

Psychodynamics of 'Wifey' Jokes

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Abstract

In the technological world, when everyone is addicted to social networking sites like face book and instant messaging services like whatsapp, jokes are continuously being invented and circulated to evoke laughter. Nevertheless, these jokes are hardly innocent but highly political. A society, which is basically patriarchal, uses the tool of humour to stabilize the prevailing inequality. While it is irrelevant to go in search of an individual author of these jokes, it definitely hints at 'collective agents'. In Indian society, where marriage becomes an ideological apparatus, social networking sites serve the purpose of educating women on how to be an 'ideal' wife. The paper seeks to analyse the psychodynamics of these anti- wives jokes through the theories put forward by psychoanalysts like Freud, Lacan, Zizek and Adam Jukes.

Keywords: Superiority, Symbolic stage, Pre lingual stage, unconscious, Fantasy, Desire, Real, Ideology.

In his introduction to Zizek's Jokes, Mortensen mentions a popular myth of the late Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. There was a department of the secret police whose duty was to invent and circulate political jokes against the regime since they believed that such jokes were effective in curing the frustration of the people. Through this, he calls into attention the crucial feature of jokes, their anonymity.

The idea that there has to be an author of a joke is properly paranoiac: it means that there has to be an "Other of the Other," of the anonymous symbolic order, as if the very unfathomable contingent generative power of language has to be personalized, located into an agent who controls it and secretly pulls the strings (Mortensen, 2014).

Nevertheless, jokes are hardly innocent but carry strong political undertones in them designed to promote the interests of particular social groups. There has to be agents to pull the string as the popular myth of the Communist regime implies. A racist society uses this tool to reinforce the superiority of one's race, a casteist society to discriminate people on the basis of

caste and a patriarchal society to fortify the superiority of men. The causes for the dissemination of these kinds of jokes may be social, political or psychological. The class or group being attacked is degraded/ denigrated by the so called 'superior' category to express their antagonism against the target group. This is generally termed as disparagement humour: a type of humour that seeks to evoke laughter by belittling others. In the technological world, when everyone is resorted to using social networking sites and instant messaging services like whatsapp, jokes are continuously being invented and circulated to safeguard the interests of the dominant group.

When special focus is given to gender related humour, Chapman and Gadfield(Palmer, 2004) analysed that sexual humour excited men where the traditional concept of masculinity was reinforced and their superiority remained unquestionable. Palmer in his work, *Taking Humour Seriously* puts forward the studies conducted by theorists on the impact of humour upon men and women.

Cantor (1976) found that both men and women prefer the butt of a joke to be female, regardless of the theme of the joke. This finding is consistent with a study by Zillman and Stocking(1976) which found that women prefer self- disparaging humour, regardless of whether the self-mocker is male or female, whereas men prefer humour that mocks somebody else, especially when the other is female; men also dislike self-disparagement by a female, perhaps on the ground that they so much like mockery of female others that self-disparagement by a female takes the fun out of the situation for them (Palmer, 2004).

Taking the examples of social networking sites like Face book or instant messaging services like Whatsapp, it could be deduced that sexist jokes, asserting male superiority are widely being circulated not by men alone but women too. It could also be discerned that most of the women remain passive when they are misrepresented in these jokes while men vehemently defend themselves if they are the targets. Jokes serve as mere jokes when they are against women folk but become political in the case of men.

Women are usually represented in two ways in popular culture; either as an 'angel' or as a 'demon'. The form of sexist jokes currently in vogue are the anti- wives jokes where wives are represented not as an angel but a monster and husbands as meek and submissive. When marriage as an institution becomes obsolete in the postmodern world, Kerala society is in search for the 'ideal' of a wife. The etymological meaning of the Malayalam words 'bharya' for wife is one who is destined to be ruled and 'bharthavu' is one who is born to rule and Kerala society is indisputably patriarchal and conservative in its belief. Still, the tone entrenched in all these popular jokes is that the husband is unhappy while his wife is perfectly happy in a marriage. Wives are (mis)represented as dominating and husbands as passive victims of the superior role played by women. Irony is the device employed in these jokes to indirectly mock women and cast them in a negative role. To cite an example of a Malayalam 'joke': In a grammar class, the teacher asked the difference between two sentences:

Sentence number 1: He washes the utensils

Sentence number 2: Utensils are being washed by him.

