Promoting Masculine Hegemony through Humour: A Linguistic Analysis of Gender Stereotyping in Egyptian Sexist Internet Jokes

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Abstract

The study aims at shedding some light on the stereotypical patterns of the representation of women in Egyptian sexist internet jokes. The paper shows how language is used and manipulated to serve maintaining the status quo of gender inequality and masculine hegemony in the Egyptian society. It addresses four themes: women and language; women in the public and private spheres; women as sex objects and finally the image of Egyptian women as compared to non-Egyptian women. Through employing van Dijk's (2003) ideological discourse strategies, the study shows that in all these themes that there has been a common explicit or implicit division of the world. There were always two images presented: A positive image of the superior, knowledgeable, rational men, and a negative image of the talkative, ignorant women who are unfit for the public sphere.

Keywords: gender stereotyping, sexist internet jokes, sociolinguistics, Egyptian women, ideological discourse

1. Introduction

Stereotyping is a representation practice that is aimed at describing the other, the different (Hall, S. 1997). It is a type of social representation that is practiced by the dominant group and directed at subordinate groups (Talbot 2003). It is also defined as 'the social practice of interpreting the behaviour and personality of others according to a set of common-sense attributions which are applied to whole groups' (Cameron 1988: 8).

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It is a way to maintain existing social power and hegemony of the dominant group(s). Stereotyping, as Hall puts it, is 'part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order' (Hall, S. 1997: 258). It involves processes of 'splitting' and 'exclusion' that divide the normal from the abnormal, the acceptable from the unacceptable, excluding the latter in each case (Dyer 1977), a means to represent the subordinate group as 'what we are not'.

Stereotyping can be observed in various types of social representational practices: in media, folk literature, social media, etc. These stereotyping practices serve to further establish the sedimented social beliefs about 'the others' – beliefs which produced these practices – as well as the hegemony and superiority of one group on the one hand (the ruling group – us, the normal) and the submissiveness of another group on the other (the subordinate group – them, the deviant).

This paper examines one type of these social representation practices, that is, gender stereotyping. This stereotyping practice is investigated through a mode of subordinate discourse, namely, humor. Through conducting a qualitative and quantitative analysis of Egyptian sexist internet jokes, the paper aims at discerning how gender stereotyping promotes gender inequality and masculine hegemony in Egypt's patriarchal social system.

Gender stereotyping is the process of categorising and classifying groups of people based on a sole criterion – their sex. Thus certain behaviour and personality attributes are expected from the members of this group, for instance, the stereotypical representation of women as chatterboxes and endless gossips as opposed to men who are rational, strong and silent (Graddol, David; Swann, Joan 1989). It has attracted the attention of scholars of many academic disciplines, among whom were linguistic feminists (Cameron 1985, 2008; Hall 1995; MacDonald 1995; Mills 2008; Sunderland 2006, 2007 & Talbot 1998, among others). Their focus of attention has been on western white middle-class women. This paper, however, addresses linguistic gender stereotyping of Middle Eastern women as represented in Egyptian women.

Such gender stereotyping can be found in various modes of discourse and on both the institutional and individual levels. This study focuses on sexist humour as the mode of discourse of investigation. Sexist humor is this type of humour that represents women negatively. It is regarded as another discursive tool that depicts 'man-as-norm and woman-as-problem research' (Crawford 2003).

Under the disguise of benign amusement, such humour, facilitates tolerance of sexism and discriminatory behavior among men (Woodzicka & Ford 2010). In such mode of discourse, responsibilities can be easily denied for these are only jokes. And these harmful effects vary from leading to greater acceptance of current gender relations and greater acceptance of societal devaluation of women (Ford 2000; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, Edel 2008, 2013) to increasing the levels of men's self-reported rape proclivity (Viki, Thomae, & Hamid 2006) and eventually to forcing sex on women (Ryan & Kanjorski 1998). It is through *language* that such disparaging humor operates. It is another method of using language to strengthen gender inequality and solidify the status quo in various patriarchal societies.

