



Unlocking the Power of Humour: Re-defining Resistance in Select Diaries and Weblogs of Iraqi Women

Dr. Somedutta Mukherjee

Assistant Professor in English, Centre for Distance and Online Education, The University of Burdwan

Abstract: Theories about power and resistance hardly ever concentrate on humour, and literature about humour hardly ever deliberates upon how it can be used to counter oppression. Humour as a form of resistance to domination is a relatively under-researched area. In other words, the strategic use of humour in challenging oppression and coercion has received less critical attention. This essay illustrates how humour has been used by some female Iraqi diary writers (both online and offline) as a subtle, yet powerful form of everyday resistance against the United States' invasion and occupation of the country. The first section of the article provides a brief theoretical framework for studying the complex and heterogenous phenomenon called resistance. In the following section, the article makes an attempt to critically analyse the complex relationship existing between the two interlinked forces: power and resistance. The concluding section of this article exclusively portrays an in-depth analysis of the strategic use of humour as a tool of resistance against the existing power structures. Based on different theories of humour (such as superiority theory, incongruity theory, relief theory etc.), this section examines the use of various forms of humour in these diaries and blogs as an alternative mode of resistance.

Keywords: Blogs, diaries, humour, Iraq, resistance, war.

Despite the ubiquity of the word 'resistance' in social sciences, it remains loosely defined. Whether there can be or should be one single definition of this essentially "plural, malleable and evolving" (Baaz et al. 138) phenomenon is a matter of much contention. The literal meaning (not in the strictly sociopolitical sense in which I will be using the term in my article) of the noun 'resistance,' according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is "the act of fighting against something that is attacking you, or refusing to accept something" ("resistance"). In medical/biological sciences, 'resistance' means a pathogen's (a disease producing microorganism like a virus or a bacteria) capacity to hold out against a harmful chemical agent (a drug). In the arena of physics, 'resistance' is something that opposes the flow of current (or electrons) in an electrical circuit. Quite interestingly, provided that the current is constant, if power increases, so does resistance, and vice versa (it metaphorically applies to 'resistance' in sociopolitical sense as well). In whatever sense may the term be used; an idea of opposition is inherent in the definition of 'resistance.' This article, however, will deal exclusively with political (politics has to be understood in a wider sense) resistance, which, in its simplest sense, means opposing or showing disagreement with some authority.

The term 'resistance' has its root in Latin *resistere*, which means "to make a stand against." According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 'resistance' is (i) "[t]he act of resisting, opposing, withstanding etc.," (ii) "[p]ower or capacity to resist," (iii) "[o]pposition of some force . . . to another or others," and (iv) "[a] force that retards, hinders or opposes motion . . ." (qtd. in Knowles and Linn 4). In contemporary literary criticism, the term 'resistance' was first applied by Ghassan Kanafani – a Palestinian writer and critic – while describing Palestinian literature in his book *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987) offers a comprehensive and impactful analysis of literary works emerging from Third World liberation movements. By delving deeper than a mere introduction to Third



World literature, her study underscores the pivotal role of literary texts in shaping political discourses and emphasises the importance of informed critical commentary.

Resistance and Power

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. – Foucault (1978: 95-96).

The discussion on resistance so far makes it evident that power and resistance are interdependent forces that keep on shaping each other. The word 'power,' comes from Latin *potere*, meaning "to be able" (Sharp et al. 2). Scholars like J.P. Sharp, P. Routledge, R. Paddson and C. Philo categorise power into two forms – 'dominating power' and 'resisting power.' Dominating power "attempts to control or coerce others, impose its will upon others, or manipulate the consent of others" (2-3), while, resisting power "resist[s] the impositions of dominating power" (2-3). Therefore, any act, which challenges power by refusing to be dominated passively, falls within the ambit of resistance. However, the German political scientist Gerhard Göhler, in his essay "'Power to' and 'Power over'" opines that power has two dimensions: 'power over' signifying power over other people, i.e., "enforcement of one's own intentions over those of others" and 'power to' signifying the "ability to do or achieve something independent of others" (28). While Göhler's 'power over' resembles Sharp et al.'s concept of 'dominating power,' 'power to' is linked to the concept of 'resisting power.'

