

SLANGS AND GENDER-A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Slangs come in various hues with their very own resources and contexts. This paper attempts a study to analyze the sociolinguistic aspect of slangs and their consequent impact on gender. The popular slangs in the Western world and India were analyzed and the causes were investigated. The commodification of women as seen from the usage of slangs in the Indian society was also analyzed. This paper, further, dealt with the effect slangs had on gender and the impact of media on the evolution of slangs. The study is based on responses to questionnaires and the data are analyzed using elementary statistics.

Index Terms: Slangs, Gender, commodification, Sociolinguistics

I. INTRODUCTION

"Walter... you son of a bitch."

-Maude [1]

Well this dialogue is from a famous 1974 episode of *Maude* (Norman Lear comedy) where her husband has a heart attack while having an affair. Before she finds out what caused the attack, Maude Findlay was very sympathetic and devastated by her husband's condition; but once he confesses in the hospital what caused it, she glares at him and delivers the almost blasphemous dialogue of its time.

Slang is usually labeled as an "exercise in wit" and used "to be different", "to enrich the language" and "to show that one belongs to a certain school" [2]. Slang helps develop and create identity both as a group member and an individual in the eyes of the group [3]. Thus we witness slangs as a human phenomenon irrespective of the language and context.

In a common man's life slangs are essentially an expression against censorship. They have been a part of our vocabulary since the beginning of time. Slangs, being a subset of language are a reflection of society and especially everything that is taboo. Their utility and use has been long debated but their role in human evolution cannot be overlooked. The Roman generals who were supposedly the most efficient leaders were also the most foul-mouthed. Hence the use of slangs especially by the male demographic enables them to establish dominance and also express machismo. Unfortunately the societal and sexual repression of women has been reflected in the usage of slangs since most of these derogatory words are targeted towards the fairer sex as they represent misguided expressions of dominance. Gender refers to a set of qualities and behaviours expected from a female or male by society. So gender is the difference between women and men resulted from cultural and social expectation. For men language is a means to preserve authority and maintain status in a competitive society. For women, language is mainly helpful to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships. Sociologists have argued that males have typical characteristics of authoritarian and socialistic behaviour

while females are pious, submissive, and domestic. Gender difference, as a social phenomenon, has been reflected in language. Tabooed words and slang can be found more frequently in men's language than in women's though they are of the same education level.

Sociolinguistics is the field of research that studies language in relation to society and "the general study of communication through the study of organization of verbal means and the ends they serve" [4]. According to Hudson [5] the social situations in which language is used, is thus "a clue to social information" and the main reason for communicating is to "convey messages effectively". Labov [6] argues that the use of language depends on the "the relations of the speaker, addressee, and audience, and particularly the relations of power or solidarity among them". Thus it is to be seen that sociolinguistics describes human interaction as being rooted in social needs and behaviour, expressed through language in relation to other people. And to conduct a study with this perspective was an enriching experience where slangs and cuss words are adopted by common people, and become a part of common people's vocabulary.

II. WESTERN AND INDIAN SLANGS-DIFFERENCES

The most popular Western slangs are: Fuck, Shit, Hell, Damn, Goddamn, Jesus Christ, Ass, Oh my God, Bitch & Suck.

The most popular Indian slangs are: Harami, Saala, Kamina, Maderchod, Behenchod, Lowda, Gaand Maar & Chutiya.

From the above list it can be observed that popular Western slangs mostly deal with blasphemous words i.e. words that are forbidden by the Bible. Hence religious (Papal) censorship was directly responsible for the origin of slangs in the Western world. In India Gods are many. And unlike the Western world, taking their names is not discouraged. In fact it is encouraged. Without censorship, no swearword could develop and hence direct religious censorship was not responsible for the origin of slangs in India. However, religious censorship did contribute to the prevalence of other swearwords. Swearwords demeaning chastity and purity of women are a reaction to censorship by patriarchal authority as well as to caste censorship. Caste, a fiction of society, is legitimized by religion. To frame an analogy, the Church is the institutional form of religion in Western societies while caste is the institutional form of religious sanction in Indian society.