2. Methodology

This study employs qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis to investigate stereotyping representations of women in colloquial Egyptian jokes. The paper employs tools of analysis adapted from van Dijk's ideological discourse strategies (van Dijk 2003). The details of data collection and sampling, points of analysis as well as the tools of analysis employed are discussed in the subsections below.

2.1 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 '*Asahby* jokes' on women was used. *Asahby* is a comic character introduced to Egyptian internet users by Egypt Sarcasm Society in 2013. 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 according to the four major categories: women and language; women in the public and private spheres; women as sex objects and Egyptian women vs. non-Egyptian women.

2.2 Points of Analysis

The study aims at shedding some light on the stereotypical patterns of women representation in this mode of indirect discourse – humor – and how language is used 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. It addresses four research points that are discussed below.

2.2.1 Women and Language

Language as a social practice is one of the major domains of 'difference' between women and men. Literary works have dealt with such difference. It can also be traced in the works of great playwrights (e.g. Shakespeare, *As You Like it*, Chapter 3, Scene II, cited by Jespersen 1922). Popular psychology literature has witnessed a surge of interest in the topic in recent years (Cameron 2008). On the other hand, scholars and feminist linguists have debated the reasons behind such 'differences' that ranged from 'deficiency' to 'dominance' ' to 'difference' (For more details, see Sadiqi 2003; Sunderland 2006; Mills 2008; Nayef 2014). The paper investigates this 'difference' through analysing the stereotypical representation of women's use of language in Egyptian internet jokes.

2.2.2 Women in the Public and Private Spheres

Stereotypically, women have been assigned to the private sphere while the public sphere has been considered to be a domain associated with men. Jokes that deal with private and public sphere affairs will be separately analysed.

The data will be tested qualitatively and quantitatively in terms of the tools discussed in section 2.3 below to discern representation of women in this regard.

2.2.3 Women as Sex Object

The Egyptian society, like many other patriarchal social systems, regards women first and foremost as sex objects. Stereotypical representation of women as sex object is another point if analysis. Jokes dealing with this topic will be analysed separately in terms of the ideological strategy tools employed in this study.

2.2.4 Egyptian Women vs. non-Egyptian Women

What is the image of Egyptian women in sexist jokes as compared to non-Egyptian women?

The jokes that compare Egyptian women to women from other nationalities will be separately analysed. This will be done through running a content analysis of the data to separate jokes that specify the nationality of the woman targeted (e.g. Egyptian, Arab, American, French, etc.). The jokes are then analysed in terms of the linguistic tools stated in section 2.3 below.

2.3 Tools of Analysis

The linguistic tools of analysis employed in this study are adapted from van Dijk's (2003) ideological discourse strategies. Given the nature of data under investigation, the tools cited below mainly function on the semantic level:

- Implications and presuppositions
- Lexicalisation on the macro-semantic structures
- Lexicalisation on the micro-semantic level:contrast; synonymy; distancing words
- Metaphors and figures of speech: irony, similes, metaphors
- Statistics and Numbers

Believing that humour reflects reality in an indirect way even more powerfully than the serious mode of discourse, discussion of the current data will help draw an image of how women are seen and placed in the patriarchal Egyptian society and shed light on how language is used to draw that image.

3. Results

3.1 Women and Language

The data yielded 239 jokes dealing with personal attributes of women, only eight of which discussed the theme of women and language (For more details, see Nayef & Nashar 2014). Half of these jokes (4) ridiculed women's talkativeness in general, while the other half made fun of women's excessive use of phones. Examples (1) below illustrates this theme.

Example (1)

The difference between phone calls made by boys and those made by girls is that the former continue for 50 seconds in which they decide when to meet, where to hang out, what to have for dinner and all other important stuff. On the other hand, girls' phone call last for 2 hours, thirty minutes and thirty seconds in which they discuss whether their friend Nadia looked contemptuously at Nora or she did not mean it.

