

“Dissecting the poisoned honey”. Sexist Humor in Egypt: A linguistic analysis of sexism in Colloquial Cairene Arabic jokes

Heba Nayef

Humanities Department, College of Language and Communication, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt

hnayef@gmail.com

Mohamed El-Nashar

Language and Translation Department, College of Language and Communication, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt

melnashar68@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper attempts to shed light on sexism in Egyptian Internet jokes. It examines how language, as an institution largely controlled by men, is manipulated and used to disparage women in this discursive mode of humor. Through running a qualitative and quantitative analysis of 284 sexist internet jokes, the study addressed three points; namely, the most frequently targeted category of women in sexist jokes; the most salient physical and personal attributes and finally the way sexist jokes is used to promote violence against women. The analysis has shown that the ‘wife’ is the category most ridiculed. The data also revealed that in spite of the freedom in anonymity that the internet provides, personal attributes far outnumber the physical features. The jokes conformed to the conservative nature of the society as derision of physical features was done through the use of general terms. The analysis has shown that ‘hatefulness’ was the most highly criticised personal attribute, with ‘stupidity’ coming second. It was also shown that under the guise of benign amusement, the effect of these jokes go beyond tolerating gender inequality to actually promoting physical violence against women. We conclude that in a patriarchal social system like that of Egypt, which already disparages women as the ‘marked’ and the ‘different’, such jokes should not be dismissed lightly as ‘just jokes.’

Keywords: gender studies, linguistic sexism, sexist jokes, linguistic feminism, Egyptian jokes

Resumen. *Humor sexista en Egipto: Un análisis lingüístico del sexismo en los chistes coloquiales árabes cairenes*

Este artículo trata de arrojar luz sobre el sexismo en los chistes de Internet egipcios. Examina cómo el lenguaje, entendido como una institución controlada en gran medida por los hombres, es manipulado y utilizado para desacreditar a las mujeres en esta modalidad discursiva del humor. El estudio consta de un análisis cualitativo y cuantitativo de 284 chistes sexistas de Internet.

Palabras Clave: estudios de género, sexismo lingüístico, chistes sexistas, medios sociales, bromas egipcias.

1. Introduction

On the 19th February 2014, Youssry Fouda, a well-known programme presenter in ONTV channel, commented, in his political talk show '*aker Kalami*' (or, final words), on the serious debate on what the people want from the next president, which by then had been going for 59 minutes between him and three female guests by smilingly saying « It is I who brought this to myself by engulfing myself in a 'vortex' of women.» He then laughed, taking a break. The comment was supposed to be a joke to which none of his three guests laughed. Fouda, unlike Don Imus who apologised for a similar sexist joke on April 4 radio talk, found no need to apologise as the incident went unnoticed. The only thing that was done is that the minute in which the joke was said when uploading the programme on the Youtube was deleted. The fact that Fouda has reduced three renowned female political figures; namely, Farida El-Shoubashy (a renowned writer and political figure), Hala Shukrallah (the head of *Distour* political party) and Ikraam Youssef (a journalist) to be a bunch of '*sitat*' (women) and joked about it seemed very natural. Fouda's sexist joke has foregrounded gender when it had no place in the discussion.

In the above-mentioned example, Fouda diverted from operating in the serious mode of discourse to the humor mode, making use of the advantages of this subordinate mode of discourse (Mulkay, 1988) to convey messages that can be easily denied. In being both indirect and allusive, this mode of discourse protects its sayer from bearing the consequences of his message if said in the direct serious mode (Crawford, 2003). After all, it is 'just a joke' (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010; Ford, 2013). In the Egyptian patriarchal society, even denial and apology were not deemed necessary as the target of such sexist joke was women.

