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From Pen to Post: A comparative study of satire in 18th century English literature and modern social media from an Indian context

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Abstract

Satire has evolved significantly from the refined wit of 18th-century English literature to the fast-paced, viral humor of modern social media. This study explores the transformation of satire as a literary and cultural device, comparing its application and impact during the Age of Enlightenment with its manifestations in the digital era, particularly from an Indian perspective. The 18th century saw writers like Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson use satire to critique societal structures, political corruption, and human follies, employing tools like irony, parody, and allegory to navigate the censorship and constraints of their time. In contrast, modern social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have democratized satire, enabling ordinary individuals to challenge authority, critique social issues, and provoke change in real time. This comparative study examines the continuity and divergence in the themes, techniques, and impact of satire across these two eras. It analyzes how satire has adapted to shifts in media and cultural landscapes while retaining its core function as a vehicle for critique and resistance. By situating this discussion within the Indian context, the study highlights how satire continues to engage with questions of identity, power, and justice, offering fresh insights into its enduring relevance in shaping public opinion and social consciousness.

Keywords: 18th-century, enlightenment, democratized, divergence, identity, consciousness

1. Introduction

The term "satire" originates from the Latin word "satura", which means "a medley" or "mixture." It was not coined by a single individual but rather developed as a term in Roman literature. The Roman poet, educator, and rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35-100 AD) was one of the earliest to use the term "Satura" in a literary sense, referring to a specific genre that blended criticism, humor, and moral reflection. Roman writers such as Horace, Juvenal, and Persius are often regarded as the pioneers of formal satire, shaping its conventions and themes. The modern understanding of satire as a genre evolved over time, drawing from their works. Satire has long been a medium of critique, offering a mirror to society's follies, vices, and hypocrisies. In 18th-century English literature, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and others dominated the field of literary satire. In the modern era, social media platforms have become fertile grounds for satirical expression, where memes, tweets, and posts reach audiences at unprecedented speeds.

This paper seeks to explore how satire has adapted to changing times, mediums, and audiences, examining both its continuities and divergences. Satire, as a literary device and cultural tool, has evolved significantly from its roots in English literature to its modern expression in the digital realm of social media. This paper explores the transformation of satire in its thematic, stylistic, and audience engagement aspects, comparing traditional literary works with contemporary social media content. By analyzing the underlying mechanisms of satire in both contexts, the study highlights the shifts in purpose, accessibility, and societal impact.

2. The Objective of the Research

- To analyze the evolution of satire: Examine how the form, style, and purpose of satire have transformed from traditional English literary texts to contemporary social media platforms.

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- To identify thematic similarities and differences: Explore recurring themes, subjects, and tones of satire in classical works versus modern social media satire.
- To study the influence of the medium: Investigate how the medium (literature versus social media) shapes the expression, reach, and impact of satire.
- To evaluate audience engagement and participation: Compare the passive consumption of satire in literature with the interactive and participatory nature of satire on social media.

These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of satire's role in shaping public opinion and cultural discourse across historical and contemporary contexts.

3. Methodology of the Research

The methodology for the research involves the following steps:

3.1 Research Design

Adopt a comparative analysis approach to study satire across two mediums: English literature and social media. Employ a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and analyze data.

3.2 Data Collection

I. Primary Sources

Select representative works of satire from 18th-century English literature, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, as well as Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.

Gather satirical content from social media platforms, including memes, tweets, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos.

II. Secondary Sources

Review scholarly articles, books, and research papers on satire in literature and digital media. Analyze audience reactions on social media through metrics like comments, likes, and shares.

4. Definition of Satire

Satire has multiple interpretations and forms. It can take the shape of a poem, a novel, a picture, a song, a movie, a play, or even a single word.

Satire is a literary and artistic form that uses humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize human vices, follies, or societal shortcomings, often with the aim of provoking thought, reform, or change. It relies on wit and creative expression to highlight issues in politics, society, culture, and human behavior, often challenging the status quo through clever and pointed commentary.

Jonathan Swift, an Anglo-Irish writer, stated in his preface to *The Battle of the Books*.

“Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason so few are offended by it.”

In his *Dictionary of 1755*, English writer and literary critic Samuel Johnson defined satire as: “A poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.”

