

## Women in Indian Television Advertisement: A Feminist Observation

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**Abstract:** *Feminists concerns in India have been one of the top priorities despite certain drastic socio-economic truths about women. Right from the Vedic period to the post modern time of today, a sensitive response to issues pertaining to women has come from all organs of society--religion, literature, social activism, literary criticism, etc. If feminism addresses the cause of women vis-à-vis their socio-economic conditions in the society, it becomes imperative for one to probe the role of media in lending the due status of dignity and grace deserved by women at large. The paper titled **Women in Indian Television Advertisement: A Feminist Observation** is a humble endeavour in that direction to explore the contribution of Indian media to the causes of women. The extant position of women in India through the lens of advertisements as an integral domain of media foregrounds the discourse of the paper while interrogating the issue from the feminist perspective. As an ideology - political, cultural or literary, feminism emerges from the discriminatory treatment of women at all fronts of life-social, economic, political etc. That women are not a commodity is the vantage point from where the discourse of the paper emerges with its focused objective of examining the veracity of gender sensitivity lent to women through Indian media in contemporary post modern context.*

**Key words:** *Media, Advertisement, Feminism, Sensitivity, Patriarchy, Stereotype*

### I. INTRODUCTION

As an ideology - political, cultural or literary, feminism emerges from the discriminatory treatment of women at all fronts of life-social, economic, political etc. It challenges the age old perceptions of people about women and rebels against the patriarchal hegemonic phenomenon to which women at large are subjected. It also ventures to edit the stereotypical perception of patriarchy for women asserting their identity as parallel to men in all walks of life. This is particularly true in the present context where women have set enviable records of their performance bringing laurel to the nation while competing with their male counterparts. Women have always dissented against their treatment as a mere object of consumption. They assert their potential character as essentially capable of and eligible for all successes and glories of the world while refusing to be seen as an object of desire, lust and consumption. That women are not a commodity is the vantage point from where the discourse of the paper emerges with its focused objective of examining the veracity of gender sensitivity lent through Indian media in general and its advertisement areas in particular in contemporary post modern context. The emergence of writers like Kamala Das, Manju Kapur, Mamta Kalia, Amrita Pritam, to name a few, whose works are but an assertive mirror of their creative potential with their pungent critique of pathetic treatment of women in patriarchal society, is a potent testimony to the fact that women are today conscious enough to understand their position and accordingly prepared to confront their disgraceful and submissive status at the vicious hands of the ever empowered male dominated society. Betty Friedan in 1960 had brought out a book titled *The Feminine Mystique* with its major emphasis on the consequences of the treatment of women as objects or commodity in advertisements. Before the paper progresses to illustrate the service of media to women through its different manifestations, it is but imperative to analyse the feminists' major concerns in order to lend a critical assessment of the

role of media vis-s-vis priorities of feminism redefined through many a feminist critic of world repute.

Out of multiple concerns of feminist critics, stereotyping of women is the one which perhaps bothers them the most. And, media in general and electronic media in particular is usually proven notorious for projecting women as stereotypical characters where they supposedly play an underrated role in the household ambience. Particularly, the world of advertisement betrays the ugliest form of sexism highlighting the essential discrimination between men and women. The rest is performed through the serials where women ironically are lent the maximum space only to be characterised as essentially inferior to men. Thus, the paper works out the treatment of women in media from intertwined twin perspectives— the commodification and stereotyping of women in the world of advertisements and eventually interrogates the role of media in extending its services to the women community of the society. Feminists' objections stand even more relevant when understanding of women as either object of consumption or in their oversimplified roles prevails in a time when women articulate their representations advocating their prerogative in public and private spheres.

### II. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Space occupied by women in patriarchal society of the world in general and India in particular is defined by two characters, firstly as sex object and secondly as their all pervasive stereotypical roles. So far as their objectification as sexual character is concerned, it also eventually ends up in perception of women as stereotypes worth nothing else than the means of sexual gratification and bearing children for the sake of familial and social dignity. Ironically enough, the same has not changed to the satisfactory extent in the twenty first century when various laws and acts have come in force to

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disseminate awareness about women and put a check on the all sorts of injustices inflicted upon them. Social activists, NGO's and National Women commission have also failed to achieve the considerable measure of success in ensuring women sensitivity. The rampant instances of women discrimination to the fatal extent in a city like Delhi where all government functionaries claim to be at the service of women's safety, speak volume of the crippled attitude of men for women continued through the ages till time. Amidst the political polemics and erudite debates the perception for women may be felt to be changing but the all exclusive world of advertisements out rightly falsifies the change of attitude putting an end to the debate. Select examples of advertisements will illustrate the fact that women are still understood and presented, though smartly and intelligently, only in terms of their stereotypical roles, that is, either as sex object or as ideal housewives with their sense of household chores and duties.

