



# Lockdown Humour and Gender Ideologies: A Critical Analysis of Social Media Memes

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## Introduction

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Social media, in today's world, has emerged as the microcosm of human society. It is not only a platform for communication, recreation and entertainment; but it also acts as an extremely crucial virtual space for mobilising public opinion, expressing voices on topical issues and organising mass campaigns against socio-political and socio-cultural problems of the society. One of the most popular communicative resources used by social media narrators are memes (Gbadegesin 2020). In general, memes can be anything such as catch-phrases, a person, a fictional character, an animal, a photo, a video, an event, a song, a belief, an action, a symbol, a word, or anything else (Moreau 2017) and stories, recipes, skills, legends, or fashion which are reproduced either singly or in bulk (Gleick 2011). They are packed with dense language and vivid imageries (Gbadegesin 2020). Memes are extremely significant as communication strategies because first, they can go viral quickly through repeated sharing on social media thus influencing a large number of people; and second, the "humour" in its content often express repugnance through disparagement, particularly in the context of gender.

During the nation-wide lockdown observed in India between 25 March 2020 and 31 May 2020 to spread the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic<sup>1</sup>, there was a surge in social media usage. According to the Hammerkopf Consumer Survey conducted in 2020, there was an 87 per cent increase in social media usage during the lockdown, from approxi-



mately 150 minutes per day before the lockdown was announced to more than 4 hours a day during the lockdown (*Business Today* 2020). Memes formed an integral part of the everyday lives of millions of Indians, having access to social media while remaining confined to their homes. A large number of these memes presented misogynous contents—they ridiculed women for their appearance, belittled their reproductive labour, lauded men for partaking in domestic chores and so forth. While the country was battling unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, nutrition deficiency, lack of access to adequate education, buttressing of gender inequalities, increased incidence of gender-based violence and so forth, in addition to indiscriminate loss of human lives, the social media platforms seemed to be gripped in an overwhelming wave of sexist humour ingrained in these memes.

In this era of postfeminism, where feminism is rendered irrelevant (McRobbie 2008), memes are crucial spaces which camouflage misogyny and sexism through the use of humour, jokes, fun (Worth et al. 2016). Several scholars have highlighted how memes communicating gendered meanings often mask asymmetrical gender power relations, to the extent that even the ridiculed "other", i.e. the women, is co-opted into accepting and enjoying the sexist "humour" despite their offensive and cynical undertones (Basu Chaudhuri 2021; Drakett et al. 2018; Gbadegesin 2020). Through extensive use of emoticons, the acronym "LOL" (laugh out loud) or similar signifiers of humour and joking, the gender regressive contents are rendered as benign and harmless, worthy of a good laugh (Drakett et al. 2018).

Thus, sexist memes become a site for symbolic violence, and can serve to subjugate women (Bemiller & Schneider 2010). The sexist humour propagated through memes can have serious and damaging consequences (Siddiqui et al. 2018). 'Studies have documented that regular exposure to sexist humour can foster the "prejudiced norm" by allowing people to voluntarily express sexism without the fear of counterstroke' (Ford & Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2008, cited in Siddiqui et al. 2018, 356). 'Similarly, numerous studies have suggested that exposure to sexist jokes increases the levels of rape proclivity among men' (Romero-Sánchez et al. 2010; Thomae & Viki 2013, cited in *ibid.*).

Located in this context, the need for a critical feminist approach to the study of memes in social media becomes self-explanatory. That said, this paper will critically analyse the memes circulated during the COVID-19 lockdown in India during 2020 through a gender lens. The specific research questions addressed are: First, how do the lockdown memes construct the meaning of femininity and masculinity through the verbal and visual representations? Second, what kind of gendered ideological



assumptions do these constructions/representations signify? This paper is organised in four sections. This introductory section is followed by a section on data and methods. The third section presents analysis of the memes through a critical feminist lens and the final section presents concluding remarks.

