

# HUMOROUS DISCOURSE ON THE MIDDLE EAST: ATTITUDE TOWARDS REPRESENTATION

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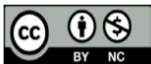
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Volume 8  
No. 1  
September 2023  
Page 741-753

## **Abstract:**

*Western perspective dominantly sees the Middle East in negative stereotypes. Many ways from many backgrounds start to criticize this perspective, including comedians utilizing comedy narration. This research aims at discovering how comedian represents Middle East and how the response manifests commenter's attitude, applying descriptive qualitative research as a logical consequence that the data are in forms of stand-up performance transcription uploaded to YouTube and its sample comments from its comment column. Process of identifying Middle East representation and commenter's attitude respectively utilizes Halliday's transitivity and Martin & White's appraisal system narrowed to attitude subsystem. The research results conclusions as follow. First, in terms of representation, the comedy narration provides an alternative platform to positively represent the Middle East, while second, commenter's responses in attitude perspective mostly support the positive representation by showing their positive affection within themselves, favorable judgment in entity perspective, and affirmative appreciation to the happening event. This research attempt to see stimulated attitude after a representation in a specific social issue appears, while other researches documented in this writing integrate both theories at the same hierarchy. The relation varies in perspective of the audience stimulated by the discourse and who affirmatively experienced the discourse. At this point, comedy may have potency as a platform to pleasantly criticize sensitive issues.*



**Keyword:** Stand-Up Comedy, Representation, Attitude

Cite this as: Pratama, F.N., Azizah, D.N. (2023). Humorous Discourse on The Middle East: Attitude towards Representation. English Journal Literacy Utama. <https://doi.org/10.33197/ejlitama.vol8.iss1.2023.2655.4585>

## **Article History:**

Received: 2 August 2023; Revised: 12 September 2023; Accepted: 19 September 2023

## **INTRODUCTION**

Western stereotype perspective sees the Middle East region as a land of terrorism. Lutz & Lutz (2015) sees that “many countries in the Middle East and North Africa have been at the center of this violence as the region has suffered from both domestic and international terrorist activities”. Then, Kelemen & Fergani (2020) at the similar way points out that “the Greater Middle East could be considered one of the most vulnerable regions for the future development of Islamic terrorism”. Mainstream news brings the idea of propaganda that the land only consists of radical idealism rooting to

a single belief. Some researches support this argument such as Alfin et al. (2018), Amiri et al. (2015), Kelemen & Fergani (2020), Bagchi & Paul (2018), Lutz & Lutz (2015), and Tin et al. (2022), showing that media discourse influences social cognition as illustrated by van Dijk (2003). This repetitive cycle of one sidedness information creates what Fairclough said as hidden power (2013, p. 14) converted into reproduced social power. This happens as mode of information comes from one-way communication such as television news. In addition, racial discourse itself occurs "...as there are strong social norms and repercussion" (Pérez, 2013), meaning that racial discourse hyperbolically appears as a sensitive thing to discuss.

As information technology shifting exponentially happens, discourse interaction changes as well, coming from one-sidedness changing into two-ways interaction. Not only does this technology matter, but the genre of content also evolves and is widely distributed. Stand-up comedy as a comedy genre (Wüster, 2006), for instance, spread globally as this kind of narrative humor genre comes from American culture (Mintz, 1985). YouTube gives all world citizens the opportunity to present their discursive ideas, as the same time as responding to other discourse, including Middle East representation. As the region, previously said, is negatively stereotyped, some comedians with broader points of view differently perceive it in a good way. Some may be mentioned as instance figures such as Russel Peter, Jeff Dunham, and Gabriel Iglesias. The last-mentioned figure pronounced his experience having performance in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia as comedic narration in his special show. He uniquely, in a positive way, represented the Middle East, certainly in comedy genre. Indeed, it naturally invites viewers response in their mind. Some might be called "silent hearers" who not explicitly bringing out their interpretation, but this research finds it interesting to focus on who directly responses to the comedic discourse. The responses in form of comment mostly contain commenter's "stance" on reacting to the discourse. Since this research considers this case in a discursive perspective, it is proportional to narrow the stance into how the respondent manifests their attitude towards the issue.

