

Being Man, Being Woman: Masculinity and Femininity as Reinforced by Advertisements

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Abstract: Advertisements have gone a long way from merely selling things. It reflects social attitudes as well. Advertising is a powerful medium of reproducing and reinforcing social values and ideologies. And gender does not escape it. In patriarchal societies, advertisements play a crucial role of reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. What an ideal women or an ideal man should be like is shown in the advertisements. It is also shown in what an ideal woman or an ideal man should not be like. While advertisements started with commodification and objectification of women, it moved on to objectifying men as well. However the objectification did not subvert gender roles. This paper will study such depiction of gender roles in advertisements in Indian media. While women's bodies are marked by fragility, vulnerability, sexuality, men's bodies are invested with values like power and authority.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, media, patriarchy, advertisements, objectification.

Introduction

Advertisements have gone a long way from merely selling things to shaping ideas and putting forth models to be followed by the larger society. Advertising is a powerful medium of reproducing and reinforcing social values as well as ideologies. And gender does not escape it. With globalisation and liberalization, media has also done away with monopoly and like trade have entered an era of free competition. But how free media is, it is a question worth pondering. If freedom is about the right to

choose one's chains, then the selective freedom of the media also underscores the fact that the media is not immune to the compulsions of patriarchy and capitalism. It can at best maneuver the degree of such insulation.

The slow and steady transition in human history from oral culture to writing culture to the electronic culture of the present has transformed human connectivity and understanding. This has been supplemented by telephone, telegraph, television and the revolutionary inclusiveness ushered in by the tools of mass media. With privatization, media however became corporate media. Globalisation heralded investments from multinational corporations in media and this have played a role in the changing nature of media. This is apparent in the audiovisual narratives, news, and advertisements that are presented to the people. Like world over Indian media also underwent change with the opening up of Indian markets in 1991.

Along with everything, the culture of the country has also seen many changes. At present what we witness can at best be seen as a fusion of cultures. In a multicultural world and society, convergence and divergence are in fact parallel. In such a context, the way advertisements reach out to markets, potential consumers have also changed. Advertisements have kept well with changing times but it has also brought back many and revived many traditional ideas. The change has not necessarily meant a break from the past. This paper will look at certain popular advertisements of consumer products used in day to day life and try to understand what ideas they try to communicate – how they have tried to break away from traditional notions and in many cases how they have also taken such stereotypical traditions on board. For instance, it will take the example of popular ads of fairness creams for women, deodorants for men, clothing line, certain food items as well as jewellery for women. The reason for choosing these advertisements is the blatant sexism in these ads

and how they also reflect the anomalies of Indian society to a great extent. These ads also clearly indicate how a 'modern educated woman' is often shackled to age old value systems.

Indian Media in transition

If we talk about the changes that Indian media underwent, we have to take cognizance of the watershed event of liberalization. In 1991 Indian government accepted the LPG model (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalisation). Along with many other things, media also went over from being state controlled to being market controlled. It in fact brought profound changes in the broadcasting arena with the entry and quick paced penetration of the satellite and the cable channels. The content of TV also underwent an important transition. As media does not exist in a vacuum, the socio-political changes find a reflection in what is being promoted in the media. In advertisements, TV soaps and movies we get a taste of such changes. The last decade saw a number of important changes like the coming up of a hybrid culture, strengthening of women's rights movements, decriminalization of homosexuality etc. Such changes found reflection in a number of films made during this time.

However the opening up of the media to a globalised culture was not all smooth and did see a backlash as well. While people had access to a large number of things, there was assertion often on what kind of things are being shown on television and how far are they compatible with the '*Indian culture*' as understood by many. Hence in late 1990s Amitabh Bachchan came under heavy fire for hosting on behalf of Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited (ABCL) the Miss World pageant in India. The protestors objected to the show being insulting to women in a country where women form is prayed to. Similar protests were pitched against M. F Hussain for drawing Indian goddesses in the

nude. The protests were such that Hussain's art exhibition was vandalized and he had to live his entire life in exile.

The opening up of Indian markets did not bring an economic integration alone. However one cannot be selective about the impacts of globalisation. As a result we get to see a mixed manifestation of such impact. The role of Indian women has undergone a tremendous change under the influence of a globalised culture. While on the one hand we see a larger number of women out in the public sphere, visiting pubs and bars (which at an earlier time would have regarded as against Indian tradition), we simultaneously also see incidents like Mangalore where pub going women are beaten up and assaulted for 'endangering' Indian culture.¹

The same limitation is seen in how media portrays change and modernity. The mainstream Indian media benefitted a lot from the opening up of the economy. But while it continues to be market friendly, it seeks to indulge in a balancing act while devising strategies – on what to disseminate, and how and to what extent – because the forces of continuity like the forces of change, constitute a fairly large segment of its market.² And while globalisation has blurred too many boundaries, media continues to make sure that its content is not very offending to others and do not subvert what the majority hold as traditional values. No wonder Indian media maintained a strict silence on homosexuality for a very long time.

