

Gender Representation in Advertisements in the Indian Media

Dr. Jyoti Raj Rathee

Associate Professor of English, UGC Research Awardee

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Media discourses are not neutral discourses but ones that are fraught with meaning-and the effects of these meanings can be far reaching and, many a times, detrimental to society if they go as far as touching the psychological contours of the consumer mindset in forming stereotypes and in social role perceptions. The present paper endeavors to analyse some selected advertisements in the Indian Media in order to gain an insight into how women and their lives are being depicted and portrayed in the present scenario.

A look at the commercials on TV clears the whole picture. They depict a woman “essentially as a consumer. Cosmetics and clothes promise the development of a woman’s potentiality to entice the right man; they portray a smart but very capable housewife who is clever at using things in the kitchen, which are appreciated and approved even by the mother-in-law. She is also presented as a very devoted and loving wife and mother. The mass of working class women and their problems are nowhere in the picture.”¹

Advertisements do not reflect the actual life and identities of real mothers. Mothers in ads look more like ‘models’ than real mothers, and the exuberance and quickness they display while cooking and serving ‘so many dishes in no time’ leaves real mothers feel inadequate and inferior.

The representation of reel-life mothers exerts undue psychological pressures on real-life mothers. Ads show mothers of school going children as slim, young, and well made up with a maintained waist line and gorgeously done Kanjivaram saris, working in the kitchen. In fact, feminine beauty is a mythic construct. As Manohar Malgonkar has said, “Perceptions of what constitutes feminine beauty have been different not only in different countries, but from time to time. Nudes in classical paintings are today thought to be grossly overfed. Today’s highest paid models look more and more like the slender slave-girls of Tutankhamen’s tomb.”² Our social prejudices tilt in favour of images of young, slim and tall women as signifying beauty. While talking about feminine beauty in these terms, we tend to support /perpetuate a dominant ideological myth regarding female beauty. Our ads also represent women in the light of this ideology.

On seeing such representation, husbands and children want their own wives and mothers to emulate these models, “Mothers often have to face uncomfortable questions like, ‘why can’t you look well – groomed like the mummy in the washing machine ad?’ and come up with a ‘believable’ answer.”³ Thus, women are caught between the drudgeries of household work and the demands of remaining slim, fit and well dressed-up all the time. But then, the real world is different from reel world. Mornings are the most busy times for Indian mothers-there are children to be sent to school, tiffins to be packed, breakfast to be prepared (that also in ever new varieties or children would skip), office-going husband to be attended, so on and so forth. What one fails to realize is that giving birth to children expands the waistline horizontally in Indian conditions (pertaining to post



delivery diet- pattern, lots of ‘ghee’ intake and a non-exercise regimen) and that the reel mother is, in fact, a professional model of twenty or twenty two years who works out at the gym for more than two hours a day to keep herself fit and well-groomed. She doesn’t have to prepare meals three times a day. Moreover, the model is a synthetic product who is made to appear as she does by the use of various cosmetic products, hairstyles etc.

Ads for fitness programmes aimed at women also employ fear appeals. Anjali Mukherjee’s ‘health total’ campaign says, ‘If your husband is looking at other women, may be you should take a look at yourself.’ It seems as if the copywriter is justifying the male roving eye by frightening the women, who had every thing going well for them until they started putting on weight, of the stark consequences of being obese – they may have their husbands dating other women. It seems as if the copywriter is terming conjugal relationship as shallow and superficial, lasting only so long as the wife remains slim and presentable.

The visual in Mukherjee’s ad shows a woman sitting huddled wearing a dress that bares her sleek legs and shoulders. She epitomizes the role model sleekness that the wives should aspire for and becomes a symbol of feminine beauty. Thus, the iconic sign (visual representation, here, the photograph of the woman) and the linguistic sign (the name of the fitness center) merge to produce the meaning of the ad.

In Indian advertisement, women are shown merely to gain attention as a commodity. Ads for cars, shaving lotions, deodorants, cigarettes and toiletries are especially found to be blamed for such plastic portrayals.