Joseph S. Nye Jr., in his famous book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, talks about two forms of power – 'hard power' and 'soft power.' He defines 'hard power' as "the ability to change what others do [through] coercion" (7); while 'soft power' implies "the ability to shape what others want" (7) through the engagement with one's culture and values. A nation's soft power, according to Nye, is based on three resources – "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority" (7). Emphasising the value of 'soft power,' Nye asserts, "Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive" (X). However, Max Weber categorizes power into three categories—economic, social and political. According to him, economic power refers to "the measurement of the ability to control events by virtue of material advantage" (qtd. in Rawat 224). Social power, on the other hand, is all about "informal community opinion," "family position," "honour," "prestige and patterns of consumption," and "lifestyle" (qtd. in Rawat 224); while, political power, in Weber's opinion, is dependent upon "the relationship to the legal structure, party affiliation and extensive bureaucracy" (qtd. in Rawat 225). Therefore, if economic power creates hierarchy by controlling material things for economic gain, social power creates hierarchy by controlling people socially and compelling them to adhere by social rules. Political power, visible generally in a democracy, creates hierarchy and keeps it functioning through a group of people called public representatives who control and decide the future of a nation by formulating and enforcing policies. Hierarchy leads to inequality, which eventually gives rise to resistance.

The Foucauldian Concept of Power

However, one cannot talk about hierarchy, power and resistance without mentioning Michel Foucault. For him, people who occupy the topmost strata of class structure do not have a monopoly over power. As McGee states, "Foucault rejects the idea of power as deliberate coercion exercised by actors, and instead holds that 'power is everywhere,' embedded and transmitted in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes



of truth,' something which constitutes social actors rather than being wielded by them" (173). According to Foucault, the traditional concept of power, which he terms as "juridico-discursive" (Powers 29) has three aspects:

- a) Power is possession
- b) Power flows downward
- c) Primary function of power is repressive.

On the contrary, for Foucault, power is not an individual's possession; rather, he believes in the "multiplicity of power relation" (92), exercised from countless points. According to Foucault:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates; or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised in a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation. (Brito et. al. 4)

Moreover, he does not approve of the traditional notion about power being something negative or regressive. He opines:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 92-93).

Therefore, the Foucauldian concept of power, unlike the traditional one, seems more productive and inclined towards resistance power deployed by the less powerful to thwart the exercise of oppressive power through class, institution or state.

In the Foucauldian theoretical framework of power, three primary distinctions are made:

- i. Sovereign power
- ii. Disciplinary power
- iii. Bio power

To Foucault, sovereign power is the power of law, which is "legislative, prohibitive and censoring: a power that primarily makes use of the law and law-like regulations" (Lilja and Vinthagen 110). Boycotts, rebellions, strikes, revolutions, political disobedience etc. are acts of resistance through which people undermine sovereign power. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, works towards training and controlling individuals, and also punishing them if any violation occurs. Surveillance is an integral part of such power. Resistance to disciplinary power is carried out in covert and secretive ways, which James Scott calls



'everyday resistance.' In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault sheds light on a power "that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (137). This form of power, which, significantly, has a 'positive influence on life' is later designated by him as biopower. However, Resistance surfaces when there is an attempt at thwarting the execution of any form of power.

Renowned political philosopher and theorist, Hannah Arendt, opines in accord with Foucault's notion of power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. (qtd. in Habermas and McCarthy 4)

Therefore, according to Arendt, the existence of power depends largely on "people," without whose support it is impossible for a power-holder to exercise his power. Contrary to the popular notion of power flowing hierarchically from top to bottom, Arendt conceptualizes power as something, which emanates from the people at the bottom.

Interplay between Power and Resistance

The interplay between power and resistance, however, is not as simple as it seems to be. Critics like Karner (2000) have brought to the fore the "dynamic between power and resistance" (Vinthagen and Johansson 28). There is an ever-going interaction between power (dominance) and resistance and the two keep on shaping each other. Social change that takes place as a result of such "interactive dynamic" "shows various alternative patterns" rather than following "any single logic" (29). Acts of resistance, therefore, do not always lead to positive change and the outcome may be the very opposite of the intended one. Strategies of resistance adopted by a subaltern/ subaltern group can sometimes lead to increased power, to the resister's detriment. Vinthagen and Johansson elucidate the point by giving the example of what happened in an organization during the 1990s when cynicism, skepticism, and other such acts by the employees to the management resulted in increased control and "reproduced power rather than undermining it" (29). They further observe that though the interaction between these two opposing forces is an asymmetrical one, it is not always power that controls the dynamic. Though the usual tendency is "to see resistance as a reaction to power" and thus as only secondary to power (29), critics like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that "resistance" is an original activity that acts without the consent of power" (29).

