



## Identity of Women and Media in Modern India

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Identity and its construction is a very problematic issue today. Descartes' autonomous thinking self (*cogito*), whose existence is independent of everything outside it, is problematized today. Though different philosophers like David Hume, Emile Durkheim, George Herbert Mead have questioned the liberal humanistic view of the unproblematic autonomous self on different grounds earlier, today Poststructuralism and its associated theories argue that the existence of the self always rests upon the existence of the other. Marxist Poststructuralist Louise Althusser argues that self is the product of pre-existing ideology. For French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, our subjectivity is constituted by language. Michel Foucault says that self is constructed through its positioning within discourses. What Althusser, Lacan and Foucault have said in their respective fields lead us to the conclusion that identity is not a fixed, enclosed and monolithic entity. On the other hand, it is in a state of flux and subject to continuous shaping and reshaping thereby opening up a space for identity politics. That the identity of a woman is culturally constructed was first clearly shown by Simone De Beauvoir who in her *The Second sex* commented, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 1956, 273). The process of becoming woman involves the acquisition of predefined roles.

Though the nation state disseminates the ideology of progress and freedom of women, in India the image of ideal womanhood has its root in the Hindu myth of Sati who sacrificed her life for her husband and in the myth of Sita who embraced fire to prove her virginity. The patriarchal nation state situates woman in a position in which her subjective sexual life is ignored and in turn she is deified to the status of Sati. This passive image of woman continues to be reinforced in the national freedom movement in the portrayal of Bharatmata in chain. It is the duty of the freedom fighters to free her from the colonizers. Woman stands for the past, heritage and tradition in Indian culture. R. Radhakrishnan writes that "Forced by colonialism to negotiate with western blueprints of reason, progress and enlightenment, the nationalist subject straddles two regions or spaces, internalizing Western epistemological modes at the outer or the purely pragmatic level, and at the inner level maintaining a traditional identity that will not be influenced by the merely pragmatic nature of the outward changes" (Radhakrishnan 1992, 85). So the "nationalist rhetoric", he says, "makes "woman" the pure and ahistorical signifier of "interiority" (Radhakrishnan 1992, 85). Indian women may be considered as heritage or be worshipped as goddess. But they lead a poor and humble life subjugated by men within the domestic sphere. The real picture of Indian women is described by Sita Raman in her book *Women in India*: "...women in India are often described as having two sharply contrasting aspects. In a region famous for goddesses with multiple visages, identities, and functions, the first facade is of the serene, primordial mother Great Goddess (Devi), Primal Energy (Shakti), and Nature (Prakriti), a gentle boon-giver who also slays demons. The other is the clouded face of the domestic handmaiden trailing behind men in life expectancy, nutrition, health, education, pay, and other rights on the subcontinent" (Raman 2009, xi). Even after independence in modern India, the same image is perpetuated in various ways. Though society felt the need to teach women modern values, science and

technologies, their identities and role in society are predetermined within a social framework that is patriarchal, heterosexual and monogamous in nature. Media and T.V. advertisements work in a nexus with nation state to play a great role in shaping the role of a woman. It always projects the heterosexual monogamous patriarchal family as a stable unit with woman at the centre of domestic duties. We find women in the advertisements of domestic commodities (detergent, washing machine, toilet cleaner, baby nutrition drinks), while men figures are used in heroic roles in the advertisements of car and motorbike. Not only the workspace, media also determines how a woman should look like (in the advertisements of fairness cream, hair oil, shampoo and other cosmetics) and dress to be a successful and happy woman in family as well as in society. Women are also used as pornographic figures or as sexual object in some advertisements. A girl who watches TV unconsciously conforms to the role set by media in the advertisements from her childhood days. Thus the interpellation (in Althusserian term) of women identity occurs under a veneer of myth of woman's progress and freedom propagated by the nation state. This paper aims to explore how media in consonance with dominant patriarchal ideologies of the nation state plays a great role to construct the identity of women in India.

A woman's duties are strictly confined to domestic sphere. Here she can perform different duties like cooking, cleaning rooms and toilets, washing clothes, looking after children and husband. In the advertisements of Harpic Toilet Cleaner and Mr. Muscle Kitchen Cleaner, female figures are used in the central roles. Though male figures are used in these advertisements, they are represented as instructors or advisors who can provide right solution to solve the domestic problem faced by the ignorant woman in the advertisement. Though they enter the domestic arena, they do not get involved into the domestic works and they can only instruct the woman and help her (who is shown unable to choose the right product

