

Questioning the 'Superwoman': Gender Image portrayal in Indian Mainstream Media since 1990's

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This paper highlights how a new stereotyped image of an individual Indian woman is projected in the mainstream media and the way this redefined image becomes a convenient site for negotiation between the traditional past and the contemporary market driven society. It also calls this homogenous feminine image a myth and shows how large sections of women remain outside this new image. The objective is to raise a question whether media is just reasserting the interplay of neo-liberal and patriarchal values or contributing to any meaningful empowerment of women.

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The 1990s have been the decade of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in India. Concomitant to this the same period has witnessed an upsurge of consumerist culture in India in the propagation of which the mainstream media has played a significant role. Today's representation of gender and femininity are produced by a number of distinct technologies of gender such as cinema, advertising, print media, satellite television etc. and we get constructed as gendered subjects across a multiplicity of discourses. Since the 1990s, there has been a shift in the stereotyping of the image of Indian woman as represented in mainstream media particularly the audio-visual media. The mode and form of construction of femininity have also changed considerably as direct response to the emergence of open markets and globalisation. There has developed a new image of global Indian woman who is an economic actor, a consumer, a homemaker and a commodity at the same time. The present paper proposes to highlight how a new stereotyped image of an individual Indian woman is projected through the mainstream media and the way this redefined image becomes a convenient site for negotiation between the traditional past and the contemporary market driven society. It also calls this homogenous feminine image a myth and shows how large sections of women remain outside this new image. The objective is to raise the pertinent question that whether media is just reasserting the interplay of neo-liberal and patriarchal values or contributing to any meaningful empowerment of women.

The conventional notion of what is political locates politics in the arena of public rather than private life. Politics is understood as an activity that takes place within the public sphere of state, governmental institutions, political parties, pressure groups and other forums of public debate. The private sphere, constituting of the family and other informal groups, are considered as inherently non-political. Feminist theory marked a departure from this public-private divide. The second wave of feminism claimed that politics is an activity that takes place within all social groups and is not merely confined to affairs of the government. It was the radical feminists who were staunch opponents of the idea that politics stop at the threshold of the home. Simone De Beauvoir, thus, proclaims, 'personal is political' (Beauvoir 1949). And Kate Millett defines politics as power-structured relationships whereby one group of persons is controlled by another (Millett 1968). The relationships within the family or any other informal groups is as much political as any distinct political relationships in the public sphere. There is a politics of everyday life that includes

the sexual division of labour within the family, process of conditioning in the family and the politics of personal as well as social conduct. These political relationships are produced and reproduced every moment through different agencies. It follows that if gender is a social and cultural construct then there is a politics of that construction. The contemporary representation of gender and femininity are produced by several distinct technologies such as cinema, print media, satellite television, internet etc and we as gendered subjects get constructed across a multiplicity of discourses. This paper would focus on a particular section of mass media, the advertisements of satellite television.

The information technology revolution of the late 20th century, accompanied by the neo-liberal philosophy of globalization has provided a conducive environment to the process of construction of gendered identity. With the information technology revolution there has evolved a form of domination leading to a methodical, scientific and calculated control diffused throughout society. Herbert Marcuse has mentioned that technology is a historical-social project and what a society, and its ruling class intends to do with its men and things is projected through it. The advancement of technology in the field of mass media, accompanied by the ethos of advanced capitalism, has been influenced by and at the same time shaped the construct of gender and the existing notions of masculinity and femininity. Through this construct there operates multiple levels of domination.

Mass media is not merely a technology. It carries with it a definite set of ideologies, philosophies of life or value system [Perumpully 2005]. It effects the unconscious and helps propagating the dominant language of power. The impact of mass media is best described in the idea of 'culture industry', propounded by Horkheimer and Adorno. It was argued that under monopoly all mass culture is identical and depraved as a consequence of culture and entertainment. Moreover, there is a merging of advertising and the culture industry so that both become a procedure for manipulating men. The triumph of culture industry is that the consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they can see through them (Adorno 1972). Advertising no longer keeps the free market free in the real sense as in the market it is not the buyer's free choice that makes the final decision. Advertisers condition the buyer's choice and also shape the content of those media which they use to carry their message. Marcuse has also criticized advertisements as they induce an individual to identify his individuality with the idea demonstrated by the commodity. Advertisements, pointed out Marcuse, make false promises to create false needs of consumerism. They always promote commodity solutions to problems (Marcuse 1964). And if we analyse the gender image portrayal in the advertisements we will find that they project market-oriented solutions to problems faced by women without disturbing the patriarchal fabric and other equations of power in the society.

