

Book review

Tomsett, Ellie (2023). *Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms: Sexism, Stereotypes and Structural Inequalities*. Bloomsbury.

Scholarship on feminism, stand-up comedy, and women has largely centred on the United States (Gilbert, 2004; Krefting, 2014; Mizejewski, 2014). Ellie Tomsett's book on stand-up comedy and contemporary feminisms in the UK is therefore long overdue. I speak of *women* here, and not of *women's comedy*, for one of the lessons of Tomsett's excellent and insightful study is that stand-up comedy by women is not a distinct genre. Pretending that it is means being complicit in the sexism that keeps marginalising women in the UK comedy industry. Her book presents compelling evidence of women's continued exclusion from British comedy, while also tracing the shifting politics and aesthetics of stand-up.

The combination of both these perspectives is one of the book's greatest strengths. By integrating comedic performance analysis with an institutional perspective to stand-up comedy as a cultural industry, Tomsett is able to demonstrate how some of the structural barriers that women face across different industries are exacerbated in the context of stand-up by the persistence of sexist comedic material. As she aptly remarks: "Comedy as an industry labours under the weight of these [sexist] stereotypes, but so too does the very comedic material being produced by comedians" (p. 47). Similarly, whereas women workers across many industries keep hearing from male colleagues that they lack a sense of humour when they are unwilling to laugh at men's sexist jokes, in the context of stand-up, such remarks are a direct attack on the professional abilities of the comedian (p. 204).

Stand-up comedy and contemporary feminisms deals with stand-up comedy in the UK between 2013 and 2023, and is largely based on Tomsett's participant observation as a volunteer at the UK Women in Comedy Festival in Manchester from 2014 to 2018, where she interviewed comedians, industry professionals, and comedy audiences. She combined this with a "netnography" (p. 26) of the barriers encountered by comedians online, specifically on social media.

In the introductory chapter "Welcome to the stage", Tomsett first outlines her feminist approach to stand-up comedy, which is intersectional and "inclusive of trans women" (p. 4). She then situates her project in the long-standing social and academic debates on women and comedy. She makes an interesting observation in this context about the way these debates have taken shape over the past decades. While it used to be common to claim that "women aren't funny" (p. 15), this is currently seen as outright sexist, and thus unacceptable. Tomsett argues, however, that the debate quickly moved to a new consensus that "women are funny, but maybe only to other women" and, finally, to the position that "women are funny, and we shouldn't talk about this topic anymore" (p. 15). While Tomsett obviously objects to the claim that women are less funny than men, the notion that we have achieved gender equality and that paying attention to sexism in the comedy industry only reinforces and reinstalls past inequalities is flawed, and "displays a postfeminist attitude" (p. 17), as it assumes that "discussing gender is more problematic than sexism itself" (p. 17). The rise of a postfeminist sensibility, and the

complexification of the backlash against feminism, is addressed more fully in later chapters of the book.

In Chapter 1, “How did we get here? The gendered evolution of the UK comedy circuit”, Tomsett presents an alternative history of stand-up comedy in the UK from the perspective of the exclusion of women. She documents how the relative inclusion of women during the music hall era was challenged by the rise of the so-called working men’s clubs in the early 1960s, where women were typically not allowed as members. The working men’s clubs also saw the rise of traditional stand-up or “trad stand-up” (p. 33), which normalised sexist, racist, and homophobic jokes. As Tomsett elucidates, it was very difficult for women “to make a transition from the object or ‘butt of the joke’ to the role of performers” (p. 33). The rise of alternative comedy in the 1980s denormalised sexist comedic material and led to an increase in (still mostly white) women comics. However, women were still (and continue to be) underrepresented in comedy, and the 1990s saw the creation of the high-profile organisations Laughing Cows Comedy and Funny Women, which critically addressed inequalities in the sector and started organising women-only line-ups.

Chapter 2, “Where are we now? Challenges today for women comics”, documents the barriers encountered by women in stand-up comedy, from sexist audience responses (both during and after shows) to persisting economic inequalities. Women are still paid less for gigs than their male peers, and are offered non-paying open spots more frequently. An arguably more subtle occurrence of sexism appears in the poor introductions by compères, who often emphasise women’s gender and appearance. Even a seemingly innocuous introduction that identifies a comedian as a woman may activate stereotypes among the audience, and most women thus prefer gender-neutral introductions.

Chapter 3, “Women-only comedy spaces: Addressing inequality on the UK comedy circuit”, presents the results of a survey among visitors of the UK Women in Comedy Festival, and the follow-up interviews that Tomsett undertook. The results demonstrate that the festival offers women an important, alternative space outside of the mainstream to perform their work. This aligns with findings from the previous chapter, which demonstrates that efforts to increase accessibility for women in comedy (e.g., by the BBC) typically lead to the inclusion of a single, tokenised woman (frequently a celebrity or talk show host rather than a professional comedian) in a panel or a line-up. Tomsett thus agrees with the festival organisers that women-only line-ups are non-ideal, yet necessary, interventions in a world where full gender equality is not (yet) reached.

