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Women's Objectification in Media Contents: through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract:

Objectification of women in Media has been a topic of discussion over the globe from the late 60s. It can roughly be defined as seeing or judging the humans, especially the women folk as objects. This is a central notion of the feminist theory. In that particular period feminist movement in U.S got peak and concentrated on media's representation of women. It was 'The Feminine Mystique' written by Betty Friedan which for the first time marked the arousing dissatisfaction of the feminists with the media portrayals of women.

Keywords: Objectification, media, and feminism.

"The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection".

Carole Patemen (1988)

1. Introduction

Woman is born to suffer--- Simone De Beauvoir

To start with such vocalizations, it seems, it is very painful for women. So, Simone de Beauvoir once asked herself what is a woman? and answered instantly that "she is nothing but the womb". Through this self-denying words Beauvoir painstakingly reveals the harsh reality and the plights of a woman's life. It is rightly stated in the following:

- Throughout history, women have been generally oppressed and repressed by the patriarchal society in which men are dominants. They were denied the right to live in the same kind of freedom as men and to get their share of education and career. Instead they were forced to stay at home and raise the family. In other words, they were silenced and locked away by the dominating gender. Marriage was considered important for women to ensure their security, but then they were forced to obey their patriarchal husbands without any objection (Beden N: 2011, p-2).

According to feminists wherever there is patriarchal set up women are thought to be subservient or inferior fit for the role of loving mother, caring wife, dutiful daughter, sacrificing sister and so on. Women are defined in relation to men, without whom as if women have no identity. It's a story of women over the globe. These oppressions have continued through the ages. Patriarchy is infused in the society in such a depth that dominance, identification and centeredness of males over female is prevalent in every field. In every field political, social, cultural, academic, legal, or religious---dominance plus servitude of male is prevalent. Murtaza S. (2012) says:

- Numerically women constitute half of the human race, but in general women occupy a secondary place in relation to men, on the bases of class, status and political power-the three recognized dimensions of inequality. A peek into the history will reveal that women have always been subordinated to men. According to Beauvoir," what peculiarly signalizes the situation of women is that she- a free and autonomous being like all human creatures –nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the **other**"(Beauvoir;1949), and this otherness takes different forms; one such form is her oppression (p-3).

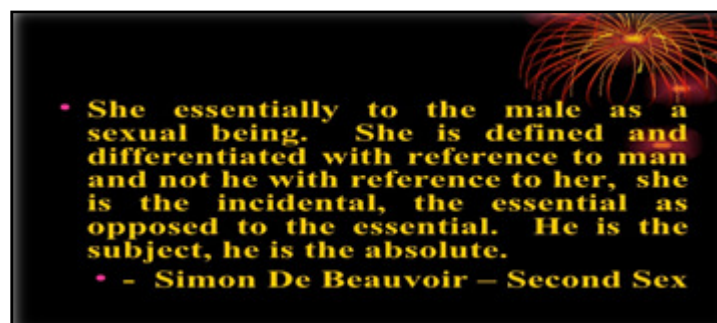


Figure 1

So, feminists of the late 60s emphasised on the durability of media towards change of the society and the empowerment of women. But being an institution established on the patriarchal set up media are playing the role of agent of the patriarchy. One of the major problems of the recent feminists with media is the objectification of women. Objectification is symbolised through those ways and contents of media which suggests that women are the objects to be own, playthings to be shown off and treasures to be touched. This leads to the categorisation of women as sex objects or objects of entertainment and women become the victim of sexual harassment by the men. The dangerous consequence of objectifying women has been highlighted by Dr Jean Kilbourne who notes that, “turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step in justifying violence against that person.” It’s been criticised that media, being the part of the patriarchal society show women always as the puppets or in other words toys for men, when he is happy with her till then she has the identity, otherwise she is nothing. For that this type of thinking cultivated in the minds of both men and women that women should look beautiful and slim, and smart. The media, it seems, is loathed to project the image of a woman as a serious partner in decision-making, a successful professional or an erudite politician or leader. Neilson (2008, p-9) once quoted like this:

- According to the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (2003) the idealisation of slimness in women is a very recent phenomenon, dating from the 1920s. It is often argued that the thin ideal is the outcome of successful marketing by the fashion industry, which has become the standard of cultural beauty in the industrialised affluent societies of the twentieth century. Clothes fashions were represented by hand-drawn illustrations until the 1920s, when they started to be photographed and widely distributed in mass-market fashion magazines. These magazines presented a fantasy image of how women should look. The fashions themselves demanded a moulding of the female body, because each ‘look’ suited a particular body shape (Grogan: 1999).

