

Sub-alternising of Women through Stereotyped Images in the Indian Mediascape

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Abstract

As a potential social tool, the mass media has been successfully playing the role of an influencer, shaping and strengthening socio-cultural norms. However, the media, in the recent time, is more preoccupied with attention-grabbing entertaining productions, rather than meaningful and truthful ones. In this context, we find that the popular images of women on Indian Television flatter patriarchy by conforming to traditional gender stereotyping. The commonly objectified representations, either as the 'sati-savitri', the epitome of virtues who delights in servitude, or as a dangerously seductive enchantress, a Medusa-like figure, do not represent her diversity at all. It is quite alarming that Television circulates unrealistic images of women, images that constitute her as the 'second sex', and subsequently marginalises an already disadvantaged section of society. Such portrayals ensure that this subaltern must always remain a subaltern. Her voice is muted, ambition maimed, role shadowed, visibility reduced and the reality is tactfully blurred. This brings in mind a potential question- "*Can the Subaltern (Really) Speak?*"

Keywords: Representation, television, patriarchy, subaltern, domesticity, marginalisation, role-playing, stereotype, discourse, hegemony, identity, power-politics.

Introduction

As a potential social tool, the mass media has been successfully playing the role of an influence, deciding, shaping and strengthening socio-cultural norms, gender stereotyping being one of them and perpetrating the same. The monochromatic thread of notions about women that Indian Television commonly exalts through popular images often sends out hackneyed and biased ideas. Representations of

women are very partial, the roles assigned to them are outrageously irrelevant, primitive, and dated. In fact, these stereotyped representations disseminate potentially dangerous messages, justifying the existing status quo and encouraging subjugation of women. While Television can and has often attacked conventions to spread awareness, its role in patronising women as ‘second class citizens’, through formulaic images, is a matter of concern.

Art and culture closely portray real conditions, but they may also effectively blur truth and reality. While today’s women, by virtue of literacy, are exposed to the worksphere and enjoy greater mobility and purchasing capacity, the dominant image of the Indian woman on-screen is still that of a wife-mother. There is also an increasing commodification of woman’s body aimed at tantalising the male viewers. It is quite alarming that Television, which is supposedly a reflection of society, continues to portray women as hardworking homemakers and ‘sex toys’, cleverly concealing the heterogeneity of functions women perform on a daily basis.

Television merrily flatters the tamed sexual image of woman as good. However the absence of any counter image allows the hegemony of patriarchy to reign supreme. ‘Hegemony’ as a term popularised by Antonio Gramsci stands for the reinforcement of power-politics that crucially hinges on the wings of popular consent. This is exactly the case with the Indian Television that constructs consent through daily soaps and popular advertisements-where the subjugated picture of women go boldly repeated and unchallenged -and are upheld as best values and ideal models for blind emulation.

Women as subalterns

Antonio Gramsci, by exuding a relief from the strict economic realm that characterise the Marxist tradition, used 'Subaltern' to denote any 'inferior rank' or 'low rank' or social groups who were subject to the hegemony of the ruling class . He had in mind only the workers and peasants of the Fascist regime who were denied access to power. But it also implicitly pointed at the women labourers, who among the other agrarian groups, toiled incessantly while their basic rights got crushed under the hegemonic domination of the rulers. Later, in his attempt at redefining the term 'subaltern', Ranajit Guha applied it as a "name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". The issue of the 'female gender' as a subaltern group is the case of study here.

Unlike one's 'sex' which is biological, 'gender' is a construct. And this makes 'gender' even more complicated as it is moulded by social and cultural notions that entrap women within the suffocating nets of expected gender roles and subordinate women to men. When Simone de Beauvoir remarks that women have 'no part' or 'history' of 'their own', it is highly reminiscent of Gramsci's assertion that the subaltern classes can never have a distinctive 'history' owing to their muted voices and exclusion from political representation in society. Beauvoir correctly observes that the whole of feminine history has been man-made-"One is not born but rather becomes woman". In a patriarchal set up where the power relationship is tilted away in favour of men, the status of man as the 'absolute' authority pushes woman to the peripheral state of the 'Other'. She is nothing but an object, a 'womb' and 'ovary' relegated to the hearth and home, while man is liberated to

extend out to assert his position as the “subject and free being”. There is also a master-slave dialectic at play where woman is defined exclusively in opposition to man, though this slave is essential to the entity called the master. With his ascendancy she is flattened into dependency-left with no ‘room’ for individuality and independence she is compelled to accept the dissatisfying life of housework, childbearing, parasitic reliance, and sexual slavishness. Here the ‘difference’ of roles can be registered- it is socio-culturally transmitted preserves man’s dominion and perpetuates woman’s status as the subalternised ‘Other’.

