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WHAT DO YOU WANT TO 'MEME'? A STUDY ON 'LOCKDOWN MEME' ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract :

The paper seeks to examine the 'lockdown memes' circulated on various social media to explore the ways humour has been used to carry forward as well as conceal potential subversive and perpetuating ideas. Working upon the porous domain of virtual space, the paper makes a selective analysis of memes to critique the construction of reality that is not too different from the actual reality particularly in the domain of gender issue. While the memes are normally approached as items of eliciting humour on various social and political issues, the present article seeks to show how humour is tactic employed by the internet users to dilute the grave social concerns. While some memes are subversive in nature, memes on gender issues are reproduce the dominant power-centric and patriarchal culture and ethos.

The nationwide imposition of lockdown in 2020 following the outbreak of Covid-19 triggered a number of 'memes' on social media that not only poke fun at the plight of people locked indoors, but also underline certain social and cultural matrix. The idea of 'work from home' has been encouraged leading to the co-habitation of male and female members within the four walls of the room for considerable period of time. The household work has been normally managed by women in a patriarchal society, and the sudden imposition of lockdown forced men to take up household work in order to share the domestic burden. A number of investigations have been made to suggest that there has been sharp gender inequality in the domain of sharing domestic chores despite the apparently grandiloquent display of men shouldering domestic responsibility. The gender bias underlying the sharing of domestic work in a patriarchal culture has been all too patent on virtual space. The memes on lockdown and its resultant effect on man-woman relationship suggest that the division of labour between man and woman is based on patriarchal society and its gendered norms. While the domestic work has been conceived as primarily unpaid and therefore deemed less important than the paid jobs in which men are mostly engaged, the idea of men sharing domestic work has not been encouraged too often. It is interesting to note that the attitude to domestic chores does not change much even when women are professionals or working women. Even in household where both husband and wife are working professionals, the onus of looking after domestic chores falls largely on women. This

has become too patent during lockdown when domestic helps remain absent. In fact the idea of 'work from home' has become highly troublesome as women are burdened with the task of not only working 'for/in home' but also from home. This 'work from home' has become literally troublesome as women have to manage both the home and the world. Men on the other hand are not generally expected to share the responsibility of domestic work. This patriarchal notion has been internalized by people of both sexes, and thus the husband's involvement in sharing domestic work is more of tokenism than the actual engagement in the work. Women are not also too ready to allow men to take up domestic work to a greater extent for various reasons. One reason behind women's apathy to encourage men in domestic chores is the socially transmitted idea that men are not fit for the job and the onus is primarily on women who have been trained to look after the domestic work. This is an offshoot of the patriarchal culture that promotes and advocates the homemaking skills of a woman. The male-dominated society divides space into 'ghar' (home) and 'bahir' (the world) and the patriarchal culture assigns sanctity to 'ghar' exclusively looked after by women. It is also seen that men are not encouraged to take up domestic work because of the fear of some sort of potential discord in the family.

The exponential growth in information technology and the greater network connectivity have created huge demand for social networking among Indians. The ubiquitous presence of social media and the addition of various functionalities have made them very popular among the users. No wonder the social media like the Facebook, Twitter, You Tube have not only opened up a new vista for communication across various borders, but also galvanized popular opinion for public causes. The hashtag # Me Too movement launched on social media had made huge impact upon different walks of life, and the mainstream, conventional media had to take cognizance of the situation. With the increasing number of subscribers, social media enjoy popular support and endorsement, and the alternative reality depicted in this media manages to impact the way we live our social lives. Since the social media remain more permissive in terms of discussion carried out openly on various issues and everything happens on a virtual space, the formation of community made through subscription to various groups is inspired by certain common interests that are volatile and flexible. Since the virtual space is considered to be fluid, intangible and unmapable, the commitment to a particular group is questionable and is always amenable to re-formulation.