At some time or other the images of both men and women are determined by the traditional stereotyped qualities attributed by the society and the culture itself. Media through their portrayals reinforce the socially and culturally imposed these stereotypical images of women. So, Julia T. Wood in her article “Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on views of gender” says:

- In general, media continue to present both women and men in stereotyped ways that limit our perceptions of human possibilities. Typically, men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive and largely uninvolved in human relationships. Just as’ consistent with cultural views of gender are depictions of women as sex objects who are usually young, thin beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb (1994, p-31).

<i>Traditional Gender Stereotypes.</i>	
<i>Feminine.</i>	<i>Masculine.</i>
<i>Not aggressive.</i>	<i>Aggressive.</i>
<i>Dependent.</i>	<i>Independent.</i>
<i>Easily influenced.</i>	<i>Not easily influenced.</i>
<i>Submissive.</i>	<i>Dominant.</i>
<i>Passive.</i>	<i>Active.</i>
<i>Home-oriented.</i>	<i>Worldly.</i>
<i>Easily hurt emotionally.</i>	<i>Not easily hurt emotionally.</i>
<i>Indecisive.</i>	<i>Decisive.</i>
<i>Talkative.</i>	<i>Not at all talkative.</i>
<i>Gentle.</i>	<i>Tough.</i>
<i>Sensitive to other's feelings.</i>	<i>Less sensitive to other's feelings.</i>
<i>Very desirous of security.</i>	<i>Not very desirous of security.</i>
<i>Cries a lot.</i>	<i>Rarely cries.</i>
<i>Emotional.</i>	<i>Logical.</i>
<i>Verbal.</i>	<i>Analytical.</i>
<i>Kind.</i>	<i>Cruel.</i>
<i>Tactful.</i>	<i>Blunt.</i>
<i>Nurturing.</i>	<i>Not nurturing.</i>

Figure 2

Source: <https://www.google.co.in/search?q=stereotype+images+of+men+and+women&num>

Feminists critique media as these put forth the body of women as ‘blank screen’ which is open for the construction and reconstruction of socially and culturally given meaning to women. In this regard Neilson (2008, P-5) has quoted like this

- In addition to presenting highly stylized and idealized imagery of the body, contemporary popular media are replete with messages that emphasize the desirability of a well-maintained body i.e. thin and toned, and that promote consumer products designed to assist in the achievement of such a body. In this cultural context, the body has assumed a sort of malleability in that it has been constructed as an object open to ready transformation through body projects of dress, diet, exercise, and surgery (Bordo, 1993; Featherstone, 1991; Foucault, 1977; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1991).

According to Sheffield (2002) at some time or other, it makes us so stigmatic to think that women are the incarnations of male gaze. Simone De Beauvoir highlighting on the “otherness” and “inessentialness” of women says through the male gaze woman is defined and differentiated according to the judgement of men. This gaze makes women objects and strips them of liberty. Laura Mulvey in her article ‘Visual Media and Narrative Cinema’ widely criticising the Hollywood’s screen magic as its manipulation of visual pleasure,

primarily revolving around the image of females. Male audience members are encouraged to gain erotic pleasure from looking at beautiful women on screen. This practice labelled as scopophilia has encouraged the objectification of women and the development of narrow criteria for sexual desire (Deckar: 2010, p-11). Many feminists have considered this “as a form of violence against women as it is a reminder of women’s object status, sexualisation, lack of power as well as a violation (Johannsdottir, N.K.:2009 p-21). Regarding the personhood of woman Rosemary Tong illustrates the thoughts of Mary Wollstonecraft’s words thus:

- What Wollstonecraft most wanted for women is personhood. She claimed that a woman should not be reduced to the “toy of man, his rattle,” which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.” In other words, a woman is not a “mere means,” or instrument, to one or more man’s pleasure or happiness. Rather, she is an “end-in-herself,” a rational agent whose dignity consists in having the capacity for self-determination (Tong: 2009 p-16).

Danya Espinosa (2010) says in some other ways it can be said that media are deeply implicated in the process of defining boy and girl or man and woman. The media messages imbibe in the mind of people what it means to be men and women. It’s a general consensus among the media to portray or project women as sex object, there are myriads of unnecessary displays of women bodies in films, magazines, newspapers or in advertisements as if women’s body is for just the medium of entertainment for the male centered society. This situation itself create an unrealistic environment for women to become beautiful for entertain the male gaze and always been in a competition for beautifying themselves as the body or beauty shown in media (p-4).

