



Postfeminist Media Culture: A Response to Feminism

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ABSTRACT:

There has been a change in the representation of men and women in contemporary media images. The image of an educated, independent, confident and career oriented woman as opposed to a shy, modest and quiet woman is rampant in the current media culture. Similarly, there has been a change in the way men have been shown. Instead of a bossy father or a bullying husband, one can find men who are ready to accept and support independent women in their lives. This paper problematizes the seemingly progressive images of men and women in the recent media culture while highlighting the superficiality of the reformist zeal in the advertisements. It intends to challenge the appearance of the dissolution of hierarchies by looking at specific adverts and showing

that one has yet to overcome the effects of the socio-cultural internalisation of a gendered mindset.

KEYWORDS:

postfeminism, commodity feminism, I-feminism, contemporary feminism, gender and media, pseudo progress, appropriation.

The media is full of images of empowered women who are assertive and confident. Very few advertisements, today, show a domesticated, silent and demure woman. If one goes back to analyse the media content from the 1970s, one would find an enormous difference. Feminists attacked the media images of women represented as sexual objects with no agency of their own. Today, one can find images of women who are bold and self-reliant; who do not mind pulling a male friend's leg; who are all ready to have a little fun. This enormous change has been possible because of feminists' attack on demeaning images of women, perpetuated by the media. To combat these attacks, the media started rethinking upon its strategies and appropriated various tropes from feminist discourse. Rosalind Gill asks a very pointed question, "Is this progress?" (91). Has the media content become feminist?

Postfeminist media culture is a response to feminism. It portrays images of men and women which are 'politically correct'. But, this does not mean that the media content has completely become feminist. Michelle Lazar points out the problems in the

media content. The empowered images of women are based on their consumption of the commodities sold. Without the commodities, where do they stand? Postfeminism, thus, is built upon commodity feminism which is nothing but “a commercially strategic appropriation” (Lazar, “Discover” 505) of third wave feminism.

This paper is divided in three sections. The first section aims to problematise media representations of men and women in the Indian context with a specific focus on two significant ad campaigns by *Havells* (an electrical appliances brand): *Hawa Badlegi* (wind of change) campaign, 2013 and *Respect For Women* campaign, 2014. The second section of the paper will discuss how the media images create a pressure on real women to achieve the standards of femininity shown frequently through adverts. To illustrate it, two adverts from *Bharat Matrimony* will be analysed using Rosalind Gill's idea of the “new superwoman”. The final section of the paper will highlight the limitations of contemporary feminism (based on commodity consumption) which is nothing more than individualised feminism.

I

Havells Hawa Badlegi Campaign, 2013 (WINDS OF CHANGE)

Havells aired a series of adverts based on various social issues. The one that captured my interest was where a newly married couple goes to the marriage registrar to register their marriage. After asking the names of the couple, the registrar (who is a woman) assumes that the girl would drop her pre-marital surname/last name and would take

up her husband's last name. The twist comes when the husband interrupts the registrar and says that he would take up his wife's last name. It brings a smile on the registrar's face signalling the winds of change.

This advertisement draws on an age-old custom where a woman has to take up her husband's last name. Several feminists have voiced their anger upon this custom for long. This has led to a new trend in naming where a woman can retain her premarital last name but she has to add a new last name as well. So, for instance Ms. Pandit marries Mr. Verma. Now, the self-dependent, liberated and empowered Ms. Pandit can rename herself as Mrs. Verma Pandit using two surnames instead of one. This again is not the solution to the problem. This advert clearly plays upon the naming anxieties associated with marriage.

However, the advert takes a very simplistic solution which does not resolve the problem. In a patrilinear family structure, the woman's premarital surname comes from her father and not mother. So, the moment the man in the advert takes up the woman's surname, he is actually taking up the surname that was accorded to her by her father. This clearly means that now the surname is taken from the father-in-law. Where is the solution in this complex world? Is it as simple as the adverts show? Evidently, the advertisers have recognised the problem. But, have they thought deeply over it? This simplistic approach does not show that. When Angela McRobbie talks about the "double entanglement" (McRobbie 255) of feminist and anti-feminist themes, this is what she means.

