

Women, the Cyber Victim: The Adverse Role of Meme on Social Media

Dr. C. Susila
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women (Autonomous),
Udumalpet
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Since time immemorial, women have been the victim of male domination and gaze and they have been considered an inferior sex than men. Though this has been changing gradually, and women come from their confined place and achieve success, still they face marginalization and oppression. As the world becomes digitalized every day, the modes and medium of oppressing women have also been changing regularly. Memes play a crucial role in entertaining a person and is recently emerging in the digital world and trolling is one of the recent methods of mocking, harassing and humiliating a person online and women have been the major victim of this trolling. Women are trolled for their body; make up, for their position in love to name a few. It is portrayed in the social media as if women control their men and they only cheat men in love. Ironically, the thing portrayed in social media is completely different from the reality. In a social order like India where the gender roles are strictly followed, women are trolled vehemently about their body with vulgar comments. This paper throws light on how women have been trolled in social media like Face book, Twitter, Instagram and You Tube even though in reality their position is completely a different one with some special reference to Tamil and English Memes. The paper presents the pictorial representation of memes and simultaneously explains the troll behind that and the actual situation of women and it also presents how it is traumatic for women.

Key words: male gaze, harassment, trolling, body shaming, social media and victimization of women, and trauma.

The position of women has always been poignant across the globe. A woman is never defined independently. A woman is never defined independently. The famous French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal feminist text *The Second Sex* stated the pitiable condition of women as follows: “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself. She is not considered an autonomous human being. ... She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is in not relation to her. She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”(Beauvoir 26) Since the ancient times, women have encountered multiple forms of oppression and violence exercised over them. There are ample evidences in history and literature that women encounter multiple forms of violence and oppression in their daily lives. They do not have agency over themselves and their body and so on. They always have to be dependent on the male partners for their basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothes.

When one analyses the position of women historically, one can find that women are always placed in an inferior position than men. In this regard, the violence against women is a common feature throughout the globe in different ways according to the place. This is because of the gender role that male is superior and female is inferior that was constructed and maintained almost in most of the cultural societies. The woman is always expected to be in the household, taking care of the family and to be in a confined space.

The modes of oppression and violence may vary sometimes but the common denominator of all the violence is limiting their space, subjugate them, exercising power over them. This can commonly be found across the globe and only very recently this problem is being addressed and measures are being taken to rectify it after the emergence of feminist research.

With the advent of feminist movements and theories, women started to advocate for their rightful position in the society. Though they have achieved their rights constitutionally, practically still women are the vulnerable victims of serious gender oppression. In Indian social order, the violence against women is operated in the following forms: wife-beating, marital rape, demanding dowry from the family of the bride is only to name a few. We still

live in a society where on one hand, women are adored as goddess and on the other hand women are beaten, raped and killed cruelly.

Due to technological innovations, the world has shrunk and everything can be accessible from a single click with the invention of internet. As the culture evolves, the modes and methods of oppression also changes. Though it may look that women have achieved certain freedom to come out and explore the world, still women face subjugation in the digital era. In such an age, women face abuse from anonymous persons through calls, messages, to name a few.

With reference to Indian society, the use of smart phones has developed rapidly since the previous decade that is from 2010 and the number of internet users increased rapidly with the attractive offers provided by the network teams like Jio, Airtel, Vodafone, etc. With all these developments, the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp to name a few, by the internet users is also enormous. According to datareportal.com, there are 624.0 million internet users and 448.0 million users of social media are there in India in January 2021(Kemp) and the number has quite increased because of Covid-19 impact.

When one analyses the usage of social media by people, it engages them in multiple ways by providing entertainment as well as education. It has a deep impact on our lives unknowingly. The people are delighted to see memes, videos, messages and stories. The advent of social media, especially in the pandemic has completely changed the world. Everything has become online now and it is like people cannot imagine how the life would be without internet a day. The lessons are taught online, the money is transferred online without even visiting the bank, shopping things online, booking tickets for travelling; all these are available at a single click.

In the cases of women, technology plays a vital role in the empowerment of women. Women started to access everything on the internet. They gain knowledge, build their skills, develop a network of shared interest and finally express their problems too. But whatever may be, still we see news about violence on women in the same multimedia and internet. Hence, this paper effectively tries to analyze and state how exactly women face online abuse and violence in everyday life.

