

Misogynistic Portrayal of Women in Select Indian Advertisements

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Abstract: *Advertisements play a vital role in the marketing of products and they have a compelling influence on the customers. The illusory world of advertisements often presents women as a commodity by promoting stereotypical roles assigned to them by a patriarchal society. Media exposure has resulted in the objectification of women, thereby shaping social values, and attitudes towards women. Many a woman is constrained to conform to patriarchal standards of beauty propagated by the advertising and media industry by transforming rigorously into beauty idols and sex objects. The article focusses on the commodification of women in advertisements by displaying them as erotic objects of desire and female sexuality. It also examines in detail how gender identities are cultivated and created in the minds of the viewers as a result of media exposure. The article also stresses the need for concerted efforts on the part of social organizations, media and advertising agencies to recognize feminine values and to assign them their rightful place in society by a positive portrayal of women in media and advertisements.*

Keywords: *Commodification, Media, Advertisement, Phallocratic, Femininity, Objectification*

We are living in an age of advertisements which mislead and confuse the viewers and they have an inordinate appeal both to men and women. The objective of these advertisers is to market their products and they are least bothered about the oppressive and harmful effects of the model of femininity prompted by the fashion and cosmetic industry. Extreme slenderness, often hailed as a mark of feminine beauty, makes many a woman sacrifice physical strength and psychological power in her eagerness to please and be attractive to man. Objectification, exploitation, stereotypical images and selling of women as a commodity has now become a common trend in the marketing and advertising industry. Internalization of socio cultural ideals of beauty and the power of the image portrayed in advertisements plays a huge role in marketing a product. Women are more or less portrayed as sex objects through their clothes, representation of sexuality, themes and behaviors visualized in advertisements.

Women in advertisements are mostly portrayed as the “impossibly young”. Obsession with thinness in the advertising industry has forced women to be a commodity, rather than an individual. According to different feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millet and Betty Friedman, media are reinforcing stereotype images of women as they find them to be inferior, subordinate and submissive.

Jean Baudrillard, French sociologist and philosopher known for formulating key concepts on media and contemporary culture is best known for his theories of ‘simulacra’ and ‘hyperreality’. Simulacra is a system of simulations, whereas hyperreality refers to something artificial that becomes more definitive of the real than reality itself. According to Baudrillard, the contemporary media are concerned not with the dissemination of information, but with interpreting our most private selves for us, making us approach each other and the world through the lens of these media images. He also uses the term ‘implosion’, to refer to the process by which there is a collapse of boundaries between the ‘reality’ and ‘simulation’, such that no distinction is visible between the two. The widespread expanse of media messages saturates the social sector with the result that the meaning and messages merge into each other, causing a neutralized flow of information in the realms of advertisement and entertainment.

Naomi Wolf (1990), a major figure in post- feminist criticism, in her monumental work *The Beauty Myth*, focuses attention on the false positions that women are constrained to take, in order to conform to standards of beauty laid down by the fashion and cosmetic industry. It is no wonder that many a woman, in order to pander to the sexist views of men, finds herself under compulsion to remodel herself along petite lines. Advertisers often create a fake image of what it means to be a ‘desirable woman’. Thus the world of advertisements is flooded with alluring and enticing female images to grab viewer attention. Women are often carried away by the advertisements and they strive hard to get the perfect skin and hair and to get rid of unwanted tummy fat. An interesting observation in the essay “Fashion as Violence Against Women”, published by the British WAVAW group (Women Against Violence Against Women) is relevant in this context:

Under male supremacy, women’s status depends greatly on male approval. If we don’t conform, we pay heavy penalties. It means that many women mutilate and injure themselves, spending an enormous amount of time, energy and resources in the process. Fashion divides us into angels, whores, dolly birds and hags. This is important in the maintenance of male power. It prevents us seeing each other as allies, but sets us up as enemies, always in competition (Palmer 33).

In world literature the “commodification” and humiliation of women have become favorite fictional themes. The premise is that man is woman’s protector whose

authority she has to acquiesce in, whether she wills it or not. Major literary works of yore, including certain celebrated epics, embody this attitude to womanhood. The feminists take strong exception to the notion of man being superior to woman and assert that both the sexes are to be treated equally. They are for a total abolition of all discriminations based on sex or gender and they shun the concept that the ideal woman is one who dedicates her life to her husband and children, alienating herself from the world outside the household.

