

HITTING OUT AT WOMEN

— Humour as a weapon of oppression

WHAT a society considers funny can tell us a lot about the nature of that society. Humour in an unequal society is inevitably directed against oppressed groups and minorities. The ruling group always sees the members of the oppressed group as having certain fixed and unvarying qualities. Thus the popular British notion of the Scots as miserly and the Irish as idiots. Anti-Semite humour portrays the Jews as crafty, avaricious and mean. Anti-black jokes perpetuate the stereotype of the black as a good-natured, lazy, childlike idiot who needs protection and constant supervision. In North India anti-Sikh jokes make this community seem stupid to the point of imbecility.

Humour as a weapon should not be underestimated. It performs two distinct functions — makes the oppressed feel inferior and justifies the oppressors to themselves. If this was said in so many words it would sound unconvincing but humour can often persuade where rational argument would fail. It appeals to and justifies the deepest prejudices of an unjust set-up, which are already being sustained through the education and entertainment systems.

Since a male-dominated society creates the idea that women are mentally or physically inferior, we naturally become the focus of ridicule. To be a woman is to provoke laughter, taunts, obscenities, hostility. Many jokes express contempt for women because they are the subordinated sex and for men who are like women, that is, are not aggressively 'masculine' or overbearing.

Humour against women is perhaps the oldest form of humour with the most unbroken tradition. It has a history in all written literatures—women are the oldest laughing stock.

'Women are made that way'

Sexist humour 'defines' the feminine nature by attributing to women all the most despicable qualities. The most interesting fact revealed by a survey of humour columns in various popular magazines was that women seem to be derided if they do and damned if they don't. Thus the untidy housewife who keeps tea leaves in a tin marked 'sugar' is laughed at but so is the scrupulously neat one who makes her husband's bed when he goes to get a drink of water at midnight. If a woman screams at her husband for coming home late, she is castigated as a jealous shrew but if she does not, she runs the risk of being called unfaithful. If she tries to look attractive, she is vain ("The meanest thing you can do to a woman is lock her in

a room with a thousand saris and no mirror") but if she does not, she is 'unfeminine' as in this joke: "She thinks sincerity means always looking her worst."

Why does this happen? The anti-woman joke satisfies the oppressor's need to feel superior. It can attribute the most contradictory bad qualities to women because it is not really these qualities which are under attack. *The joke is spitting out contempt at the woman for being a woman, an 'inferior' being.* The eve-teaser who calls a bespectacled woman four eyes' is mocking not at her spectacles but at her womanhood because he would not hurl a similar remark at a man.

It is only through jokes that we get to know what men actually think of women who play the family roles so glorified in romance and sentimental song- the roles of wife, mother and daughter.



Oh we are just two of us here—but being in the fixed income group, I can maintain only half the family on the salary I get.

Taking the offensive

"Wife: a device you screw on the bed and it does all the housework." (Rugby Joke Book). This particular 'humorous' definition is unusual in that it does not attempt to mask the degradation of the woman in the marital relationship but gloats over it.

Most jokes directed at the wife distort reality to show her as the tyrannical partner in marriage. We are familiar with the cartoon and comic strip stereotype of the harridan who wields the rolling pin and throws dishes at her meek spouse, for example Maggie in the 'Bringing Up Father' series. Jokes against wives follow the strategy of defence by taking the offensive. As soon as the problems of women are touched, hey presto! we discover that they were really men's problems all the time! Though statistics show that wife-beating is a universal and growing problem, jokes would have us believe that women are the violent ones: "A man was taken to the hospital with a broken arm. Seeing another man with both his arms broken, he exclaimed: 'Oh, do you have two wives?'"

Even before Indian women have raised the issue of their domestic burden and the need for it to be shared, Hindi magazines are already taking the offensive: "Husband: 'Let's have tea in a restaurant today.' 'Why, do you think I am tired of making tea every day?' 'No, but I am tired of washing cups every day.'" A cartoon in the same magazine shows a woman telling her bewildered husband: 'Turn off the stove in 25 minutes time. I'm just going out for a minute.'" The poor man is supposed to be ill-used if he keeps an eye on his own dinner or if he as much as lifts a finger in the house. Such jokes reassure men that housework is not their job and make women feel ashamed and guilty for asking even a little help from their husbands.