### **Materials and methods**

The data for this study are samples of gender related COVID-19 memes from Facebook and WhatsApp. 34 memes are purposively selected in all. The selection is purposive because not all COVID-19 memes focus on gender roles and ideologies. In order to understand how gendered meanings are constructed and gender ideologies are signified through the memes, a critical analysis of the visual elements used as backgrounds as well as the textual contents have been conducted. Hence, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seems to be an appropriate method for this paper. According to Chandler (2013), Fairclough (1989) and other practitioners of CDA have used it as a political commitment, and the application of the method is concerned with 'examining language and discursive practices to uncover the meanings created by historical, social, and political contexts' (47). Furthermore, 'studies employing CDA are frequently concerned with how power, dominance, and inequality are reproduced through discourse' (ibid.). Given that this paper attempts to decode how the gender-based meanings are constructed and signified through the memes, CDA seems appropriate. Indeed, gender-based memes can be viewed as discourse about masculinities, femininities and gender ideologies. As observed by Basu Chaudhuri (2021), 'Memes are an extension of our everyday life and culture. They propagate and sustain gendered identities through humour.'

The memes selected for analysis in this paper were received by the author over WhatsApp as parts of different groups during the lockdown as well as over Facebook. They were shared by both men and women. It is necessary to point out at this juncture that the objective here is not to collate a repository of all the memes, rather to critically examine them in order to divulge the underlying ideologies they signify. The analysis will consider how particular images have been used to signify the masculine and the feminine. The scope of analysing the textual contents using traditional discourse analysis is rather limited, because meme texts tend to be crisp catch phrases or short sentences lacking in proper grammar or punctuation (Chandler 2013). The author conducted initial coding through a "broad brush" for organization of content around themes. After the identification of common themes, the textual content of each thematic grouping was analysed to understand how each meme



uses concepts, images and language (wherever applicable) to signify ideological assumptions. Examples include explicit references to beauty and appearances, type of work done, interpersonal relationships and even violence.

### **Results: Deconstructing memes through Critical Discourse Analysis**

'The everyday, innocent and innocuous, mundane text is as ideologically saturated as a text which wears its ideological constitution overtly' (Kress 1993, 174). Fairclough's (1989) framework for analysis of text include: vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure. As mentioned earlier, memes could be anything from a picture to a catch phrase to a few sentences and hence, analysing the contents of the memes using all these components of Fairclough's textual analysis framework is rather difficult. Here, an attempt would be made to analyse the visual element of the salient components, including iconography, poses, and gaze.

#### *An analysis of the semiotics*

The following discussion presents a semiotic analysis of the selected memes. The author reviewed each meme and created categories based on commonality of subject references and theme in the meme text. Accordingly, the memes could be grouped into following categories: Beauty, body and seductiveness; Gender roles; Interpersonal relationships and "Normalisation" of violence. The visual elements are analysed based on categories of visual semiotic analysis.

One recurrent theme in the memes is the meanings constructed around the bodily appearances, particularly women. While beauty parlours and saloons remained closed during the lockdown affecting everyone, however, the memes explicitly projected women and men to have been affected in distinctly different ways. On the one hand, the women were incessantly vilified for looking ragged and unkempt, depicted in grown eyebrows and often even in moustaches and beards, un-manicured nails and hands because beauty parlours were shut down; the men, on the other hand, though were laughed at for their long hair and beards, they were not ridiculed. Figure 1 shows three images. One of them dons the image of a popular Indian actor and a young woman where both of them are shown with long hair, moustache and beard since barbershops and beauty parlours were closed. The second meme explicitly says 'You are going to see how people really look in a few weeks.' It shows the image of a man who after weeks of quarantine with no barbers open does not change much in terms of his appearance, the woman turns visibly unsightly. The third meme apprises that "chicks" or

young attractive women would come out of quarantine in wrinkled skin, undone hair and moustaches beards. Clearly, these three memes and indeed, all the memes of this thematic category define women's impeccable beauty in terms of fair complexion, hairless and well-groomed face.