Women who are active on the social media are usually targeted. When they express their talents especially in the medium of dance, they are abused that girls or women belonging to good families will not dance in public. One could also see that they receive obscene comments describing their body parts and make women uncomfortable. This makes them feel vulnerable and they decide to be less active or not to express their skills and they decide not to express any opinion about a post. This is stated in a news feature on The Wire as follows:

Online violence against women is essentially an extension of the offline violence directed at women owing to their gender – it targets their sexuality, reduces them to sexual objects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Online violence often leads to women being silenced or self-censoring of their opinions because of fear of backlash. Therefore, such violence and abuse act as barriers to women being able to exercise their rights to equality and freedom of expression. (Salim)

It should be noted here that one of the major forms of violence against women is abusing them with words describing their body parts. By doing this they humiliate and degrade women and this shows clearly that still women are viewed as sexual objects in major part of the world. This is a kind of violence that is exercised over women. This is called ‘troll’ a recent word spreading virally on social media. When a woman or a girl posts a video or picture on social media, she is abused as a woman without morals and she receives abusive comments describing her body parts. Women's breasts are compared to different types of fruits and the comments sometimes state that these girls or women are hyper-sexual and would need more than one man. They may also receive anonymous messages and calls using abusive language which directly offend the women or girls who wish to express their talents or skills and this makes them to be less active, that is, not to post videos or pictures on the social media. This has a serious impact on the lives of women and reducing their active and free participation and access of the world.

When one analyses as how women are viewed as sexual objects, the theory of male gaze has an important role. “The male gaze describes a way of portraying and looking at women that empowers men while sexualizing and diminishing women.” (Vanbuskirk) This concept was first stated by a British film theorist Laura Mulvey, in her 1973 essay "Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". This has become very common in today's media where women are advertised as half nude, or exposing their body parts to make the advertisements attractive. This is continued on Internet too, and this is because of this male gaze the men describe women just as objects with obscene language when a woman or girls posts a video or picture on social media.

Meme has a significant role in the internet world in recent times. Meme may be defined as "an idea, behavior, or style (meme) that is spread via the Internet, often through social media platforms and especially for the humorous purposes" (Internet Meme). Though its initial aim is to make people laugh, the definitions have changed and now it is used to troll somebody, or the humour it evokes will not be gentle in nature but a gentle criticism of a person. This meme has a significant role in the internet world today in harassing women online. The present paper particularly concentrates on Memes and caricature which abuse women in Tamil Nadu with reference to Tamil memes.

For instance, this incident is about a girl Julie who became popular with her participation in protest for Jallikattu in Chennai in 2017. With this fame, Juliana got a chance in Big Boss Tamil season 01. The people who praised her initially as a brave woman of Tamil Nadu, started to troll her since her entry in Big Boss and her performance. She was targeted whenever she posted any post on social media, the abusive comments exceed the positive ones. Many videos and caricatures and memes were prepared to troll her and were posted on social media by netizens. This clearly shows how women are targeted on an online platform and it has serious traumatic effects on the person who is trolled.

On the other hand, those who support her are otherwise trolled as 'julie *veriyān*' (Great fan) and are tagged in some obscene posts. Similarly, many others in Tamil media are trolled excessively on social media.

Another way of trolling women on social media is a projection that women cheat men in love. There are memes on social media that whatever the woman or girlfriend speaks, it is assumed/ projected a lie. The word 'uruttu' in Tamil language, in this context is spreading virally in recent days of social media, which refers to 'a lie.' Whatever the women say, that is called a lie on the online platform. Screenshots of conversations between lovers are taken and posted on social media and called 'uruttu'.

Though in general sense, it looks like a meme, trivial in nature, which makes everyone laugh, it is a serious type of violence exercised against women. There is a gender inequality which can be seen clearly in these memes. Though some men also cheat the girls they love, it is always projected that women cheat men and always lie in a relationship predominantly.

The emojis are the other way to express some obscene comments. The comment box is sometimes filled with some obscene emojis including GIFs which sometimes connote sexual activities. It may seem usual from a general perspective but is a serious type of sexual harassment that women face.