While men are respected, almost worshipped by their wives' people, jokes reverse the situation. In innumerable jokes, cartoons, it is the son-in-law who suffers at his mother-in-law's hands. He is often shown wishing she were dead, plotting to murder her or trying to separate his wife from her and we are supposed to believe he has good reason for doing so: "Judge: 'Are you willing to go back to your wife?' Husband: 'Yes, if she is willing to divorce her mother.'" (From Hindi). It is significant that the wife's mother, not her father is usually under attack. The mother is more likely to offer her daughter sympathy and support. In this country, she is often an ill-treated woman's last hope of refuge. This solidarity between women acts as a threat to the husband's oppressiveness.

Some of the most vicious stereotypes are those which have sunk most deeply into the minds of all of us. For instance, the nagging, gossipy and garrulous woman: "'What were your father's last words?' 'He didn't have any. Mother was with him to the end.'" Even though contradicted by our daily experience where we come across both talkative men and women, but in social life, find women forced to do most of the

smiling and listening, this stereotype continues to be mindlessly transmitted.

Another stereotype which justifies the status quo is that of the spendthrift wife: "'My wife dreamt last night that she was married to a millionaire.' 'You're lucky, brother. My wife dreams that in the day time.'" We all know that men control the purse strings in most homes and surveys prove that it is they who take all major financial decisions, while women have to scrimp and save to make the household run on a shoestring budget. While prices soar, it is usually women who must do without even small personal necessities so that children can have more, while men must always have their smoke, drink and outings. Jokes which portray the woman as wasteful assure the man that there is no need to feel guilty for being stingy with the money handed out to his wife for running the house, demanding accounts from her, or even keeping her salary under lock and key as many men do, because if he were not so strict, she would only fritter away the money.

'She was asking for it'

The general pattern emerging from all these jokes is one that seeks to convince us that women deserve their degradation. Why? Do we not have minds, emotions? Are we not human? Male humour seeks to deny the humanity of women.



—From Sarita

How much more humiliation are we going to take?

Most jokes remind us not to dare think we are anything more than mere bodies. Either we are the property of some man and our duty is to 'preserve' ourselves like a pickle for his consumption: "Husband to overweight wife: 'Do you realize there are 20 pounds of you I didn't marry?'" Or we are free game for all. And to be desired by a man, any man, is the greatest compliment and favour to a woman, for which we are shown to be languishing, competing and struggling. It does not occur to this lordly male that the woman concerned may not desire him, may even find him repulsive. Jokes show all women, married or unmarried, as insatiable nymphomaniacs?

“She: ‘What’s the matter, don’t you love me anymore?’ He: ‘Of course I do. I’m just resting.’ ” Or this, more vicious: “A young man with a very hoarse throat went to the doctor’s house late at night. The doctor’s wife opened the door. ‘Is the doctor in?’ he whispered. ‘No’, she whispered back, ‘Come in’.”

