MEDIA AND DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY

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Abstract: The issue concerning women's freedom, their sexual equality and acceptance of their identity has remained a subject of discussion and interrogation for the academicians, researchers and social scientist for long. With the educational awareness and with the rise of 'new world' and 'new woman', a lot has been done in the field that once was seemed to be just a dream. The way media has become a part of our day, it becomes essential us to study how it projects women in the society. Even in 21ˢᵗ century, one would hardly disagree with the view that the basic mythic and archetypal image of the woman of the ancient time rooted so strongly in Indian subconscious that it still continues to haunt the minds everyone. Image of women in the Indian media has always been projected wrongly and unrealistically. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television and films which are the powerful sources to change the society to a positivism and liberalism, are not putting any concrete efforts to change the conventional image of Indian women. Whether it is a film of the 50s or of the first decade of this century, there has been little difference in the image of the celluloid women. Women's magazines in India focus almost exclusively on food, fashion and beauty, thus reinforcing the traditional roles of women. Media such as magazines or radio find hard to escape from the traditional portrayal of women. Whatever the medium of media is, the women characters are treated more in terms of abstractions, and their basic projection centers round the need to be loved and accepted. In the case of women's depiction, media just remains a mirror reflecting the reality, instead of trying to change the sordid reality to betterment. How women are represented in mass media ultimately results from an interplay of forces which mould social reality. These social forces are the mass media.

Keywords: **Image, Media, Patriarchy, Women.**

I. INTRODUCTION

When I received the pamphlet for the seminar heading under the title, 'Women in 21ˢᵗ Century: Concerns and Issues', the first idea that occurred to me was that it was much discussed and debated issue once and has no relevance in the present scenario. But, the second thought – 'Has the women's literary, political and especially cultural struggle come to an end with the opening up of 21ˢᵗ century?' (My inner voice said 'no') inspired me to take the pen and note down my views under the above titled research paper. It is beyond doubt that for ages women have been subject matter of literary texts as well as other artistic activities. Myth, legend, epic and lyric have sung in the praise as well as of condemnation of women. However, with the arrival of media and lately social media, issues concerning the women's plight in the Indian society have caught the attention of

many people from different strata. Media which has been proved to be blessing for the overall human beings, has turned out to be responsible for women's degrading projection. It is also true that television and film have raised several issues which were untouched since long. Obviously, film, being a popular media form, is able to handle the issues pertaining to the women than any other mode of expression. However, women portrayed on celluloid are not true to the social reality. They are largely depicted in a one-dimensional manner as virgin heroine or temptress, the dutiful daughter or all sacrificing mother, the devoted wife or the redundant widow. The apparent reason for this stereotyped image of the women in media and especially in the film is that the basic mythic and archetypal image of the woman of the ancient time rooted so strongly in Indian subconscious that it still continues to haunt the patriarchal minds. Opposite to this defied image is the degraded and exploited image which represent women either as vamps or subservient to their male counterparts and this duality is reflected in other media forms such as television and magazines.

II. THE DEPICTION of WOMEN in MEDIA

21st century is defiantlymarching forward out to be the age of information and media. Whereas in the last century the sources of communications were limited, today the spread of communication technologies, with computer interfaces, national and international phone lines, internet browsing, social media etc.are becoming available in every corner of the world. It is quite obvious to accept that it has radically transformed the practices of the urban middle class. These technological innovations have changed the nature of viewing the things by permitting to see the images and channels, panoramic screens, multiplexes, interactivity, and virtuosity. With the advancement of the technologies and easily accessibility for everyone, the media is now less controlled by the concerned authority. The outcome of such freedom is that image of women in the Indian media has always been projected wrongly and unrealistically. Though issues and concerns for women are raised on special days and special occasions, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and films all these mass medium are not putting any concrete efforts to change the conventional image of Indian women. Instead of creating the atmosphere of prestige and respect of women in Indian media as well as in society, these mediums knowingly or unknowingly are contributing for lowering the image of women by projecting superficial, physical and ornamental characteristics of women.

Media as the fourth estate of the nation has not succeeded to mould the society in favourable ways as far as women's issues are concerned. One would argue with the view expressed here, if he/she looks at a few exemplary shows and arrive at the conclusion that media has done a lot for the empowerment of women. It is acceptable that women's movement owes much to the mass media for giving publicity to its activities and efforts. Yet, it should also be noticed that media has failed through its programs and commercials to turn its eyes to the new woman. UNESCO reports say, "The images projected by the media constitute a main obstacle to eliminating discrimination against women throughout the world and a main factor in preserving traditional sexist attitudes towards them" (UNESCO, 1980).

