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Stand Up Comedy, Narrative, and Pain

A Case Study: Homecoming King

by

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C-SPAN. A beaming Hasan Minhaj makes his way to the podium. It's the White House Correspondents' Dinner, and the president, Donald Trump, has refused to attend. Carrying the full weight of the expectations and fears of the journalists sitting in the room, taking in this new normal, Minhaj approaches the microphone with a huge, self-conscious smile. He takes a second to look over the crowd before breaking the ice: "No one wanted to do this. So of course, it landed in the hands of an immigrant. That's how it always goes down." From his show on *YouTube*, "The Truth with Hasan Minhaj", to small time comedy clubs, to his current post as a Senior Correspondent on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, Hasan Minhaj is starting to become a household name (Ziv). And as seen in his speech at the Correspondents' Dinner, it's his type of humor, which finds the funny in fraught modern America, which makes him stand out.

Minhaj is one of a growing group of comics who, although they come from backgrounds of otherness, now exist at the forefront of our cotemporary imagination. By laying claim to this outsider's identity, Minhaj and his contemporaries are able to express and unearth wounds, both old and new in a way that's funny. This seemingly contrasting theme of pain and humor has taken the main stage in the past couple of years with comics like Minhaj at the helm, pushing forward the evolution of comedic storytelling (Perkins).

Humor is in fact oxymoronic. In some ways, examining what makes a good joke is like reading the list of ingredients on the back of a box of store-bought cookies. It's strange to think that the Keebler elves, with their scrumptious little "Chips Deluxe Rainbow" delicacies, are pumping us full of deliciously unpronounceable ingredients like neurotoxic tertiary butylhydroquinone. In short, comedy, like the "Chips Deluxe

Rainbow” cookie, is often born out of the ugly tertiary butylhydroquinones of modern society: depression, trauma, and pain (“Chemical Cuisine”).

Scholars and humorists have been remarking on the dark “ingredients” of comedy for some time. As far back as 1905, in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud remarked that humor had a “relief” element, meaning that a comic makes use of humor in order to bring relief to repressed emotions like lust, violence, and hate (Smuts). Contemporary scholar Carmen C. Morgan, who studies the role of humor as a coping mechanism for emergency responders, adds that, “humor is regarded as one of the highest forms of coping with life stress” (Morgan 1). Humorist and columnist Erma Bombeck summarizes this phenomenon with her observation “There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt” (Greengoss). Bombeck’s observation is reflected in what many humor researchers, narrative scholars, and psychologists have discovered in recent years about the relationship between pain and humor. Because the two exist so closely together, factors like time, proximity to personal experience, and severity play a large role in determining whether or not something will be perceived by a large audience as “funny” rather than “sad” (Greengoss).

Narrative-form stand up comedy provides a means for transgressing and toying with that barrier between funny and sad. Although American stand up has roots in one liners and punch lines, the current landscape of stand up comedy is geared towards this longer, storytelling format in which comics perform structured accounts of past trauma. Comics like Hasan Minhaj, Margaret Cho, Aziz Ansari, Maria Bamford, and Kumail Nanjiani have integrated humorous narratives of pain and struggle into the landscape of

American stand up comedy. Ansari and Najjani even strike shared notes with Minhaj about the difficulties of growing up in immigrant families and the intricacies of navigating American society as brown men.

But why this shift and why now? How did we get from the Borscht Belt and Chitlin Circuit comics telling “my wife” jokes, to modern day stand up comics telling drawn out, performative stories? The findings of research on humor and pain coincide with the findings of research outlining why humans feel the need to tell stories. In a 2014 article in *The Atlantic* by Cody C. Delistraty, “The Psychological Comforts of Storytelling”, he explains why humans are driven engage with others through narrative:

Stories can be a way for humans to feel that we have control over the world. They allow people to see patterns where there is chaos, meaning where there is randomness. Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can afford meaning to our lives—a form of existential problem-solving (Delistraty 4).

“Chaos”, “control”, and “randomness” all correspond with the elements described by the aforementioned humor scholars. There’s a sense of reevaluation and learning that comes from both narrative and comedy; they enable humans to process events that have transpired and gain a sense of control. Delistraty later develops the point that, “stories can also inform people’s emotional lives.” He postulates that storytellers, ranging from comedy writers to traditional literary authors, use storytelling as a method of emotionally exploring difficult moments in our lives. He adds:

Psychology researcher Dan Johnson recently published a study in *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* that found reading fiction significantly increased empathy towards others, especially people the readers initially perceived as “outsiders” (e.g. foreigners, people of a different race, skin color, or religion) (Delistraty 6).

And pain narratives often come from a sense of being “other” or the “outsider”. Modern comedians often use narrative to talk about issues like depression, addiction, racism, and even assault, that is, experiences that have marked them as outsiders.

Before the days of Minhaj, Ansari, Cho, and Bamford, Richard Pryor explored this method of combining narrative, comedy, and pain. Pryor, a black comedian who grew up in a brothel and was a survivor of sexual assault, used his turbulent childhood to inform his later comedy. After attempting to take a more traditional comedy route—telling jokes reminiscent of his idol, Bill Cosby—Pryor changed up his style to include longer monologues and recurring characters. In his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions*, he writes:

There was a world of junkies and winos, pool hustlers and prostitutes, women and family screaming inside my head, trying to be heard. The longer I kept them bottled up, the harder they tried to escape. The pressure built till I went nuts (Watkins).

Once he gave into those voices and expressed those childhood stories of pain in his comedy, his popularity grew. Richard Pryor’s skill lay in his ability to take the racism, abuse, and neglect that he had once endured and make it funny for a broad audience. Mel Watkins of *The New York Times* writes:

He unleashed a galaxy of street characters who traditionally had been embarrassments to most middle-class blacks and mere stereotypes to most whites. And he presented them so truthfully and hilariously that he was able to transcend racial boundaries and capture a huge audience of admirers in virtually every ethnic, economic and cultural group in America (Watkins).

At the height of his career, critics lauded him as innovative; *Rolling Stone* magazine called his brand of comedy “a new type of realistic theater”. Watkins adds, “It was essentially comedy without jokes—re-enactments of common human exchanges.”

This particular comedy model carried through the turn of the century as more comedians began telling stand-up stories about personal struggle (Khazan). From Margret Cho talking about her experiences with sexual abuse as a young girl in her PsyCHO tour in 2015 to Tig Notaro talking about her breast cancer diagnosis in a stand up routine the day after she was diagnosed in 2012, modern comedians are using comedy as a means of reassessing past painful experiences (Felsenthal, “Margret Cho Opens Up”). Even more recently, certain comedians have made pain the focus of their entire stand up set, like Hasan Minhaj.

SECTION 1: *Homecoming King*: An introduction

In his Netflix comedy special, *Homecoming King*, Minhaj plays with narrative in a way that enraptures and engages his audience, navigates authorial voice, and applies his personal experience to the greater universals of love, family, and forgiveness. The special, which premiered on Netflix on May 23rd, 2017, is the successor of his off-Broadway show of the same title, which played at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City for three months in 2015. The idea was born in the back of a cab on the way to a StorySLAM in LA hosted by *The Moth*, a “non-profit group...dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling” (“About the Moth”). Racking his brain for a story to share, which had to fit the theme of “love and heartbreak”, Minhaj settled on telling the story of his high school’s senior prom.

The *Moth* performance model is focused on narrative and isn’t necessarily a comedic space. Usually, storytellers relay stories that are intimate, both in content and in delivery. Artists participating in the StorySLAM have a microphone on a microphone stand, which mirrors the layout of a stand up set, and communicate their stories to a live audience on a small stage. With little movement, the participants tell their stories in a stripped down format, with emphasis on the narrative itself (“About the Moth”).

Minhaj’s special combines elements of stand up and the extended monologue of *The Moth*, creating a hybrid that allows for both tears of laughter and sadness. It also allows Minhaj to play with intimacy, which exists in both stand up and storytelling, in the context of his chosen venue: the theater. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Stav Ziv writes, “Minhaj chose to do his show at a theatrical performance art space with the idea of mixing comedy with storytelling.” Minhaj adds:

I could do, you know, set-up punch jokes,” he tells *Newsweek*. “But I could also have longer chunks of time in the show where I am just telling a personal story, and it doesn’t have to have a huge laugh. The theater allows you to play both of those notes (Ziv).

The theater also permits performative physicality. His choice to forgo the traditional microphone and microphone stand contributes to his freedom of movement. Minhaj also makes use of a giant presentation screen that changes images as he changes topics, a multimedia element which enforces certain themes and provides a visual map for listeners.