In this example, the joke teller explicitly 'splits' phone calls into two main categories, those made by females (represented in girls) and those made by males (represented in boys). The two categories differ in both the duration and the quality of the call. The joke employs exaggeration and numbers to prove the superiority of the boys: 00:00:50 on the one hand and 2:30:3 seconds on the other. The positive image of *us* (boys) is further supported by knowing the answer to three *wh-* questions 'when', 'where' and 'what'. Using these three *wh-* words followed by the inclusive 'all other important stuff' draws a positive image of the boys against that of the girls who are empty-headed chatterboxes indulging themselves in trivialities. The choice of topic of the call in both cases supports the two images. The girls after a long debate over an insignificant point still did not 'agree' on whether the contemptuous look was meant or not. The use of the verb 'decide' with the boys, with its positive connotation of decisiveness, stand in contrast to the verb 'discuss' associated with the girls, which implies that girls not only waste time but also cannot get to agree on a thing no matter how insignificant it is. The combination of boys being able to decide and doing that fast further enhances the positive image about them but simultaneously dim the image of girls who are skillful at neither.

This relatively few number of jokes depicting women's talkativeness, however, can be explained in view of the tumultuous political events Egypt has witnessed over the past three years. The data were mainly retrieved from internet sites that were posted during 2013 and 2014. Women's talkativeness was not the focus of attention in Egyptian society in this period. Hence, jokes can be seen as a reflection of the political and social changes of a society.

3.2 Women in the Public and Private Spheres

The data yielded 42 jokes that supported the stereotypical division of public and private spheres. These jokes reflect and strengthen the stereotypical mental image of women being assigned the private sphere while seeing the public sphere as the domain of men. These jokes encourage women to be confined to their assigned place of the society, the private space (home, children) by mocking their attempts to venture outside the space assigned to them by the society. Examples (2) and (3) illustrate this point:

Example (2)

- When you see all those going to the referendum are women,
You feel like
- Dance, O suppressed women, for I swear we only have each other (for support).

Example (3)

- Can anybody explain to those women entering the polling station to elect El-Sisi and emerge trilling, that these are elections, not a pregnancy test?

The jokes in (2) and (3) make fun of women's active participation in political events that occurred in the past two years. The fact that female voters' turnout outnumbered that of men in both January, 2014 referendum on the constitutional amendments and May, 2014 presidential elections was the subject of derision in social media. Undaunted by threats of terrorist attacks, Egyptian women went to the polling stations and expressed their opinions while singing and dancing out of jubilation. Women's growing interest in this public sphere matter was met with praise in serious mode of discourse but with cynicism in jokes. Example (2) refers to the massive turnout of women in the referendum on the constitutional amendments in January 2014 and the celebratory atmosphere they formed by singing and dancing. In politics, a public sphere domain which has long been dominated by men, such celebratory air given by women is mocked instead of being viewed as an expression of women's jubilation at their active and 'leading' role in the elections, as expressed in the tacit allusion in the joke to the absence of men, 'all ...are women'. The joke employs more than one discoursal strategy on more than one level in its negative representation of women. On the micro-semantic level, the joke uses words that are not contrasting in nature but which are contextually seen as so, such as 'dance' and 'go to referendum'.

It entails more than one implication; first, that women are not fit for participating in public sphere events like voting, as they see it as a chance to vent out sexual inhibitions by way of dancing. It implies that, by contrast, though men were absent from the referendum, they are the real serious participants in public sphere domain, even by not participating.

For the joke in example (2) to be understood, it poses the presupposition that the recipient is aware of the fact that women who participated in casting their votes over the referendum – a public sphere activity – went there to 'dance.'   Thus, the joke makes fun of this huge turnout by describing the female participants as 'suppressed women' who take the event to fulfill their wish to dance.