With the advent of social media, the celebrities have become more popular on the online platform. They may have millions of followers in the social media pages. When women celebrities post the pictures on the social media, one could see the comment box is mostly filled with such comments in abusive language. Their body parts are described in an obscene language and sometimes the followers would ask embarrassing questions which would focus on their personal life. When women celebrities or persons get some opportunity or some promotion in their profession, it is naturally commented that they might have got this chance because they might have accepted the sexual advances asked by the authorities.

When one deeply analyses the root cause behind the violence exercised over women, one can find that it is because of the gender inequalities that have been naturalized in the society since ages. When women are trolled for their opinions, skills and talents on an online platform, they sometimes become silenced or voiceless. This again is an indirect way of controlling women in accessing the public space freely like a man.

Body-shaming is another type of trolling on social media that is exercised over both men and women. This targets their appearances, degrade their performances and efforts. For instance, the couple Ravi Valli is a recent trend on social media who became popular with TikTok and who regularly receive obscene comments describing their body, appearance, and their performance. They have stated that initially the negative comments created a trauma in their minds and once they had decided to close the YouTube channel. (Aji Love Nivis) Despite all these negativities, they post their videos regularly with different concepts and have become one of the popular couple in Tamil social media.

Similarly, the celebrities are trolled on social media for their success. Many women celebrities including Sridevi, Shruti Haasan, Samantha, Nayanthara and some others belonging to film industry have done surgeries like liposuction, nose job, etc., (“Check out How Plastic Surgery”) They are vehemently trolled for their fame and success after these transformations through memes and video trolls. Whenever they get fame, the negative commenters troll them that they look beautiful because of the plastic or other surgery they have undergone.

It should also be noted that whenever the celebrities have a breakup in their relationship, the women are trolled. They are trolled in a way that they are morally weak and may have affair with others and that is the reason for their ending of the relationship. Though this is a personal thing between two people, the women celebrities are trolled on social media in a way that they should not be happy after their breakup. If they post some happy moments in their life, they are trolled and their morality would be a serious discussion among netizens in the comment box. The recent break ups of South Indian Actresses Amala Paul and Samantha with their partners had been a serious discussion on the social media and the meme creators created and spread them on social media. It is ironical here that the society does not question men who commit the same act but seriously attack women on the same issue. This again reiterates the traditional idea that women should be inferior and men should be superior. Samantha, after encountering so many trolls for her break up with Naga Chaitanya, questioned the society which treats men and women differently by quoting Dr. Farida’s words: “If matters are constantly morally questionable when done by women, but not even morally questioned when done by men- then we as a society, fundamental have no Morals.” the post was attributed to Dr. Farida.” (Team Udayavani)

Similarly, the other celebrities such as Nayanthara, Amala Paul and others are trolled. But in the case of men, even if they marry multiple times, they are not trolled and commented. This is again a matter of controlling women to a confined space which was once echoed by Periyar, a visionary feminist who wrote in his book *Why Were Women Enslaved?* that women are asked to consider their husband as lord and master. Periyar also stated that how chastity is associated is only with women. (Ramasamy2) He opined that only in Sanskrit language chastity is defined as *pativrata* which means loyal wifeness. “I think

that only here the concept of slavery was introduced into the word chastity.” (Ramasamy2) Thus he questioned the social construction which links chastity to women alone and not for men.

The morality is always a discussion only for women alone and not for men. Even if a celebrity or a normal girl or woman commits suicide, one could see the variety of comments concentrate on the moral life of the person. Anchor Chitra, famously known as VJ Chithu, committed suicide in 2020. There were many rumours spreading over social media most of which commented on her personal life and questioned her morals. Similarly the murder of a Chennai IT staff Swathiat Nungambakkam Railway Station in 2016 kindled negative comments on the social media which focused on her moral life. This again reiterates the same idea that virginity as a measurement tool to analyze one’s morality is attributed only to women alone.

The following part of the article focuses on how the negative comments and trolls would be traumatic for the victims. When women especially feminist activists opine their views on the social media, they are commented badly. Sian Norris in her article stated that a woman who spoke up on abortion rights for women, is called “a fucking baby killer” by an anonymous social media user. (Norris)

The death and rape threats are serious forms of harassment which have traumatic impact on the victims. When women/girls their picture in the social media or when they voice out for certain problems in the society, they would be trolled and criticized seriously and would also receive threats of rape and murder. (Salim) This is another way of controlling women.

