



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

WOMEN IN INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS THEN AND NOW: A FEMINIST READING

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ABSTRACT

Media is the product and the producer of the society in which it exists. Representation or misrepresentation of certain societal and cultural elements have always been discoursed and problematicized in the critical understanding of media. The current research paper ensues into the long debated issue of female 'mis' representation. The focus of the study is the selected advertisements in the Indian context. The study undertakes a historical evaluation of the Indian advertisements in which a very explicit stereotyping of women can be observed. Women are objectified or represented in a manner that pleases the patriarchal mindset of the audience. The feminist theorists always contented this misrepresentation. Such cries evolved into a new "seeing" and "making" experience in the modern media scenario. The paper argues that modifying the current representation strategies can bring a paradigm shift in the movements of women empowerment.

Key words: Indian Advertising, Characterization, Feminism, Patriarchy, Objectification

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INTRODUCTION

Bovee (1992) defines advertising as a non-personal communication of information usually paid for and persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media. Main functions of advertising are, (1) to make the product distinct from its competitors (2) to inform (3) to persuade its users (4) to enlarge the distribution (5) to promote the brand preference and loyalty and (6) to reduce the sales expenditure.

Evidences show that the history of advertisements in India started from the Harappan civilization itself. When nomadic hunters got settled, agricultural activity boomed as industry and the resulted mass production eventually led to competition among producers. So these producers started to give publicity for their products and also they proclaimed advantages of the same over their competitors. These market criers or town criers were the earliest advertisers. As the competition intensified, the idea of advertising also underwent many

changes. Instead of calling out about a product, producers started using different media and first among them was print media. The concrete form of Indian advertisements started with classified advertisements in Hicky's Gazette, the very first news paper of India. Indian advertising began to develop with the Indian journalism. The technological development and advancement also paved the way for today's advertising strategies. At the same time advertising agencies emerged as a profound industry.

Women were, throughout the history of media, always portrayed as docile, timid, shy and in all such attributes of the so called "feminine". In literature or even in media, women were subject to the "male gaze". They were visualized as the "other", the second class citizens who perform according to the whims and fancies of the male dominated society. Media, old or new was vigilant in delegating the role of woman into the margins of the family and society. They were seen only in and around the secluded places like kitchen or private gatherings as opposed to the male dominance in the drawing rooms and the public places. And advertising field is not an exception. However great changes were brought about in the portrayal of women as a result of the prolonged feminist movements.

As Liddle et al. (1986) said, the women movements represent a positive creative force which inspires men and women altogether and the development of a distinct female culture rather than, a negative reactive against the oppression by men. In this context the female power principle, the 'shakti cult' can be considered as a primordial form of this women movement too.

Indian feminism can be divided into three distinct stages. The first phase (1850-1915) saw the beginning of social reformation related to caste and gender issue due to the rise in the awareness of ideologies such as nationalism, democracy, equality and individual rights. Efforts against gender issues and inequalities towards women were initiated by freedom fighters like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Eeshwar Chandra Vidyasagar. This phase of Indian feminism concentrated on the problems of "sati" and "child marriage" and the question of widow remarriage.

During the second phase (1915-1947) of Indian feminism, the women-only organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. These organizations emphasized women education and developed livelihood strategies for working-class women. Active participation of women in Indian freedom struggle was a major feature of this phase. Western education helped women to become aware about their own rights. Educated women took efforts in spreading this awareness among others.

Feminists in the post independent era (1947 onwards) challenged the inequalities that existed in the society and fought to reverse them. In later nineties feminist class-consciousness also came into focus. The third phase feminist activities did not restrict to the inequalities between men and women but also in the social aspects such as caste, race, tribe, class, religion, region, etc. Indian feminist movements in the twenty first century argued for their right to freedom and the right of self-determination.

Media advertisements can be used as vital tool in the political, social, and economic development of women. A proper atmosphere where women can raise their voices against the inequalities shown and the gender-gap they experience in patriarchal societies is necessary for their empowerment. A positive portrayal of women in media like advertisements will help maintaining the dignity and status of women and this will eventually minimize the gender gap and reduce the inequalities to a great extent.

