

ISSN : 2347-503X

Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol II Issue III : March 2014

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K. N. Shelke

www.research-chronicler.com

Research Chronicler

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Volume II Issue III: March – 2014

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Representation or Misrepresentation: Image of Women in Media**Megha Katoria***APG Shimla University (H.P.), India***Abstract**

Media is all pervasive and it has a strong impact on our perception and views. In this era of media upsurge, no one can be completely free from the influence of media. Media, print as well as electronic has become an inseparable part of life. Television, computer, internet, mobiles, magazines, newspapers – all have become an indispensable part of our everyday life. It is said that the fourth pillar of democracy, the media, has played an important part in propagating gender equality and emancipation of women but the ‘other’ side also needs to be explored whereby the media has misrepresented women. In the present paper my focus will be on the multiple ways in which women have been misrepresented in the media. The issues that have been explored in the present paper include the objectification and commodification of women in advertisements, sexism and racism, and the effects of internalisation of beauty standards. The harmful gender stereotypes that are perpetuated by media are also be probed.

KeyWords: Media; sexism; racism; beauty

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advertisements, sexism and racism, and the effects of internalisation of beauty standards. The harmful gender stereotypes that are perpetuated by media will also be probed.

The media continues to represent the stereotypical images of women. The ideas and values portrayed are those which are propagated by the culture of the society. In the words of Arpita Sharma:

Advertising deals with ideas, attitudes, and values, giving them ‘cultural form through its signifying practices.’ Advertising as ‘signifying practices’ gives meaning to words and images. Through this process, advertising diffuses its meaning into the belief systems of the society...the promotional culture of advertising has worked its way into ‘what we read, what we care about, the ways we raise our children, our ideas of right and wrong conduct,

our attribution of significance to ‘image’ in both public and private life.’ (Web)

She calls advertising a social practice which does not operate in vacuum. The media represents the female body in advertisements as a commodity. The women become objects to lure men and their bodies are presented in such a manner so as to tempt the customers. The objectification of the body of the female is done to attract the male gaze. Many sociologists have focussed their attention on the ways in which women are shown in subservient, subordinate and male pleasing roles, and the ways in which the media representation reflects as well as reinforces sexism in society.

Advertising thus, denies women their subjectivity, their true self. It becomes a marketing tool where culture stereotypes of women which continue to exist in our patriarchal society are presented. Women are “commodified as sexual creatures to serve male desire” (Lim 817). Commodifying means denying the women their identity. “Patriarchal oppression” imposes “certain social standards of femininity on all biological women” in order to prove that these “standards for ‘femininity’ are natural.” Consequently, a woman who does not conform to the prescribed standards is considered “unfeminine” and therefore “unnatural.” To make women believe that there is such a thing as “essence of femaleness, called femininity,” serves the interests of patriarchy (Moi 209). The media reinforces the standards of femininity and it therefore becomes a powerful weapon that has a great impact on the mind of everybody. In a way, it becomes oppressive for women. Julia T.

Wood talks of the analysis by Lana Rakow (1992) which “demonstrated that much advertising is oppressive to women and is very difficult to resist, even when one is a committed feminist” (36).

The media portrays the stereotypical images of woman and she is primarily shown as managing all the household chores. The male is presented as hard, tough, independent and emotionally strong in comparison to the female. Women are depicted as sex objects who are usually passive and dependent. Helene Cixous lines up a list of binary oppositions in her analysis of the ‘patriarchal binary thought’ under the heading ‘Where is she?’ Cixous lines up the following list of binary oppositions:

Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Sensitive
Logos/Pathos. (Lodge 287)

These “hierarchized” binary oppositions correspond to man/woman where the woman is always seen as the negative and everything positive is related to the man.

The major household activities are linked with the women, may it be cooking, cleaning or child care. Most of the outdoor activities are associated with the men. If we see the advertisements of cleaning agents like Colin, Vim Bar, Surf Excel etc., the women are shown as leading these advertisements. In most of the outdoor activities, the men handle all the major

activities whereas the women, if present are shown as assisting men in the task.

