SOCIOLOGY OF MEDIA AND GENDER STEREOTYPES: REFLECTIONS ON THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Rajbir Kaur

Research Scholar, Department of English, Khalsa College for Women, Civil Lines, LDH, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to critically analyse the role of media in promoting gender stereotypes and perpetuating gender hegemony. The observations are made on the basis of advertisement content on television and in print media with reference to various newspapers and magazines. The media today is a vibrant means of constructing, influencing and moulding public opinion as its reach and impact have increased many folds as compare to a decade ago. Media projects and presents society in its varied shades and also acts as a catalyst of change. It disseminates knowledge and information besides entertainment. It has the power to influence socio-economic and political structures of the society. Thus, media has a responsibility to work for the weaker sections of society, to inform and educate people, to raise its voice against old practices and traditions and bring transformation in the society but it is tantalizing to see the way women have been portrayed performing the social roles thus perpetuating the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes. Media not only promotes gender stereotypes but also denigrates women who do not conform to the parameters fixed for the image of an ideal woman. It controls all aspects consisting looks of a woman, behaviour and roles to be played by her and expects her to be paragon of all virtues. Women are depicted in various roles from an ideal homemaker to a sex object, presented as an eye candy to men or a super woman who can be seen multitasking even when undergoing physical pain.

KEYWORDS: *Media, Gender Stereotypes, Society, Paragon*

INTRODUCTION

India is a multicultural and multilingual country with sizeable and different modes of media communication like radio, television and print media. Radio has a reach to 97.2% of the population whereas television reaches out to 85.4% of the population with print media playing its own prominent role in disseminating information. The media today is a vibrant means of constructing, influencing and moulding public opinion as its reach and impact have increased many folds as compare to a decade ago. Media projects and presents society in its varied shades and also acts as a catalyst of change. It disseminates knowledge and information besides entertainment. It has the power to influence socio-economic and political structures of the society. Thus media has a responsibility to work for the weaker sections of society, to inform and educate people, to raise its voice against old practices and traditions and bring transformation in the society.

Television was introduced in the year 1959 with the objective of promoting social and economic development. It was specified that Television would be used as an instrument to curb illiteracy and ignorance and educating people about the sociological problems. It promised a new social order with people having civic sense and respect for law and order. It promised entertainment of higher aesthetic levels. It is a well-established fact that visual media leaves a powerful impact in

communicating ideas. But television could not fulfil its promise of educating people and empowering the weaker sections as expected since market forces dominated this media. Television has undoubtedly become the biggest platform to sell goods in this era of consumerism and commercialisation but at the same time it is shocking to see the way women have been portrayed in the advertisements and commercials performing the social roles thus perpetuating the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes. Advertisements and commercials are reflective of the cultural norms and standards of a society which reinforces gender stereotypes influencing the thinking and behaviour of people. Projection of women as wife or mother inside the four walls of home doing the household chores like washing, cleaning and cooking restrict them to play the roles as defined in the ideology of patriarchy. Media not only promotes gender stereotypes but also denigrates women who do not conform to the parameters fixed for the image of an ideal woman. It controls all aspects consisting looks of a woman, behaviour and roles to be played by her and expects her to be paragon of all virtues. Women are depicted in various roles from an ideal homemaker to a sex object, presented as an eye candy to men or a super woman who can be seen multitasking even when undergoing physical pain.

The observations from the trends and patterns of portrayal of women on Television recognise that media demarcates genders in clear categories and define their respective roles and personality traits as constructed in the cultural context. Women are stereotypically associated with being caring, emotional, seeking guidance, and vulnerable. Women are portrayed as seductress in almost all the ads of perfumes and deodorants for men. Sigmond freud in his study of psychoanalysis described 'osphresiolagnia' a disorder in people who are sexually aroused by odours. It seems all the deodorant advertisers believe that all women suffer from this disorder. The ad of layer shot deodorant has the tagline 'Kategi kya' and Wildstone perfume with tagline, Log to notice karenge, where mother and daughter are shown falling for the same man wearing Wildstone. It is demeaning and derogatory and indecent to portray women out of their senses and hovering around men merely because they smell good. It also perpetuates that women are less intelligent and can be easily hooked. Research on gender stereotypes reveals that women in Indian Television are portrayed either in the family roles or decorative roles. Typical Indian woman is represented as a mother, daughter, sister or daughter-in-law happily serving the family, taking care of cooking and cleaning. She is represented as a super woman who takes care of the health of its family members but does not care for her own health and even works when she is in pain (The ad of Combiflame icy) thus giving her the attributes of being caring, loving and sacrificing invariably. Another instance of gender stereotyping is portraying women as homemaker who features in the endless ads of washing soaps and detergents, and finds a good soap or detergent no less than an achievement.

