

## GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE THROUGH MEDIA TRACKING

Review by

**Dr. Shoma A. Chatterji**

Email: shoma.chatterji@gmail.com

*MEDIA, GENDER and POPULAR CULTURE in INDIA –Tracking change and continuity; Sanjukta Dasgupta, Dipankar Sinha and Sudeshna Chakravarti; Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, Delhi; 2011, pp.217. Price: Rs.595.00; ISBN: 9788132107293 232*

Technology and the communication revolution through Internet and social media networks have (a) redefined the nature of the media; (b) changed the character of ‘topicality’; (c) introduced new tools and strategies in the work environment; (d) brought about corresponding changes in both readership and public interest; (e) introduced corporate and MNC funding in a big way that has gone in to shape and map the media differently and (f) redefined the meaning and implications of professional mandates.

At this juncture, a book like *Media, Gender and Popular Culture in India – Tracking change and continuity* is an appropriate and contextual frame of reference for students, teachers and practitioners in the media. It explores the varied areas that encompass what media is all about – spanning the fields of cinema, television, advertising, print media in contemporary times with special focus on gender and popular culture. This also involves a historical tracking of the changes that have taken place over time – in the past, in the ever-evolving present to suggest at certain points of time, how the shape of the media is likely to be in the future.

This intensely researched work backed by supporting data and factual details is divided into seven chapters distributed among the three eminent authors who are professors in different departments of Calcutta University. Sanjukta Dasgupta is currently Dean, Faculty of Arts, Professor and Former Head, Department of English. Dipankar Sinha is Professor of Political Science and Honorary Visiting Professor at the Institute of Development Studies, Calcutta. Sudeshna Chakravarti is Professor at the Department of English.

In the first chapter – Introduction: Media and Mediations – Representing Change and Continuity in Indian Popular Culture and Gender, the author lucidly traces the history and evolution of the media beginning with a quote from Edward Thompson’s letter to Rabindranath Tagore in 1935 to arrive at “the spectacular sociocultural definition of India from the beginning of the 1990s” and then step into the 21<sup>st</sup> century where corporate investments by MNCs have, through heavy sponsorships and funding, have influenced the changing culture of India represented through “audiovisual narratives, news and advertisements.” She also goes on to explain how the constitutional right to freedom of expression practiced by the media can often be constrained by ambiguities created and sustained by a clash of values and contradicting aims. She judiciously divides the chapter under different sub-heads like “India Now”, “Popular Culture”, “Not a Borderless Media Empire”, “Divide and Rule”, “Gender Politics”, “The Hyperreal Text and Imageology” and “Cyberscape and the Media” to establish the setting for the rest of the chapters. The chapter, like the others in the book, is heavily referenced filled with quotes to prove each point which helps in building up each argument but for the less academically inclined reader, could either lead to some ambivalence or a blurring of the author’s personal inputs. There is an amusing illustration reproduced from the front page of *The Telegraph* (July 18, 2009) that shows a computer-morphed photographic illustration of some of the highest bureaucrats in the Left Front-ruled West Bengal Government including the then-CM of the state clad in saris (P.19). The caption goes, “We Apologize to Women Who May Feel the Elegant Sari Has Been Wasted on Our Administration.” (Quoted in the Reference section)

Indian Media in Transition: Recent Past and Present, the second chapter focusses on the dynamic entity called India. After a brief introduction marking 1947 as the stage of first transition followed by a glossing through the main, second phase of transition “brought forth by the twin forces of globalization and liberalization”, and establishing the links between media and popular culture, the author divides the chapter under the following sub-heads – (a) *Era of State Domination* which explains the factual history of the official recognition of the media as the Fourth Estate and

the Freedom of Speech and Expression articulated and affirmed in the Constitution; (b) *And Then There Was Liberalization* marking 1991 as the year that began the transition from state control to market domination backing the argument by quoting Arjun Appadurai's five 'scapes' of global cultural economy; (c) *Cricket as Mediated Popular Culture* that explores, very innovatively and imaginatively without losing track of factual details, how cricket has been commoditized and marketed through the media that has pushed the borders of cricket from remaining just a game to be watched and enjoyed to "a spectacle constructed by an aggressive visual regime" (P.39) reducing it to a commodified "item" of popular culture; (d) *Spin Effect Beyond Cricket* and (e) *Continuity Strikes Back – What Ifs and Buts* ventures into areas spinning off from cricket such as a change in the terminology of advertising, a subordination of the print media to the electronic media and so on.

