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Analysis

Feminine Humor in Full Bloom: The Importance of the Female Perspective in Comedy

Feminist writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous said, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal." Enter Rachel Bloom, co-creator and star of the television show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Instead of shying away from her femininity and the long-running fallacy that women cannot be funny, Bloom embraces feminine humor and proves the validity of female-written and female-centric stories. Feminine humor explores the female experience as it actually is, rather than relying on male perceptions of femininity, a dynamic that has pervaded the comedic canon until recent years. Feminine humor does not destroy or denounce male perspectives, but instead encourages female stories to receive the same universal celebration and acceptance as male stories. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* taps into the female psyche and explores topics such as sexuality, mental health, and the complexity of relationships. It shatters preconceived notions of femininity and showcases the need for female voices in the genre. Bloom crafts *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* to be both uniquely feminine and universally accessible, a tactic that not only bolsters female representation in comedy, but invites all audiences to continue exploring the many nuances of the human experience.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend is the story of Rebecca Bunch, played by Rachel Bloom, who abandons her successful New York City life to start over in West Covina, California, the hometown of her ex-boyfriend, Josh Chan. Historically, romantic comedies have similar expositions and progress into stories about taming sexualized, unconventional, and seemingly

uncanny women through romance and domesticity (Mundy and White 177). Although *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is initially set up under the guise of an overdone love story between a man and woman, it actually blossoms into the story of a woman's journey towards loving herself. Instead of fitting the romantic comedy mold or repeating over-played female tropes such as the damsel-in-distress, the girl-next-door, or the sexless spinster, Bloom crafts her lead heroine to be a full, complex person that reflects actual women, rather than "a series of zany clichés" (Bernstein). Just like season four's theme song says, "Meet Rebecca! She's too hard to summarize" (Bloom 2019), no woman can be summarized or reduced to a mere trope and no woman's journey is as simple as a formula for a movie. Rebecca Bunch is not funny because she represents a parody of women. She is funny because she embraces the female experience and recreates it with truth and conviction. She is funny because she does not and cannot fit into a predetermined role, a jarring reality that all human beings come to face at some point in their lives. Through Rebecca Bunch, Bloom advocates for the truthful portrayal of women and illuminates the innate hardships, heart, and hilarity of the female experience.

By avoiding stereotypical tropes and diving headfirst into feminine humor, Bloom is forced to combat the stigmas surrounding women and their socially contrived role in comedy. Comedy, like the female body, has been governed by men for generations and it is no secret. Favorites from across the decades such as Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, Johnny Carson, Sid Caesar, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Jerry Seinfeld, Robin Williams, Eddie Murphy and hundreds more have dominated the industry and controlled the narrative. While these performers have contributed to the evolution of comedy with their noteworthy work, their governance has also monopolized the genre and made it an inherently male space. Male voices and male stories have reigned supreme, which perpetuates the toxic and boring tradition that "the

man tells the jokes and the woman laughs at them" (Walker 141). Women that have sought to defy this notion and create their own space for comedy have been attacked and labeled as uptight feminists that can't take a joke (Walker 142). The irony is, feminist humor is not about slamming men and demanding control of the canon. It only seeks to reveal society's absurd expectations of women and prove that women themselves are not ridiculous, the standards of the society that oppresses them are ridiculous (Walker 123). It fights to put the female perspective in the narrative, rather than letting male voices falsely define the female experience.

Bloom takes this notion of feminist comedy and runs with it, transforming it into an even more nuanced lens of feminine humor. Bloom not only criticizes and combats society's absurd expectations of women, she does so while fully embracing every facet of the feminine experience: the good, the bad, and the ugly. She does not shy away from her femininity in order to fit the status quo. She indulges in her feminine identity and lets it inform her artistic voice and vision. She gives a voice to the modern woman, and she often does so through song.