In understanding this performance as a narrative, we can identify and evaluate multiple ways in which Minhaj creates and utilizes a narrative structure: recurring themes and tropes, language, physical performance, cyclical storytelling, and audience participation. As a storyteller, Minhaj incorporates many of these elements into each anecdote.

This special is framed as concentric stories that reflect upon Minhaj’s coming of age as the son of Indian, Muslim immigrants in Davis, California and how that upbringing and consequences of that upbringing have molded him into who he is today. He regales his audience with the story of how his parents met, married, and how his mother promptly moved back to India to finish medical school, leaving a young Hasan to be raised by his father for the first eight years of his life. Minhaj then sets the scene of his childhood; a strict immigrant father who hadn’t “downloaded the ‘good dad’ software”, finding out he had a sister when his mother returned from India with a little girl who called him “Hasan bhai” and navigating his parents’ rule of “no fun, no friends and especially no girlfriends”.

In creating the larger tapestry of this dysfunctional, yet lovable family narrative, Hasan weaves in pain and heartbreak. He describes how his family was targeted in the aftermath of 9/11 and how the prejudice of his predominantly white community collided with one of the most important events of his teen years: prom. His senior year of high school, Minhaj befriended the new kid, Bethany Reed, a white girl from Nebraska and he details their budding romance; late nights on AIM, going over to each other's houses for homework, and the feeling that finally, there was someone who accepted him, at a time when everyone else labeled him as "other". Minhaj recalls the story of Bethany asking him to be her prom date and how when he arrived at her house the night of, her mother turns him away at the door, claiming he's "not a good fit". The rest of the special hinges on this moment of defeat and follows the intersections of Minhaj's comedy career and his preoccupation with the ghost of Bethany Reed. In order to digest this hour-long special and dissect the different narrative components, we can examine Minhaj's overarching theme of forgiveness in the wake of pain, which in turn can be parceled into these specific experiences with family, love, and America.

SECTION 2: Family and Forgiveness

Minhaj starts the special with family. In this section, he explores two painful events born out of family experience: being raised solely by his father and discovering that he has a little sister, who was raised with his mother in India. In this sense, pain is defined within the context of an event or occurrence that had a moderately adverse emotional impact, within the realm of normative childhood disappointment, shame, and grief. Minhaj makes clear, through his admiring yet incredulous tone, that although he doesn't completely understand his parents, the bond is still a loving one.

Following a biographical timeline, the first topic Minhaj approaches is the relationship between himself and his father. As his story begins, an image flashes behind Minhaj on the screen of himself as a baby, his father lying next to him and reaching out to play with him. It signals the audience that the relationship is warm and serves as a sort of assurance that no matter what Minhaj is about to say about his father, it comes from a place of love. There is an audible "aww" when audience members see the tender image. With that photo as his backdrop, Minhaj begins his story, saying: "So the first eight years, it was just me and my dad. Just the two of us trying to make it in America. Minus all the unconditional love. Brown love is very conditional" (1.09.14). The setup of this joke plays with the audience's expectations, starting out in a seemingly emotional place, coupled with the photo, but immediately, that assumption is derailed. In comedy, this tactic is called using a 'decoy assumption' and is humorous because it warps our expectations. Minhaj takes it a step further when he points to the smiling image of his baby self and his father and says, "In the photo he's like 'You had better get all A's'". The joke hints at a common underlying hurt, that is, paternal aloofness and the impact of

the classically emotionally distant father. It is something that many people in Minhaj's audience can relate to, a common phenomenon that applies to people from many different backgrounds (Best). As a storyteller, Minhaj puts his own spin on this classic trope with the line at the end of the first joke, when he says, "Brown love is very conditional". Here, he diverges slightly from the "bad dad" narrative and signals to the audience that he will apply a different lens. Especially in using the word "brown" Minhaj enters into a "specialized lexicon" which according to anthropologist Charles Briggs in his book *Disorderly Discourse: Narrative, Conflict, & Inequality* gives the speaker a particular authority over the subject matter and signals a particular way of approaching a given narrative. With the term "brown love" Minhaj flexes authorial authority over the narrative of all emotionally distant dads by specifying the topic to withholding "brown" fathers.

This particular perspective manifests itself into one particular recurring symbol throughout this section of the narrative: the slap. Minhaj first describes "the slap" in the conditional tense, which both brings his audience into the experience and gives the story a sense of habitualness, signaling that this is a common occurrence. Stepping into a more physical role, Minhaj performs on stage what would have been an average trip to the grocery store with his father. He says to the audience, "[My dad] has this little kid and I'm not making his life any easier." Using water bottles as props, Minhaj runs around the stage as his kid self would have. He mimics a "conversation" he would have had with his father, using a high voice for himself and a lower, stern one for his father. "I'm picking up soda and I'm like 'Ah!'" he then responds in his father's voice "Don't do that" continuing in his child voice "I'm going to live forever!" (1:06:15).

Not only does he create characters here, but there's a build up in the dynamic and the audience is waiting for some sort of climactic finale. Minhaj supplies it saying:

Then I would trip on my Velcro shoes and I would drop the soda and it would explode. And then my dad would do what most brown parents do. He would check to see if the coast is clear...and he'd slap the shit out of me (1.06.05).

Immediately after he says this, the closed captions read "[Laughter.]" and the audience chuckles appreciatively. Minhaj responds, "I love it. Thank you. Thank you." It's strange to think about, that is, the laughter elicited by someone telling a joke about what could be construed as child abuse. And yet, the way Minhaj tells it, it is funny.

This is an excellent example of Peter McGraw's Benign Violation Theory. A comedy researcher, McGraw came up with the idea that "humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e. benign)" (McGraw and Warren 10). With the example of the slap, the audience views the slap as something "wrong" but is seemingly acceptable or safe because Minhaj gives it a ring of normality and assures us that this trauma is "okay". He says: "And for the liberal white guilt, immigrants aren't going to hit their children the way you do. Americans hit on the arm and bruise the body. Immigrants slap your face and bruise your soul" (1.05.09). He adds the punch line, "It's Guantanamo of the mind". This moment corresponds to a larger trope in narrative, which is frequently seen in television, called the "Hilariously Abusive Childhood" trope ("Hilariously Abusive Childhood"). This trope is wide ranging, from Homer Simpson strangling his son Bart, on *The Simpsons* to Dr. Doofenshmirtz of the Disney Channel's *Phineas and Ferb*, who is emotionally abused by his parents who force him to act as the family's lawn

gnome. In short, this trope is actually widely considered culturally acceptable and humorous.

The joke doesn't stop there. The slap narrative continues and develops into a symbol of misguided form of immigrant parental love. Minhaj tells the audience that the slapping "is what makes [immigrant kids] tough and resilient. It's why we become cardiologists and win spelling bees" (1.04.56). Here, the slap has transformed into a motivator, a way of pushing a child to be successful. Minhaj illustrates this by using the projection screen again, where he shows a video of twelve-year-old Arvind Mahankali, the winner of the 2013 Scripps Spelling Bee, in the moment he is announced the winner. Minhaj points out his cool composure and when the camera pans to Mahankali's mother, who also remains expressionless, Minhaj adds the caption "Conditional Love", bringing the audience back to his original thesis on immigrant parenthood.

Again, Minhaj has taken the audience's expectations and twisted them into something entirely different. He takes a story about his father slapping him in a grocery store and turns it into a symbol of the lengths brown parents will go to ensure that their children are motivated and become successful adults. It's through this storytelling that Minhaj implicitly forgives his father. At the end of the section, it becomes explicit, when he addresses the audience: "People say, 'Your parents don't love you.' 'You have tiger parents.'" Minhaj responds to this: "We have great fathers. I just think our fathers didn't download all the great dad software" (1.03.54).

Another topic that Minhaj broaches in this section on family and forgiveness is his relationship with his younger sister, Ayesha. Minhaj recalls the day his mother was finally able to finish up medical school in India and join them in California, when Minhaj

was eight years old. He sets the scene, detailing how he wore his Ghostbusters Proton Pack over his Salwar Kameez and stood, waiting for the moment his mom would come through the door. Mimicking a Ghostbusters stance, Minhaj says: “Door opens. Dad walks through. Mom walks through. And then immediately behind my mom, is this little brown girl with a mushroom cut” (59.49). His sister, who had been conceived on one of his father’s visits back to India, and who had remained there with his mother, had been kept a secret from him until the moment that she arrived in California. However, before he explains this, Minhaj both does and doesn’t explicitly explain to the audience who the girl with the mushroom cut is. What he does say is: “She just runs up to me and hugs me. ‘Hasan *bhai!*’” (59.49). In Hindi, “*bhai*” is the word for brother and adding it to a name is a way of showing affection. However, it’s not until about a minute later, after he fills in the backstory, that he uses the word sister in English. Although one could infer the situation based on the set up of his story, with the family walking through the door, Minhaj pulls from his specific lexicon to withhold information from his non-Hindi speaking audience. In a sense, he parallels on a much smaller level the surprise factor that we see in the larger story.