Yet another advertisement related to the choice of religion is where a **Hindu-Muslim** married couple in the hospital fill up a form for their daughter and they write her religion as HIMU, a combination of the mother's and the father's religion. When the receptionist asks about the unknown religion, the father strikes of this as well and says she will choose her own religion when she grows up. Again, the emphasis is on a woman's right to choose. However, what I found problematic in this whole ad was the silence of the mother. It is the father who gives the right to the daughter and not the mother. That also says something about the troublesome power relations.

Havells Respect Women Campaign, 2014

Havells again aired a series of five advertisements during IPL (Indian Premier League) cricket matches. The intent was clear: to promote the campaign among its male consumers (the assumption here by the advertisers is that most of the viewers of cricket are men). There were apprehensions about antagonising men through these ads which might lead to deteriorating demands of the product because after all, the men in the house are “decision-makers” of what to consume and what not to consume. Nonetheless, the adverts were aired and became quite popular. All the adverts emphasised that women's place is not in the kitchen and they are not synonymous with kitchen appliances. The adverts are full of humour and irony.

In the Havells coffee-maker advertisement, an Indian mother has come to see a conventional girl for her NRI (Non-Residential Indian) son. She wants the marriage to take place urgently because her son is alone in the USA and he has to go out “even for a

cup of coffee". The girl who until now seemed silent, hands him a Havells coffee-maker and tells him to marry the appliance, then there would be no hassle related to passport or visa. In the end, she mockingly says, "I am not a kitchen appliance" who will marry him to be a domestic help. Through a humourous tone the tables are turned against the powerful. In the traditional Indian wedding set-up, a girl's family is always lower in the power hierarchy and has to fulfil all the demands of the boy's family. In such a scenario, talking back aggressively is not expected. But, a little humour would surely do no harm while fulfilling one's purpose! The advertisers have wisely used humour to critique the whole trend.

In Havells, the "Humma Humma Way" advert, we see that a boy playing a guitar is being interrupted by a girl who corrects him on his musical notes. He gets offended by her action and asks her to make her a sandwich. Now, what looks like a conventional kitchen suddenly transforms into an unconventional music studio. The girl in the advert redefines the kitchen space converting all the appliances into musical instruments and sings confidently to the music. The boy though shocked, joins her but is ready to be guided by her in this terrain now because he has seen her expertise. However, towards the end when the girl says, "Go make me a sandwich," the boy is taken aback. He still believes in the stereotypical gender roles. He is still offended by the commanding tone of the girl. This advert shakes the strong beliefs of the boy and yet he is unable to respond to that. The discomfort remains with the viewers even when the advert ends.

Rosalind Gill highlights ten key features of representations of gender in contemporary advertisements (84). Out of the ten she lists, five of them can be seen in the ads just analysed. These are (1) gender reversal; (2) revenge theme; (3) the use of edgy models; (4) the articulation of feminism and femininity; and (5) the appeasement of women's anger. In the marriage registrar advert, we see gender reversal and the appeasement of women's anger. Here, the man would take up the new surname. In the coffee-maker advert, we clearly see the revenge theme and the articulation of feminism and femininity. Here, the woman's character is an ambiguous mix of feminine and feminist. It is a new femininity ("Entitled" 373) as Michelle Lazar has defined. In the "Humma Humma Way" advertisement, one can see all five of these features coming together. There is a discomfort in the gender reversal which makes the ad successful in at least keeping those anxieties alive.

II

Woman or Superwoman

Gill also talks about the images of the "new superwoman" who is "intelligent, accomplished, effortlessly beautiful, a wonderful hostess and perfect mother who also holds down a demanding professional position." (81-82) Media is imbued with the images of superwomen. The social expectations from a woman have increased manifold due to these images. Earlier, the society expected her to be a caring mother, a loving wife and an obedient daughter/daughter-in-law. Now, the society wants her to excel at her workplace, be academically brilliant while not ignoring the household

responsibilities. Apart from this, she needs to look beautiful and presentable all the time. Gill, in that sense, is right in calling her a superwoman because an ordinary human being cannot meet such expectations. For someone to accomplish all these tasks, one has to have super powers.

