

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN MEDIA IN THE ERA OF NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMY

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“...the language of advertisements is more about the consumer than the object to be consumed.”

Abstract: *This is an attempt to understand the underlying logic of representing women in mainstream media especially in electronic advertisement. Women in the neo-liberal economy or in globalized economy get ample opportunity to promote and develop them as well as find a way to maintain livelihood. Lots of electronic media have come up in this neoliberal era. Before the initiation of economic reform policy, very few channels were operating. Government controlled Doordarshan occupying the centre stage. But the open market economy has boosted private players in diverse fields including entertainment areas. Thus electronic channels are vying with each other. On the other hand, private companies and enterprises start utilizing these media to promote their goods through advertisements. Women utilize this new opportunity. But this electronic media consciously promotes a certain category of women while avoiding others. This paper interrogates this discrimination of women in media.*

Keywords: *globalization, marketization, advertisement, free market economy, women portrayal*

Introduction

Although there are lots of debate about the nature and form of globalization, but it is beyond doubt that globalization has left indelible impact upon the society. Profound changes are being perceived in economy, culture and politics. In economy private initiative and market values start dictating the terms. State or public enterprises are regarded as inefficient and causing enormous harm to the health of country's economy. Only the private initiative is the panacea. Open market economy and random privatization are the twin formula for the development. In the words of Andrew Heywood, “The central pillars of neo-liberalism are the market and the individual”.¹ The chief aim of neo-liberal economy is to roll back the state in the belief that only market capitalism will deliver efficiency, growth and prosperity. State should relegate its economic responsibilities at the hands of private players. It should remain confined within the police activity i.e. maintaining law and order and foreign aggression. In the name of welfare state should not interfere into the economic sphere. The Public sector is vilified for its inefficiency and work culture while private sector is consciously glorified. Advocates of market economy argue that the market has capacity to negotiate and alter the parochial and primordial values. Competition is the mantra of this new economy. Hitherto under-utilized or unutilized potentiality will be optimally used; every part or segment of the society will enjoy equal

¹ Heywood Andrew –Key Concepts in Politics

opportunity to flourish. Multiple choices will be there to avail; individuals will have the liberty to pick up among them. Market not only promotes economic prosperity but individual freedom will also be promoted and protected. In this new circumstance individual will tap the new opportunity for their development. Economic, political and social democracy will be promoted. As a result individualistic culture or atmosphere is gaining ground. Competition and self promotion slowly capture the minds of people. Individualism and liberal values are getting stronger and stronger. *“Significantly, the onset of liberalization has accompanied a concerted expression of the values of individualism and untrammelled self hood.”*² Private initiative and self development are the foundational values of this era.

It is undeniable that due to the globalization economic opportunity has been multiplied; new avenues are being opened up. India since early 1990s started incorporating this new value into her economy. In the name of re-structuring feeble economy India pursued policies akin to the neo-liberal economy. Public sector units are being sold out or liquidated. Trade liberalization policies have been taken up; open market policies are followed; private initiatives are encouraged; foreign direct investment is desperately sought. Private initiative and self development—the two foundational values gradually are gripping the public minds. A positive atmosphere for the private initiative is slowly but steadily getting foothold.

Globalization and Advertisements vis a vis women

Market economy runs with an extreme motive of profit; numerous attempts are being taken up to promote its business interest. Globalization has facilitated this process. Only the marketization can help sustain in competition. Private enterprises always try to innovate strategies to sell their products. One such attempt is advertisement. Media barons and conglomerates have flourished manifold. Numerous entertainment channels have sprung up leading to the rise in entertainment programmes and advertisements as well. Advertisement is the tool through which private companies project and promote their commodities. In other words advertisement helps promote goods for commercial gains. *“..the techniques and practices used to bring products, services, opinions or causes to public to respond in a certain way toward what is advertised”.*³ Through advertisements products and services are projected to provoke the public. It pushes consumerism into them which in turn serves the interests of multinational corporations. Products like gadgets, electronic and house hold items, housing, travel, financial and insurance goods etc advertised to increase the interest in these things amongst the public and to create prospective customers.