III. THE DEPICTION of WOMEN on TELEVISION

Television has taken animportant space in one's life and home. It is not just now an 'idiot box' that we are stuck to, but a 'magic box' that is fetching so many items of our taste and interest across the world. It influences our ways of life so powerfully that what we see on it, we believe it to be true, as it has audio and video devices to convince us. Depiction of women by television has also been largely accepted and comprehended to be true to nature. This mass media is also operated under gender bias. It is interesting to see that in television culture, males appear mostly in professional roles; females function as their wives /girl friends or secretaries /assistants. Moreover, males are less prone towards marriage than females. The slope of the TV serials remains to project the ideal domestic woman and male as protector of her being. KusumRana and Manju Gupta opine, "The woman is considered ideal only when she is in her nurturing roles and a supportive supplement to man. Woman specific programmes on radio and television perpetuate sex stereotypes and cater to woman as housewives and mothers, rather than provide knowledge and skills for their role as economic contributors"(Rana& Gupta, 1998). The world of soap-opera is one of middle-class people with middle-class values, which is one step above the level of the typical viewer, but not too far removed to preclude identification. Because of this realism, soap-operas have high impact potential on viewers' attitudes and behaviour, which largely remains unexplored to date.

Largely women characters are projected in their traditional roles of sister, wife, mother and daughter. They do not find any objective of life outside the realm of family life. For women, careers and jobs are subordinate to the all-important family life and personal relationships. Marriage of the chief woman protagonist remains the prime concern of the family and sometimes the whole story revolve round the same single issue. As for their physical appearance and class status, the large majority of characters are attractive, well-groomed and of middle-class status. Interestingly, a subtle observation shows that women tend to be younger than men, and ageing results in greater deterioration of occupational status for women than for men. Take for an instance, most recent and popular TV serials such as *KyunkiSaasBhiKabhiBahuThi*, *KasautiZindagi Ki*, *Bhabhi*, *Kusum*, *GharGhar Ki Kahani,SaatPhere*and *Sarasvatichandra,* they show the stereotypical image of an Indian housewife. Each serial depicts how an ideal woman should behave when multiple duties (*dharma*) are demanded from her. Nowadays with good TRP ranks, Reality Shows such as *Indian Idol*, *Big Boss*, *and Roadies* etc. have large audience across India. These shows bring before us talented, aggressive, assertive and competent modern woman of our time. But, such shows also don't miss the chance to expose a woman's body just to draw attention of a larger male oriented audience.

TV serials also portray two dichotomous characters of women; "good" and "bad". Although generally, men as well as women can be either good or bad, "bad" is generally associated with traditionallymale traits such as excessive involvement in work, neglect of family, infidelity and selfishness. However, women characters with bad attributes can also be found. Such characters are usually mother – in – law, the female antagonist or a female conspirator to disrupt the well built family. It should also be admitted here that like other types of media form, TV also usually portrays women with good qualities. They are often presented with the

characteristics such as love, compassion, loyalty to family, willingness to sacrifice oneself for others and to suffer anddesire for children.

Another aspect of TV as media form that must be taken into consideration is showing of the advertisements. The portrayal of women in household-relatedroles in advertisements for household productsis also a major cause of concern. Showingwomen performing domestic tasks and usinghousehold products in their homes is not objectionableper se. But, the restrained presentation of women's identity raises questions in our minds. Moreover, housewives are oftenshown as stupid, incapable of performing simpletasks and dependent on male advice. Even within the home, the respective tasks of men and women are clearly circumscribed. The association of cleaning products, detergents and baby-care products with female usage, and of more expensive or larger purchases with male expertise and decision-making describes the female vs. male position within the society. Women are primarily used by advertisers to sell products to bothwomen and men on the basis of their sexual appealto men.Emphasis on woman's physical appearance pervadesadvertisements directed to both male andfemale consumers. The advertisement of matrimonial site *'Shaadi.com'* frequently shows women's anxiety to find a suitable match as if only women are in need to get married. Male-oriented advertisementsfeature beautiful sexy women as theultimate reward for using the advertised productThe seductive womanis an object of pleasure for and consumptionby males. As if it is not enough, women are presented in a seductive style for the products that are usually used by men, such as deo spray, under wear, cigarettes, liquor or motorbikes. Women are objectified for the commercial purpose to get good rewards from the customers and viewers. What the following ads wants to convey? Is it that the actress is as juicy as the mango?

