



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-V, Issue-II, October 2016, Page No. 72-77

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Patriarchal Representation of Women in Media: An Analysis

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Abstract

A global communication system has transcended all national boundaries and has made a great impact on the lives of all. From education to entertainment and from shopping to sharing and health, all is being done by media. In such a scenario media can make or mar the cause of women. It has been observed that the representation of women in the media is patriarchal, though, has gone through a sea of changes but it is evident enough that the gender-based stereotype images of women still rules. Women are exploited and the media has failed to give a complete and balanced representation of the varied lives of women. The degrading images of stereotype women hovering between the docile and dependent to the vamp have adversely affected the lives of the women in general. Even the women of north-east India join the mass of women around the world in being poorly represented in the media. This paper is an attempt to see the various stereotypical images of women which have greatly affected the lives of women. This paper will also make an attempt to see how far the media, particularly the soaps and serials and advertisements in television has been able to give a realistic picture of women and its affect on its watchers. When the nation is marching ahead giving equal status to women in the fields of administration and defence, almost all the soaps and serials are still representing women within the closed doors of the home and within the family. The paper will further show how women are exploited and suggest measures to improve the representation of women in the media.

Key Words: Representation, Patriarchy, Stereotype, Television, Advertisements.

The present age is the age of information – Radio, television, newspaper and internet, all provide us with information. The global communication system has transcended all regional and national boundaries and has made a great impact on the lives of all. From education to entertainment and from shopping to sharing and health, all is being provided by the media. The media has now become something more than a source of information – it has become a vital source for shaping and moulding one's opinion about the things around them.

Media has become an integral part of our life in the present times. Just like our daily requirements, media has also become an indispensable reality. From the time we wake up in the morning till the time we retire to our bed at night everything that we do is in some way

or other influenced by media. Media provides us with knowledge and information of all kinds. Be it the newspaper or the television, radio or movies, they all play an important role in the life of the society. They not only inform and educate people but also influence the very way people perceive the world around them and at the same time change their views. Media thus plays a very crucial role in moulding and organizing public opinion. Media plays a very significant role in the shaping of a society where the rights of men and women are regarded as equal. Media can actually bring about a revolution in reforming the lives of women and at the same time hamper their very lives. But the reality that has sprung up is media still continues to reproduce stereotype about women.

The media has made the vast world a small global village where an individual can get access to anything he or she desires to see and know, sitting at his or her home. The culture of one nation influences and moulds the people belonging to other nations though separated by distance. Likewise the North East India and its people are also immensely influenced and the credit goes to the media. The geographical barriers are transcended and the North East has become one with India and the other parts of the world. The women of the North East India are also influenced by what they see, hear and read through the media. It is the media which has informed the women about the various feats achieved by the women in different spheres of life in different parts of the world and yet it is the media which still represent the women in most cases as a dependent woman or a sex object.

The media plays a dual role – firstly the media provides with entertainment in one's leisure time and secondly media is responsible for providing knowledge and helping people to make sense or understand the world around them. In relation to the second role of the media it was assumed that the way in which men and women are represented is the reality. But it is seen that the media draws upon the social reality in a selective manner. By repeatedly representing the selective aspects of the social reality, the media actually influences and shapes one's perception of the reality. According to Williams, the media also set the agenda for public opinion by selecting themes, items and points of view that tend to reinforce the patriarchal culture. At the same time, the media does not simply reflect the social reality and conditions our values, attitudes and behaviors but constitute only one side of the construction of women's marginality in culture. "The relationship between the media and reality is, however, dialectical. Culture is not static system, but an ever evolving process that constantly changes to accommodate emergent alternative and oppositional meanings, values and practices" (Williams p. 55). The comprehensive study conducted by Gallagher about the portrayal of women in visual media highlighted the derogatory media images of women all over the world. The study also concluded that media under represented women and their issues. The women are used as a commodity and inferior to men. A very significant study conducted on the representation of the women in the Indian television revealed that the women's representation reflected only one facet of their lives – the life within the four walls of the home which deny them any space in the public sphere. The women's images reflected only "common sex-role stereotypes, embedded in Indian cultural, religious and political traditions" (Krishnan and Dighe. P. 24).

A number of seminars, conferences and conventions were held to break the stereotype images of women. In spite of this media still continue to portray the stereotype image of women and present them in sexist roles. The outcome of this is that the broader aspect of the lives of women is lost. Some narrow and defined images of women come to light through the media. The images of women in media have become a subject of criticism in Feminist Media studies since 1960s. In the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan criticized the image of an ideal woman as “the happy housewife heroine” (Thornham, p. 23). A number of critics followed her in protesting against the discriminatory portrayal of women. Even UNESCO followed Friedan in stating:

“Taking into consideration that TV programmes give information and reflect on gender roles in real life, it must be stated that women’s images are distorted and unrealistic in these programs. All kind of entertainment programs portray women in a dual image. On one hand, they are decorative objects. Yet, at the same time, they are passive individuals in the household and in marriage who are dependent on men for financial, emotional and physical support”.

Though it is claimed that feminist views are religiously accepted in the modern world and women have gained equal rights with men, the bitter truth is that media still depends on the world view of men in portraying the images of women.

The societal roles of men and women have always been differentiated by media. Men are portrayed as important whereas women are regarded as secondary and dependent on men. Media has always given importance to women’s bodies and has exploited them. Women are presented as sex objects and source of entertainment in the media. Women are objectified and have reinforced the biased perceptions about them in the society. Also women are portrayed as victims of the patriarchy. Women are mostly presented as consumers and hardly as producers. Important activities of women are treated the same way as day to day events. Violence against women is approached in the same way as everyday violence. In some cases the private lives of the women become public and contain sexist perspectives which enhance the sufferings of women.