The story becomes even more concentric when he says, “Remember how I told you that immigrants love secrets?” referencing a point he made in the very beginning of the special where he said:

And I think it’s just that, like immigrants love secrets....They love bottling them up deep down, and then unleashing them on you later when it’s no longer relevant....Every conversation with my dad is like an M. Night Shyamalan movie. It’s just 90 minutes of build-up to no payoff” (1.09.03).

By establishing a foundation of mistrust and mystery, he makes the payoff to this particular joke all the more rich. This tactic in comedy is called a running gag and

corresponds to the literary device of recurrent themes. Similar patterns occur in more standard works in the literary canon, such as *Macbeth*, where audiences encounter multiple instances of false appearance. Like Shakespeare, Minhaj gives his audience lines or themes to connect multiple parts of his storylines (Sanders).

In light of this betrayal, Minhaj explains to the audience how he harbored resentment for Ayesha throughout his childhood. He recollects sitting with his parents at the dinner table and begging them to send Ayesha back to India. Re-imagining a conversation with his parents he says: ‘Look, Mom, Dad, let’s just be real. Oh, my God, these brown people...Oh, jeez. Coming into our house...eating our Fruit Roll-Ups...they don’t speak the language...I say we tell them to go back to where they came from (58:34). Although the sentiments are true to his childhood experience, Minhaj adopts what he calls his little Republican voice and channels his boyhood feelings into the modern day stump speech of Republican politicians, particularly mimicking the rhetoric of Donald Trump. Again, we see a joke that is a benign violation in that it’s an immigrant’s xenophobic perception of immigrants. The absurdity and link to popular culture make it humorous rather than dangerous.

Minhaj continues on, detailing the little annoyances, how his sister would chase after him on the playground, embarrassing him in front of the white boys from his school, “Cody, Corey and Cole” (54.32). For Minhaj, the final straw comes on Ayesha’s fifth birthday, her first birthday in the United States. Previously, in his “growing up with dad” section, Minhaj had told an anecdote about his seventh birthday, when all he wanted was the blue BMX bike from the Toys ‘R’ Us catalogue and instead, his dad took him to Home Depot to pick out a doorknob for the bathroom. Fast forward to Ayesha’s fifth

birthday. Minhaj sets the scene for the audience, describing how his father felt bad for missing so much of Ayesha's childhood and wanted this birthday to be "special". He even empathizes, saying how hard it must have been for his father "to miss his daughter's first steps" and how he wanted to make up for so much time lost. With family and friends gathered in the living room, Minhaj says:

[Dad] drags in this big box and goes, 'Ayesha, open the box.' She cuts open the box and unfurls one of the flaps, and I see 'Toys 'R' Us' emblazoned on one of the flaps. And he reaches in and pulls out a beautiful, blue BMX bike (56.38).

When Minhaj says this, the audience gasps. He creates the scene with movements, imitating pulling the bike out of the box and painting on a look of sheer defeat, his eyes huge and glassy. Quickly, Minhaj redirects the emotional energy of the performance hall. In his father's voice, he says: "Here you go, Ayesha.' He looks at me. 'Happy Birthday.'" (56.34). By exaggerating the intentionality and cruelty of his father buying the present that Hasan had always wanted, but for his little sister, the story goes from sad to hilarious. In an *Atlantic* article by Olga Khazan, "The Dark Psychology of Being a Good Comedian", the author describes why this sort of joke is funny. She says, "You can't make a joke without inserting a wicked twist, and you can't be a comedian without holding a small amount of power, even for a short period of time, over the audience" (Khazan 3). With the story of the blue BMX bike, Minhaj holds that power, evoking sympathy and then, as the subtitles read, inducing "shocked laughter" (56.27). The fact that his father bought this coveted present for Minhaj's sister isn't funny. It's quite sad and disappointing. However, the "wicked twist" when Minhaj allows the audience to think that his father is well aware of the slight makes it darkly funny. Pulling up from this emotional nosedive into depressing territory, Minhaj ends the joke with a big smile and

the rhetorical question, “Savage, right?” signaling the audience that everything is fine and that there isn’t any permanent damage (56.22).

At this point in the joke, Minhaj takes an aside. Up until this moment in the narrative about his sister, Minhaj talks through the perspective of his experience, about his own younger sister and his own childhood and relationship with her in specific terms. While funny, his stories are centered on his very individual background--not everyone has a secret sister who calls them Hasan bhai and who suddenly gets the blue BMX bike that her older sibling had always wanted. Sensing that he needs to take a moment to connect his personal story to the audience, Minhaj says, “This is a PSA. Younger siblings, you are worthless. You bring nothing to the table” (56.28). Swiftly, the special goes from individual to universal. He even takes a brief moment to interact with the audience saying, “I see you getting mad,” then mimicking the younger siblings in the audience with hands on hips, “Hell, no. I have a personality,” and replying to them in his voice, “Where do you think you got that from, dummy? Us.” (55.56). Here, Minhaj creates a larger conflict. Now, it isn’t just that he had an annoying younger sister, but that all older siblings have annoying younger brothers and sisters that have an easier time growing up because their older counterparts paved the way for them. Minhaj continues, “And then you have the audacity to be, like, ‘Hey, why are you so melodramatic?’ Because I went to war for you. Mom and Dad was my Vietnam.” (55.30). Minhaj talks to the audience members like he would his own sister. He then broadens his view further to all sets of siblings: “Elder siblings, we walk through the world like, ‘Do people love me?’ and you guys (younger siblings) are like, ‘Everybody loves me! Mom and Dad fucked up with you, not with me. See ya!’” (55.26). At the line “Elder siblings” Minhaj makes direct

eye contact with people in the audience, pointing at them in an empathetic way and then pointing at himself, showing with his movements that they share a communal plight. He even says all of the younger sibling lines in a high pitched, sing-songy tone, throwing up peace signs, shrugging his shoulders, and grinning.

This widening of the narrative plays an important role in the structural soundness of the story as a whole. Before Minhaj can move on to forgiving his younger sister, he has to revisit this larger “older versus younger” sibling struggle to jokingly reaffirm his stance from the beginning of the narrative, that his younger sister was awful, back when he tried to convince his parents to send Ayesha back to India. This storytelling structure, which has an argument at its core, can be divided into parts that strengthen the authority of the storyteller: “1. Generic claim 2. Story (exemplum) 3. Re-statement of the generic evaluation as if it were derived from the story” (De Fina and Georgakopolou 98).

Narrative scholars Müller and Di Luzio derived this structure from their research on the narratives of Latin American immigrant women, who told personal stories about language barriers. Although the conflict is different in Minhaj’s story, his narrative follows the same principles of “argumentative discourse structure” (De Fina and Georgakopolou 98). First, Minhaj claims that he had a bad relationship with his younger sister growing up (generic claim). Then, he tells the story of the blue BMX bike (exemplum). Finally, he re-states the generic evaluation by opening up a sort of forum about how hard it is to be an older sibling. This structure provides support to stance and although Minhaj’s is more of a humorous stance, he still wants his audience to understand that his relationship with his sister was a difficult one that had an impact on him.

This section of the special ends as Minhaj ties up loose ends from the bike scene and after all this buildup, confesses to the audience that all this time, it wasn't Ayesha who was the villain, but himself. He describes how Ayesha let him have the first ride on that blue BMX bike and how, feeling entitled to it, he grabbed the bike and sped away. Returning to the sort of Republican, xenophobic lexicon we see earlier in the story, Minhaj pretends to be peddling a bike and shouts, "Eat my dust immigrant!" (55.10). Then, abruptly, by accident, he crashes the bike. Taking it back to a specific moment in their relationship, Minhaj zooms in, saying:

I hear the pitter patter of her chappals. She's crying, 'Hasan bhai, why would you do this?' And I'm like 'Man...I'm being a dick. Like this whole time, I was looking for acceptance from Cody, Corey, and Cole...and I had it right here the entire time (54.23).

In these lines, Minhaj takes two beats, one after "Man" and another after "Cole" to let his point resonate. Similar to pauses in a traditional theatrical performance, these moments allow Minhaj's revelation to sink in with the audience. Suddenly, everything he's built up to, his entire argument, the bitter aftertaste of childhood disappointments, are tossed aside to make room for personal development and growth.

