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DECIPHERING THE ANTI-CATHARTIC IDENTITY OF FRIENDS: EMPLOYING FEMINIST AND MARXIST PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

From the beginning of 2020, people everywhere in the world have experienced change in the way that they live every aspect of daily life, including, but not limited to the consumption of popular culture. In these trying times, not only does visual popular culture serve as a form of entertainment and social and political commentary, but also acts as a medium to provide relief and escape from the continual distress of the pandemic. During this time of extreme emotional upheaval, when popular culture can act as a form of healing, people are leaning into the act of binge-watching, especially 'light' comedies that distract them from real-life horrors. In this paper, we aim to decipher the anti-cathartic nature of the popular American sitcom, *Friends* (1994-2004). The paper is divided into three parts: The first chapter demystifies the relevance of the anti-cathartic elements in psychotherapy by reflecting on Sigmund Freud and Josef Breur's Theory of Catharsis from their book - *Studies on Hysteria.* The second chapter identifies the anti-cathartic elements present in the sitcom *Friends*, and studies them through the deconstruction of the 'sexcom', which is examined by Christine Scodari in her paper, 'Sex and the Sitcom: Gender and Genre in Millennial Television'. The third chapter of this paper will explore Phoebe's character, and how she is represented as an almost rebellious figure who questions and pushes the boundaries of society and societal norms, hence coming out as the real cathartic element in the show that has been pushed to the side-lines. We hope to uncover the anti-cathartic nature of sitcoms, which disguise themselves as agents of alleviating pain, but instead, prompt traumas to bury deeper into the subconscious.

Introduction:

Since early 2020, the world has witnessed unprecedented changes in the way lives are led. Humankind has been put through multiple tests that are untried, and these changes have essentially altered the manner in which we consume any part of our lives: work, communication, shopping, education, and of course, the consumption of popular culture. Now that the human species has been compelled to distance themselves from interaction, there is an added pressure on visual popular culture such as films and television to not only serve as forms of entertainment and social and political commentary, but also act as an escape that provides relief to its viewers from the trauma of a pandemic. While popular culture offers its viewers a chance to come face to face with personal horrors and traumas, and cleanse themselves off negative emotions, sitcoms help their viewers only in providing immediate relief. This relief is short lived as it does not help the viewers confront the bleak in order to recover from it, but instead provides a momentary escape that only shoves them deeper inside their emotional burdens.

In light of the recent pandemic, this paper will then attempt to comprehend the anti-cathartic nature of sitcoms that provides viewers only a chance of ephemeral comfort, one that prohibits viewers from recognising the true root of their trauma, helping them escape. This research question will aid us to recognize the incapacity of sitcoms to provide its viewers with a crucial channel of emotional release. This paper, since co-authored by two young scholars, one of Media, and one of Psychology, amalgamates two different theoretical disciplines to hopefully produce an interdisciplinary argument.

The first chapter of this paper, 'Understanding the Anti-Cathartic' will reflect on Sigmund Freud and Josef Breur's Theory of Catharsis, and provide an argument as to why catharsis is of the essence for people to heal from trauma. Moreover, this chapter will also trace the relationship between storytelling and cathartic healing, an interdependence that will aid us to reflect on the effects of anti-cathartic sitcoms. Chapter two, 'The Feminist Anti-Cathartic' will aim to view the anti-cathartic elements present in the famous American sitcom *Friends* and view them employing a feminist lens. Through the study of the sexcom in Chirstine Scodari's *Sex and the Sitcom: Gender and Genre in Millenial Television,* this chapter will comprehend the ways in which Rachel's character is represented as the 'ideal', millennial woman, who can juggle her professional, romantic lives as well as motherhood. The third chapter, 'The Marxist Anti-Cathartic' will examine Phoebe's character through Pierre Bourdieu's 'Distinction: A social critique of the Judgement of Taste', studying her as peculiar and atypical - an alien member of the group of friends. This will help us in gauging the representation of the working class in sitcoms, and perhaps help us understand the trivialization of the working class concerns.

