Between Cultures and Punchlines: Postcolonial Trauma and Humor in *The Big Sick* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

Humor is generally viewed as a form of entertainment, but it can also emerge in traumatic situations. This study examines the role of humor as a coping mechanism for postcolonial trauma in the semi-autobiographical film *The Big Sick* (2017). Through qualitative descriptive analysis, this study applies Baofu's (2011) typology of humor, which includes irony, sarcasm, self-deprecating humor, dark humor, and ethnic humor, as well as Fanon's (1991) framework to identify indications of racial and cultural trauma experienced by Kumail, a Pakistani Muslim immigrant in the United States. The results show that Kumail's humor emerges in situations of racial and familial pressure and evolves from a defensive-reactive response into a more active effort to negotiate a hybrid identity. Through humor, the film critiques racial prejudice against Muslims as well as traditional demands that threaten individuals with ostracism. Therefore, within the narrative of the postcolonial diaspora, humor functions not only as entertainment but also as a means of social critique and identity negotiation. The identification of trauma here is interpretive in nature, not a clinical diagnosis.

Keywords: Postcolonial trauma, humor, culture, hybrid identity

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INTISARI

Humor umumnya dipandang sebagai bagian dari hiburan, namun juga dapat muncul dalam situasi trauma. Penelitian ini menelaah peran humor sebagai mekanisme koping terhadap trauma pascakolonial dalam film semiautobiografis The Big Sick (2017). Melalui analisis deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan tipologi humor Baofu (2011), yang mencakup ironi, sarkasme, humor yang merendahkan diri, humor gelap, dan humor etnis, serta gagasan Fanon (1991) untuk mengenali indikasi trauma rasial dan budaya yang dialami Kumail, seorang imigran Muslim Pakistan di Amerika. Hasil penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa humor Kumail hadir dalam situasi tekanan rasial dan keluarga, serta berkembang dari respons defensif-reaktif menjadi upaya negosiasi identitas hibrida yang lebih aktif. Dengan menggunakan humor, film ini mengkritik prasangka rasial terhadap Muslim serta tuntutan tradisi yang mengancam individu dengan pengucilan. Karena itu, dalam narasi diaspora pascakolonial, humor tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai hiburan, tetapi juga sebagai sarana kritik sosial dan

negosiasi identitas. Identifikasi trauma di sini bersifat interpretatif, bukan diagnosis klinis.

Kata Kunci: Trauma postkolonial, humor, budaya, identitas hibrida

INTRODUCTION

In general, humor and comedy are associated with entertainment, laughter, and emotional pleasure. Humor is a fundamental component of comedic expression that can be described as a cognitive construct encompassing perception, cognition, and mental frameworks (Morreall 2010). Humor fosters a sense of community because individuals feel connected when they share common perceptions or values (Miczo and Meyer 2025). In literary works such as films, humor is often used to provide entertainment and alleviate psychological stress because humor is one of the tools or mechanisms humans use to relieve stress and maintain mental health (Kargupta et al. 2023). Therefore, humor is generally viewed as synonymous with pleasant, joyful situations, so it is rarely associated with serious situations involving sadness and trauma.

However, in reality, humor does not only arise in pleasant situations; it can also emerge in adverse circumstances, including sadness and trauma. This phenomenon creates a paradox of humor existing alongside tragedy. Within the framework of social norms in society, individuals are generally expected to respond to traumatic experiences with seriousness and sadness. Society even dictates how and for how long the emotion of sadness should be expressed (Hilberdink et al. 2023). This also influences how individuals express their emotions when in situations associated with grief and sadness (Zhou et al. 2000). Therefore, humor in traumatic situations is often viewed as contradictory because it goes against emotional expectations; this paradox demonstrates that laughter can coexist with emotional suffering and tragedy.