In psychological field, Espirito & Santo (2015), D'Urso & Symonds (2021), and Siswati (2019) conducted research regarding attitude towards representation. Both researches focus on how citizen attitude appears towards women representation. This framework is linguistically possible to adapt by utilizing functional perspective which gives methods on how to deal with discourse implying representation and attitude points of view. Whilst, in linguistics technical side, representation and attitude are respectively revealed by transitivity and appraisal system. Scholars such as Ignatieva (2019), Qasim et al. (2020), Faoziah & Yuwono (2020), and Goetze (2020) integrates those two principles to conduct their research in different area.

Accordingly, this research sets two issues, first on how comedian represents Middle East and second how the responses manifest commenter's attitude. These two questions lead to assumptions regarding Middle East image reconstruction and recontextualization. Theoretically speaking, this case implicates the way to see how discourse cycles, starting from how an issue is represented to the attitude impact towards that action from discourse consumers. In addition, cultural points of view may see this as an offer to see how sensitive issues are criticized in a lenient atmosphere.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Middle East Sociocultural**

With an explicit diction, Sørli et al., (2005) writes academic research entitled “Why is there so much conflict in the Middle East?” Not to support or amplify the statement, but this is an academic fact that diction “conflict” strictly attaches to Middle East representation (Grossman, Campo, Feitosa, & Salas, 2021). Along with that, researches from Culcasi (2010), Ediyono et al. (2020), Alfin et al. (2018), and more firstly describes outsider negative stigmas namely area of conflict, the center of terrorist activity, instability, violence, oppression of women, anti-Americanism, and fundamentalism. Petroleum also comes as a top of mind (Issawi, 1973; T. C. Jones, 2012). Worldwide citizens, especially western consume these insights with lack of confirmation opportunity, meaning that western citizens are not able to confirm the reliability because of lack of counter-discourse or confirmation content.

In contrary, (Rezaei, Huang, & Hung, 2023) did an observation on how tourists experience visiting the Middle East Results enjoyment and pride domination. It clearly opposes negative stigma of the region. Ladki et al. (Ladki, Abimanyu, & Kesserwan, 2020) even proposed improving idea relating to Middle East tourism potency. By this research, the Middle East comes to a positive image that it is a safe place to spend time. This may give two projections. first is that since the beginning, western media gives opposite projection of the Middle East, and second is that there are efforts from many stakeholders to recreate the Middle East portrayal, as a reaction to bold negative stereotype.

### **Stand-up Comedy**

Attardo (2001, p. 62) described stand-up comedy as a genre of comedy with an artificial comprehensive preparation such as scripting. the performers are generally called as comic. Brodie (2008) stated that stand-up comedy “...is a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking.” Aiming at funny output, “...comedians frequently breach norms of etiquette and polite public discourse” (Pérez, 2013). In the original state, stand-up comedy quickly developed as it is “...arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression” (Mintz, 1985). It is no surprise that the last argument supports a thesis relating to cause of widely fast influence around the world.

Stand-up comedy has attracted scholars to bring this genre into research area (Thomas, 2015). Perez (2013), Wuster (2006), Antoine (2016), and others even observe how stand-up comedy roles in fluctuation of racial issues. A couple decades before them, Mintz (1985) had proposed the idea of stand-up comedy mediating society and culture, meaning that in the original state, this form of comedy brings up unlimited issues to society surface and serve it as serious yet light discourse, whether rejecting or affirming. Along with argument of recent scholars, the goal is not to discuss or argue, but to make it fun. Arguing the discourse is not relevant during the comedy process, it is yet a fact that the issue appears. At least, this article frames stand-up comedy as a comedy narrative genre that brings discursive issues up to society surface.

Narrow to a selected comic, Gabriel Jesús Iglesias, well known with the name Gabriel Iglesias or “Fluffy”, is an American-Mexican stand-up comedian, starting his

career at 1997. He documents his selected performances uploaded in his personal YouTube channel named by his name, having 6.31 million subscribers by the time this writing is constructed.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

Discussing discourse linguistically leads to a well-known principal approach namely Systemic Functional Linguistics introduced by the founder Halliday (1994, 2014). He argued that when a discourse appears, this process consistently brings out three dimensions of 'metafunction'; textual, experiential, and interpersonal. Textual function discovers an idea that a discourse owns its message to deliver, experiential function brings the idea regarding to process going on, and interpersonal function describes the entity involved. Consequently, he needed to consider clause as the basic unit that contains a single comprehensive proposition.