The foundation of the chapters will be laid upon the popular American sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), the one English television show that became an instant phenomenon in 1999, when it first released in India. According to an article reported by the Hindustan Times, the television show in the 2000's was shown to Indian

call centre employees who spoke to customers in the United States of America: "Scenes from the show were screened, over and over, to help Indian employees (often rechristened with American names) understand the accents, lingo and culture of their overseas customers" (Mollan). Even though *Friends* has been already been written about excessively, its ability to introduce India to a global culture and at the same time, evolving into a comedic culture in itself, naturally assures its position as the ideal sitcom to study with regard to the pandemic in India. Moreover, in the United States as well, *Friends* was the most watched television show in the country (Murphy).

The pandemic, arriving into the world as the means of a mass trauma - this is the first time in history where all of humankind is suffering a single form of trauma - provides us with a chance to comprehend the idealistic popular culture we are drawn towards during this time. National Public Radio (NPR), a non-profit media organisation in the United States of America conducted a survey in the month of April, 2020, which concluded that fifty-four percent of the respondents watched episodes of old television favourites during the lockdown (Ulaby). A respondent also said, "I'll start to watch something I *thought* I wanted to watch, but then I just stop after a couple of minutes. It seems like a lot of effort to start a new thing, if that makes sense." While a lot has been written about the science of rewatching in times of distress, there are no published studies on how and why these objects of popular culture are constructed the way they are, and the counterproductive psychological effects of these films and television shows how viewers have increasingly started to revisit sitcoms they have previously watched, during the uncertain period of the pandemic, treating these visual narratives as short-term escapes from the traumatic reality that has engulfed the entire world.

Understanding the Anti-Cathartic:

The idea of catharsis refers to the purging of emotions, an attempt at confronting a negative emotion to get rid of it. Introduced first by Greek Philosopher of the Classical Ages, Aristotle, the concept appears in the Poetics, a collection providing an insight into the origins and forms of poetry. The concept follows the idea that a negative emotion can be purified by the confrontation of tragedy. Tangled with the psychology of humans and how they perceive the tragedy, Aristotle discusses the true form of art as an imitation of not man, but of action and life (Aristotle 23), a copy of the tragedies of life. Sitcoms on the contrary, a contemporary form of visual popular culture does the exact opposite, they are an imitation of neither action nor life.

Catharsis is not only essential to the realm of popular culture, but can be understood as a form of healing in itself. Therefore, the first part of the larger research question will be confronted by comprehending the cathartic elements in the foundation of psychotherapy, and how it has evolved in modern forms of therapy as well. Establishing the use of the cathartic, this chapter will also highlight the necessity of cathartic elements in the process of storytelling and healing, which in contrast with anti-cathartic sitcoms, play no pivotal role in making its viewers 'happy', like the makers advertise them to be.

Essentiality of Catharsis:

Although the essentiality of catharsis was brought about by the Classical Ages of the intellectuals of Greece, the authority or control it still has in the conception of healing is what is essential to our paper. Many theorists of psychology have spoken about the same - the concept of catharsis was first used by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breur in 1895, after which theorists of the next generations adopted the same in many different ways. The term catharsis was first explored and adopted in psychotherapy by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer in their psychoanalytic treatment method known as the 'Cathartic Technique'. Freud and Breuer in their book Studies on Hysteria (1895) used hypnosis to 'purge' or remove the repressed cause of various hysterical symptoms. This book went on to become a foundational pillar in the field of psychotherapy, and the theory is a testament to Freud's leaning towards Aristotle's conception of katharsis as purgation.

The Cathartic technique consisted of the therapist encouraging their client to "associate to the origins of their symptoms" (Nichols 46). This allowed them to describe certain events from their traumatic pasts and fantasies and express the emotions associated with these events. The expression of these repressed emotions led to mitigation of their psychological issues, which is according to the scholars, what catharsis is. This basic principle of confronting one's negative emotions and traumatic experiences, is used in modern day psychotherapy as well.

The foundation of Breur and Freud's book is based on their interactions with subjects such as Anna O., who came to her physician, Breur with complaints of physical pain. Breur and Freud learnt that these physical ailments were stemming from the psychological unconscious; such experiences, along with their repressed emotions were explored and brought to light and this was derived as the cathartic method. We learn that the patients discovered through the cathartic method or 'talking cure' that certain symptoms disappeared when fragments of what was said and done in an altered state of consciousness (known as dissociative state) were successfully linked up with forgotten impressions from her waking life (Fonagy 12320).