for her home) to choose the appropriate product. This advertisement unfolds the binary oppositions between knowledge and ignorance, between public and private. The wise and intelligent male figure who belongs to the public sphere enters the private domestic sphere of the ignorant female figure to instruct her. In the advertisement of Harpic Toilet Cleaner<sup>1</sup>, a salesman, a male figure, who is smartly dressed, enters the home of a housewife who is shown in ordinary dress. He quickly takes control of the situation and recommends Harpic as the best product for her. She also agrees to his claim. In the advertisement of Mr. Muscle kitchen cleaner, Mr. Muscle, a cartoon figure, is shown working in a laboratory in his superhero outfit wearing lab coat. He is represented as a super-scientist who uses his scientific formula in his product to reduce the effort of a housewife who is tired of cleaning her stove-top. Firstly the contrast can be perceived between Mr. Muscle who works in laboratory and the housewife who works at home. He is intelligent and uses science to solve the domestic problem like kitchen cleaning easily. Thus the world of science and modernity, as shown in the advertisement, is inhabited by a male figure who introduces it to the woman at home to solve her domestic problem. But his duty ends after the introduction of the product to the woman. The woman finishes her work with the new product more easily but he never joins her. He then stands apart from her sharing snacks with her son. His detachment from the working woman indicates his superiority.

Baby rearing is taken as one of the 'natural' duties of a woman. Some advertisements of baby soap, baby oil and baby shampoo reinforce this ideology of the 'natural' duty of woman. Johnson and Sons is a world famous brand that makes products for the babies. In the advertisements of these products, women figures are presented taking care of the babies. They are, as it appears, taking utmost pleasure from this work. So the ideology that baby nurturing is the 'natural' duty of a mother and it is most pleasurable experience is disseminated through these advertisements. In the advertisements of nutrition drinks for

children, women figures are used in the central roles. It is the duty of a mother to provide her children with proper nutritious food to ensure their growth and development. These advertisements uphold the feminine ideal of domesticity and convey the message that good mothering can be accomplished by buying the product. Often in such advertisements, a doctor, who is usually male, is introduced to affirm the experience of a domestic housewife who speaks about the benefits of the products. In an advertisement of Horlicks health drink<sup>2</sup>, three mothers share their experiences of using Horlicks and recommend it as the best product for their children. They agree on the point that as they want 'everything' from their children, they should give them the best. Finally their claim is validated by a male doctor who comes to represent science and rationalism. Thus a housewife's claim is assumed to be incapable of attaining the credibility of the audience. That a housewife is ignorant and unaware of basic concepts of science is shown in the advertisement of Bournvita Lil champs<sup>3</sup>. In this advertisement, a housewife is perturbed to a great extent by his son's some simple questions of science which she cannot answer. This advertisement conveys the message that Bournvita Lil champs makes a child intelligent and studious. But it also represents the housewife as fool and ignorant.

A wife's duty is also to soothe and alleviate her tired husband who struggles outdoor to earn livelihood. Women are perceived as a place of calmness and comfort where men can find peace and revitalize themselves. In the advertisement of Himani Navaratna oil<sup>4</sup>, a man, tired of working pressure, craves for Sunday for relief. But it is his wife who removes his tension, relieves and comforts him with the help of Navaratna oil. She revitalizes and reenergizes him for his next day struggle. Though she revitalizes him, her duty is strictly confined to the domestic sphere. It is he who should go outside and face the blows of life. This advertisement represents a binary opposition between private and public and upholds the feminine ideal of domesticity. A woman is not only dependent

upon her husband but also her son when she grows old. In the advertisement of Honda Dream Yuga motorbike<sup>5</sup>, a son who works in an office in town comes to a village to take his mother with him riding Honda Dream Yuga motorbike. The son is shown as clean shaved and dressed smartly while the mother is shown in poor dress with wrinkled face doing domestic work. Firstly the contrast is shown between the son who belongs to the public sphere and the mother who belongs to the domestic. Contrast in their appearances marks the contrast in their life styles. While the son lives amidst the sophistication of city life, the mother leads a humble and colourless life in a distant village. Though the advertisement shows the bond of love and affection between mother and son, it naturalizes the distress and helpless condition of a widow woman in old age. It too naturalizes the fact that such woman lives on the mercy of her son and if she is lucky, the son comes to erase her unhappiness.