The media portrays two extremes of the woman: the good and the bad. The good woman is the one who is sacrificing, passive, obedient whereas the bad woman is the one who interrogates, questions and lures. Either she is Mother Mary or she is the temptress. The real woman with all her pain, anger, and yearning vanishes. Good women in daily soaps on T.V are “pretty, deferential, and focused on home, family and caring for others. Subordinate to men, they are usually cast as victims, angels, martyrs and loyal wives and helpmates” (Wood 33). Even if women are shown as working and outgoing women, their primary duty is shown as caretaker of the home and she becomes a good woman if she also adheres to the standards of femininity set up by the society. Julia T. Wood says: “The rule seems to be that a woman may be strong and successful if and only if she also exemplifies traditional stereotypes of femininity- subservience, passivity, beauty, and an identity linked to one or more men” (33). The Indian serials depict the double standards of society where the serial is shown in the name of empowering women but most of the time the female protagonist is performing others household duties and serving the family. We can see in an Indian serial like *Balika Vadhu*, which is supposedly shown to empower women that in actuality it also shows the leading female protagonist as always serving and sacrificing for others because of which she is loved by the family people. The so called good woman of the society is thus, a woman who cares for others more than herself. Arpita

Sharma rightly says: “Television images on women in advertisements [movies and serials] highlight beautiful bodies and faces, smart clothes, make up and accessories, efficient housewives, loving daughters- in-law, caring mothers...happy women who are ready to attend to the errands of their spouses and children. They do not have any individuality, they never think of themselves, they keep themselves just fit to serve their family...” (Web).

Stereotypical images of women are also portrayed in children’s literature and movies. The animated movie of Walt Disney, *The Little Mermaid* “vividly embodies females’ dependence on males for identity...the mermaid quite literally gives up her identity as a mermaid in order to become acceptable to her human love” (Wood 33-34). In this children’s movie based on the fairy tale of mermaid “we see a particularly obvious illustration of the asymmetrical relationship between women and men that is more subtly conveyed in other media productions [as well]” (34). The representation of women in fairy tales is such that the children also internalize these portrayals to be a part of their identity. Lieberman’s argument is justified in saying that fairy tales “have been made repositories of the dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations of girls” and that “millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts” and their ideas of “what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and the nature of reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales” (qtd. in Hasse 385). Children’s literature shows women as incompetent and men as authority. The man becomes the savior

whereas the woman becomes saved. The portrayal in these tales is such that “men are the competent authorities who save women from their incompetence” (35). Also these tales reinforce the idea of beauty which is in turn internalized by children.

The beauty and body image in the advertisements and movies has a strong impact on the mind of the public. The artificial look which is depicted as ‘ideal’ in front of the people is what influences people who try achieve this standard of beauty. The body image or rather the ‘ideal body’ image of the woman is presented in the media in various ways. Skinny models who are fair and tall are the ones presented in a way that it almost becomes the standard of beauty which the women yearn and therefore, try to attain. Everyone yearns to attain the model look. The common women and girls do not seem to be satisfied with their body and looks. They are always on the run, trying to enhance their looks with beauty products displayed in advertisements. Dieting or eating meagre amount of food becomes a habit for women so that they remain ‘thin’ which in turn signifies being beautiful. Kasey L. Sedar rightly points out: “Images in advertisements, television and music usually portray the ‘ideal woman’ as tall, white, and thin, with a ‘tubular’ bodyThe media is littered with images of females who fulfill these unrealistic standards, making it seem as if it is normal for women to live up to this ideal” (Web).

Trying to be thin which is actually portrayed in the media as being attractive, the women and girls adopt unhealthy habits of dieting or eating too less which may lead to health

problems like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Fashion magazines portray the images of women in a way that the women crave to attain the standards of beauty which are shown in magazines. Kasey L. Sedar in her paper, refers to the statement made by Dittmar and Howard regarding the prevalence of unrealistic media images which says: ‘Ultra-thin models are so prominent that exposure to them becomes unavoidable and ‘chronic,’ constantly reinforcing a discrepancy for most women and girls between their actual size and the ideal body.’

These days the women undergo surgeries to enhance their features. The socio-cultural idea of beauty is expected to be fulfilled by a woman to be truly attractive in society. What the culture considers as beautiful is the way that the women are portrayed in the media. Cosmetic surgery for so called ‘beautification’ has become a common feature today. Julia T. Wood talks of the adverse effects of these cosmetic surgeries. She says: “In an effort to meet the cultural standards of beautiful bodies, many women suffered unnecessary surgery, which led to disfigurement, loss of feeling, and sometimes death for women when silicone implants were later linked to fatal conditions” (38). Depicting the “white” as beautiful in the media also accounts for racism as it is the “white” which is considered beautiful. Constant and daily exposure to such advertisements which portray “white” as a beauty trait have a strong impact on the minds of common people including little children who think that being fair is being beautiful.

Being considered as the fourth pillar of democracy, the media needs to understand its responsibility. A gender sensitive approach is required in the media so that it becomes a potential agent for positive change in the society. The women also need to assert their identity and not submit to the suppressive set-up of the patriarchal society. The media should provide a balanced view of the diverse lives of women and their

contribution to society in a changing world. The women's diverse roles should be explored. The existing laws regarding media and advertisement also need to be reviewed. I would like to conclude in the words of Swami Vivekananda who says: "There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."

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