If we compare Indian and Western (Greek) mythology, we notice a direct contrast between the tales of Sita and Helen of Troy. Sita's chastity, when she returned from Lanka after 14 years, was doubted even though she passed the 'Agni Pariksha' or 'Test of Fire'. In fact the doubts of

the citizens eventually compelled Rama to excommunicate her from Ayodhya. Helen of Troy on the other hand was embraced despite her considerable list of paramours. She was kidnapped by Theseus when she was quite young. After that she was married to Menelaus, the brother of Agamemnon. It's speculated that she had sexual relations with Agamemnon as well. Later she eloped with Paris and became his wife. After Paris' death in the Trojan War she married Deiphobus, Paris' brother. After Troy is conquered, Menelaus reclaimed her as his wife. This reflects the value with which female sexual purity is revered in India and how it has influenced slangs and gender in India is analyzed in the next section.

III. POPULARITY OF SEXUAL SLANGS IN INDIA

"We hang miniature paintings of the same act in our homes proudly. The young men who grow up seeing this, or listening to the story told in an amused tone are bound to not find such an act abhorrent."

-Kancha Ilaiah. [7]

This is with reference to Lord Krishna's stealing the clothes of women bathing in the Yamuna River, teasing them and enjoying the sight of their naked bodies. And in India Hindus strive to emulate the Gods blindly.

Sigmund Freud proposed that incest and patricide are the two universal taboos. This is certainly true in an Indian context. In India's primarily patriarchal culture men are viewed as independent resources. Women on the other hand are dependent on men for protection and defending their honour. The mother-son relationship is glorified in Indian culture. The irony lies in the fact that this relationship is the source of most severe slangs in India. Western slangs do not usually target these relationships.

In the following list we have analyzed how the most popular sexual slangs in India affect both men (by targeting their honour) and women (By targeting their sexual sanctity directly)

- **Saala:** The receiver's sister's honour targeted. The receiving man as well as the sister (woman) suffers.
- **Behenchodh:** It suggests that the receiver himself violates his sister's honour. It affects both the receiver (man) and the sister (woman).
- **Maderchodh/Teri Maa Ki type:** It suggests that the receiver himself violates his mother's honour. It affects both the receiver (man) and the mother(woman). It is the most severe slang because it represents the most severe taboo.
- **Haramkhor** (from Persian Haramzada meaning Haram=Illegal + Zada=Product): It refers to a bastard or illegitimate child. In contrast bastard is not a popular slang in the West.

From the above list of slangs we understand that protecting the Mother's/Sister's honour is of highest priority to Indian men. So slangs targeted at Mother/Sister affect the receiver most severely. This is also because traditional female sexuality in India deeply linked to purity. Hence the idealization of the 'Pavitra Naari' or 'Pure Woman' in Indian society. Purity of caste is a direct function of purity of women in Indian society. Male members of a certain caste are dependant for their status in society on the purity of their women. Thus religious censorship indirectly leads to slangs targeted at women as the onus of maintaining sanctity

and purity of everything is placed on women in India, particularly in the patriarchal parts.

Bengali and Assamese societies on the other hand are the frontier of the patriarchal belt of India and hence sexual slangs targeted at women are a lot less popular compared to the patriarchal heartland of India. The North Eastern Indian states being dominated by tribal culture there is less gender disparity. Khasis and Garos (Meghalaya) are in fact matriarchal societies where the mother is considered as the head of the family. So using the Khasi word 'Dah-Bei'(Motherfucker) in Shillong would be considered odd and repulsive but not as offensive as in India's patriarchal belt. This is because women have a strong presence in Khasi society. They are not seen as a weaker gender in need of protection from their men. Also, ritual purity is in no way linked to sexuality and pre-marital sex and widow remarriage are both allowed.