The student immediately replies that in the first sentence, he is not married while in the second case he is (Kattachaligal, 2017) It underscores the gender inequality prevalent in a marital relationship where washing utensils is the duty of a wife and she ceases to be an 'ideal wife' when it is performed by her husband no matter whether its foundation is love or enforcement. Looking into the grammar of the sentences, the first sentence is in the active voice, the second is passive. An inversion of reality takes place where the husband is passivized by the wife. Here is an instance of another joke from a social networking site where the husband is represented as one who finally decides to break the 'silence and passivity' that his partner has imposed upon him:

At last a Husband has taken the time to write down this all finally. We always hear "the rules" from the Wife's side. Now here are the rules from the male side:

These are our rules! Please note: these are all numbered "1" ON PURPOSE!

1. Husbands ARE not mind readers

1. Shopping is NOT a sport. And no, we are never going to think of it that way

1. Crying is blackmail...

1. Whenever possible, Please say whatever you have to say during commercials.

...

1. Thank you for reading this. Yes, I know, I have to sleep on the couch tonight; But did you know men really don't mind that? It's like camping

Share this post as much as you can, for the 'Rights' of all the husbands! (Shevaldyshev, 2017).

The Communist regime, according to the popular myth, was conscious of jokes' positive stabilizing function. A closer reading of the purpose of these kinds of jokes clearly hints at their motive which is two pronged. First, by representing women as domineering, these jokes indirectly educate women on 'how not to' behave rather than 'how to' by direct means. Second, these are akin to those political jokes perpetrated against the communist regime by their secret police to ease the frustration of the people. In this sense, the false representation of men as passive victims of marriage tabilizes/ hides the frustration of the real victims.

Modern psychoanalytic theory of Freud makes women psychologically inferior through ideological rationalization with concepts like 'penis- envy' and 'castration complex'. It makes women subordinate to men. In a phallogentric world, the set of values imbibed by women or rather imposed upon them is essentially patriarchal. The psychological superiority experienced by men makes them mock women who they feel are always inferior to them by this lack. To further reclaim their superiority, disparagement humours are used against wives in general where they are portrayed as domineering and victimizing their partners, a situation contradictory to the existing one as in the examples given above. When psychology defines male ego and self-identification of men to a greater extent, the identity of a woman remains undefined, 'a dark continent' in Freud's coinage.

These jokes analysed from a different perspective, reveals the psyche of a phallogentric society. Jokes like dreams, according to Freud, are the gateways to the

unconscious which serve the purpose of imparting pleasure. For him, there are two types of jokes; the innocent and the tendentious. The tendentious jokes that serve the purpose of the unconscious have two purposes that of being hostile and obscene. In the contemporary society, where women are gaining more equality and success, the superiority experienced by men hitherto is slowly getting eroded away. The fear of losing this superiority is being repressed in the unconscious of men, to say, the 'collective unconscious' of a patriarchal society which gets expressed through jokes. Many of the differences between men and women in Osho's view are as a result of years of conditioning. The primary difference he points out is women's capability to produce life which has paved way to the feeling of inferiority in men and has consequently made them dominate women. The psychology of women has been corrupted by reducing her to a secondary position. Adler's complex theory proposes that the striving for superiority never ends. 'We should not be astonished if in the cases where we see an inferiority [feeling] complex we find a superiority complex more or less hidden. On the other hand, if we inquire into a superiority complex and study its continuity, we can always find a more or less hidden inferiority [feeling] complex'. (Adler, 2013).

An attention seeking fact related to the sexist jokes disseminated in whatsapp is that while wives are made a laughing stock, mothers are not. Ours is a society that glorifies motherhood; mother is self while wife is the 'other'. In the pre lingual stage, a child essentially finds no difference between itself and the mother. Upon its entrance into the symbolic stage, the child enters into society and social relations. He comprehends that the mother is the 'other' he can desire upon but cannot be achieved. Thus desire remains a 'lack' which is repressed. As Elizabeth Wright puts it, 'language imposes a chain of signifiers along which the ego must move while the unconscious remains in search of the object it has lost' (Nayar, 2010). It is said that a man searches his mother in wife particularly in a culture that glorifies motherhood. But from Lacanian perspective, all signifiers gesture at the lack. A wife can never be a mother because she is a wife, a lover. When men could not find his mother in his wife, an antagonistic attitude develops in him towards the 'other' which is not a part of him. The Symbolic order is a threshold to culture and one's relationship with wife through marriage is cultural while the bond with mother is natural. The pre linguistic union of mother and child becomes unattainable with the new social agreement called marriage.

The psychotherapist Adam Jukes relates the mistreatment of women by men to infancy.

Culture may teach men attitudes and give them permission to maltreat women, but I think that to understand where the wish to behave like this comes from we have to look at psychodynamics. The floor of my consulting room is littered with the psyches of men struggling with their relationships with mothers (Jukes, 1993).