Another issue which surfaces in almost all forms of media is the projection of unrealistic and unattainable standards of beauty. These parameters of beauty set by the socio-cultural forces are threatening to the psychological wellbeing and self-esteem of women. These unrealistic models of beauty as portrayed in the media sends an implicit message that in order to be beautiful, they have to rely upon the plethora of beauty products. Therefore, these companies sell their products from weight loss aids to fairness creams, fashion brands to cosmetics portraying unhappy woman who finds happiness only after a physical makeover. Shradhha Kapoor promoting Lipton green tea and advising all the fat women to burn their belly fat and Ranveer Singh suggesting 'Head and Shoulders' as a solution to the query made by a desperate model on 'Sardion me boyfriend se doori kyon bad jati hai'? are typical examples to tempt women to desire the products to be looking good and wanted in the eyes of men. Yet another instance of gender stereotyping is the broadcasting of daily soaps which are implicitly designed with a perspective that portray women as commodities or put them in

stereotyped roles and responsibilities. These soaps always portray women in two extreme characters. She is either a Devi or a vampire. There are many narratives told from a biased perspective or from the point of view of men. On the contrary men are represented as being ambitious, hardworking, responsible and adventurous.

Print journalism is a strong platform of public opinion and social change. It reflects the society in action especially the activity related to socio-economic and political spheres. It also discusses the education, health and justice but it is unfortunate that there is lack of sensitivity among the print media in terms of women and their problems. It is observed that the brutal crimes against women get the coverage on the front page and all other important issues pertaining to women are not given its due attention. The prime objective of print media is to fight against the exploitation, discrimination and marginalisation of women but in order to make its news story more sensational it loses its spirit which further victimises the victim and glorifies the crime and criminals. There are a number of commercialised articles or issues on beauty and recipes but there is dearth of content that deals with the health and hygiene, awareness programmes, career opportunities, informative articles on constitutional provisions and rights of women.

The stereotypical representation of the society in a narrower sense misleads others to follow the same. The discrepancies found in the portrayal of women by the media and social reality is a matter of concern and criticism. It is evident that lack of gender sensitivity leads to derogatory portrayal of women by media. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act was passed in 1986 to curb the indecent portrayal of women in media through advertisement or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner. But lack of sensitivity among media had led the National Commission for Women to call for amendment in the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition Act) 1986. The government in order to give more power to the legal machinery protecting the dignity of women, approved amendments to the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 in 2012. It also included into its new technologies like MMS and the electronic media, posters and TV serials which perpetuate stereotyping of women.

Though many advertising agencies are coming forward to take cognizance of the misrepresentation of women in media but we are yet to witness a major change in the attitude and concerns of advertisers. Many agencies have taken initiatives to frame policies for the ad makers to keep in check the indecent representation and gender stereotyping since it restricts the choices, aspirations and opportunities of viewers, especially women who are trying to find a place of their own in this so-called man's world. According to Hall gender stereotyping is a process that permits for "the maintenance of social and symbolic order." Furthermore "stereotyping tends to occur when there are gross inequalities of power." In seeking explanations, it is essential to identify that gender construction cannot be understood in terms of a single cause. In fact, there are many factors responsible for the gender construction and gender roles. The study on gender stereotypes strongly recognises that many of the differences between men and women we feel natural, are not we are born with but we are taught over the time. It is the parental and societal reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes on the infant brains which gets magnified over the time. Boys are stronger than girls and girls are more empathic than boys are the feelings we instil in them and they practice thus internalising the roles they are expected to play. Media can play a prominent role in educating the masses and breaking these cultural notions of gender. Therefore, media can help in constructing positive mind set by portraying women in a good light. Media must carry the responsibility of balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women, gender sensitization and social emancipation to witness a change in the real world.

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