The case history developed the basic principles of early psychoanalysis: Neurotic symptoms are based on buried conflictual feelings, which can be re- covered through the abreactive process. Breur and Freud coined the term 'abreaction' - which is defined as the actual expression of emotion, which cures the patient's symptoms. The expression of repressed emotions, or abreaction is achieved through the cathartic method which

consists of recovering past memories - however painful they may be, followed by thorough discussion of it, leading to acceptance of the traumatic past and its accompanying effect in the present. For the authors, the expression of emotions by the patients was essential to the process of curing the symptoms or ailments that the patients had first come in with, that is, expression is necessary to complete the cathartic process.

However, Freud in the later years abandoned the cathartic method as a form of therapy, as he believed he had found a more reliable tool for overcoming repression, free association - a concept now seen as one of Freud's biggest contributions to the field of psychotherapy (Nichols 48). Free association is a tool used to gain access to a patient's unconscious - it involves allowing the patient to freely express their conscious thoughts which in turn reveal unconscious thought patterns to the therapist. Even though the cathartic method was replaced by free association, its idea of revisiting thoughts to eventually overcome them, still belongs at the heart of catharsis.

It is also important to note that Breuer's belief in the reality of the memories that surfaced during the process, connects to the notion of catharsis as an essential element of storytelling and narrative. He did not dismiss the patient's associations as "productions of a deranged mind" (Fongay 12320), allowing the patient to be in absolute control of their narrative: "A memory of such a trauma, even if it has not been abreacted, enters the great complex of associations, it comes alongside other experiences, which may contradict it, and is subjected to rectification by other ideas" (Breur 6). The author states that one's reaction to an event plays as much of a role as the event itself. Therefore, trauma is not just one single experience, but is an amalgamation of the traumatic experience and one's reaction to the traumatic experience. We control our own narrative by the way we respond to the events that take place around us. Hence, it is essential to the process of catharsis to revisit the actual event of trauma as well as the patient's narrative of the same.

Tracing the Cathartic Narrative:

Through Breur and Freud's study of the unconscious in psychotherapy, it is intelligible that the notion of storytelling is an essential element to the process of catharsis. Very recently, in 2007 itself, Richard Kearney, an Irish philosopher and public intellectual published an article titled, 'Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis', discussing the ability of storytelling to act as a cathartic element. The author brings to light the process of re-experiencing the past through the fictional component of a story. What he categorizes as 'creative repetition' (Kearney 51) is the act of experiencing something that we already have, and viewing it again, this time from the objectivity of not being a part of the situation.

Kearney goes on to refer to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist who elaborated upon the theory of Structural Anthropology, which functions around the notion that all cultures are home to inherent, unchangeable structures, and hence, share common cultural practices. Through this theory, he goes on to discuss the hybridity of narratives that have historically played healing roles in all cultures. In one of the many examples that Kearney shares from Strauss' work is the incident of a woman dying while giving birth to her child, and how a village shaman narrates the ancient myth of a battle to her. While the final battle scene is recited, the child is born (53). Kearney comments: "Myths do not necessarily provide a cognitive answer to these irresolvable conundrums so much as symbolic response at the cathartic level of imaginary plots, characters and representations. What cannot be solved historically in other words, can be resolved fictionally in terms of a structural balancing of opposites" (53-54). By sharing accounts of narrative traditions, the author states that experiencing personal trauma in the form of stories, and by stepping out from the situation one is in, a healing can be brought upon. A healing that is difficult to initiate when one is engulfed in the traumatic situation, or when someone actively attempts to avoid it.

While the above quote is a testament to the historical traditions of narratives in the process of healing, the author goes on to discuss the role of cathartic storytelling even in modern forms of psychotherapy. He refers to the biography of British psychotherapist and human rights activist, Helen Bamber, who during the end of the Second World War worked for the psychological and physical rehabilitation of Holocaust survivors. She encouraged survivors to translate the trauma that they had suffered into stories, which she then listened to.

