

Advertisements and Depiction of the Woman Image: A Critique on Feminism

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Abstract- *By promulgating the principle of equal status for the women, the movement of feminism has questioned, criticized, and protested against the conventional images of woman. By re-defining the existence of woman it compelled both men and women of the society to comprehend the identity of the woman from a different, hitherto neglected perspective. However, with the rampant socio-cultural changes due to the globalization, feminism has been trapped in new trauma. In this post-capital, post-post-modern world, all the revolutionary ideas are swiped away. Amidst this, several rejected values are re-nurturing their roots. This revival has made many revolutionary movements and thoughts dead. By watching the media that is the complete product of globalization and especially the advertisements that are the effective means of communication and manifesting tools of the contemporary culture one is sure to ask whether like all other disciplines there is the death of feminism.*

The present research paper intends to probe into the philosophy of feminism and its present status in the light of some select advertisements. Many times the audio-visual texts of ads may not use an overt manifestation of women, however, the pretext to the text and the cross referential world it creates through the text do communicate the new stereotypes of women image.

General Terms- *Feminism; Globalization; Popular Culture*

Keywords- *New Capitalistic Social Order; Volkeswagen New Beetle; Mahindra Centuro; Seagram's Imperial Blue; 'Slut Walk Movement'*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the 19th century, feminism evolved as a socio-political movement. With its noticeable agenda, it showed its significant presence in the first and second half of the 20th century. As a socio-political movement it demanded the status of equality for women in the male dominated society. By protesting against the subjugation of women, feminism tried to redefine the role and image of woman in a new light. Through a vast body of literature pioneered by feminist critics such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wolstencraft and extended and modified by the writings of Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, and many others, feminism as a movement tried to give a new understanding to woman as a 'human being'. These feminist critics accepted the biological physique, but denied the socio-culturally constructed 'gender' identity of a woman. In this mode, feminism questioned the stereotype representation of women in every walk of life. Feminism had an agenda to empower woman who was taken for granted as a weaker section of society. In re-examining the role of woman, feminism tried to illustrate that how the 'difference' between the 'genders' is used as a tool to give different treatment to men and women. In

doing so 'woman' came to be understood as a meek, weak and lesser entity in comparison to men. She was restricted to the homely domain, and through the various means of culture and literature certain attributes were assigned to woman. The repetitive naming of these attributes emphasised and by that way created the stereotypical images of woman. These attributes basically were used to exemplify the meekness of woman at physical as well as psychological level. It resulted in treating women with inequality. This re-definition of 'woman' by feminism then naturally asked to erase these attributes of woman that are the means of her subjugation and suppression in the society. Among several of these attributes, feminism highly questioned and rejected the understanding of 'woman' as an 'object' of fulfillment.

With the advent and spread of feminism it was expected that 'woman' as an entity would be equally understood as a human being as 'man' is. By getting education and equal opportunity in any field of society, it was expected that women would work like men in any field irrespective of her gender identity. Her entry in any career was seen as a sign of freedom from the conventional roles and a chance to get the same status and respect towards her. It was

assumed that after a considerable awakening about her equal status in the society, she would not be restricted to follow those social values that belittle her existence itself. With the rejection of conventions and traditions which are seen as major means of her subjugation, woman entered into the modern era. 'Modernity' was understood as a sign of liberation. To some extent apparently it seemed that women are now free to choose any type of education, any career option and can demand esteem as a woman. The change in her attire, her mannerism and life style is seen as her attainment of the state of freedom. By putting on 'men-like' clothing and accessories, women are also likely to feel the sense of liberation and equality. Coming to the decades of the 1990's there ushered a new phase of globalization which was considered by feminism as a complimentary to its original agenda. The phenomenon of globalization promised the economic freedom and integrating 'men' and 'women' into homogenous entities irrespective of their national, racial or ethnic identity. However, though a de-politicised process, globalization rebounded back the evils of capitalistic forces. Globalisation gave rise to many philosophical and policy crisis. Globalisation considers every individual as a consumer and willy-nilly everyone is compelled to recognize with this new identity. The invasion of satellite television since 1990's has boosted process of this consumerism. The new social order has been well reflected in numerous daily soap operas, erstwhile unbelievable channels (e.g. Food Food, Travel XP) or 'spectacles' (e.g. IPL, Pro Kabaddi) and of course the commercials. The incursion through these forms is so rampant that now there is a serious threat to the 20th century predominating grand narratives. Many of the governing ideologies are on the deathbed and many are almost dead. In this light, now feminist criticism is once again concerned about the issues like trade culture, gender exploitation and social security. In the following section the researchers would like to concentrate the Indian satellite television commercials aired particularly in the first decade of the 21st century which is supposed to be the highpoint of globalisation. The discussion will take into consideration the commercials of the products namely Airtel, Amul Macho, Ponds dream flower talc, OLX, Mahindra Centuro, Seagram's Imperial Blue and Volkswagen.