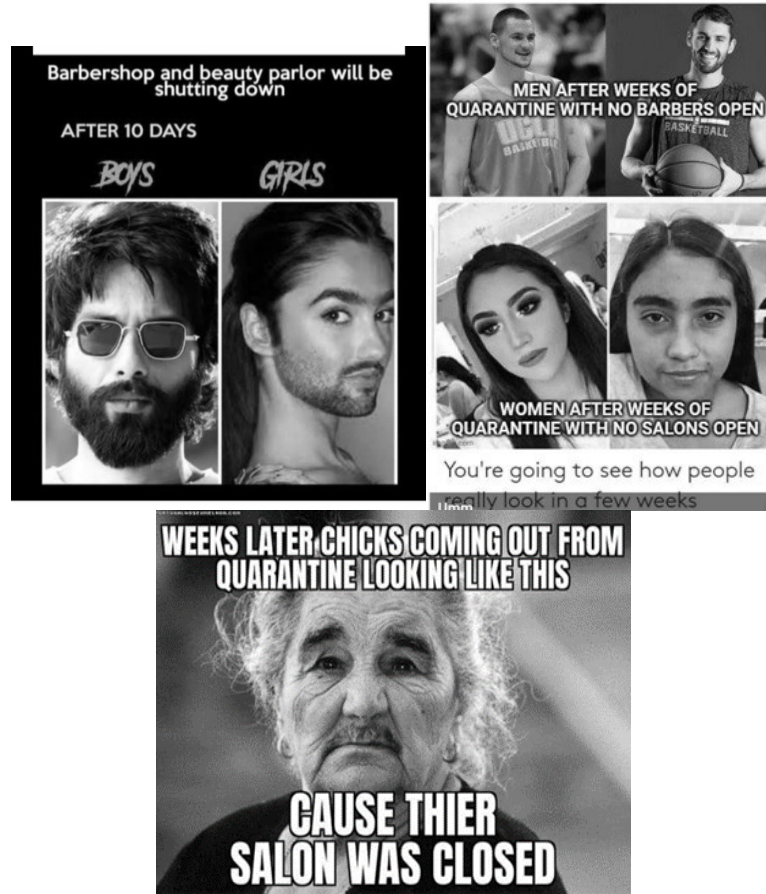


Figure 1, The Beauty and the beast. Facebook and Whatsapp, 2020.

Blatant sexism is also apparent in the memes which disparage women's bodies. Out of the 34 memes analysed here, about 11 scoff at women's fat bodies (Figure 2). The meme "Meeting up with the girls after lockdown" shows women who have become so fat after lockdown that they need to be helped out of the car by friends and they do not fit into their clothes. Interestingly, all the women in the meme seem to be laughing out loud at themselves. Another key observation is that the woman actress in Figure 1 and the girls meeting friends after lockdown are all looking straight at the viewer. Women's gaze is a salient feature in semiotic analysis. Like Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), Machin and Mayr (2012) categorise the images of people whose eyes are not visible, or who are not 'looking out at the viewer' as 'offer images' while those images where the pictured person is gazing directly towards the viewer as 'demand images' (71). Demand images indicate a form of visual acknowledgment while in offer images, the viewer is neither visually

acknowledged nor expected to give any response. Another salient aspect of the woman's gaze is that it is directed downward. As Machin and Mayr explain, a demand image 'asks something of the viewer in an imaginary relationship, so they feel that their presence is acknowledged and, just as when someone addresses us in social interaction, some kind of response is required' (ibid.). The nature of the demand is determined by other elements of the image, such as the facial expression of the pictured person, the apparent setting of the photograph and other visual cues (Chandler 2013). The fact that the despicably presented women are directly gazing at the reader probably indicates that they are demanding a form of response from the latter, perhaps abomination and disgust. In a way, they reiterate that well-groomed women are beautiful and pleasant to look at.



Figure 2, The trope of the "perfect body". Facebook and WhatsApp, 2022.