The film *The Big Sick* (2017), an American romantic comedy-drama, depicts this paradox. Directed by Michael Showalter, the film was written by Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon. It follows Kumail, a Pakistani immigrant who falls in love with an American woman named Emily. Kumail navigates contrasting cultural frameworks: Pakistan's tradition of arranged marriage and America's individualistic culture. The tension between these cultural paradigms lies at the heart of the postcolonial trauma Kumail experiences throughout the film. Postcolonial trauma is a psychological experience that may arise from internalizing the dominant culture's racist views, along

with rejection and pressure to relinquish some aspects of one's original identity to gain social acceptance (Fanon 1991). The postcolonial condition may cause psychological trauma through conflicts between self and culture and competing identities, leading to inferiority, loss of control, and mental health problems (Licata 2011). Postcolonial trauma stems from colonial domination and oppression, potentially causing racial trauma through discrimination and cultural trauma through alienation from cultural identity and values amid migration and interaction with different social environments (Gnabro 2025). Postcolonial trauma is typically psychological rather than physical, involving alienation from oneself and inner conflict in the search for identity (Mahima 2024). Kumail is an immigrant from Pakistan, a former British colony, living in post-9/11 America; therefore, these two forms of trauma are used to interpret his experience. For postcolonial subjects, this pressure is intensified by the struggle to find a voice within the dominant culture. Kumail uses humor as a means of managing the emotional pressure he feels. This pressure comes from two directions: racial discrimination in American public spaces (racial trauma) and the demands of his own family traditions (cultural trauma). In this situation, humor allows Kumail to respond to both without having to abandon either of his identities.

Several studies have explored the cinematic production of *The Big Sick (2017)*, emphasizing the themes of romance, representation, and cultural interaction embedded in its narrative. Most of the research focusing on the conflicts experienced by the main character, Kumail, covers cultural oppression against Kumail (Ayuningtyas 2020) and the social deixis used by Kumail (Salam 2023) cross-cultural conflict (Rosenberg 2021), representation of Pakistani-American identity (Azahra 2019) and cultural identity within interfaith relationships (Yahya 2024). There is a lack of discourse regarding the role of humor in addressing postcolonial trauma. This study posits that comedy and humor serve as socio-psychological mechanisms for managing cultural vulnerability and emotional distress. Consequently, this research will provide an innovative psychoanalytic and postcolonial analysis of coping strategies in the film *The Big Sick* (2017), which has predominantly been analyzed through a sociocultural lens.

Considering this research gap, this study aims to explore the complex role of humor as a psychological defense mechanism within the cinematic narrative of *The Big Sick (2017)* by systematically analyzing and examining: (1) the deliberate placement and

contextual significance of humor during traumatic events in the film, (2) the various types of humor employed, particularly the nuances of sarcasm and the complexity of black humor, and (3) the profound psychological implications of humor that influence character development within the context of traumatic experiences.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze humor as a coping mechanism for postcolonial trauma in the film *The Big Sick (2017)*. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to identify the types of humor Kumail employs to cope with postcolonial trauma and to examine how these humorous techniques influence the emotional development of the characters as they confront traumatic situations. This study also employs film theory to demonstrate how aspects of the film, such as *mise-en-scène*, camera angles, framing, color grading, lighting, and even symbolism within the frame, reveal and shape the humor and trauma Kumail experiences in *The Big Sick (2017)*.

The analysis in this study is based on two theoretical frameworks. First, Peter Baofu's theory of humor, presented in his book "The Future of Post-Human Humor: A Preface to a New Theory of Joking and Laughing," views humor through the perspectives of mind, nature, society, and culture. The theory identifies five types of humor: irony, sarcasm, self-deprecating humor, black humor, and ethnic humor, which serve as analytical variables. Second, Frantz Fanon's (1991) ideas in his book "Black Skin, White Masks" are used to explain the origins of Kumail's psychological trauma as a postcolonial subject. Although Fanon himself does not use the term "postcolonial trauma," he demonstrates that alienation is not a personal matter but is shaped by social structures, and that inner wounds arise not only from a single traumatic event but may also result from racist conduct and discriminatory narratives absorbed from childhood through reading, education, and one's environment. Four of Fanon's concepts serve as points of reference: the racial epidermal schema, in which a person understands themselves through images shaped by the dominant group rather than through their own experience; the epidermalization of inferiority, the process by which a sense of inferiority arising from socioeconomic inequality is accepted as part of one's identity; the phobogenic object, the position of a person perceived by the dominant group as a source of fear and anxiety; and the reactional response. These concepts are used to identify Kumail's psychological wounds, while his responses to those wounds are interpreted through Baofu's humor

typology to analyze patterns in his character development. Accordingly, humor is interpreted as Kumail's means of coping with wounds caused by racial treatment and cultural aspects of his experience as a postcolonial subject.