Hollander and Einwohner (2004) conceptualise the relationship between power and resistance as a cyclical one. In their model, "domination leads to resistance, which, in turn, leads to further exercise of power, provoking further resistance and so on" (qtd. in Vinthagen and Johansson 30). But Vinthagen and Johansson propose a spiral model instead:

Power and resistance affect each other throughout history, in what we would instead describe as a spiral, or rather constant spiral-dynamics of actions and reactions, of innovations and counter-innovations, measures and counter-measures. (31)

Confronted with oppositions, those in power and authority devise newer ways of subjugation, control and oppression. The subjugated, on the other hand, take recourse to "new methods and strategies" (31). It is, therefore, a matter of constant improvisations and adaptation which leads to the evolution of newer techniques on both sides.



The Iraqi Resistance

As Bayat has pointed out, power and resistance do not exist in binary opposition, but in an ambivalent relationship, where one affects the other. In contexts like that of Iraq, where open resistance might have brought fatal consequences, and where everyday life became synonymous with everyday politics, resistance seems to be a way of life rather than some extraordinary event. Moreover, since war is increasingly becoming personal day by day; since it is not limited to the battlefield and targeting civilians (predominantly made up of women and children) has become normal, and since women's experiences during times of war drastically differ from their male counterparts, we need to concentrate on the ways women navigate war-space for a better understanding and conceptualisation of the complexities of war. However, while conducting research, reducing female war experiences to only what their bodies have gone through would be limiting. Researchers like H. Patricia Hynes (in her article "On the battlefield of women's bodies: An overview of the harm of war to women"), Cynthia Cockburn (in her article "War and Security: Women and Gender"), Karen Brounéus, Erika Forsberg, Kristine Höglund and Kate Lonergan (in their article "The Burden of War Widows: Gendered Consequences of War and Peace-Building in Sri Lanka.") and numerous others have shown how women are treated as casualties of war due to changing family dynamics and sexual violence. But scholarly works concentrating solely on women's survival strategies, especially, the acts identified as everyday forms of resistance, which differ from different forms of direct confrontation are few in number. In this article, I intend to explore how humour has been used as a subtle yet powerful strategy by Iraqi women to resist the dominant hegemonic structure of the western discourse on Iraq and to reclaim power through the humanisation of Iraqi people during the Gulf War and the American invasion of Iraq.

Use of Humour as Resistance

The use of humour in various literary forms like *nukat* or *du'aba* (jokes), *sukhriyya* (satire), *hazl* (jest), *tahakkumand hija* (derision) has long been a part of Arabic culture. Examples can be found in literature from almost every period ranging from the old Arabic 'invective poetry' (where poets from different tribes engaged in the act of ridiculing one another) to the Arab poetry of classical age and the satirical *Abbasid* and post-*Abbasid adab* (Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich 15). The humorous medieval folk tales of Nasreddin Hoca, the *Maqamat* of Hamadhani and al-Hariri, the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* are only some of the numerous examples where wit, irony and subversive humor has been used to challenge existing power structures and transgress norms imposed upon by the authority. It is this rich heritage of Arab satire and subversive humor that these diary writers have drawn upon to resist the daily oppression faced by them.

Theories about power and resistance hardly ever concentrate on humor, and literature about humor hardly ever deliberates upon how it can be used to counter oppression. Generally, humor is any content which is used with the intention to make someone laugh. However, apart from that, as stated by Sandberg and Tutenges:

It can be used to exert control and resist being controlled, to reduce stress and to generate well-being, to enhance in group solidarity and out-group hostility . . . Humor may sometimes be histrionic in its expression, but it can also be subtle, covert, and diffuse. It is culturally relative, since what is "a laughing matter in one culture may be criminal in another". Even within the same cultural milieu, humor can be variously interpreted. Given its ubiquity in social life, including the social life of



marginalized populations, humor deserves close attention from researchers interested in crime, marginalization, and other social problems. (564)

