

Morality Plays - Entertainers Draw the Line

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Have you noticed: moral issues are no longer the domain of clerics and philosophers? Not politicians either.

Our ethics, however capricious they’ve become, evolve largely from the mega entertainment industry. Authors and athletes, singers and poet-rappers, television hosts and comedians, even though they sometimes do so unwittingly, guide our choices, consequently our values as well. Today’s A-list stars —oh, how we adore them—they are who pronounce what’s good and right, bad and wrong. At least we endow them with that power. Even when they don’t intend their statements to be a moral judgement, even after they’ve moved beyond whatever they’re charged with.

Columnist [Paul Street](#), addressing the weakening role of journalism, hints at the moral implications of that slide: “In the name of political neutrality”, he writes, “‘the news’ often produces *moral* (my emphasis) and intellectual paralysis in its consumers...”.

I agree that morality can be allied with reason; but not always.

So, what do we do in the vacuum created by this paralysis? Well, it’s readily at hand: we simply scroll down the website, click to alternate channels, slide to another app. Thereby we effortlessly find ourselves enveloped by dazzling graphics, stunning talent and, if we choose, fiery one-liner opinions. Though these may not stir us intellectually, they can make us feel woke or hip, soothed or aggrieved, offended or assuaged—somehow engaged.

Star power over our cultural values is imbibed effortlessly. It leaps to the forefront when a perceived transgression arouses someone’s anger. Take for example the attacks against authors J.K. Rowling and Germaine Greer by feminist and transgender activists. Or the assaults on comedian Kevin Hart when his early homophobic remarks came to light. Either they uttered something contemptible that conflicts with the moral standard of a newly potent interest group. Or their influence is so highly valued they’re obliged to endorse the new morality.

Colin Kaepernick’s taking-the-knee at a highly symbolic public event is of a somewhat different order. One wonders if the football star envisaged the fierce reaction to his simple

but loaded gesture. Having chosen to make his statement about police brutality against African Americans during the U.S. national anthem in front of crowds and cameras, his action generated intense reactions —public condemnation, termination of a lucrative contract, banishment from the National Football League.

We have yet to see how J.K. Rowling will emerge from cultural assassination, even [after a heartfelt defense](#) of her opinion on gender identity. [Germaine Greer, a leading feminist voice](#) who starting in the 1960s helped define a new ethic for women, is disinvited from prestigious events and delisted for an honorary degree for her recalcitrance.

Perhaps bolstered by the power of the BLM movement, [Nike's choice of Kaepernick as the centerpiece](#) of its “just do it” social justice campaign and the man’s personal mettle, his immoral kneeling led to a stunning turnaround. Embraced by sports figures nationwide, “taking-the-knee” became a symbol of solidarity in the struggle for justice, and a [model marketing tool](#). Many citizens like me were unfamiliar with Kaepernick-the-quarterback. After witnessing his unjust treatment and his resolve, hearing him speak, we recognize him as a moral leader.

Kaepernick has moved to another stage in his mission. With filmmaker Ava Duvernay, he [co-directs and narrates a new film series](#). “Colin in Black and White” focuses on Kaepernick’s childhood. Though dramatization of young Colin’s encounters with racism is only part of the film’s message. Regularly throughout the story Kaepernick enters the frame to speak directly to viewers about American racism, referencing case histories along with historical and sociological studies. The film series thus becomes a moral lesson on justice and the Black American experience.

Opprobrium of individuals in the public eye is often harsh. Judgements go beyond mere criticism. Beyond a warning. You’re fired, cancelled, banished, de-A-listed. J.K. Rowling’s refusal to join the ‘trend’ in support of transgender identities is unacceptable. Like Greer and others, because she’s a highly-regarded celebrity she deserves censure. And the label “TERF”, trans-exclusionary radical feminist. An “illiberal left” has also entered culture war terminology.

Support for some international causes is morally weighted, too. On the one hand, women’s moral rights were offered as justification for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. By contrast, non-violent programs such as Boycott Divestment and Sanctions in support of Palestinian rights are [attacked as immoral](#); [teachers who dare to endorse Palestinian](#) statehood are expelled. (Compare to the warm reception of [George Clooney’s advocacy of South Sudan’s](#) secession.)

Was it always so dangerous to be not only successful but a celebrity? Stardom brings huge influence. As such, spurning a new status quo may find you out in the cold.

But the temptation for glory and wealth is double-edged. Our A-listers often exploit their own luminary status to define values for their fans. Trendsetting in food and health, clothing and language is second tier; now it’s motherhood—e.g. [Serena Williams](#) on birthing and athletic prowess- sexual license, ostentation and, not unreasonably, political advocacy.

An example of explicit moral messages originating from the liberal left is the HBO show hosted by John Oliver. (Would Noam Chomsky include Oliver as one of his morally responsible intellectuals?) Oliver leaves little doubt about his ethical views on public issues.

