



WOMEN AND THE WORLD OF STAND-UP COMEDY IN *THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL*

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Abstract: The series, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, makes a jump back in time and takes its viewers to 1958 America, booming with people from different races and classes co-existing, intoxicated by jazz, blues, nightclubs and a ravishing lifestyle, that everyone aspired for. Mrs. Maisel, the Jewish American protagonist of the series, is introduced as a much contended homemaker, mother and daughter, until one fine day her world starts collapsing. The series focuses on Mrs. Maisel (Midge/ Miriam) as she makes her way from being a wife, mother and daughter to become one of the first renowned female comedians, in a male dominated space. The series portrays Mrs. Maisel, the elite, upper class Jewish American who has a seemingly perfect life, marriage and family, deciding to achieve the most unthinkable, with the assistance of Susie Myerson, when her perfect world starts to fall apart.

When examined closely, a viewer would find various levels of subjugation/ oppression that women even from these affluent societal backgrounds faced, shrouded in the language of love, security and affection. The Jewish community is predominantly patriarchal and Mrs. Maisel, though unsure in the beginning, ventures away from the norm(al) and mediates through these structures of power and topples them time and again and finally forges her individualistic identity as a Jewish American woman comedian.

This paper aims to understand the various nuances that the series tries to bring into attention. The paper will focus on American Jewish identity, American Jewish household, the status of women in Jewish households, beauty standards, role of a woman in society, stand-up comedy as a profession, marriage and the quest for an identity.

Keywords: oppression, stand-up comedy, American Jewish, individualism, identity, marriage, society, role of a woman, female comedian.

Comedy as a genre has mostly been looked down upon for its inability to uphold serious and sensitive issues of the society. It is often perceived as lewd and insensitive in its content and presentation. But, this genre has come a long way since then and has proved the mainstream's perception wrong and has made its own space. This very quality of comedy being lewd and insensitive gave birth to the renowned stand up comedy. Stand-up comedy, as we understand is an entertaining piece, usually a solo, live performance that includes

spontaneous interaction with the audience. Taking its birth in Twain's comic lectures, it became in 20th century a thriving profession that most men wanted to have specifically in America.

The series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is set in the backdrop of early 20th century when America was thronged by different people across cultures in the hope of achieving the Great American dream. These people envisaged America as the land of hope and freedom. The series open with a throwback to the marriage of the Jewish protagonist, Midge Maisel to her husband Joel, and how since then her life has always revolved around marriage, making briskets and taking care of her children and her household at the Upper West side apartment. In the beginning, she was projected as a very happy and satisfied homemaker tending to the needs of her family. Joel, Midge's (Mariam) husband as well as Midge's parents were quite well-off Jews in the society. The society that is portrayed in the series is that of the upper, elite strata of the American society who had money, fame, and power and was equally respected and revered by all. In season one, Mrs. Maisel as Midge/ Mariam as known throughout the show, is overshadowed by her husband's ambitions or dreams. The only goal that she seemed to have was to make perfect briskets to bribe the manager at Gaslight, where rising comedians (men to be specific) would perform their gigs live in front of a room full of audience. Joel, though Vice-President of Tri Borough Plastics by the day, was desperately trying to make stand-up comedy as his full-time career. With the turn of events, Joel actually failed to make a career out of it and in desperation and hopelessness, cheated on his wife along with his assistant.

Unable to accept the infidelity, Midge decides to leave him for good and goes back to Gaslight on the same night and gives an impromptu performance which was loved and enjoyed by the audience. According to the creators, though the protagonist was not based on any real life character, Lenny Bruce, who goes on to become one of the most important influences in Midge's life, was surely real. Lenny Bruce and Midge met in the prison where both were charged with obscenity in public. In the early 20s, Bruce was gaining popularity by performing phenomenal gigs dealing on an array of subjects ranging from 'Jazz, moral philosophy, politics, patriotism, religion, law, race, abortion, drugs, the Klu Klax Klan and Jewishness'. This episode is not only significant because Midge for the first time in her life crosses the set boundaries of her life to do something extraordinary, but at the same time she meets Susie who would show her the way to become a renowned stand-up comedian from a homemaker.

From this episode onwards, the show goes on to break multiple dimensions at different levels which are socially normalised. The viewer by now has seen how obsessed Midge is with her looks and the shape of her body and how she has been taught since her childhood that the goal of her life was to please her husband and give birth to his kids and raise them. Midge's decision to separate from her husband thus comes as a shock to the entire family. Midge's father, Abe Weissman who is a patriarch and an old school, in the beginning fails to comprehend the need for separation for he believed Midge could just forgive and forget and move on with her life like nothing has ever happened. But, what the viewer fails to see through is, that, her father since that moment till the end turns out of be one of her greatest

allies, while her mother, Rose Weissman becomes the face of patriarchy who kept forcing Midge to get back, first with her husband and then after the divorce, continued to force her to marry and have a normal life, as it was expected from her as a woman. Paying no heed to anyone and taking charge of her own life, Midge begins to work in a departmental store as a store assistant by the day and as a stand-up comedian by the night. Stretching across 3 seasons, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* showcases how Midge and her manager Susie take on the world of comedy which was predominantly dominated by men. Season 1 of the show showcases Midge's self searching journey to find who she really was other than just being a wife, mother and a daughter.