Thus far, Minhaj has described his relationship with his sister in the past tense, only memories of growing up together. Now, he ends the story in present day, saying: And Ayesha hates that story. She's always like 'Oh my God, Hasan bhai, you are so melodramatic. You make me sound like a refugee baby to entertain white people!' (54.04). He adds, smiling, "That's true. I'm doing that right now!" (54.02). By changing to the present tense, there's a shift where Minhaj takes the audience forward in time in order to indicate a sense of growth. When authors or comedians jump forward in time,

it's in order to indicate that some sort of change has taken place (Humpage). Explicitly, Minhaj illustrates that change by detailing to the audience all of Ayesha's accomplishments since that moment of the bike crash: "And like, she learned English. She went to an Ivy League law school. She does mergers and acquisitions now. She is the one percent!" (53.40). Now, Minhaj becomes the adoring brother, the less cool one, joking that he didn't go to grad school and is essentially a clown for a living.

Forgiveness comes into play when Minhaj segues from Ayesha's success into his recent marriage. Minhaj tells the audience that he fell in love with a Hindu woman, which was a huge problem for his Muslim family. Again, he refers to the projection, where a big, two-columned chart appears with "Muslim" on one side and "Hindu" on the other, which Minhaj uses to list some of the differences between the two religions. Comically, he boils it down to three main differences: "Don't eat pork vs. Don't eat beef" "Don't like statues vs. Like statues" and "Hate cartoons vs. Love Cartoons" and yells, "Because of these difference we've been killing each other for centuries!" (52.12). Minhaj then recounts convincing his father that marrying a Hindu woman showed that people were evolving and learning to live and love together. When his dad consents, Minhaj calls it "a Hall of Fame brown dad decision" (51.35). The audience cheers appreciatively at the perceived victory and there is an "assumption" or "the audience's expectation that the 1st story will continue along the predicted line" ("Glossary of Stand Up Comedy").

However, when the whole family gets together to go and meet Hasan's fiancée, his dad has second thoughts and uses the Hindu phrase, the "killer of every brown kid's dream", "Log kya kagenge" which he projects onto the screen behind him. It means, "What will people think?" The camera zooms out and Minhaj stands in the very middle

of the stage, perfectly aligned with the words behind him and suddenly, he looks very small. He tells the audience that in that moment, he felt hopeless because he has “played all his cards” with his immigrant parents by skipping grad school and becoming a comedian. In the story, he turns to walk back to his parent’s Toyota Camry, defeated, which he mimics on stage, turning his back to the audience and then continuing to speak while facing the projection screen to give the illusion of someone else talking. He describes hearing a voice: “Oh, my God. You guys do this all the time.” Minhaj interjects: “And it is Ayesha and she is pissed” (50.55) Ayesha’s line continues: “Dad, I did not fly out from Philly for this. Beena is so legit. She has a PhD. Hasan bhai is a comedian. No one is going to marry him. Let’s get him married before she changes her mind” (49.12). Comparing her to the basketball coach Phil Jackson, Minhaj tells his audience that his sister was the one that brought the whole team together. He finishes this section:

Because of her, I got to marry the love of my life on January 2nd. Because of my sister. I can’t believe it. For years I resented that brown girl, I hated her. But on that day, that special day, I couldn’t have been more proud to be her Hasan bhai (47.55)

While he says this, two images flash on the big screen. The first of Minhaj and his wife, Beena, on their wedding day, the second of Minhaj and his sister, Ayesha, hugging each other as children. The audience erupts into thunderous applause and Minhaj allows the moment to settle, allowing people to take in the emotional, satisfying finale to a humorous, but wicked section on family.

SECTION 3: America and Forgiveness

In order to transition to his next big narrative arc, Minhaj pauses for a moment and then, when the lights come back up on the stage, he addresses the audience in a serious tone: “They say every generation is defined by a great struggle or tragedy.” He then looks solemnly into the camera and continues, “And it’s wild that our kids will never know there was a period in time in this country where you had to make a choice between being on the internet or being on the phone” (47.28). The audience erupts into laughter, transitioning out of the familial, specific space of Minhaj’s marriage and family into a topic that many older millennials and members of the audience are able to appreciate. Minhaj plays off this encouraging laughter, adding, “That was our World War I, man. Especially in middle school, if a girl called the house” (47.15). Again, Minhaj bridges the personal versus universal divide, eliciting further bouts of knowing laughter. Even if younger audience members can’t relate to that particular era of technology, the experience of having a parent interrupt a line of communication between themselves and the object of their affection functions as the underlying unifier.

Although Minhaj may lead us to believe that he’s about to go into an extended rant on dated computers, this segment of the special isn’t just about the technologic struggles of the early nineties. It’s about America and racism and relationships; it’s about forgiving and understanding those who seek to make others feel like outsiders. Deftly, Minhaj brings us from a lighthearted moment of “Alice” from Algebra calling to ask a homework question (only to have his father pick up the line first and answer the question), to another moment that his dad reached the landline before he could. This time, the call is much darker. An American flag appears on the screen behind him and the

camera pans out—the massive flag dwarfs Minhaj. With the stars and stripes looming behind him, Minhaj tells the audience: “So when 9-11 happened I was in high school. My dad sits everybody down at the dinner table. He’s like, “Alright Hasan, whatever you do, do not tell people you’re Muslim or talk about politics” (46:33). The audience winces, but Minhaj throws them the quick line: “Alright, Dad, I’ll just hide it. This (his skin color) just rubs off” for a small laugh (46.01). Then, he pulls us in further. He recalls how as his family was sitting around the dining room table and how they heard the landline ring in a different room. Again, Minhaj’s dad gets to the landline first. Minhaj picks up the other line and listens in:

I hear a voice. ‘Hey, you sand nigger, where’s Osama?’...’You can hear me, right? You fucking dune coon. Where’s Osama? Hey, 2631 Regatta Lane, that’s where you live right? I’m gonna fucking kill you.’ (45.29)

Minhaj holds his hand up like a phone and speaks these lines directly into the camera with glassy eyes and a direct stare. Through the camera, he’s looking directly at the viewer watching through the Netflix medium. Although he’s played with boundaries before in his own voice, in this moment, with the voice of the racist caller, it feels like the fourth wall has been demolished. The audience in the theater is silent. Minhaj has made a strong transition, making the phone a central character at the very start of the segment, and using it as a both a vessel for embarrassment and violent threats; pain on two different levels. *Vice* writer Tyler Watamanuk, in an article about non-traditional stand up comedy routines explains that moments like this one, when Minhaj shares a jarring story with the audience, are there for a reason. He says that “candor seems to challenge the audience” and that there is “defiant vulnerability” to material like this that borders on becoming uncomfortable and frightening (Watamanuk).

There is no quick quip to take the audience out of this moment. Instead, Minhaj keeps going, sticking with the same storyline. Dropping his phone hand—which acts as a pseudo prop—he recalls how he heard a noise outside the house, the smashing of glass: “All the windows on the Camry are smashed in” (44.25). He takes long strides across the stage, occupying the full space, and holding his head in his hands and says, “I’m pissed, I’m fucking mad. Fuck this, man!” (44). Then the story takes an even more sickening turn:

I look back in the middle of the street, my dad is in the middle of the road sweeping glass out of the road like he works at a hate crime barbershop. ‘We’ve got customers. Log cya kahenge? We’ve got to clean this up.’ (43:20).

Minhaj mimes brooming, giving frantic looks to the audience. Although the phrase “hate crime barbershop” gets an appreciative chuckle, because Minhaj says it in a lighter tone, putting up his hand, as if to pause the sad overtones of the story, the room is mostly hushed. He even repeats the Hindi phrase from earlier in the set, “Log cya kahenge?” This time he doesn’t translate for the audience the phrase, “What will people think?” Using it again is equally, if not more, heartbreaking than the first time, when his father tried to convince Minhaj not to marry a woman from a Hindu family. Here, the “What will people think?” is exponentially more shameful and all the more powerful. It’s not just what will our family and friends think, but what will everyone think and how will that affect our safety as a family? It’s a repeated rhetorical question—a painful inversion of the running gag.

Minhaj pauses for a moment here, after doing his sweeping impression, and plays the part of his teenage self. He stands, straight but defeated, pretending that his dad is there, standing next to him, and says, “Why aren’t you saying something?” Again Minhaj

leaves a moment—the ambiguity of the pause allowing the audience to frame the question on two levels. First, in a literal sense, in terms of the story at hand and on another level, the question: as members of a community, why aren't *we* saying anything about injustice? Minhaj presses forward with his dad's reply: "He looks at me and he goes, 'Hasan...[speaking Hindi] These things happen, and these things will continue to happen. That's the price we pay for being here'" (43:00). As Minhaj repeats this line that his father said to him almost a decade ago, the giant American flag on the screen changes. One by one, the stars fall, spiraling into nothingness.