The cunning of power politics implemented through the marginalisation of one class of human beings in favour of the promotion of another has been a sordid reality down the ages. However, times have changed and women have been breaking barriers to claim social, financial, intellectual, emotional and physical emancipation, no matter how gradual the transition is or how small the ratio is. Nonetheless, the image of the Indian female reiterating across the Television screen is that of a domestic adjunct or a sex object, roles that do not represent her diversity at all. The depiction of woman as the domesticated subaltern diffuses the serious efforts women are taking to carve out individual identities. While the media can reach out to the masses and propagate change, the biased images of women idolised by the Indian Television alarmingly feeds into the notion that woman’s central function is only secondary to man.

The subalternation of women is made possible through stereotypes that naturalise unequal status of men and women in society. According to Homi Bhaba stereotypes form a body of ‘knowledge’ that “vacillates between what is always ‘in place’ already known and something that must be anxiously repeated ”. It holds true to the Television that propagate certain messages through popular

representations that commonly conform to conventional stereotyping of gender roles. The discourse of patriarchy and the politics of power are implicitly revealed- man as the bread-earner, and woman as his pleaser, performing her ‘womanly’ duties as sanctioned by society. Though these stereotypes make her the traditionally venerated ‘Lakshmi’ of the household, they nonetheless deny her identity and choke the path to equality and emancipation.

To explore the subalterned position of women on the Indian Television, I will make three separate categories-

1. **Women and advertisements**-Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother of Western feminism, in her seminal pro-feminist tract, *A Vindication of The Rights of Women*, critiques the notion that the girl child, from a very impressionable age, is told to be careful about her looks, as if she has nothing else -“Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (Wollstonecraft, 2004). Unfortunately, this obsession with physical beauty, gloriously reigns over the advertising scenario as Indian woman’s only means of attaining a place in society. Advertisements on skin whitening products make waves in India- from acne free face, fair skin, and fairer armpits to bleached vagina-the desire for whiteness seems to be the ultimate goal of ‘Brown’ women. Then there are anti-ageing creams, skin tightening lotions, spot reducing facewash, hair removal lotions, hair vitalising oil and shampoos, fat burning food products, ‘beauty enhancing’ jewellery, and tons of make-up brands claiming to retain youthful vibrance. It is a disgrace that most of these products are endorsed by Bollywood stars, who are,

apparently, role models of millions!

The advertising messages are equally regressive. It is only alluring body that can awaken individuality (I never understood how a fairer face can give a girl oodles of confidence to refuse her father's counsel of getting married to a "well settled" bachelor and proclaim her desire to get a job first to be his 'equal' match), fetch her a suitable job (whereas previously she was derided for her dark complexion), earn her the love of her desired man (who initially dumped her for a fairer chick), tempt her man with brighter armpits (and 'backless' outfits) , and finally renew her husband's interest in her trim figure (that also makes 'jealous' husbands adorably 'cute'). Apparently, only angelic looks, directed at making women more wanted by men, can guarantee love, happiness and prosperity in an Indian woman's life.

The Indian advertisements gladly endorses certain roles as being fit for women. This assigning of gender roles occurs representations such as frivolous college girl, nagging girlfriend, greedy bride, dutiful wife, ideal mother, sexy bedwarmer, and mysterious enchantress. The most popular image is that of the faithful homemaker who serves her family, does the cleaning and moping of the house, happily scrubs dirt off her husband's shirt, cleans piles of dirty dishes, makes bowls of healthy meals and energy drinks, and who is loved by her children and husband for being the uncomplaining wife and mother. Advertisements therefore encourage domestication of women as being respectful.