IV. COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN

Commodification or Objectification refers to an attitude of regarding a person as a commodity. The sexual objectification of women is by far the most harmful effect of slangs in India and also in a global context. The word 'maal' literally refers to goods. Hence sexually objectifying slangs are a tool for objectification of women. The entire process of classification of women according to their physical features is extremely sexist and unfair (prevalent in college campuses across India):

- Maals
- Males
- Non-males

When a hierarchal classification such as Patakchodhmaal>Bakchodhmaal>Tanakmaal [8] is used, it is as if women are being classified as products. As if they are being rated as products are on e-shopping portals like Amazon and Flipkart. The irony is that men mistakenly believe they're complimenting the women, whereas in reality they are being victimized. Slangs such as 'Spankablemaal' and 'Doodwalimaal' directly objectify female body parts. 'Badi hoke maal banegi' is a term that borders on pedophilia. Maal like aunties (Indian version of MILF) targets women who have become mothers. All these have a very damaging effect on the women they supposedly complement. They undermine the personality of the 'object' and deeply impact the self-esteem of the victim. They degrade an entire gender and reinforce a belief about female inferiority.

The general belief is that jokes denigrating women are harmless but research by Sociologists shows that women are negatively affected. Such 'subtle sexism' has a twofold psychological impact:

- Demoralization and decreased self-esteem: Professional achievements of classically beautiful women are often undermined
- Formation of Objectified Body Consciousness: Internalization of the attitude of sexual objectification and aspiring to be sex objects

The exact opposite is faced by women who are not perceived as 'beautiful' by the transgressors. Especially in professional fields, jealous men whose egos are threatened by confident, intelligent women make value judgments on these women to demean them. Women with flatter chests and darker skin are victimized.

V. THE EFFECT OF SLANGS ON MEN

We have noticed that men don't suffer because of slangs to the same degree as women. However, because of societal expectations, men are often forced to use slangs to reaffirm their machismo even if they don't want to or don't mean it. In patriarchal India, the most severe slangs against men are those that target the women in his life, since protecting their honor is of utmost importance to him.



VI. MEDIA AND SLANGS

The media is a very powerful medium which influences society with ever increasing depth. Hence it has a profound influence on the development and propagation of slangs. The most ancient form of media, 'The Ramayana' depicts the banishment of Sita from Ayodhya because of her suspected lack of sexual purity highlighting patriarchal values of the day. In the modern age, the excessive use of expletives in 'Gangs of Wasseypur' reflects the need of men to affirm their dominance through usage of slangs i.e.

expression against censorship. The usage of the words 'baby' & 'item' and 'item numbers' in Bollywood movies highlight the sexual objectification of women and how it has crept into our collective unconscious through mainstream Indian media.

The AIB roast which drew much controversy made a mockery of the Indian value system yet highlighted its hypocritical nature by promoting crude and sexist jokes. It was extremely abusive and not only ruined the clean image of the Indian culture and women, but also misled today's youth. Farida Jalal, an Indian cine artist who was the butt of a crude joke said that her consent wasn't taken and that she didn't like it as it isn't part of 'our culture'.

VII. SURVEY RESULTS

A field survey was done on 100 subjects. Of these 65 were women and 35 were men. All 100 people were between 18 and 24 years of age (Questionnaire attached in Appendix for reference). In the following paragraph I would represent the major findings. Also a couple of the most revealing questions have been referenced to give a clear idea of modern trends of thinking among today's youth, the most dedicated user of slangs in society.