In her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf lays bare the evils of a patriarchal society that assigns only an inferior status to women. She exhorts them to shun its authoritarianism and resist its militarism. Driving home her view that women in a patriarchal system are an oppressed lot, socially as well as emotionally, Woolf argues that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and changed. Gender inequality, she points out, begins very early in the patriarchal family, which in turn, leads to fascism. She explains how men dominate women, socially and psychologically. 'Women as looking glass' is Woolf's resonant phrase. To quote her words: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses, possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power, probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle" (Humm 23).

This echoes de Beauvoir's view that women are regarded as the 'other' (16), a commodity in a chauvinistic regime; "the mirror that reflects back to men how men want to see themselves" (Humm 21). Her argument is that women are both victims of themselves and of men, acting as mirrors to men. "Their domestic and professional isolation is the culmination of their material and ideological domination by men, in which women collude" (Humm 22). J. W. Scott (1988) points out:

The movement from a first wave feminism which is principally concerned with equalities, to a second wave feminism, which uses women's difference to oppose the 'legalities' of a patriarchal world is a radical and visionary formation. In the first movement women are objects, sometimes victims of mistaken social knowledge. In the second movement women are challenging that 'knowledge', from the strength of their own experience. (12)

Gilbert and Gubar point out how women transform themselves into a new ultra

feminine corporeal shape in order to conform to the standards of beauty propagated by the media industry.

The sexual nausea associated with all these monster women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own inexorably female bodies. The ‘killing’ of oneself into an art object – the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odour and ageing, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick – all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels, but trying not to become female monsters (Gilbert & Gubar 34).

Commodity feminism has become ubiquitous and inescapable in the modern world. Women are often portrayed as decorative objects and the advertisements reinforce the significance of the female body as a source of splendid imagery. Women in advertisements are simulations who have little connection with the real lives of people. Commodifying the female body by incorporating latest technologies brings out a simulated image of the real which makes the audience believe in simulation. It is interesting to note that men are engaged in a constant endeavor to assert their supremacy over the female folk even to the extent of blinding themselves deliberately to reality. Thus every model that appears on the screen with a fair, bright skin and slender body are just simulations of socially constructed beauty concepts. Even women are trapped in the myth of the beauty idols and most of the advertisements reiterate the fact that women want to look ‘impossibly young’, and that age is just a number, as far as women are concerned.

Our television screens are replete with a host of advertisements aimed at popularizing their products which create a direct appeal on the viewers and to a very great extent they explore the prevailing notion of considering women to be the ‘impossibly young’. The advertisements of two popular products from the soap manufacturing sector – Dove and Santoor are instances in point. These ads portray real life women and the challenges that they face in everyday life which pose a threat to their appearance. These ads are so persuasive that they generate an illusion among women and unknowingly their mind develops an inclination to buy and use these products.

A popular advertisement of yesteryears pertaining to Usha Sewing Machine, depicts a mother instructing her teenage daughter to be an ideal house wife, so that she may meet the patriarchal standards expected of her. This advertisement contained the words “Buy her an Usha Sewing Machine – Yes, only you can transform her into a capable economical house wife... a precious asset to her home and family”. One wonders whether such words instill the idea that girls are destined to do household domestic works rather than urging them to empower themselves.

Body deodorants and talcum powders also exploit themes of sexuality and gender, often portraying scantily clad women. Engage Body Spray catches our attention with the tagline “Cast your spell and tempt him with all your charm” and such ads evoke the notion that men are more attracted to women by the deodorants that they use. Similarly, in the advertisement of the Cuticura Talc Powder, there is a farewell party and everyone seems to be mesmerized by the fragrance emanating from the girl’s body and it has as its tagline, “Ignite your passion and take on the world”. Here the woman’s body is commodified and her emotions are expressed in such a dramatic way that the audience who watches the advertisement is subconsciously moved on to sexual desires.