Stepping out of the moment, Minhaj shifts into an analytical mode, telling the audience: "My dad's from that generation where he feels like if you come to this country, you pay the American dream tax. You're gonna endure some racism, if it doesn't cost you your life, pay it. There you go Uncle Sam" (42:44). On the last line, Minhaj pretends to write a ticket and hands it towards the camera, fixing viewers with a piercing gaze. Here, Minhaj zooms out again from his particular experience with xenophobia and racism to a larger, generational immigrant attitude that he's observed in his own family. Looking at the specific phrasing Minhaj uses, especially the repetition of words like "pay", "tax", and "cost", there is a monetary language that acknowledges how basic human rights of dignity and respect are turned into commodities that demand a fee. By framing it this way, Minhaj encourages viewers to confront the inequality even though narratively and comedically, the moment is uncomfortable. It's not funny and it's not meant to be funny because it's a violation.

This violation isn't benign like the ones Minhaj described from his childhood. There's no misdirection or incongruity that takes this story from serious to funny.

Instead, it just functions as an awful, horrifying look at the reality that many immigrants and people of color face today in America. Dennis Perkins of *The AV Club* comments on this particular moment of the special: “His anger is in service of the greater story he wants to tell about how brown people in this country experience prejudice every second of every day—and what it makes of them” (Perkins). Perkins acknowledges both the anger Minhaj brings to the stage, as well as the idea of a “greater story” that encompasses Minhaj’s family’s experience with racism and xenophobia.

His personal narrative also functions on a psychological level. Returning to psychologist Dan Johnson’s findings about narrative, it’s clear that Minhaj uses this portion of the narrative, telling a personally painful story, to establish a sense of empathy in his white audience, so that he can push through to more comedic parts of the special. As someone who has felt like an outsider because of his skin color in his hometown of Davis, California (where he performed and taped *Homecoming King* for the Netflix special) he has to use his storytelling abilities to ensure a mutual understanding and respect, because the rest of his comedy material revolves around 9/11, an event that he, as a Muslim man from a Muslim family, has often felt scapegoated for.

Minhaj continues the story of his personal experience with 9/11 very delicately: “And I know 9/11 is a super touchy subject. I understand. Because when it happened, everyone in America felt like their country was under attack” (42:22). This is interesting to note, because according to Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakoupoulou in *Analyzing Narrative*, with “stories of conflict” or pain, there’s always disagreement surrounding authorship and authority of storytellers, especially if they come from the out-group. They postulate that these disputes stem from “who has the right to recount a

narrative, who tells the truth and who lies, and what consequences the telling of particular stories may have on the life of individuals and groups” (De Fina and Georgakoupoulou, 125). Minhaj exemplifies this theory, because he is obliged to give the above disclaimer before continuing: “But on that night, September 12th, it was the first night of so many nights where I felt like my family’s love loyalty to this country was under attack” (42:19).

From a comic standpoint, there are hints at the stand up structure from earlier parts of the special as Minhaj plays with expectations in these sentences. A large part of comedy is not just flipping an experience or an idea around to look at the other side, but even just acknowledging that there is another side. For Minhaj, this “other side” is the fact that even though he didn’t suffer a physical loss in the 9/11 attacks, what he lost was a sense of belonging in the country he had been born and raised in.

He persists in his claim to authority in this 9/11 narrative: “Nobody loves this country more than immigrants. I fell in love in this country” (41:54). Minhaj goes on to tell the story of his first love, a girl in first grade, Janice Malo, who when he says, “I love you!”, replies, “You’re the color of poop” (41:50). And while this seems like a quick laugh, which uses a certain childlike humor to ease the tension of the previous section, it actually acts as a sort of foreshadowing for his next segment, which transitions from general racism in America, to the insidious, interpersonal racism and how that seeps into love and romantic relationships. De Fina and Georgakopoulou discuss this phenomenon, of telling a “small story” in order to broach a larger topic in *Analyzing Narrative*. They argue that today, small stories often function as isolated examples that are “generic framing devices, mostly openers,” which allow narrators to introduce a wider concept or

idea (De Fina and Georgakapolou 120). This is exactly what Minhaj does here, using the short anecdote about Janice Malo to bring his audience into a larger narrative later.

SECTION 4: Love and Forgiveness

This acts as an introduction to Minhaj's first real relationship, which was in his senior year of high school. He sets the scene by listing the strict rules his parents had for him at the time, counting them off on his fingers: "[My dad's] rules with me were very simple. 'No fun, no girlfriends. Have fun in med school'" (40:11). He then takes a quick but funny aside, retorting, "Which is a huge lie. It never gets popping in med school" (40:04). Minhaj adds to the joke by pretending to dance to club music on stage.

He then cuts back to his high school experience, detailing how he'd never been to a school dance, got cut from the basketball team three years in a row, and had just finished up an acne medicine called "Accutane" that caused his skin to flake and peel. For audience reference, he even puts up his senior year portrait on the big screen--he's cute and boyish, and the audience aww's appreciatively. The camera shows Minhaj, embarrassedly pointing at the photo and yelling over the applause: "Don't clap. No one did for that photo" (39:14). He goes on: "But there was one bright spot, to my senior year, this girl named Bethany Reed...we were in AP Calc together, but...we had chemistry" (39:13). At the last line, Minhaj does his best Drake impression, leaving a hefty pause and looking suggestively at the camera. The audience enjoys his cheesy, overused pick up line because of the self-aware delivery. This sort of Boyz II Men, flirtatious but incapable style of Minhaj's youth carries throughout the section.

With this persona, he details how she had asked him "Hey...what's your AIM screen name?", an only somewhat dated reference with heavy flirtatious implications (39:07). Minhaj continues in an aside, "Whatever I lacked in real-life game, my digital

game...bananas. Status updates, away messages, sub profile, Boyz II Men...I was a lover” (38:52). Behind him on the big screen, different AOL windows pop up above him, with profiles and lyrics and mock conversations between Hasan and Bethany. He even loops back to the previous section headliner about the great struggle between using the phone and the Internet, “Some of you guys don’t know this. Back in the day, we had to fire up the Internet like goddamn cavemen”, a line he accompanies with crackling and buzzing noises meant to mimic the modem (38:36). Exaggerating the moment, he walks over to the stool on stage and pretends to blow on it like a modem, again creating improvised props through movement. His line, “Hey get off the phone I’m trying to talk to somebody” carries on the cheesy, of-its-time funny (38:24).

Returning to the action, Minhaj describes how finally, after all of their messaging back and forth, Bethany invited him over to her house to study. He recreates his first impressions of her house and the conversation that ensues between Bethany’s mom and himself:

I bike over to her place, white picket fence, McMansion, Ford Expedition, Eddie Bauer edition...Mrs. Reed’s like, ‘You want brownies?’ ‘Yeah. Cool.’ ‘Hey, stay for dinner.’ ‘We just had brownies, but okay’ (38).

This dialogue is filled with different impersonations and tonalities, like his emphasis on “Eddie Bauer edition” and his conversation with Mrs. Reed where Minhaj uses a happily baffled tone at her hospitality. In that same sort of tone he goes on:

We’re sitting there at the dinner table and now Mrs. Reed’s like, ‘Hey honey, we know so much about Bethany, but we don’t know anything about you. What do you like, what are you into?’ (37:14).

At this point, Minhaj pulls a completely confused face and says, “Nobody ever asked me that before” and allows the audience to fill in the gaps with his previously explained strict family background. At the end of the dinner conversation, Mrs. Reed concludes, “You should follow your dreams” and through the use of this dialogue, Minhaj gives the audience the impression that these are people who are warm and welcoming towards him and that he enjoys spending time with them.

Minhaj then creates a parallel story to exhibit contrast between his reality and Bethany’s when one day she remarks: “Hey, we always study at my house. Why don’t we study at your house?” (37:04). Minhaj visibly panics on stage, pacing, and says to the audience, “What, invite you over to my house?” (37). He transitions back into his “Cody, Corey, Cole” white boy accent to voice his own fears: “What language are you guys speaking? What’s that smell?” (36:57). He follows up, “I was not going to open myself up to that. But I was like, ‘No, she’s different” (36:56). From a narrative standpoint, Minhaj has his audience sweating with the possibilities of what could happen and comedically, he is close-up, keeping the audience in suspense (Caulfield and Herring). He keeps that zoomed-in view as he starts the story, “Mom, Dad, a school friend is coming over. Everyone here, please be normal” (36:50). Bethany arrives and Minhaj sets the scene at his house:

We’re sitting at my living room table. My mom and dad are arguing in Hindi. My mom is frying pakoras. The fobbiest thing ever. Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham is playing on Zee TV. But it’s too much. It’s all coming at this girl. It’s too much. You’ve got to ease your way in. She’s from Nebraska. Soul cycle, yoga, then Zee TV. Don’t just, like, go into it. (36:03).