Another major theme pertains to gender role stereotypes. On the one hand, women's reproductive roles were alluded to in several memes, while others glorified men's participation in domestic chores. Some memes even seem to render men as less masculine on account of their partaking in women's roles. 'Masculinity is a "precarious state" demanding constant corroborations through gender conforming performances. Thus, masculinity is arduous to gain but disappears easily' (Bosson & Vandello 2011, cited in Basu Chaudhuri 2021). Men tend to lose respectability as "real men" should they participate in what is stereotypically considered as women's jobs (see also ibid.). For instance, the meme presented in Figure 3 portrays a vegetable seller who mistakes a man for a woman because of his long hair. When the vendor refers to the man as "Madam", he retorts asking the vendor to call him "Sir", and that he could not get a haircut done because saloons were closed. While this meme reinforces the argument presented in the context of Figure 1 in this paper, it could also be understood as alluding towards gender role stereotypes. Since women are supposed to look





after the household chores including buying everyday needs for the family, when the man goes out to do the same, he is mocked at for carrying out a "woman's job". Hence he is referred to as "Madam".



Figure 3, The "unreal man". Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.

Another meme presents a joke in colloquial Bengali language:

Woman: Do you have coriander leaves? I need it.

Me: No, there is no stock of coriander leaves.

Woman: How would you know? Ask your wife, she would know what is or isn't there in the kitchen.

Me: I have been cooking for the past 25 days. So, I know very well what is or isn't in the kitchen. [Translation by author].

There is the picture of a man laughing generously and evidently, this is the man referred to as "me" in the above joke. Thus, the fact that the man is cooking for the family is presented as humorous. The women's participation in domestic chores is presented in a very different light in the memes. Domestic helps constitute an integral part of the Indian households, especially in urban areas. The lockdown put stringent restrictions in place on mobility and travel, thus prohibiting the domestic helps to come to work; additionally, all the members of the households were confined within the house—both factors which substantially increased the burden of performing reproductive roles—cooking, cleaning, tending to elderly and children. The situation was particularly grim for the women engaged in paid work as they had to "work from home" in addition to discharging domestic and care work. The social media was abuzz with memes on how women coped with these multiple roles. A very popular meme circulated on social media was how the wife turned slim after 21 days lockdown due to the burden of domestic chore while the domestic help put on weight, possibly because she was at rest (Figure 4). Probably, it also indicates that she had to manage the entire

responsibility by herself. Such memes seem to trivialise the immense stress women undergo in balancing multiple roles by showing that by doing so, eventually women get slim bodies which are ardently desired for in social parlance. Another meme depicts a "Lockdown Queen" who not only knows how to make perfect coffee but also works hard towards preserving her beauty and body. During the lockdown, the users of Facebook engaged with a series of so-called "challenges" such as mastering the art of making Dalgona Coffee, doing eyebrows at home, draping the perfect saree and so forth. And the woman who won these challenges seem to be declared by this meme as the "Lockdown Queen". She looks away from the reader, oblivious of the surrounding, evidently she does not require any visual acknowledgement as she has been acclaimed as the "queen" (Figure 4).