Masculinity and Femininity

To understand what Indian media promotes as masculinity and femininity we need to know what values and characteristics comprise these two ideas. Masculinity in simple terms comprises

¹ "Girl assaulted at Mangalore pub", Times of India, Jan 26, 2009.

² Sanjukta Dasgupta *et al.*, p. 49

the qualities which are popularly seen as inherent in a biological man. Femininity similarly talks of attributes of women. They identify a set of characteristics, values and attributes related to gender. In patriarchal society, the values tied to masculinity are generally seen as superior to those associated with femininity. While qualities like strength, dominance, aggression, independence etc are associated with masculinity and held superior, attributes like weakness, submission, emotional etc are associated with femininity. And these characteristics are passed on from one generation to the other through the process of socialization. Not adhering strictly to these values is considered deviant behavior.

Such characteristics are essentialised and in a patriarchal society a hierarchy of values is put in place whereby masculine characteristics are put above the feminine ones. Essentialised characteristics often become dominant in deciding the various aspects of a person's life – like the way that person should conduct his/her life and the priorities that they should have. Hence an educated woman should still look for fulfillment in marriage and motherhood. And a man is assumed to be able to calmly make strict decisions. Soft spoken men are often ridiculed for 'being like a woman'. The danger of such essentialised idea is that it forces individuals into role playing to fit in characters decided by the larger society.

Ads: A gendered reading

While modernity understood in western terms have entered every aspect of Indian lives, gender inequality and disparity continues. To understand gender discrimination prevalent in advertisements, we need to start with looking at the traditional gender status in a patriarchal and capitalist system and the relation

of power in such a set up. In India, women in television still perform traditional roles of washing clothes, serving food to adults and children and are often shown as craving jewellery, using cosmetics, and displaying clothes. Even professional women seem to be obsessed with the power of the *fair* and hence *lovely* skin, glossy long hair and a slim body. These are seen as qualities essential for firstly landing a good job and then fairing well in it. It seems we are yet to break completely from a limiting sexual division of labour and a woman and her capabilities continue to be overdetermined by her appearance.

A closer look at the changing character of media and advertisements will bring forth some interesting observations. Even in contemporary and futuristic situations there is a deep penetration of traditional role playing of the sexes. So often in advertisements related to insurance companies and home/car loans, it is often the male in the family calling the shots and making decisions. This is based in the inherent understanding that the man of the house is at the helm of the economic and hence important affairs and the mother is just the homemaker who may not understand these complex economic affairs. Even when affluent homes are shown, the power relation is rarely reversed or subverted. We will undertake a closer look at ads that re-entrench stereotypical gender roles in a later section.

Advertisements have also started targeting younger groups and using university campus spaces for promoting problematic images. Famous labels worn by attractive popular individuals (stars) do the same and instill a belief in youngsters that everyone should be a part of the culture of dressing well. Klein (2000) has a problem with such role of the advertisements. She feels that university spaces should be left out of the war of logos and brands as “university campuses in particular with their residences, libraries, green spaces and common standards for open and

respectful discourse, play a crucial if now largely symbolic role: they are the one place left where young people can see a genuine life being lived.” (Klein, 2000: 105)

Sexism in Advertisements

Advertisements often undertake a biased use of images. Ruth Holliday points out that capitalism and patriarchy both play a systemic dual role in the construction and consolidation of images of men, women and the family in industrially advanced societies. She says, “Media and advertising images continuously display idealized versions of women – as good, beautiful glamorous and feminine women caring for their husbands and children, or bad seducers and manipulators of men and uncaring ‘career bitches’ (Richardson and Robinson, 188).

Asia is an upcoming market for capitalists and is already on the map of capitalist consumerist material culture. As such we see changes in how images are portrayed. The changes in real socio-economic lives of people and their upward mobility are visible in the language of advertisements as well. The tendency is to maintain a balance between the changing use of images and the age old value system held dear.

Globalisation would require that the representation of the “new woman” in the globalized world is not about reiterating the traditional images with certain superficial, cosmetic face lifting. It should mark a clear break from traditional roles. However, a closer look at the advertisements would prove that it is not so. Rather it is noticed that advertisements not only consolidates but also continues to construct gender inequalities despite atypical subversions. Despite the fact that advertisements acknowledge the sex/gender paradox, understand the nuances of gender-stereotypical images continue to be transmitted. In the words of

Creedon and Cramer women continue to be regarded as the second sex, “Women thus have been treated as the Other, marginalized in mainstream media representation by the powerful men who control media industries, with media content helping to systematically reproduce that unequal gendered social relationship” (Creedon and Cramer, 226) The professional woman is still shown as someone who feels success lies not in intellect and skill but in fair skin and glossy, silky long hair.

