young Giorgio Armani, could tell you what his parents were wearing on a given day (Dumas 20).

Martin argues that “the greater the emotional arousal and tension engendered by the stressful events, the greater the pleasure and the louder the laughter when joking about them afterwards” (20). Humor for Dumas is a relief, a catharsis for her discomforts, as best expressed in her memoirs. Some of Dumas’ comedy is a “pleasant expression of her inconvenient environment or elimination of something painful or harmful” (Stebbins). She coped with her emotional discomfort living in a country with a far different culture through humor, with wit functioning as a veil hiding her distress.

## Different Forms of Humor

Martin divides humor that occurs in daily interactions into three categories: joke telling, spontaneous expression, and unintentional behavior. The first one deals with the canned jokes people use in their conversations and occupies the lowest percentage of daily laughter. The second category accounts for 72% of daily laughter arising spontaneously during social interactions, either in response to funny comments that people make or amusing anecdotes about personal experiences. The final category involves the laughter that arises from utterances or actions that are not meant to be funny and accidentally make others laugh (cited in Martin 12). Humor in *Funny in Farsi* involves mostly the second category. In her daily social interactions, Dumas produces a sort of context-dependent humor. Spontaneous conversational humor, according to Martin takes many different classifications and categories with regards to their intention and usage. Below are some types of humor from the text. The examples in this section can be studied and interpreted from a number of angles significant to the analysis of humor.

### 3.1 Irony

Irony is the expression of a statement in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning. Dumas draws on irony in the following passage:

I was stuck with the King Kong of all sleeping bags and nothing to put it in. Finally, my father, with his “mind of an engineer,” came up with a brilliant solution: a Hefty trash bag (Dumas 45)

“Mind of an engineer” encourages the reader to expect an impressive solution, but Dumas disrupts this expectation with an ironical punch line.

### 3.2 Satire and Sarcasm

While both satire and sarcasm qualify as aggressive humor, satire pokes fun at social institutions or policy and sarcasm targets an individual rather than an institution. Dumas targets an Iranian girl’s clothing which was not suitable for a parade.

With each breath she took, I expected her bosom to just break free and come out to watch the parade with us. (Dumas 136)

Dumas’ humor is gentle and usually avoids aggressive satire, favoring instead self-deprecation. She drolly describes her own family’s treatment of roots and culture as

being rather blasé and indifferent:

Abdullah, my shohar ameh, was a man of books, a learned man who enjoyed learning for its own sake. Fluent in Arabic, he had a particular interest in linguistic roots. In his thirst for knowledge, he stood alone. Potatoes, radishes, and turnips were the only roots my family cared about. (Dumas 98)

Similarly, she pokes fun at her own father's lack of interest in cultural heritage:

In the lobby of an art museum, his hostess had obviously thought that as an engineering student, my father could benefit from a bit of culture. Little did she know that the only culture my father was interested in was the kind in yogurt. My one memory of a family excursion to an art museum ended with my father asking, "Did we have to pay to get into this place?" (Dumas 92)

Dumas' purpose here is to portray shortcomings such as indifference to cultural experiences issues and heritage. She accomplishes this purpose through self-deprecating humor to win the attention and good will of readers and avoid causing offense.

### 3.3 Overstatement and Understatement

These forms of humor involve changing the meaning of something another person has said by repeating or paraphrasing it with a divergent meaning. As an example, Dumas hyperbolizes the seemingly hopeless experience of getting lost during the early days of their arrival in America.

She and I wandered aimlessly, perhaps hoping for a shooting star or a talking animal to help guide us back. (Dumas 6)

Dumas also uses an extreme analogy to describe her mother's unhappiness:

He (Dumas' father) was upset that my mother did not want to make time-shares a regular part of their twilight years. "Why can't you just go and have a good time?" he asked her. Perhaps the same can be asked of patients going to the dentist for root canals. (Dumas 80)

### 3.4 Self-deprecation

Most of Dumas humorous remarks target her. "This may be done to demonstrate modesty to put the listener at ease or to ingratiate oneself with the listener" (Martin 13). Dumas embraces the fun in laughing about herself, her family, and her nation of origin. She does not take herself too seriously and laughs at her follies and weaknesses.