Scholarly works on humor have categorised three different types of humor— (i) superiority theory, (ii) incongruity theory and (iii) relief theory. In case of the first one, humour is “driven by feelings of superiority of an individual or group against other individuals or collectives” (Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). Therefore, according to this theory, humour derives from the sense of superiority one enjoys while looking down upon and laughing at others. Incongruity theory, on the other hand, focuses on “cognitive aspects of humour and conceptualises it as a social phenomenon, depending on the violation of what is socially and culturally perceived as normal” (Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). In this case, humor is derived from the gap between what is expected to happen and what is actually taking place. According to Kuipers, the juxtaposition of incongruous objects often involves the “transgression of social norms, or the breaking of established social patterns” (qtd. in Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). The third theory of humor, i.e., the Relief Theory perceives humour as a kind of emotional catharsis, healing us from several psychological scars. Papazoglou rightly asserts, humour, “enhancing the production of hormones called endorphins, which act as natural painkillers, thereby increasing vitality and reducing stress” (316). On “Day 19” of the first Gulf War, Nuha al-Radi expresses her shock about Baghdad being heavily bombed in a humorous, or rather, sarcastic way, as she writes, “They were supposed to be freeing Kuwait. Maybe they need a map?” (28). In her January 28, 2005 blog entry, Hadiya writes:

I told you before about the water in Baghdad — that there was none in the days that we were there. But I didn’t tell you about the water we were drinking when it finally came out of the tap. I studied in school that water doesn’t have a color, odor or taste. From my tap, I discovered I was wrong. So was I drinking water or something else? (42)

An alarming phenomenon like the unavailability of clean and safe drinking water is presented in the form of dark humour, probably to ameliorate the pain of not getting the basic necessities of life fulfilled. Another instance of black humour is seen when she recounts the news she heard about people throwing dead bodies in the river and believes that the toxins released from these bodies are contributing to the water’s foul smell and murky colour. Hadiya, in her June 7, 2005 blog entry, posts a joke:

A man was taking a walk in Central Park in New York. Suddenly he sees a little girl being attacked by a pit bull. He runs over and starts fighting with the dog, and succeeds in killing the dog and saving the girl’s life.

A policeman who was watching the scene walks over and says “You are a hero, tomorrow you can read it in all the newspapers: *Brave New Yorker saves the life of a little girl!*”

The man says: “But I am not a New Yorker!”

“Oh, then it will say in newspapers in the morning: *Brave American saves the life of a little girl!*”

“But I am not an American!” answers the man.

“Oh, what are you then?” the policeman asks.

The man says, “I am Pakistani.”

The next day the newspaper says: *Islamic Extremist kills innocent American dog.* (68)

Thus, in the form of a joke, Hadiya presents the serious issue of Islamophobia spreading rapidly in various parts of the worlds, especially in the western countries. By making her readers aware of the situation, she, subtly urges for a change in thinking.



However, political humor, which, according to Jason T. Peifer, is a “crucial part of society’s political discourse” (qtd. in Pearce 69) has an interesting quality of attracting those who are not even interested in politics, thereby escalating political learning and awareness among those who are lacking in political cognisance. As pertinently pointed out by Pearce:

Political humor does have an effect: the outcome of consumption of political humor is sometimes increased feelings of political efficacy; greater interest in discussion and participating in politics, and lower trust in politicians and greater cynicism. (69)

However, at times of serious social unrest like the one under discussion in Iraq, when protesting openly involves fatal risk, people sometimes tend to use humour as a tool of “soft resistance” (qtd. in Sandberg and Tutenges 567), which, by challenging oppressive socio-discursive narratives, provide a sense of power and situational supremacy. As Sorensen opines, “a demonstration, a street theatre, or hanging up of a poster has a very different impact in a dictatorial society, where fear dominates, than in a democratic society. Fear is not something one can touch and feel, but it still has a dramatic impact” (Sorensen 185). Indeed, in situations like the one under discussion, such acts of defiance can be perilous, carrying risks of arrest, torture, or even death. Humour, in such scenarios, can be a potent tool in nonviolent resistance, allowing individuals and groups to challenge oppressive systems in creative and subversive ways. Playing a crucial role in exposing absurdities and critiquing policies, humour can be a powerful strategy in the fight against oppression.