This study aims at investigating one type of sexist humor in the Arab societies; verbal internet comic jokes in Colloquial Cairene Arabic (CCA), the most popular and widely spoken Arabic variation in the Arab world. The paper runs both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of sexist jokes found in the internet. It attempts to examine how language is used in this subordinate mode of discourse to disparage women and represent them negatively. The fact that Egypt has long served as the capital of culture in the Middle East, that Egyptians are found to be the most mirthful among Arab countries and that CCA is widely used and understood by all Arab societies lend significance to the importance of studying how women are represented in this subordinate mode of discourse.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *Sexist jokes and language*

Scholars have argued that language, as an institution and apparatus via which concepts, values, judgments are conveyed, does not belong equally to everyone. It is again that a small class of elites is in control of it (Cameron, 1985, van Dijk, 2001). In our modern patriarchal culture, it is the men who have control over language among other legitimate areas of power (Irigaray, 1985).

As Gay argues, sexist language is a type of covert institutionalised violence against women, in what he terms as 'linguistic violence' that occurs across a continuum that stretches from subtle forms such as children's jokes to grievous forms such as totalitarian and genocidal language (Gay, 1997:1)

Sexist humor negatively portrays women or promotes negative behaviour against them. Based on sexist beliefs about the inferiority of women, it focuses on women's personal attributes (Shifman & Lemish, 2010) that stress the fact that women belong to the private sphere, and that use of violence against women can be tolerated (Bemiller & Schneider 2010). It is the type of humour that demeans the personal and professional abilities of women. Jokes that support a patriarchal culture continue to oppress and subordinate women (Wesely 2002), regard them as "second-class citizens, neither seen nor heard, eternal sex-objects, and personifications of evil»(Cameron, 1985:4). These jokes represent the powerful language that legitimises prejudice in society and thus should be viewed through a critical lens (Ford, 2000). Such disparaging humor provides a seemingly benign channel for the expression of prejudice or malicious attitudes (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996). Under the guise of play and fun, this sexist humor promotes inequality between women and men (Sev'er & Ungar, 1997; Mills 2008). What is told as a joke is not really a joke at all, but rather a form of power that is used to oppress and subordinate entire groups of people (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010:463).

Such humour is found everywhere, in every-day conversations, at home, in the work place and in the media. It has been part and parcel of many patriarchal cultures for centuries. Such sexist humor, which target women and represent them negatively, go far beyond being benign amusement or 'just jokes' that can be dismissed as silly or funny (Sunderland, 2007). They form another type of discursive discrimination against women (Mills, 2008).

The effects of this prejudiced language use goes far beyond promoting gender inequality, maintaining as well as strengthening the status quo and masculine hegemony in patriarchal societies. They were found to promote physical violence and abuse against women (See Thomas & Esses 2004; Viki, Thomae, and Hamid, 2006, Ford 2000, 2008, 2013)

2.2 Sexist jokes in Egypt

More than any patriarchal society in the Middle East, the Egyptians are known for their love of jokes and humor. This was noted by the great 14th-century Arab social theorist, Ibn Khaldun. He observed that Egyptians are an unusually mirthful people (Messiri, 1978). In modern days, the common phrase Arabs use to describe an Egyptian is '*ibin nokta*' (lit. 'son of a joke'; 'jokey' or 'joke cracker') testifies to this nature characteristic of the Egyptians (Shehata, 1992).

Egyptians have employed humor to fight imperialism, dictatorship and all sorts of oppression (of, for instance, ex-presidents Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsy who were both frequently ridiculed during massive demonstrations against them that ended up with their ouster). They also used it to make fun of themselves and all their problems. Thus, the Egyptian culture is abundant with a huge literature of jokes that is used on all sorts of occasions. For Egyptians, jokes are not merely jokes. Despite their profound significance in understanding the various types of relations that govern the Egyptian society, modern jokes in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular have received very little scholarly attention. And even the few studies conducted have been almost exclusively investigations of political jokes (Shehata, 1992; Laineste, 2013).

Though important, politics and its related jokes are not the only salient theme in the literature of Egyptian jokes. In present-day Egypt, one conspicuous object of jokes is women whether they are girls, wives, mothers-in-laws, professionals, or even those women partaking in public-sphere activities.