Figure 1: Women in Advertisement
Source: images.google.com

I.   **THE DEPICTION of WOMEN in FILM**

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in 20th century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art or media form could ever achieve. As Lalitha Sridhar notes, "Popular films are documents of social experience…with all its contradictions and tensions" (Shridhar, 2015). The theme of social inclusion as it relates to media readily anticipates consideration of race, gender, class and other such visible markers of identity. The question of woman's identity has remained a moot issue in the history of Indian cinema. It would be no exaggeration to say that without woman there would be no cinema. However, no genuine effort has been made to

address the concerns of woman in films. From the very beginning of cinema a woman has been made the centerpiece of attraction, an object of male desire.

A retrospect in the history of Indian cinema, especially Popular Cinema, presents a woeful picture of discrimination and marginalization of women. Whether it is a film of the 1950s or of the first decade of 21st century, there has been little difference in the image of the celluloid women. Women are used to play romantic or decorative roles, or that of a mother, who spends her days to look after the lives of her children. As AshaBhende views "Many commercial film today depict women only in secondary roles. The male dominates the female follows. The number of films where the theme revolves round the problems of women is small and even where films do revolve round the adventures and physical feats of the hero, the heroine is not even shown as supporting him in his activities, but often plays only a decorative role, an appendage considered necessary for the song and dance sequences" (Bhende, 1985).

In the male dominated world, women are placed in the precincts, be in a real life or films. Women in Hindi films have been portrayed as devoted housewives, sacrificing mothers and dutiful daughters-in-law. This image has been so constantly drilled into the Indian female psyche that women themselves have started believing in this 'moulded image'. At the opposite pole of the representation of the wife stands the image of the 'vamp', normally a decadent modern woman. She flouts tradition and seeks to imitate western model. The biggest hit movie of the 1990s era *Hum AapkeHainKoun..!* depicts women in their traditional role and also messages that they are safe and happy if they remain under the patriarchal norms.
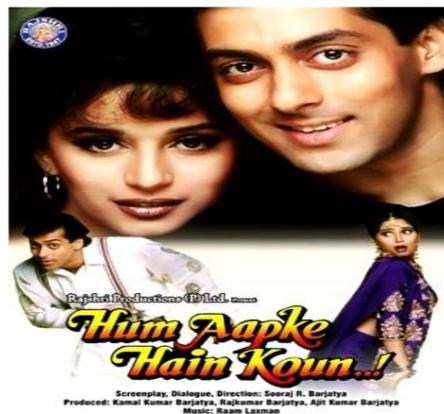

Figure 2: Women in Film
Source: in.pininterest.com

The makers of these films (in most cases men) emphasize that they are simply catering to what the audiences are accustomed to seeing. In order to be financially viable, it needs to incorporate within it all those ingredients, which may contribute to its success at the box office, but at the same time one is required to draw a line of discrimination between decency and void of it, as ours is a cinema obsessed society. Film in general and behaviour of the heroes/heroines in particular can leave a deep impression on the minds of the viewers. At the same time film also represents culture, as WimalDissanayake views, "Film is not an isolated art form; it inhabits a common expressive culture fed by tradition, cultural memory and indigenous modes of symbolic representation" (Dissanayake, 1998).Popular films are

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like a social mirror. It is believed that films are a true reflection of society and social values. It would not be wrong to say that Hindi films have had a deep impact on the changing scenario of our society in such a way as no other medium could ever achieve. So, while in reality the things are changing in the Indian society and women are successfully trying to carve an identity for themselves, it is quite disheartening to find that equitable gender representation is still a distant dream in Indian cinema.

In recent times, especially after 70s, it has been observed that feminism and feminist thoughts have enhanced women's consciousness and awareness about themselves in the relation to their environment. Moreover, with the spread of education, the number of self-reliant women has increased. Influence of urbanization, westernization and women's empowerment has transformed the Indian consciousness to a great extent and offered women a gust to come out of the restricted role and space. Consequently, the sensibility of women has changed considerably. House making and child rearing are no longer sole purposes of a woman's life. However, their male counterparts are yet to acknowledge the changing role of women. It is especially evident as far as portrayal of women is concerned, be it in film or in any other media forms. Noticeably, the change in women's role in the society has been accommodated but their conventional image has not changed much.

