

## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN MEDIA

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**Abstract:** Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or so the saying goes, but who feeds the beholder's view of desirability? I believe the language of advertising over the past few decades has reinforced the notion that the ideal female is white, thin, sexily clad, and above all, submissive. Women's participation, performance and portrayal in media are the three important dimensions of study for the researchers of modern time, especially for the feminists. Indian society is male dominated and this dominance can be seen everywhere and unfortunately media is not the exception to that. More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. The portrayal of women in the Indian media oscillates between two extremes: the "mother India" and the "glamour girl" image. The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications-electronic, print, visual and audio- must be changed. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society. A positive portrayal of women in media is necessary to maintain the real dignity and status of women which will minimize the gender gap and inequalities. For this, mass media can play a significant role in shaping social values, attitudes, norms, perception and behavior. Thus, the overall effect of the portrayal of women in media is to reinforce rather than reduce prejudices and stereotypes. Media has an important role to play – to create awakening in women to achieve their potential as the prime movers of change in society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Gender gap, Mass media, Portrayal of women.

**Introduction:** Media is the buzz word of the era of globalization. In fact, the rapid expansion of term and the concept of present form of globalization has been made possible only through the information revolution throughout the world. It has been widely recognized that media can play a substantial role in promoting and disseminating information and are key players in the social and economic development of women. Therefore, media largely reflects the life styles, socialization patterns, participation levels, cultural boundaries, political manoeuvrings, religious manifestations, educational standards, social hierarchy, and of course, society images of any given society. As per the political scientist, James Rosenau definition, "Media is a label that is presently in vogue to account for peoples, activities, norms ideas, goods, services, and currencies that are decreasingly confined to a particular geographic space and its local and established practices." In fact media can play a significant role in either perpetuating or challenging social norms and behaviours that condone violence against women. New media can be a platform for the objectification of women and girls, from everyday hyper-sexualized, one dimensional images of women and girls to overt violence. Researchers report that women's magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines. Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a women's worth. In recent reports over three-quarters of female characters in TV are underweight, and only one in twenty are above average in size. Over weight actresses tend to receive negative comments from

male characters about their bodies. Research indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, air-brushed female bodies can be linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls. Twenty years ago the average model weighed 8 percent less than the average woman, but today's models weight is 23 percent less than the average women. The messages that the media sends to women about thinness, dieting, and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment, and that the female body is an object to be perfected. Emotional abuse is any behavior that is designed to control human beings through the use of fear, humiliation, intimidation, guilt, coercion, or manipulation. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It can include verbal abuse, constant criticism, put-downs, and constant disapproval.

**Women and Media:** Information revolution, in its truest technical terms in India, is the latest phenomenon. During the phases of economic liberalization in last one and half decade, the overall scenario of media in India has changed tremendously. The depiction of Women in Indian media, be it films, television serials, news, media, visual advertisement, or modernized traditional media, is indeed an area of great concern for people having interest in social science research and studies. Some studies found have that social issues related to women (equality of status and opportunity) got less than nine percent while sensational stories relating to women which were invariably crime stories got between 52 and 63

