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OPINION

The Blue Thesaurus

Why swear when you can do without verbal catharsis

'CH*******M sulphate', Vidya Balan's profane biochemical combo in *Ishqiya* must go into the new Indian thesaurus of swear words. The two terrible and terrific words had just the right measure of sexiness and cynicism, enough to turn poison into passion.

The cathartic act of swearing—achieving control by displaying the absolute lack of it—has just gone mainstream. Recite it like bad poetry, whisper it like gossip, SMS it in crude Hinglish or sing it in the bathroom. Allegedly, some even take it to the boardroom as an emergency shot of cocaine to be snorted when emphasis must parade as power. Others employ it full-time when they are at their imaginative worst or poetic best. In universities worldwide, swearing has always been a compulsory skill, never mind that it may actually reveal a lack of talent. Now, it is acceptably haute and hot.

SORIT

So what happened to us good Indians, who judged obscenities as moral slips of the tongue? When Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's book *The Stuff of Thought* argued that swearing was an emotional trigger for the brain and often used to arouse equally negative responses in others, we nodded reluctantly. But when Messrs Vishal Bhardwaj and Anurag Kashyap, professors-in-vogue of profane linguistics, peppered their scripts in *Ishqiya*, *Omkara*, *Dev D* and *Gulaal* with fiery obscenities rolling off the tongues of even their female characters, Pinker started making sense. Emotion has no gender, but it has a nationality. The answer also lies in a dialogue in Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan,* when two young TV interns find themselves jostled in a crowd impatient to see the American president. The boy curses in Hindi, and the girl smiles and comments, "*Hindustani gaali ke jaisi koi gaali nahin hoti*! (There is nothing like swearing in Hindustani)." Say 'fuck' and you'll feel brighter, stronger, faster. But say it in Hindi, or in your mother tongue and you will fly. That's catharsis!

In India, swearing was never morally okay but we didn't really abstain from it. Almost every woman who has gone through labour will admit to cursing in revenge for pain. Swearing raised the pain threshold, according to Richard Stephens from the Keele University of Psychology, US. "Volunteers who cursed at will could endure pain nearly 50 per cent longer than their civil-tongued peers," he said in a 2009 study published in the journal *NeuroReport*. In sex, dirty words are said to enhance intimacy. Dharmendra's unforgettable cinematic curse "*kutte kaminey, main tera khoon pii jaoonga*" still survives today. Abuses hurled by Bollywood Villains Inc was stuff *The Stuff of Thought* could have used as a case study. Especially the *randi* and *behenchod* in Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* echoed for days in the minds of the viewers, given the context in which they were used. Women cursed in movies too, but only if they had enlisted for other bad things—prostitution, cheating on the hero, dancing in skimpy clothes or having sex with Prem Chopra.

Now, instead of a villainous expression or one of intense rage, love or power, swearing has become glamorised. Most of us swear. Some do it regularly, normally, like saying, "Pass the salt". A horrifying bomb blast or the price of sugar, both elicit the same response—"fuck". The censor board is clearly on the side of mixing realism with shock value and that goes to its credit. When *Slumdog Millionaire* was released in India, it had an A certificate for its English version full of curse words. And U/A for the Hindi version, where the profanities were edited out. But *Omkara*, *Dev D* and *Ishqiya* were cleared. Does this high-on-obscenities-Hindi lend us new insights into whether we really need verbal catharsis or is it a paucity of original expression through language is worth debating. Is it cinematic liberty giving us an illusion of civil liberty? Or, as Pinker said, swearing is like showing off muscles, tattoos and piercings!

Look up 'fuck' on Wikipedia. This bisexual global monarch of swear words has apparently been devulgarised because of its prolific usage. "It is due to the convergence of two weighty concepts (sex, destruction) that the term can carry such overloaded emphasis," it reads. 'Fuck' can be used as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, or interjection and as any word in a sentence, anywhere. It's grammar-free! Pain-free too, as Stephens proved. We've nothing to lose if we curse.

Or do we? Former PM H.D. Deve Gowda was expected to apologise for calling Karnataka CM Yediyurappa a 'bloody bastard' in public. Curse words are banned in the media. No parent wants to teach their child the multidimensional F-word. The irony is, we only have observations on swearing becoming acceptable, but few insights to understand why. What does it really do besides lending us some informality, a bit of linguistic bravado and a half-baked idea of liberation? Until we find the answers, it remains a mindfucking debate.

Till then, I suggest all employers put up a sign barring swear words at work. Call it 'No Fucking'. ◘