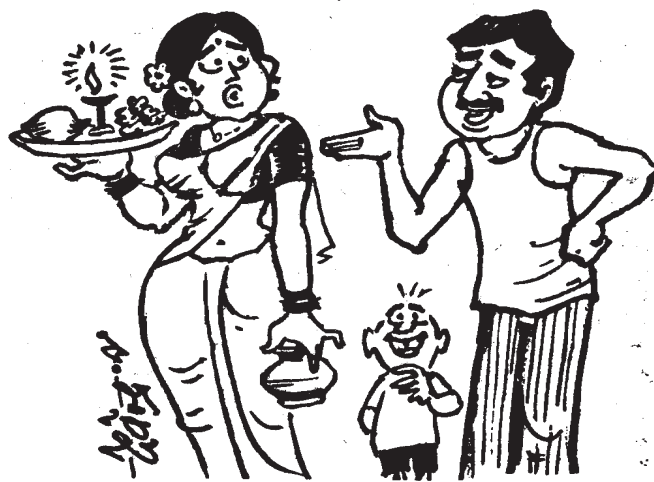
The more specifically sexual jokes categorize women as ‘gorgeous blondes’ or ‘cute young things’ and give them names which suggest only a sexual identity like Mrs Tartly or Miss Rustyfan. And if a woman is treated by a man as a human being with a mind and personality, it means that her body is unwomanly and unattractive: “When a man looks a girl straight in the eye, she had better start doing something about her figure.” or “She has a Supreme Court figure. No appeal.” This dehumanizing of women means that the only relationship possible between a man and a woman is one of possession. One of the most horrifying of such statements that I came across scribbled in a university toilet was: “Seven Fs with a girl. Find, Follow, Feed, Finger, Feel, Fuck, Forget.” None of the words acknowledge that the woman is anything more than a piece of flesh. A man who is tender to a woman is seen as a sissy, not a ‘real man’: “He: ‘What would you say if I were to kiss you?’ She: ‘That would be like getting a chance at a Cadillac and taking only the windshield wiper.’ ” And jokes express the reality of most sexual relationships between men and women where the aim of the man is only copulation, not communication, as in this Rugby Joke Book definition: “Kiss: Application at headquarters for a position at base.”

The logical conclusion of this violent desire for possession is a violent repulsion after possession. The female body excites scorn, indifference, disgust: “A man explained why he did not want to go to a topless bar: ‘Once you’ve seen two, you’ve seen them all.’ ” Many jokes exaggerate the proportions of women’s bodies as ridiculous objects: “A nightclub owner heard of a magnificent blonde with a stupendous figure — 68-23-37! When he asked what sort of dance the girl did, her agent replied: ‘Well, she doesn’t actually dance. She just crawls on to stage and tries to stand up.’ ”

Sisterhood—they can’t stand it

The sexist joke forces us into ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles. It mocks at the man who expresses his emotions and at the woman who refuses to be an object. However, the male is compensated for the stripping away of his emotions — he is flattered into a sense of almost godlike superiority. He ‘takes’ the woman but remains emotionally untouched by her while all the women are shown to be scrambling among themselves to be chosen by him.

A woman’s life is supposed to revolve around some male or the other. This is partly wish fulfillment — that’s the way the male reader of the joke would like it to be — and partly expresses the male fear of women getting together or of the woman-woman relationship becoming an important and



Instead of keeping all these fasts for my happiness and longevity, I wish you would keep a ‘Maun Vrata’ (keep silent for a period of time).

Adding Insult To Injury!

sustaining one. Repeatedly, women are shown being ‘catty’, jealous of each other and possessive of their men: “There’s nothing a woman likes more than a double chin — on her husband’s old girlfriend.” They are shown hankering for a man and dying to get married as in this Hindi one: “‘Why are you crying?’ a guest asked a young girl as the bride was leaving her parents’ house, ‘It’s not your marriage.’ ‘That’s why I’m crying’ was the reply.”

Attacking the exceptional

The woman who rejects a role which defines her solely in relation to a man is most virulently attacked. She is shown to be utterly incompetent in doing anything beyond wifehood and motherhood and the joke finds that she is actually a frustrated woman looking for a man. Thus the unmarried woman is a favourite target: “The old maid went into the mail-order business. The first day, she ordered three males.” The emphasis is always on the assumption that no man must have wanted her. The joke refuses to believe that she could have chosen not to marry: “‘What’s for dinner tonight?’ asked the cannibal chief. ‘Two old maids.’ ‘Ugh, leftovers again!’ ” She is also made out to be sexually starved to the point of imbecility as in the well-known joke about the spinster who reports to the police that she can see some boys bathing nude outside her window and after they are told to move further up the river, complains that she can still see them through binoculars.

If she is unmarried and has also ventured into a ‘masculine’ field and is an intellectual, all the worse!