The ad for ‘Spirit of Man’ shaving cream features a man (being shaved by a woman). The catch line says ‘Introducing Spirit of Man, world’s first herbal shaving cream. (or how to get a free facial every morning.)’ If the woman, here, had been referred to as the spirit of man, her presence could have been understandable, but it is the shaving cream that is being advertised. Another ad where the portrayal of a female model is unnecessary is that for Opel Swing (car) by Kotak Mahindra. It shows a pretty, semi-clad model splashing yellow colour on the car. Yellow colour here symbolizes vitality or prosperity the colour of the sun which lights the whole world. The slogan says ‘Simply Bindaas’ which may refer either to the car or to the girl. The ad for ‘old street, the men’s clothing store in Delhi’ shows a female model as adorning curled men’s ties as her latest hairdo.

In the same vein, the ad for Panasonic GD 75 Gold cell-phone goes with the catch line ‘Simply Irresistible!’ The visual shows a seductive female model (Malaika Arora) as holding a phone. The slogan at the bottom says ‘GD 75 Gold-Sleek and Sexy’ This slogan explicitly evokes suggestive overtones. A phone can’t be sexy, a woman can be. This ad carries deeper semiotic meanings. The picture of the beautiful model with a Panasonic phone is not simply a plain iconic sign denoting a particular object and particular person as having been photographed together. The picture of the model is also a sign which evokes connotations like youth, beauty, slimness, sex-appeal etc.

The sleek female model is a symbol for the sleek shape of the cell phone. The ‘sexy’ image of the product is in consonance with the sexy looks of the model – her attire and make-up speak for her – an off shoulder short top exposing the naval area and a shining, velvety skirt, symbolizing the velvety touch of the phone. As the looks of the model are ‘irresistible’, so are the shape and features of the phone.

The ad for Hindware sanitary tanks also works on the same strategy. It features a female model as standing on a sea shore, wearing a collared printed yellow unbuttoned jacket that exposes her same yellow bikini, matched with yellow knickers. This visual covers almost ¾ part of the page. On the right hand side, in a vertical strip are shown bright green wash basins and sanitary tanks. The headline says “Looks so tempting, you wouldn’t mind



fishing out extra money. But then, you don't have to." Here the model (iconic sign) functions as the symbol of tempting looks comparable with those of Hindware sanitary tanks.

In advertisements where women are not depicted as attention getters, 'they are stereotypes, demure, home loving, devoted to home and family. They are shown as the super efficient mother who washed the clothes whiter than white, shopped discerningly and did everything in their power to ensure that the home and family were cared for'.⁴

Advertisements for cosmetics try to present women as stereotypes interested only in fair skin, good looks and well sculpted bodies. These ads try to woo women consumers on the basis of the 'exaggerated' merits of their products, which are shown as working wonders. The ad for 'Jolen Crème Bleach' invites the consumer to buy the product to 'be beautiful with Jolen . . . in minutes.' It further claims that 'the search for skin and hair care intelligent elixir stops here. The mesmerizing range of Jolen cosmetics with international quality. . . are now available at your hands reach at moderate prices. Rediscover yourself by reaching out to Jolen care and give into its power and magic.' Words like 'mesmerizing', 'rediscover yourself' and 'power and magic' only add to the heightened effect the ad purposes to evoke in the mind of the consumer.

The ad for Sunova Natural Glow capsules also tries to woo the women consumers by working on the same principle. It begins with making a strong suggestion 'With Sunova Natural Glow, let your skin radiate with health and confidence, like never before,' then proceeds in a somewhat dreamy language, 'Imagine a beautiful, glowing skin that makes you feel good and confident. A flawless skin, naturally beautiful from within. Well such a dream skin can be yours too with Sunova natural glow', claiming to change the very texture of the skin, the ad promises to make it beautiful 'from within' through an 'outside' agency (Sunova). The last two lines of the copy say, 'so why hide behind a mask of synthetic cosmetics, when you have Sunova Natural Glow?' Deeming all 'cosmetics' as 'synthetic', the ad cashes in on the 'natural' formula by terming the product as 'Natural, Safe, Effective.'. Such advertising may produce aggressive behaviour and frustration due to false expectations generated by exaggerated product claims. Such advertisements present women as running after a dreamy and ephemeral existence.

The discourse analysis of the above advertisements reveal that advertisements in the Indian media do not seem to present a very justifiable portrayal of Indian woman. It is time for stereotypes to fade out of fashion. Such portrayals distort public image of the women in today's changing socio-cultural scenario. There is today, a need for women's multiple possible identities to be constructed through the powerful discourse of advertising

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