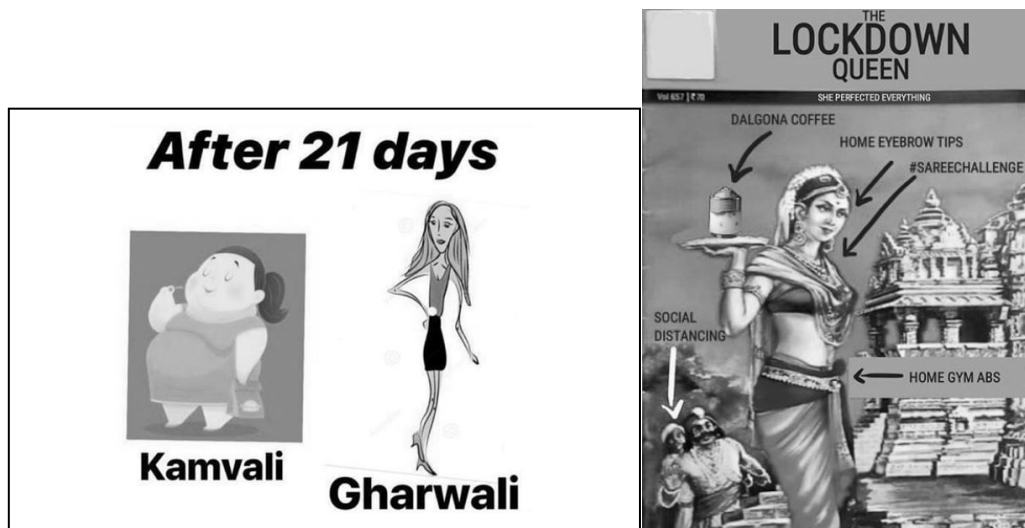


Figure 4, The "ideal" woman. *Facebook and WhatsApp*, 2020.

Belittling women's work is perhaps best evident in the memes on "work-from-home" (Figure 5). Evidently the expectations and realities of "work-from-home" have been presented in different light for women and men. While for the man in the meme, expectation is that he would sit at the table, formally dressed and with his laptop; the reality is that he would have to cook while work from home. He is seen in the meme wearing a headphone and his laptop is kept on the kitchen counter. On the other hand, the working woman is sitting probably in a coffee shop, there are snacks on her table and in the background the shop is visible. In addition, in the "reality" part of the image, she is not even shown working, she is simply setting and brushing her teeth. It would not be wrong to observe that such an imagery grossly undermines the professional ethics of women in paid work.





Figure 5, Work from home and professional ethics. *Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.*

Another dominant sexist message propagated by these memes pertain to women's mothering roles. The author came across several memes which convey the message that the women would come out pregnant after the end of lockdown and quarantine, subtly hinting at sexual intimacies with their partners. No matter how gullible these memes appear to be, given that women in India reported a manifold increase in domestic violence during the lockdown (Mohanty & Mohanty 2021), one cannot ignore the insinuations of sexual violence implicit in these memes. In fact, violence in general and sexual violence has been a major theme in many of the memes—this point will be returned to later in this paper.

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Figure 6, Women as objects of sexual gratification. *Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.*

Figure 6 shows memes mocking at women who would come out as pregnant after lockdown. Interestingly, in one of the memes, the woman is shown in her kitchen and cooking, thus demarcating her "ideal" place in the house. In both the "before" and "after" lockdown images, she is turning her back and cooking. However, before lockdown, she is posed as a seductress while after lockdown, she is shown with a baby bump and not dressed with sexual innuendo. The cultural fabric of India thrive on a gender ideology that puts men in a position of privilege marginalising women to the peripheries. In 2020, India ranked 123 out of 162

countries in terms of Gender Inequality Index which involves participation in economic activity, reproductive health and empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding this grim reality, there is no dearth of memes which eke humour out of the interpersonal marital relationships, depicting the wife as the monster or the tormentor.



Figure 7, The distraught husband, the hideous wife. *Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.*

In Figure 7, the first meme compares a woman, who has grown facial hair over the period of the quarantine, to a chimpanzee, thus dehumanising her for her appearance. The woman is rushed to a beauty parlour by her husband in a car, the very first day after quarantine, so that she can get back to her pre-quarantine shape and beauty. The expression on the man and the chimpanzee indicates that they are driving in high speed and can hardly hold on to their patience to reach their destination. Thus it is evident that both for the man and his wife, the latter's looking beautiful is of utmost priority. Nothing matters more in their interpersonal relationship. The second meme shows a man who is visibly disappointed because both he and his wife have contracted the corona virus. The disappointment of the man clearly alludes to the fact that he would have been happier to have fallen sick alone, because in that case, he would get an opportunity to stay in quarantine and most importantly away from his wife. Now that his wife is also sick with the virus, he would have to remain in quarantine with her, and this evidently is not a pleasant experience for him. The meme tries to communicate wives are uncouth companions and living alone with them is a distressing experience. The third meme is a statement which says 'Be nice to your wife. Restaurants are closed.' with laughing emoticons all around the text. It indicates that since restaurants are closed, the husbands must keep their wives appeased, otherwise they would remain starved. It not only reinforces