This amply bears out the fact that popular culture and contemporary times resists the independent educated woman who can have a fulfilling life as a professional or business magnate. Rather it continues to overplay the importance of how a woman looks (according to a man of-course). The success at an interview for a young ambitious woman is a tube of fairness cream that her mother places in her cupped palm. Similarly in a recent advertisement a flight attendant who has her mother on the flight, ends with the mother cleaning her shirt on which a passenger has spilled something. Advertisements have comfortably married age old ideas about a woman’s duty with the changing role that women play in a globalised world. As Zoonen says –

Instead of signifying progress, the presence of a “new woman” in contemporary advertisement can thus be perceived as co-optation of feminist ideals into acceptable fantasies of individual middle class achievement and success. A second problem with the cheerful vision of the “new woman” is that the image itself is not problematized. The methodology of content analysis only allows a recognition of social roles which women perform: the evidence of advertisements portraying the new woman, however, reveals that she only departs marginally from her older, more traditional sisters. (Zoonen, 72-73)

Advertisements that use images of women consolidates the traditional stereotypes of women as caregivers in the family with supreme knowledge about domestic consumption from detergents, toilet cleaners to health food and cooking oil. Betty Friedan outlines the invidious agenda of the advertising agencies in her tellingly captioned chapter “The Sexual Sell” in her seminal feminist manifesto *The Feminine Mystique* as she reports a conversation with an advertising agent of motivational research operation “.... We have to liberate women to desire these new products. We help them rediscover that homemaking is more creative than to compete with men. This can be manipulated. We sell them what they ought to want, speed up the unconscious, move it along” (Friedan, 2001: 227)

The Scenario in Indian Advertisements

Sexist representation of women is very much present in advertisements in Indian media as well. It reflects the deep seated patriarchy that the country continues to grapple with. However with changing times, such representation has become more subtle and nuanced. Married women is often seen to become vocal as she claims that she is the Home Minister of her house and the home ministry works at her behest. Half a century ago a woman asserting anything was unheard of. However here she is shown content with and proud of her role in the private sphere. Irrespective of the milestones that women have achieved in multiple spheres and everything else, their role as homemakers continue to be the prioritized one. So female doctors would make it a point to mention that she is also a mother besides being a doctor. Rarely male doctors are seen reiterating any such details. Rather they are shown as objective professionals giving balanced statements.

Advertisements not only transmit popular images but helps in shaping them as well. Women are mostly noticed as full time in-service personnel within the domestic sphere, they are shown as vigilant health advisers to all in the family from infants to adults. Women's own medical needs are generally about pain balms that women apply in order to attend to more domestic chores.³ Rarely serious diseases which only afflict women like breast cancer and cervical cancer are shown. They are pushed to the domain of uncreative campaigns by governments or NGOs. It may be the case that such patients cannot be shown partaking their traditional housework. We do see advertisements about calcium intake as the risk of osteoporosis is dangerous because it may leave a woman less useful in housework. Women working in kitchen and serving her family is shown very happy as if she is grateful for being given the opportunity of cooking for her family and serving them. Rarely is she shown eating with the rest of family.

Along with advertisements, even in popular TV soaps, women are projected as homemakers, wives, mothers, daughters rather than professionals in important decision making positions. Even the timing of TV serials are decided keeping in mind the profiles of prospective viewers. So like in the Global North, in Indian media also women in daytime channels are projected as housewives in subservient roles, in sportscasts women are projected as sex objects as the cheerleaders during cricket matches, in the evening prime time viewing, however working women are projected who are nonetheless well steeped in the traditional housework.

Deodrin Correa (2009) in her work found out that all the advertisements involving domesticity emphasized the traditional

³ The link of the video of the ad is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qntsShtGv8>.

role of women – as a wife and a mother. Through the ideologically constructed messages of the advertisements, the domestic roles of women were made to appear normal while highlighting their traditional bearings. The media it seems is loathe to project the image of a woman as a serious partner in decision making, a successful professional or an erudite politician or leader. This despite the fact that there is a sizeable number of working women, and women representatives are found in almost all spectrums of jobs. Big IT companies which have gender equality recruitment policy and have almost equal number of men and women working will still use a male model as an IT professional while advertising.

