



Womankind Through History : Ancient to Contemporary Period

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Womankind Through History: Ancient to Contemporary Period Building egalitarian world
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Abstract

Building egalitarian societies is one of the priorities of modern democratic states. Mass media such as cinema, television, popular literature etc. play a unique and important role in our society where men and women enjoy equal rights. Raising women's legal awareness is important for the creation of an egalitarian society. This is reached through several means, including psychological, social, economic, political, legal, awareness of human rights, and so on. The role of media is important for being successful in all the mentioned spheres. The media can promote and speed up the reforms in progress, or, on the contrary, it can hamper their implementation. A number of international conferences and conventions have voiced and publicized the need to break public stereotypes through mass communication. Mass media, however, continue to reproduce discriminatory stereotypes about women and portray them in sexist ways as seen in movies, sitcoms, serials. As a rule, women are portrayed in a narrow range of characters in mass media. If we were to divide mass media into two categories, such as fictional like movies, cinema, sitcoms, television programmes and news-reporting, news channels, then in the former, women are often associated with the household or sex-objects, and in the latter category, they lack roles. Only in a limited number of news programs do women appear as main actors or experts. One of the reasons for this situation is the smaller number of women in these spheres, but even the existing number of women are under represented compared to their male counterparts. In advertising, movies, glamour world and magazines, women are usually portrayed as young, slim and with beauty that meets the accepted standards. Women with this kind of appearance

are often associated with sex objects as portrayed in hits item songs of Bollywood movies or in erotic Hollywood movies. Femininity, as well as masculinity, are not biological, but rather, cultural constructs. Representations and manifestations of femininity differ across cultures, time and societies. Femininity is culturally and socially constructed by the family, education, the public, and to a larger extent, the mass media such as television, movies, literature. In this respect, the long-term change in women's images in media could help change the perceptions and stereotypes women face in a society.

Key Words

Misrepresentation, Mass Media, Televisions, Movies, Literature, Advertising Agency.

Building egalitarian world is one of the priorities of modern democratic states. Mass media such as cinema, television, popular literature etc. play a unique and important role in our society where men and women enjoy equal rights. Raising women's awareness is important for the creation of an egalitarian society. This is reached through several means, including psychological, social, economic, political, legal, awareness, and so on. The role of media is important for being successful in all the mentioned spheres. The media can promote and speed up the reforms in progress, or, on the contrary, it can hamper their implementation. A number of international conferences and conventions have voiced and publicized the need to break public stereotypes through mass communication. Mass media, however, continue to reproduce discriminatory stereotypes about women and portray them in sexist ways as seen in movies, sitcoms, serials. As a rule, women are portrayed in a narrow range of characters in mass media. If we were to divide mass media into two categories, such as fictional like movies, cinema, sitcoms, television programmes and news-reporting, news channels, then in the former, women are often associated with the household or sex-objects and in the latter category, they lack roles. Only in a limited number of news programs do women appear as main actors or experts. One of the reasons for this situation is the smaller number of women in these spheres, but even the existing number of women are under represented compared to their male counterparts. In advertising, movies, glamour world and magazines, women are usually portrayed as young, slim and with beauty that meets the accepted standards. Women with this kind of appearance are often associated with sex objects as portrayed in hits item songs of Bollywood movies or in erotic Hollywood movies. Femininity, as well as masculinity, are not biological, but rather, cultural constructs. Representations and manifestations of femininity differ across cultures, time and societies.