percent of items in newspapers. (Nitin Jugran Bahuguna) More disquieting is the growing trend in media to portray women as victims. Some recent studies of news stories show that sex and sensation is the primary motivation behind the reportage. A study of four main English dailies in India finds that women's issues accounted for little over two percent of the total items in one of the dailies and even less in the other three. (Bahuguna). Apart from the long and heated debate over the percentage of women in legislative bodies, the situation of women in Indian society at large is a matter of alarming consideration. There has been much criticism of Television advertising of some commercial products like cigarettes, laxatives or articles of intimate wearing apparel on moral grounds. Comments in newspaper articles have found some of them objectionable and violating the requirements of good taste and sometimes offensive, some objections have also been made to the appearance of scantily clad women in some commercials (Ahuja & Batra). As the tentacles of globalization have trespassed into the electronic media, the advertising industry has been swept by the market forces with the result that sexist display depicting women in demeaning manner has become the norm. Though, it is true that the level of active participation and decision making capability of women in each and every aspect of social and political life in India has increased leaps and bounds, yet the overall conditions of women is not so good. The depiction of women in Indian media is simply shoddy and at times vulgar. Commodification of women as a sex object has been relentlessly portrayed in audiovisual media. The overtones of sexual equation are much more explicit these days in our media. The orthodox presentations and the conventional inhibitions seem to overpower the orientations of media planners. The women in Indian media are depicted generally as scrupulous, religiously intolerant, craving only for their own family, politically naïve, socially inevitable and culturally ultra-modern. Some criticism of advertising using women as sex objects can be seen in letters to the editor and very mild criticism of the cheapness and vulgarity in the display of women in advertising can be found in our literature on media. Often the criticism of the advertising stems out of big business game, believing the advertisements, rising prices and creation of artificial needs. (Kumar) Serials are depicting women and young females involved in conspiracy, premarital, extra-marital, post material illicit affairs, wearing costly, heavy golden, and diamond jewellery, perpetuating their religious fundamentalism, spending time is family feuds, suicidal love affairs, mega parties, palatial houses, luxury cars, sleek mobiles, elegant, make ups, little

care about anything else than the individual matters, and at all not even a word about the outside world. Newspapers give place to the news related to rape, crime, politics, scandals, sports and economics, serious debates and discussions on issues related to women in general are completely missing. The columnists of the newspapers are rarely females. Most of them who find place in the leader pages are political activists or so-called socialites. In vernacular press the depiction of women gets a share only in coloured pages where there is a lot of gossip about actress of T.V. serials or film stars alongwith some hot pick-up and pinups. The English press also dwells upon providing snaps of hot babes and erotic photogallery of party-mania in multi star hotels. Even the photos of sports stars are also provided in a manner that depicts their body attraction.

**Portrayal of women in Soaps:** The term "soap opera" was coined by the American press in the 1930s to denote the extraordinarily popular genre of serialized domestic radio dramas, which, by 1940, represented some 90% of all commercially sponsored daytime broadcast hours. The "soap" in soap opera alluded to their sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products; while "opera" suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms. The defining quality of the soap opera form is its seriality (Pingree and Cantor, 1983). Examples of the open soap include (The Guiding Light, etc.), the wave of primetime U.S. soaps in the 1980s (Dallas, Dynasty, Falcon Crest), such British serials as Coronation Street, East Enders, and Brookside), most Australian serials (Neighbours, Home and Away, A Country Practice), and Indian soaps as BalikaVadhu, Uttaran Pavitra Rishta enjoy immense popularity. The closed soap opera is more common in Latin America, where it dominates primetime programming from Mexico to Chile. In India, Geet, Dil Mil Gaye fall in this category. Deriving from Simone de Beauvoir's perception of woman as the "Other" to man, sexuality and woman-ness has always been identified as a binary opposition that registers difference between groups of people; differences which are socio-culturally manipulated and transmitted in ways which cause one group to dominate the other (Beauvoir, 2009). This sexuality and woman-ness of these women (or women in general) has always been fitted within male-constructed stereotypes that through their projections and appropriations has successfully kept the "second sex" as the domesticated subaltern. It is interesting it is to note how popular TV serials uphold and propagate these very notions that unfortunately clog the path of further emancipation and socio-cultural up-liftment. With the nation claiming to join footsteps in the march to

globalization and modernization where the state legislatives and judicial systems attempt to emancipate the marginalized women in our society, it does seem a little bizarre to see contemporary TV serials and soaps projecting women more as models of expensive costume-jewellery or "jardousi"sarees. Moreover, the stereotypes used -that of a wronged wife, a domineering mother -in- law, bitter relationships between sisters-in-law, though bear resemblance with a certain reality of society fails to do justice with the changing and shifting patterns of identity within household. They fail to circumscribe all the career options that are now being taken up by Indian women, new modes of lifestyle being adopted and remain entrenched in certain deep-rooted notions that are hard to be erased away.