5. Purpose of Satire

The purpose of satire is multifaceted and often depends on the context and goals of the author or creator. Here are its primary purposes.

I. Criticism of Society and Institutions

Satire critiques societal norms, practices, and institutions that are deemed corrupt, hypocritical, or unjust. By highlighting these flaws, it seeks to provoke thought and encourage reform.

II. Encouraging Reflection and Change

Satire challenges readers or audiences to reflect on their values, beliefs, and behaviors. It often serves as a mirror to society, exposing its absurdities and contradictions.

III. Entertainment and Humor

While satire serves serious purposes, it also entertains by employing wit, clever wordplay, and absurdity. Humor makes difficult topics more accessible and engaging.

IV. Exposing Hypocrisy and Corruption

Satire frequently targets hypocrisy, revealing how individuals or groups fail to practice what they preach, particularly in politics, religion, or morality.

V. Highlighting Absurdity

By exaggerating or distorting reality, satire exposes the absurd or contradictory nature of certain practices, beliefs, or systems, often making them appear ridiculous.

VI. Breaking Taboos

Satire addresses topics considered taboo or sensitive, opening up conversations that might otherwise be avoided. It does so by cloaking criticism in humor or allegory.

VII. Revealing Hidden Truths

Satire often brings to light issues or truths that are concealed or ignored by society. By exaggerating or mocking, it reveals underlying problems that might not be easily visible.

6. Discussion

Satire is highly entertaining while simultaneously encouraging readers to think critically about real-world problems. People enjoy how it cleverly mocks politics, society, religion, human foolishness, and other aspects of life. Satire becomes particularly powerful when it addresses current societal issues, including culture, lifestyle, and politics. Readers often enjoy deciphering the hidden meanings or messages embedded in satire. It serves as a fun yet thought-provoking way to engage with societal problems and initiate conversations.

Satire has undergone significant transformations over time, evolving from the writings of 18th century English authors to the posts and tweets of today's social media. This section examines the differences between these two mediums, with a particular focus on how satire is employed and understood in the Indian context.

6.1 Satire in 18th Century English Literature

The 18th century, often referred to as the “Age of Enlightenment”, was a period of intellectual and cultural flourishing in Europe. In England, this era saw the rise of satire as a dominant literary genre, reflecting the political,

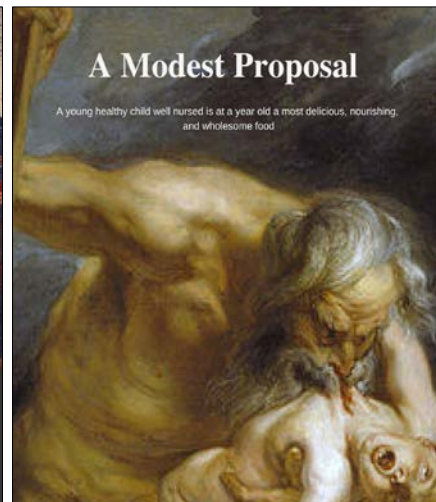
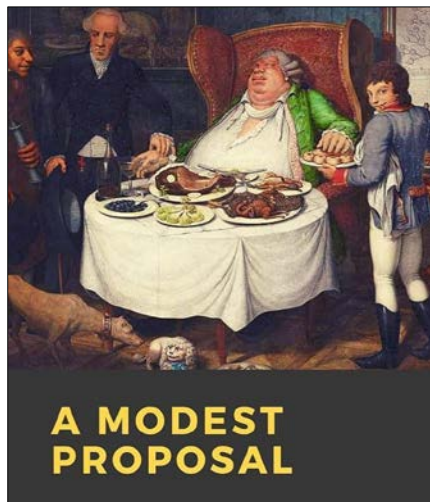
social, and moral complexities of the time. Satirical works of this period were characterized by sharp wit, irony, and moral purpose, often aimed at exposing societal flaws and correcting human follies.

English literature is divided into many eras or ages, such as the Elizabethan Age, Jacobean Age, Restoration Age, Augustan Age, Romantic Age, Victorian Age etc. Each age is renowned for its unique qualities. The Augustan Age, named after the Roman emperor Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), is particularly notable for its satirical writings. Writers during this period looked up to Roman literary figures and often compared their own era to the Roman period. The Augustan Age in England was marked by significant political and social changes, including the rise of the middle class, the decline of absolute monarchy, and the growing influence of print culture. Satire thrived in this environment, as writers engaged with controversial topics like religion,

politics, and class dynamics. The satirical works of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Gay, and Samuel Johnson exemplify this period, showcasing the power of humor and irony in critiquing society. The themes of 18th-century satire-political corruption, social inequality, and moral hypocrisy-remain universal and timeless, making these works relevant even today.