The primary data for this research were derived from *The Big Sick* (2017) by observing the character Kumail's actions and dialogues, emphasizing scenes that present humor and trauma. Data classification refers to the five types of humor according to Baofu (2011). The analysis procedure begins with the transcription of dialogue based on time and scene, grouping into existing variables based on Kumail's discourse (spoken) and performance (practice), and then each scene is analyzed to examine the relationship between the use of humor and traumatic experiences based on Fanon (1991) idea depicted through dialogue and cinematic elements. Secondary data were obtained from articles, previous research, and theoretical texts discussing humor, trauma, postcolonialism, and film studies as the foundation and support for the analysis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Kumail's Postcolonial Trauma

Postcolonial trauma in this film does not stem from a single past event, but rather from accumulating pressures that are apparent on two levels: the stressors Kumail experiences and their psychological effects. The film's racial trauma is rooted in the post-9/11 context, in which Kumail, a Muslim from Pakistan, is continually viewed with suspicion by American society. In Fanon's (1991) concept of the racial epidermal schema, his identity is defined externally, for example, through the label "terrorist." This is evident in the stand-up scene: when an audience member shouts, "Go back to ISIS!" and is asked to explain why, he merely replies, "Because of how he looks." Kumail is positioned as a phobogenic object, a source of threat to the dominant group despite doing nothing. The psychological effects are evident in the burden of concealing his Pakistani identity in public and in his feeling that he does not belong in the community where he lives. These include his reluctance to grow a beard, his hiding of photographs of Pakistani women, and even his failure to perform the daily prayers.

Cultural trauma arises from the tension between his family's demands that he preserve his Pakistani identity and the dominant society's expectation that Kumail assimilate into American culture. The first demand comes from his mother, Sharmeen, who says the family has just one expectation: that Kumail remain a good Muslim and

marry a Pakistani woman. The threat is real: his cousin was ostracized by the Pakistani family for marrying a white American woman for love. As a result, Kumail conceals his relationship with Emily from his family and his arranged-marriage plans from Emily, forcing him to hide part of himself in both worlds. At the same time, he belittles himself through humor in order to gain acceptance from Emily and her family, demonstrating the internalization of inferiority that is, accepting an inferior position as the price of belonging. The psychological impact is a twofold fear: losing his family while also losing his place in Emily's world. Thus, evidence of Kumail's trauma emerges through three mutually reinforcing layers: exposure to chronic stressors, manifested in post-9/11 suspicion, arranged-marriage demands, and threats of ostracism; the internalization of an image imposed by the label of terrorist and of an inferior position; and behavioral responses involving concealment of identity and fear of loss.

2. Ironic Humor

Ironic humor is a type of humor that relies on incongruity, pretending to agree with or accept something that contradicts reality to highlight how ridiculous, bad, or absurd it is. In the film *The Big Sick (2017),* ironic humor emerges when Kumail confronts the trauma resulting from racial discrimination, cultural alienation, and identity conflicts as a Muslim in the American diaspora. In situations that demand a response of sadness and anxiety, Kumail instead responds with remarks or comments that run counter to the reality or atmosphere he is experiencing. Kumail uses ironic humor to create distance from potential pain and mental burden. Humor, irony, and satire essentially provide an opportunity for those who employ them to confront painful experiences or trauma in a healthy and less threatening way (Garrick 2006).

Midway through the film, while Kumail is still establishing his presence in the American public sphere, an ironic moment arises during one of his stand-up performances before an American audience. Kumail is suddenly heckled by a member of the audience who calls him a terrorist, shouting, "Go back to ISIS!" This remark reflects a collective stereotype that constitutes hate speech and racism prevalent in American society. That statement is a manifestation of a racial epidermal schema: Kumail is not seen for who he is, but rather through the image of a terrorist constructed by the dominant group, so his identity is determined from the outside. Kumail responds to these comments by creating a new space for discussion by bringing up something absurd and completely unrelated to

ISIS: "Toast." The word "toast" can be interpreted as a form of epidermalization of inferiority: one's self-acceptance depends on adapting to the culture of the dominant group. By choosing to discuss "Toast" to demonstrate that he is part of American society, he seems to be saying that he is not a foreigner, not a Pakistani who typically eats rice, and steers the conversation toward the conclusion that he is not a terrorist. This scene is cinematically enhanced by the framing of Kumail alone on stage against a dark backdrop, while the audience is depicted only faintly at the bottom of the frame, a visual composition that underscores the social isolation and discriminatory pressures he must face on his own.

