



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ADVERTISEMENT: 'CELEBRATING AZADI THROUGH MICRO TALES'

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Abstract:

The long and checkered past of India is not only a story of her political struggle to gain freedom from the British yoke but also one where women had to fight for their own rights – social, economic, political, legal. Though we have women who have been strongly bonded with the struggle for azadi for matribhumi the mainframe has a different picture to unfold. While strong women have been able to hold on to their forte, the more general class had to suffer oppression and subjugation. However, with the passage of time the scenario has gradually changed to show that with policies and laws women are now making a place of their own.

This paper would look at the changing scenario using advertisements as the medium. Advertisements, within a span of few seconds unfold stories that talk about the social condition of society. These micro stories can be used as tropes that convey significant messages. My paper would look at some advertisements that relay the story of how women have gradually appropriated changes in society's perspective of looking at them. From being judgmental to being emphatic the new order of society is now ready to make way for women in different arenas– and advertisements very aptly capture this shift in perspective. While my paper celebrates the azadi of women, it will also question if enough has been done and what more needs to be done.

Keywords: liberation, stereotype, feminism, advertisement

A study of the history of India has been a study of her struggle with different foreign powers who assumed charge of her at different points of time. With the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206 by Central Asian Turks, followed by the establishment of the Mughal Empire with the defeat

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of Ibrahim Lodhi in the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 by Babur right upto the advent of the British for trading purposes and gradually establishing a British Raj, India has survived it all. The British Empire was instituted on 28 June 1858, when, after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the rule of the British East India Company was transferred to the Crown in the person of Queen Victoria. Each phase of Indian history tells us the story of how our motherland survived years of yoke and how untiring was her effort to gain freedom from imperial power. With independence achieved in 1947 India started a new journey. Leaving behind past experiences of pain and trauma a new dawn was ushered when Pandit Nehru made his celebrated speech “Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny...”. In the context of his speech he pointed out that “Freedom and power bring responsibility” and the endeavour of the nation builders will be to “... bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman”.

Our freedom struggle shows that men and women equally participated in the cause of the country. If we remember men like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Bhagat Singh, Dadabhai Naoroji, Tantia Tope, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Ashfaqulla Khan, Nana Sahib, Mangal Pandey, Chandra Shekhar Azad just to name a few we also cannot forget the contributions made by illustrated women like Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. The list is endless as there are names behind the scene.

Today, as we celebrate the 75th year of India’s independence we, once again need to ponder on the inaugural speech made by Pandit Nehru where he explicitly stated that we need to build a nation that will “ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman”. Azadi, freedom, liberation, and emancipation are all very strong terms that proclaim domination in any form or of any kind is not acceptable.

Celebration of our independence is not just remembering our heroes who brought us glory; rather the celebration is more geared to seeing what we have achieved in terms of freedom. Our country has travelled a long path in becoming a developing nation with current GDP standing at 12.55% (2021 data) we have made remarkable progress in almost all sectors and though being primarily an agrarian economy our country is steadily progressing towards industrialization. In this growth men and women have shouldered equal responsibility. However, it needs to be stated that while society saw men as natural bearers of this responsibility, women had to fight their way to become equal partners of this responsibility. Freedom from the British did not actually free society from conventional thought pattern. The mainframe of society is more conducive to the thought that women are more ancillary in nature where progress of nation is concerned. Their role is much more streamlined within the circle of the family and trespassing the boundary is considered to be skeptical. Women are better in supportive role and they are secondary in intellect to men. Hence,

their domain has always remained chiefly the domestic zone and their contribution is much more valued as caretaker of the family and caregiver. This stereotypical model suited the taste of a nation that did not consider women to be equal to men.

One best way to look at the prevalent attitude of society towards women is through the lens of advertisements. Within a span of few minutes advertisements unfold stories that reflect the attitude of society. George Gerbner in his 'Cultivation Analysis' theorised that over exposure to media affects the mind of the viewers in particular manner. In this situation the viewer starts believing in a particular order and Gerbner called it the 'mean world syndrome'. Repeated exposure to a set thought directs the mind of the viewer to a set social thought and this very often plays a critical role in ascribing gender biased identity. Media stereotyping can be quite dangerous as it leads to building up of a set ideological structure. The theory of stereotyping emerges from Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony'. It states that the dominant ideologies tend to become dominant social discourses and find space and acceptance across various domains including the media. Gender stereotyping is one such dominant ideology which is used and re-constructed by the media. Advertising images have been reflective of the stereotypical gender images – a dimension of hegemonic ideological discourse.