Earlier studies

In the 21st era, media became the primary source of all kind of information in our digitalized society. Hence the media has a profound influence in constructing the ideology and believes in the mindset of its consumers. Many studies have explored the area of women portrayal in advertisements and the influence of media in society. Walter Lippman (1992) expressed that, representations and pictures in our heads are primarily reflected in 'pseudo reality' seen in media coverage. In this context, media plays a significant role in articulating, conveying and explaining particular discourses which help in representing and misrepresenting certain minority groups. (Cottle)

Similar concepts can be seen in other studies also. Media has played a prominent role in constructing and shaping the ideas of many social and political themes. With the technological advancements in various

fields and the creative modes of markets, the social formations have been constantly subject to change and reform. The forms and impact of media were also subject to drastic changes with time. Media has gradually risen to occupy one of the important positions in the modern state machinery as one of the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser). Post the digital revolution, the proliferation and the reach of media had pursued an explosively exponential path both in its importance and influence. (Chauhan and Shukla)

Walter Lippman (1992) opined that photographs have a kind of authority over imagination to-day, which the printed and spoken word had yesterday. It creates a sense of reality. On the screen the photographs will accomplish the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining for you.

Images are more powerful than words in influencing the mind set of people. In a study, Mitchell (2001) found that the formation of product attribute beliefs and attitude towards the advertisement can be affected by the visual component of advertisements.

Patriarchal society and women objectification also have been identified as prominent research area. Shiva (2013) opined that, economic systems influence the culture and social values. The economics of commodification leads to a culture of commodification where everything has a price, and nothing has value. And this includes the commodification of women too.

Mies (1998) expressed that the exploitation which lies at the basis of the man-woman relationship is not a biological or psychological category but a historical category. She says it was historically created by patriarchal tribes and societies.

In a study, Brinker (2009) states that, modernization is a cause of devaluing the women's work, which is not done for financial gain, but for meeting the daily needs of people and families.

Vandana Shiva (2013) said that there is a deep gender bias in our traditional cultures and social organizations. A more vicious form of violence against women happened due to the hybridization of traditional patriarchal structures and structures of capitalist patriarchy. The connection between the violence of unjust, unsustainable economic systems and the growing frequency and brutality of violence against women should be questioned. "Traditional patriarchy has structured our worldviews and mindsets, our social and cultural worlds, on the basis of domination over women and the denial of their full humanity and right to equality."

Brinker (2009) viewed Vandana Shiva's vision for a combined movement to end oppression of both women and nature as a way to achieve sustainability on this planet and find our place as a species. He says, "We must acknowledge that we are part of the larger web of life that provides for our survival, and therefore it is imperative that we protect that fragile web of life, not as dominators—men over women and humans over nature—but as partners with every other life form on the planet."

Objectives

1. To analyze women characterization from the view point of feminist movements.
2. To compare female portrayal in Indian advertisements of the past and present.
3. To find out the social scenario reflection on corresponding advertisements.

Methodology

There are a number of advertising media like bill boards, posters, TV ads, radio ads, new media ads, mobile ads, point of purchase, pop ups, etc. It is an easy and effective way of enlightenment. The study is a content analysis of certain ads to examine the portrayal of women in Indian advertisements. It helped in identifying the stereotyping of female portrayal and the changing trends in Indian ads. As one among the media, advertising also has its cultural and ideological influence in the society.

Universe of the study: Indian advertisements

Population of the study: Indian advertisements from mid-20th century to 2016

Sample of the study: Indian advertisements namely Cinthol toilet soap ad (print), Femina Shaadi Mahol ad (TV commercial), Havelles Coffee Make Respect for Women ad (TV commercial), Airtel 3 G Boss ad (TV commercial) and Vogue's My Choice ad (Online ad) to find out the changing trend in female portrayal.

Sampling: Every year lots of advertisements are being introduced via various media. In this context, after considering all the Indian ads, through judgment sampling the researcher selected 5 advertisements for the study.

Analysis and findings

Influence of paradigm shifts in the Indian feminist concepts is being reflected in the Indian media too. Earlier print advertisements and electronic media portrayed women as mere commodities and objectified the female physique as in Old Liril soap advertisement (girl singing la laalalaa and bathing under a water fall) and Lux-‘wanted husbands’ advertisements. And in some advertisements, women were stereotyped as they are concerned only with their household chores. Those days’ advertisements were from the point of view of the male. Patriarchal concept of the society was explicit in those advertisements. These time worn concepts still exist but in a few advertisements. Some advertisers feature women as talented, smart and confident to please others in order to attract male or to create good impression in her employer.

The advertisements promoting anti-bacterial soap show a woman as a doctor but the patients are only children. It appears that the purpose of the advertisement is to focus that the responsibility of women is primarily to the family (children, husband and the home). It is not significant that the woman in this case is a doctor. Gender discrimination is very acute in this media. Most of the advertisements portray men as more career oriented and successful persons who give advice to families as in the ‘Lifebuoy’ advertisements.

Earlier print ad of Cinthol soap is an example of objectification of women and gender inequality in earlier advertisements. Following is the older print advertisement of Cinthol soap for gents and ladies.