Example (3) mocks the participation of women in a similar public sphere affair; that is, the 2014 presidential elections. Again, the politically active jubilant women are ridiculed for spreading celebratory air via the traditional trills of joy '*zaghareed*', the traditional way of showing and expressing exhilaration in all joyful Arab events. The words '*zaghareed*' (or, trills) on the one hand, and 'elect', 'elections' and 'pregnancy tests' on the other, are represented as contrasting. The joke implicitly draws a comparison between *us*, the men, who are the serious voters, and *them,* the women, who go to celebrate and who lack the basic knowledge of what they are there to. The comparison is also between *our* sound acceptable conduct and *their* deviant unacceptable behaviour. Although the subject of the verb 'explain' is translated as 'anybody', which is a gender-neutral pronoun, the original subject in colloquial Egyptian Arabic '*hadd*' always has a masculine reference. Therefore, 'anybody' in the translation should also be taken here to have a masculine reference. This suggests that men are superior in view of the presupposition that men are assumed beforehand that they are the ones who teach women. They take on the role of the teacher while women are the recipients of instructions. It is the men who set the rules of correct conduct while women have to follow. There is also the use of the demonstrative (those) in 'those women', a strategy of distancing oneself, again the implicit positive representation of *us* – men – and the explicit negative representation of *them* – women. The joke derisively implies that women who vote and then come out of polling stations expressing happiness in the form of trills of joy do not know the difference between elections and pregnancy tests.Politics, however, was not the only public sphere field that social media jokes targeted.

The data included jokes that depicted women as unable to develop interest in anything outside the private sphere domain, as seen in Example (4) below. There were also jokes that targeted women's performance at work or in schools (Example 5), and their street conduct as pedestrians, or car drivers (Example 6).

Example (4)

- 90% of women in Egypt watch the weather forecast to make sure the linen will dry up.

Example (5)

- A math teacher asked a very clever female pupil: What does this symbol (=) mean?

The pupil replied: A sleeping eleven, Miss.

Example (6)

How do you know that the driver is a woman?

-     When you see the car turns right while the left flash indicators are turned on.
      - The driver does not respond to horns or light alerts because she is busy
      - doing other more important things like chatting over the mobile phone or
         checking her appearance in the mirror.
             -    The car suddenly stops and is left in the middle of the road – her idea
                  of parking.
   -     When the car speed is 60 km per hour on the high way and 100 in crowded
         areas.

Joke (4) implies that women's interest is shown to be limited to the private sphere (a house chore). Therefore, the maximum benefit they get from weather forecasts is to know whether the weather will be sunny enough for the linen to dry up or not. The joke teller uses a numerical, statistical strategy to prove his point (90% of women). For the joke to elicit laughter, the recipient has to understand what the joke teller implies. First, weather forecasts are meant for other purposes than drying up the linen. Second, men, unlike the majority of women, heed weather forecasts for their more 'serious' purposes, thus implying again that men '*us*', who made the weather forecast in the first place, are the knowledgeable group while women are the ignorant group.

On the other hand, Example (5) mocks women's performance in a different public sphere matter – education. The joke draws on the stereotypical belief that women are not good at science topics (Bridgeman & Lewis 1996; Cheryan, Plaut, Davis & Steele 2009; Valian 1998, 2014). This is achieved through the contrast between describing the girl as 'very clever' although her answer shows lack of basic knowledge. The joke implies that when girls are faced with a question in a public sphere domain, they search for the answer within their private sphere experiences (sleeping). Thus, the joke ridicules females (girls, in this case) to be unable to understand the basics of a science like mathematics. The girl's mind associates everything with private sphere experiences (the home), thus interpreting the sign (=) to refer to the number 11 but when it is horizontally 'asleep'.

The joke in example (6) targets women's performance in another public sphere domain, car driving. In some Arab countries, driving a car is still widely seen as a male activity, with countries like Saudi Arabia prohibiting female driving. In Egypt, the capital of culture in the Arab world, even though female drivers are widely accepted, they are the target of criticism on the way they drive, with men claiming superiority in this domain. The joke reflects this belief in male superiority. The joke teller here describes women's car driving behaviour as 'deviant' from the 'normal', accepted rules of driving. By stating that one knows the gender of the driver from the way s/he drives, the joke 'splits' the driving practice into one for men and another for women, with the former as the correct and the latter as the wrong. The joke assigns to women a series of actions while driving that the recipient knows to be wrong from her/his everyday experience. The humor stems from the sharp contrast between these 'wrong' actions of women '*them*' and the 'correct' actions of men '*us*'. On the micro-semantic level, the joke employs the contrast between 'right' and 'left'; 'no response' and 'horns and light alerts'.