2. **Women in serials-** The daily soaps or serials running primetime depict extended families and daughter-in-laws, be it Balaji Telefilms or others that closely emulated its tradition. The plot is unilinear- how a simple girl gets integrated into an affluent household and her trials and tribulations aftermath. That is from being a socio-economic subaltern she gets elevated through matrimony only to become a familial subaltern. As the perfect 'bahu' she embodies patriarchal values refashioned as the great Indian tradition. She wears only sarees(heavy silk or 'zardousi' adorned ones, while the vamp wears designer or light-weight ones), paints her forehead thickly with vermillion, puts on glass bangles, 'mangalsutra', and heavy jewellery. All these alone guarantee conjugal bliss! Sometimes she may even cover her head in facile obedience with her 'dupatta'. She is the ideal homemaker, self-effacing, soft spoken, docile and submissive. She gladly performs rigorous poojas (does all rituals single-handedly), fasts for her husband's sake (even he is a lustful infidel or she is battered and deprived), craves for motherhood soon after marriage (willingly or out of familial compulsion), cares for her in-laws, spends hours in kitchen, eats after the males are done, and prioritizes the family over her own needs and wants. All these construct the 'good woman' stereotype, the tamable pliable housewife who is the epitome of femininity even if she is illiterate. On the contrary, there is also the 'bad woman' stereotype standing diametrically opposed to the homemaker subaltern. She is ambitious, career-oriented, extrovert, wears western outfits and high heels, irreligious or atheist, confident, refuses to part with her independence or compromise with her rights, asks for her own space, and disproves of symbols of marriage. She is ultimately punished for transgression and expelled from social life, while the man is forgiven for all his wrongs and brought under the folds of family and society. Then there is also the young wailing widow who ceremoniously proclaims her loss through breaking of bangles, putting on white saree, exposing dark circles and refusing to

take delicacies. Sadly enough, TV serials do not inspire women to shatter the fetters of widowhood; they rather end up glorifying the state of self-denial as being virtuous and pious.

The 'good woman'-'bad woman' dichotomy that Victorian literature delightfully endorsed, can find a close ally in Indian serials that seem to train young women into becoming prospective wives, compromising and unpaid maids who must and only aspire for marriage and homemaking. They reinforce the age-old assumptions that women are wives, mothers, caregivers, servants, and can have no role beyond them. Furthermore, the stereotype of the ideal woman as being the home-bound serf and the ideal man as being the brooding breadwinner is problematic as it implies that women are fit for domestic functions alone, while financial independence is the exclusive domain of the males.

There are other stereotypes too that combine to offer all serials a melodramatic unity- the conspiring mother-in-law, the evil sister-in-law, the sexy intruder or 'second' woman, the scheming 'frenemy', the vitriolic sidekick or maid and so on. Their jobs are alike- petty quarrels, clandestine affairs, woman versus woman, and dirty conspirations have the upper hand. Sadly, serious issues like inequality, the rigors of juggling family and work, workplace problems, restrictive impositions of motherhood, plight of single parenthood, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and legal battles are rarely discussed.

3.Roles of women vs men's- Women and men have static set of separated sex roles to essay on screen. Woman constitutes the weaker clan and subordinated producer of sons with very little identity or individuality. She is hardly portrayed as an adventurer or initiating venture (unless ofcourse the house really needs her to take up the reins because of absence of the male or masculine treachery and/or

incompetence), a dreamer (none but her 'patiparmeshwar' can coax her), an occupational (she will work only out of financial constraints and not out of her own volition), or as the supreme authority (a woman in command must be an autocrat). Women need to continuously adapt to be acceptable while men are always accepted the way they are. Men have the dominant voices who have outer world at their feet while their so-called better-halves have marginal and decorative roles as the 'angel of the house' and that too in an indoor setting.

In advertisements too, women are shown to perform insignificant tasks. They are mostly visible in endorsing beauty products, cleaning products, food items and groceries, clothing, home and kitchen appliances. Contrarily, men have rejuvenating beverages and pills, tobacco, liquor, wild parties, industries, corporate offices, home loans, travel and tourism under their folds. Again the female body is capitalised on and subsequently commercialized-it is tempting and alluring-it is the product. Man, on the other, is the authority of that product.