6.1.1 Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal

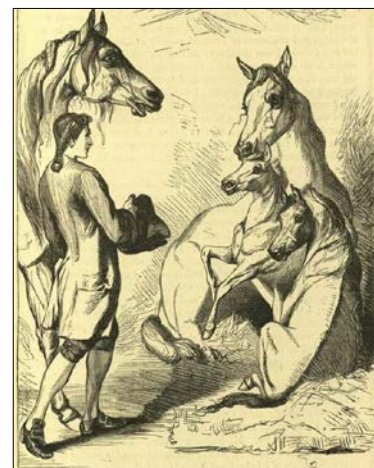
Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is one of the most famous satirical essays of the 18th century. In this work, Swift pretends to suggest that poor Irish families should sell their babies as food to the rich. This shocking idea, of course, is not meant to be taken seriously. Rather, it serves as a clever and provocative critique of British policies and society's indifference to Irish poverty.



In his essay *A Modest Proposal*, Swift satirized the English government's policies by suggesting that, rather than allowing poor, starving children to burden society, they should be fattened up and eaten.

6.1.2 Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels

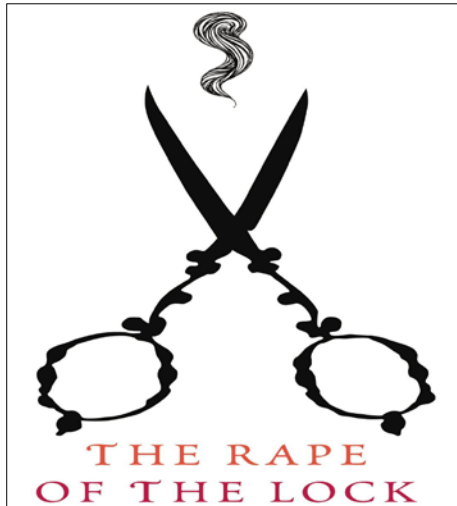
Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a satirical masterpiece that uses humor, irony, and exaggeration to critique human nature, politics, society, and science. The story follows Gulliver's journeys to strange lands, where the unusual behaviors of the inhabitants reflect the flaws and absurdities of 18th-century England and humanity in general.



In Book 4 of *Gulliver's Travel*, Swift critiques human nature, focusing on moral corruption and the flaws of society, contrasted with the rationality of the Houyhnhnms. In Book 4 Swift compares the Houyhnhnms to an ideal of rationality and virtue, contrasting them with the Yahoos, who represent the worst traits of humanity. The Yahoos are a degenerate, brutish species resembling humans. They symbolize the vices, greed, and moral corruption of humankind.

6.1.3 Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock

Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is a mock-epic poem that satirizes the trivialities of 18th-century aristocratic society, particularly its obsession with appearances, materialism, and superficial concerns. By treating a petty incident—a young man cutting a lock of a woman's hair—as if it were an epic event, Pope humorously critiques the vanity and absurdity of the English upper class.



The cutting of the lock of hair in “The Rape of the Lock” symbolizes the triviality of social disputes and the absurdity of the aristocratic obsession with appearance and honor. It also represents the loss of personal integrity and the impact of vanity in a superficial society.



Pope portrays aristocratic women in “The Rape of the Lock” as frivolous, self-absorbed, and obsessed with beauty, using satire to highlight their superficiality and trivial concerns.

6.2 Satire on Modern Social Media

Social media has transformed the way satire is created, consumed, and shared. Unlike traditional forms of satire in literature or print, which relied on essays, poems, or plays, modern satire on social media thrives through brevity, immediacy, and accessibility. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have democratized satire, allowing anyone with internet access to create and disseminate satirical content.

