

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES CONFRONTING WOMEN IN MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The media has a vital role in formulating femininity as a social construct. It serves as a guide to tell the society how women should dress up, think and act. However, women are mainly covered by media not on the basis of how they perform in their personal and professional lives but rather, what happens to them when some untoward incidents take place, when they are victims. We look at women through the prisms carved by media representations only to find how such depictions compartmentalize certain chosen (or doomed) images for women to fit in and finally, how their cumulative effect works against the construction of a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Paralanguage Matrix, Media Texts, Gender Stereotypes, Social Construction, Authority and Resources

Introduction

The media often depicts women's issues treating them as minorities when they, in fact, constitute one half of the population. Dorothy Smith's book 'The Conceptual Practices of Power' (1990) opens with the following lines from Gail Scott's work 'Spaces like Stairs' (1989): We women have two ways of speaking, the first begins in our mother's womb as we listen to the rhythms of her body (Likewise for our bothers) But at the same time we are developing another relationship to the "father tongue" of education, the media, the law, all patriarchal institutions. Thus, the media has a vital role in formulating femininity as a social construct. It serves as a guide to tell the society how women should dress up, think and act. This gender role stereotyping results in a greater specificity in sex-role portrayals, and leads to inscribe and reinscribe the dominant gender ideologies, however as Kamla Bhasin puts it: 'More frightening than the direct reach of media, however, is its indirect influence. By gradually shaping public opinion, personal beliefs and even people's self - perception, media influences the process of socialization and shapes ideology and thinking'. In advertising, gender advertisements point to the use of social tropes which propagate specific roles formulated for a particular gender. As a social construct, gender influences thinking as well as behavioral patterns. Mass media is the potent vehicle to

pave the way for public consciousness and opinion formation. Advertising perpetuates social cues and spreads the subliminal messages imprisoned in the consumers' psyche.

The aspirational value that advertising holds renders gender advertising a crucial importance. An advertisement portraying a man or woman with say, a hair product, not only makes one inclined to buy the product but also brings to naturalize the specific roles that the man and woman particularly play in that advertisement. Hence, advertisements act as the building blocks for a socio-cultural domino effect, advertisements are believed to plant the seeds of engineered opinion and bring about cultural realignment. A detailed study of consumer behaviour and responses has the capacity to garner the greatest cues to marketers and strategists. Such roles not only allow advertisers take advantage of the most progressive cultural changes but also present the power binaries from taking shape and look at the gender spectrum in its entirety.

Erving Goffman⁴ specifies five categories that encompass almost the entire spectrum of gender codes in advertisements.

- **Family:** The visual depiction of the familial structure in advertisements speaks of a certain social setup based on the dynamics and roles set by the intangibles. For example, depiction of the relationship between the mother and the father, father and the daughter etc.
- **Feminine Touch:** Traditionally, women are depicted as 'touching themselves or items' delicately. This portrayal characterized them as soft, gentle and meek unlike men. A woman is shown caressing a product to convey an element of delicacy which is considered strictly feminine as opposed to commonly thought masculine traits.
- **Function Ranking:** Creation of a power binary between the man and the woman where either is pushed to an advantage over the other. These power structures can keep shifting, but, as a practice, advertisements have only depicted men being favored over women. Example: a man driving a car and the women by his side.
- **Ritualization of Subordination:** Juxtaposing of male and female bodies in images in a way that correlate the body postures with associations that people can draw as regards character traits, gender traits and so on. For example: the feminine touch, lying down, the shy knee bend, a titled head or body, licensed withdrawal and infantilization – all ascertain a submissiveness with respect to gender roles.
- **Licensed withdrawal:** A portrayal of any gender/ individual as detached, withdrawn and un-involved psychologically and/ or physically with the immediate surroundings is labeled as licensed withdrawal. Example: A women in an advertisement with her face away from the camera, looking into the distance, not actively participating in the scene unlike her male counterpart who seems alert and in control of the situation.