However, toward the end of the film, the function of this ironic humor shifts. After Emily rejects him, Kumail returns to dinner with his family, hoping to be accepted back. The absence of a place setting for him signals that he is no longer considered part of the family, while a wide shot showing all the family members with stiff expressions and no interaction emphasizes the awkward, hostile atmosphere. In this situation, Kumail says, "Motion to kick Kumail out of the family, denied." This remark constitutes ironic humor because it relies on a disparity. Kumail is the clown of his family, and in this scene he uses the formal, impersonal language of parliamentary procedure at the family dinner table, positioning himself as the authority who can decide his own fate, even though he knows that his family is not a parliamentary institution and that he has no such power. This incongruity creates the humor. By using legal terminology and procedures, he seeks to affirm that he still meets his mother's expectations, despite failing to meet the demands of the arranged marriage, and therefore deserves to remain part of the family. Unlike before, Kumail does not flee the situation this time: he no longer merely reacts to rejection or remains reactive, but begins to assert a position of his own, which Fanon's theory describes as actional. Kumail's irony helps him confront cultural trauma, the fear of losing his family, and demonstrates his character development from using humor as a defense mechanism to using it as a means of negotiating Pakistani cultural expectations.

3. Sarcasm

Kumail uses sarcastic humor when facing family pressures and cultural expectations as part of the Pakistani diaspora in the United States. Instead of simply remaining silent and accepting the discrimination and emotional pressure from those around him, Kumail tries to fight back and respond with sarcastic humor. Essentially,

sarcastic humor is a tool used to express strength and solidarity; it serves to criticize while simultaneously protecting oneself, all while remaining within the realm of entertainment (Romadlani and Wijana 2022). Sarcasm always involves speech directed at a specific target and contains mockery or a negative attitude toward that target. This is what distinguishes it from the ironic humor discussed earlier. Sarcastic humor in this film is evident in the scene where Kumail argues with Emily. In this scene, Kumail's inner conflict and identity struggle finally come to the surface: whether he will obey the rules and traditions of marriage dictated by his Pakistani family or choose his romantic relationship with Emily.

In this situation, Kumail responds with sarcasm and belittles Emily, saying, "You were ugly in high school!" Kumail views what Emily is going through as merely a personal issue, something that will pass quickly and doesn't require centuries to resolve. The phrase "fourteen-hundred-year-old culture," previously used by Kumail, implies that the burden he carries is not merely a personal issue, but a collective one passed down through generations. The sarcasm in this scene serves to distinguish identities. Kumail draws a dividing line, arguing that someone like Emily, who grew up as part of the American majority, would not understand the life of an immigrant caught in the dynamic tension between two distinct cultural communities. This scene also employs visual techniques that highlight Kumail's tense posture, with raised shoulders and open hands reflecting his defensive stance. This is a physical visualization of someone caught between two unavoidable demands. The dialogue also illustrates a situation in which he does not feel entirely comfortable within the cultural sphere of his family or in his romantic relationship with Emily. The statement "I can't lose my family" at the end of the dialogue reveals Kumail's greatest fear: not just losing his partner, but also losing his connection to the cultural identity and family environment that have shaped him all this time.

The second form of sarcastic humor serves as a weapon of resistance that provides Kumail with a safe space when confronting racism. This is reflected in the same stand-up scene as the previous example of irony. Kumail experiences collective trauma, which is a group's psychological reaction to traumatic events caused by systemic oppression, pandemics, and other disasters (Kennedy 2021). When the ironic humor of "Toast" fails to alleviate the collective racial trauma, Kumail does not back down; he escalates to

sarcasm as his next weapon. This reveals the hierarchy of his defense mechanisms: irony is the first layer, sarcasm is the second, more aggressive layer.

In that scene, rather than denying the heckler's accusation, Kumail sarcastically accepts the label by using the phrases "Actually" and "Find out," as if he wanted to reveal the secret that he is actually a terrorist, even though he has absolutely no connection to such matters. This form of sarcasm is a clever counterattack; by accepting and laughing off the heckler's accusation, Kumail aims to highlight just how absurd the accusation is. The choice of the phrase "First of all" demonstrates the manners and politeness that are part of his culture. Kumail creates a space where the heckler actually appears more despicable due to his choice of crude language, while Kumail comes across as a friendly and civilized figure. By attempting to respond to the accusation with laughter, Kumail shifts his position from the target of insults to the person controlling the narrative on stage.

