

Woody Allen and Comedy

“As regards the origin of jokes, I was led to assume that a preconscious thought is given over for moment to unconscious revision”
- Sigmund Freud

Comedy is not only about laughter and jokes; it is a genre of art and needs scientific approach to study it. If we closely analyze each joke or laughing moment, we shall find a logical rhythm that follows and breaks the codes. Codes could be understood as rationalist perspective of seeing the world like cinema of Ingmar Bergman. If we decodify the rationalist language of any standard literary text or performance then comedy will occur, but that comedy also has a scientific approach and it needs equal amount of hard work and practice.

Personally, I do believe that comedy is the most difficult form of art because it needs the perfection in terms of timing and spontaneity. Comedy is like any other genre of creativity. For me, the key questions are- what does make people laugh? How to break the codes? Woody Allen is a perfect example of contemporary comedy, where everything has been materialized including religion, love, sex and god which becomes a part of cosmopolitan universe. It is more unifying to conceive the essence of comedy and knows the significance of laughter in our day to day life. Particularly Woody persists to create humor within the framework of certain themes which belongs to us and breaks the anxiety and ambiguity of human shyness. For instance:

Ah! Whenever you get high, we make love...ANNIE HALL

Ah! I have a headache; you must be getting your periods...ANNIE HALL

Comedy does allow an alternative language of communication. It breaks the orthodox forms of dialogues. Comedy does not mean to take everything lightly or to escape from the reality. In fact it gives another medium of expression.

In comedy spontaneity and the presence of unconscious mind are the two important aspects to deal with because when a comedy play is being performed, actors know the moments of laughter. The whole debate of spontaneity dies but nothing is called subtle or alive comedy. Because actors already know, when and where they accept laughter from audience and where they have to emphasis (on a particular dialogue) to make it more humoristic and funny. But sometimes unaccepted and funny moments do occur during the performance which is completely unknown to the actors which they have purposely not tried to break the code but spontaneously moment something funny things happens and brings forth the humor in public. Then the whole idea of codify and decodify dies out altogether and creates more complexity and ambiguity in the study of comedy and how do we create comedy?

Woody Allen

Woody Allen is considered as extraordinary artist in American cinema who has become a part of junky Hollywood cinema for more than past fifty years. He still talks about empty sex and blowjobs. In fact he is the first person in the world cinema who has persisted to give particular vocabulary to our materialistic desires. When our eternal feelings and virgin emotions do not have any value in our hostile life style and in that proposition, Woody's cinema is more relevant and debatable. Most his movies like Annie Hall, Manhattan, Deconstructing Harry begins on abstract and empty note, where an individual is struggling in his day to-day life, about particular things which are related to our existential reality like sex, love , God, religion, and takes help form

psychoanalyst to bring his messed like into a substantial order. Because we are not sure, what we want in our lives and Woody narrates that journey in the most comic manner.

Life and movies of Woody

Woody Allen was born in a poor family on December 1, 1935, at The Bronx, New York, U.S. and after completing school he took the admission in New York University but later on dropped out because he believes in self study and was always interested in Comedy writing. He composed a play "Play it again Sam (1971)" which was later on adapted into a full- fledged movie. In the same film he got a chance to act also. It was a crucial film in his career. It perfectly justifies Freudian and Bakhtin comedy of philosophy that I will discuss later in my paper.

He was very fond of European art cinema especially he had a liking for filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Ingmar Bergman. But in the beginning he was influenced from silent era comic icons Charlie Chaplin and Keaton. He tried to copy their style in his movies such as 'Take the money and Run' (1969) and Sleeper(1973) . However, he soon understood the language of cinema and tried to focus on stories rather than merely on jokes. His first major break was Annie Hall (1977), it is a classic example of contemporary comedy. It contains all the themes of comedy such as sex, religion, love, woman, psychoanalysis and death which are related to our everyday life. After Annie Hall, Woody consistently developed his personal style of comedy and began quoting philosophers and psychologists (Freud, Satire) to substantiates his arguments .For an example in Annie Hall, Alvy(As child) does kiss his classmate and teacher says.....

For God's sakes, Alvy, even Freud speaks

of a latency period.

ALVY (AS Adult)

(Gesturing)

Well, I never had a latency period. I

Cannot help it.