The advertisements shown in T.V. also determine how a woman should look like to be a successful and happy in family as well as in society. White Skin is considered as one of the criteria of success and happiness. The advertisements of different fairness cream propagate this ideology. The advertisement of Fair & Lovely fairness cream<sup>6</sup> is the best example. The name 'Fair & Lovely' carries a symbolic expression. It implies the fact that those who are fair skinned are lovely and beautiful. The ideology of fairness is entwined with success and happiness as it conveys the message that those who are beautiful will be happy and successful in life. In the advertisement, the father asks for tea while the mother replies that there is no milk available and with his small amount of pension money she cannot manage to bear the expenses of the whole family. Then the father wishes if he had a son. The dark-skinned daughter overhears all this. She feels sad for she cannot support her parents. Then she returns to her room and finds an advertisement in newspaper for the recruitment of airhostesses. But she considers her dark skin as an impediment to her getting the job of an airhostess. Then

different properties of the cream are shown in the advertisement and its benefits are told in a voice-over. The camera now focuses on the girl who now is shown walking confidently wearing pink dress in a hallway. She enters the where the job aspirants are interviewed. The interviewers are charmed by his beauty and fairness and finally she gets the job. Now she becomes rich as she takes her parents to a sumptuous restaurant. Firstly, the advertisement presents the ideology of domesticity of women. When the father regrets for not having a son, the advertisement seems to represent women as weak and incompetent to support her parents. But the girl breaks the ideology by getting a job and supporting her parents. But how she gets a job is a representation of another patriarchal ideology that constructs the identity of a woman. The girl gets the job by impressing the interviewers with her beauty as she does not need to show her resume. Her beauty, as it is shown in the advertisement, is more important than her work efficiency. She enters the male domain from her private domestic world by selling her beauty and by becoming an object of male desire. Secondly, the ideology that equates beauty with fairness is also represented through this advertisement. So if a woman wants to be financially independent, she must be beautiful to attract the men with her body and in order to be beautiful she must be fair skinned and use Fair & Lovely fairness cream. Women need to be beautiful not only to get success in public life but also to be happy in domestic life. There are a number of advertisements shown in the T.V. representing women trying to attract the attention of their husband using beauty products. In the advertisement of Parachute Summer Fresh Body Lotion<sup>7</sup>, the husband returns home from office and finds the cupboard locked. He looks for the key. Then the wife invites him in a tempting way to take the bunch of keys from her. He is charmed by her smooth skin and intends to touch it. Then a female voice-over says that new Parachute Summer Fresh contains mint extract and coconut milk that makes skin smooth and fresh even in summer. Thus smooth and fresh skin is

shown as one of the must-haves for a housewife who wants to attract her husband. In the advertisement of Nivea skin Whitening Deodorant<sup>8</sup>, Fair and white underarms are represented as one of the important aspects of a beautiful woman who wants her husband's attention. Thus the standard of ideal, perfect and beautiful female body is set by the advertisements. The women, who watch these, often try to mould and shape themselves according to this standard.

Women are not always, as some theorists argue, passive and subservient in this identity politics. Cultural theorist Mica Nava says that when in an advertisement women are the target audience, they enjoy a new kind of authority and consumer right. Nava argues that women are "...central to the process of consumption...it is not only that they have expertise and confidence here, and that they wield 80 percent of purchasing power; it is also that they are uniquely placed in relation to environmental issues – to food contamination, health care, pollution and, more grandly, the future of the planet – in their continuing capacity as bearers of responsibility for nurturing and for the details of everyday life" (Nava 2006). She considers women in the age of consumerism as "active, knowledgeable and progressive." But for the women in a third world country like India, this seems to a kind of negotiation with global capitalism which is patriarchal in nature. A middle class woman in India can hardly win freedom in this way as they are financially dependent upon a male member of her family. Ipsita Chanda aptly remarks in this context in the introduction of her book *Packaging Freedom: Feminism and Popular Culture*: "Freedom will never be packaged in an instant mix to which you can add water and shove in the microwave...Changing times demand that ideologies change as well, as a disgruntled Marxist put it, the truth is not something you carry in your pocket, but something you run after" (Chanda 2003, xv). She makes clear distinction between theoretical formulation of the woman's state and her real condition in India. A woman cannot win freedom and be intelligent by

buying a product advertised in media. Consumerism and its glorification in media can never be an appropriate way to women's emancipation in India. What is needed is to find a new language and discourse to express the experience of women through media.

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## Endnotes

- 1.<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1E-qkUXRkY>> (accessed on 26.07.13)
2. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=em4r3r4pOYs>> (accessed on 26.07.13)
- 3.<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkHxx2SIpdQ>> (accessed on 26.07.13)

4. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6bq9ewy4TQ>> (accessed on 27.07.13)
- 5.<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyqYYLswgC8>> (accessed on 27.07.13)
6. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a1iXt1yPsk>> (accessed on 27.07.13)
- 7.<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WQJ4Pwz0\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WQJ4Pwz0_M)> (accessed on 28.07.13)
8. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht9TUUcBJxc>> (accessed on 28.07.13)