The noses in my maternal lineage are all large and hooked. Gonzo, on Sesame Street, bears an uncanny resemblance to my mother's side of the family. (Dumas 162)

In making fun of her appearance, she works to create an intimate and friendly tone with readers. This manner of introducing herself to an audience extends a sense of good will, which helps her convey a message of solidarity.

### 3.5 Teasing

Teasing or banter involves humorous remarks directed at the listener's personal appearance or foibles. In contrast to sarcasm, the intention is not to seriously insult or offend. In narrating her school life Dumas describes funny banter and teasing. An example includes Dumas' interaction with a boy during her first bus trip:

"Well," he said, "do you look down a lot?" "No, why?" I asked. "Well, your nose points downward so I figured that's because you're always looking at the ground or something." Upon hearing this, all the kids around me burst out laughing. (Dumas 46)

Teasing among school children may result in harmful consequences (Douglass 2016) which usually ruin peers' intimacy. Dumas never talks about an intimate American friend in her memoir, which might be the result of such ethnic or racial teasing. She humorously narrates her unpleasant experience. Zin says: "Humor exposes ugly human phenomena (those that render the world almost unbearable) to mockery, in the hope of thereby eliminating them. (356)»

### 3.6 Clever Replies to Serious Statements

Humor in this category comes from a clever reply to a statement or question that was meant to be serious, as this exchange demonstrates:

"Is that boy from your country?" she asked me. "Why, yes," I wanted to tell her. "In my country, which I own, this is National Lose Your Child at Disneyland Day."

"No," I told her. "He's not from my country." (Dumas 20)

### 3.7 Transformations of Frozen Expressions

This form of comedy entails transforming well-known sayings, clichés, or adages into novel statements. In her language, Dumas uses different types of verbal humor to evoke laughter even at her own expense.

"He's not from my country." I had no idea where the screamer was from, but I knew he wasn't Iranian. A gerbil would never mistake a hamster for a gerbil, and I would never mistake a non-Iranian for an Iranian. (Dumas 21)

### 3.8 Allusion or Cultural References

The humor in this category references cultural, mythological or biblical phenomena. Firoozeh Dumas creates fun and memorable comedy by playing with real characters' name, situations, places and themes. Indeed, much of this humor requires prior cultural or biblical background knowledge. The following sentence is Dumas' comment on a boy who was lost in Disney Park and nobody understood his language.

Not only was he separated from his loved ones, he was now trapped in the Tower of Babel. (Dumas 21)

The Tower of Babel is a biblical and mythological reference to humanity with a language. The tower was ordered to be constructed by a tyrant and meant to reach heaven, an act of defiance against God. God scattered humans across the earth and divided them into different linguistic and cultural groups.

Unable to learn to swim under her father's instruction, Dumas comments that: "I was my father's Waterloo" (69), a final crushing defeat. She applies many familiar names in her work, much of them likely to be more familiar to her American readers.

Like a caterpillar morphing into a butterfly, my father magically transforms into Daddy Warbucks as soon as he sets foot in Iran. (Dumas 185)

My aunt dragged me out of the pool and, doing her best imitation of General Patton in a bad mood, announced that I was hopeless. When my parents joined us, she announced, "Firoozeh is a rock." (Dumas 72)

"Now can you tell me what your parents are wearing?" he asked. No seven-year-old, except maybe a young Giorgio Armani, could tell you what his parents were wearing on a given day. (Dumas 20)

### **Ethnic Humor in 'Funny in Farsi'**

Ethnic humor is defined by Apte as "perceived behaviors, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity" (qtd. in Cashmore 161). Ethnic humor makes fun of a group's specific traits such as race, language, appearance, behavior, ancestors, and homeland. Two basic modes of interactions according Mulkay are "serious and humorous." He suggests that a socially risky message is communicated through humor in a way that allows both the speaker and the audience to "save face" if the message is not

well received in an ambiguous context (qtd. in Martin 362). “Humor of this sort generates a considerable amount of mirthful laughter, but they also have a more serious underlying communication function” (Martin 366).