At this point, seeing things from Minhaj’s perspective, the audience is worried. Minhaj sets us up to believe that something is about to go horribly wrong given the

overwhelming nature of the environment. To create this anxiety, Minhaj has returned to the specialized lexicon from earlier in the special. The details, words like “fobbiest” and “Kabhi Hushi Habhie Gham” are all minutely specific to his immigrant experience. And although that might not be the experience of his majority white audience, and even though he’s not making physical sounds like in other bits, it is through his specific phrasing that the audience vicariously takes on that overwhelmed feeling. We can hear the arguing, the crackling of oil in the pan, the Zee TV, even imagine the smell of something cooking.

Minhaj sits on the stool wide-eyed and says, “So I’m looking at her, like, ‘Don’t say anything. Please don’t say anything”, a foil to his earlier statement to his father after the hate crime, “Why don’t you say something?” (35:59). Again, the audience is still immersed in Minhaj’s perspective and his earnest plea that Bethany won’t reject him and his family. Finally, he zooms out, “She looks up from her book, and she’s like, ‘You know what? This is really nice. We should do this more often. This is really nice” (35:51). Minhaj draws out the last nice for dramatic effect, cementing the sentiment. This technique of withholding pertinent information is often seen in television and in literature, where writers “pan out from a close-up to deliver a humorous situation” and although this reaction from Bethany Reed isn’t necessarily hilarious, it’s funny in a nice way, that she subverted all of Minhaj’s fears and expectations (Caulfield and Herring). He continues: “And I look at her, and I’m like, ‘Oh, my God. I love you, my white princess.” (35:42). This comment is the truly funny pan out moment in the overall joke. For the white members of the audience, it’s an awkward moment of “saying the unsayable” where Minhaj lays out the bare truth of his situation, being a brown guy

involved with a white girl (Caulfield and Herring). He goes on: “You see me. I don’t got to change who I am? I can be me!” (35:30).

The audience applauds and Minhaj describes how this continued, the two of them going back and forth between each other's houses until one day, they’re doing “integrals” at Minhaj’s house. The screen, which sort of curves around the back of the stage, lights up with a cartoon suburban scene, topped off with a night sky. Minhaj, back to using his Boyz II men voice, describes how Bethany, “closes her book. She’s like, ‘Hey. It’s late.’ And I’m like, ‘It is late.’ And she’s like...‘I should go home.’ I was like, ‘Yeah you should...’” (35:15) And then in a self deprecatory aside, “Why did you say that? That was your chance. Don’t do that.” (35:05). He comes back though:

I said, ‘Wait, let me walk you out.’ So I’m walking her out. She gets in the car. I’m about to close the door. She rams her arm in the door, leans out and gives me a kiss. ‘I love you.’ Drives off into the night. Like a fucking G! (34:51).

Here, Minhaj’s incredulous and then elated face garners cheers and laughter. Now his specialized lexicon “like a fucking G” (“G” meaning “gangster”) is accessible to the young members of the audience who would connect with the slang term. It’s a satisfying moment in that despite the racism he endured growing up, he goes from being the “color of poop” to someone who’s desirable and wanted by a white girl. Especially in the line “my white princess”, Minhaj definitely acknowledges the underlying trope of the white savior that existed around their relationship. But he doesn't necessarily impose that role on Bethany, who he says, “knew the rules. She knew the rules. No fun, no friends, no girlfriends.” (34:40). Essentially, Minhaj describes Bethany as someone who bridges the gap between his two worlds, the world he lives in at home and the “Fair and Lovely” world that he has to navigate outside. His reaction to the kiss is adorable; informed by his

sheltered childhood and the impact of first love, he goes: “We are definitely getting married. When in the shaadi?” (34:20).

To move the story along narratively, Minhaj has to introduce an obstacle. So, he goes back to where it all started between him and Bethany: AP Calc. His teacher Mr. Pendleton, knowing the class was full of “overachievers” wanted to make sure that they all had one night to let loose and be kids: the night of senior prom. He went so far as to create a “March Madness for nerds” style bracket and made it “mandatory” for all 30 kids to go to the dance. Minhaj details the motley crew: “Me, Jehovah’s Witness girl, Korean exchange student, going to prom?” (33:36). Days pass and as the bracket fills up, Bethany and Hasan are in the last spots. Minhaj, knowing his parents will say no, looks at Bethany and repeats his line from before, “Please don’t say anything,” and adds, “She says nothing, like a G” (32:50). That is, until she follows him after class and asks him to prom, “Will you go to the prom with me?” to which he replies: “Yes, my white princess” (32:11). In these lines there are two running gags, that of the “white princess” and the “say anything” phrase. This background passes quickly and feels almost rushed, mimicking the anticipation Minhaj feels for the dance.

Fast forward to the night of prom. Minhaj’s parents have not consented and he mimics a conversation with Bethany outlining how the night is going to go down:

Bethany, situation at home. Father doesn’t want us to go to prom. I’m going to sneak out. I live on the second story. I’m going to jump off and land on my bike. I’ll bike to your place, we dance it up, and if I die, I had a great run! You know? You’re going to die, so put it on the tombstone: Hasan Minhaj, 4.3 GPA, kissed a white girl (31:23).

Minhaj is optimistic and brings us closer, setting up a parallel structure to his imagined plan above. Contrasting fiction with reality, he says:

I put on the JCPenny suit. Spray on the Michael Jordan cologne...I'm scaling down the side of my roof, scraping my knees. I jump off the roof. It's like 20 feet...I get on my bike. And I'm biking with my knees bowed out. So my slacks don't get caught up in the chains (31:00).

Here, he gets physical, sitting on his stool, leaned back, legs out and pretending to peddle a bike, all while speaking. The camera circles his form and lands in front of him, capturing his large frame in whole. He's smiling though, and there's that Hero's Journey, almost Knight in Shining Armor trope, as Minhaj rides through the streets of Davis to go get his date. The moment is hopeful and the screen behind him shows a beautiful sunset over a suburban landscape. The warm orange glow of the lights is comforting and in it's own way, a decoy.

Then, Minhaj arrives. He's about to ring the doorbell he stops for a moment to take a breath, "Wait. 30 second time-out. Do you understand what's about to go down? You're about to go to prom with Bethany motherfucking Reed. This is the American dream. This is what Dad fought for" (29:53). The audience applauds as we get to see our nerdy but loveable hero realizing his dream; he's finally "made it"; his struggle has been resolved and his existence has been legitimized. He rings the bell and Mrs. Reed, brownies, "what are your dreams", Mrs. Reed, opens the door:

She has this look of concern. And I look over her shoulder, and I see Jeff Burke putting a corsage on Bethany's wrist. And she's like, 'Oh, my God, honey, did Bethany not tell you? Sweetie, we love you and we think you're great. We love that you come over and study. But tonight is one of those nights...We have a lot of family back home in Nebraska, and we're gonna be taking a lot of photos tonight, so we don't think it'd be a good fit. Mr. Reed can give you a ride home.'" (29:04).

Behind him, on the screen, “Log cya kahenge?” flashes on the big screen and goes almost unnoticed. This time, it’s what will white people think. Again, Minhaj speaks directly into the camera, doing his Mrs. Reed impression. Interestingly, the dialogue is all hers and Minhaj doesn’t interject with observations or jokes. Instead, he just lets her monologue stand alone, unfiltered.

It’s a moment of coded language, with words like “love” and “great” masking darker sentiments. Even the way she trails off after “tonight is one of those nights” speaks volumes. In her jumble of words, Mrs. Reed desperately tries to avoid acknowledging the blatant racism that she is inflicting upon Minhaj. He addresses this after finishing up the story, which sees him biking home and playing Mario Kart in his suit. He says:

And it’s not like they were yokels yelling ‘sand nigger!’ I could let that pass. I’d eaten off their plates. I’d kissed their daughter. I didn’t know that people could be bigoted even as they were smiling at you. It’s hard when you see people saying they love you but they’re afraid of you at the same time. And I didn’t know what that meant (28:17).