**Portrayal of women in Advertisements:** In recent years, Indian advertising has witnessed a significant transformation in the manner in which women are portrayed. The way women are depicted in advertising changes with times, reflecting the transformation taking place in society. Advertising is one of the major media that affect, our daily life consciously and unconsciously and are responsible to play a significant role in shaping the society in a much broader perspective. Women today are no longer consolidated behind kitchen walls. Their aspiration for coming out of the door also taught society to think differently. Marketer wisely utilized this transformation process to launch their product and advertisement strategically. Das (2000) examined the portrayal of women and men in Indian magazine ads from a wide range of magazines in 1987, 1990, and 1994. Results indicated that although the gender portrayals in Indian magazine ads have changed over the period, they are still portrayed in stereotypical ways. Vela, (2007) examined male and female stereotypes in Spanish magazine advertising during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The results found that male and female portrayals have undergone significant changes in the last 30 years though gender stereotypes persist. Results also indicated that low and decreasing levels of sexism in Spanish magazines. Dwivedy, (2009) examined the role portrayals of men and women appeared in India's most popular men's, women's and general interest magazines during October 2006 to April 2007. Ads were content analyzed to identify the role portrayal patterns of male and female across magazine types. It was revealed that male and female are portrayed in traditional roles. Men's magazines depict men and women in very traditional role while women's and general interest magazines depict women in more modern roles.

**Women in Movies:** Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of

modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. Hindi cinema has influenced the way in which people perceive various aspects of their own lives. The movies that have three different points of view towards women. To some extent they identify areas where "modern feminism" comes into contact with "traditional values." Films have also been inspired to a large extent from religion and mythology whereby women characters were seen as the epitome of virtue and values, those who could do no wrong. The image of women as "Sita" has been repeatedly evoked in many films after independence. Over the past few years, much has been said about Hindi Cinema breaking the stereotypes related to women and the phenomenon of the Indian Woman 'coming-of-age'. It reminds us of a few moments of the cinema of yore, when women were shown, not just in shades of white or black, but also in different shades of grey. Now while the Indian cinema completes its 100 glorious years let us not forget the ever mesmerizing roles played by Meena Kumari in *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam*, (1962) Nargis in *Mother India* (1957), Waheeda Rehman in *Guide* (1957) just to name a few. Even the roles played by Kajol as Simran in *DDLJ* (1995) or the role of Priyanka Chopra in *Fashion* (2008) are quite commendable. The working woman vanished from the popular blockbusters of the nineties which relegated Indian women to the boundary of the home. Despite the progress that Bollywood films have made and the increasing accessibility of these films, things haven't changed much for Indian women, as objectification of women still continues in most of the Indian movies in the form of item numbers or an explicit love making scenes. These continuities are proof of the ongoing influence of Western neocolonialism, this time invested in the circulation of cultural products that express Western/racist ideals of women and femininity. Kumkum Roy in her essay "Where women are worshipped, there the Gods rejoice" locates the Hindutva attempts at constructing an identity for the Hindu woman in Manusmriti, an ancient Indian text. In women were equated to material goods with men in command of them.

**Conclusion:** Thus, it can be concluded that overall effect of the portrayal of women in media is to reinforce rather than reduce prejudices and stereo types. None of these women were self defining, powerful characters who decided for themselves and chose for themselves. They were always deciding and choosing and doing as per the norms and values of family, culture and society. In this sense, a hero who smoked and went to a cabaret dance was still a pure man, but a heroine who by choice dressed in a sexually attractive fashion (wore revealing attire), or a vamp to whom the hero goes to satisfy his desires were all not as he point of this analysis is not to argue

that women should not be objectified or that it is immoral for women in films to expose their bodies. These are personal choices made by actresses and directors. However, the way this exposure and exhibition of sexuality is portrayed on screen has an

undercurrent, which carries messages to the audience, reinforcing further, the pre-existing stereotypes in society, adding strength to the vicious cycle. Do films lead to socio-cultural stereotypes or do these stereotypes find their way into films.

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