Kumail's use of humor associated with American stand-up comedy enables him to express his hybridity and navigate a discriminatory environment. Although he seeks to adapt to Western culture, his race and religion continue to mark him as a minority and outsider. This leaves him seemingly without a home: he strives for acceptance in the American public sphere yet is still perceived as not belonging. In The Big Sick (2017), sarcasm differs from ironic humor by functioning as a verbal attack through which Kumail preserves his dignity and asserts control in extraordinary circumstances. It allows him to convey his emotions while challenging stereotypes, family authority, and Western perspectives that shape his position. This development marks an important step in his personal growth: he moves from responding to pressure with defensive humor toward wielding humor as a form of resistance.

4. Self-Deprecating

According to (Baofu 2011) self-deprecating humor is a type of humor that stands in contrast to sarcasm. Instead of attacking others, this type of humor makes oneself the object of laughter. Kumail uses this humor as a way to ease social tension, gain acceptance, and at the same time protect himself from potential rejection. In this film, self-deprecating humor is reflected not only through dialogue but also through Kumail's actions, which highlight the absurdity of the situation. Self-deprecating humor is the most vulnerable yet the most strategic form of humor. Within Fanon's (1991) own framework,

this mechanism of humor is closely linked to the "epidermalization of inferiority," that is, when the colonized subject seeks acceptance from the dominant group by adapting, altering, or even abandoning their original identity.

This humor emerges as Kumail struggles to navigate a major crisis and his vulnerable position, specifically when he is cast out by his family, while his relationship with Emily has yet to improve. Kumail seems to be caught between two "homes" that have yet to accept him back, and self-deprecating humor becomes the only safe coping mechanism he can use. The first scene takes place when Kumail visits Emily after she wakes up from her coma, bringing along a few items as a bargaining chip. Kumail brings items like "hospital passes," which symbolize time and presence, serving as proof that when Emily was in her worst situations, Kumail was always by her side. The ticket stubs here represent Kumail's effort to demonstrate that he has built a bridge between his world as a stand-up comedian and Pakistani immigrant and the world of Emily's Western parents. The most significant object here is the "Jar Full of Ashes," which symbolizes death and the loss of Kumail's former identity as an immigrant who adhered to Pakistan's arranged marriage customs; these ashes signify that Kumail has cleansed himself of the Eastern expectations that have always weighed on him so that he can be fully accepted by Emily (the West). These interpretations show that Kumail's epidermalization entails relinquishing part of his original identity to gain others' recognition, making self-acceptance contingent on that sacrifice. Kumail uses self-deprecating humor as a way to avoid rejection by winning over and gaining the trust of the last person close to him, Emily.

The second scene takes place during a family dinner. This time, Kumail talks with his family and tries to return to his "Eastern home." Faced with his family's "silent treatment", a form of social punishment and emotional isolation, Kumail does not respond with confrontation, such as sarcasm. Instead, Kumail returns to his true self as a comedian and acts silly by making fun of himself, becoming a "dumb" character who carries a cheat sheet to communicate with his family. The "guide card" Kumail carries is a layered symbol: it represents the failed communication he is trying to establish, and it also reflects his effort to remain the writer of his own script within the family and to reject the script of expulsion that has been written for him. By using the simple vocabulary his family

typically uses for jokes, Kumail strives to rebuild closeness with his family through humor they recognize.

Toward the end of the conversation, Kumail deconstructs the absolute Eastern rules and traditions where parents have full authority to expel disobedient family members by challenging them with a new logic: "You can't really kick someone out… because they'll always be your family." This statement is delivered not with confrontation but with humility. Kumail concludes this conversation by telling his family, "I'm moving to New York to pursue stand-up, but I am not leaving this family." This statement may also be read as rejecting binary choices: Kumail refuses to be limited to one identity, whether as an obedient child or a marginalized person. More fundamentally, humans should not be confined to a single identity because they are destined for freedom, not imprisoned by their histories (Fanon 1991). Kumail therefore faces an identity dilemma, torn between the individualism associated with Western culture and his attachment to Eastern collective values.

Unlike sarcasm, which reclaims control and the narrative of one's identity through verbal attacks, self-deprecating humor operates on the opposite logic. Kumail sacrifices part of his self-esteem to gain something greater: acceptance from two different worlds and the formation of his identity. This is the crux of his character's development; Kumail no longer acts defensively or aggressively but instead builds an active negotiation between himself and his two worlds.