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of jokes being exchanged and circulated in the Egyptian society. There are two major factors that contributed to the increase of jokes in Egypt in general and those targeting women in particular. The first is the increasing use of the internet and the role it plays in the rapid dissemination of information. The second is the growing popularity of the comic character *asabby* on the other. This comic character was introduced to the Egyptian Internet users by Egypt Sarcasm Society in 2013. It made women a target of a significant part of its jokes. Almost two thirds of the 284 jokes that constitute the data of this study were attributed to *asabby*, recording a significant increase in the jokes targeting women via the social media.

This tendency to deride women, however, was not the case in ancient Egypt. In ancient Egypt, issues of social status and foreigners, rather than women, were the main objects of humour (Sweeney, 1997). And when made the object of humour women were depicted as witty and strong, as in the blind women joke found in a letter in the Late Ramesside period, that dates back to the period between (1099-1069 BCE) during the reign of Ramesses XI. The joke runs that a husband after twenty years of marriage wanted to divorce his wife and told her that this is because she was blind in one eye. The wife responded by saying that it took him twenty years to see this. There is also the humorous ostrakon (sketch on a bit of stone or potsherd) that

is believed to date back to the early 11th century or late 12th century B.C., depicting a queen and king in chariots firing arrows at each other. Some scholars argue that though the drawing might have looked funny to ancient Egyptians in the nineteenth dynasty with women acting as men but still the fact remains that the drawing depicts her as a powerful competent warrior (Sweeney, 1997).

3. Methodology and Research Questions

This study employs qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis to investigate linguistic sexism in colloquial Egyptian jokes. The details of data collection and sampling as well as the research questions posed by the study are discussed in the subsections below.

3.1 *Data collection and sampling*

The first step of data collection and sampling was to search the internet using search terms 'jokes involving women, Egyptian women, wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, working women.' Also the search term '*Asabby* jokes' on women was used. Data was then examined separately by each of us to dispense with any joke which we did not deem sexist, then results were compared.

The data was then organised and classified on the two major categories: General Sexist Jokes (GSJs) and Specific Sexist Jokes (SSJs) which will be explained in Section (4.1). Further sub-classifications were then carried out which will be discussed further in Section (4.2).

3.2 *Research questions and tools of analysis*

The study aims at shedding some light on how language is employed through this mode of indirect discourse; humor, and manipulated to serve maintaining the status quo of gender inequality and masculine hegemony in the patriarchal Arab societies in general and the Egyptian society in particular. Thus it addresses three research questions:

Question 1

Are women in general more frequently targeted by the jokes under investigation or is there a category of women that is more exposed to being ridiculed? In other words, are sexist jokes general in nature, covering all women, or do they fall into specific sexist jokes covering specific types of women? Or both?

To try to answer this question, data will be further classified according to the 'lexical nominals' (e.g. women, wives, mothers-in-law, girls, etc.) pertinent to female entities targeted.

Question 2

What are the most salient personal/physical attributes of women mentioned in the data?

In an attempt to find a reliable answer to this question, we ran a qualitative content analysis of each joke followed by a quantitative one for the data as a whole, in terms of the 'lexical collocations' of adjectives, nouns, assigned to the females in the jokes as well as their connotations.

The data is classified into two major categories as adapted from Bemiller and Schneider's (2010) 'devaluation of personal characteristics' classification; namely:

- A. Physical appearance
- B. Personality traits

Question 3

How is language in sexist jokes used to promote violence against women?

Attempting to answer this question, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the data to filter jokes that contain verbal or nominal choices that denote violence against women. The data is further analysed to determine which category of women is more frequently targeted in violence sexist jokes.

