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Gender Perception in Nuptial Commercials in West Bengal

Sriparna Chatterjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Matiaburj College, Kolkata

Abstract:

The sustainability of tradition and culture is one of the predominant aspects of Indian Society. The manifestation of marriage as an institution and an eternal bond has long captured a pivotal position in the broader societal context. The norms and customs of Indian marriage confer substantial importance on the role of the family in deciding the progression of the marriage between two adults. This unique feature has been named as arranged or negotiation marriage and is persisting intensely in the society even in 21 st century.

This system has been institutionalized through formal and informal modes of communication to achieve a positive outcome. Matrimonial advertisements are the main recognized mode through which arranged marriages take place. In a patriarchal structure, the issue of gender representation in the forum of marriage turns out to be palpable. The content of advertisements adheres to the prejudiced notion of gender and confirms its sanctity through a wide range of publications in cyber and print media versions. This paper intends to explore gender play in the backdrop of a globalized society making matrimonial columns as the fulcrum to unveil the discrimination. Multiple factors stretching from physical structure to financial ability are considered as major components of the credibility of an applicant in the marriage market and that too with different levels of priorities based on gender. The role of society has been questioned in this unfair portrayal of gender prototype in a holy nexus of marriage in West Bengal. Through the survey of matrimonial advertisements, this perpetual practice has been scrutinized and the role of gender has been attempted to perceive in a society strained between progress and prejudice.

Keywords: Matrimonial Advertisements, Arranged Marriage, Prejudice, Globalization

The manifestation of an individual's identity depends largely on surroundings and cultural heritage. From the very moment of birth, societal regulations bind one within the periphery of 'imposed identity', which ultimately becomes a mountainous task even for a grown-up person to overcome. This apparent failure of surpassing the struggle between the natural and artificial notion of 'self' ultimately results in an identity crisis. The present study wishes to capture the dynamics of identity-culture nexus through the lens of gender. Out of a few maladies which put greater importance on imposition over originality, gender occupies the front row. While analyzing the role of gender in the culture-identity context the study has used columns of matrimonial advertisements as catalysts for exhibiting gender discrimination in society.

Marriage is almost certainly the finest institution to explore the cultural heritage of a nation, of society, and families. The tradition of marriage in India is generally been glued to the concept of arranged marriage. Practise of an alternative mode of tying up the knot (love marriage) is limited in number. Patriarchy has held its head high in Indian society and is carrying forward the legacy even

after embracing globalization. People here, are presumed to be not matured enough or else are incapable of finding out life companions for themselves that has escalated arranged marriages in India. At this point of discussion 'gender' demands further clarification to unfold the storyline of patriarchal dominance through the medium of arranged marriage.

Sex is a biological matter of genes and hormones, whereas gender is a social construction. It is the preconceived notion of manhood and womanhood, of rules and practices indicating the way of behaving like the stereotype of a boy or a girl. Children learn the use of verbs from grammar books that 'Father is going to the office' and 'mother is cooking in the kitchen'. Such kind of bifurcation is the first strategic attack of the patriarchy on the blooming minds where one section learns dominance at the cost of compliance of the other. Eventually, subjugation becomes identical with custom and society starts adding spices to the dish of discrimination from that blurred juncture. Reflection of male chauvinism through the columns of matrimonial advertisements is unique of its kind. The prototype of gender discrimination becomes vivid through the content of matrimonial advertisements both in cyber and in print media versions. The present paper highlights gender-role expectations in marital relations as expressed in matrimonial advertisements in the contemporary media of a globalizing India. For having an analytical discussion, the issue has been confined within the periphery of urban Bengali society. Content analysis of contemporary matrimonial advertisements from leading Bengali newspaper Anandabazar Patrika and popular online matrimonial site Bengali matrimony reveals the dialectical strains between contemporary and traditional, masculinity and femininity, individualism and collectivism.

Matrimonial advertisements are a popular medium for seeking suitable life partners. Most of the daily newspapers keep a separate section for matrimonial columns, for example, Anandabazar Patrika has its separate section of 'Patro-Patri' in Sunday versions of 'Ityadi'. The story of online matrimonial sites is a bit different as they are solely dedicated to matrimonial issues regularly. Irrespective of the medium, which is interesting to observe is the image presentation of the proposed candidate. People here are been treated as 'products' whose acceptability depends on how effectively they could exhibit their best features in a competitive environment to get privilege over the other. Since the cost of the advertisement is equivalent to quality (length) thus advertiser has to be selective enough in terms of words and adjectives to catch the eyes of potential partners or their families. Remarkable contrast can be observed if we view the content of the advertisements with an inquisitive mind. Instances from the male and female ads could illustrate the matter in a better manner.