Riverbend’s both volumes of *Baghdad Burning* are replete with such political humour. Critiquing the contemporary political scenario of the country, Riverbend, in her September 24, 2003 post, writes:

For Sale: A fertile, wealthy country with a population of around 25 million . . . plus around 150,000 foreign troops, and a handful of puppets. Conditions for sale: should be either an American or British corporation (forget it if you’re French) . . . Please contact one of the members of the Governing Council in Baghdad, Iraq for more information. (*Baghdad Burning I* 76)

Here, in a sarcastic tone, she not only critiques the US war policies which has exploited her fertile, wealthy motherland and subjected her 25 million people to a life of humiliation and pain, but also critiques the existing government of Iraq, the members of which are nothing but mere puppets in the hands of the invaders. She again takes dig at the members of the Iraqi Governing Council, whom she calls “a bunch of power-hungry people” who are absent in most of the meetings of the council in her November 13, 2003 post:

I can imagine Bremer preparing for a meeting with the pioneers of Iraqi democracy, the pillars of liberty . . . the Iraqi Puppet Council . . . He strides into the lavish room, Italian heels clicking on the marble floor — there will be 25 faces today . . . He stops in the middle of the room, heart sinking . . . Why are there only 5 unsure faces? . . . Bremer roars and rages — where are the Puppets? . . . How dare they miss yet another meeting! But they all have their reasons, Mr. Bremer: Talbani is suffering from indigestion after an ample meal last night; Iyad Allawi is scheduled for a pedicure in Switzerland this afternoon; Al-Hakim is jetting around making covert threat to the Gulf countries, and Chalabi says he’s not attending meetings anymore, he’s left the country and will be back when it’s time for the elections . . . (137)

At a time, when revolting against the powerful members of IGC involved fatal risks, Riverbend chose political humor as her tool of resistance to critique their lavish ways of living, and their lack of communication among themselves and with the people of Iraq whom they are supposed to represent and



protect. Instead, as suggested by Riverbend, they are working as an extension of the occupying forces. Here, humour is used as a powerful tool against oppression. By juxtaposing the seriousness of the issue of oppression with the lightness of comedic expression, Riverbend makes a very smart use of political humour. Oppression, by its very nature, is a grave and somber reality that demands attention and action. However, when humour is employed as a form of resistance, it subtly shifts the dynamics of the situation. The act of using humour in such a context inherently suggests that the speaker is not entirely bound by the oppressive framework, signaling a degree of defiance and freedom. In her December 18, 2004 post, titled "Christmas Wishlist," Riverbend lists items like gasoline, cooking gas, kerosene (for heaters), running water, diesel generators, flashlights and candles (*Baghdad Burning II* 47) for the festival. However, she doesn't include "peace," "security" and "freedom" in her Wishlist, as "Christmas miracles are exclusive to Charles Dickens" (*Baghdad Burning II* 47). When someone includes such trivial items in her Christmas Wishlist, there remains nothing more to be commented upon how low the living conditions have reached for them. Moreover, categorising 'peace,' 'freedom,' and 'security' as 'miracles' lays bare the incompetence of the governing bodies ruling Iraq. Talking of Santa Claus, in the same post, Riverbend writes:

When Santa delivers please make sure he is wearing a bullet-proof vest and helmet. He should also politely ring the doorbell or knock, as a more subtle entry might bring him face to face with an AK-47. With the current fuel shortage, reindeer and a sleigh are highly practical—but Rudolph should be left behind as the flashing red nose might create a bomb scare. (*Baghdad Burning II* 48)

This humorous post about the precautions Santa should take before visiting Iraq on Christmas, reveals a lot about the nation's the then socio-political scenario—the possibility of being shot at any moment; the hazards of subtle movements, which might be interpreted as suspicious and thereby lead to death; the worsening condition of fuel shortage all over Iraq and the Iraqi people's palpable panic about being bombed anytime. This contrast between the seriousness of the oppression and the lightness of humour creates a unique space for subversion. Even if the humour itself does not succeed in making people laugh, the very attempt to use it in the face of oppression changes the narrative. It implies that the oppressed are not passive recipients of their circumstances but are instead active agents who can redefine the terms of engagement. The reformulation of a serious issue in a humorous mode is, in itself, a statement of resistance, creating an expectation of further challenges to the status quo.

