Gender and Verbal Violence: a Form of Psychological Abuse in Moroccan Popular Culture

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Abstract
Language is a mechanism of communication that is constructed to provide a shared environment with mutually understood terms and ideologies. Language is both constructed by society and it constructs society. The words people use to communicate ideas reflect the ideologies people hold and how they think about the world. Indeed, language can be used to convey violent ideas and feelings. Although "violence" is presumably physical, it can extend into the verbal realm of spoken and written communication in a way that produces both physical and psychological effects. It is within this theoretical framework that the present study tends to reflect upon verbal violence as a form of psychological abuse against women. Based on qualitative data, this study argues that Moroccan popular culture, especially through some words and expressions constitute a key form of violence against women. Words such as “divorced”, “infidel”, “spinster”, and “‘aqrusha” are used to serve and maintain the patriarchal system through upholding a set of gender binary pairs where women are linguistically relegated to a passive other.

Key words: gender, language, violence, women, Moroccan culture, patriarchy, stereotypes, feminism.
General Introduction

The term ‘violence against women’ refers to various forms of harmful behaviour directed at sapping women’s physical and psychological well-being. It is often known as ‘gender-based violence’, as it evolves from a range of imbalanced power-relations between men and women in society. According to the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, ‘violence against women’ is defined in article 1 as: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”

Generally, gender-based violence entails two major forms of violence against women. The first form has to do with physical abuse, and the second form concerns psychological oppression. The latter, with which this study is concerned, entails all forms of verbal and mental abuse which affect women’s psychological sense of integrity. This form of violence may include forcing, intimidating, threatening, preventing, insulting, humiliating and other sorts of violence which is generally referred to as “bad treatment”. This study focuses on verbal violence, or the violence of words as a key form of psychological violence against women.

Verbal violence is referred to as ‘hate speech’. It tends to convey hatred to the addressee through words known within the social pattern as insulting and dehumanizing. Jennifer Hornsby writes in this vein that:

‘hate speech’ can be the name for speech which is addressed to individuals whom it is intended to insult on the basis of sex, race, handicap, sexual orientation… and which makes use of hate words, words which are commonly understood to convey direct and visceral hatred or contempt (Hornsby, 2000, p. 98)

Other researchers like Renata Salect (1997) refer to this violence form as ‘injurious speech’. Relying on deconstructionist theory, Salect argues that injurious speech, either on the basis of sex or race, intends to provoke the person assaulted to question his or her identity and to perceive him or herself as inferior. By uttering injurious speech, the speaker seeks to confirm his own identity through assigning a subordinate place to the person being verbally attacked. In verbal attacks, one encounters the same logic that is found in all forms of violence, which is always
targeted at ruining the fantasy scenario that sustains the identity of the person being harmed or even tortured verbally.

Such logic demarcates an imbalanced power-relationship between the sender and the receiver of verbal violence. This relationship enhances, on the basis of sex, a hierarchy of binary oppositions in which women are reduced to the negative side. Hence, binary oppositions such as reason/emotion, subject/object, self/other, superior/inferior, nature/culture, etc. are discursively meant to emphasize social, cultural and psychological structures constructing the overall dichotomy men/women. In this regard, feminist theorist Cixous (1997) argues that language is a means by which patriarchal thought is articulated; that is, language forces us to view the world in terms of binary oppositions that can often be categorized as male and female. The male term is typically the unmarked one, and the one that is considered superior.