What Bamber's accounts of these basic first hand testimonies makes evident is that Holocaust stories- "like all stories of deep trauma, fear and pain- are to be understood less as tales of heroic triumph over adversity, than as truncated, wounded quasi-narratives that call out to be heard, impossible stories that the victims and survivors nonetheless have to tell… For without such conversion from aphasia to testimony, from silent wounds to narrated words (however stammered or inarticulate), the survivors could not survive their own survival" (60-61). The author reinstates the effectiveness of cathartic narratives in the realm of psychotherapy, in this case with survivors of trauma, fear and pain, calling for war-like situations to be comprehended from the perspective of displacement and traumatism instead of valiance. Bamber's approach towards victims and survivors of the Holocaust relies heavily on the notion of storytelling to survive, a blend of the real-life horror one has faced, with an unagitated retelling that one gains by distancing themselves from the situation.

Therefore, while the notion of catharsis was (and is) an essential element of release in the realm of storytelling and fiction in general, it is also serviceable in modern forms of psychotherapy. Ideas of fear and

pain guide the way of healing, and to attempt to heal from the trauma without confronting it, is to give in to an avoidant technique.

The Feminist Anti-Cathartic:

Taking into account the English language sitcom's impact on India's culture, this chapter will scrutinise *Friends* anti-cathartic element of mis portraying and underplaying its female characters' private sphere of sex and motherhood. While it attempts to 'free' the show's women by celebrating their involvement in the public sphere, it eventually fails to represent the challenges of being a mother, or being a wife in a patriarchal setting. The fact that this sitcom has been consumed and continues to be re-consumed by the masses dictates that the overconsumption of the television show can possibly enable its female viewers to visit the show as a form of escape from the real-life burdens of womanhood. Although this can provide women short-term relief from daily-life distress, it is not capable of cleansing the female population from the traumas of womanhood. It instead portrays a 'what-could-be', like a land of fantasy where one of the protagonist's Rachel, continues to receive promotions, irrespective of her being a single mother to an infant.

Employing a feminist lens to study the anti-cathartic nature of *Friends*, this chapter will be theorised through Christine Scodari's (a scholar on Gender and Sexuality in the sphere of Media) research work, 'Sex and the Sitcom: Gender and Genre in Millennial Television', a chapter from the consolidated book, *The Sitcom Reader*. Scodari's work on exploring gender in millennial television involves a study of two American 'sexcoms' (Scodari 241) - *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and their textual and narrative elements that "simultaneously privilege and trivialise concerns of the femine, private sphere" (242). While these sitcoms attempt to portray the feminine by providing them with a sense of sexual agency that is established through the ability to choose from multiple partners, it also belittles this choice by viewing these women to be hungry for conventionally attractive romantic and sexual partners (249). By portraying this world, the sitcom eventually rids itself of any cathartic elements that arise out of women's struggles. This chapter then will aim to study the anti-cathartic nature of *Friends* by employing a feminist lens and unearthing the idealistic concerns of the feminine sphere.

Feminine Consumption:

Although Scodari's work is primarily based around *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, two sitcoms with strong female leads, *Friends* can too be studied under the subgenre of the sexcom, as the overarching theme of friendship that is at the heart of this sitcom allows a space for free flowing conversations around sex and romance. The sitcom also fits the author's criteria of "attractive, urban, professional women, most of whom are single, White and fit snugly into the twenty-five to thirty-four demographic grouping" (242). Therefore, the sitcom *Friends* can be critiqued under the subgenre of the sexcom that does not overtly represent itself as such, but does fit the criteria.

The author in her research argues that the feminine sphere in the subgenre of the sexcom is looked at from a fetishised lens that places the interest of the male gaze at the centre of the television show. By excluding the 'real' concerns of the feminine sphere, the sitcom attempts to free women from the shackles of patriarchy, but instead, creates a disfigured understanding of the feminine that emerges from superficiality, or a patriarchal understanding of liberated women.

While the female characters of the show are financially independent, this independence is displayed through prominence consumption of goods, especially fashionable goods. The character that is shown to proudly hold this ideal is Rachel, played by Jennifer Aniston. Commenting on this aspect of consumption with regard to *Sex and the City*, the author states, "Another mechanism is the pervasiveness of very posh and revealing fashion, as reflective of the clandestine product and lifestyle advertising concocted by premium cable networks distinguished by their upscale clientele and supposed lack of overt commercial content. The show has run afoul of animal rights groups critical of its unrepentant display of fur. Designer labels are habitually name-dropped; Kate Spade and Fendi handbags, and Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo shoes have figured prominently in story lines" (249). Scodari relates the female body with the notion of fashionable consumption that places the financial independence of a female in a space of "posh and revealing fashion". The idea of fur is also extremely crucial to this study as Rachel has often been seen sporting the expensive, cruel to animals fur coats. Although there is an episode where Phoebe, played by Lisa Kudrow, is seen debating the ethics of wearing fur coats, hers is an outlandish character that will be explored at length in the next chapter. Rachel's character revolves around this idea of consumption that is linked to her occupation as well. In season 3, she works as a personal shopper at Bloomingdale's and later gets promoted to a job at the luxurious Ralph Lauren. Her occupation does argue in favour of her shopaholic persona, however, her occupation was decided by this persona of hers, instead of the other way around.