IV.   THE DEPICTION of WOMEN in MAGAZINE and NEWSPAPER

The depiction of women by print media is not largely different from the visual media such as film and TV. For the financial assistance, advertising remain the prime focus of the print media. Moreover, the advertisements specially target the female readers as they provide fair commercial market for the products. Magazines in general and women's magazines in particular are therefore a highly valued advertising vehicle. Women's magazines in India focus almost exclusively on food, fashion and beauty, thus reinforcing the traditional roles of women whose prime duties are to cook the food, to take care and nurture the children and to serve the male members of the family with sticky smile. The very existence of a separate newspaper section for the female reader is perceived as inherently gender based. It implies that all other news areas are exclusively male territory, and that men are not interested in "women's issues" In the words of S. Wal and ShrutiBanarji, "The print media has perpetuated the neglect of and damage to women. All magazines / newspapers have special columns / pages for women. In addition, there are exclusive magazines for women in almost all Indian languages. Invariably, their fiction sections glorify patriarchy and women's roles as house wives, mothers and dependents. Atrocities against women, from eve teasing to wife beating, are portrayed in neutral terms. The emphasis remains on embroidery, cooking and home management skills"(Wal and Benarji, 2001).

In recent years, the emphasis on the beautiful woman as an object of pleasure has increased in contradiction to the earlier image of woman as incapable and dependent person. If this development is to be interpreted as a reflection of the changing social climate, it indicates that advertising is not committed to changing woman's image. It merely adapts to social change by updating the traditional image. To capitalize onwomen's new self-image, advertising has turned to manipulating one aspect of the new woman, i. e. her sexuality. Under the guise of sexual liberation, advertising continues to exploit the traditional image of woman as sex-

symbol. Information about relevant socio-economic issues, including the status of women, is largely lacking. The dependence on advertising, which is often blatantly sexist in its depiction of sex-roles, is indicated as one of the major reasons for the perpetuation of traditional female images. In this respect, women's magazines in India do not differ from those published in Western societies. Theevidence indicates that woman is utilized in advertisingto sell products to both male and female consumersby virtue of her two-dimensional role: herrole as housewife/mother /wife and her function asa decorative and sexual object. The fact that theconcept of woman's role, underlying these dominantimages, has remained virtually unchangedover the past decades indicates that advertising isindeed not to be perceived as a vanguard of socialdevelopment. Its impact onthe process of socialchange is restraining rather than progressive.

II. THE DEPICTION of WOMEN on RADIO

Because of its decreasing popularity against the audio – visual media such as TV and Computer, the radio nowadays has proved to be little influential. It has lost the power of generating interest in the listeners and as a result, it does not help more to mould the society in a particular way. Radio, owing to its own limitations has not contributed to theimprovement of women's status in these countries. However, it cannot be denied that radio too broadcast women's concerning programmes either in daily show or on a specific occasion. On contradictory scale, it is found that women are employed less as newsreaders as their voices lack authority. Through different surveys and researches made on the accessibility of radio, it is found that less numbers of women use this medium as a source of information and education and this condition is more frustrating in rural areas. Moreover, the advertisements and news feed that are announced during the air time are largely gender oriented and present women as stereotype and traditional ones.

III. CONCLUSION

Our study of the different media forms such as a film, television, magazine or newspaper, shows that women face many social prejudices, orthodoxies and beliefs, yet none of these problems get articulated or challenged, more so in the case of films and television. Women are depicted by well-defined speech, dress, and appearance, social and religious practice. The women, whether urban or rural, rich or poor, literate or illiterate, the issues of subjugation and emancipation have often been the subject matter for the soap opera or films. However, true and realistic portrayal of women, with different class positions, social backgrounds and individual dispositions are ignored. The women characters are treated more in terms of abstractions, and their basic projection centers round the need to be loved and accepted. A semiotic and psychoanalytical approach to the representation, especially in the case of popular cinema, reveals that the image of women is not wholly congruent with the reality of women's life and conduct outside the cinema hall; on the contrary woman functions as a 'sign' within the definitive parameter of myth, custom and ritual. The traditional roles as devoted housewives, sacrificing mothers and dutiful daughters-in-law are so constantly drilled into the Indian female psyche that women themselves have started believing in this 'self-portrait'. However, somewhere media attempt to bring forward the image of the 'modern woman' but such portrayals can be counted on fingers and are proved to be insufficient to eradicate the age old image of woman.

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