The format of [“Last Week Tonight”](#), a plate of satire that combines convincing research, smart graphics and provocative narration rendered in his working-class British accent, has won him an enormous following. With disciples quoting Oliver adopting some of his moral indignation; understandable since Oliver himself is hugely pompous and absolutely, f*cking unarguable. (Although one wonders if his lectures translate into real social action.)

Fox News’ Tucker Carlson is Oliver’s political nemesis. Although Carlson wins without satire, without intellectual airs, too. Isn’t he as much a moralist as Oliver, his statements imbibed as uncritically, repeated as righteously?

Celebrities surely realize they’re not simply entertaining, not only informing. They’re advocating.



Some, like the daringly brilliant Dave Chappelle, seem to welcome a role in this volatile moral game. From his early productions on Comedy Central, Chappelle’s routines flirted with the boundaries of our social code. His edginess and irreverence do more than make us laugh; they make us squirm. He has enjoyed a moral license on a par with fellow comic-writer-actor Larry David. Yet, Chappelle doesn’t rely on funniness alone; he strategically interrupts his hooting audience with a moral tale. Riding on a hilarious, shocking punchline, he slips in a gentle lecture or a sobering anecdote to remind us of the reality behind life’s funny stuff.

Chappelle returns to the stage with a [Netflix series](#) that finds him at the center of a moral storm:– that concerning transgender rights. Eager to engage his attackers, he points to *their* intolerance. It’s more than a free speech issue, Chappelle explains: “My problem has never been with transgender people. My problem has always been with the dialogue *about* transgender.

In a shrewd shift to satire, he emphasizes *the* moral position underlying his work: “I feel these things should not be discussed in front of Blacks; it’s f*cking insulting about how these (transgender) people feel inside. Since when has America ever given a f*ck how any of *us* feels inside?”

Who can argue with that?

To his transgender critics, Chappelle confesses: “...you have to understand that as a policy, I never feel bad about anything I say up here.... I do understand that life is hard and those types of choices do not disqualify you from a life of dignity, happiness and safety.” Then comes his riposte: “Why is it easier for [Caitlyn Jenner](#) to change his sex than for Cassius Clay to change his name?” Which returns us to the overriding moral issue for Chappelle —

injustice in the Black American experience.

Not everyone gets this. [The Economist](#)'s sympathetic review of transphobia charges against the comedian concludes a possible moral theme underlying Chappelle's mission—that "everyone is flawed and everyone should be accepted". Not quite.

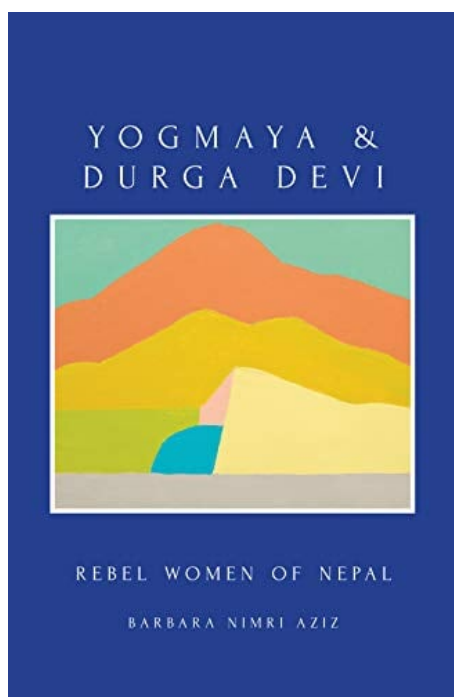
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Barbara Nimri Aziz whose anthropological research has focused on the peoples of the Himalayas is the author of the newly published ["Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal"](#), available on Amazon.

She is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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["Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal"](#)

By Barbara Nimri Aziz

A century ago Yogmaya and Durga Devi, two women champions of justice, emerged from a remote corner of rural Nepal to offer solutions to their nation's social and political ills. Then they were forgotten.

Years after their demise, in 1980 veteran anthropologist Barbara Nimri Aziz first uncovered their suppressed histories in her comprehensive and accessible biographies. Revelations from her decade of research led to the resurrection of these women and their entry into

contemporary Nepali consciousness.

This book captures the daring political campaigns of these rebel women; at the same time it asks us to acknowledge their impact on contemporary feminist thinking. Like many revolutionaries who were vilified in their lifetimes, we learn about the true nature of these leaders' intelligence, sacrifices, and vision during an era of social and economic oppression in this part of Asia.

After Nepal moved from absolute monarchy to a fledgling democracy and history re-evaluated these pioneers, Dr. Aziz explores their legacies in this book.

Psychologically provocative and astonishingly moving, "Yogmaya and Durga Devi" is a seminal contribution to women's history.

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