Advertisements are meant to lure target consumers and if we look at the different types of advertisement we can classify them into sectors like domestic products, cosmetics, apparels, appliances and so on. Advertisements blatantly objectified the female body, for example body soaps preferred to show women bathing and the perfume of the soap she used tantalized men. Soaps add to the fairness and beauty of the women and men find these women attractive. Even products that advertised men's apparel used women as sex symbols - in the 2016 advertisement of Jack and Jones, (a men's wear brand for jeans, shirts and inner wears), we see the well known Bollywood hero, Ranveer Kapur lifting a woman on his shoulder with a tagline Don't hold back, Take your work home. This clearly indicates male authority over women at workplace where the women are glorified as objects to satisfy men and are not seen as co workers with intelligence. The reason behind a clothing advertisement with a tagline of take your work home showed the power over woman. The clothing ad created a wrong notion that the women would easily fall on the men those who wear branded clothes. Deodorant advertisements show women absolutely enamoured by men using branded colognes and the men taking these women for a dance like the pied piper of Hamelin. Stereotypical gender roles where women are necessarily appendages of the men form the basis of different advertisements all round the world.

A research project was conducted by UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, UNICEF Programme Division in New York, and UNICEF India with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media in 2019. This research focused on almost thousand advertisements on television and you tube to measure the level of gender stereotyping found in Indian advertisements. The survey conducted in the process of this research clearly indicated that advertisements greatly affected the thought pattern of society and concluded that advertising media went a long way in reinforcing and challenging harmful gender roles that shape the lives of girls and women in the country. The process of gender socialization means expected gender roles are learned from birth and intensified

throughout childhood and adolescence with messages received from society, including from the marketing and advertising they see around them. Negative gender norms and stereotypes influence children's self-perception and contribute to shaping different pathways for their future. Addressing negative gender socialization is critical to achieving gender equality.

There is ample research material on how advertisements are stereotypical in portrayal of gender roles in society. In a paper titled *Portrayal of Women in Indian Advertisements: From Objectification to Empowerment*, the writer has identified some common features in advertisements. They are –

- Over exaggeration of masculinity.
- Women as weaker sex, fall for hyper masculinity.
- Women each body parts is seen as commodity.
- Illusion of “Ideal Woman” as portrayed in the ads, gave the inferiority complex.
- Taught to desire, In Freudian terms, induce the pleasure principle Id's stimulation.
- Gender stereotypes, the products always attract the opposite sex.
- Beauty and house products gave marital strength and pride for women.
- Women empowerment connected with family satisfaction.
- Female body as a marketing agent to sell the commodity.
- Photoshop constructed the false reality.
- Women as savour of the family.
- Men as the hard worker for the family.

In their paper ‘Gender Issues in Advertising Language’ (1999), Nancy Artz, Jeanne Munger, Warren Purdy quote the findings of different research studies conducted across the world. The broad patterns of portrayal identified by them include-

- Women are more often portrayed as young and concerned with physical attractiveness than their male counterparts.
- Women are less likely than men are to be portrayed as authority figures and more likely to be shown as product users.
- There is a tendency for women to be shown as subordinate to men, as decorative objects, or as alluring sex objects.

With the advent of technology and with more participation of women in different sectors this objectification of women in advertisement gradually gave way to projecting women as empowered individuals. As women stepped out of their defined roles within the domestic sphere to make their mark in different job sectors the portrayal of women in advertisements underwent change. From being seen as objects to lure and amuse men women now are presented as bold and intelligent human beings who are not reluctant to be vocal when needed. Contemporary advertisements project women as strong willed individuals with leadership qualities who are both able managers of home and office. These women do not shun domestic responsibilities and are adept at handling administrative responsibilities. Beauty products showcase women as efficient workers who do not need any such beauty item to make themselves presentable. Their talent speaks

for them. Nihar Coconut Hair Oil believes in this and the catchline of their advertisement is thick hair does not prove your ability as a worker, thick hair only suggest that you have healthy hair. Dabur Vatika Hair Oil salutes female cancer survivors who have lost their hair to cancer treatment. Their theme is good hair is not reflection of your beauty, being bold is beautiful. Jewellery is meant to make a person beautiful. The PC Chandra wedding collection advertisement is very rare in concept – the woman about to get married and decked in fine PC Chandra jewels is handling office calls on the day of her marriage. This inter cultural marriage shows her walking down the aisle where her American husband is waiting for her. She walks the aisle in her traditional Indian wedding attire and when her husband calls tells her “you are looking beautiful Arpita Anderson” she answers back “it is Arpita Sen Anderson”. It is assumed that after marriage the woman would take the surname of her husband, here the women clearly states that while accepting the surname of her husband she will not let go her identity. These advertisements break the stereotypes to which society was tuned.

One important factor needs to be addressed – previously advertisements showed women as doing all household chores while men were supposed to manage outdoors. With these gender roles becoming more accommodative men and women are now expected to perform no fixed role. If the woman can manage office work, fly planes, handle patients the man is also expected to mop floors, wash clothes and start dinner at home. Washing machine advertisements and detergent advertisements show the men quite capable in doing the job of washing clothes. The Ariel detergent advertisement with the idea ‘share the load’ show a typical household where the mother is doing all the household work and the son idling away. When her daughter calls her to inform her that she plans to quit her job so that she can devote full time to her home the mother questions her why cannot her husband help her out. The girl replies he cannot do any house work and then the mother looks at her son and realises that she is repeating the same mistake. She learns her lesson teaches her son domestic responsibility. The idea is to show that training starts within the house and parents need to groom their children in shouldering responsibility.