5. Black Humor

Black humor is a subgenre of comedy that addresses taboo topics, particularly death, in a humorous or satirical way, eliciting both laughter and discomfort from the audience (Baofu 2011). Black humor works by transforming trauma that previously could not be discussed openly; it is now brought to the surface and becomes a point of connection in the conversation between Kumail and his audience. For Kumail, black humor is the boldest and most strategic form of humor. It not only allows him to survive and navigate these experiences but also introduces his inner world and trauma to the dominant culture through laughter.

One scene containing black humor appears midway through the film when Kumail eats with Emily's parents in the hospital cafeteria. Terry, Emily's father, directly asks Kumail about his stance on the 9/11 attacks: "What's your stance?" Terry's question isn't

just an ordinary one; it is a form of object phobogenic. Minority groups are often required to prove that they are not a threat, a racial epidermal schema, and this demand is rooted in a superficial conception of race that is, a self-assessment determined from the outside through the stereotypes attached to them. Kumail responds by saying, "We lost 19 of our best guys". The use of "our" is a direct critique by Kumail of the tendency in American society to generalize that all Muslims are a homogeneous group associated with terrorism. Kumail attempts to highlight the absurdity of this logic by feigning an alignment with the terrorist group. The result of this humor isn't comfortable laughter, but rather an awkward silence between Beth and Terry that exposes their own prejudices. Looking at the visual aspect, the warm lighting should create a cozy atmosphere; instead, it contrasts with the tension present. This is a visualization of "unhomeliness": Kumail is in a physically warm space yet remains socially alien. The black humor here functions as a veiled confrontation. Kumail challenges stereotypes without sparking open conflict, shifting his position from suspect to the one steering the conversation. Within Fanon's framework, this response remains reactive while taking the form of a subtle confrontation that contests stereotypes without provoking direct conflict, moving the individual from a defensive stance to one that directs the conversation.

Black humor also surfaces toward the end of the film during Kumail's stand-up comedy routine. Kumail recounts his experience visiting a mosque and hearing a story about a massacre that took place 1,400 years ago, not in a solemn tone, but in an absurd style that draws laughter. In this scene, Kumail uses the phrase "graphic details" to describe how a religious story that should have been spiritual is instead etched in his memory as a narrative of violence and suffering. This is a collective trauma passed down through cultural memory. However, rather than letting this trauma settle and become a burden, Kumail brings it onto the stage and compares it to "Tarantino-esque" works. This comparison isn't merely a joke; it is how Kumail evaluates his cultural experiences through the lens of American pop culture, proving that his identity can no longer be understood through a single cultural system. The props on stage invite American audiences into his private space, into his childhood memories in Pakistan, and transform that collective trauma into something we can laugh at together without diminishing its gravity. At this point, Kumail no longer uses humor as a shield or a weapon, but rather to build a bridge between two worlds that have long pulled him in opposite directions.

This second black-humor scene marks a subtle shift: whereas Kumail's character previously responded passively, he now acts proactively. He neither rejects his cultural heritage nor allows it to define him; instead, he decides what to share and how, rather than simply reacting to others' imposed definitions. He also seeks to connect with, empathize with, and understand others. Humor thus ceases to function as a shield or weapon and becomes a bridge between the two worlds that have long pulled him in opposite directions. The movement from black humor as covert confrontation midway through the film to black humor as a cultural bridge near its end represents Kumail's most significant transformation. He is no longer simply navigating two cultures; he is beginning to integrate them into a coherent narrative that he can express only through laughter.

6. Ethnic Humor

Ethnic humor works by borrowing and playing on specific ethnic stereotypes to elicit laughter (Baofu 2011). In a postcolonial context, this mechanism is far more complex than simply exploiting stereotypes. For Kumail, ethnic humor implies a deep understanding of two cultural systems simultaneously. Kumail must know exactly which stereotypes are in his audience's minds and how to manipulate those stereotypes for his own purposes. Ethnic humor reflects a person's understanding of diverse cultures, and as such, it can illustrate Kumail's journey toward balancing his hybrid identity. The first scene appears early to midway through the film when Kumail is eating with his brother, Naveed, in a public space surrounded by Americans. When Kumail mentions that he is dating a white woman, the white families around them begin to stare with suspicious looks.