Bharat Matrimony advertisements

Two adverts from Bharat Matrimony show career aspiring women. But, these women in no way ignore their personal relationships or responsibilities related to the household. They are multitaskers/superwomen. In one of these adverts, a wife is going abroad for a year for a business project and her husband is shown supporting her. The wife asks her husband if he is feeling bad that she is going for so long. The husband replies, "Do you think I don't know what this project means to you? I will feel worse if you didn't go." The woman is still worried about her husband when she leaves him, "Who would make you coffee every morning?" In this advert, we come across a woman who is ambitious but who loves her family; who loves her job but is worried about her husband at the same time. The society expects a woman to balance her professional life with her family life. Hence, it becomes important to show a woman who is desirable in the marriage market. After all, it is a matrimony ad. Without a caring nature, no man would want to marry her because attributes like love, care and affection are associated with being a woman. If she cannot display these emotions, she is not woman enough in the eyes of the society. The advert, on the one hand, shows a progressive woman who can leave her family for work, who knows her priorities in life. On the other hand, the psychological

attributes that are associated with femininity are implicated on her. This is the best example of the articulation of femininity and feminism.

In the second Bharat Matrimony advert, we see a son supporting his wife for her choice to work after marriage. The boy's parents ask him if his salary does not suffice for their survival even after his promotion. The boy remarks, "Sudha (his wife) doesn't work to manage/assist in household expenses. She works because she loves to work." Superficially what looks like a very reformist advert, is not so progressive after all. A woman's work is dissociated from the economic sphere. Her salary is not seen as a financial contribution to the household. The husband's salary is enough to look after the household. Because he is understanding, he lets his wife work. The power balance is not disturbed in this ad. The husband has the power to let her work. The husband's reply brings a smile on his wife's face and she recalls the moment before marriage when she was negotiating the terms and conditions of marriage: when she as an empowered woman (education and career as markers of empowerment) had the right to negotiate the terms of marriage. In her assertion to let her potential partner know, "I would like to work after marriage", there is an underlined knowledge that he and his family have the power to stop her from pursuing her career. The power hierarchies have always been there. Even after marriage, I do not see any shift in the power balance despite her husband's being understanding. The gender roles have been so deeply ingrained in us that any attempt to deviate from these roles seems like a failed attempt.

III

Limitations of Postfeminist Media Culture

In the contemporary world, women can be seen in almost every sector. The high visibility of women creates an illusion that the goals of feminism have been achieved. Women have accomplished gender equality. Contemporary media helps in building up this illusion. Images of empowered women can be seen everywhere. But, surveys show that is not the case. Global Media Monitoring Projects have deconstructed the “feminist success” myth. “The question today is not so much 'Where are the women?' but 'Who are the women?' Also, 'When and where do they appear?' and 'What are they shown saying and doing?' In other words, 'How are they represented?’”(GMMP 5). There is a glass-ceiling that awaits women. Some reach it earlier than others. Media hardly shows the challenges women face in their workplace. Rather, the way media represents successful women, one gets the impression, it is all so convenient if only one has the determination to achieve. But, will power, determination and talent are not enough to sideline gender biases.

The figures of GMMP 2010 India have revealed a harsh reality. The top positions are still in the hands of their male colleagues. They still have to endlessly wait for promotions. Expert opinions are mostly given by men: 82% of experts cited in news media are male; 87% of spokespersons cited in news media are male; 78% of the news sources were men; 63% of the news stories reinforced gender stereotypes while only 9% challenged them. Most of the stories related to politics and economy were covered by men. Stories related to fashion, health and education were women's domain (GMMP 7-

13). Does not that say something about the way women are represented and the way they actually lead their lives? There is a discrepancy that is voluntarily ignored.

A slew of progress is seen throughout the media content but the research shows the flaws and unveils the reality. Although the media has become gender sensitized, the problem areas are dealt with superficially or light-heartedly. Today, media content is flooded with feminist statements but most of these statements have been emptied of their political significance (Gill 95). Michelle Lazar remarks that the focus of the postfeminist identity is in “the achievement of personal freedoms and pleasures” which has rendered the contemporary feminism as “I-feminism” rather than a “collective we-feminism”. She further elaborates, “Detached from the social and the systemic, the individualism, in fact, is in danger of blocking change and links between the individual and the collective.” (“Entitled” 397) The need, then, is to sensitise the society not just at the individual level but at the collective level to achieve the goals of feminism in a real sense. Campaigns like Havells *Hawa Badlegi* and Havells *Respect For Women* can definitely work towards the targeted goals but they need to be more thought out. Oversimplifying things is not the solution.

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