In his view, they punish women for their psychological separation with mother during their infancy which prevented them from experiencing perfect love. A child thus separated does not wish to place itself in the hands of another woman. Jukes says: 'He has to repress those feelings, but at some level the boy decides never again to allow a woman such power over him. I believe (that decision) is made by all men, whatever the particular form or intensity it adopts in adulthood' (Jukes, 1993). Why then he does not construct and circulate jokes against his mother is a debatable one. This feeling of antagonism is repressed in the

unconscious/id and held in check both by the ego and the super ego since denigrating one's mother is socially unacceptable. When a child experiences love and emotional satisfaction in infancy from the mother, he will not maltreat women which accounts for the greater understanding of female compassion exhibited in some men. Maltreatment may not be confined to physical bullying or psychological torture but defaming a person in front of others. In this context, the creation, reading and circulation of the so called 'jokes' could be viewed as a kind of maltreatment which seek to degrade the category called wives in Indian society where marriage is both an institution and apparatus that articulates the interests of patriarchy.

According to Freud, language reveals, conceals or modifies the desires of the unconscious. Desire cannot be expressed as such since culture does not allot a space and the use of language need to be scrutinized to discover it. In other words, language allows the unconscious to express itself through different means, jokes being one of them. While some jokes appear to be innocent, the hidden desires in them seem to be terrifying. For instance, a man makes a call to the marriage bureau and the system requests him to press 1 if his preference is for beauty, to press 2 if his interest is in getting an educated woman and so on. He presses 9 to converse directly with the agent and expresses his desire to have a second one. When asked about his first wife, the man replies that he no longer wanted to continue his life with a nagging wife upon which the agent gives an ultimate solution i.e., to 'press' the throat of his wife (Chedathi, 2016). There is yet another one where the husband makes a call to the maintenance office of a hotel complaining them that his wife could not commit suicide since the window doesn't get opened (Pyaar Dosthi Life aur Entertainment, 2015). When Stephen's dream of murdering his wife in Dicken's novel, *Hard Times* could be read as the desire of his unconscious, can't it be the same desire which makes men invent these kinds of jokes since Freud says, jokes like dreams are expressions of the unconscious mind? The misogynist in men as identified by Adam Jukes in his work, *Why Men Hate Women* is explicit in the above mentioned jokes. Wives become the target since marriage culturally guarantees men the right over a woman's individuality and identity in a society like Kerala.

Slavoj Zizek's concept of fantasy could be applied to analyse anti wives jokes with a special focus on those where husbands no longer wish to maintain the relationship and eagerly wish to get separated from their wives either through divorce or death. Fantasy is a product of the unconscious and it teaches us how to desire. It does not stage the unconscious but rather creates desire. 'In order to continue to exist, desire must have its objects perpetually absent. It's not the "it" that you want, it's the fantasy of "it". So, desire supports crazy fantasies'. (Zizek, 2013). Desire is a transcendental signified; the object of desire is never reached upon. The desire of a patriarchal society for the 'ideal' of a woman, when analysed in Zizekian terms is not based on need but fantasy. Consequently, men fantasize their desire of an 'ideal' wife in marital relationship. But when fantasy comes into conflict with ideology, the Real of the Desire is masked. Men, as ideological subjects cannot literally murder their wives even on grounds of hatred. Desire for another woman in the presence of a wife is also ideologically unacceptable. So, the role of these jokes is to hide the Real and make a compromise with reality through language.

Palmer puts forth three variables against which a humour can be placed to state whether it is funny or offensive: the structure of the joke, who invents and circulates them and who the target is and finally, the nature of the occasion. The 'Other of the Other of the anonymous symbolic order'(Mortensen, 2014) ignored by Mortensen might be the one who pulls the strings. When it is unwise to negate the presence of the author, it is also irrelevant to search an individual agent to be the author of these jokes. In a patriarchal society, there could only be collective agents who treat women as the 'Other' and the Other of the Other are those trying to stabilize and fortify the system. A similar logic operates in the institution called marriage too. Lacan analyses the role of representations in defining a woman's sexuality. He further adds, 'Women are constituted in language as an *exception*, as what she *lacks* and what she is not. She is defined against the man (woman is not man). It is not that she is constituted within language only in particular ways as negative' (Nayar, 2010).

Using Palmer's yardstick, anti -wives jokes could hardly be read as innocent but offensive since they are disparaging and their unwitting circulation displays a bruised patriarchy. When the unconscious is structured like language and when the unconscious is available only through language, the analysis of these jokes is inevitable to interpret the collective unconscious of Indian society, especially that of Kerala.

Endnote: (The translations of the Malayalam jokes are by the author)

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