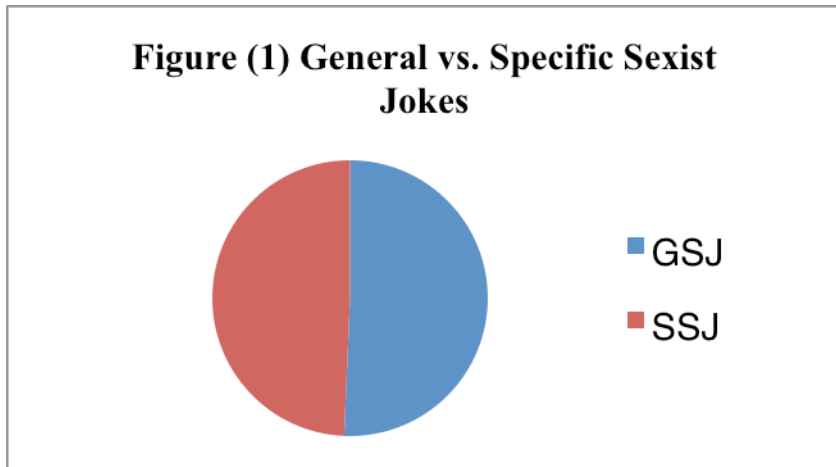
4. Findings

The data retrieved from the internet yielded 284 jokes that met the criterion of being sexist in that they disparage women through any of the following: devaluing the personal characteristics of women; focusing on the physical beauty of women or lack thereof; instigating violence against women and confining women to the private sphere.

The data was tested qualitatively and quantitatively in an attempt to answer the research questions and draw an image of how women are represented in the data. The results of these two types of analyses are discussed in the following section.

4.1 General vs. Specific jokes

The data was examined and classified under the two major taxonomies: General Sexist Jokes (GSJs) and Specific Sexist Jokes (SSJs) in an attempt to find whether women and girls are being the target of the jokes in general or is there a specific category of women which is being the subject of ridicule? And in the latter case which category? GSJs category includes jokes that refer to women in a general sense while SSJs refer to those jokes that specify a category of women as subject of the jokes. The latter category includes wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, professionals (doctors, nurses, maids, etc.). Figure (1) below illustrates this point of analysis.



Of the 284 jokes that constituted the data under investigation, (involving 294 occurrences), 149 fell under the GSJ category (50.68%), while 145 were SSJ (49.31 %). Examples 1-5 below illustrate these two categories.

Example (1)

Imagine life without women

Markets are quiet.
 economic stagnation
 Empty streets
 Telecommunication companies suffer a great loss.
 Car market breaks down.
 The devil will be out of job.
 Hypertension treatment will be out of use.
 All men will go to heaven.

Example (1) falls into the GSJ category. The subject of ridicule in both cases is women in the former and girls in general in the latter. The joke implicitly focuses on certain attributes stereotypically associated with women: craving for shopping and possessing expensive things, being the reason of men’s troubles and sins. Thus, if the world were void of women, there would be economic stagnation (referring to women’s love of shopping); men will not suffer of hypertension (blaming women for being the direct reason behind this) and no man will go to hell (blaming women for the sins of men).

Example (2)

Once a man took his wife to the zoo
 He took a picture of her next to the monkeys cage, hang it in the salon and wrote the following caption:

A picture of my wife with the monkeys. N.B. My wife is the third to right.

Example (2) illustrates the category in which the target of the joke is the wife. In this example, the wife is likened to monkeys in an implicit reference to ugliness and triviality.

In further examining the SSJ, it was shown that wives appear to be the most salient target of humour. Wives were subject to 109 jokes of the 145 SSJs, with the mother-in-law (of the husband) as next (21 occurrences). It is worth noting here that it was not mother-in-laws in general who were subject to jokes, but rather the wife's mother. The wife's mother-in-law scored only one occurrence. This finding gives support to what has been noted by scholars that language does not belong to everyone equally and that those in control of this tool - in our case, jokes - determine what and who to be depicted in a favorable light and who to be criticised (van Dijk, 2001).

Table (I) illustrates the number of occurrences and percentage of the various classes of women in SSJ.

TABLE (I) CATEGORIES OF WOMEN IN SSJ

SSJ Subtypes	No. of occurrences
Wife	109 (75.17%)
Mother-in-law	21 (14.48%)
Fiancée	9 (6.20%)
Mother	3 (2.06%)
Husband's mother	1 (0.68%)
Sister	1 (0.68%)
Old age woman	1 (0.68%)
TOTAL	145

4.2 Personality vs. physical attributes

The data was examined in terms of the most salient feature of ridicule: Personal vs. physical attributes. Table (II) below draws a comparison in terms of the number of occurrences of personal and physical attributes.