The atrocious discrimination of women is born of the sadist treatment lent to them by the male society in general. This has led to the emergence of many a literary feminist critic in defence of their cause. Simone de Beauvoir's opinion in this respect is amply suitable when she says:

One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society; it is civilization as whole that produces this creature."(Beauvoir, 457)

While stating a sharp distinction between "sex" and "gender" being biological and cultural/social/psychological construct respectively, Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* observes the repression and subordination of a woman as "a most ingenious form of interior colonization"(25). In as early as 1869, J.S. Mill expressed his critical concern reflecting on the pathetic condition of women in society at large. In his book, *The Subjection of Women*, Mill writes about the problems of women's inequality in society and stated—"what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions"(22). I will revisit the feminists' assumptions with respect to women's position at the hands of media after I share my understanding of literary truth in Indian literary tradition that follows this passage.

Having accepted all so far, it emerges that the question of discrimination and oppression is a social and historic one. The same, however, is not true about treatment of women in Indian literary tradition that professes a glorious truth pertaining to feminine space. Indian literary tradition is comprehensive enough to include Urdu and English literatures besides Sanskrit and Hindi ones, all of which have presented generous treatment of women. The shloka like "Yatra naryastu puhyante, ramante tatra devata"(Hindu View of Life) asserts that while on the one hand divine perception of women prevails in our classical literature, on the other hand, poets like Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Harivanshrai Bachchan in Hindi and Mirza Ghalib and Basheer Badra in Urdu identify the romantic glory associated with women.

### III. RIGHT FROM THE SMALL SCREEN

Advertisements in particular are modelled on the vision of their longevity in the credulous minds of the consumers. Multifarious innovative styles of communicating the merits of a product are devised by the advertising agencies and their teams with a view to arresting and retaining the attention of the consumers. But one thing which has worked wonder for these companies in selling their products over a period of time is their application of sex, voluptuousness and aphrodisiac visuals in their advertisements. And this results in generating the controversy which ensures the success of a given stuff even though the ad doesn't work out. A list of advertisements fraught with heated controversy would be worthy of observation in this respect. Being in consonance with the objective of the paper, these television advertisements are relevant in the sense that they are constructed and built up at the expense of ethical and more particularly feminist concerns in a country where women are held in high divine esteem, higher than their human self. Divine impression prevails for women in the country since Vedic era. The nudity of women being displayed in the ads certainly speaks volume of the perception of women as no more than sexual commodity media has for them.

Fastrack ad featuring Virat Kohli, the cricketer and Genelia D'souza in their respective role of pilot and airhostess generated much furore for its intimate scene of the two in the cockpit. Though the commercial was condemned by many an aviation company, the court eventually could not uphold the cases filed against it.

Similarly, the ad of Amul Macho was a grand commercial success in market with its loud suggestions of voluptuous, desirous mood of a woman who finds herself sexually driven and taken to a particular ambience when she couldn't check her impulse saying: "Ye to bada toying hai".

The treatment of women as a mere object of sexual consumption in these commercials stand in sharp contrast with the culture of a nation where women are considered as the epitome of pious creation worthy of our reverence as stated by the celebrated Chhayavadi Hindi poet, Jai Shankar Prasad:

नारी! तुम केवल श्रद्धा हो  
विश्वास—रजत—नग पगतल में,  
पीयूष—स्रोत—सी बहा करो  
जीवन के सुंदर समतल में(46)

India has been a promising market of the world. The companies stoop to any menial level playing with the cultural ethos of the nation. If we go down the memory lane, we remember an ad of Bisleri water in 2001 which involved two couples lying out on a beach trying to communicate the change of tagline from "pure and safe to play safe". The ad with its articulate sexual suggestions was abandoned by the Indian audience eventually leading to its ban.