In the show, Rachel is often seen carrying the weight of shopping bags which more often than not seem to outweigh her. In the 'Pilot' episode of the sitcom itself, Rachel is seen pleased with herself with the fact that she bought 'John and David' boots for a fifty percent discount, after stating that she has been dismissed from twelve interviews, and that she does not possess any skills. Although it is comprehensible that her character has been hyper-realised to portray a stereotypical, rich 'daddy's girl', the manner in which her personality develops

through the course of the show ensures that her financial independence is gained through the medium of fashion, which in turn supports her shopaholic obsession.

As much as the show attempts to free Rachel from the financial shackles of patriarchy, it reinforces the patriarchal stereotypes that are associated with a rich woman living in New York, "If the women of Sex and the City and Ally McBeal are liberated, they are liberated in ways that tend to support, rather than challenge, patriarchal definitions of female sexualiy" (247). While Scodari specifically refers to female sexuality in this quote, it also stands true in the way these characters have been developed, the kind of choices they make, and the way in which their characters take the story forward.

Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind, as authors of the first academic work on the sitcom, *Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom*, have written all praise about Rachel's character: "Though not eliciting instant likeability, Rachel's humorous characterisation as 'inexperienced' enables the assumed younger audience to identify with her and is one example of the series' humour not becoming dated because of its use of widely recognisable themes, which might explain the continuous success of Friends ' comedic agenda" (Knox and Schwind 47).

The authors, while recognising the character's inexperience and ignorance as an element of relatability in young adults, fail to consider that she was a conventionally attractive, white, very wealthy woman, who does not represent women in the real world. The actress was awarded the title of Most Beautiful Woman by *People* magazine in the United States, not only in 2004, but once again in 2016 (Jordan).

Millennial Motherhood:

The manner in which Rachel's financial independence has been driven and achieved by her brand-obsessed, shopaholic personality is proof of the unrealistic vision of patriarchal expectation that has gone into the creation of its female characters. A similar unrealistic vision of patriarchy has gone into representing the idea of motherhood in this sitcom, which again erupts from the subgenre of the 'sexcom'; is proof of an idealistic world that misrepresents motherhood, essentially underplaying its struggles. While Phoebe does not have children of her own, and Monica and Chandler adopt twins in the last episode of the television show, the idea of motherhood among the six protagonists will again be studied through Rachel's character.

Scodari in the essay brings to her readers' attention the idea of motherhood that has been underrepresented to its potential in the subgenre of the sexcom. While her complaint is not directed towards the aspirational lens that has been employed to create a feminist eco-system, her issue lies with the idea that the day to day struggles of having a child is pushed to the sidelines, especially when the woman's romantic-sexual (Scodari 250), in this sense the patriarchal gaze with which women's relationships are viewed enters the scene.

The author discusses the commodified viewing of motherhood that scarcely represents the struggles of the same in the real world: "Miranda's unplanned pregnancy plays out in Sex and the City's fourth goround, actual children are seldom pertinent in either show. Whereas family sitcoms have been known to portray the feminine and the feminine sphere as mundane, the sexcom, while pretending to rescue women from such hum-drum domestic pursuits, actually belittles and disparages the private arena even more by representing it as petty and self-indulgent" (250).

Scodari refers to one of the four protagonist's, Miranda's pregnancy in the fourth season, where after being born, the baby is rarely present in the show. The author also refers to traditional family sitcoms in which the female characters' lives appear as monotonous and unexciting, and while these did capture the woman in an unfair world, they also represented the truth of many women. Sitcoms such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City,* while representing their women in a polar contrasting 'reality' that liberates them from the duties of motherhood, eventually downplays the struggles that come with it.