The next four chapters focus on the different media worlds such as cinema (*Filming Change, Securing a Tradition: A Hobson's Choice of a Dynamic Duality*), television (*Television: Images and the Imaginary*), advertising (*Advertising: Encoding Seduction*) and print (*Print Media and Popular Culture: Agents with a Difference*).

The cinema chapter maps the rapid evolution in Indian cinema in the way it has transcended its 'Indian' identity in terms of geography, history, language, subject and technology especially between 2004 and 2009. The stress in the beginning is on how globalization has pushed the borders of Indian mainstream cinema. At the same time, she also mentions how biographical films have also been produced during the same period (page 55). The *Gender and Popular Cinema* section in this chapter traces how "overt architectural differences" in narrative cinema inspired by Hollywood or "its inspirational semantic surrogates...share similar responses to gender representations and the female body." (p.57.) It would however, be pertinent to point out at this juncture that there have been exceptions in recent times of films where "the female body" has been rendered secondary and subservient to the principal female character in some recent films that can go to form a genre unto themselves. Examples are *Astitva*, *Dev*, *Black*, *Paa*, *Hum Aur Tum*, *Parineeta*, *Aja Nachle*, *Cheeni Kum* and more recently, after this book was written, films like *No One Killed Jessica*, *Kahani*, *New York* etc.

The trend for the sexually aggressive heroine was set some time earlier in *Jism* (2003) followed by *Aitraaz* (2004). *Jism* lays claim to a new beginning in its representation of female sexuality. It functions not merely beyond the framework of socially sanctioned ties like marriage but is radically liberated from all taboos that control the female body and female desire.<sup>1</sup> In choosing the out-of-work, alcoholic lawyer Kabir as her lover, Sonia acts like a panther pouncing on its prey. Even her husband, in one of their intimate encounters, acknowledges her superior powers. She is compared to a vampire, eager to drain her husband of all vitality. This is new in Hindi cinema but not in world cinema. Women as voracious predators, driven by an insatiable hunger have been witnessed earlier in cultural representations, placed in juxtaposition with women devoted to their material and domestic duties. In *Aitraaz* the character portrayed by Priyanka Chopra is fleshed out as a go-getting seducer who has no moral compunctions about using her body both for professional reasons and for personal passions – the choice is for her to make. She has to play heavily for these choices perhaps in order to appease the patriarchal mindset of the Indian audience that can accept the characterizations but not ideology or the choice.

However, the 'ideology' of the sexually aggressive woman driven to the use and wanton display of her body for financial pressures and/or out of choice has been widely accepted in Milan Luthria's *The Dirty Picture* (2012) that fetched the Best Actress Award for Vidya Balan in the title role. The choice of a woman to be or not to be a sex object is left to the woman alone in this film which perhaps, might pave a new path in female representations in Indian cinema. Maybe these are mere drops in the vast ocean of patriarchal perspectives that harp on the cinematic and cinematographic exploitation of the female body, but the fact remains that a beginning has been made and the commercial success of some of these films reflect an acceptance of female assertion by the audience in a mainly patriarchal world.

The section called *Social and Cultural Trends in Eastern Indian Films in the 1980s* is a brilliantly researched segment that offers historical and cultural insights into the cinema in the Eastern regions. It sheds light on the socio-political backdrop against which censorship influenced Eastern and specifically Bengali cinema to quite an extent. *Images in the Imaginary – Bollywood* studies the evolution of the term *Bollywood* to explore how "Bollywood film texts track popular culture and societal norms and the transition that has been taking place in the national and diasporic affiliations" (p.73).