Part of what makes *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* so special is the way it uses music to reveal the inner lives of characters and provide palatable social critiques. As revealed to her best friend Paula at the end of the series, Rebecca often imagines moments of her life as musical numbers. Through song, Bloom brilliantly crafts characters, their relationships to one another, and their relationships to the world. She also uses songs to include social and even political messages that keep audiences in check regarding the greater significance of her show and the things it seeks to destigmatize. The use of song is also a comedic device that makes moments of absurdity more acceptable to an array of audiences. While some of the songs may touch on experiences specific to smaller groups, music is a universal language and it invites all types of audiences to listen together.

Through the show's use of music, audiences can understand the mental workings of the characters in a more nuanced way. Rebecca's character, in particular, is fleshed out through musical numbers. Bloom uses these songs to expose Rebecca's humanity and comment on her worldview. She does not shy away from any of the real and human impulses of her character, and the brutal honesty of her songs leads to the creation of comedy. From the very beginning of the series, Bloom fearlessly embraces the psychology of her heroine and gives her a dramatic array of songs that showcase her position in the world.

The first episode boldly gives audiences "The Sexy Getting Ready Song," the tune Rebecca imagines while getting ready to go to a party. Throughout the song, Rebecca rocks a large set of Spanx and can be seen "primpin' and pluckin'," "brushin' and rubbin'," "fluffin' and flouncin'," and "gigglin' and layin'" (Bloom 2016). Then, rapper Nipsey Hussle enters the number to provide a token misogynist rap about the female body. After looking at Rebecca as she gets ready, he cuts the rap off and says, "God, what… this is how you get ready? This is some… this is horrifying, like a scary movie or something. Like some nasty-ass patriarchal bullshit. You know what? I gotta go apologize to some bitches. I'm forever changed after what I've just seen" (Bloom 2016). This song is brilliant because it creates a scenario that is universally funny while fully embracing a woman's point of view. "The Sexy Getting Ready Song" is not afraid to point out the absurd rituals women go through in order to meet society's lofty standards of beauty. The song provides a brutally honest portrayal of a feminine struggle but turns it into both a moment for laughter and a moment for reflection.

Female sexuality is a theme Bloom fervently explores and embraces throughout the series. Though female sexuality is largely exploited in media by male gaze, Bloom reclaims the female body and presents it a natural and comedic way. She respects and honors the female

sexual experience without glamorizing it. Songs such as “Period Sex,” “Sex with a Stranger,” “Heavy Boobs,” “Horny Angry Tango,” and the numerous “Vagina Metaphor” songs use comedy to provide more realistic portrayals of the female body and female sexual experience. Because sex and sexuality are provocative topics that are typically seen as taboo, this material is popular with audiences (Gilbert 74), which works in Bloom’s favor because she is still able to attract a crowd while tailoring the material to showcase an honest and funny female perspective. There is a universal fascination with sex, particularly with the mysteries of female sexuality. Bloom’s take on female sexuality creates products that are universally enjoyable. Women can relate specifically to scenarios depicted in her songs while others with various sexual identities can laugh along and learn something.

Another hot topic Bloom embraces throughout *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is mental health. The show’s title, referred to as a “sexist term” ironically in the first season’s theme song (Bloom 2016), becomes a launching pad for Rebecca Bunch’s mental health journey across the series. “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” is a term frequently assigned to women after failed romantic relationships for any number of reasons. Bloom strategically chose this charged title to comment on the way women are regarded for having natural emotional responses and for exhibiting signs of mental illness. This stigma surrounding the emotionality of women can be traced back to the catch-all diagnosis of “female hysteria” that has continued to shape the way women are perceived for experiencing emotions and grappling with changes in mental health (Lines).

Bloom, who has faced her own battles with mental health, does not let *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* tread lightly when dealing with its characters’ psychological experiences. Because the show, at its core, is about Rebecca’s inner journey, it places a large emphasis on destigmatizing mental illness. In order to show the humanity of mental illness, Bloom uses a blend of comedy

and pathos. Humor is a natural defense and coping mechanism, so it allows Bloom to explore heavier and more sensitive material while keeping it humane.