Indian mythology is replete with women characters true to the values of the times in which they occurred and were recorded. Though some of the female characters display a feminist spark, verve and defiance, the trend really is towards submissiveness and obedience. Manusmriti, considered to be the referring guide of code of conduct for women has been appreciated by few scholars, but discarded by the rest. The two major Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata were written by men in the patriarchal system. It is largely believed that the epics were also interpreted and transmitted by a particular class of men, the Brahmins, who had vested interest both in maintaining their status and in controlling the female population. Women were not allowed to read or hear the scriptures as per the rules across all classes of the society. This gave the men immense freedom where the women lost any chance to disagree to anything that was being addressed and thus, created enough monopoly to shape the mythological characters as per the will of the men. At the end of the epic drama, when Rama refused to believe in Sita's chastity and asked her to take the Agni Pariksha, Sita agreed but decided to never return to Rama despite several pleas from him. These incidents suggest that Sita had a mind of her own and did what any wise woman would have done. Draupadi, Wife of the five Pandava brothers, Draupadi is known for her well rounded, intelligent and spirited character though not exactly 'ideal' as per the societal norms. Draupadi, who represents the most famous case of polyandry in Indian mythology, has

an interesting background. Shared by the brothers in a cyclic manner, Draupadi is portrayed as having excellent wifely skills who never fails to please her husbands. Every husband got to spend one entire year with her while others waited for four years for the next turn. No other brother would intervene during this period and the arrangement was made keeping privacy and emotions of everyone involved. But when compared to any other female mythological character Draupadi is not the one who takes suffering easily. Her interest and discussions about Dharma often reflect her keen interest in philosophy and knowledge. Yudhishtira is very supportive of her opinions and encourages their discussions which may be why she is so articulate. But when he stakes her in the gambling, she questions his right. She is unforgiving and pledges revenge. Kunti, Daughter of King Sura and wife of the king of Hastinapur, Pandu, Kunti has a life full of ups and downs. Kunti upon being reminded of her maternal responsibility chose not to jump in her husband's pyre and chose to take care of her children instead. The decision wasn't easy but she made sure that her sons had a good upbringing despite the negativity that they faced with their enemies Kauravas around. And throughout this period, she stood with patience and perseverance in a way befitting Kshatriya dharma.

One of the most controversial point in Kunti's story is that Kunti purposely didn't go back on her decision to make Draupadi the common wife of her five sons even after realizing that Arjuna was talking about a person and not an object. If you notice, the women characters in Indian mythology have traits that surprise us at times and at other times appear inexplicable. These women have been put on pedestals of honour, fortitude and what is regarded as 'ideal womanhood'. The fact is that that these characters were curated and edited to suit the needs of a patriarchal society. While Sita has been hailed for her sacrificing nature, Draupadi has been known for her sharp oratory and comments and has been branded as being the centrifugal force that caused the Mahabharata. The epics have survived several revisions that ride high on opinions. Hindu religion through its mythology and epics, continues to keep the women at a subjugated level. But it is immediately established that the consequences of defiance are brutal, punishing and unforgivable. For instance, Sita did not adhere to Laxman's instructions of staying within the boundary drawn by him and hence was subjected to suffering and ridicule. Also, another noted example is of Ahilya, who was cursed by her saint husband on charges of infidelity and turned to stone. There's an important lesson lurking here somewhere which our epics are trying to convey even up until these modern times. The character Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, who is portrayed as 'demoness' though she was a very beautiful woman with a mind of her own. The only character who tries to break away from this framework with her own agency for her sexual expression is Surpanakha who approaches Lakshman and Ram, motivated by her own desires. However, her effort is reciprocated with an unjustifiable punishment and she is labelled forever as a villain. Talking about another character i.e. Urmila, Lakshman's wife. It is not easy to be a wife of a prince who decides to leave his wife and accompany his brother for a fourteen-year-long exile. Even though Urmila insisted on accompanying her husband, Lakshman insisted her to stay back as he will not be able to protect his brother and Sita if she came along. Urmila kept herself composed all through and after the trio returned, she fulfilled her duties of a devoted wife with compassion.

Our mythology has a host of horrid women, exploring a wide range of representations of female evil through demoness, witches, seductresses, scheming queens or old hags. We recognise them through some characters like Menika, Urvashi, Manthara, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Tadaka, in the Ramayana and in the Puranas, there is Putana and Holika, both profoundly malevolent as child killers. They are but representations of evil that women are constructed as embodying within cultures, by consent and circumstances. This evil female excess, encompasses the women's otherness, including the duality of the humane and the grotesque.