Drawing on the recipient's experiences, the joke poses two contrasting propositions: 'being busy driving', which should be done and which men do; and 'be busy chatting on mobile phones', which should not be done but which women do. The joke also depicts women as using the front mirror to 'check (their) appearances' not to check the road which is the original purpose of a car mirror. Another contrasting proposition in the joke is what women understand by car parking, leaving it in the 'middle' of the road as against the common practice of the recipient who would park the car on the 'side' of the road.

The joke also employs the contrast between ' 60 km (slow) and 'high way' on the one hand, and '100 km (fast) and 'crowded areas' on the other. In all the previous propositions, the joke implies that men, unlike women, do not do this. Thus, in the matter of car driving, the world is 'split' into two categories, those who know how to drive – '*us*', men' – and those who do not – '*them*', women'.

All these jokes reflect and support the stereotypical division of the public vs. private spheres. Another stereotypical notion that is reproduced in sexist jokes is sex objectification of women, which is discussed in the coming subsection.

2.3 Women as sex objects

One widely accepted stereotypical image in Egyptian society, like many Middle Eastern patriarchal societies, is that of women as sex object. When examining the data in terms of this point, however, a few number of jokes appeared that can assigned to this theme. We found only one joke that contains explicit reference to women as sex objects (Example 7) and five cases that implicitly refer to this (No. 8 is an example).

Example (7)

- 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.

Examples (8)

- A woman at the age of 20 is like a football with 22 men chasing after her;
At the age of 30 is like a basketball with 10 men chasing after her;
At the age of 40 is like a baseball with one man chasing after her;
At the age of 50 like a tennis ball each man throws her to the other;
At the age of 60 like a golf ball that is thrown into a hole in the ground.

Example (7), which is the only joke in the data that contains explicit reference to women as sex object, 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'. The implication here is that the only job a woman is good at is to be a sex object.

Physical features are thus seen by the joke teller as the only qualifications needed for a female to pursue a career in the public sphere (i.e. secretary). Such allusions stress the traditional stereotypical image that women are first and foremost sex object.

Example (8), on the other hand, refers to sex objectification of women using the discourse strategy of similes. In the joke, a women's value is associated with two things: age and men chasing after her. Thus at the age of 20 she is seen as the most valuable with 22 men chasing after her while at the age of 60 she should be dumped in a hole (i.e. the grave). The joke explicitly dehumanizes a woman, likening her to a mere ball to be toyed with.

It is worth noting here that anonymity granted by the internet and social media offers a degree of freedom that can be conducive to breaking even the strictest taboos in the society, in what can be termed 'freedom in anonymity'. Nonetheless, the conservativeness of the Egyptian social fabric along with the two major strict taboos (religion and sex) explain the rarity of jokes that can be assigned to the theme under discussion in this section (For more detailed discussion of this point, see Nayef & Nashar 2014).

2.4 Egyptian Women vs. non-Egyptian Women

Another theme that has been analysed in the current study is the way Egyptian women are represented in comparison to non-Egyptian women. The data included 16 jokes that explicitly or implicitly compare Egyptian women to women of other nationalities. In a total of 15 examples, Egyptian women were depicted in unfavorable light using personal attributes that carry negative connotations (Example 9). The data contained only one joke that showed Egyptian women positively (Example 10).

Example (9)

- A foreign woman describing her fiancé: He's cute, lovely, so handsome, romantic.

But as for the Egyptian woman: An employee who has a flat, gets a good salary, has a dead mother and does not have sisters.