Now, as an audience, we’re left with an emotional, almost philosophical question that even the performer doesn’t have the answer to. When Minhaj shows up at school the following Monday, Bethany finds him and repeats his line back to him: “Please don’t say anything. It’s a generational thing. Please don’t say anything” (28:01). This is particularly powerful in that it continues to repurpose “say” and plays with the power or in this scenario, the imbalance of power through silence. And according to Minhaj, that was the last time that they ever spoke.

The stage lights up again and Minhaj talks about “new chapters” and moving on, the sort of “Tools, Clear History, Never happened” way we navigate phases of our life.

He even re-contextualizes by approaching the painful moment from his dad's perspective:

Oh, you didn't get to go to prom with a white girl, who gives a fuck? At least your spine isn't getting shattered in a police wagon, though it's happening to African-Americans to this day. So this is the tax you have to pay? I'll pay it. (26:29).

This line is particularly masterful, bringing back the American dream tax that he had mentioned with the 9/11 window-smashing incident. He even downplays his own experience, pointing to how other groups are treated with even more disdain and violence.

However, he takes a pause and reconsiders, addressing how harmful day-to-day, implicit racism can be: "there is bigotry that happens everyday. Because we're too afraid of the Other. Someone who's not in our tribe...It's good people and bad people. Irrespective of creed, class, color find those people. Because love is bigger than fear" (25:50). Again, there's no joke, no punch line. It reads more like the end of a novel, a sort of life lesson at the end of a traumatic journey. But it isn't the end, and Minhaj keeps going:

You know what the shitty part is? When you first fall in love, you get that first taste of Heisenburg Blue. It's never the same after that...We had those first secrets. My secret was 'I want to be a comedian'. We promised we would follow our dreams, no matter what people would think (26:01).

Here, he sets up the audience for the falling action, mentioning comedy and implying that he's going to bring us up to present day and how he got to be on this stage. Minhaj also brings back "what people would think", this time only in English and in a subverted form. But still, the sentiment stands. Again, it changes in this part of the narrative, taking on a new sense of resilience and hope.

At this point, Minhaj gives a brief glimpse into his comedic journey--the seven years it took him to get a headlining spot in a comedy club in New York City. Detailing the experience, he says: "I did what a lot of early comedians do, I got on Facebook, I got super cocky" (23:55). A Facebook status update appears on the screen and as he speaks, the status update gets typed out along with his words: "YOOOOOOOOO FACEBOOK YA BOY HEADLINING GOTHAM COMEDY CLUB LEMME KNOW IF U WANT SOME TIX" (23:41). Minhaj reads it in a bombastic voice and it's doubly poignant as accompanied by the visual. It's a sort of late 2000s kitsch that the "fairly young fan base" can relate to (Genzlinger). And then, another Facebook message appears on screen. It's Bethany Reed, who now lives in Manhattan, asking if she and her girlfriends can "get some tix".

His response, which he calls "revenge lemonade," is dramatic and hilarious: "Bethany comma enter," he says in a Facebook message, "TOTALLY remember you. Long time no see indeed! Listen, I would love to give you some tix, but we're going to be taking a lot of photos tonight...and I don't think you'd be a good fit" (21:47). At the line "we're going to be taking a lot of photos tonight..." the audience goes wild. Their cheers drown out Minhaj's second line and bleed into the next few seconds. The irony of bringing back Mrs. Reed's line to him on prom night is beautiful. Minhaj runs around the stage, his energy pulsing through the hall.

Strutting, he answers a pretend phone: Hello, headliner. What do you need? (21:28). He replies in his sister's voice: "Hasan *bhai*, come home Dad had a heart attack. Hey idiot, pick up your phone. I need you. Dad had a heart attack" (21:16). Just at this moment of seeming elation, everything melts away. Again, a decoy assumption is

employed to make the audience think that everything is fine and that Minhaj has gotten his revenge and that the cosmic balance has been restored. And yet, that energy dies in a second.

Minhaj gets real with the audience, detailing how his sister begged him to come home right away and how he delayed a day because he had a set at the “Comedy Store”. At this point, the stage is completely dark, only a single spotlight illuminating Minhaj. The whole thing looks like a criminal investigation, as though Minhaj is interrogating his past self. *The New Yorker* writer Doreen St. Felix critically remarks that some moments of the special focus on, “personal memories excavated for teachability” and Christian Becker of *Paste* observes that sometime the special seems like a “Ted Talk” (Becker, St. Felix). This seems to be a moment that is more about reflection and “teachability” than comedy or storytelling. At this point, Minhaj sort of has his audience wondering, where exactly is he going with this? Why is he beating himself up on stage? Where’s the payoff?

Thankfully, it comes shortly after Minhaj’s father gets out of surgery. He recalls when his father was in recovery: “We’re in the hospital and I have to tell him stories. So I’m telling him stories about my life, he’s telling me stories about his life. So I tell him the prom story” (19:49). Stories become recursive, as he limns this multi-level storytelling experience. In this portion, Minhaj is again facing the camera, sitting on the stool mimicking how he would have sat at his dad’s hospital bedside. And again, he defies expectations with his father’s reaction: “Hasan, I’m mad at you...why don’t you forgive Bethany?” (19:33). Returning to his incredulity surrounding the hate crime with the Camry, Minhaj is surprised and angry at his father for “wanting to be the bigger

person again”, emphasizing the “again” in an frustrated tone, to highlight the disturbingly repetitive nature of the racist slights his family endures.

Standing in the spotlight, Minhaj gives a monologue in his father’s voice, his father’s reasoning for being the bigger person:

You know when I emigrated to this country in 1982, everything I saw on TV...I thought if I let you go to a school dance, you would join a gang, get a girl pregnant and become a drug dealer in one night. So I wanted to protect you. And her family saw stuff about us on TV. They wanted to protect their daughter. You’re afraid of me, she’s afraid of them, everybody’s afraid of everybody. But Hasan, you have to be brave. And your courage to do what’s right has to be greater than your fear of getting hurt. So Hasan, be brave. Hasan, be brave (19.00).

It’s a touching, poetic moment that hints at some sort of healing between Minhaj and Bethany and more largely, Minhaj and America. And Minhaj tells the audience that he was moved by this speech, but still went back and forth. He varies between the “Tools, Clear History” attitude and “*House of Cards*, we crush our enemies” attitude. And then he says, “I didn’t know how to feel, until this,” and in one of the biggest plot twists in the entire narrative, an advertisement for Pizza Hut starts playing in the background with Minhaj as the spokesperson:

Pizza Hut new big pizza sliders are here. Get nine in a box for just ten bucks! Ten bucks! Match up to three ways! Three? Cheese! Big, delicious sliders, only at your Pizza Hut. And that’s how you make it great!

It’s absolutely absurd. The audience, confused but delighted, bursts into laughter after an especially serious section in the hospital. But it’s a strange leap and we’re not exactly sure why this made Minhaj think about forgiveness. That is until a tweet pops up on screen.

It's Bethany Reed saying: Just saw my high school prom date in a pizza hut ad. #throwback #itsasmallworld #brilliant (17:10). He tweets back: Nugg! We didn't end up going tho? How've you been??? #MrP #Calc (17:07). She then replies : I know! :(Made for a better tweet. Let me know when you're in New York! (17:05). He answers back: Absolutely (17:00). The whole thing is another use of textual and visual narrative within the verbal narrative. Narrative researchers have pointed to visual aids like this as a means of giving the storyteller more credibility, because it allows the audience to verify other source material and not solely rely on the word of the narrator. He goes on: Now, against the advice of my therapist, I go on Facebook (a line *many* people can relate to) and [Bethany] has a public profile. So I start clicking around" (16:47). He lists some perfunctory information and then says, "In a relationship with...I click it" and takes a pause as a giant image of an Indian man flashes up on the screen, "Rajesh Rengatramanajananam" (16:03).

Minhaj expresses his frustration on stage, pacing in circles crying: "He is Indian as FUCK" and "So big. Ten syllables." He counts them all out, stomping on stage, "Rajesh Ren-gat-ra-ma-na-ja-na-nam" and goes: Are you fucking kidding me? Do you know how many letters there are in the alphabet? Do you know how many letters are in Rajesh Rengatramanajananam? 25!" (15:49). Christian Becker of *Paste* comments: "The act is so personal and well thought-out that it could work without the help of videos or graphics, but some jokes hit harder because of them" (Becker). And this, because of the grandiose, bombastically long nature of Rengatramanajananam, is one of those moments.