Within jokes and comic punches in his movies, a kind of intellectuality could be seen easily; it brings creativity and breaks the standard codification of dialogue writing to make it humors.

Themes of comedy

God and Death

“How can I believe in God when just last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter?”

In *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) Harvey, a young married writer does not feel to make love with his wife because he is attracted to her and in the meantime, while searching for pleasure, he decides to have sex with a prostitute and he uses his friend's apartment and his name also. Then suddenly someone knocks the door and he opens it. It is death with its black robe and scythe. He tries to convince death that he is just using his friend's name and he is not that person, but death refuses, saying “Don't give me that bullshit.” Therefore, Harvey Stern dies instead of someone's death. There are unknown factors in our lives; we do not know the answers of all of them. Then Woody tries to deal with those unknown factor through comedy and satire.

If you do not obey, God will punish you.

Not me, he punishes the wicked like Hitler...

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), Woody tries to point out the question of God and fear that we have with uncertainties and anxieties of human suffering. We believe in God because in our society he is projected as supernatural power that sees everything and brings the difference between evil and good. But in this movie Judy commits crime, he murdered a woman with whom he was having an extramarital affair and for the sake of his marriage life, he kills her. But in the end nothing happens because according to Woody history is written by the winners and says "I cannot afford the luxury of God" and Judy lives a happy life with his wife and children. It depicts other elements like difference between love and sex, human nature and selfishness. The same issue was also overlapped in *Match Point* (2005), when Chris kills his pregnant beloved (Nola) and her neighbor just to save his marriage life and says it was not easy, but when the time came, I could pull the trigger and Nola says you killed your unborn child, Chris quotes Sophocles – "To never have born may be the greatest boon of all". It brings many existential issues about the presence of the God, nihilism and empty universe where an individual judges his action and path. It depicts the dark side of the world and Woody masterly point out the seriousness in a comic manner with a tinge of satire.

Sex and Psychoanalyst

"Sex is the best fun I have ever had without laughing"Annie Hall

Sex is a recurring theme in Woody's cinema. In every film, he tries to give proper treatment to sex and its related thoughts such as psychoanalysis. *Annie Hall* (1977) is a masterpiece of sex and comedy. Sex has been considered as the simplest form of

comedy because of human anxiety and agony about sex and shyness of talking about their interpersonal affairs. In a scene at midnight, Alvy is making love with his second wife and traffic's violent voices come and his wife rejects to make love and Alvy says.....

Jesus, last night it was some guy honking
his car horn. I mean, the city can't
close down. You know, what-whatta yuh
gonna do, h-have 'em shut down the
airport, too? No more flights so we can
have sex?

It depicts cosmopolitan culture and how does it affect lives of people? And Woody tries to convey his message in a comic manner.

In another scene where Alvy is making love with Annie and she loves to get high before making sleep but Alvy wants her completely not an illusion of her body but Annie rejects his desire. It depicts the life style of cosmopolitan cities, both scene maybe read as a critique of violent life style of big cities and demands the importance of natural life. For Woody sex is a tool of comedy and it is easier to break the codes of sex thoughts because sex has been considered as preoccupied thought for comedy.

“I cannot get my love life in order, still I love the whores” ...Deconstructing Harry

In Deconstructing Harry (1997), Harry confesses to his psychoanalyst that he still loves the whores and does not have any soul to love someone. I am spatially empty and narrates his neurotic life and tries to laugh it out. In movies of Woody psychoanalysis

plays a very important role to confess the truths. In Woody's cinema psychoanalyst play a key role of the mediator to settle down the miseries of his neurotic characters because it gives more laughing moments. Here an individual tries to be funny as much as he/she can and breaks the standard form of communication. As Freud said "probably more primary and important situation of humour ,in which a person adopts a humorous attitude towards himself in order to ward off possible suffering. Is there any sense is saying that someone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child?"

The whole concept of psychoanalyst gives the enormous space of freedom to confess neurotic truths of their lives without warring about anything and that is why Woody loves to sit with psychoanalyst and solve out the problems.