The problem with the religious explanation is obvious: nothing rhymes with “Muslim.” At least if you’re “Jewish,” you can feel “blue-ish” during Christmas, but with “Muslim” you’re just stuck. (Dumas 104)

By making a humorous remark about certain attitudes, feelings, or opinions, we can reveal something about ourselves in a way that allows us to deny it if it is not well received (Martin 117). Dumas jokes about different religions or races to see to what extent those attitudes are tolerated or accepted by others. For example she writes:

Before meeting me, François had a longtime French girlfriend. From all accounts, she was an intelligent and capable person. But she was Jewish. Her religion was a problem until François started dating me. Compared to a Muslim, the Jewish girlfriend didn’t seem so bad after all. I once asked François if there was anybody he could have dated that would have bothered his mother more. “Well,” he said, “a black Communist bisexual would have really irked her. (Dumas 141)

Despite the belief of most Westerners that all Middle Easterners look alike, we can pick each other out of a crowd as easily as my Japanese friends pick out their own from a crowd of Asians. It’s like we have a certain radio frequency that only other Iranian radars pick up. (Dumas 21)

Most of her jokes about her mother focus on her ignorance, which is rooted in her past and oppressive experiences, to inspire laughter among readers. She communicates her annoyance with embarrassing behavior of her ethnic group by means of humor that is gentle and non-aggressive.

My children know that a visit from their grandparents means a dozen packets of American Airlines peanuts. How do they get so many? My mother has a system. “I tell them that I’m visiting my grandkids and they love peanuts.” I assume that works better than telling the truth: “I’m paying \$150 for this seat and I would like the equivalent in free food” (Dumas 77).

Ethnic representation of her nation’s traditional system of marriage is expressed by Dumas’ amusing analogy.

Dating, like the rodeo circuit or trout farming, is a completely foreign concept to my parents (Dumas 142).

And when recounting preparing her wedding guest list, she writes:

I didn't know half the people on the list. "Who are the Abbasis and why are we inviting them?" I wanted to know. "They invited us to their daughter's wedding last year. Plus, they live in Australia. They won't come." They came, and they brought a niece with them. On a dozen occasions, invitations addressed to "Mr. and Mrs." came back announcing that six would be attending. Since our wedding was taking place in the summer, our guests who themselves had houseguests decided to just bring them along. We invited 140 people, 163 accepted; 181 showed up. (Dumas 145)

She describes her family's food preferences:

Sultani, a combination of lamb, beef, and chicken kebob on an enormous mound of rice. His order arrived, looking as though someone had just grilled an entire petting zoo. (Dumas 142)

According to Martin, "humorous communication reduces the risk of hostility and rancor that might be generated using a more serious mode of communication in confrontation" (120).

#### 4.1 Ethnic Names, a Source of Humor

When we use names in daily communications, correct pronunciation is crucial for proper and healthy interactions. Some people believe it is acceptable to mispronounce unfamiliar names, and in doing so focus only on their comfort levels. Encountering unfamiliar ethnic names in multicultural societies complicates this phenomenon. Members of an underrepresented ethnic or racial group "probably get tired of explaining or correcting it [their names]. The fix should come from the person who mispronounces it" (Pitlane Magazine). Dumas narrates her experiences with such difficulties:

My cousin's name, Farbod, means "Greatness." When he moved to America, all the kids called him "Farhead." My brother Farshid ("He Who Enlightens") became "Fartshit." The name of my friend Neggar means "Beloved," although it can be more accurately translated as "She Whose Name Almost Incites Riots." Her brother Arash ("Giver") initially couldn't understand why every time he'd say his name, people would laugh and ask him if it itched. ... nobody without a mask and a cape has a zin his name. (Dumas 62)

Douglass and et al. (2016) found that “teasing may be one way in which adolescents interact with their close peers and friends about ethnicity/race, and that such experience may have harmful individual effects that are consistent with general discriminatory experiences.” However, Dumas describes her painful experience through a lighthearted analogy: Exotic analogies aside, having a foreign name in this land of Joes and Marys is a pain in the spice cabinet (Dumas 63).