In India this scenario becomes evident since 1990s. The entire gamut of mass media has changed in shape and content. Concomitant to larger socio-political and economic shifts since the 1990's, there has also been a rapid change in the media situation. With the end of state monopoly over broadcasting and the liberalisation of the skies, the broad network of satellite television has become accessible to a huge mass of audiences. Due to its visibility, geographical and psychological presence, television seems to loom large on the urban mind as a dark, ominous and unmanageable presence (Nandy 1995). The impact of television is no longer limited to urban minds and also encompasses the suburban and a section of the rural within its ambit. With the proliferation of the number of private channels, advertising has also emerged as an important cultural form that not simply reflects but also facilitates the process of shaping social reality and maintaining certain norms and set of social values.

In the tele advertisements of 1980s, two types of stereotypical projection of women were found- as housewife using domestic products and as sex object. The landmark advertisement that popularised the

housewife image was that of Surf detergent powder. The character of 'Lalitaji' became popular as a smart, intelligent, urban housewife in the traditional attire of bun, *bindi* and *sari*, who was capable enough of taking reasonable decisions on household purchases. She was projected as capable of making assessment of products as she distinguished between *achchi cheej* and *sasti cheej* with confidence. Within the micro narrative of the advertisement, there was a reflection of the contemporary socio-political and economic milieu of emerging consumerism. She became the symbol of urban housewives who were just started to be targeted as consumers (Guha Thakurta 2004). Other than this *surf* advertisements the housewife image was projected through several other in most of which woman was projected as 'dirt-obsessed fanatic' busy in domestic responsibilities (Nair 2008). They have mostly figured as mother or wife and buyers in the area of domestic goods. The narratives of all these advertisements conveyed the message that the intelligence of women lie in their ability to get the best bargain from the market. At the other end of the continuum there lies the advertisements that projected women as sex objects. The most popular one was the Liril soap advertisement which has the permanent theme of a scantily-clad woman bathing under the fountain.

Of this dual stereotypical projection of women, the woman as sex object has continued in the 1990's also and that too in a more intensified form. Women and their body parts sell everything from soft drinks to laptops and automobiles. The use of women's bodies has been extended to even designing and packaging of different commodities. Alcohol, beverages and perfumes often make their bottles as replica of a woman's body. Advertisements of bikes even use a woman's body to depict the shape of the bike with the rider, invariably a man, riding on top of it in an assertive and commanding position (Guha Thakurta 2004). Recently there was the Sony 'vaio' laptop advertisement where the size-zero figure of a Bollywood actress was projected as representing the ultra thin laptop. Interestingly in certain advertisements like Amul, Lux or erstwhile VIP Frenchie undergarments or Axe deodorants, men are represented as not merely potential consumers of the product but also consumers of the commodity called woman. In most of these advertisements women are offered as prizes to the male consumer [ibid.]. Guha Thakurta claims that in terms of cultural politics, this sort of sexist projection in the advertisements defines the relationship between man and woman as binaries like superior-inferior, dominant-subsidary, active-passive and consumer-commodity, thereby, maintaining and sustaining the conventional gender power relation in the social structure [ibid.].