While the social media are marked by variety of activities ranging from political discussion, social and cultural activities to exclusively personal interests, the contemporary and trending things happen to proliferate and dominate the social space. Since the virtual space is considered to be less strict and more flexible, people are apparently less critical about the content they share or notice. However such activities may seem innocuous but a critical study of the content circulated on social media points towards certain patterns in the content on circulation. One of the important aspects of virtual messages/content is the humorous and ironical undertone embedded in the message. Since the virtual space is generally employed by the users without any serious intent or purpose, the

messages contain palatable material or are humourous in nature. This particular nature of the virtual message or space has given greater currency to 'meme'. Shifman argues that memes are 'units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience'. No wonder memes are part of the 'popular culture' that enjoys the popular participation and is subversive in nature. While acknowledging the varied nuances of the term, John Storey argues that the term 'popular culture' is 'simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people' (5). Such an understanding of the term implies the centrality of the people in the making and dissemination of culture. Therefore what is commonly perceived to be appealing to the mass constitutes the popular culture. Another aspect of this popular culture is that it is distinct from what is considered to be high or elite culture by its emphasis on mass production and consumption without any reference to standard notions of 'culture'. The social media which witness huge participation of people across various social and cultural divides have been very powerful in the making of popular culture by giving access to the people to engage in various cultural products. One of the recurrent features of the memes on circulation on social media is the humour they invoke and thrive on. A meme may be defined as a humourous image that is copied, circulated on virtual platform, and is primarily intended to make humorous comment upon certain social, political or cultural event or fact. A meme may be a visual message or text or video message that provides a unique perspective on the cultural events of a moment in time and space. Memes are generally made on trending topics or contemporary issues. Sometimes memes contain potential subversive messages that may not ordinarily be made in given circumstances. Therefore memes may be taken as tactics resorted to by the subaltern in their struggle for social justice. While memes originate from a sense of making jocular comments on the state of affairs, they are nonetheless powerful in galvanizing popular opinion on a particular topic. Milner argues that memes 'empower ordinary citizens to undermine the elite's control over mass media, to mobilize support for collective action, and to resist hegemonic discourses'. The success and popularity of a meme depends on how it is received and re-consumed by people, for 'it is only through the collective use that the artefact becomes an internet meme' (Osterroth). The underlying implication is that memes offer a participative engagement on the part of the users whose involvement in appreciating/ sharing the visual content contributes to the considerable life span of a meme. In fact the participatory ideas of online communication blur the content production and consumption. The success of a meme depends on the way humour and ironical tone is employed in making the meme.

It has been observed that social media have been abuzz with various contemporary events, and the users ventilate their opinions often by producing a meme. The conventional aspects like the man-woman relationship, oppositional views on career options by father and son/daughter etc. are generally considered to be suitable topics upon which memes are made. However as the virtual space is primarily marked by what is happening in the present, the contemporary events attract attention of the meme makers. A critical scrutiny of the memes circulated on social media will suggest that a good number of them are made to target the government policies by poking fun at them. Since the

unabated humour is at the core of a meme, users make fun of the government policies without running the risk of being considered as anti-government. This space thus offers ample opportunity to the common masses for ventilating their opinions as well as subscribing to the stand against any issue. The contemporary issues like the hike in petrol and LPG prices have been the butt of humorous diatribe by the users of social media. The unwanted behaviour of the political leaders, like sleeping while in the Legislative Assembly or Parliament has been trolled on social media in the form of memes. The declaration of election results for different State Assemblies or the performance of a cricket team are the popular themes upon which memes are made. Sometimes the memes are localized by offering local flavour to the visual message circulated on the internet.

However virtual space has been inundated with the images of men engaged in domestic work, and such display underscores the need to unmask the show. It is in this perspective meme needs to be investigated as to how it underlines the socio-cultural matrix. The fundamental aspect of meme is the humour through which a message is conveyed. But humour is employed merely as a tool to disguise the inherent disapproval or opposition. Humour in fact facilitates in the articulation of antagonism in a veiled manner (Freud). No wonder the transmission of a disparaging remark or message goes unnoticed or remains ordinarily overlooked when it is couched with humour that advocates the light-hearted tone in which the message is to be received. Since the core of a meme is thought to rest on its element of humour, it can easily penetrate the psyche of both sexes, and force them to participate in the message. Such participation becomes almost voluntary and normative through the immediate act of sharing and forwarding the message on various online platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. It has been observed that memes centre round our everyday life and culture, and thus the participation of internet users is quite staggering primarily for its familiarity. A critical discourse on lockdown memes will gesture towards the inherent gender dynamics operative under the guise of innocuous memes. The memes circulated during lockdown emphasize the role of women as primary caregivers who have to look after not only the household work in the absence of domestic help, but also take care of the elders and children at home. Men on the other hand are projected more as consumers of the product made by women at home. The citizens have been urged to clap in order to applaud the work of frontline workers during pandemic, and this has led to the circulation of various memes. One meme depicting a middle class couple confined indoor and engaged in various activities suggests certain gender roles fashioned by society. In the meme it is seen that the husband enjoys the special programme/soap opera broadcast on television while the wife is engaged in cooking and speaking on the phone: "No, he is not helping at all. He just claps in recognition of my work for five minutes every day". While this meme takes a dig at the political undertone of the context, it further sheds light on the gender division of labour. The meme underscores the gender-based expectation according to which women are considered to be the service providers while men are projected merely as consumers. This further perpetuates the social norm that domestic work is a matter of responsibility, and that primarily rests with women while men