TABLE (II) PERSONAL VS. PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

CATEGORY TYPE	Personal attributes	Physical attributes
Specific	126	19
General	113	26
TOTAL	239 (84.15%)	45 (15.84%)

As the table shows, jokes dealing with personal attributes of women far outnumber those dealing with physical features, with the former scoring a total number of occurrences of (239) against (45) for the latter. An explanation for such a huge difference in the number of jokes associated with personality traits compared to that dealing with physical features can be sought in the conservative nature of the society. The Egyptian society, like many other Middle Eastern cultures, is governed by a set of strict taboos the root of which can be traced to the Islamic oriental ideology. For most people, a women’s body is a taboo and talk about the physical features of a women in a joke will not serve the main recognised function of the joke which is laughter. It will also hamper its dissemination by others who might feel embarrassed or even ashamed of repeating it. The shock of breaking a taboo, whether by praising or criticizing a women’s body, will have an adverse effect on stirring laughter. This notion may account for such a result and is further supported in Section (4.2.2) below when the physical feature jokes are put under scrutiny.

4.2.1 Personal attributes

An examination of the 239 jokes dealing with personal attributes reveal that the most salient personality feature targeted in the data was ‘hateful’, occurring 33 times with ‘stupid’ coming next, recording 23 occurrences and ‘domineering’ and ‘revengeful’ coming third with 16 occurrences each (See examples (3-5) below).

Example (3)

A girl complains to her mother-in-law: Help me mother-in-law, each time I cook, your son throws the food to the dog. The mother-in-law replied by saying: And what did the dog do to deserve this?

Example (4)

A girl phoned an airline company and asked: “How long does the trip take from Cairo to China?”

They replied: “One moment...”

She said: “Thank you.”

Example (3) is the one and only occurrence of the husband’s mother in the data. In this example, which belongs to the SSJ category, while the wife is shown to be helpless and subordinate through the words ‘help’, ‘cook’ and ‘throw to the dog’, the husband’s mother is depicted as ‘hateful’. The mother-in-law responds sarcastically, implying that the wife’s food is a torture to the dog – let alone her son. In example (4), the girl is depicted to be too stupid to understand that the phone operator was only excusing her for ‘one moment’ to find an answer to her question. She is thus ridiculed for believing that a long journey from Cairo to China would only take one moment.

Example (5)

A man whose wife has died walks in the funeral laughing while everyone round him was crying. A clergyman stopped the procession and said: "I will not allow them to proceed until you tell me the reason behind your laughter."

The man said: "I have been married to her for 20 years and it is the only time I know where she will be going (her whereabouts)."

The joke in (5) is about a wife being 'domineering' but some background is needed to explain it. In patriarchal Middle Eastern societies, it is a commonly accepted custom that a wife takes the permission of a husband before she leaves the house or goes anywhere. A husband must be fully aware of her whereabouts. It is also an inveterate custom in the Islamic tradition that a wife should obey her husband. Thus, even among the educated class, a wife is expected to follow this behavior. In the Egyptian patriarchal social system, it is believed that it is only the domineering wives who switch roles with the husbands and not take their permission to leave the house or inform their husbands of their whereabouts. Example (7) illustrates this case where a domineering wife has never told her husband of where she went. Thus, it was only when she died that he was sure where she was going for the first time. The use of 'died', 'funeral', 'cry' on the one hand and the word 'laugh' on the other pinpoints the man's relief of his wife's 'domineeringness'. Table (III) illustrates the most salient personality features in the data under investigation.