Women's sexuality particularly in the context of media has of lately been a debatable issue among feminists. On the one hand, a section of the feminist theory condemn the commodification and objectification of women's bodies in the media. This view holds that women in pornography are victims of sexual violence in the same way as they are in prostitution. Andrea Dworkin is associated with this view. In the mid 1980s she along with Catherine Mackinnon was instrumental in drafting the Mackinnon-Dworkin Anti-Pornography Ordinance¹. Pornographic depictions maintain male power over women in all situations. On the other hand, there is a contradictory view within the feminist approach that contends that censoring women's sexualised images would further deny women their right to claim their own sexualities and control over their own bodies. The emergence of postfeminism during the 1990s raised the issue of sexuality of women and criticized Dworkin for perpetuating a negative image of women as the passive victims of men. The spice-girl debate of post feminism has its origin in the media. The Spice girls² upheld the strength of

¹ The anti-pornography civil rights ordinance, drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon in 1983, proposed to treat pornography as a violation of women's civil rights and allowed women affected by pornography to seek damages through a court of law. In the 1980's versions of the ordinance were passed in several cities of the USA

² A British all-female pop group formed in 1994 that became cultural icons of the 1990's. Members of the group with nicknames Sporty, Baby, Ginger, Scary and Posh popularized the phenomenon of girl power.

female sex appeal. Instead of viewing women as a passive sex object for male they argued for “girl power” where the female is not a sex object but fully a subject, who can lay claim to male privilege and can override male domination. Instead of viewing beauty and fashion industry contributing to women’s objectification they viewed it as a channel through which liberty of women can be an alternative male construct. They claimed that the ‘future is female’ and girl power is the way of saying it in 1990s. This view was supported by Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfield, Camille Paglia and Natasha Walter. This late 20th century focus on ‘girl power’ became the focus of advertising industry with many advertisements focussing on girl power. It was projected in the Indian tele-advertisements also. So there came advertisements with the caption, ‘Why should boys have all the fun?’ and cosmetics advertisements like those of Elle 18 where women were found celebrating their beauty and sex appeal. The Spice girls’ postfeminism faced criticism from feminists like Germaine Greer as she refuted postfeminism as a market led phenomenon through which multinational corporations view women just as consumers of pills, paint, cosmetic surgery, surgery, fashion and convenience foods. What marketing strategies seek is not informed choice but compliance and marketing has co-opted the post feminist stand as a fashion (Greer 1999). Seeing the way the idea of ‘girl power’ of postfeminism has been nurtured by the advertisements, the stand taken by Greer seems to be appropriate.

In India, protest around obscene representation, objectification and commodification of women were triggered off in 1990’s on the issue of the use of vulgar lyrics in Hindi films like *Khalnayak*, *Raja Babu* and *Khuddar* and some nude photographs of model-cum-advocate Anjali Kapur in the *Fantasy* magazine. There were severe protests both from women’s organizations and from Hindu right organizations like the Bharatiya Janata Party and Shiv Sena. The issue of censorship of media also came to the forefront with the Information and Broadcasting ministry imposing restrictions on TV programmes as well as presenters. There has been an opposite view also which raised the question that if commodification is an issue then why commodification of women’s body becomes more important than other forms of commodification like commodification of art or cricket (Ghosh 2005). Moreover, who has the right to decide that what constitutes the proper representation of women.

Body-centric representation of women can be found in advertisements that impose the cosmetics and fashion industry dictated terms of beauty on women. The idea of beauty is essentially normative as it exists as a rule to which a woman’s body must conform. These norms change with time and socio-cultural context. All historical epochs have their own notion of beauty imposed on women from outside. These beauty rules are aspects of a feminine ideal that almost all women prefer to emulate. Historically, this ideal is defined, framed and expressed in the art, literature, law and culture of a particular historical epoch (Geetha 2002). In the 1990s, as Indian economy started integrating with the world economy, the feminine beauty ideal came to be increasingly defined by the beauty product and fashion industry with advertisement as an important agency of propagating that ideal. ‘Beauty myth’, as Naomi Wolf calls it (Wolf 1990). The idea of externally imposed standards of beauty was also earlier criticized by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). She has called her female contemporaries, ‘feathered birds’. Naomi Wolf argues that pressures to conform to unattainable aesthetic ideals perpetuated by advertising and the media are inhibiting modern women in their search for social and political advancement. Obsession with the attainment of impossible parameters of beauty and the self-hatred engendered by the inevitable failure to do so cause women to resort to invasive cosmetic surgery or eating disorders. The myth also creates a climate of competitiveness among women that divides them from each other. Joan Jacob Brumberg³ estimates that up