### **Transitivity**

Advancing to experiential function, Halliday introduced Transitivity as a linguistic device to discover experiential phenomenon within a discourse. This theory technically focuses on process categorization contained within verbal phrase. The categorization process determines what kind of representation attached to the activity doer and target (if any), as called 'participant'. In this frame, Halliday also offers this experiential function that returns the value of participant representation. Also, it draws an imaginer regulation to analyze discourse that the process comes first, then the representation appears by itself. Therefore, representation identification appears when the process is clearly determined.

Focusing on the process and then each participant representation, Halliday (1994, 2014) (Halliday, 1994, 2014) categorized it into six patterns: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential process/clause. First, material process describes physical experience. A clause "I will punch you directly" literally projects physical activity in verb "punch". It shows the doer that moves his/her hand hard, and the target suffers impact from the hand movement. This returns the doer participant as "actor" and the impacted entity as "target".

Second, mental process describes mind and affection experience. A clause "I'm thinking of you" projects mind experience in verb "thinking". It shows mind process that projecting someone in his/her mind. This returns the doer participant as "senser" and object entity as "phenomenon". Third, relational process describes characteristic of an entity. A clause "she is beautiful" comprehensively shows that the entity "she" has a specific characteristic represented by "beautiful" linked by verb "is". the participant representation varies depending on sub types of this process.

Forth, behavioral process describes human nature activity. A clause "I had breakfast this morning" shows physiological activity that every human being considers it as basic needs. This returns the doer participant as "behave" and target phenomenon as "behavior". Fifth, verbal process describes process of delivering information. The clause "she tells her story" projects information movement from the doer specifically in verb "tells". This returns the doer participant as "sayer" and the information as "verbiage". Last, existential process describes existence of a being,

whether animate or inanimate. A clause “There is a car” projects an existence of a kind of transportation in a specific place linked by verb “is”. This returns the exist stuff as “existent”.

Utilizing computation technology, transitivity process and participant detection possibly appears to utilize a specific algorithm covered in a software called UAM Corpus Tool. This software is designed to support linguists in working on corpus-based research (Müller & Strube, 2006). It serves automatic detection for some linguistic features, such as part of speech and Hallidayan functional linguistics. This tool also provides a framework for manual annotation, such as Martin’s Appraisal system. The user only needs to manually annotate the text, and then the tool helps its user to calculate or search specific features on the data.

### **Appraisal System**

Later, Martin, a functionalist, develop a version on interpersonal function. He argues that language functions to evaluate phenomena. He introduced the concept with the label Appraisal System (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal System is a form of interpersonal meaning that is at the level of discursive semantics to construct a speaker's or writer's assessment of certain language phenomena through a close relationship with the speech function and negotiation systems. Martin & White (ibid.) revealed that this approach would “...complement the interactive turning focus of those two mood-based systems, highlighting the "personal" dimension of interpersonal meaning”. Therefore, this system responds to the development of an intersubjective perspective about evaluation and proposes complementary views of interpersonal meaning beyond grammar and clauses, such as mood and modality.

The Appraisal System compiles evaluations on three systems or domains semantics, namely: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. This multidimensional framework presents an organizational system of 'the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgments and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations. In other words, this linguistic research is concerned with how evaluation is expressed both implicitly and explicitly, as well as creating valuative prosodies in discourse which can be codified at the lexicogrammatical level.

The three semantic systems, one that governs the first Appraisal System is Attitude. Attitude is part of a three semantic system related to emotion (affect), which is related to positive and negative expressions originating from conscience or feelings; Ethics (judgment) is related to attitudes towards such behavior admire, criticize, praise or condemn; and aesthetics (appreciation), involving the evaluation of semiotic phenomena and basic phenomena based on how a subject is valued or not in a particular field.