Celebrity culture

"You cannot control life. It does not wind up perfectly. Only-only art you can control. Art and masturbation. Two areas in which I am an absolute expert"...Stardust Memories (1980)

Celebrity culture ruins the whole idea of "we are the people" and Woody loves to comments on this topic with a witty sense of humor. Stardust Memories (1980) is a satire talks about the human race because it is our emptiness, selfishness that allow us to behave like morons. Sandy Bates is a successful filmmaker but a loser in his personal life. It depicts two faces of a same person, one is covered up with glamour, money and fame and another is covered up with guilt and shame. It could be serious film but it is Woody's craft which created something very funny in black and white with amazing humanistic satire.

Recently in "To Rome with love"(2012) ,Woody tries to create comedy on this particular theme; a normal middle class man gets the fame incidentally and his entire life does changes. He loves all these changes but at a certain point he has started hating gossips and media coverage. Moreover, at the end he loses everything and gets back to normal middle class life. But on one fine afternoon, he goes to the city streets with his wife where people do not recognize him. He feels sad and misses his stardom then an old man says it is good to be rich and unhappy rather than poor and unhappy and sometimes life is cruel.

In both the movies Woody tries to capture human nature and emptiness, both the movies can be considered as counter of each other because in "To Rome with love" Woody puts a normal person in his position and tries to convey we are unhappy and discovering something in our lives that do not have any existence.

Philosophy of comedy and Breaking the codes

"In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter" Henri Bergson

"Metaphysics of comedy"

It would be a delusion and a priori to find out the reason of “why do we laugh?” Moreover, nothing is funnier than writing a rational paper on comedy. As I believe comedy is an abstraction of human mind and sometimes laughter comes from unconscious mind of an individual, that need a separate research like Jackson Pollock’s paintings because unconscious humor is also as spontaneous as Pollock’s brush strokes. Recently a female friend of mine asked me. Hey, today late evening, I am going to attend a wedding and I have no idea about the gift. I told her to buy I nice packet of strawberry condoms, she laughed endlessly and I was wandering why is she laughing?. There must be a difference between jokes and humor because joke’s intention is to create laughing moments but humor is more about creating a thought which generates a sense of happiness and sometimes it may relate with amusement.

According to John Morreall’s “The philosophy of laughter and humour ,Socrates argues that the soul experience both pleasure and pain when amused by the ridiculous portrayed in comedy one can feel pleasure and laugh when presented by such fools in comedy, but to feel pleasure at others misfortunes is to feel malice.”.....(The philosophy of laughter and humour by John Morreall)

The whole argument of sorrow, pleasure and feelings takes me to the fundamental question of “the essence of human”, who are we? mind and body or walking –talking machine? Obviously we are much beyond merely mind and body. There is something within us which allows us to laugh and cry. According to Kant, first we conceive the sensation from the outer world then we perceive those sensation in our inner world and then we react. Sometimes we conceive the sensation into rays that our body does not get proper time to sense it then our thoughts come from unconscious mind.

“How to create comedy? (Breaking the codes)

“Sleeping with you is like reading the history of sexuality “

Woody Allen knows the basics of comedy and cleverly breaks the codes of rationalized thought and put them into comic genre. He is a well-read artist. In spite of not having a decent academic background he has a “sense of understanding” about the world. He always paraphrases some great intellectuals of the world such as Freud, Sartre, Groucho Marx and Ingmar Bergman. Woody’s cinema can also be understood as de-codified cinema of Bergman because both are reactant of realism. For them, art is possibilities of realism instead of merely realism. Bergman’s cinema is the most intellect cinema in the world. And in the contemporary study of cinema, Woody’s cinema is rated as the funniest cinema ever born.

There are some films which I have tried to deconstruct the dialogues and I find Annie Hall and Vicky Cristina Barcelona are very interesting and challenging because Annie Hall (1977) received the Oscar for its unique comic dialogue writing. Vicky Cristina Barcelona(2008) is the most controversial film of the decade, especially the way Juan approaches two close friends over the weekend and expresses his desire of making love with both(Vicky and Cristina) of them. It opens the doors of multiple lover culture and gives paradoxical perspective of seeing the human relationship.

Annie Hall (1977)

“There is a big black spider in the bathroom”

In Annie Hall, Annie calls to Alvy , at three in the morning because Annie finds a spider in her bathroom

sighing)

Are you all right? What-

ANNIE

There's a spider in the bathroom.

ALVY

(Reacting)

What?

ANNIE

There's a big black spider in the bathroom.

ALVY

what you got me here for at three
o'clock in the morning, 'cause there's a
spider in the bathroom?