If we talk about cinema with changing times, movies too have undergone a lot of changes. But the progress in portrayal of women in Indian cinema has not caught the progress of our society yet.

As there are more movie lovers in India than the rest of the world, the impact of movies on Indian society is huge. India is still a patriarchal society, so does the Indian film industry. Though times are changing, men's ideals and their fantasies are still taking up most of the space in Indian cinema. Some of these things are regressive and derogatory towards women. And it is true that the number of movies that have meaningful roles for women is increasing. Hence it is important to discuss how far have we come and what issues need to be addressed in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema. Tracing the time line of Indian cinema Raja Harishchandra (1913) was the first full-length Indian feature film, in which the heroine character is played by a male actor. It was inevitable because there were no female actresses at that time. Mother India (1957) is the first Indian cinema in which female actor is in the lead role. Roughly upto the 1980s, lead actresses have significant roles. Movies at that time used to have wonderful stories which totally reflected the society. But at the same time, film makers used to add 'vamp' characters in the movies to provide sexually explicit or demeaning musical entertainment. This culture has not changed even now. Producers are adding item songs to gain commercial success. Since 1980s, the role of lead actress started reducing to just an add-on to the hero-centric film. Most of the mainstream movies are following this trend. But in recent times, many lead actresses are doing strong roles. As more and more women are joining in the film industry as directors, producers, actresses etc., the situation of female character portrayal is improving. So, the issues that need to be addressed is why most of the mainstream movies are male-centric? Lead actresses are treated as glam dolls in these movies. In many movies of present times, female characters are needlessly sexualized. Along with that, adding vulgar lyrics and dances in the name of item songs is very derogatory towards women and is impacting youth in a bad way. Item songs teach people that it's okay to tease women, it's okay to look at them voyeuristically and it's okay to ask sexual favours from women. Indian film industry topped in objectification of women according to first-ever UN sponsored global study (2014) of female characters in popular films across the world. Lead actors are always shown as saviours. Women are shown as either helpless victims or cunning villains. In general, hero is the one who solves everyone's including heroine's problems. Movies depict actresses as unrealistically beautiful. This causes a lot of trauma and insecurity issues not just for the female audience but also for the actresses. Stalking and eve-teasing are depicted as love in Indian movies. In many mainstream movies, female characters fall in love with these abusers. Due to this, several young men are harassing women in the name of love. In 2015, an Indian man in Australia was accused of stalking, and after analyzing the incidents, the court came to a conclusion that his obsession with Bollywood films is the cause of his behaviour. Times are changing for the better. As more and more women are joining in the film industry as directors, producers, actresses etc., we are witnessing strong female characters in movies.

The term media is widely used as a short hand for 'Mass Media'. The word media is the plural form of medium. Conceptually, the media are those technological agencies which are engaged in the creation, selection, processing and distribution of messages among the people. As a logical connotation, the mass media deal with the day to day problems of the nation and especially of the general people. It contributes towards the emergence of mass society and mass culture. Mass Media in India, like every modern and advanced country, comprises of the Print media and Electronic media which are composed of the Radio, the Television, the Film, the Press, Publication and Advertising. Among these media, the television, films, Advertisements, photography, animation, paintings etc. are regarded as the visual media. Coming to one of most important pillars of modern democracy i.e. Media academicians like Robert Jensen, Sut Jhally and other cultural critics accuse mass media of using sex in advertising that promotes the objectification of women to help sell their goods and services. In Gender Advertisements, Erving Goffman sought to uncover the covert ways that popular media constructs masculinity and femininity in a detailed analysis of more than 500 advertisements. The relationship between men and women, Goffman argued, was portrayed as a parent-child relationship, one

characterized by male power and female subordination. Many contemporary studies of gender and sexualization in popular culture take as their starting point Goffman's analysis in Gender Advertisements. Clothing designer Calvin Klein was criticized for using images of young, sexualized girls and women in their advertisements, having said: "Jeans are about sex".