She is shown ‘to have lost that mysterious product of the male imagination—her ‘femininity’ in the process. Interestingly, while jokes in English attack women in fields like law, engineering or politics, Hindi jokes even attack school teachers,

perhaps because for women to venture into the workplace at all is a newer phenomenon among the Hindi-speaking middle class: "A senior teacher asked her pupil, 'What tense is: I am beautiful?' He thought for a moment and then replied, 'Past tense' ". "College Rags" a humour column in a popular magazine is most revealing of the status of women in our institutions of higher learning. Many anecdotes sent in are about women students who are out to catch boyfriends or husbands: "She climbs the social ladder, lad by lad." When the woman is a lecturer, her proficiency is trivialized in more subtle ways: "One particularly attractive lecturer-trainee while lecturing on 'Frequency curves' took great care in drawing smooth and symmetrical curves on the blackboard. A student assessing her performance, wrote, 'Her perfect curves gave the visual impact necessary for a clear understanding of the subject' ".

The downgrading of a woman's intellect is extended to those who handle technology. We are all familiar with the jokes against women motorists. Even though statistics prove that women are more careful, law-abiding drivers than men are, and cause fewer accidents, the popular image of women drivers is derogatory—a testimony to the power of such jokes: "She put her hand out of the window and signalled right, then left, then she erased it. 'What kind of signal is that?' asked the irate policeman. She said, 'I wanted to go right, then I wanted to go left, then I changed my mind and rubbed it out.' "

Women participating in political activity are also shown to be really hunting for men: "One of my friends told me proudly that she had joined a sit-in at the university. I asked what had been the reason for the demonstration. 'No idea', she replied, 'But the boys were fabulous'."

Nurses and secretaries whose jobs in male-dominated professions make them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation by their bosses, are made out to be 'easy lays'. Again, the old logic operates - the victim is shown to be willing and eager to be exploited. How very comfortable for the attacker—she really wanted to be attacked all the time!

'I was only having fun'

While on the one hand chauvinism justifies itself through its humour by saying "Women deserve to be and want to be trampled upon", it also acts out its fantasies in jokes. The most blatant malice, sadism and violence are expressed: "If you doubt the power of solar energy, watch a girl in a bikini sit down on a metal chair that has been out in the sun."

Such violence has become a part of our daily lives. Obscenities in all languages are a means of verbally raping and attacking us. Two men angry with each other work off their anger by abusing each other's female ancestry. This has an effect on our minds that we rarely realize. We would hesitate to call someone a 'chamar' but the words 'bitch' and 'bastard' spring to our lips almost automatically. These words directed

against women are considered 'unladylike'. Like the dirty joke, they are reserved for men only. Young boys are initiated into 'manhood' by picking up such language. No wonder then, that it is a 'manhood' so contemptuous of and hostile to women.

The jokes we hear and read daily are no laughing matter. They have the effect of slow poisoning on all of us, men and women. Just think how many times you have tended to 'naturally' categorize a woman as a jealous, nagging or bitchy creature. That is how deep the stereotype has sunk.

The most dangerous thing jokes teach is not that a particular woman is jealous or nagging or on the lookout for a man. But rather that these jokes ignore the social context which has made some women so, that they generalize and say it is a woman's nature to be so, that all women are so. Jokes laugh at a woman as she is but laugh even more if she tries to be different. Their message is that the world and human nature are unchanging and unchangeable. Therefore, those of us who believe differently, had better wake up to the reality of this most subtle of weapons and stop shrugging it off as 'only a joke all in fun!' Such humour is meant to humiliate, insult, defeat where rational argument fails, to destroy our sense of self, and that is how it is consciously being used against us as women. Should we react with anger or with smiles? □

SPARK

Penetrating through disgusting wind
 My bike was rushing to the press...
 Heart-thrilling scene —
 Three teenaged tribal girls
 Ruthlessly charging a young man —
 Slowed down my race. With their saris tucked up
 In a fighting pose
 And eyebrows lifted up
 With raised fists
 Almost ready to bash him up.
 Through the vibrating lips
 Erupted abuses
 Like the language of quarrelling birds,
 Falling flat on the nervous young man's face.
 What was behind the skirmish ?
 Though not known, yet obvious:
 'Disrespect of woman by man'.
 How to honour
 That Spark of Women's Liberation?
 I felt like getting down
 To offer a revolutionary salute
 To those dark, illiterate,
 Yet revolutionary girls.

—Narayan.