perform their gender roles by remaining conspicuously absent from these activities. It may not be out of place to refer to the advisory issued by the Malaysian government regarding the appropriate behaviour expected of women: 'Avoid wearing home clothes. Dress up as usual, put on make-up and dress neatly.' Such directive is issued from the conviction that any kind of domestic discord or violence is directly linked with a woman's physical charm and can be averted only if women conform to the gender roles like remaining attractive or desirable. Such 'sexist' advice was however met with huge protest, and the government had to apologize for offending people. Such kind of 'sexist' approach is evident in another campaign poster which suggested women should use baby voice of cartoon character Doraemon instead of 'nagging their husbands' during lockdown. All these campaign posters only perpetuate the gender roles championed by the patriarchal society.

The gendering of space has been further consolidated by the circulation of memes that are thought to evoke laughter. Such evocation of laughter is merely a trick to conceal a potential gender stereotyping. The following meme pokes fun at the role reversal of the sexes, but it vicariously conceals the normalization of gendered space in a patriarchal society.

" Lockdown...working from home

Boss: Maine tumhe phone kiya tha, tumhari patni ne kaha tum khana bana rahe ho, tumre waapis phone kyun nahi kiya?

Employee: Sir kiya tha, aapi patni ne bataya aap barton dho rahe ho!"

Boss: I called you, but your wife said you were busy in cooking. But why didn't you ring me back?

Employer : Sir, I called you back but your wife said that you were washing utensils

(Translation mine)

There are a number of issues that invite our attention here. Firstly the reversal of gendered roles is highlighted, and provokes fun. Secondly such reversal of roles is not socially acceptable or desirable, hence the meme. Another important aspect is the categorization or grading of even domestic work. While the act of cooking by man is acceptable, particularly in trying times like the pandemic, but the less masculine and utterly dishonourable act of washing utensils by men is not only hilarious but is considered highly derogatory. This covert message has become more pertinent as the boss is here assigned the task of washing utensils which is performed only by the domestic help. The meme therefore perpetuates the gender bias by reiterating the function of men as primary wage earners, and relegating the unpaid work as meaningless, or even no labour at all. Here the use of humour has been capitalized in order to elicit popular approval from the consumers. The social construction of masculinity is done through the division of labour, and thus the sharing of any household work, especially the so-called inferior works like washing utensils or clothes or mopping the floor etc. is deemed to question the sense of masculinity. No wonder the pictures of men cooking after learning the recipes from YouTube are quite visible while the image of men cleaning the floors or washing utensils remains nominally present. A meme depicts a man in his office attire doing

domestic chores like mopping the floor and washing the utensils and writes an imaginary letter to his office complaining how he is disturbed by the new routine he has to follow as the lockdown is imposed. Interestingly the man complains of the highly disturbing nature of domestic work. Such depiction of domestic chores is intended to insinuate that men are not fit for such job.

Memes are therefore the reflection of the social and cultural orientation. The lockdown period witnesses a number of memes that comment on the hurdles faced by people in coping with the unforeseen situation. A number of memes has been made to poke fun at the discrepancy between expectation and reality in matters of online teaching or 'work from home'. However ordinarily, memes depicting men's participation in household work perpetuate gender bias by poking fun at the inefficient work done by men. The use of humour makes the memes seemingly acceptable, and thus memes potentially normalize the gender inequality maintained in a male-dominated society.

Note:

The memes referred to in the paper were available on internet and shared with me by friends and relatives.

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For details visit <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/01/825051317/dont-nag-your-husband-during-lock-down-malaysias-government-advises-women>