Dumas is a self-aware observer who “hold that things might be changed by a less tedious approach that is, by means of humor” (Ziv 357). Ziv believes that “Humor exposes ugly human phenomena (those that render the world almost unbearable) to mockery, in the hope of thereby eliminating them... In his efforts at changing and improving mankind, man turns matters he thinks grave into absurdities. He does this sometimes with delicate casualness, sometimes with disrespect, and sometimes with ferocity. The laughter that derives from the perception of absurdity reforms the world. (357)” In the following passage, Dumas’ use of humor illustrates Ziv’s description of its potential for social reformations and improvements:

My name, Firoozeh, chosen by my mother, means “Turquoise” in Persian. In America, it means “Unpronounceable” or “I’m Not Going to Talk to You Because I Cannot Possibly Learn Your Name and I Just Don’t Want to Have to Ask You Again and Again Because You’ll Think I’m Dumb or You Might Get Upset or Something.” My father, incidentally, had wanted to name me Sara. I do wish he had won that argument... Fifth grade in Whittier, where all the kids incessantly called me “Ferocious.” (Dumas 63)

Thus for Dumas humor has an “educational function,” reflecting Bergson’s theoretic emphasis on addressing detrimental behavior and advancing positive changes by strengthening healthy bonds and solidarity.

#### 4.2 Ethnicity, Stereotype and self-deprecating

Members of ethnic groups often employ humor to resist stereotypical tags. Describing an uninvited girl in her wedding party, who came in the hope of finding a husband, Dumas writes:

I like to think that she eventually found a husband, a tall Iranian doctor maybe, or perhaps a short Mexican businessman with a big heart, or a medium-built Irish Catholic book vendor whose family thinks she’s the best thing that ever

happened to their son. But regardless of her husband's ethnicity, one thing's for sure. If she did get married, there are a couple fewer lambs in Iran. (Dumas 153)

In addressing Iranian girls' aimless lives, the main end of which being marriage, Dumas references a stereotypical perception of Irish-Americans. At first glance, this comparison seems aggressive but according to Attardo and Raskin, forms of humor are not really aggressive at all: they simply make use of common stereotypes to play with ideas in an amusing way. Self-deprecation is another form of ethnic humor, as presented by Freud's representations of Jewish humor. Simon Critchley explains how this self-deprecating humor can be liberating and cathartic, and certainly a more ethical activity than externally directed joking.

For my American friends, "a visiting relative" meant a three-night stay. In my family, relatives' stays were marked by seasons, not nights (Dumas 24)

Dumas creates jokes that communicate her societal pressures by referencing stereotypical perceptions of a racial group historically perceived as superior. Moreover she skillfully expresses her internal conflicts about identity in American society.

Once I got married, my name became Julie Dumas. I went from having an identifiably "ethnic" name to having ancestors who wore clogs (Dumas 65)

My mother and I, because of her Turkish ancestry, possess a skin color that on Nicole Kidman is described as "porcelain" and on others as "fish-belly white." (Dumas 37)

This is why, in my next life, I am applying to come back as a Swede. I assume that as a Swede, I will be a leggy blonde. Should God get things confused and send me back as a Swede trapped in the body of a Middle Eastern woman, I'll just pretend I'm French. (Dumas 41)

Dumas injects subtle humor in many situations involving her own personality, traditions, nationality, and even visits to her relatives. In this way she creates an identity for herself as well. Kotthoff writes, "By joking at his own expense in a particular context a man can create an identity for himself as a 'new man' and a girl can use the same strategy to present herself as the "girl next door" (Kotthoff 2006). According to him humor in interactions can form an identity.