Language is, in fact, the means by which the patriarchal system exercises its power and superiority. More than this, Luce Irigaray (1985), argues that language is the medium through which women are conditioned to accept their subjugation. The question which is raised by poststructuralists focuses on who is to blame for perpetrating verbal violence against women: is it the subject whose speech hurts, or the socio-symbolic structure that is responsible for injurious speech? Indeed, the subject who utters such speech only quotes from the existing sexist speech. The speaker only repeats fragments of the discursive environment, of the habits and moods of behaviour of a certain community. Thus, the subject who is perceived as the author and responsible for verbal violence is only the outcome of the very production of the social corpus which is deemed loaded with andocentric ideologies. (Salect, 1997, p. 83)

For deconstruction theorists, the question regarding who is responsible for verbal violence finds answer in the general pre-existing social, and particularly linguistic context which constitutes the community of individual speakers. It is on the basis of this approach that deconstruction theory calls for a reconsideration of language so that it no longer embodies and reflects sexual prejudices. Deconstruction intends to provide a theory that is capable of ‘deconstructing’ all gender ideologies that have existed for so long in language and other social discursive practices. More so, it seeks to “‘go beyond’ gender … in order to deconstruct [it] and explore sets of categories more true to human experience than those channeled primarily through … socially constructed and gendered preconceptions”(Freeman, 1990). This reflects the concept of Michel Foucault (1987) who, through his analysis of discourse and power, aims at producing a
new form of discourse, an ‘ungrounded language’ in which hierarchical binary pairs can be replaced by others that do justice to human experience and reality. Such a project Foucault targets remains ideal because the pre-existing discourse, the “violence which we do to things”, or the “practice which we impose on them” (Foucault, 1987, p. 67) is deeply rooted and rigidly fixed in culture with all its social, political, economic, psychological, and even sexual dimensions.

In Moroccan culture, for instance, it is perhaps not surprising to find a set of expressions and stereotypes employed to reduce women to a secondary position. Such demeaning language is vigorously at work within the context of conjugal life. This assumption has been justified through the data gleaned from this study’s respondents. Most of them reported having suffered verbal violence from their husbands. They reported that the verbal violence they endured was more injurious than physical assault. Some of them expressed this by mentioning the Moroccan popular saying “allahumma darba be demha ula kelma be semha” (give me a bloody beating, but not a venomous word). Other women reported that after a verbal attack took place, they would say to the perpetrator: “you’d rather beat me than call me names.”

**Methodology**

The findings of this study are based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Twenty women respondents were randomly chosen from the El Jadida region. The interviews’ questions revolved mainly around the respondents’ definitions, attitudes and experiences of verbal/psychological abuse perpetrated on them by their husbands or other men. When analyzing data, I tried to find out which words were mentioned by all the respondents and described as ‘violent’ words. The words that were singled out include ‘divorced’ (mtalqa), infidel, (khayna) spinster (bayra), and “‘aqrusha”.

**The Word “Divorced”**

Moroccan language is fraught with abusive words and expressions which disparage women’s psychological integrity. For example, the word ‘divorce’ was reported to constitute a serious form of verbal violence when uttered by the husband as a warning against his wife. Some women said that they suffered a great deal of psychological pain when they heard the expression “I will divorce you if you do this or that.” This is because the word ‘divorce’ weighs heavy upon
women. When women are threatened with divorce, they feel that their marital life and the whole family are at stake. As Halima (42 years) recounted, “one day my husband swore he would divorce me if I went to my parents’ home without his permission; I felt the earth shaking under my feet when I heard the word divorce.” I asked this woman why she felt so; she replied that ‘when the husband utters the word divorce, this means the marital life has reached a critical point.’

Divorced women are in a much more critically disparaging situation. To be called a ‘divorced woman’ (mra mtalqa) means that the woman has something wrong with her, for most people tend to attribute the cause of divorce to the woman. Worse than this, a repudiated woman is looked at as a bad person who has failed to protect her family from destruction. She is viewed as a burden on her parents who will be responsible for feeding her and her children. What is more, her presence as a divorsee will bring about shame to her parents and brothers who are now responsible for protecting her chastity. To wit, the expression ‘she is a divorsee’ connotes that the woman has become an easy prey for prostitution and delinquency; she is not virgin and hence has nothing to lose. Such negative labels do not fit in when describing a divorced man. This is because the linguistic expression “he is a man anyway” (hadak ghir rajel) connotes that a man whether single, married, divorced, or widowed is far protected from people’s tongues (lsan nass) regarding his chastity.