However, another important aspect of humor is that it can help individuals preserve self-respect and dignity by overcoming political apathy. In other words, humour helps create a sense of identity and provides a sense of control. While writing about Bush's covert and hasty Iraq visit (to say more precisely, his visit to Baghdad International Airport, situated 20 minutes outside the city), which nobody knew about until it was broadcasted on different news channels after he left, Riverbend sarcastically writes:

Why didn't he walk the streets of the country he helped "liberate?" Why didn't he at least *hover* above the country he "liberated?" He constantly claims the situation is much better now than pre-war, so why isn't he taking advantage of our excellent security situation?! (*Baghdad Burning I* 152; original emphasis)

Here, we are not witnessing a timid, oppressed 'Arab woman' (the stereotype generally circulated while upholding the 'liberation' propaganda by the west), rather, we hear the words of a confident, brave woman fighting the oddities offered to her by the socio-political condition of a nation, where even world's one of the most powerful persons like the US President did not dare to venture. The mocking tone she uses in her post helps her regain self-confidence and sense of control amidst the chaos she is living in. However, this post is



not the only one where she critiques the 'liberation' propaganda. There are numerous such examples, where Riverbend expresses her dissatisfaction, or rather we should say, her frustration about this whole big lie about 'liberation.' In her March 20, 2004 blogpost, Riverbend sarcastically writes:

That was the beginning of the "liberation" . . . a liberation from sovereignty, a certain sort of peace, a certain measure of dignity. We've been liberated from our jobs, and our streets and the sanctity of our homes . . . some of us have been liberated from the members of our family and friends. (*Baghdad Burning I 227*)

In the same post, she makes a wonderful comparison between 'terrorism' and 'liberation,' using sarcasm as her tool:

We've learned that terrorism isn't actually the act of creating terror. It isn't the act of killing innocent people and frightening others . . . no, you see, that's called a "liberation." It doesn't matter what you burn or who you kill — if you wear khaki, ride a tank or Apache or fighter plane and drop missiles and bombs, then you're not a terrorist —you're a liberator. (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning I 228*)

Moreover, as humour is generally associated with innocence, which is in stark contrast to the serious phenomenon of oppression, the use of humour to resist oppression becomes a strategic move because, when violence is used to suppress non-violent resistance, it becomes difficult for the oppressor to justify it. As Gene Sharp opines:

Cruelties and brutalities committed against the clearly nonviolent are likely to disturb many people and fill some with outrage. Even milder violent repression appears less justified against nonviolent people than when employed against violent resisters. (657)

Despite the serious intention behind it, humour conveys a dual message: "Don't take me seriously," and "I'm not dangerous" (Sorensen 171). This duality allows humour to navigate the complex terrain of resistance without fully committing to outright confrontation. It provides a veil of ambiguity that can protect the speaker from severe repercussions while still delivering a potent critique of the oppressive system.

On December 24, 2003, Riverbend, in her blog post titled "Filling the Water Tank," documents a sweet and simple fun conversation she had with her brother E:

I took the final bucket upstairs to the roof . . . As I neared the water tank, I saw E leaning against it conversing with a pigeon that seemed oblivious to his presence. . . I thought he had finally lost it. "What are you talking about?!" I asked, awed.
"I was envying its wings . . ." he murmured, staring out into the distance.
"Ah . . . you'd like to fly away . . ." I nodded sagely.
"No . . . I just think it's fantastic he doesn't have to wait in line 8 hours for gas to get from one place to the next . . ." (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning I 172*)

This seemingly innocent conversation between a brother and sister has a subtle sense of sarcasm, critiquing the post-invasion scenario of the nation, where, even the non-human species enjoy more freedom of mobility than human beings. Moreover, this conversation also takes a dig at the electricity conditions of the 'New Iraq,' because of which they are compelled to fill the water tanks up manually instead of just turning on the electric pumps. The power of humour in oppressive situations lies not in its aggression, but in its nuanced



ability to convey complex messages. This type of humour requires courage to deploy, as it walks a fine line between seeming innocence and delivering a sharp critique. The ambivalence inherent in this humour allows it to be both subtle and powerful, making it a potent tool for resistance. In another post, Riverbend writes about cleaning their roof, which “took almost 2 hours, 600 sneezes and around 15 buckets of water” (*Baghdad Burning I* 271). Thus, time and again, throughout her blog, she keeps criticising the deplorable condition of Iraq using humor as her tool. The courage to use humor in this way is a testament to the resilience and creativity of those who employ it as a form of subtle resistance.