TABLE (III) MOST SALIENT PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES IN GSJ & SSJ

Attribute	No. of occurrences
Hateful/mean/dispensable	33
Stupid, naïve, foolish	23
Revengeful; lethal, truculent, evil; bitter	16
Domineering, commanding, overimposing	16
Greedy; demanding, materialistic	12
Nagging, making man's life hell	11
Aggressive, violent	10
Emotionally insecure	8

4.2.2 Physical attributes

The internet is believed to offer a considerable degree of freedom to disseminate material that may be judged inappropriate under the cover of anonymity (Gossett and Byrne, 2002). This notion of freedom in anonymity would give members of the most conservative of societies a means to break taboos. Yet when the data was examined in light of the most frequently mentioned physical features of women in Egyptian Internet jokes, it revealed, as mentio-

ned earlier, substantially fewer occurrences of physical attributes (15.84%) if compared to those of personal attributes (84.15%). A closer examination of the physical feature jokes showed two consistent characteristics: the absence of positive physical features and the almost zero reference of body parts (only one mention).

When the data is examined in terms of the lexical choices and word collocations involved in the physical feature jokes, it was shown that out of the 284 jokes under investigation, there was one joke that included lexical nominals denoting physical parts of women as illustrated in example (6) below.

Example (6)

The qualifications of a successful female secretary according to some people:

In the past: Good experience and good conduct certificate.

Now: blonde hair, plump lips and blue eyes.

Example (6) makes fun of the present qualifications of a secretary. The female secretary is no longer required to have secretarial experience but rather to possess sexy physical features according to beauty standards in Egyptian culture 'blonde hair' 'plump lips' and 'blue eyes'. This comes in accordance with the conservative nature of the society even under the guise of anonymity. The data also reveals that there was only one occurrence of a positive feature in the physical attribute jokes as illustrated in example (7).

Example (7)

An American woman, a French woman, and an Egyptian woman are trying the echo of their voices:

The American said: Hello.

The echo said: Hello

The French said: Bonjour.

The echo said: Bonjour.

The Egyptian said: heee, heee, heee (i.e. seductive laughter)

The echo said: Oh, sexy girl!

Example (7) is the only joke in the data that implicitly depicts Egyptian women as better (here sexier) than their American and French counterparts. While the American and the French women's greetings are 'Hello' and 'Bonjour' said in a normal voice tone, it was the seductive voice and tone of the Egyptian woman which made the 'echo' respond, praising her sensuality.

This can again be explained in light of the conservativeness of the society. It is also shown that the negative features being ridiculed tend to be of a 'general' sense in that they do not concentrate on a particular part of the body, e.g. the nose, the cheeks, the hair, etc. Instead, emphasis was on adjectives like 'ugly', 'fake', 'fat', 'tall', 'short', etc. Examples (8) illustrates the most common physical feature found in the data under scrutiny.

Example (8)

The wife says to the husband: Don't you think I look like Hend Rostom (A seductive actress).

The husband: You look like her in the last her last scene in '*Rud Qalby*' (film) (i.e. where she is burnt and deformed).

In this example, the woman is ridiculed for being 'ugly'. The wife is linked to a beautiful seductive actress in a scene where she appears burnt and completely deformed. There is contradiction between the beauty of the actress, which the wife was referring to, and the ugliness of the wife, as seen by her husband.

TABLE (IV) PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES IN GSJ & SSJ

Attribute	No. of occurrences
Ugly	31
Fake, wearing too much makeup	7
Fat	5
Tall	3
Short (dwarfish)	2
Black	2
Thin, bony	1
TOTAL	49

It is also worth noting that in the SSJ category, physical appearance jokes were limited to wives only. It is also clear that 'ugly' was by far the most recurrent physical attribute in the data under scrutiny, both in GSJ and SSJ.

4.3 Violence against women

As it was previously shown in Section (2.1) above, the effects of sexist humour go far beyond giving abstract advantage to men and promoting gender inequality. As studies have shown, this seemingly benign type of amusement may lead to physical violence against women (Ford, 2000, 2008, 2010). The data of the current study included 29 jokes that implicitly or explicitly expressed a type of physical violence against women that varied from a slap in the face, a morbid wish to get rid of the woman or an act of gloating her death. Table (V) below illustrates the findings in this point of investigation.