Surprisingly, in the south of Morocco, people value divorced women; when a woman gets divorced, her Saharawi family celebrates the event rather than embarking on a series of mourning and blaming practices. The divorced woman’s dowry becomes even higher than the would-be wife for the first time. This is because the divorced woman in the south is seen as a more experienced person, a person who has gone through tough moments of marital life. Most importantly, the presence of a divorced woman in a Saharawi family connotes that the family is so tolerant and generous to cater for its divorced daughter. However, this positive attitude towards divorced women in the south remains a drop in the bucket in comparison with the verbal and psychological torment faced by divorced women in the rest of Moroccan geography.

The Word Infidelity

Another word that is deemed injurious for women is the term ‘infidelity’ (khiyana). Some respondents like Zineb and Fatima reported that they were called ‘treacherous’ when they
bickered with their husbands. Both women said they had undergone a traumatic experience when they heard the word ‘infidelity’. Zineb said:

One day, he accused me of infidelity. ‘You are unfaithful!’ he said. These words have been torturing me since I first heard them. You can’t imagine how torturing to be accused of infidelity when you are innocent.

The affliction of the word ‘infidelity’ was also expressed by Fatima:

I prefer to be beaten a hundred times than to be accused of infidelity. It is more painful, more torturing, more devastating to be stabbed in your chastity and honour.

Another woman said:

I never spent with him a day without his calling me names, or insulting my dead parents. I got accustomed to his ‘dirty’ words. I was bearing silently all what he had to call me, but last time he not only called me a stinking bitch, but he also accused me of infidelity. I almost fainted at hearing this. You can’t imagine the trauma I have been experiencing since that black day. (Rachida, 50)

In sum, it is noteworthy that verbal attacks are almost always associated with men. The female stereotype dictates that girls and women should be nice, good, pleasant, polite, passive, and conforming. According to the psychoanalyst Michele Toomey (2000), a verbally abusive woman is deemed a “bold woman who has dared to rebel.” In Moroccan culture, it is not usually accepted for a woman to attack her spouse verbally. The woman who does so, or even defends herself by speaking back is called disobedient (meskhuta); shameless (mafiha hya); masculinized (mrajla) and other names relegating the wife to a rebellious woman who deserves chastisement and tight control. The ideal wife, according to the myth of Moroccan popular culture, is one who bends her head downwards when her husband is venting his words of rage, and one who keeps tethered to her domestic work no matter how strenuous and mundane this work is and whatever her educational, social and economic backgrounds are.

The Word “Spinster”

In Moroccan parlance, a woman who reached 30 and above is called ‘bayra.’ Bayra is a belittling term that is loaded with much discrimination, marginalization and pitying looks. The
term connotes that the woman has become ‘expired’ because, according to most people, this woman has reached the menopause age, and hence she is physically incapable of reproduction. This is why the term ‘bayra’ is often used as a lethal weapon during a verbal fight between two women. In a word, calling a woman ‘bayra’ is a finishing blow. It goes without saying that no unmarried woman accepts being called bayra no matter how old she is. The term is fraught with off-putting images in the popular mind. Most Moroccan people associate spinsterhood with a variety of social ills. They consider the existence of a spinster in the family a burden that must be disposed of since she is deemed beyond the pale.

Such palpably biased attitude towards spinsters has no room in describing an unmarried man who is 30 years and above. A man is never valued by his age or physical appearance; he is gauged by his ‘pocket’, a connotation for money. In this regard, a famous Moroccan saying depicts that the only defect that a man may have is his pocket (arajel may’aybo rhir jibu). Therefore, as long as his pocket is full (jibo ‘amer), no barrier shall stand before him to get married at any age because there is no label identifying him as ‘bayer’/spinster. Indeed, there are many words and expressions that describe a single man who is advanced in age. These include ‘azri (single man), zufri (single man living alone), hur (free), ta’ rasu (independent), baqi khfif (not burdened with marital responsibilities yet). All these, among others, bestow positive depiction upon a single man.