Conclusion

At the face of extensive destruction all around, the use of humour as an act of underground resistance, showcase the resilience of Iraqi women, who struggle, on a daily basis, to preserve the cultural and spiritual soundness of their communities. The use of humour in the face of oppression is a declaration of intent – a signal that those affected are not resigned to their fate and are willing to challenge it in creative and unexpected ways. This act of defiance through humour reclaims agency, asserts humanity, and momentarily shifts the balance of power. Coming from different backgrounds, these Iraqi women, consciously, never formed a group. But the content of their narratives, which bore the unmistakable scars of war and occupation, brought them close. Resistance, as we all know, is not only about bodily sustenance; but about mental wellbeing too. Resorting to humour not only helped these women survive the chaos and destruction all around but also restored in them a sense of empowerment and authority.

Works Cited

- Al-Radi, Nuha. *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile*. Vintage Books, 2003.
- Baaz, Michael, et al. “Defining and Analyzing “Resistance”: Possible Entrances to the Study of Subversive Practices.” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 41, no. 3, August 2016, pp. 137-153. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26386319. Accessed 8 December 2023.
- Brito, Lydia Maria Pinto, et al. “Michel Foucault: Analysis of Power Relations in Entrepreneurial and Innovative Initiatives in Brazil.” *Athena Digital*, vol. 20, no. 1, e2478, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenea.2478>. Accessed 12 August 2022.
- Damir-Geilsdorf, Sabine, and Stephan Milich, editors. *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings*. Transcript Verlag, 2020.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Göhler, Gerhard. “‘Power To’ and ‘Power Over.’” *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, edited by Stewart Clegg and Mark Haugaard, 2009, pp. 27–39.
- Habermas, Jürgen, and Thomas McCarthy. “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power.” *Social Research*, vol. 44, no. 1, Hannah Arendt, Spring 1977, pp. 3-24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40970268. Accessed 16 August 2022.
- Hadiya. *Iraqi Girl: Diary of a Teenage Girl in Iraq*. Edited by Elizabeth Wringley-Field,



Haymarket Books, 2009.

Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Rachel L. Einwohner. "Conceptualizing Resistance." *Sociological*

Forum, vol. 19, no. 4, 2004, pp. 533-54. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4148828. Accessed 8 June 2022.

Knowles, Eric S., and Jay A. Linn, editors. *Resistance and Persuasion*. Taylor and Francis, 2004.

McGee, Rosie. "InvisiblePower and Visible Everyday Resistance in the Violent Colombian Pacific."

Peacebuilding, vol. 5, no. 2, 2017, pp. 170-185, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1277013>.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, 2009.

Pearce, Katy, and Adnan Hajizada. "No Laughing Matter: Humor as a Means of Dissent

in the Digital Era: The Case of Authoritarian Azerbaijan." *Demokratizatsiya*, 2014, pp. 67-85.

Powers, Penny. "The Philosophical Foundations of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis." *Critical*

Approach to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, pp-18-34.

Rawat, H. K. *Contemporary Sociology*. Rawat Publications, 2013.

"resistance." *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/resistance>.

Accessed 5 December 2023.

Riverbend. *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. Feminist Press, 2005.

---. *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. Vol. 2, Feminist Press, 2006.

Sandberg, Sveinung, and Sébastien Tutenges. "Laughter in Stories of Crime and Tragedy: The

Importance of Humor for Marginalized Populations" *Social Problems*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2019, pp. 564-579. JSTOR,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spy019>. Accessed 13 December 2023.

Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Sargent Publisher, 1973.

Sharp, Joanne P., et al. (2000) "Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance."

Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance, edited by Joanne P. Sharp, et al., Routledge, 2000, pp. 1-34.

Sorensen, Majken Jul. "Humour as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace*

and Change, vol. 33, issue 2, 2008, pp. 167-190, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2008.00488.x>.

Vinthagen, Stellan, and Anna Johansson. "'Everyday Resistance': Exploration of a Concept

and its Theories." *Resistance Studies Magazine*, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-46. [https://rsmag.nfshost.com/wp-](https://rsmag.nfshost.com/wp-content/uploads/Vinthagen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf)

[content/uploads/Vinthagen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf](https://rsmag.nfshost.com/wp-content/uploads/Vinthagen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf). Accessed 11 August 2023.

Author Bio: Dr. Somedutta Mukherjee is an Assistant Professor in English at the Centre for Distance and Online Education, The University of Burdwan. She completed her Masters in English from The University of Burdwan in 2016, securing first position in first class. Dr. Mukherjee earned her PhD from the same university in 2025. Her research interests include Resistance literature, women's narratives, self-narratives, and war literature, exploring the intersections of identity, power, and storytelling.