Many scholars iterated that one way to change women's standing before the law would be to raise the number of women who are law makers. Thus, it has been a major feminist political strategy in the past few years to increase the number of women serving in public political offices. Thus, it is logical that women should take their rights seriously and protect them without allowing their male counterparts to make them feel inferior. Significantly, stereotyped roles for males and females should be discouraged.

The role of media is very important in attitude formation and in deciding which issues the public accepts as topical. In fact, issues are lent importance by way of depicting them on media platforms. These depictions shape ideology, public opinion and social values.

However, women are mainly covered by media not on the basis of how they perform in their personal and professional lives but rather, what happens to them when some untoward incidents take place, when they are victims. They are rather presented as playing a second fiddle in the society, often in a light-hearted and frivolous view. Hence, we largely come across negative publicity of women in/ by the media, whereas less reportage is found of the exceptional achievements of women who do something worthwhile and novel in areas of education, invention, economy or leadership. We get to see such positive portrayals of women only around the international women's day when it becomes customary or imposing on the media to feature women in a positive way. During the rest of the year, they are largely presented as 'victims'

Language has a rich vocabulary and repository of images that delineate inherited attitudes and utterances towards women. These signs of language depict women as less than the whole and insufficient in many ways. It slows down the task of national growth for women which requires the efforts of all stakeholders.

The Joshi Committee Report of the Working Group on Software for Doordarshan set up in 1982 and chaired by P.C. Joshi (Published in 1985) has the following comments about Doordarshan's approach towards programming for women, which is equally applicable in the context of media representation of women's issues as a whole:

Middle class ideologies of women's roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis for most programmes. In a country where 36% of the agricultural workforce is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non-producers and as playing a limited role outside the home. Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as being marginal to national growth and development The plural nature of Indian culture and the diverse roles that women play is neither acknowledged nor communicated. This results in a reinforcing of the stereotyped images and role specification of women in a uni-dimensional projection of their reality.

Objectives of the Study:

This research paper aims to study and understand the representation of women in media discourses and public speeches in the present context. An effort has been made to fathom the associated ideas of femaleness that emerge from the diverse and clashing trends that one observes in the portrayal of women in the media where women are being depicted as saree-wearing stay-at-home mothers, ever ready to please their families in many ways, as well as in the moulds of sex idols who are objectified and independent, intelligent go-getters or sometimes as a mix of all these while also representing our highly traditional society where life is built around caste, religion, family and gender. Traditional gender roles are, by and large, still the standard in large segments of the society.

Media representations are influential as they convey an idea about what is thought to be 'desirable' gender to the spectator, what gender roles/ moulds are acceptable, desirable and which ones are avoidable. This acceptance/rejection of gender roles is known as 'stereotyping' which works by taking a quality or trait applicable to a small minority of a group and making it representative of the whole group. Stereotypes are not necessarily negative but they perpetuate perceptions and belief systems in the society. This is especially important in relation to gender when it is observed that many stereotypes are thoroughly sexist and perpetuate gender prejudices. In this respect, the study of gender representation in the media is useful topic for research.

Media discourses refer to interactions that take place through a broadcast platform, whether spoken or written, in which communication is directed to a non-present consumer of media (i.e. a reader, listener or viewer). What is covered under 'media discourses' here as regards this work, is the representation/ depiction of women specific news/ stories/ articles in the print media, especially newspapers, in the social media and in advertisements.

Advertising is a major form of mass communication where communication and semantics go hand in hand. "In addition to information regarding service products, advertising also constructs a secondary discourse about various aspects of a society and power relations. Gender relations are one of the dominant discourses that advertisements construct." There is an array of unintended communication besides the intended one, hence, language comes forth as the chief carrier of meaning. Fox states, "Unfortunately, such images may be accepted as true to life by many men, women and children. Advertising neglects its responsibility to be fair, accurate, and truthful in the presentation of men and women".

According to Blanche & Durrheim, “the manner in which people engage in the world is structured by the way in which the world is structured. When we act, what we achieve is to reproduce the ruling discourses of our time and re-enact established relational patterns”.

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