traditional gender roles, but also accords kitchen as a major site of power and that the woman who cooks weilds power over her husband; it seems to allude that men are gullible and vulnerable to women's fury.

One particular meme is especially significant in this context (Figure 8). It shows a Bengali (Indian) woman talking over the phone, referring to her husband. She mentions:

Today my husband went out. On his return, I made him bathe in dettol and vinegar, made him gurgle with sterilised mouthwash, washed his hands with harpic bathroom cleaner. Are these sufficient to kill corona virus? Or do I need to boil him in hot water for 15 minutes? [Translation by author]



Figure 8, A thinly built "effeminate" man doing dishes and his fat "demonised" wife seeking advise on husband abuse in the name of Covid 19 hygiene protocols. *Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.*

This meme uses some interesting symbols and seem to communicate nuanced meanings. First, the expression of the husband indicates that he is quite tormented by his wife while the grin on his wife's face indicates that she is enjoying the conversation and the act of harassing her husband. Second, the statures of the two characters have been made quite different and seem to be alluding to power asymmetries between the two. While the husband is rendered powerless through his thin stature, the wife is shown to depict considerable power over her husband through her heavy built. This also demonises obese women as ruthless and men-bashing. Third, the fact that this man so helplessly

assaulted by his wife is shown as washing dishes probably also indicates that he who does domestic chores would fall short of "true manhood" to counter violence in the hands of his wife (recall the discussion in the context of Figure 3).

Violence against women in India is a burning problem. Notwithstanding the various policies and measures adopted by the Government, Indian women continue to face serious physical, emotional and sexual violence. In such scenarios, memes normalising violence could have far-reaching regressive effects upon society. Many of the memes analysed for this study hinted at gender-based violence.



Figure 9, "Normalising" violence. Facebook and WhatsApp, 2020.

In Figure 9, the first meme shows a piece of sponge shaped up with the curvatures of an obese female body while the text reads 'When you have been in lockdown so long, garbage starts getting you aroused.' Three points clearly emerge from this meme: first, that a woman's body is a tool for sexual arousals; second, obese female bodies could be equated to garbage; third, it talks about the sexual arousals of heterosexual males with no regard for the woman's willingness or desire. The second meme in Figure 9 shows a girl bending over provocatively and talking to



a car driver saying 'For \$50, I'll do whatever you want' to which the man replies 'Do you know how to cut hair?'. The third meme in this Figure normalises stalking. In this meme, the Government asks its citizens 'Send your domestic helps on a leave if possible.' The left picture in the meme shows the househelp doing her chores, whereas in the right picture, the man of the house gapes at her with a grasping smile. All these memes allude towards women as sexual objects.

### *Textual analysis*

As mentioned earlier, applying the methods of traditional discourse analysis to the textual content of the memes is difficult, because virtually most of the meme texts consist of sentence fragments and lack proper grammar or punctuation. However, the author began with an analysis of the specific verbs present in each meme and then moved on to map the texts based on Fairclough's framework (see Table 1). A list of each unique verb in every meme in the data sample has been noted down and has been categorised as follows:

- Verbs that signify material processes: bathe, gurgle, wash, cut
- Verbs that signify mental processes: know, would know, want
- Verbs that signify behavioural processes: getting aroused, meeting up, coming out, cooking, taking, getting away
- Verbs that signify relational processes: "be nice to your wife"

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Most of the verbs, thus, signify material and behavioural processes. Table 1 presents an analysis of the texts based on Fairclough's framework as much as practicable.