Certain rules, code of conducts, expectations dominates a woman's life and that has been the norm since time immemorial. Such rules and norms are passed down generation after generation by women to other women and mostly these rules continue subjugate women at various fronts. While women rights and feminism might have been at the rise and were breaking ground rules, families across culture clutched tightly onto the age old norms to have stability in the society. Any deviation from the norm would mean to lose the social standing in the society. Marriage, amongst them surely stands out. A woman is usually perceived as someone who is to be taken care of, first by the father, secondly by her husband. An unmarried woman is seen as a threat, someone who is beyond the norm and thus unnatural or abnormal. These women are spoken against and other women are warned not to be like them. On the same lines, divorce is again perceived as a sin and Midge here commits that sin according to her family which was unacceptable. Midge's life changes right after she files a separation from her husband. The society starts seeing her in a completely different light. In one episode we find, how she was even barred from taking part in few competitions because she was no longer married even though she was being the sole champion of them for past consecutive years. Though life changes for Midge, Joel's social life hardly gets impacted because of his divorce.

The show breaks these stereotypes and creates an ever-lasting bond between Midge, a divorcee and Susie Myerson, her manager, unmarried, wears pants, talks about sex and other taboos openly and rules the world in her own terms. The show tries to problematise how women are conditioned to act or think in a particular pattern. This is evident, firstly, when Midge had to literally suppress her own talent of being a stand up comedian just to support her husband. Secondly, when Susie asks her to use a stage name, Midge fails to even come up with something for she had never been anything other than a bunch of identities that were bestowed on her for the relationships she shared with others. The show subverts all these norms and ends the season 1 finale with a bang, where we finally see Midge coming in terms with her own talent and accepting who she is and embraces her identity as Mrs. Maisel but no more as Joel's wife but as an individual, as a divorcee as woman with a voice. She says it loud and clear- My name is Mrs. Maisel.

In the beginning, because of the class differences, Midge also finds her manager Susie not trust worthy but it is only after overcoming all the doubts that she finds a confidant in Susie. Susie on the other hand, uses her contacts to get the best for Midge all times and even at

times keeping aside her own needs. The show is a groundbreaker for it not only makes a Jew divorcee its protagonist but also gives her a voice. While the society expects women to remain silent and obey, here in the man's world Mrs. Maisel was breaking every rule that was ever taught to a woman. Quickly with the help of Susie she learns the ways of the world of comedy and its functionalities. It did not take Midge time to learn how to use her disadvantage situation to her advantages. Stand-ups were always seen as lewd, obscene comments or dialogues between the presenter and the audience. It was always assumed that it required strength to present such personal topics in public which surely only men possessed. With time Midge learnt to use her personal life, her relationships, her identities and even her ex-husband as topics for her gigs. In one of her sets she calls herself- ...the famous mad divorcee of the upper West Side.

As a woman, she was even charged for obscenity in public for showing her breasts in her first performance; such was her demeanour. Though there were setbacks in the personal front, Midge kept soaring in her professional space. As the show progress, she not only carves an identity of her own but she becomes the mouthpiece of women and vocalises the oppression that women go through masked in the language of love and security. In one of the episodes she comments- "Comedy is fuelled by oppression, by the lack of power, by sadness and disappointment, by abandonment and humiliation. Now, who the hell does that describe more than women? Judging by those standards only women should be funny.)

While contemporary male stand- up comedians looked down upon her throughout her journey, Bruce showed and shared great friendship with her which actually helped her in believing what she was doing was right. The show also showcases how even her female contemporary, Sophie Lennon arrives as a threat to Midge and Susie's booming career. She not only threatens Midge but also tries to pitch in Susie to be her manager.

The relationships that the women share in this show, shows multiple dynamics. On one hand we have side characters like Midge's friends and her sister-in-law who have devoted their life to create an ideal home for their husbands and children. On the other hand, we see Midge's relationship with her mother which had its own ups and downs. While the mother becomes the face of tyranny many a times throughout the show, there are instances where we see her standing up for her own rights and also for her own self-esteem. Susie and Midge's relationship, on the contrary to all, was based on friendship, love and trust where both of them helped the other to grow.

The show uses the world of stand-up comedy where everyone shares a good laughter with a female Jew protagonist to challenge and question deep embedded rules and norms that shackles women and stops them from making themselves heard. The show subverts these norms, rules and also gender stereotypes and reinstates the fact that a woman can be what she wants to be at the end of the day. The show makes its allegiance very clear to its audience and this is resounded in one of the momentous comments that Midge makes- "Why do women have to pretend to be something that they're not? Why do we have to pretend to be stupid when we're not stupid? Why do we have to be helpless when we're not helpless? Why do we

have to pretend to be sorry when we have nothing to be sorry about? (The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, SE 1, Episode 7)

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