Although advertisement in different media came into being much earlier but its preeminence was found when expansion of business started rolling out. In 19th century in USA advertising agencies started cropping up. In 1920s these agencies gained fame for their professionalism. They promoted the goods in a comprehensive way. *“.....by the 1920s agencies had come into being that could plan and execute complete advertising campaigns from initial research to copy preparation to placement in various media”.*⁴

Advertisement not only promotes the commodities for commercial gain but it is also a medium through which culture can be promoted, demoted or redefined. This public arena is being consciously or unconsciously utilized for the promotion or demotion of a particular culture. Although there are many media for advertising, but electronic media especially television captures a lion’s share. It reaches to a wide number of viewers. At a given point of time television covers millions of audience injecting uniform cultural ethos into different audience. Naturally business establishments and corporate world are pouring their wealth in this media to promote their business interest. One estimate says that advertising revenue has shot up to 300% from 1994-1995--- 1999-2000. Newer and innovative strategies are being employed, models are hired to capture the public minds. *“.....the composition of the audience*

² ibid

³ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol-1,(2010) P-113

⁴ ibid

determines the advertisers' choice as to when a certain message should be run."⁵ Advertisers buy slots between or during regular or important programme to bring into the notice of the public. Size and composition of audience are the important determinants of different types of advertisements. "...the composition of the audience determines the advertisers' choice as to when a certain message should be run."⁶

Advertisements contain a message of a specific life style of specific strata of society. "The life styles of upper-class are mostly portrayed in the entertainment contents to create a sense of desire and aspiration amongst the viewing public towards such life styles".⁷ Advertisements have played important role in manipulating and manufacturing ideological transformation and transmission in the public domain. "Advertisements would ...act as ideological apparatuses".⁸ Ideological manipulation in a free society is done so as to perpetuate the hegemony of dominant classes. Gramsci in his *Prison Note Books* put forward the theory of hegemony. Capitalist class resorts to the means by which it obtains the consent of the subordinate groups. The ruling ideas are presented before the society in such a manner that it appears as the ideas of the whole society. "The world view of the ruling class, in other words, was so thoroughly diffused by its intellectuals as to become the common sense of the whole of society".⁹ Dominant class in order to extract general consent over their domination takes shelter under the aegis of hegemony. "Dominant ideology becomes invisible because it is translated into common sense, appearing as the natural, apolitical state of things."¹⁰

Gramsci is of the view that perpetuation of ruling ideas is due to the constant propagation of mass media, civil society organizations and their intellectuals. By this way they represent their interests as the interest of the whole society. Noam Chomsky, US radical intellectual and anarchist theorist propounds propaganda model of the mass media to manufacture consent and perpetuate dominance of the ruling class. The dominant discourse is nourished and protected through advertisement and broad casting news and views. "This distortion operates through series of filters, such as the impact of private ownership of media outlets, a sensitivity to the views and concern of advertisers and sponsors and the sourcing of news and information from agents of power such as governments and business think tanks."¹¹ It is the power play or power politics through which different discourses engage them to enjoy hegemony. A dominant stratum of the society always is in search of mechanism to hold sway its domination. For that it carefully constructs its own discourse and utilizes different tools to ingrain it into the public minds. "Society.....requires discourse the mapping, description and articulation of situations and processes) which by definition has the effect of annihilating and delegitimizing certain views and positions while including others".¹²

In sum it may be said that dominant discourse deliberately ignores even subverts the other discourses for the fear of losing its privileges and prestige. Other discourses are subjugated due to their inability to spill over the civil society and public sphere. From this theoretical position, now I try to understand the underlying politics of advertisement in television.

Recasting women in the advertisement leads to the recreation of a new middle class norm. A conscious attempt is being taken to promote and recreate a new normative Indian consumer. These advertisements silently but effectively exclude the image of other world containing poor, tribal, working and peasant class and Dalit. Although a glacial shift in India economy has been occurred in 1990s; it was argued that neo-liberal economy would neutralize the cultural differences, promote a perfect democracy where discrimination in any pattern will not be encouraged, merit

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ Dr. Saswati Gangopadhyaya: Seminar Paper presented at 3rd Refresher Course on Women Studies at ASC, BU

⁸ Maitrayee Chaudhuri

⁹ McLellan, David—Marxism After Marx, Palgrave Macmillan, 4th Edn, 2008.

¹⁰ Chaudhuri, Maitrayee---Gender and Advertisement, Women's Studies International Forum, Vol.24, No.3/4,pp.373-385,2001

¹¹ Heywood, Andrew—Political Theory: An Introduction, Palgrave Macmillan,2004

¹² Van,Zoonen Liesbet – Feminist Media Studies , Sage, London, 1994, P-40

will drive the society. Social barriers and taboos will die down. Freedom and liberation will be celebrated. The new India will enjoy unfettered liberty. ‘.....at last the individual is free to choose’.