Deodorant ad whether it is of Axe, Fog, or Set wet Zatak, they all have been made with shockingly explicit sexual suggestions where women/young girls with her seductive look would be responding to a semi-clad man.

SeT Wet Zatak, a deodorant from Wildstone is such an example that has been much controversial to the extent of compelling intervention of I&B that directed Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) to assess the morality of the ad. ASCI in turn asked the agency to to effect change in the ad to its acceptable degree. The advertisement apart from containing bold scenes also spelled out the manifest stereotyping of women as a commodity while men as robust dominating lot deserving these women for their use.

As early as 1998 saw a still more sexually glaring ad of Calida, a Switzerland based Innerwear Company(<http://post.jagran.com>). Commercially speaking, the ad was a tremendous success with its highly obscene contents wherein Bipasha Basu and Dino Morea are wearing the said underwear and the latter was pulling off the girl's underwear with his teeth. The ad was banned following the strong criticism and protests from all quarters of the country, particularly from women organisation. The obscenity of the ad would have been acceptable in a country like Switzerland but the same is thoroughly unethical and anti-feminists in a country like India where women are not only the idols of worship but also the deity incarnate of Power:

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता,  
नमस्तस्यै, नमस्तस्यै, नमस्तस्यै, नमो नमः।(112)

To think of wine and its ad without the lavish display of the body of woman would be more of a pious wish than an honest reality. The tag line "Kucch bhi ho sakta hai" for the print ad of Aristocrat black whisky rose into controversy in 2002 with its allegedly bold exposure of the "accentuated bosom" of a model. Massive furore erupted for this ad leading to the intervention of the court that eventually directed the company and the advertising agency to edit the ad and curtail its glaring sexuality to its acceptable degree.

In a recent advertisement for a strawberry flavoured condom, Sunny Leone, an Indo Canadian porn star, who has made her way through Bollywood Industry ever since she got into Big Boss, a highly popular Television show, has flung a glaring sexual look with loud erotic suggestions oozing out of her seductive style of licking strawberries. Needless to say, an advertisement of a condom and its promotion by none other but a porn star will not be adorned with feminine grace and ethics for T.V. viewers at large in India.

The notion of recognition of women's identity in literature and media is different from each other. Both of them claim to redefine the women's position in their own ways but with a difference. Literature promises a holistic representation of women's self lending them an enviable comparable status with men while media believes in exposing only physical domains of women making them commercially viable rather than appreciating their aesthetic merits. A comparative character of literary/feminist recognition of women and their representation in media can be illustrated from one example each. As for literature, the assertive voices for women emerge as typically distinctive character of women writers across the globe. The poem, *I am the Daughter of the Land of Dravida* by Amrita Pritam is a radical example that redefines the identity of a woman in Indian context. The very title of the poem is powerful in its use of evocative terms loaded with poignant implications. The subversion of image through the

process of demythification could be easily figured out throughout the poem including the title itself:

I am kama- kanya, the daughter of love.

I am kal-kanya, the daughter of death.

Wearing this body, I have come.

I am the daughter of the land of Dravida.(89)

The multilayered excerpt ostensibly spells out three points of significance: a) assertion of women's position, b) dynamically comprehensive character of women that excludes almost no space and c) the endeavour of redefining the history as earlier written and perceived by men.

Contrasted with the above mentioned literary excerpt redefining the identity of a woman is an advertisement wherein a girl resembling Katrina Kaif, in her role to promote the sale of a fairness cream, 'clean and dry intimate cream', is finally able to succeed in luring her husband after she comes back to him having cleaned up her vagina with a fairness cream. While the ad receives reactions like "ultimate insult to women" "ultimate insult to women" and "As long as we are hypocritical about our skin colour, these kind of sickeningly insulting advertisements will not stop!" (healthland.time.com), the opinion of the Clean and Dry ad director, Alyque Padamsee, proves more than ironically hilarious:

"It is hard to deny that fairness creams often get social commentators and activists all worked up. What they should do is take a deep breath and think again. Lipstick is used to make your lips redder, fairness cream is used to make you fairer — so what's the problem? ... The only reason I can offer for why people like fairness, is this: if you have two beautiful girls, one of them fair and the other dark, you see the fair girl's features more clearly. This is because her complexion reflects more light."(Women's Health)