Fig.1 Old print advertisements of Cinthol

In the Fig.1, one can see the gender gap in the model portrayal itself. Here the male model is energetic, happy and is in full dress. But the female model is almost nude and is in a kind of seductive posture. Most of the toilet soap advertisements follow suit. Both men and women use soap. Then why have the advertisement producers used entirely different concepts regarding the same product. Some ads portrayed women as doing only household work and complaining about the same. Some ads stereotyped women as always trying to impress man. Exposing female physique (objectification of women) was one of the common techniques in earlier Indian advertisements.

According to Pal (2016), report of the 1974 Committee on Status of Women, ‘Towards Equality’ laid the foundation of women’s movement in independent India, which highlighted discriminatory socio-cultural practices, political and economic processes. Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar among its authors later founded the Centre for Women’s Development Studies in Delhi. Issues raised during this time were wide ranging such as land rights, political representation, divorce laws, sexual harassment at work, dowry and rape. Feminist movements related to these issues interrogated the existing laws and became central focus in public discourses.

An anti-rape campaign was launched in 1980 led to the emergence of some autonomous women’s organizations in several cities of India. They include Saheli, Vimochana and Forum Against Oppression of Women in Delhi, Bengaluru, and Mumbai respectively. Several legal reforms also took place as some special interest group focused on women legal aid. Vishaka Guidelines of 1997, explaining the procedures for dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace (later replaced by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013) is a landmark example. (Pal)

However the stereotyping continued till the latter half of 2000. After that many of the advertisements showed women in more independent roles. Following is a shot from Femina Shaadi Mahol TV commercial which can be said to be a trend setting ad in women characterization.



Fig.2 A still from Femina Shaadi Mahol TV commercial (2000s).

The advertisement (Fig.2) shows a scene from a typical wedding day. A young girl dressed like a bride entering her home and getting blessings from elder ones. While walking, she takes a look at her dad's photo and she proceeds to a room in the upstairs. There she meets her mother and viewers understand that the whole *shaadi mahol* was for her widowed mother's remarriage.

As Sridhar (2014) said, "Advertisers' attitudes towards women have changed and changed for the better; the community is more sensitive on how it places women in communication and is paying extra attention on the effect that continuous exposure to such messages will have on viewers and society at large."

Indian society is largely composed of patriarchy and hierarchical systems. The word, patriarchal society describes cultures in which males as fathers or husbands are assumed to be in charge and the official heads of households. Society considered women are only for household chores and not meant to pursue any professional life or have her own individuality. Hierarchies are there in the form of age, sex, caste, lineage, wealth, occupations, etc. So the focus of the Indian feminist movement has gone beyond treating women as useful members of society but also having the power to decide upon their personal lives and the right of self-determination in the early twenty-first century. Positive reflection of these activities can be seen in the ads. TVC of Havells Coffee maker's ad is an example for the same.



Fig.3 A still from Havells coffee maker TV commercial (2014)

In the Havells Coffee maker's advertisement (Fig.3), a mother who wants her son to get married complains that there is no one in her home to make coffee. And the prospective wife promptly gives the mother a Havells coffee maker and states that she's not a kitchen appliance. There had been a convention that sons should get married because there is need for someone to do chores in the home. The advertisement questioned the purpose of the so called 'arranged marriage' through it. It helped in the elevation of women's status in the society.

The picture of the real world is shifting from time to time. Now women are more career-focused, independent and have their own identity. They are able to manage both their personal and professional life through their own talents. Nowadays women are conscious about their decision making rights. Even the patriarchal concept in the Indian society is going through a paradigm shift.



Fig.4 A still from Airtel 3G TV commercial (2014)

In the advertisement (Fig.4), a woman is shown giving a work deadline to a man in the first scene. The man silently moves out of the woman's cabin to finish the assigned job and works late into the night. However his boss the assertive woman leaves for home. After reaching home, the woman then calls up her husband, who is the employee from the office (her subordinate) and persuades him to come home by telling him about the delicious meal she has cooked for him.

Although the constitution of India grants men and women equal rights, one could find that employment of women was not preferred much. Today the scenario has changed. Now many manufacturing and banking/financial sector companies employ women in top posts. Women have also entered board rooms of many companies, though of course in a limited way. Legal support like Companies Act 2013 paved a way for the same. (Rao, 2013). TVC of Airtel 3G belongs to this time period.



Fig. 5 An image of Vogue's My Choice ad (2015)

'My Choice', the ad on women empowerment from the Vogue Magazine India features 99 women including celebrities like Deepika Padukone, Niram Kaur and Anupama Chopra. In this ad, the narration is done by Deepika Padukone and the ad shows these 99 women talking about the choices they have made in their life by challenging the existing patriarchal society.