The continuous presentation of women as sex objects or distressed or inferior would normalise the cultural indictment of men’s superiority which had been solidified through the ages in the religious writings, rites and rituals, customs and so on. Women would become the victims of the harassment which might be in the shape of wife battering, rape, witch craft, dowry death or many more. In a Third world country like India where women have to live under the guardianship of father, brother, husband or son, it’s a dream which is yet to be accomplished to think about freedoms and empowerment of women.

- In childhood must a female be dependent on her father; in youth, on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons; if she has no sons, on the near kinsmen of her father; if she has no paternal kinsmen, on the sovereign; a woman must never seek independence. (Quoted in Introduction, V, 148)

From birth to death an Indian woman has to be secondary without having any say in the house hold affairs or in the public. The place of women in the private sphere, blocking the stepping of women in the public sphere has generalized the Manu’s dictum that women can never be independent. But media are not focusing those problems. They are only busy with to publish the gossips of the actors and actresses, the love stories between them. This negative attitude towards women in real life is very much reflected in the way media represents them as well. Media representations of Indian women reveal that they are less accepted and respected as persons and more looked upon as objects. She has three projected roles--- biological, domestic and decorative. Media are hardly challenging the gender attitudes promoted and perpetuated by the society. In this regard the following can be cited:

- Uma Chakravarti (1993: 579) has opined that the general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India, through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence(quoted in Nath, D.P & Dutta J., p-15)

So, Indian media cannot be free from the shackles of patriarchy or in other words from the bindings of social, cultural and religious beliefs. As a result, different Indian feminists have come forward with different criticism and they have conducted different scholarly researches over the representation, portrayal and performance of women in media. Indian media’s role towards the portrayal and projection of women is basically succumbed into the two extreme continuums as ‘devi’ and ‘damned’. As the Indian society is more complex and different than that of west in regard to the perception, projection and acceptability of women in a stringent patriarchal culture, the persona or role model of Indian women revolves around ‘devi’ and ‘damned’. With Feminist movement of 70’s the very question of women’s rights, role/status and identity of Indian women in Indian patriarchy were raised and is yet struggling to gain clarity and acceptance of society.

Between these double standard role as ‘devi’ or blessed and ‘damned’, Indian women are now experiencing the intense identity crisis and has been narrowed down as secondary and inferior to men. In this regard Jain says (2011, quoted in Sarkar S.:2014)

- Indian women representing urban class have been projected as self-independent, empowered, liberated and looking good in terms of “fair and lovely”, “thin and sexy”, “smart and fashionable” and also financially empowered as projected by media in last two decades. These images have reached largest no of households in India through TV channels and influenced the societal attitudes en-mass and women in particular. On the one hand women are still being exploited, used, victimised seen as an object of desire and second grade citizen in the family and the society as well. Films, television and advertisements all have been reconstructing women image by visual and print—prioritising elegance and beauty (p-53).

Be it television, films or advertisements in both print and visual media, women body is used for market purpose, to sell the beauty products, sarees, salwar suits, jeans, even cars, under wears of both men and women, home appliances, household utensils. By such type of projection of women body is itself oppressive and devastating in terms of women empowerment and deceives the women as to what is or should be the real image. In this regard Sumita Sarkar (2014) quoted Derne like this:

- Derne put forth that media promoted the divide of same gender through generating lifestyle and promoting in all small screen soaps showing class division within women population, a class exposed to pasta, jeans and tea shirts, laptops and size zero fashion and the other suppressed and overtly oppressed often shown wearing sarees, believing in talisman and tantras, making kheer as best desert to give traditional taste of palate and protector Indian culture (p-55).

The mass media have long been welcomed as the watch dog of society and this tradition bestows upon them the social responsibility to mirror and guide the process of social change. Media reports reflect the happenings of the society but unfortunately media is wavering from its actual role of disseminating factual information instead presenting biased information which obstruct the development of the society. The women's issues get a low priority in media. Our society is plagued with burning women's issues like female feticide, sexual harassment, discrimination in work places, women empowerment, maternal health, unemployment and literacy among women. Women are rarely given professional coverage in fields like economic, social, political and business. The most disquieting trend in media is that women are either poorly or negatively covered, and where covered women are exhorted to the reconstruction their image to suit to male perception of beauty. The under representation of women in media in the west but paramount of gender based studies in mass media is relatively less in India. Media needs to be sensitized in addressing the positive portray of women.

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