These stares are not a casual reaction, but rather a form of surveillance commonly experienced by Muslim immigrant communities in American public spaces in the post-9/11 era, a collective trauma that makes Kumail's presence, wherever he may be, always potentially perceived as a threat. The medium-wide shot used by the camera shows Kumail as the object of public attention simply for discussing white laborers with his own family. Kumail responds to those stares by saying, "It's okay! We hate terrorists!" He borrows the stereotype attached to his identity and uses it as a tool to defuse tension. The use of "we" is Kumail's attempt to position himself as part of the same group as the Americans staring at him. Kumail seeks to shift his position from that of an outsider to

being part of the majority. Kumail does not challenge his audience's prejudices; rather, he preempts them by laughing at them first. Kumail uses these stereotypes as a shield to protect himself.

The second scene appears toward the end of the film in a different context. It shows a recording of Kumail's stand-up routine that Emily watches while she is in critical condition. Kumail himself isn't there, but his humor shines through even in his absence. In the recording, Kumail explicitly juxtaposes two systems of meaning: "arranged marriage" from a Pakistani perspective, which emphasizes family affection and cultural continuity, and the Western concept of "romance," which is associated with individual freedom. By adding the word "Pakistan" to the phrase "Pakistani romance," Kumail isn't mocking his own traditions, but rather showing American audiences that these two conflicting elements can coexist within a single person. This humor stems from Kumail's ability to view his own traditions from two perspectives simultaneously: as both normal and absurd, depending on the lens through which we view them. Kumail is no longer caught between two cultures; rather, he has found a way to inhabit both consciously and even perform them with confidence on stage.

The contrast between the second scene and the first is pronounced. In the first, stereotypes shield Kumail from others' definitions; in the second, he draws on personal experience to shape his story rather than respond to accusations. This shift marks a move from reactivity to initiative: he deliberately navigates Eastern and Western cultures instead of simply conforming to others' expectations and reactions. As the final category in Baofu's framework that Kumail employs, ethnic humor signals his progress beyond mere survival. He can now tell the complex story of his identity without choosing one home at the expense of the other, consciously inhabiting both and presenting them confidently on stage.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that humor in The Big Sick (2017) serves not merely as entertainment but also as a coping mechanism Kumail uses to confront postcolonial trauma, including racial and cultural trauma, as part of life in the American diaspora. The film's humor is closely connected to Kumail's social wounds: he is labeled through stereotypes (racial epidermal schema), accepted only when he conforms to the dominant culture (epidermalization of inferiority), and treated with suspicion as a threat

(phobogenic object). Each type of humor serves a distinct purpose: irony creates distance and enables negotiation; sarcasm offers a still-reactive form of retaliation; self-deprecating humor reveals Kumail's vulnerability; black humor turns pain that is difficult to voice into an oblique confrontation with prejudice; and ethnic humor evolves from a shield into a means of sharing experience onstage. Overall, Kumail's humor shifts from reactive to active: early and midway through the film, he responds to labels imposed on him, while in the final scene he shapes a narrative of his own identity.

The significance of this humor lies in how it conveys the film's criticism of two sources of pressure. First, the film challenges racial prejudice against Muslims after 9/11. When a viewer shouts, "Go back to ISIS!" and can only explain, "Because of how he looks," humor reveals that this suspicion rests on appearance rather than actions. Second, the film critiques traditional demands that bind individuals through the threat of exclusion, as illustrated by Kumail's cousin, who is cast out for marrying an American woman. Humor frames this criticism in an accessible way: the film invites viewers to enjoy Kumail's jokes, then directs their laughter toward what is being challenged the absurdity of prejudice and rigid demands- rather than Kumail's identity. Thus, the film's humor affirms that Muslim immigrant identity is not defined from outside, either by the dominant society or by the community itself, consistent with Fanon's (1991) view that alienation is produced by social structures rather than personal failure. These findings indicate that in postcolonial diaspora narratives, humor can serve as a medium for social criticism, identity negotiation, and resilience in the face of psychological pressure.

This study is limited by its analysis of only one film and one character, so findings should be generalized to diaspora narratives with caution. The identification of wounds and trauma is interpretive and based on the film's character, not a clinical diagnosis; nor does a semi-autobiographical film necessarily reflect its writer's psychological experience. Future research could compare humor as a response to postcolonial wounds in diaspora films from different cultural backgrounds, examine cross-cultural audience reception, and apply other Fanonian concepts or postcolonial theories to analyze film conflicts in greater depth.

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