Frequently shown advertisements relate to floor and bathroom cleaners like Lizol and Harpic, which make use of film actors to ensure that these ads are being watched by women who happened to be the target audience. They seem to substantiate the idea that women are entrusted with the duty of cleaning and taking care of the house. Consequently, the advertising company entraps the women by wisely choosing a film actor who may not possess any idea about the product and its utility. Women are often carried away by popular film actors and this aspect is dexterously used in the commercial advertisements.

A woman’s sole purpose in life, it is assumed, is to please her man by attending to her twin duties as mother and wife. A few lines from Milton’s (1992) *Paradise Lost*, puritanical though they seem to be, are worth noting as they reflect society’s attitude to women.

For nothing lovelier can be found

In woman, than to study household good

And good works in her husband to promote. (lines 232-34)

The poet goes a step further and says:

The wife, where danger and
dishonor lurks, Safest and
seemliest by her husband stays,

Who guards her, or with her most endures. (lines 267-69)

Milton also asserts, “He for God only and she for God in him” (line 300).

Advertisements of Horlicks, Ensure, Aashirvaad Aatta and curry powders provide a fertile area for analyzing the cultivation of social attitudes towards food products. Majority of these advertisements, have female casts to reinforce the existing patriarchal notion that the women of the household have to shoulder the responsibility of cooking and other culinary activities. It is more convincing when a leading actress endorses the product relating to food items. When the product is related to sports or it has something to do with stamina and physical fitness, then the scenario shifts over to men, despite the fact that many women have brought laurels to our country by participating in various sports events.

In 1976, communication researcher George Gerbner developed the Cultivation Theory, which claims that people who watch television are more likely to be influenced by the messages contained within that television reality as opposed to actual reality. The theory argues that the media generally present an image of the world that does not reflect reality. This theory helps to understand the effects of television advertisements related to health and hygiene products and its influence in formulating social constructs.

Advertisements have a crucial role in influencing and changing market trends. For this purpose, they skilfully employ exploitation, objectification, sex appeal, conformity and stereotypical images of women to make them more appealing and attractive. Women are often projected in glamorous roles, as alluring and decorative objects. Many of the advertisements seem to convey the idea that home is their only domain and are dependent for existence on their male counterparts. Erotic representations of women serve as an effective tool to catch the attention of the viewers. These representations last for a long time in the minds of the viewers. They are often offensive to a great extent confirming the misconception about the role of women in our society. These images of women give rise to serious repercussions among the audience especially the young generation, in the sense that they may nurture the belief

that women are mere 'sex objects' or as always, dependent on men.

The body language of women and girls appears vulnerable, passive and submissive, totally different from that of men and boys. If a man is presented in an effeminate manner, it is sure to become absurd and ridiculous and therefore they are made to appear strong and muscular. It is worth noting that even grown up women are infantilized in our advertisements and the pity is that even little girls are increasingly sexualized.

An extremely unhealthy trend in the advertising industry is that the sexual abuse against children, discrimination based on gender, caste, colour and body shaming are portrayed as normalizing concepts. The result is that the advertisements have become more graphic and pornographic in the present day than ever before. It is shameful that women are constrained to sexualize themselves, making them see themselves as objects. These stereotyping tendencies can cause irreparable damage in the future generations. Various psychological studies reveal the fact that girls exposed to sexualized images from a very young age are susceptible to depression, poor self-esteem and eating disorders. It would be a difficult task for women to fit themselves into the advertised beauty idols of the times and they lose self-confidence causing mental issues, changes and disturbances in their behavioral patterns and emotional turmoil.

In due course, the objectification and commodification backlash against women themselves to an intolerable extent. Advertising trivializes and often normalizes sexual assault and violence, battering thus increasingly triggering misconceptions about the status of women including motherhood. This sort of normalization intensifies the notion that women are seen as 'things', as 'objects'. In the year 1993, the Advertising Agency Trikaya Grey caught the attention of world by a simple 30 cm ad, published in the inside page of newspapers, with the caption "Nude Models Wanted". This drew smiles as there was no better way to describe baby models in the age group of 8-12 months. It is therefore quite evident that commodification of the female body has always been a key element in the success of most celebrated advertisements in India and abroad.