Rachel gives birth to her baby, Emma, in the last episode of the eighth season. The next episode, the premiere of season nine, the penultimate season, begins with a romantic conundrum that Rachel is presented with, that too in the hospital. Even when she has just given birth, the first incident that is introduced into her life is the confusion of having to choose between Ross and Joey to marry. The humour of the sexcom that is presented in the form of romantic and sexual storylines takes over even when her character has gone through a life-altering event of giving birth.

Through the course of the remainder of the show, the last two seasons, Emma is hardly present, and Rachel is shown to be 'free' from the shackles of traditional forms of motherhood. It is only till the eleventh episode of season nine that Emma's responsibilities are realistically represented in the show. Afterwards, Rachel's life is taken over by her bitter-sweet rivalry with her good-looking replacement at work, Gavin, developing romantic and sexual feelings towards Joey, and the whole group even going to Barbados for Ross's conference, but more importantly a vacation, in the season finale. Rachel's life of romantic and sexual quests begins soon after Emma is born. Although the sitcom attempts to contemporise the notion of motherhood with respect to early, twenty-first century working women, it eventually fails to provide a platform for mothers to find themselves in this story.

The Marxist Anti-Cathartic:

Although it would be inaccurate to state that the sitcom is about upper-class struggles, the show does consist of all white and middle-class protagonists. Their tastes and interests, while not belonging to a certain

intellectual class, except for Ross perhaps, they do belong to a comfortable middle-class that does not need to worry about where their next meal would come from. However, there is one clear distinction between all the others and Phoebe, the one character who had a different social upbringing than all the other characters. As she says in her own words, **"**Okay, I wasn't rich like you guys, okay? I didn't eat gold and have a flying pony. I had a hard life! My mother was killed by a drug dealer". The mockery and humour that is created out of Phoebe's social class is evident of the appropriation of the working class in this sitcom, and this is what we will be studying in this chapter. The manner in which Phoebe's struggles have been concealed by a sense of humour and disgust ensures that the narrative remains bridged to privileged spheres and issues, prohibiting the viewers from visiting the bodily and mental trauma of the working class.

Taste of Necessity:

Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned French sociologist, anthropologist and thinker, in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), derives this understanding of social distinction from his work on culture capital in the 1970's, wherein the author theorised that a person's social assets (educational assets) determine their financial assets, and consequently, their social and economic status in the society (Bourdieu 2). Unambiguously, these social assets are predetermined by the status of the family the concerned person is born into: "To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'. The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it: the importance attached to manners can be understood once it is seen that it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different-and ranked-modes of culture acquisition, early or late, domestic or scholastic, and the classes of individuals which they characterize" (1-2). The author acknowledges the social hierarchy that exists in the arts, and consequently, a social hierarchy that exists in the consumers; stating that this hierarchy evidently penetrates into matters of taste. There are ranks of culture that may not be definite, but can only be accessed by people of corresponding social classes.

The manner in which Phoebe conducts herself in elite social circles, such as her meeting with her eventual husband, Mike's parents, is evident of the difference in social classes between her and the other characters. Describing an incident from 'the streets' when she had been infected with hepatitis, she says, " … this pimp spit in my mouth. But I got over it". While Phoebe's experiences are freely spoken about, they are eventually reduced to humour and mockery. Her statements are alienated to the point that they seem isolated from 'reality'.

Although Bourdieu's work observes the disparities between a 'high' and a 'low' culture of art and aesthetic, we believe that Phoebe's character has emerged from this vision of 'low' art, ie. the becoming of her character as an aesthetic by itself, is derived from a privileged perception of art, and hence, not taken seriously. Phoebe's struggles, however true to the working class and grounded to reality they may be, are represented in a humorous fashion, one that can easily be disregarded.

The argument that the author makes regarding the "taste of necessity" and the "taste of luxury" to comprehend the social hierarchy of popular culture is essential here, as Phoebe has been designed to appear as a mockery of the taste of necessity. The uncomplicated and to-the-point form in which she conveys and expresses herself is proof of the lack of aesthetic ability of the character, which is laughed upon: "The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition-linked to different distances from necessity-between the taste of necessity, which favours the most 'filling' and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty or luxury-which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function" (6-7). The author here comments upon the two forms in which aesthetic or taste can be understood in the social hierarchy: taste of necessity and taste of liberty or luxury, that stems out of socio-economic eating habits. While the former is the aesthetic of the socio-economically subordinate that is characterised by the maximum utility of a product, the latter is the aesthetic of the socio-economically superior, privileging form over function, ie. aesthetic quality over utility. Therefore, while the art that is derived from the taste of necessity may reveal itself as 'loud' and jarring, the antithetical exhibits itself as one that compliments the larger aesthetic quality of experimentation, denying utility a higher preference.