All three of these systems encode feelings, but affect can be seen as the basic system in between judgment and appreciation as feelings that serve as propositions. In other words, judgment and appreciation can be interpreted as affect which officially developed to socialize individuals to some unnatural feelings - judgment as affect which is recontextualized to regulate behavior (what we should and should not do), and appreciation as affect which is recontextualized to regulate feelings (what things are worth).

## **METHOD**

As the research needs to deep dive to text-formed data, it is appropriate to utilize qualitative descriptive as Creswell & Creswell (2018, p. 297) mention that qualitative research describes text and image. Moleong (2011, p. 108) in a similar way mentions that story, photo, and artifact needs qualitative method to describe. In the same way, discourse is also a form of language, while comment (also speech) may form as discourse in written speaking or interactive writing (R. H. Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2015, p. 1).

This research considers two separated data as a union, stand-up comedy video (that later transcribed) and the comments as its response. Problem identification leads data selection to a specific topic. First, the stand-up show video from Gabriel Iglesias containing Middle East representation in the discourse and second, the direct comments as response formed in their attitude. A problem appears that there are loads of comments, thus an appropriate treatment must be taken. Considering this research guideline, this research uses proportional random sampling to select representative sample, as this method gives the whole population (comments) the same chance to be selected (Sugiyono, 2007).

This research selects the data from his video entitled “Fluffy Visits Saudi Arabia - Gabriel Iglesias (from Aloha Fluffy: Gabriel Iglesias Live from Hawaii)” as it explicitly comedic Middle East as place, nation, person, and its bad stereotype. This is a friction video from a whole performance called “Aloha Fluffy: Gabriel Iglesias Live from Hawaii”. Within ten years this video achieves more than 32 million views all over the world with more than 18,000 comments as its direct responses. Even, by the time of this research writing, still some new responses appear.

The problem statement guideline regulates how the research runs. First, Middle East representation needs to select appropriate data from original speech relating to Middle East people, entity, and place This procedure utilizes UAM Corpus Tool latest update (version 6.2) to automatically annotate the process and its participant representation. So technically, it is near to corpus research like has been conducted by Heriyono (2020). Following procedure is secondly analyzing attitude response in comment samples. This second procedure treating comments as discourse bases on Pratama’s thesis (2021). This relation also displays how discourse cycles that constructing representation may create attitude projection.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Transitivity**

The first research attempts to discover how the comedian (re)represents the Middle East. This research uses the word “(re)representation” since the performer firstly brought a negative stereotype as initial representation, then he recontextualized the phenomenon returning new representation. Focusing on data works, the piece performance may contain three story sections: departure, stand-up performance, and prince invitation. By working on based on that separation, here are the automated results of transitivity research.

CLAUSE-TYPE	Texts/departure.txt		Texts/stand-up performance.txt		Texts/prince invitation.txt	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
- material	22	55.0	52	43.3	18	58.1
- mental	3	7.5	25	20.8	5	16.1
- verbal	2	5.0	5	4.2	1	3.2
- relational	11	27.5	38	31.7	6	19.4
- modal	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
- existential	2	5.0	0	0.0	1	3.2
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Uncoded:	2	-	4	-	5	-

Table 1 Automated Transitivity Process Result

The table gives notice of transitivity process movement for each section. Material process dominates all the section followed by relational one in overview. This also returns the movement of participant representation value. This indication will be later on discussed and interpreted. Here are samples of dominating transitivity process identification.

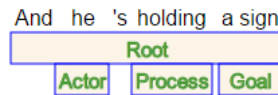


Figure 1 Material Process

This clause expresses material process in the verb “*is holding*” giving an image that the participant “*he*” represented as an actor literally do a physical move to the target a sign represented as goal. This must consider that the pronoun “*he*” in this substance refers to an Arabian man crew of Fluffy’s stand-up comedy performance.

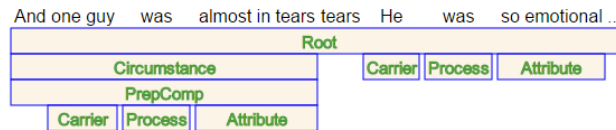


Figure 2 Relational Process

Next clause sample (focusing on the second clause) expresses relational process in the verb “*is*” that links an entity “*he*” represented as carrier with his attribute “*so emotional*”. Compared to the previous sample, this also must consider that the pronoun “*he*” in this substance refers to Arabian, but it refers to a single man stand-up comedy audience.