The United Nations published a research report in 1995 about the portrayal of women, which amply clarifies the role of advertisers for projecting women in a derogatory light and as an inferior class of beings (National Advertising Review Board 1975). This report reinforces the notion that women have only a decorative role to

perform, without being able to contribute anything substantial to national growth and development. The Indian feminist writers such as Ritu Menon, Kamala Vasin and Kiran Prasad have been highly critical of the role played by the print and visual media in portraying women. The male-centeredness of the Indian society and how this dominance is perceptible everywhere including the media and advertising sector are what they highlight in their discourses.

A survey was conducted among professionals and students belonging to the age group of 18-13 years and a questionnaire was distributed among them. Their responses clearly supported the view that women were commodified and exploited in several advertisements. 100 students of various disciplines attended the survey and marked their responses to the following questions. The questions and their responses are consolidated in the following table:

Sl No.	Question	Not at all (%)	Sometimes (%)	Usually (%)	Always (%)
1.	Have advertisements become part of our life?	Nil	4	9	87
2	Do women in advertisements portray a fake reality of beauty?	2	6	18	74
3	Have advertisements increased the consumption of cosmetic products?	3	5	10	82
4	Do Television advertisements have major influence than printed advertisements?	7	8	17	68
5	Do advertisements portray women as "sex idols"?	2	7	12	79
6	Are women in advertisements projected in fashionable and glamorous roles and are they commodified in various ways?	Nil	3	5	92
527	Are erotic images of women in advertisements offensive?	Nil	1	3	96
8	Are the advertisements containing erotic images of women more appealing to audience compared to other advertisements?	3	2	7	88
9	Do advertisements suggest that women are	9	2	16	73

	fundamentally dependent upon men?				
10	Do the women portrayed in advertisements stand in sharp contrasts with the women around us?	Nil	7	7	86

The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society.

The glorified beauty images of women that we often see in the media are the direct outcome of the cumulative effects of technological advancements like studio lighting, air brushing etc. This fosters a 'willing suspension of disbelief' in us and hoodwink us to falsely believing the 'unreal' to be the 'real'. As a matter of fact, the common people fall a prey to the artificially designed images and befool themselves by aping and gaping at these models in the advertisements. Dismemberment is a technique employed by advertisers who popularize various products especially cosmetics. A woman's body is broken down into fragments, with each part being given prominence by projecting as an object. Thus images of eyes, lips, legs, hair etc. present women as fragmented creatures, each part as a bait to attract and allure customers to their respective products. This has resulted in utilizing and exploiting the physical features and attractiveness of women to facilitate in selling their products, thereby transforming women into objects of male gaze rather than human beings. This transformation of women into commodities have in fact enriched the advertising industry to a great extent.

Advertisements play a decisive role in our lives, as they have a persuasive power to make us choosers of certain products and utilize them for our use. The manufacturers of the products have an axe to grind and it is their profit motive. The advertisements have an appealing cast, consisting mostly of women who are presented in such a way as to suit the interests of the advertiser. By projecting the female body in a manner that arouses our interest and curiosity, the advertiser succeeds in driving home his ulterior motive of making us consumers of the product.

This is indicative of the fact that women are more concerned with domestic duties,

reflecting the sexual discrimination in a phallocratic society. The commodification of women as mere sex objects, destined to be confined to the daily household chores is what the phalocrats want them to be. The advertisers accentuate such a concept, and this tendency on their part deserves to be curbed. It would be in the fitness of things, if our media and advertisers work in unison to realize that woman is not to be defined by reference to the body only. Let them stand united in stressing the positive values and feminine qualities like gentleness, sensitivity and a capacity to co-operate and nurture.

It is high time that women are accorded their rightful place and due respect in the advertisement industry. A positive portrayal of women in our media is an inevitable necessity to uplift them from the present state of ignominy, and humiliation, so as to bridge the gap of inequality between man and woman. The need of the hour is that the media, advertising organizations and other professional agencies should come together to dismantle the stereotypical images of the women in the print and visual media. Several Indian women's organizations make a clarion call to promote the presentation of non-stereotype images of women and to empower them by focusing more on their problems. Most importantly, they should portray women as bold, strong, dynamic and confident, no longer weaklings to be subordinated and commodified.

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