From the feedback it was concluded that both men and women felt that using slangs was more acceptable by men in any social setting. Almost all men felt that males use slang more profusely while nearly half of the women felt that women use slangs more profusely. This finding may have been biased because men in general use less slangs in front of women and vice versa. Both men and women felt that using slangs was most acceptable in mixed friend circles. Almost all the women who use slangs said they use slangs almost exclusively in private settings. The men said they use slangs in public and private settings in equal measure. Both men and women felt that low income and poorly educated classes use slangs derogatory to women and slangs in general more profusely. 2/3rd of the men felt that all male groups used more derogatory slangs towards women while 1/3rd felt that all female groups used more derogatory slangs towards women. Almost all of the women felt that all male groups used more derogatory slangs towards women. 'You're a pussy' i.e. describing a man using feminine slang was considered to be more offensive than 'You've got balls' i.e. describing a woman using masculine slang by both men and women. The question 'Why do you think the word STUD has a positive connotation while the word SLUT has a negative connotation?' divided men and women as most men felt it was because the biological cost of promiscuity for women was higher than men while most women felt it was because of sexist/patriarchal societal values. When asked 'Why do you think men use slangs derogatory towards women?' most men and almost all the women agreed that it was to establish dominance and appear macho reaffirming sexist/patriarchal societal values. Finally the question 'Why do you think more sexual slangs are targeted towards women than men?' once again divided opinion as almost all women said it was because of social/sexual repression of women while 70% men said it was because women are physically weaker than men in general.

VIII. CONCLUSION

We conclude that slangs have a much more severe effect on women than men. Slangs are used mostly by men

to establish their dominance in society. Slangs being a reflection of society as a whole also reflect its nuances. Compared to Western slangs the most popular Indian slangs are sexual in nature which is ironic considering the high esteem with which women are viewed in this country. Sexual slangs objectify women and this leads to further sexual repression.

IX. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to extend my appreciation to students of HIT K and the library staff.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Please tick the correct options

1. Name:
2. Sex: (A) Male (B) Female
3. Age Group: (A) Below 18 (B) 18-24 (C) 25-32 (D) 32-40 (E) 41 and above
4. Do you have any children: (A) Yes (B) No
5. If yes then have you ever accidentally used slangs in front of him/her/them: (A) Yes (B) No
6. Do you think it's more acceptable using slangs in front of: (A) Males (B) Females
7. Economic Status: (A) Low Income Group (B) Middle Income Group (C) High Income Group
8. Educational background: (A) High School Diploma (B) Undergraduate Degree (C) Postgraduate Degree
9. Did you attend a (A) Co-ed (B) Non Co-ed School?
10. Which Indian state are you from:
11. Which gender do you think uses slangs more profusely: (A) Males (B) Females
12. What type of social setting do you think is acceptable for the use of slangs?
(a) Male friend circle (B) Female friend circle (C) Mixed friend circle
13. Do you use slangs: (A) Solely in private settings (B) Solely in public settings (C) Both settings (D) Nowhere
14. Do you think it's more acceptable for (A) Males (B) Females to use slangs in Private settings?
15. Do you think it's more acceptable for (A) Males (B) Females to use slangs in Public settings?
16. Which section of society do you think uses slangs more profusely?
(A) Low Income/Educated Group (B) Middle Income/Educated Group (C) High Income/Educated Group
17. Which section of society do you think uses slangs derogatory towards women more profusely?
(A) Low Income/Educated Group (B) Middle Income/Educated Group (C) High Income/Educated Group
18. Which social group do you think uses slangs derogatory towards WOMEN more profusely?
19. All male group (B) All female group (C) Mixed group
20. Which social group do you think uses slangs derogatory towards MEN more profusely?
21. All male group (B) All female group (C) Mixed group
22. Which do you think is more embarrassing?
A female slang targeted at a man e.g. 'you're a pussy'
23. (B) A male slang targeted at a woman e.g. 'you've got balls'
24. Why do you think the word STUD has a positive connotation while the word SLUT has a negative connotation?
(a) promiscuity for women being higher than men (b) Biological cost of Sexist/Patriarchal Societal Values (c) Other (Please describe in short):

25. Why do you think men use slangs derogatory towards women?
(a) To establish dominance/appear macho/manly (b) reaffirming Sexist/Patriarchal Societal Values
© Other (Please describe in short):

26. Why do you think more sexual slangs are targeted towards women than men?
(a) Social/sexual repression of women
(b) Women being physically weaker than men in general
© Other (Please describe in short):
