



Review on Depiction of “Empowered” Women: A Feministic Analysis of Selected Indian Television Advertisements

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Abstract

The paper explores the Indian media culture which is propagating the stereotypical image of women in the garb of ‘progressive advertisements’. This study aims to do a semiotic and feministic study of the selected Indian television advertisements and unpack the hidden connotative meanings. The advertisements engage the viewers and propagate the mass cultural forms, relegating the females of the species to a marginal space. Women are subjugated and men hold the position of power. The theoretical framework of this study is the Feminist Theory and Semiotics is the fitting tool for discourse analysis. The data for the study incorporates the television advertisements broadcast on various Indian channels. The study concludes that Indian television advertisements are showing gender disparity and confirming to the patriarchal discourse. The paper recommends the change in the representation of women in advertisements.

Oxford English Dictionary lists the word ‘empowerment’ and states the meaning as ‘authority or power given to someone to do something’. In theory, empowerment has many dimensions. A woman can be said to be empowered if she has the authority or power at the individual and social level. She must be able to exercise her power within the family, organization or society at large. This empowerment can be at economic, social or political level. With the spread of education, modern women have started participating in all walks of life. Their education, awareness and contribution towards society has offered them a better place in the social setup. There are many deterrents in the way of true empowerment of women in patriarchal society like India. Women education has played a vital role in making them aware of their rights. They have gained a higher status as compared to their illiterate counterparts. The big question still looms large. Is she empowered enough to take decisions about money? Is she free enough to not require permission from male relatives to visit friends? Is she safe enough to visit the market without a chaperon? When we use the word ‘empowerment’, in our minds this refers to the poor, uneducated, uninformed, oppressed women, who need to be empowered by others. But it appears that even urban, affluent, educated modern women, who use their identities to reinforce their social roles as mother, wives and daughters are not empowered in the true sense.

Keywords: Gender; Feminism; Television Advertisements

Introduction

Media is the medium of construction, collection and dispersal of messages among the people. The messages can be related to the problems being faced by women in social, political or economic areas. Media can serve as a vehicle of change portraying women as productive individuals of the society. A space should be created for the participation of women to reinforce a positive attitude towards the fairer sex. Television is the most important electronic media nowadays due to its reach to the masses. But in India, the media has forsaken the moral responsibility.

What is ‘empowerment’ and who is an ‘empowered’ woman?

Review of Literature

Many feminist writers have shown their concern about the negative portrayal of women in media. A feminist approach towards the issue is the need of the hour. Simon De Beauvoir [1] in *The Second Sex* clearly depicts that the issue and the poor image of women are the result of confirmation of the past and a complete indifference towards the advancement, abilities and opportunities of women in societies.

Betty Friedan [2] wrote *The Feminist Mystique* which gave a

new life to women's movement. She was the head of the primary 'second wave' feminist group 'National Organization of Women'. The pioneers announced the media as one of the main fields of conflict for women's rights. The demands of the group were better representation of women in the media, infant care centre and publications by women. Feminist media studies is a branch of feminist studies which can be categorized into three classes-Liberal feminist media analysis, Radical feminist media analysis and social feminist media analysis.

Liberal feminist media analysis focuses on the sex role stereotypes and argues that general principles of equality and liberty should be applicable to women as well. It analyses appearance of gender congruous behaviours, skills and self-perceptions in the media. According to liberal feminist group, media projects and perpetuates sex-role stereotypes. Women are depicted as mothers, wives and daughters or depicted in traditional roles of secretary, nurse, school teacher or sex-objects. Moreover, they are usually young and beautiful, but not very well-educated. These stereotypes are shown in media because male media producers are influenced by and believe in these patterns of society.

According to radical feminist group 'patriarchy' is a social system in which all men are presumed to control and subjugate all women which explains the women's position in society. It has exposed the hidden issues which were hitherto not spoken about such as domestic violence, human trafficking, sexual violence inside and outside the family and pornography. The main focus on pornography and rather polemical: "Pornography exists because men despise women, and men despise women because pornography exists [3]. Radical feminists believe that the producers and owners of the media are males, so they operate according to the rules of the patriarchy.

Socialist feminism does not consider gender to be the exclusive rationale to explain women's position. Social feminist group takes into consideration class as well as economic status of women. This group has incorporated ethnicity, age, physical ability and sexual preference to discuss the position of women in the society.

Persaud [4] argues that there is stereotyping and marginalization of women in advertising. Further developing the argument, the author states that elderly people and Black women are the least represented characters in the media. These images represent the vast gender disparity between males and females. Persaud [4] states that present scenario adds to the association between technology and masculinity which is already present in the culture.

Craig [5] establishes that the people responsible for advertising deliberately incorporate the Gender bias in the advertisements. Advertisers try to strengthen the traditional viewpoint. The patriarchal structure does not allow the equality in the portrayal of men and women as they are presented in their traditional roles.