2. DISCUSSION

It is an accepted fact that an advertisement as a text (both from print media and electronic media) is a culture product. It determines and is determined by the culture in which the product is marketed. As a saleable product, it requires the attractive, catchy communication of the product. It is a part of popular culture through which it originates and affects the participants of that culture. In another sense, it is a replica of the society that constructs a

consumer. It is absolutely true, "...marketing and advertising generate a desire for cultural/material objects and are thus central to the production-consumption patterns of culture" (Nayar, 41). Being a part of media the text of advertisement reveals an ideology of the social structure and represents it. Naturally, it involves various elements and intricate strategies while making the product more attractive, saleable and communicative. Among many other strategies, the advertisement exploits 'the woman image' at large.

The use of woman's body for creating advertisements is seen at different frontiers. From many of the advertisements, it is very explicit that women are used in more numbers for ads as the models. The young, slim, beautiful and 'womanly' women as understood by the society are 'used' for ads. The large number of women working as models in advertising industry is manipulated for attracting the consumers at the visual level. For instance, one may consider the ads of Volkswagen New Beetle, Mahindra Centuro and Seagram's Imperial Blue. In the Volkswagen ad there is not at all any relationship between the model and the car; her swallowing act has nothing to do with the car. Again, it is the reassertion of the stereotypical notion that women should eat decently. And one may not notice the punch line "Curves are back" where the camera is shifting from the model's physique to the car. In Mahindra ad a woman, unnecessarily in an amorous pose enters to steal a bike which relates her to the primeval image of Eve. Then enters male persona in an image of macho man, orders the model to hand over him a helmet, and rides on the bike. And the Seagram ad where there is a double deception because the original product has nothing to do with the music CDs. Similarly, the male model's pretention of missing the floor and watching the female model frivolously is absurd. This is how ads aired on television, or even published on hoardings, in newspapers and in other print forms exploit a body of woman for the promotion of the product. Presence of woman is exploited as a visual aid to catch the consumers. At certain times, products exclusively used by men also use the presence of woman for ads. At other times woman is not directly presented on the screen but is presented through the images and symbols. The highest achievement of life or success shown in many of the advertisements after consuming the product is 'attention' of a man towards a woman. Again and again, it is reinforced through the ads that the use of a particular brand will lead the woman user to get 'man' of her choice. Pouring of the cosmetics, soaps and several such products advertise the woman user with her 'smiling' 'pleasant' face as an object to be desired and loved by man as if it is the only destination woman has in her life.

In other products related to medicine woman is shown in a glorified form as a dutiful persona who works for each and

every family member and she is made to use that medicine (e.g. Amrutanjan, Zandu balm or Move ointment). Here, woman is working hard at domestic frontier, but seldom do they talk about the lessening her burden of her work. Instead, the remedy is provided in the form of the product which women can use and keep themselves fit for working hard permanently. In the new capitalistic social order once again, the able, sincere, hardworking image of woman as a wife is reinstated and care is taken that whatever the ailing she suffers, she must remain pleasant and with happy face as 'better' half of her husband. The ideal image of such woman is constantly depicted and woman is made intrinsically to copy that image by internalising such behaviour and of course by using the said product in her daily life.

The simplest way to deny the feministic agenda was to parody it through the popular culture. The serious agenda of equality and liberation has been mis-constructed and one can see thousands of instances where the stereotypical image of woman has been reasserted vehemently through cinemas, daily soap operas and social networking sites. There are some ads which also exploit the hyperbolic representation of woman image and ridicule the philosophy of feminism. As a reaction to the misconception of female identity, some of the feminists questioned the attitude of society where not the man's approach but woman's attires are to be blamed for several wrongs men do to women sexuality. The reaction is seen where the feminists materialised the much debated 'Slut Walk Movement' and made a sign that woman's is a body of human being and not the object of use. Still woman's choice to wear what she wants; her thoughts about self-image are not at all free from the attitudes of men towards women. In this sense, then her liberty is exploited as a means in showcasing her as a woman and that has created a large question on the very ideology of feminism. The intricacies of power – politics, feminism is trying to communicate are used once again to exploit woman with her own involvement. By confirming, glorifying, reviving and making deceptive images of free, liberal woman, advertisements are reinforcing the images of woman that feminism for years has been trying to erase. For instance, the advertisement of Ponds Dream flower talc where of course, the care is taken to present a model with beauty; the one who by just using the talcum powder can tantalize man to go after her. But the more objectionable is the very event where the freedom of woman is understood as "a twist in love story". Just by changing the role where woman on a bike urging man to elope with her for marriage who is still confused to make a choice; the attempt is made to show the liberty and freedom woman has got. 'Is it not the empowerment of woman?' is a kind of question implied in the ad. But very conveniently the ad makes it clear that the confusion of man gets clear only

when woman leaves a sense of freshness and beauty and not when she has shown courage to come on bike to elope by breaking the conventional ties of the family. In a more hyperbolic manner the Amul Macho ad of men vests questions the feminism agenda where the established man – woman role are interchanged. Now man is shown as meek and submissive, and women are teasing him. But wearing of the Amul Macho vest regains him manliness and once again women are sidetracked. Actually feminism never demanded this kind of interchangeability. Its appeal is mainly for the equality.