³ In *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease*, Harvard University Press, 1988, Joan Jacob Brumberg gave a historical perspective of eating disorders of women starting from medieval Europe. Brumberg’s statistics later faced criticism for being incorrect and projecting an exaggerated picture of women as hapless victims of a patriarchal society.

to one female student in five in American universities is anorexic which is an inevitable consequence of a misogynistic society that demeans women by objectifying their bodies (Brumberg 2000). Women become obsessed with keeping their weight low in attempt to conform to the cultural demand for feminine slenderness. The contemporary advanced technology of photo touch-up software has made this problem more critical as the image that women tend to emulate are mostly artificially modified using advanced software and doesn't reflect the real image. Beauty is all about being tall, thin, young and fair with a flawless skin. Advertisements project women always in a heterosexual relationship with the target of getting married as the ultimate goal of their life. Women who do not fit into these criteria are mocked at and depicted as rejected lot. In some advertisements we find a shift as instead of marriage career is projected as a goal. The shift in the advertisement of the fairness cream, Fair and Lovely, can be cited as an example. Earlier there was a *kundli ban gayi* advertisement of the product which projected fairness as the criterion of getting a prospective groom. The girl concerned was found to be having her horoscope or *kundli* ready, once she started using the product. But now making a career and accepting responsibility of parents is the latest narrative of the advertisement of the same product. It is definitely a significant change of narrative, but the shift is superficial as in the latest case also the success is related to the fairness of skin. The success of career is fairness and not intellectual capability. Not only this particular cream, several other creams and sunscreen lotions have made their entry into the market the advertisements of which portray women in some unconventional career like journalists or architect but their success invariably linked to the fairness of their skin. *Vaseline* presents a lady journalist who claim that the lotion ensure not only fairness of face but your skin as well. The beauty myth not only reflects gender, it has another agenda also. A very flourishing worldwide beauty business thrives on this myth. The gym, private health-club, cosmetic surgery and diet product industry survives on this myth. Ficci⁴ estimates that the Wellness industry in India will be the most prospective one in the 21st century and this industry is likely to feature among India's fastest growing industry with a growth rate of 35-40 per cent. More than 30 products and services fall under this gamut including dietary supplements, health and convenience foods, spa and yoga centres, slimming centres, gyms, beauty salons and surgical as well as non-surgical cosmetic procedures.

The impact of the media is not direct, unilinear or universal. It is conditioned by a set of overlapping factors within a specific socio-cultural context. The messages conveyed through the advertisements have made beauty a commodity in the market. In the world of global capitalism, woman has lost control over her body matters. How she is to act on body matters is increasingly being conditioned by the demands of the market. Her charms are acceptable only if the demands of the particular market are met. Commutarian notions of beauty have been systematically destroyed. Beauty is now what the beauty business promotes. While fairness creams determine beauty norms in India, tan lotions do the same thing in the west.

Constant exposure to images of thin, fair and young women being superior than others often cause depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls. On some occasions the focus on women's external appearance may even turn to more desperate self-destructive measures like bulimia or anorexia. Such overpowering is the beauty norms that in 1950's American women ate a chalk like substance called metrical to shrink to the size of thin young models (Friedan 1963). Metrical diet became very popular in the 1960's wherein women in enormous number were found consuming the diet-supplement food. Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1981) and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) both have explored and the fears of ageing to which contemporary women are often subjected to. Though

⁴ The Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce of India held a conference on 'Wellness Exploring the Untapped potential' in 2009 to discuss the prospects of the Wellness industry in India . <http://www.slideshare.net/spasindia/ficci-wellness-conference-spas-india-1983995> accessed on Mar 05, 2011

bulimia or anorexia are mostly the predicament of western women, liposuction, a surgery to stay slim, is the number one cosmetic surgery in India at present. In the Indian context this sort of beauty myth often makes it tough for dark-skinned girls to find prospective grooms. Marriage is still considered the best career for majority of girls in India and discrimination faced in marriage negotiation process affects their self-esteem. And this linked with dowry issues assume an unparalleled critical form. Even if one follows the matrimonial advertisements, the bias for fair, slim and tall girls become evident.

