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Giuseppe Balirano, *The Perception of Diasporic Humour – Indian English on TV* (Loreto: Tecnostampa, 2007), 192 pp.

Reviewed by **Giuseppe De Riso**

The Indian diaspora is probably a microcosm of India. Barring a few exceptions, Indian emigrants around the world zealously try to preserve their ethnic, language and caste identities. Owing to their distinct lifestyles and cultures, the Indian communities in the UK experienced considerable difficulties in assimilation during the 1950s.

Placing emphasis on education has granted them valuable resources to accelerate upward social mobility and improve their general position in the host country. Indeed, only a few decades later, a group of British-born Indians decided to bring their culture into the limelight by using the media in an attempt to break with Britain's conservatism and to add a new concept of multiculturalism to the UK public agenda.

First broadcasted as a radio program by the BBC, *Goodness Gracious Me* was an ingenious Asian comedy which originated precisely from this new resolution. The sketch show's resounding success spurred BBC2 to promptly convert it to a mainstream TV series which would later hit the towering peak of 3.84 million viewers. An astonishing performance for a show intended both to produce a more accurate representation of India beyond its stereotypical global image as a land of poverty and snake charmers, and to suggest, in Balirano's words, immigrants' "difficult relocation of 'home'". Despite being written and performed by Indians for Indians, it was apparent that the show had made an impact on the British audience as well.

Whereas other ethnic TV programmes broadcast in Britain at the time were steeped in colonial rhetoric which would only hinder communication between the parties involved, Balirano argues that *GGM*'s producers dealt with universal and ethnic topics exploiting the classical British 'sense of humour' and comedy tradition, thus making Indian and Western cultures come humorously into contact. More specifically, the show resorted to 'stereotyped reversals' which, in Balirano's words, turned "the Indian characters into hilarious English subjects, ridiculing, in a conventional all-British manner, their fellow countrymen". Aptly mixing culturally connoted jokes with Anglo-centric or white-friendly skits, this stratagem produced a new blend of Indian and English cultures, thereby preventing anyone from feeling excluded. This allows Balirano to pinpoint the main reason behind the show's phenomenal popularity within such different ethnic groups. The scholar recognizes that the subverting blend of Western and Eastern stereotypes generates a hybrid, Indo-Saxon form of narration which

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hinges on what he terms “Diasporic Humour”. In *GGM*’s case, this kind of humour ensues from the clash between group-specific need for cultural pluralism on one side, and national aspiration for absorption into conventional culture on the other; yet it manages to appease both England’s authoritarian national discourse and the immigrants’ resistance to it. For even though England and India are connected to the two main scripts (a.k.a. mental frames concerned with personal or group-related ideas representing social attitudes) overlapping in *GGM*, diasporic humour is in fact unique in the sense that it cannot be substituted by either.

To expose the existence of this diasporic sub-category of humour, Balirano analyses the 289 sketches from *GGM* which constitute the corpus of his study. While still conducting a computer-assisted linguistic analysis of the sketches, he is aware that the inferential activities triggered by script opposition in composite, multi-level narrative structures such as filmic productions do not necessarily pivot upon verbal utterances. On the contrary, the narrative structures thrive on the distinctive combination of language, moving images and sound. Moreover, since the comic effect achieved in a witty show like *GGM* is ‘concocted’ through what Balirano calls “Semiotically Expressed Humour”, another crucial factor in his research is his detection of the incongruity between words and significance, implementation and encyclopedic or cultural information. In order to carry out a comprehensive transcription of the *SEH* the show features, Balirano frames all the relevant elements of video supported material within an inclusive synoptic perspective borrowed from Paul Thibault’s multimodal analysis. He then adopts the mathematical theory of graphs to map the interaction of the various visual and textual elements, thereby highlighting the sketches’ final humorous effect. Far from considering humour as an element of the comic simply consisting in the ability to amuse people or make them laugh, Balirano embraces a semantic and pragmatic perspective on *GGM*’s humorous strategies in order to bring into focus the narrative organized opposition and overlapping of ethnic models, pursuing his investigation with meticulous scientific rigour. Indeed, in the last of the five chapters which compose Balirano’s work, the quantitative results of a questionnaire proposed to 95 subjects stratified according to three ethnic groups (namely Indian immigrants to the U.K., British people of Indian origin and white English subjects) showed the Indo-Saxons always occupying a middle position in the enjoyment of *GGM*’s humour, testifying to the progressive assimilation to a shared hybrid culture between second and third-generation British-born Indians and Anglo-Saxons.

With his work Balirano helps the reader understand why *GGM* wasn’t merely a huge mainstream success but a powerful social instrument as well. Mocking and aggregating at one and the same time, the sketches’ diasporic humour overturns the Western balance of power so that both

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euro-centric and ex-centric subjects can surface as hybrid post-national identities and acknowledge one another. More generally, as a product of hybrid interactions between mother-country and host-country, this kind of discourse has the power to remove the boundaries between different and often opposite cultural dimensions, thereby overcoming their polarity and dissolving the very notion of 'origin'. That's why, looking beyond the rich data his study abounds in, Balirano's observations point to more fascinating landscapes for cross-cultural interaction. The work of successful immigrants can help to provide a ticket home. Not the homeland they (or their ancestors) left behind, but the new one their skills could make out of hybridity.