TABLE (V) VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Category	Lexical entry	No. of occurrences
GSJ	-	3 (10.34%)
SSJ	Wife	15 (51.72%)
	Mother-in-law	11 (37.93%)
TOTAL		29

The majority of the violence jokes fell under the SSJ category (89.65%) and were mainly directed towards the nominal entry ‘wife’ (scoring 51.72%) against (37.93%) for mother-in-law, while the GSJ scored (10.34%). This can have an interpretation in the Islamic culture. One controversial issue is the widely accepted interpretation of a Quranic verse that allows the husband to physically ‘hit’ the wife if she does not obey him. This practice of excessive violence against the wife makes using lexical items that express violence in jokes tolerated, accepted and even a source of amusement.

Example (9)

Shakespeare says: Women’s tears if frozen can make the most beautiful of gems.

Asabby: A *slap in the face* in the morning and another in the evening and you become one of the richest jewellers, my friend.

Example (10)

What is the similarity between a girl and a nail? Both would not ‘walk’ except by *being hitting on the head*.

Examples (9) and (10) belong to the GSJ category which makes fun of the physical abuse of girls and women. On the linguistic level, the two examples involve verbal and nominal choices that entail the use of physical violence against women. They also reflect common societal beliefs that tolerate physical violence against women. In example (9), a man repeatedly slapping a woman in the face is condoned. Thus, the man in the joke is advised to instigate the ‘tears’ of a woman by ‘slapping’ her twice on a daily basis, making fun of the idea that women’s tears are as beautiful as gems. In example (10), the joke explicitly reflects a common belief that girls need to be ‘hit on the head’, meaning to be oppressed and coerced to be of any use. In Colloquial Cairene Arabic, the phrase ‘hit on the head’ involves all sorts of oppression, physical as well as psychological, while the verb ‘walk’ is used in the sense of ‘proceed’ or ‘function’. The use of the Arabic ‘exception structure’, represented in ‘would not... except by...’ consolidates the belief that masculine hegemony and superiority can be secured by not only psychological oppression but physical abuse as well.

Example (11)

A fool was asked: *Would you like to see your wife die?*

He replied: No.

He was asked: Why?

He replied: I am afraid *I might die of happiness* after her (*death*).

Example (11) goes beyond the idea of physical abuse to secure women's subordination, to finding mirth in domestic homicide. These SSJ jokes entail a wish to get rid of women. The man in the joke is reluctant to wish the death of his wife because he thinks the news of her death would be too exhilarating for him to live thereafter. So, the only reason why his wife deserves to live is to secure his own life – the ultimate reflection of wives' unworthiness.

5. Conclusion

In this final section of the paper, we attempt to answer the three research questions posed earlier on the basis on the findings of the analysis. As far as the category of women which is most frequently targeted in the jokes at issue (Question 1), the data revealed that half of the jokes came under the GSJ category while the other half fell under the SSJ category. Within the latter class, the lexical entry 'wife' was the category most ridiculed, followed by the husband's 'mother-in-law'.

As for the most salient attributes being mocked (Question 2), the data showed that personal attributes far outnumber the physical features. It also revealed that in spite of the freedom in anonymity that the internet provides, the jokes conformed to the conservative nature of the society. That was manifested in the occurrence of one joke only that involved body parts. Derision of physical features was done through the use of general terms, such as 'ugly', 'tall', 'fat' etc. The analysis has shown that 'hatefulness' was the most highly criticised personal attribute, with 'stupidity' coming second.

The analysis has also shown that out of the 284 jokes, (10%) support physical violence against women (Question 3). The violence ranged from a slap in the face to wishing the woman dead, and ends in jokes where the man is directly or indirectly involved in killing the woman.

This paper aimed at examining how language, as an institution largely controlled by men, is manipulated and used as a tool to disparage women under the veil of benign amusement. By drawing negative images of women, this widely popular 'not-so-innocent' discursive mode promotes gender inequality in a patriarchal society that regards men as the 'unmarked', the 'normal' while women are labeled the 'marked', the 'different'. This paper attempted to show that such 'seemingly harmless' jokes should not be dismissed lightly as being 'just jokes'.

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