Apart from body-centric representation, there is the role-centric representation of women. The form and construction of the role-centric image of the feminine has changed considerably as a direct response to the emergence of open market and globalization. The 1990's began with a major policy shift in India as India adopted its *New Economic Policy* (NEP) and the character of a neo-liberal state. The neo-liberal model of development advocated that development, in general, is more likely to be successful if the various bodies of the public space like the state, market, and the local community draw on women's contribution to society. Women's productive role is not just recognized under the neo-liberal discourse, it is actively prioritised. This neo-liberal agenda brought a focus on women's identity as economic actor. The market economy projected women as producers, consumers as well as commodities. Concomitant to this shift there has also been some change in the representation of women as housewives in advertisements.

The image of women became redefined, recast, reorganized and regenerated in the mainstream media and advertisement was not an exception (Guhathakurta 2004). There developed a new image of a global Indian woman who is an economic actor, a consumer, a home-maker and a commodity at the same time. This redefined image is that of a 'superwoman' or the 'new woman' who manages her domestic responsibilities and her public responsibilities with equal efficiency but at the same time looking fresh, beautiful and staying healthy. The homemakers in the advertisements also appear in a new avatar. In the advertisement of anchor toothpaste a young married girl is seen in a very trendy outfit of shorts and spaghetti top with *mehndi* and *suhag churis* in her hand signifying her to be newly married. She is in modern attire but at the same time traditional in keeping the symbols of marriage and more importantly in her confinement to her domestic responsibility of cooking for her tired for her tired husband homebound from office. The woman is simply relegated within the confines of her domestic role. Though contemporary and more modern situations are used in the narratives, what remains unchanged is the representation of women within the traditional spaces of the household. Most of the advertisements where women appear in key role are related to domestic products or appliances. In the field of domestic product, her role has been extended to decision-making regarding larger affairs like painting of her home as the latest Asian Paints advertisement where Saif Ali Khan advises a woman on the issue of deciding on a paint. Advertisements are keeping women preoccupied with good housekeeping and responsibility for the health of the entire family from in-laws' back-pain to husbands' ailments and children's nutrition. And all these have to be done economically. The modern Indian womanhood, as the narratives of the advertisements project, is redefined with woman in the role of wife, mother, daughter-in-law, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur driving her children down to school, child care, expert on interior decoration, furniture refinishing, nutrition and education. Betty Friedan has made almost similar categorization of American middle class suburban housewives. This superwoman concept making a judicious balance between her domestic and public responsibilities is reinforced by women's magazines where majority of the articles are focussed on managing home and work simultaneously. Women rarely figure in advertisements concerning the stereotyped male bastions like those of banks, mutual fund or insurance industries.

In some of the advertisements, role reversals are sometimes projected with the husband shown as indulging in cooking, washing clothes or doing other domestic chores. But this sort of projection has a subtle

sense of humour in it. Men are seen in these role performance but their clumsiness make it evident that the role is not theirs and they can gain access to the women's domain only with the help of the market. The latent message is that economic freedom of women don't change gender stereotyped roles and only the market can provide the solution of enjoying your freedom while keeping the underlying gender power relations intact. The MDH *masala* advertisement that was telecast a few years back can be cited in this context. There was a visual of a daughter-in-law dancing to the tune of music in the kitchen while the mother-in-law dictated her a list of spices. The market provides the ways by which a woman can freely enjoy herself and satisfy her mother-in-law while keeping the sexual division of labour and the ideology that goes with it unchanged (Guha Thakurta 2004).