Advertisement for bridegroom- "Suitable alliance is invited for 25 years, 5'3" beautiful, fair, homely Bengali girl. Father is a retired Govt. Officer, brother is working abroad". (Anandabazar Patrika, 6th November 2016).

Advertisement for the bride- "Seeking alliance for 33 Years, 5'7" handsome, Private service holder, from the beautiful, fair, tall, educated homely girl. (Anandabazar Patrika, 28th June 2020). The usage of language, adjectives, and method of self-presentation in the above advertisements drag us towards the theoretical exploration of gender biases in society. Sandra Bem (1993) in her book, *The Lenses of Gender* has sketched three lenses as unifying principles for understanding people's perception and interpretation of social reality in a gendered fashion. These lenses of gender are active in any patriarchal society. The first lens, androcentrism, is the predominance of male privilege that accepts male experiences as the rule. Gender polarization, the second lens, views the world in terms of two different gendered realities and believes in treating men and women differently. The

final lens, biological essentialism, accepts androcentrism and gender polarization as a natural, biological consequence rather than a socio-historical construct. It is been noticed that advertisements for bridegroom are generally submissive by nature as these are announcer ads, only describing their profiles and not specifically mentioning the type of bridegroom they want to have, whereas advertisements for the bride are seeker by nature as they describe their profile and clearly demands the feminine traits sought in the prospective spouse. The above-mentioned examples conform to the norm of androcentrism.

With the stepping in of globalization in our drawing rooms via the internet, an alternative way of mate searching has gained popularity through matrimonial sites. The depiction is not always bounded here by the length-cost ratio (one can post a free profile also with some limitation), hence the advertiser can make a clear statement of choice in a much sumptuous way. Irrespective of the medium of communication, it is indeed an established truth that patriarchy dictates the game, otherwise one could have expected to envision an equilibrium in partner preference criteria part of the so-called modern medium of online sites. A man is non-hesitant to declare his status as a social/occasional smoker/drinker, but he sets criteria of non-smoking/drinking for his partner as these are social taboos for women. Liberalism and globalization have little to do with shackles of age-old prejudices and dogmatism of a male-dominated society like ours where divorce is considered as a sin for a woman and misfortune for a man. Matrimonial columns for divorced candidates are witness of such societal polarity where the family of the divorced woman is ready to accept bridegroom of any choice; married or unmarried, alone or having kid, but the divorced man wants an unmarried woman as a partner as he has been embittered in his former marriage. The psychological exploration behind such mentality arises from the long-established belief of worshipping man or husband as the savior of women, Thus even when a woman has already undergone the process of divorce, marriage is again been observed as the safest option to save that woman. Anyone of any background is welcome in most of the cases to play the role of rescuer to the woman. On the contrary, virginity remains a prime criterion for the marriage or even a divorced male. Thus Gender polarization does not require much effort to prove its stance.

Another important framework cited by researchers for understanding sex role expectation in relationships is the social exchange theory (de Sousa Campos et al., 2002; Gist, 1953; Shukla & Kapoor, 1990). According to the theory, '[I] individuals evaluate relationships in a relatively rational manner akin to an economic analysis' (Miller, 2005, p. 170). It is been found that bridegroom seeking advertisements largely emphasize the beauty, physical structure, complexion, adaptable nature of the proposed bride rather than highlighting her qualification, achievements. Moreover, the affluence of her father, the position of her brother (if any) comes to the forefront as if the proposed bride is nothing but a parasite in the family. On the other side of the coin, the proposed bridegroom/his family feels proud to declare the qualification, property status, job profile of the groom and in return demands beauty, fairness, smartness, caring nature from a bride. Scholars have brought this kind of attitude under social exchange theory where a man's economic well-being is been exchanged for a woman's physical attractiveness. The marital tie has been observed more as a shopping mall running with exchange offers with attractive items on the display frames where potential customers are coming and picking up products of their choices in exchange for the available resources (quality) at their custody.