The rape threat for women should be analyzed critically here that rape again, as stated by Periyar, is connected with women’s chastity. In our society, the rape is considered as a shame for the victim. One who commits the crime or the perpetrator is not questioned but the victim is seriously commented and criticized for being attacked. Most of the time, the victim is blamed for her condition. The woman is blamed to be responsible for the sexual assault on her based on her clothes, and her behaviour. The Delhi Gang rape incident happened in 2012 triggered negative criticisms on the victim Nirbhaya. She was blamed for being out during night time with her male friend. In this way, when a post appears on social media regarding

sexual assaults, the women or the victim is predominantly accused to be responsible for her condition.(Ryan)

Similarly, the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was recently attacked in the social media “for helping an interfaith couples who were denied passports.” (Dutta) This again shows that how great a woman may be, she would be attacked if she crosses the so-called traditional social order. This is stated in a feature as follows: “The attack on anyone who has a strong political or social view not in line with a certain ideology is vicious but assaults on women are particularly sexualised in nature by threatening to rape and kill them.”(Dutta)

The main aim of trolling is to humiliate, discredit or degrade somebody. The rape threat is predominantly received by women alone and the major reason behind the rape threat would again be as their virginity/chastity is linked with a woman’s character and a family’s honour is decided upon the women, their behavior and chastity. When a girl or a woman receives a rape threat, they are afraid about it and hesitate to disclose it to others because of the image created by the society about rape and its perpetrators and victims.

When a woman is sexually assaulted, she and her family would be looked as untouchables as if they have committed some serious crime. These social constructions have indirectly intimidated women that they should not go out during night time, and should not go out without the male members of the family, and even if they are assaulted sexually, they should not disclose that to others. This is because of, as stated by Dr. Aradhana Salpekar, “Women are trained to be rape victims. To simply learn the word “rape” is to take instruction in the power relationship between males and females.. .Rape has something to do with our sex. Rape is something awful that happens to females.. .”(Salpekar 216) Again this is linked with the power relations in the society which looks at raped women like a sinner. She will be then blamed for being a victim.

Another type of harassment on the online platform would be posting the nude or edited pictures of girls/women as a way of revenge. Some men, at some instances, do this type of harassment for women they love and who do not love them back. This is a major type of cybercrime that happens against girls/women nowadays. This has a serious traumatic effect on girls/women and they sometimes attempt or commit suicide after looking at their

obscene pictures on the internet. Even though the girls/women have not done anything wrong, they are simply looked at as though they have committed the crime. The society always finds fault with women, that they have to behave properly in social spaces, and a man will not approach any woman without her consent. These generalized statements always advise women to observe and follow morality whereas these social orders never question a man for committing such crimes. All these fear of humiliation, discrimination of women were the main reason for the perpetrators to send rape threats to women online. This would be a serious hindrance in attaining objective results in researches, Kristina Rolin argues in her article. (Rolin) In other words, this victim status of women and the threats received by women becomes a major reason for them to hide themselves or to silence their voice about any issues; it is an indirect way of controlling their freedom of speech.

The crime and violence against women are carried over in multiple forms and women are simply being the victim. Our social order would not warn or punish the perpetrator who has done the crime. On the other hand, they mostly find fault with women for being the victim. They tell women not to go out in the night, do not post video or picture on the social media, and do not speak on public issues and so on. For instance, the 2012 Delhi gang rape incident triggered comments both accusing and supporting the victim. However, the negative criticism told that it was the girl's fault to be out during night along with boyfriend. The negative commenters also accuse the girl as morally weak for being with her boyfriend and justified that the gang-rape would happen to any women who are out during night time. These all can be interpreted again to silence the voice of women and trying to keep them in a confined space and making them inferior.

Women should come out of this fear to overcome their unseen or invisible enemies. They should develop a kind of "oppositional consciousness" which is described as "an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination." (Mansbridge 5) The oppressed group, here, is the collective category of women; women should overthrow and fight against the crime carried out against them online. They should come forward to express their problems, or the threats they receive. They should not be worried about the humiliation or discrimination they would encounter and should express their personal sufferings to the

public forum to create knowledge, awareness to other women who might have undergone the same trauma. The “Me too” movement is the best example in recent times which expressed that many number of women including the celebrities have been harassed sexually. Women should ignore the trolls and should move forward and become successful which would be the best reply for those online haters and negative commenters.

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