Referring to theoretical section, transitivity concept explains that every single process owns their representation. Accordingly, process types of proportion movement from each performance section shows indication of representation movement. This also needs to consider that the representation polarizes depending on its attached attribute.

At the beginning, which is the departure section, material process dominates since he comedically and in detail narrated the experience of him being escorted from the airport to his solo performance. Interestingly, he covered the material process in a specific context realized by relational process that most of attributes sound stereotypically negative to the Middle East. This forms impression that the Middle Eastern do literally physical activity in negative direction.

At the middle, which is stand-up comedy performance section, material process remains dominating but in a different plot. The process proportion moves down while relational process raises. This proportion indicates Fluffy starting to give more attributive description about his perspective changing. Explicitly mentioning a mainstream news media giving unfavorable representation (minutes 11:30) creates an impression that he as a Mexican-American, even American in general, consumes that insight turning out as their only perspective. His shows changed it and automatically transformed his version of the Middle East representation to be more positive.

At the last material, which is invitation to prince's palace section, material process also remains dominating. However, the research in this section necessarily considers context changing. Having material process domination discovers the story of Fluffy visiting a palace and doing a house tour. The context changing here is (re)representative "punch-line" as he declared himself that at this last section of his material, he came with wrong mentality which means having negative perspective on Middle East.

Accordingly, limited in this writing frame, the westerly discursive Middle East discussion shifts its substance. Comedy as a soft touch highlighting creates laugh to the direct audience coming to the special performance. However, this research does not reach interpretation of the laugh. what can be assured is the laugh always come after punchline, whatever the material is. On the other hand, considering this is a video uploaded to open-source platform, the responses in comment column will continuously appear as long as the video remains, and new viewers watch it. Led by problem statement, this research continues to how the virtual audience's response in attitude perspective.

### **Appraisal System: Attitude**

After previous representation movement identification, this section discovers the issue of response in form of comments from Fluffy's video viewers. From the findings, it constructs subsystem that most appear are judgment: veracity, affect: happiness, and appreciation: reaction. To make it more particular, here are some analyses of sample from attitude subsystem:

#### **Affect**

The semantic group of un/happiness is probably the first thought about emotions. This includes the feeling of being happy or sad and the ability to channel that emotion into triggers by liking or disliking them. From the data found, there are positive and negative polarities. This following data has positive polarity:

*"As a person from Saudi **I find you hilarious I'm happy you had a great experience** in our country because it's true a lot of people think we are terrorist but **I'm happy you visited our country**" (Data 1)*

The clauses "*I find you hilarious I'm happy you had a great experience*" and "*I'm happy you visited our country*" construct that the commenter shows fondness of something. In this context, the commenter was glad that the comedian had visited Saudi Arabia and had a great experience there. This subsystem can be drawn as *happiness* side since it has positive polarity.



Attitude	Affect				Judgment					Appreciation				Total	%	
										Reaction		Composition				
	Dis/Inclination	Un/Happiness	In/Security	Dis/Satisfaction	Normality	Capacity	Tenacity	Veracity	Property	Impact	Quality	Balance	Complexity			Valuation
Polarity																
+		11	4	2	7	5	1	14			7	1	1	1	5	79.4
-	1	2	1	1	1	4		1		1				2	1	20.6
Total	1	13	5	3	8	9	1	15	0	1	7	1	1	3	6	100
%	1.5	19.1	7.4	4.4	11.8	13.2	1.5	22.1	0	1.5	10.3	1.5	1.5	4.4	1	

Table 2 Appraisal System: Attitude Result

“As a person from Saudi **I find you hilarious I’m happy you had a great experience** in our country because it’s true a lot of people think we are terrorist but **I’m happy you visited our country**” (Data 1)

The clauses “*I find you hilarious I’m happy you had a great experience*” and “*I’m happy you visited our country*” construct that the commenter shows fondness of something. In this context, the commenter was glad that the comedian had visited Saudi Arabia and had a great experience there. This subsystem can be drawn as *happiness* side since it has positive polarity.