The Ditsy, Vulgar Hippie:

This exhibition of inclining towards the taste of necessity is evident in the manner in which Phoebe articulates her thoughts. The character's dialogues are such that her explanations about her 'alien' traumas are to the point, appearing overwhelming and hence humorous to her other friends. For instance, the music she makes lacks aesthetic quality, not only because of her substandard guitar playing, but also the lyrics that she incorporates in her songs. The words, while definitely hyper-realising their ridiculosity and hence, appearing as funny, incorporate a sense of straight-forwardness, which unlike 'high' art are not characterised by symbolic implications. Her lyrics, prioritising utility over form, characterises her as a product of the taste of necessity, which eventually humourises her as an object of ridicule, even causing the spectators to laugh at her. While a subdued form of Phoebe might be depicting the working class to its full and true potential, the exaggerated product her character is, places her at the centre of ridicule.

In the nineteenth episode of the ninth season, Phoebe is seen playing her music at Monica's 'high-end' restaurant, which prioritises form over utility. An average working class individual could and would never eat here. As described in the previous episodes, the food at her restaurant is excruciatingly expensive and serves small portions, a quality that the working class cannot afford to experience. Phoebe, on hearing that the queue outside Monica's restaurant is lining up, decides to play music there. The lyrics, as Monica hears them are:

"And there's a country called Argentina
It's a place I've never seen
But I'm told for 50 pesos
You can buy a human spleen"

Phoebe's character of the 'ditsy', hippie who has spent most of her childhood on the streets is complemented by a hyper-realised vision of how the privileged view the working class. The distance between the nuanced, art-loving class, and the utility-driven aesthetic is emphasised in this scene. Although this distance may highlight the social hierarchy that exists in matters of taste, the absurdity with which Phoebe has been portrayed throughout the sitcom insinuates the ridiculosity with which the working class has been portrayed; the trauma and grief of poverty and drug-abusing parents have been overlooked by trivialising matters of the privileged.

Phoebe's peculiar characterisation is not limited to the way she expresses herself through music, or even the straightforward manner in which she communicates with others about her past, but is also evident through the way in which her sexuality has been translated to the screen. While she could be described as a sex-positive woman who is not afraid to explore her sexual freedom and expression, and communicate the same to the people around her, her behaviour often makes people (her friends, and others around her) gasp in shock, making us wondering if it is really her sex-positivity that has been portrayed, or just the 'vulgarity' that is supposed to be stemming out of her socio-economic background. What exactly are we laughing at?

Bourdieu in the introduction to *Distinction* discusses this expression of the working class self, and the superior in the social hierarchy of taste: "The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile-in a word, natural-enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (7). The author concludes this chapter by reaffirming the idea that the socio-economic hierarchy that maintains art and culture are acquired in two different ways by two groups of people, and this separation further fuels the socio-economic and cultural gap between what the 'rich' and the 'poor' consume. The characteristic of 'vulgarity' that is associated with the socio-economically deprived is again used to create the character of Phoebe.

In the fourteenth episode of season five, when Phoebe gets to know that Monica and Chandler are secretly sleeping together, and that Rachel and Joey already know, she devises a plan to use the "strongest tool at my (Phoebe's) disposal", her sexuality. In her quest to make Chandler believe that she is smitten by him, she pinches his butt, and opens up her shirt to his face. While Phoebe's ability to express her sexuality is definitely a feminist characteristic, is the narrative intervention of seducing her friend a tool of empowerment, or is this scene humorised for us to laugh at Phoebe's 'vulgarity'?