Example (10)

- 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 (9) compares 'Egyptian' women to 'foreign' women (of other nationalities). Being derided as having materialistic inclinations, an Egyptian woman is portrayed to have a checklist whereby she judges her fiancé, which includes his job 'employee', his possessions 'owns a flat' and his income 'has a good salary'. Egyptian women are also implicitly mocked as being emotionally possessive as they consider it an advantage if the man has no close relatives, such as a dead mother and no sisters. On the other hand, the joke depicts non-Egyptian women as 'romantic', associating them with lexical items denoting personal attributes 'lovely', 'cute', 'romantic' as well as physical appearance 'handsome'. Thus, the joke implies that Egyptian women, unlike non-Egyptian women, do not care for the man himself, but rather his possessions in a comparison that disparages Egyptian women and portrays them negatively.

On the other hand, example (10) 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 'hello' and '*bonjour*' are said in a normal voice tone, it was the seductive voice tone of the Egyptian woman that made the 'echo' respond by praising her sensuality 'Oh, sexy girl'. The joke implies that Egyptian women are sexier than their American and French counterparts.

4. Conclusion

Gender stereotyping is a social practice that reflects cultural ideologies about gender roles and social relations between the sexes. These beliefs and ideologies get reproduced by such social practices.

This paper addresses such stereotyping in a mode of discourse that is both indirect and subordinate – humour. The most untolerated gender infringements on women rights can be easily tolerated and accepted as mere jokes. After all, those who cannot take a joke are dull and lack any sense of humour. Egyptian society is both mirthful and androcentric, and jokes are one of the weapons it uses to express beliefs that cannot be openly said in the serious mode of discourse (Nayef & Nashar 2014). We sought to study and investigate sexism in Egyptian Internet jokes, hoping to shed light on what we believe is another tool of using language, an institution mainly controlled by men, to reflect and maintain already sedimented negative stereotypical images of women, thus enforcing a form of social injustice upon women; namely, gender inequality.

The paper investigated the stereotypical images of women in this widely popular 'not-so-innocent' discursive mode – jokes. The study addressed four themes: women and language; women in the public and private spheres; women as sex objects and finally the image of Egyptian women as compared to non-Egyptian women.

The data proved that few number of jokes targeted women's use of language (8 out of 284 that constituted the data). An explanation of this surprising scarcity of jokes addressing such widely popular theme in Egyptian society can be sought in the major political events that have affected Egypt over the past three years. All the jokes targeting this theme portrayed women as chatterboxes who fritter away hours discussing insignificant topics. There has been equal number of jokes dealing with the talkativeness of women in general and those dedicated to chatting on the phone.

The second theme to be investigated was women and the private and public spheres. The results proved that the jokes at issue support the stereotypical division of public sphere and private sphere between men and women. Egyptian women were stereotypically portrayed as unfit for public sphere activities, whether in politics, work and academic performance, or even driving a car.

The data also revealed that there were a few number of jokes depicting women as sex object. There was only one joke that contains explicit reference to women as sex objects and five jokes that implicitly refer to women in such terms. The reason behind this can be traced in the conservative nature of the Egyptian society in which sex and religion are taboos.

The data proved that even under the freedom granted by anonymity on the internet, sex remained a taboo as far as Egyptian internet jokes are concerned. As for the last theme addressed in this paper, that is, the image of Egyptian women compared to non-Egyptian women, the data revealed a strong proclivity to depict Egyptian women negatively when compared to non-Egyptian women, be they Arab or Western. In only (6.25%) of the cases were Egyptian females depicted in favourable light.

It was shown in all these themes that there has been a common explicit or implicit division of the world. There were always two images presented: A positive image of the superior, knowledgeable, rational men, and a negative one of the talkative, ignorant women who are unfit for the public sphere. These two images were drawn through the tool of language as has been shown above. It is the language glasses that help us see the world round us. And it is through language that we learn our prejudices and express our ideologies and social beliefs (van Dijk 2001). We talk about the acceptable *us* and the deviant *them,* in this case men and women respectively. It is through reproducing such negative representations of women that patriarchal societies promote and maintain the unjustified masculine hegemony.

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