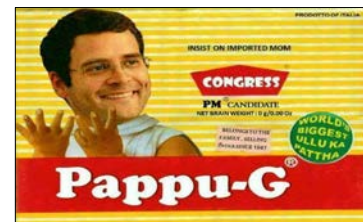
Influencers, stand-up comedians, and meme pages like Just Indian Things (JIT), Log Kya Sochenge (LKS), Rajnikant v/s CID Jokes (RV CJ), Trolls Official, and Sarcasm etc. have popularized satirical content. Political memes and parodies often highlight government policies, corruption,

and societal issues, resonating especially with the youth. Satirical videos by stand-up comedians like Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, and Munawar Faruqui combine humor with social commentary.

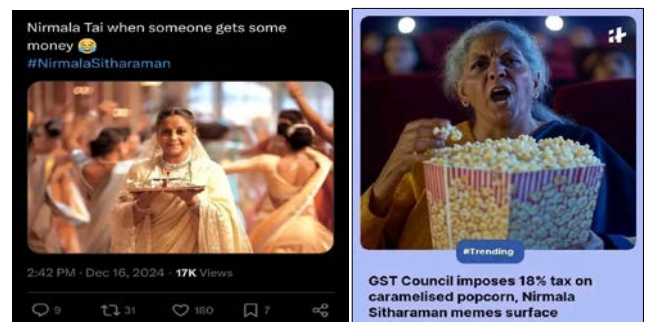
Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have made satire more accessible to everyone. YouTubers like Dhruv Rathee, Ravish Kumar, and Akash Banerjee openly critique the government. People use memes, videos, and short posts to comment on social and political issues. For instance, memes about government decisions or viral tweets about social problems spread quickly, sparking widespread discussions. However, social media satire can sometimes oversimplify serious issues or cause misunderstandings because of its fast and concise nature. In India, comedians and creators often use humor to address topics like corruption, caste, government policies, and societal inequality. Politicians, Bollywood celebrities, sportspeople, and business tycoons frequently become part of satire culture on social media.

6.2.1 Politicians

Rahul Gandhi, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress, is often referred to as “Pappu,” a satirical nickname widely used by critics to mock him.



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman trends annually for her budget announcements and GST policies.



Politicians like Prime Minister Narendra Modi often trend on social media for his “acche din” dialogue and his government’s policies.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is frequently discussed on social media due to his strong emphasis on Hindutva (Hindu nationalism).

Apart from that, politicians like Amit Shah, Mamata Banerjee, Smriti Irani, and Nitish Kumar, often become trending topics on social media for various reasons and face criticism.

6.2.2 Bollywood Celebrities

Actors like Ajay Devgn and Akshay Kumar have been trolled and nicknamed “bolo zuban kesari” for endorsing Vimal Pan Masala, a controversial brand linked to pan masala products.



6.2.3 Business Tycoons

In 2024, Mukesh Ambani, India’s richest person, and his family faced criticism and trolling on social media after his younger son Anant Ambani’s extravagant wedding. The event seen as a symbol of extreme wealth, highlighted the gap between the rich and the poor, sparking memes and public criticism.

7. Major differences between 18th century English literature satire and modern social media satire

I. Medium of Expression

18 th -Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Primarily conveyed through books, essays, pamphlets, and poems, requiring significant effort in publishing and distribution.	Expressed through tweets, memes, short videos, and posts, allowing for instantaneous creation and global dissemination.

II. Accessibility

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Limited to educated and literate audiences who had access to books and periodicals.	Accessible to anyone with internet access, regardless of educational background or social status.

III. Audience Engagement

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Audiences engaged passively, with time for deep reflection and analysis of satirical content.	Interaction is immediate, with likes, comments, shares, and discussions fostering active participation.

IV. Purpose and Function

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Aimed at moral and social reform, often targeting societal elites and emphasizing intellectual critique.	Balances between entertainment and activism, with a focus on virality and instant impact rather than deep reflection.

V. Wit and Craftsmanship

18 th -Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Characterized by elaborate wit, nuanced irony, and meticulous literary craftsmanship.	Relies on brevity, punchlines, and visual elements like memes, often prioritizing simplicity over complexity.

VI. Longevity

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Works were designed for enduring relevance, studied across generations for their cultural and historical significance.	Ephemeral in nature, with content often losing relevance quickly due to the fast-paced digital environment.

VII. Censorship and Constraints

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Faced censorship through government regulations and publication restrictions, often necessitating subtlety or pseudonyms.	Encounters legal challenges, online trolling, and content moderation policies but benefits from anonymity and decentralized platforms.