ANNIE

My God, I mean, you know how I am about

Insects.

Annie Hall(1977) is a classic example contemporary comic writing and this particular scene throws light on the depth to the relationship of Annie and Alvy. In that scene Woody cleverly breaks the codes of human expression and tries to convey that Comedy could be a medium of human feelings and “the spider scene” created the same impact as we see in any classic romantic film or play.

When Annie calls Alvy, Alvy was having sex with a rolling stone reporter and Alvy says “Empty sex is better than no sex”, after Annie’s call Alvy comes to meet her. It gives an ambiguous personality of Alvy but as Alvy says, according to Freud, Good

love and sex life is key to lead a content life. In this particular scene Woody wanted to show difference between sex and love. It has generated a debate on sex and love which are more relevant in today's hectic world. He has made his statement in humoristic genre rather than tragic or melodramatic way.

In this scene Woody breaks the codes of simple narrative and tried to make it more avant-garde cinema more communicative style and does not give any space to empty room because two characters are continuously kept talking and breaking the codes of standard form of communication. In Annie Hall (1977) Woody tries to break conventional form of dialogue writing. It does not sound like literary dialogues. For instance on the Annie's birthday, Alvy gifts her "red panty" and says wear this in the night when we make love. It clearly signs of breaking the standard form of social codes. After having breakup from Annie, Alvy goes to a public place and ask a man...

"With your wife, in bed does she need some kind of artificial stimulation like marijuana?"

It is completely de-codification of social interaction to create humour out of it. Alvy acts as a comedian so it was much easier for Alvy to create humour because he just has to allow himself to be funny and make people laugh on his gestures, dialogues and mannerisms, as Bakhtin said in his comic essay "centrifugal forces (such as carnival and some comedy) promotes looser, freer, and more uncontrollable and even anarchic culture". In Annie Hall, Alvy is a looser, freer how does break the codes of social communication.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008)

“Oh, God, look, I would not call our reluctance to leap at your sexual offer being over-analytical. If you would care to join us for some recognized form of social interaction, like a drink, then we would be fine, but otherwise, I think you should try, you know, offering to some other table.”

In Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008), Vicky and Cristina decide to spend the summer in Barcelona. There in an art gallery, they see a painter (Jaun Antonio) and during dinner in the café Jaun directly comes to Vicky and Cristina’s table to ask to join him at Oviedo. It breaks all possible form of social communication and breaks the codes deliberately and Jaun says.....

I would like to invite you both to

come with me to Oviedo.

VICKY

To come where?

JUAN ANTONIO

To Oviedo. For the weekend. We

leave in one hour.

VICKY

Oh, right, y-y-y-you’re asking us

to fly to Oviedo and back?

JUAN ANTONIO

Mm...no, we'll spend the weekend. I

mean, I'll show you around the city

and...we'll eat well, we'll drink

good wine, we'll make love....

It is only possible in Woody's world, to ask two girls to make love and Jaun is an outsider and justifies himself by saying "Life is short. Life is dull. Life is full of pain. And this is a chance for something special, life has no meaning unless you give it any sense to live in" These dialogues sound like Sartre's concept of "Existence precedes essence" and perfectly set the sensation of de-codifying wherein an individual is trying to define his life in his own way.

As I have said at the outset of this paper, codify and de-codify both are co-related and could be understood as thesis and antithesis. One brings intellectuality and another evokes laughter. In this movie, Woody tries to break all the social codes as much as possible. Even in a scene, when Jaun asks both women to join him in bed but Vicky denies Jaun's offer and says I am engaged and going to be married and Jaun says then enjoy the last days of freedom. It breaks all the social and ethical values but Cristina accepts Jaun's offer and says "I will join you in bed but you have to seduce me" and in bed Cristina says to Jaun "If you don't start undressing me soon this is going to turn into a panel discussion". In this context Vicky could be understood as well codified person and Cristina as de-codified person and Jaun is a mediator who breaks the codes.

Bibliography

Sigmund Freud's essays on Humour and jokes

The films of Woody Allen by Sam B. Girgus

The philosophy and comedy by Dr. Russell Ford

An essay on the meaning of the comic by Henri Bergson

The philosophy of Humour by Dr. Adrian Bard (Wake Forest University)

Pratap Singh

M.A. Second semester

May 2013