Car ads in the country have similarly projected women with their baser drives. Tragically enough, when the horrendous incident of Delhi Gang rape in December, 2012 was still being protested from all corners of the country leading to the approval of even more austere laws to deal with incidents of sex crime in the country the Ford ad 'depicted Italy's former Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi with a trio of bound women in the trunk of the car.'(Hindustan Times) The violence of sexual crime oozing out of the ad provoked cyber crime in the country compelling eventually an apology from Ford India: "We deeply regret this incident and agree with our agency partners that it should have never happened." Ford said. "These posters are against the standards of professionalism and decency within Ford and our agency partners, and weren't part of any projects that Ford and WPP are working on, or for any commissioned commercial use.(Ibid.)"

Thus, we see that the success of advertisements is subject to the commodification of women and "reinforcement of age-old stereotypes." In this context, the pertinent observation on the character of advertisements made by Meenu Anand is remarkable enough to illustrate:

“...The process of commodification in advertising brings out the paradoxical nature of women’s role as consumer; she is the subject of a transaction in which her own commodification is ultimately the object. Advertising frequently commodifies women by exploiting their sexuality or fragmenting the female body into their eroticised zones such as hair, face, legs, breasts etc. Thus, in the exchange between the commodity and ‘woman’ in advertisements, a woman becomes a commodity too. Women are portrayed as sex objects who are probably casted to titillate the viewers by exposing their body parts. Women are shown wearing revealing clothes and take leaning and yearning postures – signs of incompleteness or lack of security. Women and their body parts sell everything- food, clothing, cars, computers, men’s shaving lotions and underwear. Even in commercials of the products consumed mostly by men alcohol, tobacco, cigarettes, briefs; women are used as models exposing their bodies. Glamour dolls in front of cameras and ace photographers do the same behind the lenses, trapping thousands of teenagers believe in the miracle of the product.”(Women’s Studies and Development Centre).

Media, universally acknowledged as the Fourth Estate of the nation is supposedly the agent of realistic and honest communication with its sense of ethical responsibilities towards all sections of the society. The neutral character of media should rule out any possibility of discrimination among people in terms of their gender, age, social and economic conditions, demographic positions etc. But the same is blatantly violated when it comes to the advertisement domain of media. For example, the fantabulous advertisements of cosmetic stuff and luxurious items are highly confined to the particular group of women making the ads doubly villainous; firstly for their gender discrimination between men and women and secondly for creating internal discrimination between women themselves. So, even the claims of progressive ads in the twenty first century fall flat when they are exposed with the fact that they accommodate only a relatively small sample of the larger population of the audience residing in villages. Also in terms of age, this prejudice or limited choice of audience comes to the fore. The ads relating to the women between the age group of 20-30 years are also evidently catering to the economically empowered section of the society.

Another significant aspect of advertisements in electronic media is its act of creating a world of perfection where women remain pretty angels sans any blemishes or scars on their body. This utopian idea of wrinkle free women is not only at loggerheads with modest actuality where possibility of minor spots in a man or woman cannot be ruled out, but it also spells precarious psychological impacts on women not able to identify themselves with the “ideal women” created in the ads. In this respect, Reichart opines that such ideal advertisements engender “devaluations of one’s— and one’s partner’s— attractiveness, attitudes supportive of aggressiveness toward women, triggering of gender stereotyping and gender role expectations, and distorted body

image” (Reichert, A Test 82 ).The apparent ambivalence created between the glamorous objectification of women and the drastic realities of their being in their real life leaves the world of media prone to criticism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, we see that representation of women in media in general and television advertisements in particular in India is based on the gender discrimination wherein women are treated as no better than an object or commodity. Portrayal of stereotypical sensational images of women not only reduces their identity to a mere object of desire but also simultaneously retains the binaries between men and women prevailing since the ages. To say that media and its variegated organs inhabiting the twenty first century have come of age in so far as they project the progressive characters of their advertisements involving women is but only half true amidst the dichotomic character of glamorous ads and real lives lived by larger section of the deprived community. Hence, the dissemination of feminist sensitivity is the only remedial possibility sought for effecting the desirable change in the prevailing trends of Indian media at large.

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