VIII. Cultural Context

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Rooted in specific historical and cultural milieus, addressing issues like aristocratic vanity, political corruption, and societal norms.	Adapts to diverse global audiences, often addressing trending issues like racism, gender, contemporary society and contemporary politics.

IX. Reach and Speed

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Dissemination was slow, relying on print culture and personal distribution networks.	Content spreads instantly, with viral reach extending to global audiences within minutes.

X. Interactivity

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
A one-way interaction where the writer conveyed a message and the audience interpreted it individually.	Enables two-way communication, with creators and audiences engaging in real-time opinions.

XI. Textual vs. Visual

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Primarily text-based, relying heavily on linguistic and rhetorical devices.	Often visual, utilizing memes, videos, and images alongside text to convey humor and critique.

XII. Democratization of Creation

18 th Century Satire	Modern Social Media Satire
Created by educated elites, often reflecting their perspective on societal issues.	Democratized, with ordinary individuals, influencers, and professionals contributing equally to the satirical discourse.

These points can provide a comprehensive framework to analyze the evolution of satire in the paper.

8. Comparative Analysis

Aspect	18 th Century English Literature	Modern Social Media
Medium	Books, pamphlets, essays	Tweets, memes, videos
Accessibility	Restricted to literate and educated audiences	Universal access, minimal literacy required
Purpose	Enlightenment, moral reform	Entertainment, activism, or viral popularity
Longevity	Enduring works studied for generations	Ephemeral content with short relevance
Engagement	Passive consumption, deep reflection	Active participation, instant reaction

9. Challenges and Risks

Both forms of satire face challenges such as censorship, misinformation, and the risk of oversimplification. Despite these obstacles, the demand for satire as a tool for truth-telling and societal critique ensures its survival. Historically, satire has encountered pushback, both in the past and today. In 18th century England, all books required government approval before publication. This system of prior restraint forced authors to submit their works to the Stationers' Company, which could withhold publication if the content was deemed politically, socially, or morally objectionable. Writers often resorted to using hidden meanings or pseudonyms to avoid repercussions.

Similarly, in contemporary India, social media satire frequently faces backlash or legal action, especially when it targets political or religious institutions. For example, stand-up comedian Munawar Faruqui was arrested in January 2021 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, for allegedly making objectionable comments about Hindu gods during his comedy show.

Another instance involves Kunal Kamra, a stand-up comedian who mocked the judiciary's alleged partiality by referring to it as a "puppet" of the government in one of his tweets. Kamra faced legal challenges, including contempt of court charges, for his openly critical remarks about the Supreme Court.

Similarly, Kiku Sharda, a popular comedian and actor, was arrested in 2016 for mimicking Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the controversial leader of the Dera Sacha Sauda organization, on a television show.

10. Impact on Audiences

In the field of literary satire, understanding satire often required education and exposure to sophisticated language, making it accessible to a smaller audience. Today, social media satire reaches a much broader audience, as anyone with a smartphone can access and share it. However, while social media democratizes satire, it can lead to shallow engagement, with many people merely sharing content that aligns with their beliefs without critically analyzing it.

In India, social media satire has become a powerful tool to expose injustice and hold leaders accountable. However, it also risks creating divisions, as satire can be misinterpreted or weaponized to reinforce existing biases.

11. The Future of Satire

The future of satire looks promising as it continues to adapt to changing mediums. Literary satire will remain relevant by

addressing timeless human flaws while incorporating modern issues such as technology, science, the global economy, and climate change. Meanwhile, social media satire will grow with new platforms, instantly reaching wider audiences through creative formats like memes, tweets, hashtags, and videos. Together, these forms of satire will evolve to challenge authority, question societal norms, and inspire critical thinking in innovative ways.

12. Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of satire lies in its ability to evolve with its mediums, remaining sharp, relevant, and impactful in addressing the complexities of human behavior and society. From the quills of English satirists to the keyboards of digital creators, satire has proven its adaptability across eras. While literary satire provided profound reflections, social media satire democratizes critique and accelerates its spread. This comparative study underscores the enduring relevance of satire as a cultural tool and emphasizes the need for a balance between depth and accessibility in its modern iterations.

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