Who is this superwoman is a pertinent question to ask. Woman is not a homogenous category. But advertisements present woman as an amorphous category. The woman who confronts us through the world of advertisements is an educated, urban, middle-class, higher caste Hindu woman in a heterosexual familial relationship. Motifs like *mehndi*, *sindoor*, *bindi*, *mangalsutra*, dress, home settings make this evident. While women exist in power-centered relationship with men, so do they with women of other classes, ethnicities, sexual preferences, disabilities etc. The predominant image of feminine cannot be universally applied to all women cutting across regional, religion, ethnicity, class or caste barriers, what it is to be a woman is no longer a narrow, prescriptive or traditional question. But these variations are not projected through advertisements. Rather the world of advertisements projects a particular image and seeks to universalise it. The vast mass of working women in the unorganised sector of industry and agriculture, various categories of single women, old-aged women, sex-workers, lesbians, transgender, hermaphrodites and disabled are rendered invisible though they too are a part of the consumers whom the advertisers target.

The concept of Hindu nationalism is another important factor that operates in the context of gender representation through advertising. It has been said earlier that women are represented in isolation from class, caste and religious variations. Images of women in media, projecting a cultural homogeneity, are actually a power discourse through which the categories of the 'other' cultural identities are totally wiped out.

This is a systematic process of constructing a homogenous Indian identity by usurping the diverse cultural identities of the 'other' of the dominant class. It is a deliberate strategy to wipe out the existence of undesirable communities, who are just relegated invisible in the narratives of the advertisements (Guha Thakurta 2004). This deliberate oblivion is accepted because the market that is dominating the media has created a new narrative of consumption. The media discourse not only presents male and female as binary oppositions but also creates a power-structured relationship within the women wherein the image of certain privileged section is imposed upon all others inducing them to emulate the lifestyle of the privileged section as it is conducive to the logic of consumerism. This imposition or systematic homogenisation is created to bridge the gap between a specific socio-cultural contexts and amorphous, inchoate aspirations, between the real world and the world of desire, aspirations and consumption. The third wave of feminism has rightly questioned the ideological process of hierarchical dualism where men and women are placed in placed in separate oppositional categories. The third wave feminists have also challenged the logocentric interpretations of gender and the universalistic category of men and women.

Advertisements project the ideal Indian feel-good family unit as an urbane, middle-class, nuclear family with father, mother and a son. This is the predominant image of an ideal Indian household projected by the advertisements. Whenever a nurturing and caring mother is found, mostly the object of the nurture and care is the son and not daughter, The advertisements of Kissan Jam, Complian, Bournvita, Junior Horlicks, Top

Ramen noodles, Glucodin cough syrup can be cited as examples of son-preference advertisements. Even the latest Census of India advertisement does the same thing. Interestingly daughters are also projected but mostly in the advertisements concerning beauty products like Santoor soap, Pears soap, Clinic Plus shampoo. If daughters appear in advertisements of products other than beauty products, then they are usually accompanied by a son. If one related this with the prevalence of amniocentesis tests to determine the sex of foetus among the middle classes and the resultant practice of female foeticide then the implications of this types of representations become clear. The sex ratio in India is still 940 females per 1000 males at the national level and at the state level with some states/union territories having as low as 618⁵ females per 1000 males. It will not be an exaggeration to say that these advertisements not only legitimise but also reassert the son-preference phenomena through its image of father-mother-son feel-good and go-happy family. Gender stereotyping can be found even in representation of children. Generally, a male child is presented as adventurous, active, mischievous, generous, adventurous, innovative and brilliant and female child as submissive, pretty and coy.

The changes that representation of women in advertising has gone through, after 1990s, are a superficial one. The reality is that global capitalism is invoking the age-old gender power relations but with a facelift. The superwoman is none but an overburdened woman who exists without posing any challenge to the gender power structure. She is not even the representative of all sections of women. This redefined image of woman has become a convenient site of negotiation between the traditional past and the contemporary market-driven consumer society. Since gender identity is a social, political and cultural construction there does arise the question of consent in this construction. Mass media, particularly advertising, plays a crucial role in manufacturing that consent.

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⁵ As per Census 2011, Daman and Diu has 618 females per 1000 males [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/s13_sex_ratio.pdf ,accessed on Mar 08,2011]

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