Women portrayal on T.V is one of the contentions issues surrounding the media today. The modern images of the more liberated woman are not the image of the contemporary Indian women. It seems that sex-stereotyping is more deeply woven in to the fabric of television soap operas and does not depict the reality of women's role in society, for a variety of different reasons, including the illusionary characters, the concentration on domestic and personal issues. It has been seen that women are portrayed in stereotypical, often fashionable way and never as an intelligent, confident and emancipated women. Serials and soaps projecting women more as models of expensive costume-jewellery or sarees. Moreover, the stereotypes used- that of a wronged wife, a overbearing mother-in-law, bitter relationships between sisters-in-law, though it bear resemblance with a certain reality of society but it fails to do justice with the changing and shifting patterns of identity within household. They fail to circumscribe all the career options that are now being taken up by Indian women, new modes of lifestyle being adopted but it remains entrenched in certain deep-rooted notions that are hard to be erased away. For example, during the good-old days of Doordarshan, there had been several programmes like "Udaan" that dealt with issues concerning a woman's struggle, her dreams of becoming an IPS Officer. This was probably the first Indian television show on women empowerment. Inspired by the real-life story of Kavita Choudhary's (the director of this series) elder sister Kanchan Choudhary, who after several hardships went on to become the first female Director General of Police, it inspired its viewers and instilled in its female audience a desire for emancipation –beyond the claustrophobic nets of society.

However, with the advent of cable and satellite television and a major upheaval following it, things rapidly changed and serials stopped short of projecting those that could prove beneficial for uplifting this maimed section of the society. The new millennium saw the phenomenal success of the soaps involving family dramas (Kasauti Zindagi Ki, Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kahani Ghar Ghar ki etc. to name a few) championed by none other than Ekta Kapoor. True it is that her Balaji Productions indeed revolutionized Indian serials which now shifted the camera lens from outside to the dark nitty-gritties within a family household. This narrowing down of the targeted domain brought to surface several hidden truths, opened up several new arenas that society needed to concentrate upon. But the phenomenal success of these serials never obliterated the fact that they targeted a certain, specific, economically privileged section of society where the main source of familial income was either inherited property or that amassed by business activities. This particular focus on such women who were married off to rich households often belonging to elite class themselves further alienated these serials from a larger reality- reality that changed over the decade. No matter how "modern" the women characters were in these serials with respect to their attire and access to technology, the mode of presentation of these women with junk jewellery and designer sarees failed to bring within its territory the struggling middle class. Throughout the decade such typifications and vilification continued with ornamentally decked up women lit up the screen and sensuously dressed vamps exercised her heinous tricks.

Conclusion

The UNESCO report describes the common images of women in the media: "the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard-faced corporate and political climber." The report, released in 2009, states that, at the current rate of progress on stereotyping women, forcibly fitting them into cliché - it will take another 75 years to achieve gender equality in the media. For my analysis I have taken into consideration the following popular T.V serials scoring high on the charts –

Balika Vadhu (Colors) and Uttaran (Colors), both of which have their respective target audience. 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. But in contemporary India, mass media under various pressures have become the commercial channels only and failed to reflect the social problems or aspirations of the entire population, especially the problems faced by women in particular. So, the portrayal of women in Indian media, be it films, television programs, visual advertisements or newspaper and magazines is becoming an area of great concern to the people having interest in social research and studies. There is an ongoing trend in today's media, both electronic and print, to portray women as commodity, sex objects and sometimes as victims. It is known to everybody that Indian society is a patriarchal society; patriarchy is established in everywhere and every aspects of life, and unfortunately media is not exception to that. Media as the modern corporate organisations are still dominated by the male and in all the higher posts men are employed and they by controlling the whole system of media try to depict the picture of women as weak and inferior in front of the whole world. Femininity is culturally and socially constructed by the family, education, the public, and to a larger extent, the mass media such as television, movies, literature.

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