Some of the advertisements attempt to confirm the so-called image of liberated, self-esteemed woman in the new global society. But underneath such depiction one can see that the sense of modernity, liberation and equality is all deceiving. Woman is still the victim of those several stereotypical identities and roles from which she intended to liberate herself. It is true that in the present day complex social structure, it is pretty difficult to define the concepts like freedom and equality. Many a time the arguments of feminism are considered as extreme things and are seen as elements causing threat to social structure. It has been argued (of course, by the proponents of the patriarchal society) that society is a system involving many elements where 'family' is a major institution. The preservation of family institution is in a way preservation of the social order. Hence woman, who is a part of that family institution is shouldered the responsibility to maintain and secure this institution. She has been assigned the roles as mother, wife, sister, caretaker and many more through which attempts are made to glorify her. But the very glorification of these roles is seldom understood as a means of oppression on the part of women. So, the representation of women in the advertisement if analysed from the feminist perspective, one can see that the very social system and its values questioned and rejected by feminism for the sake of man – woman equality are reinforced through these advertisements. For instance, in the famous "Womania" advertisement of the OLX a woman is shown as smart and intelligent one who changes her 'cell phone' to a 'sell phone'. But all in all, the woman represented is a stereotypical housewife demanding a number of things (electronic consuming goods, to be precise) from her husband. The office going husband, in a sarcastic tone asks her, "Paise kahan se aayenge?" The woman doesn't find anything hurting in his tone. At the cost of her self-esteem, with her cell phone, she goes on selling the household things. The words 'woman' and 'mania' are cleverly combined together to represent the modern woman implying the same attributes which feminism is struggling hard for years to erase.

Through new 'avatars' and different guises the advertising world is re-imposing the conventional woman image may be in the form of wife or mother. In the famous Airtel 3G

advertisement entitled “Boss”, the change in woman’s traditional image is shown. Now she is the boss of her husband. She is ordering her husband and his male colleagues, “Sorry guys, you’ll have to manage it”. Here, woman is shown in a new social structure, in a superior position, self-reliant role. “Yes, indeed these are the fruits of globalisation. Bravo, feminism” could be responses to this ad. The scene up to this frame projects the success of feminism as a socio-political-cultural movement. Woman has proved her ability and with her ability she has occupied a significant place in the corporate world that was hitherto male dominated. But then in the next frame, the woman is seen driving car and reaching the home. Back home she is again seen in a modern look of homely attire engaged in her ultramodern kitchen. Not showing any signs of weariness, she is busy in cooking. The climax of the ad comes when she appeals her husband to return home. Like a typical caring wife, she is waiting for her husband. The people may appreciate the woman in this ad as she is trying to balance both the roles in an efficient way. Thus, the ad very tactfully tries to reinforce the multiple roles of woman ascribed to her through ages. It never considers the practicality of such multiplicity of roles and the consequences that woman has to face in balancing these roles. Instead of glorifying the loving, desirable man – woman relationship (more particularly as husband – wife relationship) it suppresses the voice of all those working women who can’t make such balance between career and home. The ad implies at another level that those are the only capable women who can dutifully perform their ‘natural’ ‘conventional’ role of wife. Her going out for work for the sake of her career is seen as an additional asset not as the basic requirement of women. Hence many working women go on imagining and ‘internalising’ this ‘perfectionist’ attitude towards their image. The ad at its farthest implications communicates that only if women are capable of balancing these different roles should think about their status, self-respect, identity and demand for equality.

3. CONCLUSION

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), established in 1985 is a self-regulatory voluntary organisation of the advertising industry in India. According to its official website, in India every average adult every day reads newspaper for 28 minutes and watches television for 108 minutes. In 2013 Rs. 12,500 crores were invested in the print ad industry and Rs. 12,200 crores were invested in the TV ad industry (ASCI home page). It is suffice to state the vastness of advertising world in India and its rampant invasion in the Indian social structure in post-global world. There are serious objections towards the commoditisation of the woman entity through advertisements. The Consumer Complaints Council

(CCC), the ‘heart and soul’ of ASCI looks in to the complaints regarding the offending ads. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India is also keeping an eye on the ads. Very recently, it has issued a statement warning television channels not to broadcast the television commercials following a rash of ads featuring voracious women and “libidinous” men (Telegraph). But the real threat that feminism faces today is from two sides: the invasion of consumerism in the phase of globalisation is so rampant that it becomes difficult to discern that the machinery of ‘oppression’ is devastating the whole social structure. And second thing is that the regulating authorities may control the ads depicting ‘voracious women’ and ‘libidinous men’, but what about those ads which implicitly, symbolically convey the working of the patriarchal dominancy. Consequently, the internalization of patriarchy and succumbing to stereotypical notion of womanhood is likely to lead the socio-political movement of feminism back to square one.

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