Power politics as a means of ensuring patriarchal authority and feminine submission

It is interesting to note that Television as the mouthpiece of society attempts to mentor womenfolk in traditional ways by employing modern women. I use the umbrella term 'modern' to denote that they are working women making their living through acting. No matter how perfect a wife or mother she plays in reel life, she is an economically independent individual in real life, who could be a wife and/or mother but never a domesticated subaltern (though financial independence does not guarantee freedom of mind). Now this is complicating, as woman is caught between two antagonistic poles-the call for modernity on one hand, and the need

for bearing the baggage of traditions on the other. This is precisely the issue with today's women-she may be highly educated, earning as much as the male counterpart, staying away for hours, yet it is she who, upon returning from work, will cook meals, sweep the floors, and tutor the child. She will hardly complain of workload. She may even have to entertain guests, eat last (the husband and other males get to sit first though), and claim to relish eating the tail of the fish (in Bengali cuisine the fish tail has the poorest flesh). Here I am reminded of a woman IPS officer (who at a point in time decides to quit her dream in favour of motherhood), and a female badminton champion (who never parts with her 'shakha-pola-sindur' even when in a face-off) in a Hindi and Bengali serial respectively. Even after the rigors of work or practice, these leading ladies will return home to rush straightaway to the kitchen, do the dishes, or perform religious rituals as the bliss of a household relies heavily on the 'goodness' (read domesticity) of the wife ('Sangsar sukher hoy ramanir gune'- a popular Bengali saying). The man of the house will rarely step into the "wife's duties" as he cannot compromise with his masculinity! He will fulfil his 'manly duties' by sipping evening tea, turning the pages of office files, discussing sports and politics, resting his limbs, and signing the child's grade card. Gender roles are therefore clearly pronounced-it is sacrosanct and must not be upset.

The subtlety of patriarchal power-politics is crystal clear. Michel Foucault observed that all relations are caught up in a struggle for power and 'discourse' is the zone where this power-politics is played. The discourse of patriarchy that Indian Television exalts through stereotypes not only furthers subjugation of an already marginalised section of society but also naturalises difference and unequal power distribution. Patriarchy thus flexes its muscles to classify women as vulnerable, childish, irrational, homely, seductive, over dependant, overtly emotional, in order

to claim the authority figure for itself. Woman therefore becomes ‘interpellated’, as a prospective daughter-in-law, bedwarmer and breeder, ideal nurse, and so on. In this way, she continues to perform these constructed roles as her ‘natural’ ones, and becomes inserted into the discursive power-politics though she can never be aware of it.

Depiction of changing times: Does Indian Television do it at all?

It would be wrong to assume that Television is entirely prejudiced. While business houses invest finance in accordance with what will sell and what won't, a growing trend in experimenting with innovative concepts and contemporary issues is also visible (that obviously runs on a risk factor). Television has brought out acts of sexist discrimination in the most naked and subtle forms, as well as helped spread the cause of women, thanks to globalisation and expansion of literacy. Certain number of advertisements and serials do portray women in the positive light of realism and balance. A leading detergent brand focuses on the need for equal distribution of daily household chores, 4 young ladies actively push an ambulance out of mud (portray women in action contrasted to incompetent males who simply look on, embarrassed), a group of flamboyant girls drive scooties as a symbol of free spirit (afterall, ‘why should boys have all the fun?’), a working lady refuses to be branded ‘handicapped’ because of her pregnancy, a beauty and wellness company stresses not on the princess’s body but on her duty as a ‘warrior’ and vigilante, wrestler Geeta Phogat steps out of her house boldly amidst fading calls for domesticity carrying along her ‘will of steel’, ads on sanitary napkins employ females from a variety of spheres to focus on increased mobility – academia, sports, army, engineering, medicine, business, corporate world, mountaineering or adventure and others, a body soap brand strives to ‘break the rules of beauty’ and