The advertisement went viral soon after its release and became a controversy due to some sensitive lines in the ad lyrics like, "To have sex before marriage, to have sex out of marriage", "to come home when I want. Don't be upset if I come home at 4am" and "My pleasure might be your pain.. My songs, your noise My order, your anarchy Your sins, my virtues". Some believe that the advertisement showcases a truly arrogant feminist attitude; some say it caters to only a small segment of privileged women and some simply called it "elitist and sexist". The purpose of this advertisement seems to be to create awareness that, every woman has her own freedom of choice in matters like relationship status and sexual orientation as in any other thing in this patriarchal society. Concept of women rights is expanding day by day. It has got transformed from the men and women equality concept to women's independent role in the society.

Conclusion

Pal (2016) observed that contemporary Indian feminism has been showing some encouraging trends. It includes (1) exaggerated economic liberty of women (2) their constant efforts to comprehend economic, social and sexual rights (3) they're not ready to hand over their space however negotiating tougher to expand the same (4) the existence of real partnership and collaboration of men and ladies notably among youth to attain proper gender equality and (5) the web and knowledge revolution facilitate them to create communities and networks, giving them a much bigger voice and tools to arrange themselves, forge partnerships and demand their rights . Feminist movements have its own vital role in the elevated status of women in the society.

While the reason for the stalling is unclear, like the unevenness of change, the stalling of change reminds us how contingent and path-dependent gender egalitarian change is, with no inexorable equal endpoint. Change has been as much unintended consequence of larger institutional and cultural forces as realization of the efforts of feminist organizing, although the latter has surely helped. Indeed, given the recent stalling of change, future feminist organizing may be necessary to revitalize change. (England)

Earlier undivided families became nuclear families due to industrialization in the colonial era. People from villages migrated to the places where industries were located. These urban areas provide more job opportunities and better facilities like hospitals, schools, transport etc. When male members went to town

areas for jobs, the family responsibilities were carried out by the female members of the family. So the 'karta' (eldest male in the family who is also the in-charge of the family) concept in the family got changed. The patriarchal concept also lost its prominence with the advance of time.

As the trends of the society keep changing the advertisers also try to change the patriarchal views in the advertisements and portray the new concept of gender roles in society. Today both male and female earn for the family. Men also lend a hand in the work of the household. Hitherto some advertisements consider an only women domain focus the picture of a family where both husband and wife have taken the equal responsibility for doing all the tasks in the home. It is not only the woman's responsibility to look after the family and do all the chores (Julia 53). Therefore, the advertisers are now becoming more conscious in the characterization of women in advertisements, though the change is rather slow. In today's world both men and women are aware of the need for judicious choice of products. Therefore, advertisers need to focus more while representing both male and female models to promote any products.

It is considered that the modern feminist movements can be divided into three distinct phases. Nineteenth century to 20th century is the first phase. The second and third phases began in 1960 and 1990 respectively. Every advertisement is influenced by the respective social scenario that exists at that particular point in time. Cinthol print advertisement (fig. 1) belongs to the first phase of the modern feminist movement. In those days, women were highly subjugated in the society and being exploited in different ways. The situation became much better towards the end of the first wave of modern feminist movements. It saw an increased participation of women in the Indian national movements /freedom struggles and the launching of women only organizations. After the independence in 1947, women enjoyed some constitutional rights like right to vote, right to equality, right to equal opportunity for government jobs, etc. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) targeted to improve the working conditions of women and United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front for mobilizing women against price hike (inflation) were formed during this second wave. Third wave of modern feminist movements insisted more on independent roles of women and arranged protestations against women atrocities. Femina Shadi Mahol, Havells Coffee maker Respect for Women, Airtel 3GBoss and Vogue's My Choice advertisements belongs to these periods. Positive portrayal of women in these advertisements can be due to the influence of feminist movements.

After analyzing the contents of Femina Shadi Mahol, Havells Coffee maker Respect for Women, Airtel 3GBoss and Vogue's My Choice advertisements, the study concludes that the female portrayal in today's advertisements have undergone a change for the better. Indian society is gradually moving away from the patriarchal thought system and this is being reflected also in the Indian media. Apart from the social awareness messages regarding the roles of women in the society, these ads can be seen as an emerging marketing tool too. For example, from the view point of business sector, remarriages too are shown as acceptable in those advertisements for jewelries and textiles just like normal marriages. TVC of Havells Coffee maker is giving a subtle idea that Home appliances like Havelles coffee maker helps to reduce the strains of so-called 'women chores' and save time so that they can pursue their profession or career. Airtel 3G TVC is meant for promoting video chats on data recharge. And Vogue's ad for promoting new trendy dresses in order to break the conventional dress codes and patterns. So these advertisements can be seen from a market oriented point of view too.

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