What comes next is the stereotypical role of women as expected in the marriage market which can be elaborated under the umbrella of social role theory. Today following the Western tradition, trends

towards the double income concept in the family are growing but simultaneously nature of the job of a woman is always under scrutiny. Jobs with fixed working hours, flexible schedules are considered to be ideal for a woman as her primary duty is to nurture her family. Women having traditional values of integrity, honesty, adjustability is the first choice for men with a modern approach. Society expects women to play the role of superwomen in today's consumption-driven world who can make a balance walk on the swinging rope. They would be capable to manage both professional and family lives and effortlessly maintain the role of caring, nurturing homemakers. Moreover physical attractiveness, fair complexion will be treated as added feathers to the crown of the ideal partner. Women might become the victim of stress and trauma from such a high range of expectations of society. As per social role theory, the qualities that reflect the 'feminine' aspects of women's reproductive, domestic, and social roles are termed as feminine or interdependent qualities (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). An ideally socialized woman should be gentle, docile, quiet, and patient. Attainment of these qualities ensures the potentiality of success in the field of child-rearing and household work. On the contrary, men espousing the breadwinner's role must demonstrate the obligatory masculine, independent qualities of aggression, leadership, industriousness, and dominance. This perspective assumes that our society constructs the belief that males and females do differ not only in terms of their occupation but also in personality traits and roles. Very little effort is found to establish or re-establish the actual role of women as a human being despite the formation of several committees and commissions for securing women's rights, The notion of feminism is often viewed sarcastically by the propagator of masculine power, The significance of women's movement and their sacrifices are yet to be recognized by our society. A homemaker is still under the impression that she does nothing as her untiring effort and day-long service to keep the family members well does not come under the purview of a paid job, Thus under the veil of affection and love for the family, thousands of women effort got unnoticed and unrecognized every day which is nonetheless another version of exploitation. Society has only confirmed this mistreatment through different modes and mediums. Children are made socialized of their culture and customs in a biased manner which ultimately constructs the base of discrimination and culminates overtly with the maturity of each generation. One such advertisement published in the Anandabazar Patrika in June 2020 further explores the bare truth of male domination. Here a dental Surgeon, who is believed to be enlightened in terms of education and degree received in career is asking for an educated, beautiful bride with the conditions imposed that the bride should not be employed. This can be seen not only as gender discrimination rather a direct attack on human rights. An educated woman is not allowed to get engaged in any job at the same time she needs to be educated to showcase her degree in the family and to match the status of the would-be groom. One person's potential, her liberty her right are under the control of a male simply because of the predominant position of the patriarchy.

The above findings suggest that our society is in a state of flux as it is experiencing an amalgamation of a culture where liberal ideas are on rising with the wave of globalization and tradition is pulling the cart in the opposite direction. Globalization has inculcated the notion of homogenization in the minds of people, i.e. in terms of culture and practice, they are setting universal criteria of being modern. The notion of gender in the western sense of the term is comparatively broader where the women enjoy much more liberty than their Indian counterparts. But the Indian society while following the major aspects of globalization blindly is making her eyes open to witness the observation of rigid customs rigorously. Thanks to the flamboyant Indian patriarchy which has adapted the idea as per its interpretation. Homogenization here stands for submission towards shameless arrogance of male chauvinism, acceptance of subjugation of women without

investing a single word from the account of consciousness, nurturing the unjustified claims of men, and most importantly viewing women as nothing but an object. Naturally, the mind becomes skeptical about the utility of living in a 'global village' and chanting the mantra of human liberation. It seems we are far away from 'destination equality'. Time has arrived to shed off the dust of ignorance. An awakened mind might not be able to erase social rigidity in an overnight manner but can start drawing the path of salvation. Gender movement, struggles of thousands of women all over the country for their rights are some of the major steps in the staircases. A comprehensive outlook needs to be build up from the stages of infancy blurring the division between pink for girls and blue for boys and inculcating gender-neutral values in the children. Working women are increasing in number but that is not bearing the guarantee of a gender-neutral society. Voices are needed to be raised in favor of well educated, handsome, and efficient in household chores grooms to balance the weight. Surprisingly the prejudice prevalent in matrimonial advertisements is hardly been questioned by the female group itself. It seems the women themselves have approved the injustice. People have become habituated to practice the 'culture of silence', otherwise in 21st century morning, we do not have to read a matrimonial column like this one – "Alliance is invited for 31 years, 5'11", smart, handsome, highly qualified(IIM Bangalore) well settled Brahmin boy from a beautiful, fair, slim, educated girl aged between 26-28. The girl must have a brother" ["bhai thaka abosshik"].(Anandabazar Patrika,9th August 2020). This is perhaps the darkest side of the human mind which is initiating the battle from the home front, indicating that woman can never be equal with men, be it is her brother or husband. The first connotation of the advertisement is that the woman will not be able to take care of her parents like a man thus she requires a brother and the latently manifested inference demands the woman to unconditionally devote her life for the well-being of her husband and In-laws at the cost of oblivion of her past. Civil society needs to organize a candlelight vigilance, if not a revolution against such conceptual disorder otherwise our future generation will learn 'gender' and 'danger' as synonyms.

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