Even today when we hear about a very successful doctor, engineer or astronaut we are likely to think of them as males whereas a model as a female. It is the stereotypic images that influence our thinking of the world around us. Stereotypes are created when individuals are regarded by others as possessing certain common traits because they belong to a particular group or category. Gender stereotypes are a set of general characteristics or fixed ideas attributed in one’s psyche based on the gender. According to gender stereotypical perceptions women are regarded as dependent, inferior, weak, passive, etc while the men are strong and competent. Traditionally, the stereotypic role of a female is to marry and beget children. She is to look about her family’s welfare before her own. She should always be loving, caring, nurturing, sympathetic and compassionate. These assumptions are so deep rooted in the psyche of people that it has always led to gender inequality. It has already been proved that children learn about gender stereotypes from adults. Our socializing agents like

parents, teachers, religious leaders and the media pass along gender stereotypes from one generation to the other. It is high time that we come out of such fancies and here media can do wonders. Even today in India girls are regarded as a liability for the family and boys as assets. A statistics by the United Nations shows to what length the women have become victims of gender inequality – women perform two – third of the work done in the world but earn only one – tenth of the income of the world. Women again comprise of two – third of the world's illiterates and own less than one – hundredth of the world's property.

Television is regarded as the most popular form of infotainment – both information and entertainment. Social learning theory holds that audio visual learning affects the human psyche more than audio and visual separately. Hence the influence of the television which is audio visual affects its audience the most. When women are shown to possess the traits of strength, courage, intelligence, self-respect, etc, the viewers are likely to be positively influenced whereas women represented as dependent, dull and incompetent negatively influence the women. Representations of women in the television have changed in the last few decades but seeing the changing role of women in today's world one is forced to ask whether the representation of modern women have also changed in the media. It is time to assess how real the representation of women is in the media and how this affects the lives of the watchers, particularly the women.

Though the representation of women in television has gone through a number of changes, the media has still not been able to overcome the stereotype images of women and give a realistic representation of women covering all facets of their lives. The women are still confined within the boundaries of duties and responsibilities of her home and family. In the present decades, there are some changes from the stereotypical images of docile and submissive women. But this is an image which has been borrowed from the western world – the women as an icon of beauty and glamour. The portrayal of women in the television thus oscillates between the submissive and dependent woman to the glamorous woman. In spite of the fact that a large number of women today are working hand in hand with men in every fields, the media hardly ever projects women as a decision maker, a serious professional like a doctor, engineer, political leader, etc.

Most of the soaps and serials shown in the television represent women in two extremes – either as submissive and docile women or as women with no virtues. Women are depicted as the ones who sacrifice all their desires and succumb to the orders and dictates of their husbands. These women remain dumb to all the injustices and ill-treatment. The women's place is shown within the four walls of her home and all her energies devoted only to the family members. The working woman is portrayed positively only when she gives priority first to the family and then her profession. The social expectation theory of mass media says that the messages that come up through the television are perceived as “social prescriptions” of the society. The gender stereotyping of these kinds of soaps and serials would have all women behave like a Sita and Savitri, who, is always submissive and sacrificing, never capable of any rational action and their identity being a wife, mother, sister or daughter. It is further seen in these soaps and serials if any woman breaks free of these images, she is

depicted as a wicked woman who lacks the feminine qualities of gentleness and can threaten “male virtue” and the peace and “sanctity of the home. Television thus perpetuates these stereotypical images in the psyche of its watchers.

Even when it comes to advertisements and commercials women’s images seems to have worsened keeping in mind the present context. Through women feature in different types of products, they are seen to be more prominent in the commercials related to household goods, detergents, soaps, cosmetics and food. They are represented as loving daughters-in-law, wives, mothers, who sacrifice their selves for the cause of their family members. They perform the household chores and attend to the need of their family members inspite of their physical ailments. It is also seen that women are frequently comodified by exploiting their sexuality. Women are treated as sex objects and their nude or semi-nude bodies are use to titillate the viewers. These women and their body parts are used to sell all kinds of products, including the ones which are used only by men. Thus women are used in selling products of both men and women “consumers through their two dimensional role: as caretakers of the household and the family and at the same time as decorative sex objects” (Krishnan and Dighe, p. 62). The present day trend towards consumerism has made the advertisements often represent women as only consumers and product high lighters.

Both in the soaps and serials and advertisements a housewife is shown to be superior and capable where as a working women is a breaker of home who is ambitions and neglects her family. This dichotomy between a housewife and a working woman is represented again and again to prove that a woman is incapable of looking after dual responsibilities of both home and work place. The repeated representation of negative and degrading images of women in media negatively affect women and their participation in society. It is very much true that Indian women till a few decades ago were mostly confined within their homes and catered only to the needs of their family members, both before and after marriage. But the reality today is that this has gone through a radical change. Today the ideal woman is one who is efficient both at home and work place. Inspite of this reality the media is still reluctant to represent the complete woman of today’s world. Working women are to some extent represented in the media today but her success is not measured in terms of her efficiency in her professional life but in her relation with her family members and her home. The feminist media professionals are trying their best to improve the representation of women in the television by voicing their concerns about women’s issues but much more needs to be done. Some initiatives on the part of the Government, society and media professionals are likely to improve the representation of women in the media.

- Increase the participation of women in the decision making process in and through the media.
- Representation of a non – stereotyped, balanced and multiple images of the women.
- Government should also come forward to promote an active participation of women in all areas of media like management, programming, etc and promote a gender perspective.
- Increase women’s programmes where the needs of women are adhered to.

- Discourage the media from representing women as inferior beings and mere sex objects.
- Projecting women as shouldering responsibilities both in the home and work place.
- Promote gender equality in the media by showing the family responsibilities shouldered on both men and women.

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