Research Gap

The paper investigates the representation of contemporary Indian women within the framework of Indian television advertisements. Thus, it addresses a theoretical research gap connecting the marginalized and stereotypical representation of women in Media within the paradigms of Feminist Studies. The study focuses on how under the pretentious veil of 'empowerment' the women are still peripheralised and subjugated. Gender is a social construct and its representation is context dependent. Past studies have established the relation between gender and media, yet there are some areas which have not been explored fully in the context of Indian television.

Objectives

- To analyse the portrayal of women in the Indian television advertisements through feminist perspective.
- To analyse the feminist understanding of media and to critically analyse the role of Indian television advertisements in constructing the image of women.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the study is that the stereotypes depicted in the ads the ideas of women being physically weak, short-statured and preoccupied about their beauty are rampant. They are always shown in the ads for food products, beauty products, cleaning products, home appliances or drugs while men are shown in the ads for banking services, education, entertainment media, travel or industrial companies. These ads are not true mirror of the society because they ignore a vast number of women who work in the fields, factories or mines doing physical labour. It is not only the sexual objectification of women that is derogatory. The reinforcement of the stereotypes is also very damaging. The traditional values and practices in the society that hinder the overall empowerment of women still exist.

Methodology

Using qualitative content analysis, the paper explores the gender images, meaning and cultural ideology in selected Indian television advertisements. The study will follow the descriptive and explanatory procedure to analyse the advertisements on the basis of theory of feminism. Polkinghorne [6] has suggested that Qualitative research includes semiotics, ethnography and discourse analysis. The present paper discusses the representation of women in Indian television advertisements, arguing that the Patriarchy still prevails under the fake veil of 'empowerment' and 'modernity'.

Data Collection

The present study includes selected Indian television advertisements broadcasted on different Indian television Channels. The data for the analysis was collected in phases. The researcher has watched the content being broadcasted in the

primetime, that is, from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM. The selected data has been recorded and stored in a flash drive.

Population

The population for the present study encompasses all the Indian television channels which aired the advertisements during the primetime in the timeframe of the study.

Sample

The sampling technique used in the present study is non-probability purposive sampling. A total of hundred advertisements were examined on the basis of representation of gender. Ten advertisements were not considered for the study which did not show women characters. Forty advertisements were excluded on the basis of repetition of the content. Advertisements were categorized in five categories for qualitative analysis. Ten advertisements were placed in each category. One advertisement which is most aired in the given timeframe of six months, that is, January 2018 to June 2018 has been included for analysis in the present study.

Results and Discussion

The question arises, what is the essence of the Indian woman? Who is the quintessential Indian domestic goddess? Sadly, the answer lies in the collective subconscious of the majority. A sexually passive, self-effacing, monogamous and custodian of the values of the family is hailed as the ultimate image of the lady of the house. This image is the construction of complex historical and social processes. We are again and again reminded of the interesting mix of expectations from the ideal woman. 'Bhartiya Nari' is the product of the society which is reflected in the print and mass media equally. There is an ambivalent attitude towards women in India. They are respected, revered, even worshipped as 'Devis'. The woman who follows all the rules laid down by the patriarchal society is the one who has the right to be respected. The working woman, who travels daily to her work, goes to the market alone, has friends, who happen to be males, is under the constant scrutiny. Her motives are always suspected. She is not confined to the four walls of the house, wears modern 'revealing' clothes, does not move around under the protection of a male, thus, cannot be regarded as a woman of exemplary virtue. A country where a minister remarks, "Girls wanting a night out may be all right elsewhere but it is not part of Indian culture." The society we are living in is constantly under the influence of media which is creating stereotype of 'Ideal' woman. Media concentrates on creating an image of the modern woman and reflects the culture of metropolitan cities. It creates an image which is in accord with the traditional values upheld by the mainstream culture. It ignores all the women who sit and linger at the periphery and cannot be considered 'ideal' woman due to their social or economic status. The world of Indian television advertisements is a fairyland where we encounter 'ideal domestic goddess'. Patriarchal values are upheld again, though the outer garb may have undergone change. The woman may not be clad

in a traditional 'saree', she may be in a designer wear, but the uppermost concern in her mind is spick and span kitchen. There is a constant tussle between 'traditional' and 'modern', where 'traditional' holds sway.

A cursory glance at the Indian TV advertisements shows following dominant negative stereotypes with reference to the depiction of women:

- Women cannot be decision-makers.
- Women are not the bread-winners or providers of the family.
- Women's place is in the house or more precisely in the kitchen or laundry room.
- Women are always concerned about their beauty as this is their most important asset. Women must find ways to enhance and protect their beauty.
- Women are dependent and submissive.

Educated, progressive women of the ad world endlessly worry about the nutrition of the family, wash clothes and check the stains on husband's shirt, bathe their babies with the soft soap and care for their skin and hair. These women are glorified housewives and their education or jobs are only props. These images are insulting and damaging to the idea of new-age women. It is a regressive ideology going back to where it began. Modern woman has proved her mettle and made her presence felt in education, healthcare, information technology and other areas but still they face the expectation of more housework despite full-time employment. Since Indian women do not like to ignore their roles as mothers and wives, they still prefer jobs where they have flexible working hours. Their priority is home and family. Prevailing cultural bindings result in the lower productivity at the work place.