Another incident such as this occurs in the eighteenth episode of the ninth season, when Ross suggests to Rachel that she should call him 'daddy' for Emma, their daughter, to hear them and replicate the same. At this point, Phoebe jumps into the conversation and in a hyper-sexualised manner says,

"Phoebe: Ooh. I like that, Daddy.
Ross (stares in a gasp and smiles awkwardly): I, uh… I was just talking about Rachel.
Phoebe: Ooh, is Daddy getting angry?
(Pause)
Is Daddy going to spank me?"

When Ross begins to play along, he soon stops by saying he cannot do 'this'. Phoebe in this manner is often seen pushing the boundaries of social conduct, and again, while this does place her sexual agency in a liberated space, the humorous manner in which it is represented presents her as a vulgar subject.

Conclusion:

The cathartic process requires one to go back to the root of the traumatic event in order to experience the emotions that were triggered by the event. The emotions stimulated by the trauma is what makes it subjective - as trauma is perceived differently by every individual. The subjectivity of trauma is what brings in the idea of individual narratives and storytelling. The end goal of catharsis is achieved by accepting the emotions felt by the trauma, but also by being able to separate the emotion from the actuality of the experience. Modern forms of psychotherapy follow the same principle. During the pandemic, we relied on watching sitcoms as a source of comfort, unaware of their anti-cathartic nature, which is just pushing us deeper into the trauma we are experiencing.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies in the United Kingdom in May 2020 revealed in a detailed study that there are immense gaps in the lives of working mothers than working fathers during the 'Work from Home' period of the lockdown: "In 2014/15, mothers were in paid work at 80% of the rate of fathers; now this is 70% of the fathers' rate. Mothers in paid work used to work an average of 73% of the hours that fathers worked; this has fallen to 68%. Mothers and fathers used to be interrupted during the same proportion of their work hours; now mothers are interrupted over 50% more often" (Andrew, Cattan et al.). During the lockdown period, throughout the world, the increased intensity of the burden on motherhood has proven that merging of the public and private sphere for a female is bound to take place. It is essential to state that the sitcom is not completely washed away by male fantasies and does include elements of truth: such as Monica's encounter with sexual harassment by a prospective investor, and Rachel's struggle as a financially independent woman, however, these concerns are quickly washed away by other narratives and lead to quick resolves. The sitcom's failure to prove itself as a visual piece that represents the struggles of real people proves itself to be an anti-cathartic sitcom, at least from a feminist perspective.

Phoebe's character, in contrast to all the others, emerges from the choice of clothes she dons, her dialogues that are not camouflaged with societal subtlety, and her overall demeanor in public as well as private spaces. Her sexual expression, while placing her in a 'sex-positive' space where females do have the agency to explore notions of pleasure, makes us wonder if this characterisation is provided due to her 'inferior' socio-economic status. In this world, that is the world of *Friends*, Phoebe's character is of a sociably-alien one, and perhaps her struggles of the past are laughed over because of her socio-economic status. It makes us wonder that in the times of the pandemic, when capitalist notions decide who can protect themselves from the pandemic and who cannot, a character such as Phoebe's would be the only one bringing to light the distress and misery of the working class, eventually being laughed over.

The notion of the cathartic, although driven away from the conventionality of Breur and Freud's theory, remains pertinent in modern psychotherapy. The essentiality of catharsis has perhaps been de-emphasized due to its vigorous emotional repercussions, but its core essence of having to revisit the problem-emotion to eventually recover from it is the basis of modern therapy sessions.

During the course of the lockdown, when people who do not originally suffer from mental disorders, illnesses were also being preyed upon by the trauma of the pandemic, there was an added pressure on popular culture to not only serve as voices of political and social commentary, and a means of entertainment, but also as a recovery from the trauma and distress of the lockdown. Although this research paper does not make any statistical claims regarding the effect of popular culture on mental health, it brought to light the manner in which the genre of 'light' comedy sitcoms are manufactured. Since this paper was studied from two distinct perspectives, the feminist, and the Marxist, we were able to assert our argument from only these two approaches. The conclusion that we reached to was that the genre of 'light' sitcoms erupts from a space of ignorance, an ignorance towards the struggles of a millennial woman, and the same towards the economically subordinate. There is a refusal to explore the trauma of the minority body, and this ensures the anti-cathartic vision of the same. While watching 'light' sitcoms may provide a breather or escape from reality, it does not support to the healing of an individual. Therefore, while people may be attracted to this genre due to its fantasized vision at play, it eventually does not contribute as a remedy to trauma.

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