But in reality a new form of culture and norm is being implicitly constructed. The new Indian is constructed as English educated, upper caste, cosmopolitan, rationalist with scientific bent of mind against rural, illiterate or semi literate, lower case, parochial mentality. This new individual has been constructed as “...the typical corporate executive, an upwardly mobile professional who travels a great deal, works hard, and unwinds at weekends and holidays.”¹³ Same is true for Indian women. Earlier images of Indian women were erected on the nationalist discourse which portrayed women ‘*educated, politically aware and yet innocent of western cultural mores*’. This image of Indian women gains support from cultural nationalism which portrays women as ‘*chaste, demure and sexually sanitized*.’ The ‘other woman’ is devoid of education, cultural and moral etiquette and politeness. Partha Chatterjee beautifully depicts this image of other woman. He calls them as common woman “who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males”.¹⁴ This common or other woman performs socially less respected jobs. “Alongside the parody of the westernized woman, this other construct is repeatedly emphasized in the literature of the nineteenth century through a host of lower class female characters who make their appearance in the social milieu of the new middle class---maid servants, washer women, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, prostitutes”.¹⁵ In the post –independent India, the common woman or other woman raised a high hope of demolishing this compartmentalization. Fathers of Indian constitution with an aim of crushing the social curses and impediments, inserted principles of liberty, equality, justice, abolition of untouchability even special privileges with an aim of enhancing togetherness and withering away discrimination and inequality from everywhere. “*Written into the Indian constitution was a pledge to battle against discrimination on grounds of sex, caste, community, class and tribe*”.¹⁶ After so many years of independence, the condition of other woman remains almost on the same position. Through the scale of development and modernization their objective conditions are not encouraging. Indicators of modernization tell different story.

In the advertisements women are predominantly employed to promote products and services. In every item they are utilized whether it requires their presence or not. Even in masculine accessories women are presented. From these advertisements a desirable value can be discerned. Fair complexion, slim and beautiful looking women are the ideal ones. These traits only ensure a good life. Even dark complexion, it is propagated, is the major hindrance for self-development even marriage. Being fair, the adverts convince, is the secret of success. Utmost care is taken to manipulate the minds of young women that overweight, dark features are the disqualification for their self-development. Fairness cream and beauty soap are showering promises to bring their dreams come true. Diets are being suggested to maintain figures. Even creams have been innovated to conceal the age. One advert (***Pond’s Wrinkle Free Cream***) says that they discovered the secret of enjoying ever youth, ever green image. All these beauty creams and soaps are meant to construct and narrate a new value, a new norm, a discourse which promotes a certain stratum of society and excludes others. It is propagated in such a manner that this becomes a common sense, a discourse of whole Indians.

It is necessary to create a new discourse for the companies and business establishment because they are in search of capturing the newly emergent large middle class. Economic reforms policy help flourish a sizable portion of middle class. The emoluments and perks the new middle class enjoy that their earlier generation could not dream of. The expansion of the new middle class lures the manufacturing companies to capture their imagination. These adverts

¹³ Chaudhuri, Maitrayee---Gender and Advertisement, Women’s Studies International Forum, Vol.24, No.3/4,pp.373-385,2001

¹⁴ Chatterjee, Partha – The Nationalist Resolution of Women’s Question, in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (ed)- Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, 1989, Kali for Women, New Delhi

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Maitrayee Chaudhuri

lure the woman to aspire for those goods by which they will be able to win the world. Companies producing cosmetics and fair creams vie with each other to promote their products. Different methods are applied but the core value remains the same. Private companies (indigenous or foreign) fix their target to capture the new middle class. It is due to this large market, multinational companies and conglomerates are shifting their attention to India. She becomes the most preferred destination for foreign investment. India occupies the front seat in terms of attracting FDI all over the world. On the other hand, these companies and enterprises create job opportunities for the young generation for which physical appearance and smartness are the basic qualifications. Naturally young generation especially the female sections run after the desirable qualifications. It is complimentary to each other. Private enterprises and new middle class survive embracing each other. Both necessitate both. For that a new discourse is necessary, a new image of Indian women is needed to construct. Fair, metropolitan, English educated women are the new India women; rural, dark complexion, tribal or peasant-working class woman is to be excluded from this project as they are not the potential customer. As globalization successfully sprayed the consumerism into the public minds, new Indian women are constantly lured to consume. Physical fitness, smart and good looking, fair complexion are the hidden formula to sustain in the market. Naturally socially ostracized, neglected, deprived, illiterate rural poor women have no place to enter into the public domain. The careful construction of new women embraces one and subtracts others. Historically they were deprived; now the neo-liberal economy puts chain in their legs, erect hindrances for their development. Conscious attempts are being taken up to create psychological inability for them to move forward. Their culture value and belief system are regarded as backward. Advertisement is being employed to recreate and sustain this new woman and the private enterprises as well.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it appears that globalization and neo-liberal economy creates opportunities not for all women, but a certain section of women enjoy the fruits of open market economy. It is the exigency of the private companies and the new middle class that they consciously require an image of new Indian. Various methods are applied to construct this project; advertisement is one of them. Through this medium they find it easy to preach this discourse. Market economy has promised equitable distribution of resources and equal opportunity, but their operation tells the opposite story.

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