encourage diversity, dark skinned females and second marriage for women are stressed on by a jewellery brand, while freedom of creatively dressing, flaunting all body types, lesbianism and sexual liberty are implicitly discussed accompanied with the call to ‘move on’. Sports brands are also marching along-two of our foremost Bollywood heroines turn “more human” as they join an entire clan of Indian sportswomen in celebration of sorority and she-power, singing to the peppy tune of ‘Da Da Ding’. Recently, a promotional advertisement has caught my attention- in it three of our celebrity cricketers are seen to bear their mothers’ first names on their jerseys by dropping the more popular surnames like Dhoni, Kohli, and Rahane, acknowledging and honouring the mother’s crucial role in making them what they are today.

Our daily soaps too are trying to catch up with the multiplicity of roles that women-centric advertisements highlight, though the number of women in liberated or occupational roles is comparatively limited. Nonetheless, the soaring TRPs over serials with IPS officer, budding advocate, pilot, practicing physician, business tycoon, detective, and Badminton champion as female protagonists suggest that the Indian viewership is changing. This wave of change is also evident in serials that present progressive and self-reliant women even within familial boundaries-she fights the stigma of dark complexion, carries out works independently without being bogged down by social sanctions, executes business plan successfully, refuses to compromise with her dreams for marriage, allows her innate passion to materialise, combats child-marriage and social ostracism, dares to love outside marriage when all her expectations from her husband are brutally foiled, revolts against injustice, clings on to her individuality in the face of raised eyebrows, and so on.

The remodelling of traditional epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to suit contemporary audience deserves hearty appreciation. Unlike the previous versions where women were portrayed as meekish and helpless dolls, blind followers of male dictates, the modern rendering of these literatures show them as flamboyant personalities, indomitable, and strong-willed, with minds of their own. While princess Amba refuses to be given away to marriage and blatantly reveals the shocking nature of patriarchal Bhishma, Draupadi scornfully declines being made a pawn in the Game of Dice with the recurring phrase 'Maanya nahi hai mujhe' ('I am nobody's belonging') and even condemns masculine morality when Duryodhana attempts to shame her in public ('Vastraharan' episode). In the penultimate scene of the Ramayana, the exiled Sita refuses to compromise with her dignity and bravely turns down the comforts of the palace of Ayodhya-her reason: she disapproves of a society that judges a woman only in terms of her physical chastity. Through her bold decision, she exudes solidarity with all women, demeaned and ostracised, by the ordeals of chauvinistic patriarchy.

Employing a leading actress to play a transgender ('kinnar' or 'hijra') who is also the protagonist, has been a major breakthrough, a never-before-attempted concept on India Television. The fact that its popularity is growing daily and earning applause widely, show that a level of audience maturity has definitely been reached.

Conclusion

Though strong women characters, ready to crush adversities, are celebrated, the share is depressingly meagre. It cannot be denied that women are majorly typecast

as physical entities, trophy wives and tender mothers with little personality. By conforming to the primitive decrees that continue to decide the socio-cultural structure of the country, every image of the Indian woman is deliberately and cunningly distorted. All attempts to portray the real conditions of women are thus brutally foiled.

Television must be more responsible about what they show to a heterogeneous audience. There is also the youth who learn a bunch from the virtual medium, their impressionable minds and perceptions being crucially shaped by what they receive. The need to be cautious about how we portray our women is the call of the hour. Are we giving out conducive messages at all? Does progress have superficial connotation alone? Is TV really democratic or a notorious ally of parochial notions? Does it pronounce equality or counsel its audience in feudal mentality? A number of questions needs to be catered to.

The continued projection of women in derogatory light needs quick remedy. Times are changing and the depiction of women must also undergo positive change. We do not need exalted idols far removed from reality, but rather truthful portrayal of women as individuals of flesh and blood, coherent beings with multiple facets to their psyche, living people relatable to reality. We must not forget that women empowerment and slogans on equality will remain confined to theory unless Television plays a pro-active role in offering a more realistic and balanced coverage of Indian women. Only when that is accomplished, the rights of one of the most disenfranchised groups will be vindicated and their dignity as a human being will be rightfully restored.

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