Linguistically, Fatima Sadiqi, a prominent Moroccan linguist and sociologist marks the absence of an equivalent term for men who reached an advanced age without getting married. She maintains that the use of ‘spinster’ only for women highlights the notion that women’s value is inextricably linked to their physical attractiveness and to their role of reproduction (Sadiqi, 2003). Feminists have generally drawn attention to the way the use of paired words such as man/woman, master/mistress, husband/wife, bachelor/spinster, etc which systematically encodes female inferiority (Bowden and Mummery, 2009). More specifically, while the male terms imply power, control and independence, the female terms convey weakness, subservience, dependence and, in the case of “spinster”, failure (Nye, 1988, p. 147).

Failure to get married as the other girls in the neighbourhood is one of the many negative descriptions given to a spinster. Other off-putting descriptions include leftover (shayta), ugly (khayba), jealous (masmuma), missed the train (fatha tran), and husband snatcher (khatafet rjal). These descriptions, amongst others, are in the limelight in the Moroccan parlance. Nonetheless,
as I said earlier, there are no equivalent words to identify an unmarried male who is in advanced age. His status could be seen as an advantage and he may even be a source of begrudge for other unhappy married men.

The word “‘aqrusha”

The word ‘aqrusha is also denigrating in Moroccan language. It has two shades of meaning. First, it refers to an old woman who is seen as a pesky person in the house. Second, the term is used to describe an old mother-in-law who uses extreme authority to keep her daughter-in-law under hand. In most cases, ‘aqrusha is used to taunt an elderly woman who possesses certain forms of power in the household. Such woman is feared not because of her social or economic power, but due to the havoc she may wreak upon marital relationships, especially the relationship between her son and daughter-in-law. In fact, the existing literature (Houssan & Lamkhanter, 2016) has evinced that the mother/daughter-in-law relationship remains restive and agitated within the Arab world context due to a variety of socio-cultural, economic and educational reasons which have a say in the shaping of traditional Arab marriages. In Morocco, what has been written on the mother/daughter-in-law relationship focuses on the negative representation of the mother-in-law in popular culture and how she is the one to blame for causing a restive relationship (Derdar, 2005).

To be called ‘aqrusha connotes that the woman has advanced in age, and hence her position in society becomes a problem to other people. That is to say, the woman is not useful and helpful anymore; she becomes a trouble maker and a burden on her family. If one says “we have a ‘aqrusha in the house,” they mean they have a trouble maker, a woman who has consumed up all her energy of rational thinking. Her old age becomes a harbinger of cunning, mischief, perfidy, frivolousness, superstition, witchcraft and other off-putting descriptions. Such negative images are rarely attributed to old men. There is actually a binary opposition between women’s advanced age and that of men. According to Moroccan popular culture, especially proverbs and sayings, women’s advanced age is associated with evil and foolishness, whereas men’s advanced age is associated with goodness and wisdom. It is said that when a boy is born, a hundred demons are born with him; but when a girl is born, a hundred angels are born with her. Every year a demon passes from the man to the woman so that when he is a hundred years old, he is surrounded by a hundred good angels. And when the woman is a hundred years, she is surrounded by a hundred devils (Westermarck 1980: 68).
Conclusion

In sum, it is important to reiterate that verbal violence perpetrated by men in their day to day social interaction with women remains a hard nut to crack for feminists and researchers working on gender and women’s studies. This is due to the complexity of the problem which is deeply rooted in language and culture. Within a Moroccan context, it does not take a very discerning eye to see that popular culture provides fertile soil for verbal violence against women. The words we have discussed above are only tiny examples from a countless number of violent words with which women are bombarded on a daily basis. The power of popular culture in reproducing, buttressing and maintaining such form of psychological abuse is demonstrated in cases when women abuse each other. This is referred to as women’s ‘self-victimization,’ a strategy used by the patriarchal system to turn women’s focus far from any form of unified effective resistance.

References