Minhaj is in a frenzy, shouting, "God is laughing at me" and venting his anger to the audience. He then brings back the line, "Now, against the advice of my therapist...I

make contact” and he reaches out to Bethany, pretending he has a gig in New York, but really, flying out from California just to see her (16:01). At this point, his confidence is down, having been indirectly slighted by Rajesh Rengatramanajanam, and Minhaj tells the audience how he psyched himself up on his way to the restaurant. “Walk in there like this,” he says, doing a casual spin, finishing it off with a nod, lick the lips and “What’s up?” (14:10). Confident in his entrance, he goes to open the door and hears “Hey Hasan!” because Bethany is sitting outside. “She saw me doing this shit in the street!” he cries. In this moment, Minhaj makes himself ridiculous and allows the audience to laugh at him, rather than something funny he’s said. This pattern—of realizing his own mistakes and laughing at them—continues throughout the end of the special, as Minhaj ebbs towards his final reconciliation.

Minhaj sits on the theater stool, hunched and looking down, pretending to have a conversation back and forth with Bethany. Then he goes: “You know how when you see someone from your past, all of a sudden, you’re that age again? So all that Kanye juice just goes out of my body.” This is an excellent moment of rhetorical crowd work, where Minhaj is including the audience and making the story relatable to them, but without asking for particular responses.

He describes freezing up, how he can’t find the words to say. He even repurposes the earlier “Please don’t say anything” plea to “say something”. All of a sudden, he cuts pretend Bethany off and says: “Bethany, do you know why I’m here? I’m here to talk about prom!” (13:13). The audience laughs at this because both they and Minhaj both realize how crazy he sounds, ten years later, tracking down this girl to ask about prom.

He recalls how: “her face went white. You guys knew she was white? It went whiter than white” (13:02). Pressing on, Minhaj grills Bethany, laying out all of his baggage:

You knew my situation. You knew it. I was ride or die for you. At that age, that’s a lot. You weren’t the same for me, fine whatever. But what makes matters worse is you had me socially crucified. You knew how hard it was for me. And then I was so insecure that I couldn’t date another white person, because I was afraid of not being able to be with them, because of the color of my skin. Do you know what that’s like? (12:55).

She remains silent and he keeps going: “And now I’m trying to pursue my dreams. I’m trying, but now you’re writing (via social media) about me, you act like we’re cool, when we’re not. Why do you do that?” (12:23). There’s an ambiguity between whether or not we can believe Minhaj’s monologue. Given how awkward he was going in, his lines here seem deceptively perfect, almost like the rehearsed arguments that everyone has in their heads after the actual moment has passed. Then in her voice, Minhaj gives Bethany’s defense:

I am so sorry. But you know we were 18 right? Like, I really wanted to go with you. But my mom, she’s very controlling. Do you know what it’s like to have a parent that controls your life? (11:55)

Here, Minhaj takes an ironic pause, giving his audience a knowing look and saying, “Oh, do tell.” He then transitions back into Bethany-mode:

I wish I could have gone with you. But I can’t change the past. I never thought you would want to talk to me ever again. But the reason why I write about you is because I see you kept your promise. So even if you never want to talk to me ever again, I’ll always be rooting for you (11:38).

Now, loose ends are starting to tie up. Bethany goes from a hypocritical villain, touting Minhaj’s success for “likes” on social media to someone who has always believed in him and is genuinely proud of him. Minhaj turns to the audience saying: “You know how you

carry hatred in your heart for people in your past? In that moment I let it go. I crushed it, like a Voldemort horcrux” (10:40).

The story develops even more when Minhaj asks about “Mr. Rengatramanajanam”, Bethany’s current boyfriend. She tells him that they recently moved in together, and how she had called her mom to ask for help with a deposit: “My mom was like, ‘No. You know the way our family is. So make up your mind” and Bethany’s reply: “I told my mom, ‘Not again. This isn’t high school. Raj is a good person and so am I. So I’m going to be with him because it’s the right thing to do. So I hope you make up your mind” (10). At this point, Minhaj goes back to being himself, the performer on stage, and wears an expression of disbelief. He explains how for Bethany, her mom’s “co-sign” was really just a symbol of acceptance and support, a human universal, and more broadly, how he just wanted a “co-sign” to legitimize his stake in America:

I care about what [Bethany] represents. Growing up, we just want that co-sign. To tell them you’re good enough. Sit here, you’re good enough. But that’s not the American dream. It’s not reaching out and asking for a co-sign. It’s what every generation did before you. You claim that shit on your own terms. This is new brown America. The dream is for you to take so take that shit (9:40).

This part of the narrative brings together a lot of elements of the special as a whole: Minhaj’s childhood, his feelings of national rejection, and his Bethany complex. It’s a call to arms that gives this lengthy story a definite, unifying theme. It’s the ultimate “pull back and reveal”, just in a repurposed, lesson-like format (Herring and Caulfield). Doreen St. Felix describes this as a moment where he goes for “pathos as well as humor” and the comedy special “elicits not just laughter but tears” (St. Felix).

But even this isn't the ultimate end to the greater circular structure. Minhaj, in the last three minutes of the special, talks a little bit about how he auditioned for and landed a role on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Although it brings the audience up to speed chronologically, it seems a little out of place—it's funny, but it doesn't pack the same punch as the more emotional material that leads up to it. That is, until Minhaj talks about the day he landed the role and immediately went back to his hotel room to post "the greatest status update". He describes the scene: I run upstairs and I fire up Facebook, and then I see this (2:08). It's a Facebook status update from Bethany, a picture of her, hands over her mouth in shock, and Rajesh Rengatramanajanam on one knee, proposing. The caption reads, "I said yes!"

Although the audience groans, Minhaj isn't upset: "You guys see this right? Don't you know what this means? Don't you get it? I'm the cure for racism!" (1:44). The audience laughs and Minhaj clarifies his statement further:

Maybe I didn't cure it, but everyone has a purpose. Some people were put here to find a cure for cancer or find a vaccine for Ebola. My life is definitive proof that once you go brown, you got to lock that shit down!" (1:24).

The final line sees the lights go to black. In a metaphorical sense, Minhaj has gotten in his last word and "dropped the mic". He brings back that idea of "saying the unspeakable" in his generalizing claims about "curing" or "solving" racism in a way that's not naive, but mindful and funny. Dennis Perkins comments: "[Minhaj is] not afraid of looking like an asshole as he fumbles his way toward his own understanding of how race in America is even more complex than he imagined" (Perkins). And it really does complete the circle of narrative; because his bottom line issue is that he has always felt like the other, an outsider because of the color of his skin and all of the implications

that accompany that difference in white America. Whether it was his parents raising him a different way, kids at school teasing him, a white girl rejecting him, or even America rejecting him, there was always a consciousness of his otherness due to his “brown-ness” that had kept him from the sense of belonging that we all crave.

But by the end of the special, he’s not only reclaiming the American dream narrative, but he’s proud of himself and the path he has to carve out for himself, bit by bit. With so much build up, so much pain and disappointment throughout the special, the payoff at the end is substantial. Even the way he reclaims the phrase “once you go black you never go back” rings of his new approach to his specific identity.

CONCLUSION: Comedy and empathetic implications

This case study in *Homecoming King* is meant to exhibit a seasoned but still fresh comedian flexing a particularly strong, critically acclaimed narrative muscle within the realm of stories about pain. In remembering the difficult times in his childhood and throughout his youth, Minhaj draws from the Richard Pryor style to tell an autobiographical story that engages the audience in an emotional way. This entire special—the reactions from the audience, Minhaj’s earnest expressions, and the ultimate laughter that fills the theater—acts as a testament to the ways comedy and narrative intermingle as a collective medium for processing pain. *Homecoming King* is a cathartic exercise that is equal parts confession and reflection.

In light of this example, when we approach comedy, we can engage with it as a form of narrative that serves a real, emotional purpose and merits analytical consideration. Comedy is not a Band-Aid. Instead, it’s a medium for exploration that allows performers to tell prolonged, unsettling narratives because at its core, comedy is about the balance between benign violations and genuine violations.

But why expose ourselves in this way just for catharsis? Why lay out our secrets, our dirty laundry, and our deepest fears and hurts for the public? As humans, we are compelled to tell and express. We write, we speak, we create. Our existence is just one prolonged story and we’re all just characters in the narrative of the human experience. And all stories need listeners. Humorous pain narratives are told because they turn audience members into witnesses. And with every new listener, a new witness is created who shoulders a small portion of the storyteller’s burden. They carry with them the

knowledge of the storyteller's pain; it permeates and impacts their experience, hopefully for the better.

I would say that an implicit goal of comedy is to create a rank of more empathetic, compassionate listeners that aren't laughing at, but with comedians. Cartoonist Lev Yilmaz says this of comedy: "When you get down to it, at its root, Comedy is truth, absurdity, and pain." But really, that's just the human experience.

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