After an emotional spiral that results in a suicide attempt, Rebecca finally comes face to face with her greater mental problems. Though the show feels far more tragic than comedic during such heavy scenes, these are the deep, emotional moments that make the comedic moments of the show so poignant. The greatest comedies find the sweet spot between heartbreak and hilarity, which is where the humanity lies. It is essential that Rebecca is the character to tell this story because she serves as an icon for both normalizing mental health and calling attention to it. Mental illness is as real to humans as laughter, and it should not be a reason for isolating or labeling others. At the same time, while it is okay to laugh through the pain, mental illness itself is not a joke and deserves to be treated respectfully and with compassion. Is throwing out the term "crazy ex-girlfriend" so funny now? Bloom takes ownership of the term "crazy" for herself and for all women who have received such a label. In doing so, she illuminates the difference between shaming and using laughter as medicine.

Because *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* taps into characters' psyches through song, the show includes many musical numbers that touch on mental health. Much of the beginning of the series paints Josh Chan as a chipper, naïve, optimist, but the song "Thought Bubbles" from season two episode five reveals that even Josh has moments where he is afraid to be alone with his thoughts (Bloom 2017). Though it is sung with an upbeat, Jason Mraz style and is filled with comedic lines, the song still touches on an important and real struggle. Season three's edgy theme song "You Do/You Don't Want to be Crazy" shows Rebecca in the midst of facing her mental instability as she grapples with the label "crazy" and works towards finding herself (Bloom 2018). Rebecca's big song "A Diagnosis" from season three, episode six depicts Rebecca post-

suicide attempt as she joyfully heads to her doctor to receive a new diagnosis (Bloom 2018). In true musical theatre fashion, the song is filled with hope, wonder, and, of course, comedy. The number reveals Rebecca's excitement to receive a new identifier, as she hopes this label will be accurate and reveal her place in the world. Of course, Bloom uses this song to drive home the larger sentiment that no single label is enough to encompass anyone. "Fit Hot Guys Have Problems Too" may not reach as far as mental illness, but it still reiterates the notion that coping with emotions is a real, human experience and is not limited to women (Bloom 2018), even though it is a story that is more often told by or associated with women. Finally, the song "Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal," performed as though it were straight out of the movie *La La Land,* aims to normalize the responsible use of medication (Bloom 2019). Bloom's take on mental health is definitely crafted through a feminine lens because her focus is primarily on how the stigmas impact women, but she still includes male narratives in her story because mental illness is not gender-specific.

Although mental illness can impact anyone and everyone, women deserve to take charge in destigmatizing it because they are largely associated with its negative implications. So much of masculine comedy is defined by critiquing women, whether it be targeting the crazy ex, the nagging wife, or the iron-fist feminist. Rather than being viewed as complex people with vast emotional processes, women get scrutinized for having emotional experiences, and these emotional episodes are often connected to mental health. Comedy is the perfect medium for approaching mental health issues because it turns it into a palatable topic brimming with humanity. Bloom's use of feminine comedy while approaching mental health reminds women that they are not alone in their experiences and empowers them to reclaim their emotions from the harsh labels applied by society.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend also tackles the complexity of relationships and the difficulty in connecting with others while trying to identify a sense of self. Through Rebecca, Bloom shows that a person can easily become a product of their relationships with others or their relationship with society if they do not have a grasp on their own identity. Women are particularly susceptible to this group-think phenomenon because of the immense societal pressures placed on them, but everyone is influenced, in some way, by the relationships in their lives. Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory argues that a social identity is "a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s)" (McLeod). Human beings like to believe that they are special and unique, but Bloom comically calls attention to the impressionability of people through her characters.