### *Socio-cultural practice*

According to Rose (2001), '[a]n image will depend for its effects on a certain way of seeing... [b]ut this effect is always embedded in particular cultural practices...' (14). Thus, the act of seeing an image not only takes place in a specific social context but is also mediated by the latter. As indicated in the preceding discussion, the meanings produced in the memes quite explicitly signify unwavering gender ideologies. These construct femininity in terms of their bodily appearances—thus, the slim body is posed as a reward that women might achieve by tirelessly plodding through their reproductive responsibilities; the fat body is disparaged as unsightly, tantamount to garbage—nonetheless capable of arousing sexual desires given the monotony in men's life due to lockdown. Femininity is also constructed around sexual allusions—for a petty amount of money she is ready to offer any sexual service, lacks resistance in the face of detestable male gaze and male sexual desires, the latter rendering her pregnant by the end of quarantine. None of the





memes actually bestow any overt appreciation for the hard work that women had to put in during the lockdown. Men's portrayals were visibly different in similar situations. Neither their long hair nor beard was ridiculed, nor were they slandered for their bodies. On the contrary, both their bodily appearances and participation in domestic chores were highly appreciated. They were also projected as dedicated employees as opposed to their female counterparts. Further, they were posed as insufferable at the hands of their wives. Table 2 summarises the themes emerging out of the analysis based on the coding categories.

Components of textual analysis	Description*	Reference in text
Vocabulary	<u>Words and meanings:</u> "Charbie" probably is a summation of chubby plus Barbie	Figure 2
	"Chick" used to signify young and attractive woman - worthy to be looked at as opposed to the rugged old lady in the meme	Figure 1 Figure 4
	"Kamwali" meaning domestic help and "Gharwali" meaning wife	Figure 9
	<u>Metaphors:</u> "whatever you want" as a metaphor for offering sex by an escort	Figure 9
	"garbage starts getting you aroused" - a sponge dumped into garbage is used to indicate a plump's woman's body that arouses sexual desires - metaphor for women as inert sexual objects	Figure 9
Grammar	"Me taking my wife to get pampered" - the husband is in a decisive position here - high level of categorical modality	Figure 7
	"I have been cooking for the past 25 days. So I know very well what is or isn't in the kitchen" - husband is in decisive position here, high level of categorical modality	Figure 3



	<p>"I made him bathe in dettol and vinegar, made him gurgle with sterilised mouth-wash, washed his hands with harpic bathroom cleaner"          -the wife is in a decisive position here, high level of categorical modality</p>	Figure 8
Cohesion	<p>Very few memes use complete sentences. Based on that, the following memes can be said to generate a bond with the reader through a range of cohesive ties:</p> <p>"When you get corona virus and it was your only chance to get away from her"          - the use of pronoun "you" tends establish a personal relationship with the reader thus co-opting him into the same experience.</p> <p>"Be nice to your wife. Restaurants are closed."          - the use of pronoun "your" tends establish a personal relationship with the reader thus co-opting him into the same experience.</p> <p>"When you have been in lockdown so long, garbage starts getting you aroused."          - the use of pronoun "you" indicates that any heterosexual men among the readers shall get aroused by even garbage shaped as female body</p>	Figure 7  Figure 7  Figure 9

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\*Not all components were observed in every meme  
 Table 1, Textual analysis. *Constructed by author.*

The hideousness of women depicted in these memes, through the images of unsightly bodies or the unprofessional women or the tormenting wife, in fact corroborate the misogynistic imagery of women rampant in our religious scriptures, folk tales and other cultural artefacts. In these, women have been typically portrayed as inherently deceptive, manipulative and evil and there is an apparent hatred towards female sexuality. This is also reflected in memes as the preceding analysis amply points out. In all the memes, the ridicule aimed at women is targeted towards their body and sexuality, while those aimed at men seem to be simply for fun and not derision. The sexist humour evoked by the memes appear as gullible, amusing or laughable; but it also has serious and damaging consequences (Siddiqui et al. 2018).