After my rendezvous with the welcoming committee, I searched the airport for someone carrying a sign with my name on it. Once I found her, I was greeted with “Where have you been?” I explained to her that I was a VIP, a Very Iranian Person, and things just take longer for us. (Dumas 133)

### **Gender Representation**

Deborah Tannen states that “men and women have somewhat different conversational goals: for women, the primary goal of friendly conversation is intimacy, whereas for men the goal is positive self-presentation” (Cited in Chiaro 135). These different goals are also reflected in the ways men and women use humor. Women more often use humor to enhance group solidarity and intimacy through self-disclosure and mild self-deprecation, whereas men more often use humor for the purpose of impressing others by appearing funny and creating a positive personal identity. Thus humor is a mode of communication that, along with more serious communication, is used to achieve gender-relevant social goals.

Dumas represents and explains the notions of what a woman should be and wants to be in the two distinctly different American and Iranian cultures. She criticizes Iranian feminine ideals dictating that a woman should marry, bear children and cook, and she complains about the injustice towards girls in Iran. Her aunt Sedighe didn’t have the same opportunity as her own three brothers who were engineers and doctors.

Sedigeh was not allowed to pursue her education past sixth grade and was married shortly thereafter. All her brothers became engineers and doctors. My father found this a huge injustice ... she would have become the best doctor of them all, for not only was she smart, she was resourceful as well (Dumas 100)

Her parents were always proud of their son:

My parents, both of whom are painfully shy, looked upon their outgoing anomaly just as Native Americans regard an albino buffalo—he (Farshid) was a miracle. (Dumas 43)

Most of Iranian women represented by Dumas are referred to as good cooks. She describes the women of her mother’s era as:

In her era, a girl’s sole purpose in life was to find a husband. Having an

education ranked far below more desirable attributes such as the ability to serve tea or prepare baklava (Dumas 5)

She critiques Iranian women for being more obsessed or burdened with cooking than pursuing their dreams, and she does so by employing gentle and playful humor.

No one was made happier by our foray into eating prepared foods than my mother, who, lacking both Iranian ingredients and Zahra, had a very difficult time cooking in America. The Colonel's secret recipe had set my mother free (Dumas 26)

In fact "Shake 'n Bake" does not have a translation equivalent in Persian "culture where slow cooking, not speed and ease, is the preferred method of food preparation and cooking is a duty, not an entertainment" (Excerpt from Firoozeh Dumas' new book). In the representation of Iranian women worrying about their beauty to please male partners, she begins by citing an example of a confident and an intellectual American woman, who was librarian in Berkeley University:

This woman had the ugliest nose I had ever seen. It was as if God, in a moment of confusion, had switched her nose with the beak of an exotic bird. I suspected that somewhere deep in the rain forests of Brazil, high in a mango tree, lived a toucan with a human nose. (Dumas 161)

Duma wondered why the American librarian didn't seem insecure and was able to move like a "beauty queen". She goes on to engage in broad satire about the role the nose plays in Iranian women's lives:

In Iranian culture, a woman's nose is much more than a breathing device; it is her destiny. (Dumas 161)

Dumas humor is not aggressive, but is instead gentle and funny and even sometimes self-deprecating with the hope of educating women to improve their self-esteem more than their physical appearance, which can lead to a happier and more enjoyable social and individual life.