In season one, episode ten, Rebecca follows Josh to volunteer at a camp for teenagers where she hopes she and Josh can bond and share a romantic moment. A group of teenage girls from the camp give Rebecca a make-over to the song, "Put Yourself First." At first, the song seems to be about encouraging women to embrace their identities and love themselves before they worry about someone else loving them, but it quickly proves to promote an opposite message. The song repeats, "put yourself first for him," in between verses filled with suggestions on how to be more appealing in order to attract men (Bloom 2016). The irony of the song is hilarious and the message is not lost. It even relates back to "The Sexy Getting Ready Song" and the notion that women must conform to ridiculous standards to be embraced. If women subscribe to their socially contrived identity, they must meet certain criteria. By conforming to social standards, women set off a chain reaction of complacency and abandon individuality. Bloom makes fun of this while at the same time highlighting how common it is for people to turn to others when searching for a sense of self.

"We'll Never Have Problems Again" sung by Josh and Rebecca in season two, episode ten, is another example of how individuals cling to relationships with others to form a sense of self. For the first two seasons of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,* Rebecca only does things in order to bring herself closer to Josh. She uproots her life, hurts people that care about her, and acts obsessively and impulsively all because she does not know who she is without him. When they do get together, they declare, "We'll never have problems again!" (Bloom 2017). This hilarious and clearly satirical song points out the absurdity of looking to someone else to find yourself. Later in the song they even sing, "Some say we're all repeating patterns taught by our parents, but that's just…" followed by scoffing and muffled disagreements (Bloom 2017). With a little bit of a Nature v. Nurture shout-out, Bloom once again brings forth the challenges of separating the individual from their world.

Rebecca's dramatic lament to Josh, "After Everything You Made Me Do (That You Didn't Ask For)," sung after he leaves her at their wedding, begins to show Rebecca's evolution towards a sense of self. In a hilarious and contradictory manner, the song both pushes blame on Josh and gives Rebecca ownership of her actions (Bloom 2018). It signifies the beginning of her transition into a woman that can look past the influence of others and make her own decisions. Bloom lets this song be a turning point in the series, where any hope for a romantic comedy-style reconciliation is lost. The song lays out each and every ridiculous thing Rebecca did in her quest to be with Josh, from clogging her garbage disposal to paying $10,000 to get their wedding moved to a closer date (Bloom 2018). The list gets pretty hilarious and horrendous, so why does the audience still root for Rebecca? Her antics are forgiven, and even encouraged, because her realness is sympathetic and almost vulnerable. Each failure and success encountered helps her

character continue to evolve and audiences cannot wait to see what other trouble she gets into, knowing that with each antic, she somehow manages to grow.

In the final episode, Rebecca sings her eleven o'clock number, literally titled "Eleven O'clock," where she asks with frustration, "How do I still not know myself after all I've been through?" (Bloom 2019). At this point in the series, she has three perfectly eligible men vying for her affections and she is left to choose. After four seasons of needing to be defined by her relationships, Rebecca chooses to be alone. Bloom socks it to society by taking this "crazy ex-girlfriend," a sum of labels given to her by others, and lets her stand alone as an independent woman. What average audiences would expect to end as a heteronormative love story actually ends at the beginning of a woman's journey towards discovering herself. It completely shatters the mold for romantic comedies and proves that a woman does not need anyone to be strong, intelligent, beautiful, or funny.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend tracks Rebecca Bunch's evolution from "just a girl in love" (Bloom 2017) to a woman "too hard to summarize" (Bloom 2019). Throughout the journey, Rachel Bloom embraces feminine humor and feminist ideals in order to craft a progressive story that gives women a voice in comedy and across modern media. Bloom shatters overplayed tropes and archetypes by crafting an eclectic cast that reflects actual flawed people and not cookie-cutter characters. She uses Rebecca's story for honest explorations of female sexuality, mental health, relationships, and identity. She also uses music as a vehicle for her biting satire and as a medium to connect with a broader audience. Although Bloom embraces the need for a female narrative, she crafts *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* with many universal themes in mind to keep it relevant for all types of people. Sher relies on comedy to make her progressive messages palatable rather than preachy. Bloom's commitment to recreating honest femininity on-screen while dispelling the

notion that women cannot be funny is a triumph for women everywhere. Rachel Bloom and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* are icons of feminine humor and are perfect examples of how to revolutionize the comedic canon and appreciate female stories.

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