While social media’s growing influence on stand-up comedy careers justifies its inclusion in a book on the UK stand-up comedy industry, Chapter 4, “Online to URL: The impact of social media on stand-up comedy by women”, is the least convincing chapter of the book. This chapter broadly examines the affordances and limitations of social media platforms for comedic practice and comedy careers. The interview with male comedian David Schneider in particular deviates from the book’s focus on women and the challenges they encounter. The chapter’s conclusion that “digital space is often reflective of the wider societal context and thus contains specific gendered (and in the case of women of colour, racialised) hostility towards women” (p. 136) is important, yet would have benefitted from a more in-depth and focused discussion.

Chapter 5, by contrast, is one of the most fascinating chapters of the book. “Bodies on stage: Feminisms on the comedy circuit post-2013” deals with the style and content of stand-up comedy performances, and points to an overall shift from self-deprecating to “body-positive” humour (p. 137) as the preferred aesthetic mode among women comedians. Interestingly, Tomsett speculates that the decline of self-deprecating comedy might be related to the dominant, postfeminist emphasis on female empowerment and the rise of a so-called “confidence culture” (p. 145). Tomsett illustrates this shift to body-positive humour in an analysis of three comedians,

whose work present fascinating case studies of contemporary stand-up in the UK: Adrienne Truscott, Gráinne Maguire, and Lolly Adefope. In the final part of the chapter, Tomsett contrasts the feminist comedy of Bridget Christie to the postfeminist comedy of Luisa Omielan. Drawing on the useful typology of Limor Shifman and Daphna Lemish (2010; 2011), she argues that Omielan's postfeminist comedy does not enact a return to self-deprecating forms of humour, but is "self-objectifying in a way that moves beyond self-deprecation" (p. 171). What makes it decidedly postfeminist is its emphasis on the presumed biological differences between men and women, without encoding these differences in hierarchical terms.

Chapter 6, "An (un)equal and opposite reaction: The backlash and barriers facing feminist comedy", deals with the backlash against feminism. Tomsett first discusses the work of white cisgender male comedians who either openly attack women stand-up comedians (Andrew Lawrence) or hide behind an ironic comic persona while performing sexist humour (Dapper Laughs). While scholarship that is based in "critical comedy studies" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005) has scrutinised such types of reactionary humour before, Tomsett's discussion adds to the larger argument of the book. In the second, and more revealing, part of the chapter, Tomsett points to the difficulties that women comedians experience when they try to navigate between the live circuit and television. Taking the well-known and long-running panel show *Have I Got News for You* as a prime example, Tomsett concludes that, "[e]ven when women comedians are successful both commercially and critically in a live environment, it does not guarantee them an automatic, or indeed comparable, transition to a wider audience, especially when trying to integrate into existing or long-running shows" (p. 192).

Chapter 7, aptly titled "Comedy too", points to stand-up comedians' involvement in the sexually transgressive behaviours exposed by the #MeToo movement. The chapter usefully points to the wider context of the cultural industries, where freelance work and an informal climate create the conditions for an unsafe working environment. While Tomsett began her research a couple of years before #MeToo, and sexual harassment did not occur as a topic during her conversations with comedians, it is surprising that she only refers to American comedians such as Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby in her discussion of #MeToo and comedy, and does not mention British examples.

In some chapters, a tension emerges between Tomsett's feminist engagement with comedy and her willingness to acknowledge other perspectives. For example, when discussing the meritocratic idea(l) that quality matters more than gender in the assessment of comedy by audiences and industry professionals – a belief expressed by some of the interviewees – she remarks: "It is not possible in this context for an answer to these interview questions to be 'wrong'; however, there is a discrepancy here between the data that exists regarding the exclusive nature of the cultural industries and this respondent's perception" (p. 106). This suggests that the answer given by this interviewee is, well, wrong. Similarly, whereas Tomsett consistently and convincingly questions postfeminist sensibilities in stand-up comedy and the wider culture, there is one point at which she distances herself from such criticism and calls it an "unhelpful approach to contemporary feminism that attempts to pit different factions against each other rather than to push for collective action" (p. 172).

Overall, however, this is a lucidly written, critical, and powerful book that documents the historical exclusion of women from the UK comedy industry and connects it to the present cultural conjuncture, where feminist comedy and affirmative action coexist with continuing marginalisation and a complexified backlash against feminism. The book thereby also sets an example and offers inspiration to researchers who are willing to take up this important theme and perform research on stand-up comedy, feminism, and sexism in other national and cultural contexts, including those beyond the Anglophone world.

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