I grew up thinking that it was normal to yell "Not the profile!" whenever a picture was being taken. Mine is the kind of nose that enabled me to impress

fellow high school students with my ability to balance a pencil and eraser between my nose and mouth. This enviable contortion act pretty much sealed my fate as the type of girl who never had to worry about buying a prom dress. (Dumas 162)

Dumas also critiques Iranian women's pressure to undergo cosmetic surgery, mostly nose jobs, in order to find good husbands. This illustrates Morgan's point that "women's attractiveness is defined as attractive-to-men" (243). In fact their act is not an act of freewill, and Morgan argues that it is a way of colonizing women's bodies. Dumas prioritizes the mind's beauty, emphasizing women's self-esteem and confidence. She writes:

I hate beauty pageants. This may have to do with the fact that I was one of those girls who learn early on that they will have to rely on their brains to open doors. It took me years to overcome the beauty expectations of Iranian culture and a few more years to overcome growing up in Newport Beach, where the standard of beauty involves rigorous exercise, bottles of hydrogen peroxide, and silicone. There was no way I was going to dip my toe in the dysfunctional pond of beauty pageants. (Dumas 173)

As a member in the committee of judges in a beauty contest, Dumas challenged and subverted the traditional emphasis on superficial qualities:

The girl we had selected was undoubtedly the underdog. She was quite overweight, she was the least physically attractive, and she had the smallest cheering section. She was, however, the most articulate...we were looking for depth, not beauty (Dumas 178)

Her humor is "undeniably female and feisty" (Darlington 331) when she talks about her dirty and greasy hair and body. She needed to bathe. She was powdered to play the role of ghost but rather she "resembled someone who'd been dunked in a vast of bread dough."

Among the women characters represented by Firoozeh Dumas, her mother Nazireh and her mother's sister aunt Parvin are able to shift their traditional views. Parvin was the first female in the family who pursued her education and achieved professional success. Her mother also pioneered the acceptance of a non-Iranian husband for Firoozeh Dumas.

Aunt Parvine has always been considered something of a deity in our family because she managed, despite being an Iranian woman of her generation, to become a doctor and to set up a successful practice in Geneva. (Dumas 71)

When her mother realized that she wanted to marry François, she said, “He will be like a third son to me,” and wiped the tears off her face. At that very moment, my mother threw aside everything she and her generation knew about marriage and entered a new world where daughters select their own husbands. She became a pioneer. (Dumas 144)

Moreover, Dumas is a Cixousian loyal female character. Fidelity is her salient feature as represented in her memoirs. She writes:

“Without my relatives, I am but a thread; together, we form a colorful and elaborate Persian carpet” (Dumas 103)

She has courage to assert herself and laugh at the traditions of her origin. This laughter according Billingsley can “be used to break the binds of masculine discourse, carrying a power to assert women as women distinct from men by pulverizing masculine-centric institutions, laws, and truths” (9).

I wanted to stand up on the table and tell the girls to take off their high heels and hurl them at the organizers of this event, demanding that the pageant be replaced by a spelling bee. Instead, I just sat there and prayed for the end. (Dumas 177)

According to Cixous women must break their silence by writing and thus liberate themselves from the prisons built by men. Women can draw from the irrational unconscious to break patriarchal tradition.

## **Conclusion**

Firoozeh Dumas, an Iranian female humorist who writes in English, was able to develop her own style of writing memoir with the employment of humor. She is an insightful observer of her social environment and expresses sensitivity to articulate and convey her message in a highly effective manner, i.e. humor. Her humor has a variety of linguistic types; from irony, exaggeration, satire, sarcasm, to self-deprecation. Intimate, gentle and peace-building are remarkable traits of her jokes

with “educational function.” Through humorous remarks, she wants to reform detrimental cultural, ethnic, and racial behavior. Dumas remarks on and critiques the Iranian women’s lack of self-esteem and their suppressed nature in humorous ways; inviting them to break the destructive ideals built for them by society. Moreover, she conveys her messages that “our commonalities far outweigh our differences” and “Muslims, Jews, Catholics, we’re all the same,” and condemns ethnic and gender inequalities. In communicating these messages, she benefits from the use of comedy, employing a humorous tone and mostly self-deprecating humor that helps reduce possible tensions among her American and Iranian readers. She tries to avoid impolite, aggressive, and hostile jokes towards different ethnic groups. Therefore her language and overall work strengthen solidarity among different ethnographical groups on the one hand and her female readers on the other.

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