Final coding categories	Meme themes	Meme examples
Objectification of women	slim, fat, ugly, instrument for sexual pleasure	"You are going to see how people look in a few days" pointing to dishevelled woman's face and body parts. Many memes showed women with grown facial hair. Several memes ridiculed obese women.
Gender stereotypes	Construction of masculinity	- Men growing long hair due to closure of barber shops laughed at but not ridiculed - Men's participation in domestic chores posed as humorous, and also as a marker of loss of "manliness" and professionalism
	Construction of femininity	- Women as the primary bearers of the responsibility of doing domestic chores - Women coming out of lockdown as pregnant hinting at the primacy of their reproductive role, lack of professionalism
Interpersonal relationships	Relationship between husband and wife	Husband ridiculing the wife, comparing her to chimpanzee, wanting to get away from her or avoid her, even physically assaulted by her
Normalisation of Violence	Sexual violence	Humourising male gaze at women, considering fat women's body as garbage, women as objects for sexual gratification

Table 2, Themes based on gender stereotypes in *WhatsApp* and *Facebook* memes. *Constructed by author.*

The fact that these prejudiced gender ideologies are presented as source of humour basically reinforces tolerance towards biased constructions of masculinity and femininity. These sexist memes "'infect" the people and influences the infected people's behaviour so that they help perpetuate and spread the virus' (Brodie 1996, 16). The element of humour seems to diminish the magnitude of the problem of reproducing asymmetrical gender ideologies; people tend to embrace these ideologies nonchalantly and do not hesitate to express sexism overtly. The gender-based problems plaguing Indian society, ranging from declining female work force participation, unequal wages, grotesquely poor levels of nutrition, low education and health outcomes etc. are all rendered extraneous. Such casual approach to reproduction of sexism and gender inequality is of particular concern in the context of violence encountered by women, both in private and public spaces. Several studies have noted that



enjoying sexist humour escalates physical and sexual aggression among men while women tend to become more tolerant towards violence (Ryan & Kanjorski 1998). To the extent that garbages are used to signify female bodies to be used for sexual pleasures, the horrifying fate of the women in this country is not hard to contemplate.

### **Discussion**

As put by Drakett et al. (2018), 'a meme is simply a unit of cultural transmission' (112). The preceding analysis succinctly brings out that the memes reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Gender stereotypes about appropriate masculine and feminine performances are packaged through apparently "harmless" humour—one that is "repressive" in nature (see Holmes 2000). That is, the humour entailed in these memes fails to subvert established gender ideologies and legitimise asymmetrical gender power relations in the society. By trivialising women's contribution to the sustenance of the family, by underplaying the immense stress born by women in balancing personal and professional lives and by mocking at women's commitment to professionalism, these memes act as a backlash to the project of feminist discourse (Faludi 1991). Thus, these memes serve a specific political function, that of consolidating the gendered construction of power.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic entered India through the State of Kerala in the month of January in 2020 (Andrews et al. 2020). Gradually it started spreading across the country and in order to reduce transmission of the disease, a 21-day nationwide lockdown was announced by the Government of India during 25 March 2020 to 14 April 2020. Subsequently, this was extended upto 31 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The Human Development Report 2020 calculates Gender Inequality Index (GII) to highlight gender-based inequalities in the countries, taken on three measures: economic activity, reproductive health and empowerment. The GII value of India was 0.488, which made it rank at the 123rd place out of the 162 nations. Economic activity is measured by the labour market participation, which stood for Indian males at 76.1 per cent and for females at 20.5 per cent. The index measures reproductive health using maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rate, which were at 133 deaths per 100,000 live births and 13.2 births per 1,000 women respectively. For empowerment, the index measures the percentage of female seats in the Parliament, which is at 13.5 per cent in India, and the percentage of males and females with at least some secondary education. For females, this was at 27.7 per cent and for males at 47 per cent.



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