The chapter on television, *Television: Images and the Imaginary* traverses the many areas that encompass this audiovisual medium stressing on topics like *Television Coverage and Media Responsibility* where the ‘watchdog’ function of television is elaborated upon. *Imaging Gender on Small Screen* analyses the major soaps and mega serials’ representation of the Indian woman. There is considerable overlapping of television and cinema in this chapter the latter drawn as points of reference to explain a given situation or paradigm. References to several popular Bengali serials on regional satellite channels are also made.

The next chapter on advertising is principally focussed on how “Bengali literature has responded to the impact created by advertising in the print media,” (page 117). This chapter spills over with informative and educative research perhaps for the first time in English on Media and Advertising in Bengali Literature tracing the history of print media advertising in Bengali. Referring to the present situation, the chapter referring to Girija Vyas comment linked to the Prohibition of Indecent Representation of Women and Children Act, (1986) where she says that “the definition of ‘advertisement’ had to be amended too as “there have been many changes in technology in the past years” (p.137.)

*Print Media and Popular Culture* sheds light on the concept and practice of little magazines that defined a cultural and literary innovation within the context of the Bengali print media on either side of the Bengali border – India and Bangladesh. The ‘Little Magazine’ occupies a major slice of this chapter and moves on to women’s magazines in the latter part of the chapter. It is exclusively focussed on Bengali language print media interpolations vis-à-vis the little magazine providing an excellent frame of reference for future researchers to fall back on.

Interestingly, this chapter refers to the erstwhile Bengali literary magazine *Ekkhon* which was jointly edited by Soumitra Chatterjee and Nirmalya Acharya for 35 years but ceased publication when the latter passed away. (P.151). References are also made to *Sandesh*, the children’s magazine originally published by Sukumar Ray and resurrected by Satyajit Ray his son which gained massive popularity among children. However, the gender factor and the print media factor merged into the same chapter seem incongruous at times and perhaps could have been divided into separate chapters to be a bit more lucid and reader-friendly. The chapter also includes a case study of *Sananda*, the most popular and hard-selling women’s magazines in Bengal originally edited by actor-director Aparna Sen that ventured out to become a kind of a Bengali version and also a counterpoint to the English *Femina* but met with unprecedented success over the years.

The last chapter, *Conclusion: Media Responsibility – The Winding Road Ahead* is the most problematic chapter in the entire book which stands out like a sore thumb in an otherwise well-written, extensively researched collection of essays on the media because it appears to have not gone through proof-reading, redrafting and final editing processes. There are several grammatical gaffes too. The topics and sub-heads are well-chosen but the end result is sad.

In terms of language and style, there is a tendency in all the authors to write long, winded sentences that could have been broken up into several small ones making of easier and smoother reading. There is considerable overlapping too but that is natural and expected in a scholastic book that explores every area of media through its history, politics and sociology.

Globalization and the convergence of various forms of media and new information technologies have fuelled the widespread and rapid promotion of ideas and values at the local, national and global levels in a scale and intensity never before experienced. This book seriously examines how this development has engendered or hindered the definition and status of gender and popular culture in the country. It repeatedly points out how, as a powerful socializing agent, media has become an important tool as well as site of struggle as a vehicle of information, education, social change and, according to new terminology, ‘infotainment.’

All said and done, *Media, Gender and Popular Culture in India – Tracking change and continuity* will remain a wonderful handbook and reference work for future scholars, practitioners and workers in the media.

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<sup>i</sup> Lahiri, Ranabir: The Body Politic, article in *The Statesman*, Sunday Supplement, March 9, 2003, p.3.

Dr. Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 titles. She has won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema twice, and the UNFPA-LAADLI Media Award for Gender Sensitivity, 2009-2010 (Northern and Eastern Region) for “consistent writing on women’s issues with a gender perspective”. Among other fellowships, she has won a post-doctoral -Senior Research Fellowship from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) , Delhi for research on the representation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema. She has been on the jury of several film festivals in India and beyond.