There is nothing called the man’s work or the woman’s work. Work is neutral gender and requires participation from all members living in a family. In the Fortune cooking oil story ‘ghar ka khana’ is celebrated but the idea is this food is not necessarily cooked by the mom. Even dads can prepare delicious meals which, to borrow from KFC, ‘is finger licking good...’. In fact the boy is shown to lick his fingers as he is missing home cooked healthy food. In Saffola the husband is concerned that his wife is in too much work stress and decides to switch to cooking oil that is low on cholesterol. He clearly states that he is not in a position to reduce his wife’s job stress but at least he can ensure that she stays healthy. This kind of domestic concern was reserved only for women as they had to look after working husbands. In a sense these advertisements showing husbands as the concerned home makers are iconoclasts. With women gradually making inroads into the corporate sectors, the conservative attitude as to fixed working hours for women and only certain types of jobs for women are getting relegated to the background.

Despite change being initiated in advertisements and recent advertisements keen on diluting gender discrimination, there are still stereotypes that would prefer to have specific gender roles. In

these type of advertisements body politics really play a key factor. For example in the Imperial Blue ad the man in the couple visiting the unconscious patient is more interested in sneaking a look at the young lady doctor. The woman sitting next to her realises this, as evident from her expression but remains silent. What contributes to the shock is that the patient, who incidentally is a man, is responding when the lady doctor is checking him. The response of his faster pulse on the monitor shows that the unconscious man even in his current ailment feels excited when touched by the lady doctor. The catch line of the advertisement “Men will be men” stands to be questioned. What exactly is the advertisement trying to sell – men conscious or unconscious are accustomed to treating women as sex objects? Is their treatment of women as sexual commodities a tag line on their manliness?

The Dabur Honey advertisement shows the wife drinking a glass of lukewarm water with Dabur Honey. This beverage is not only her fitness mantra but also her secret in keeping her husband glued to her. When the wife is about to leave for her work the husband comes and places her mangalsutra in such a manner that everyone can notice it. the wife is thrilled as this exhibition of jealousy is proof that her husband is absolutely in her grip and she questions her audience “Don’t jealous husbands look cute?” Signs of marriage must be on display for all to see so that women can take shelter from gawking eyes. Men really do not need any kind of sign to show that he is married because society thinks women are in danger. But why should women be in danger, shouldn’t this society be the same for both men and women? These are questions that are being raised but we are still in very vulnerable position as regards position of women in society.

In an article titled Feminism in advertising: irony or revolution? A critical review of femvertising we come across this term ‘femvertising’. This is the latest in advertising where advertisements “highlights women’s talents, centers themes on pro-woman messaging and counters stereotyping”. The writers, Neema Varghese and Navin Kumar have identified five factors that have off late indulged in this style of femvertising -

- (1) Growing activism around the better representation of women in advertising
- (2) Brand activism and conscious capitalism
- (3) The criticism of corporate and commodity feminism
- (4) Increasing awareness of gender stereotyping
- (5) Increasing scrutiny by regulatory bodies on gender role representations in advertising.

In conclusion to their paper the writers have said that though media is now quite conscious on how they are representing women on screen still much remains to be done. They stated that “remaining issues of lack of authenticity, dilution of feminist discourse, interconnection with social movements as well as linkages to increased representation of women in advertising, both to construct a full picture of the current state of femvertising and to understand its future configuration in a shifting social and ideological environment” is far from complete.

What Elaine Showalter meant when she coined the term ‘gynocriticism’ in the seventies is almost parallel to what femvertising means in advertisement. Showalter liberated the female from the male yoke of literary tradition. She created for women her own literary culture, constructing for

them their own tradition that is free from phallocentrism and sexism. Gynocriticism turned to a focus on, and interrogation of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology, and the history and development of the female literary tradition. Almost in a similar manner femvertisement constructs a discourse that is free from male authorship. Women in these advertisements advocate equality, practice liberty and thrive on individuality. They are not secondary to men and are quite the stalwarts in their fields.

Present day advertisement has seen a shift from the feminine to the feminist. From being typified as the feminine the society wants to see advertisements are now more focused on the feminist where every day there is a new challenge to societal norms related to women. The shift is seen from sexual objectification to empowerment.

It remains to be said that advertisements have control on our choices. Our freedom to choose is quite often not so much our freedom as it is motivated by luring advertisements. Since advertisements within a very brief span can effectively narrate a story they become powerful agencies that do control our minds. Presented in proper way these mini tales can become catalysts that will change the way we look at issues. Hence the stories they have to say can become effective tools to change the conventional attitudes of society. From sexifying the body to empowering the body – advertisements can be the new age guru.

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