There is an advertisement showing a woman with many arms. The iconography of the ad provides an eloquent commentary on the underlying agenda. Traditionally, 'Devi' with many arms is worshipped. Her arms are a symbol of her 'shakti' or 'power'. Now our new age 'Devi' uses her 'shakti' to prepare various food items simultaneously. The underlying idea is to posit her as the source of a desirable conduct as a wife and mother. This clearly promotes patriarchal thinking. Husband, Father-in-law and children should enjoy a lazy Sunday brunch and 'Laxmi' of the house should work hard even on a Sunday to make the life blissful for them. She cannot give orders as she is conditioned to take orders. Now, the point to be considered here is that she is not a harried woman who uses 'chulha' to cook food. She is definitely a 'modern' woman which is evident from the contemporary setting of the advertisement. It is an upper middle class home with a kitchen fitted with the modern amenities to make her comfortable. What is the problem then? The problem lies in the traditional roles assigned to men and women. Women cook while men enjoy. Why can't 'modern' men cook for the family and enjoy all the modern gadgets which have made cooking so easy? It must be remembered that the internalization of the secondary status for the wife takes place at a domestic site.

Television advertisements show men in the position of power. Media is still projecting women in traditionally approved roles which are mainly sexual and ornamental or she is presented as a glorified 'home-oriented woman'. She is not shown as the decision-maker rather she is portrayed as a naive, simple-minded, submissive girl expecting others to make decisions for her. An ad shows a working woman waiting for her husband to pick her up after a regular workday at job. He is late due to some reason and the wife is waiting for him feeling helpless as is evident from her expressions. The moment of 'empowerment' comes when she claims that she was more independent before marriage, but this situation is again exploited for the benefit of the patriarchal society. Husband appears in the role of 'provider' and 'oh! So thoughtfully' buys a car for her. The image of a capable, working, educated woman is subverted as there is a childish glee on her face akin to the joy on the face of a baby after getting a most desired toy. Female are either subservient or behave as children normally would be expected to. Media is hardly challenging the gender attitudes perpetuated by Indian society.

There is a continuous flux of 'evolved' advertisements. These advertisements do not show a sari-clad woman with a tucked 'pallu', rather a smart looking educated and aware woman has taken the place. She can be a doctor, a college going girl, a teacher or an office-worker. These ads are just a ploy to sell things and not truly 'empowering'. The companies which propagate these ads do not necessarily believe in the message they distribute. Advertisers are taking advantage of feminism, leveraging a market fad. They want women to get interested in the products as these ads showcase the happy idealized picture of womanhood. It is important to attract the female consumers because they are the target of these advertisements. Thinkers like Maria Mies [7] are vocal about their concerns of 'housewifization' as a fundamental basis of capitalist profit and the focus is on the women who do what is termed as 'consumption work' by Mies. The habits of the consumers have not undergone a major change through decades. Most of the consumer purchases for day-to-day household supplies are made by women. Females are the target of these ad-agencies selling their products selling feminism for their profit. Harvey [8] puts it as: "The commodification of sexuality, culture, history, heritage, of nature as spectacle or as rest cure...these all amount to putting a price on things that were never actually produced as commodities." A woman in a hair-care product ad is shown to ruminate about the future of her daughter. The advertisement makes it abundantly clear that whether her daughter wants to become a scientist or a pilot, all she needs to achieve these goals, is to have beautiful hair. Mother happily chooses the product. These kind of advertisements simply put girls back in the beauty section. This advertisement is again using the progressive ideas of education and growth of girls as productive members of the society to sell a beauty product.

Suggestion and Conclusion

In conclusion, the words of Prasad [9] are appropriate. In her article, "Women, Media and Society: Recasting Communication Policy" which is included in her book, *Women and Media: Challenging Feminist Discourse* writes that the development of

the society without the welfare of women is not possible. She further argues that women should be given the democratic space where she can talk about her problems. For this, media can be regarded as the best way through which they can transmit their voices and ideas to the society. So, media should play an important role to develop as well as empower the women by focusing on their problems and most importantly they should portray women as strong and superior and not weak and inferior [10,11].

It is not necessary for a woman to be always slim, fair, tall, energetic and youthful with soft skin and shining hair. The advertisers need to re-examine their ideas about the women-empowerment and be sensitive to women's right to be treated with dignity and respect. There is need on the part of media to develop some self-regulatory mechanism to promote a more balanced and non-stereotyped images of women. The focus should be on presentation of women as productive and creative human-beings.

Limitations

The research was carefully prepared but there are some limitations of the study. The study was conducted on a limited number of advertisements. The time frame of the study was six months which is not enough to observe all the advertisements being broadcast on various television channels. Regardless of the limitations discussed above, the study provides ample evidence that the image of woman as being portrayed in Indian television advertisements is regressive. The media should re-examine its idea of womanhood and should take measures to present a balanced and contemporary image of woman.

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