Besides, there is negative polarity of this subsystem, which constructed in the following comment:

“As a Saudi Lady, **didn’t like the Assassin’s joke....**” (Data 2)

The clause “*didn’t like the Assassin’s joke*” that conveyed in the comment section of Fluffy’s video shows that the commenter has the aversion disposition towards content of the video. Then, it can be described as *unhappiness* side because the comment has negative polarity.

### Judgment

Judgments are generally divided into judgments on ‘social esteem’ and judgments on ‘social sanction’. Sanctions are judged on “truthfulness” or how honest someone is. Veracity subsystem is included to social sanction. From the findings, all veracity data have positive polarity. This data below describes comment which has positive polarity of veracity subsystem:

*“Funny thing is people think that this true. As if these Arab countries Don’t treat people of other religious badly, of course they treated him nicely this is good international pr, probably even got paid too to say these nice things.”* (Data 3)

The clause “*funny thing is people think that this true*” constructs positive judgment towards a specific entity. At this point, the clause represents a positive image about the content that conveyed by Fluffy is real. The commenter has the same assumption as Fluffy has relating to treatment of Middle Eastern.

### **Appreciation**

The semantic term of appreciation is turning the meaning of building an appreciation or valuing something. Appreciation is divided into reaction, composition, and valuation. Each subsystem has its polarity, which are positive and negative polarities. The data below shows subsystem reaction that construe a positive polarity:

*“As a Jewish person, I thought that joke was **absolutely hilarious**”* (Data 4)

The phrase ‘*absolutely hilarious*’ shows the value given by one entity to a specific phenomenon. In this setting, the commenter gives their quality value to the content of Fluffy’s video.

Another proposition which construes negative polarity in appreciation subsystem:

*“Timestamp 7:40 sound much like what we know them under the name of Taliban. (The moral police) there to keep their culture **old school**.”* (Data 5)

The phrase ‘*old school*’ is a form of the way the commenter giving his valuation concerning one entity. In this section, the phrase above explains the commenter cynically satirized the rules of culture in Saudi Arabia.

The attitude research uniquely shows top three from different points of view. As explained that affect, judgment, and appreciation respectively focus on personal feeling, entities’ value, and phenomenon measurement, the top three come from each subsystem, and positively polarized. Narrowing point of view at dominating label and polarization, virtual audiences appear to support positive representation of the Middle East in all aspects of attitude: Middle East as experience, entity, and event. This must consider that these attitudes appear with context of comedically constructed representation. At least, in this research limitation in term of specific data, the positive representation is positively responded by also positive attitude.

Concerning at linguistics technical side, this research follows the possibility of integration between transitivity revealing representation and appraisal system revealing attitude from scholars such as Ignatieva (2019), Qasim et al. (2020), Faoziah & Yuwono (2020), and Goetze (2020). However, while those researches integrates both theories at the same hierarchy, this research try to adopt attitude towards representation framework with a consequence that representation comes first then it stimulates attitude.

In line with Ridder et al. (2021) in different academic fields, this research sees comedy being an effective platform to deliver sensitive issues in a pleasing method.

Humor “has the risk of not being taken seriously” while Middle East representation is probably heavy to discuss. These combinations result in a lightened storytelling of serious issues. Projected by its comments, a pleasing domination creates lightly positive yet serious responses. In addition, Perez (2013) expressed that scholars even strategically a way of many to reject racism is by explicitly expressing the stereotype discourse in “private conversations, discussions, and/or jokes, and continues as usual in intimate settings of family, friends, the workplace, and other closely knit social circles”. this procedure opens an opportunity to convert racial issues from sensitive discussion to even engaging conversation.

## CONCLUSION

Analyzing this phenomenon, which is recreating the Middle East representation is possibly done by utilizing comedy platform to create pleasant impressions from the audience. This also indicates that comedy may turn into an alternative platform to discuss sensitive phenomenon. The way comedy uniquely discusses a phenomenon differs from ordinary story telling or debate, Comedy delivers a phenomenon to produce laughter. As a specific and limited result in this research frame, the process of (re)representation that invites variative, yet positive domination comments spread a positive atmosphere about the Middle East. This article also offers a point of view for next research that linguistics is capable for describing and discovering comedy phenomenon, not only in term of language features, but also cultural issues.

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