Re-entrenching Gender Stereotypes

The power that advertisements carry is immense. They have the ability to change and shape people's opinions of themselves with one picture of an image that is technologically modified to represent the advertiser's perspective of what is seen as perfect by viewers.⁴ We start seeing ourselves just as the ad maker wants us to. Maitlin (1987) explains how the media's misrepresentation of women in advertisements has created plenty of stereotypical (often negative) representations of women. Women are often shown in a sexual or vulnerable position in order to sell the product, whether it is an advertisement for shaving cream, alcoholic beverage, chocolates etc which has practically nothing to do with sexuality. (Maitlin, 1987:43-44)

We should be clear what is problematic in ads -- when a woman is shown in a bikini in an ad of lingerie is not the problem. But it is degrading when women are objectified as sex objects in

⁴ Indhu rajagopal pg 3333.

ads which has no requirement of a skin show --- like ads of male deodorants, *pan masalas* or mouth freshener, chocolates, thermal wears etc. How women are shown in ads become important because they play an important role in shaping men's expectations of *how women should be*. Men start looking for women who are five feet six inches tall and weigh less than hundred pounds, who look great in tight clothes but are still demure and submissive. Advertisements have consistently confined women to the traditional role of a mother or a sex symbol and these not necessarily represent the diversity of women. [Kang 1997:981] The ads are made to portray unrealistic and over exaggerated images of both men and women. Women may indeed be engaged in such tasks, but how many wash her husband's clothes, work in kitchen, clean toilets wearing the latest trendy clothes and bubbling with happiness?? This shows how farfetched such assumptions are.

Before we start looking at specific advertisements from Indian media and study the sexism peddled by them, there is a need to understand what kind of advertisements have been selected. These are advertisements of objects used on a daily basis like moisturizing creams and deodorants and which used blatant sexist images to promote their products. The aim in choosing such ads has been to understand how such display of explicit stereotyping of women is made to fit in the visual tastes of a modern audience. How such ads have married a traditional reductionist and often a problematic view of woman with that of a modern career oriented one. And in doing so, how these ads have again and again put in place a wrongly hierarchical set of aspirations of men and women.

Let us first take up the controversial Fair and Lovely ad.⁵ It is a fairness cream which claims to lighten skin tone. While this ad underlines a preference for fair women and a bias against women with a darker skin tone prevalent in India pointing to a subtle inherent racism, it does not stop at that. It goes ahead to lay down problematic linkages between skin shade and what women can achieve. In the given link, a woman is confident enough to pursue her passion for becoming a cricket commentator only after she is armed with a fairness cream. However the ads did try to undo the criticisms by roping into modern working women. Hence from depressing ads like dark complexioned women being rejected for marriage, her life being changed by a fairness cream, the ads tried to show professional women gaining accolades but based on their skin tone. So the prospect of getting a job lies heavily on skin tone rather than the efficiency of the woman. The commercials typically contain the message of a depressed woman with few prospects who gains a brighter future either by attaining a boyfriend/husband or a job after becoming markedly fairer from using Fair & Lovely. In a latest Fair & Lovely ad the daughter thwarts her father's plan to marry her soon by asserting that she first wants to achieve enough to be equal to the bridegroom. But she needs a fairness cream and a fairer skin to acquire the confidence to say this to her father.⁶

This ad has invited criticism from women's rights activists and many others. Many have equated it to a different kind of racism and apartheid and an affront to women's dignity. Such ads have aggravated the use of *kali* (black or dark complexioned) as an abuse. Beauty in such a sense is decided by one's skin colour. As a response

⁵The link to the video of the ad is
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XqcKe1VuKI>.

⁶ The video of the ad is available at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDMT9e5Wb2Y>.

a large number of women came out and started a campaign called *Dark is Beautiful* to challenge such limiting notions of beauty. Acknowledged actor Nandita Das lent her voice to this campaign. Other actors like Kangana Ranaut turned down a proposal for doing an ad for Fair & Lovely on the same reason that it demeans woman.⁷ This ad leaves one feeling that the priorities of women continue to be considered beautiful from a male gaze, get married and even land a job but on the basis of how she looks.

Coming to the next ad which tries to re-entrench problematic traditions, we will talk about a jewellery ad.⁸ This photo of the ad shows a newly married couple in which the woman is stating that though she did not choose her husband, she got to choose her jewellery. The set up points to an arranged marriage which is a fairly common practice in India. The girl is married to someone her parents chose where she has very little space to give her own opinion. This is a limitation because women are kept out of the most crucial decision of her life. But she is contended that she has been allowed to choose her jewellery if not her husband. It is an extremely problematic portrayal of what a woman prioritizes -- the jewellery she will wear over the person she will marry. It also justifies not letting women have any say in her marriage.

The next ad is the ad of a pain reliever called Moov.⁹ In almost every version of the advertisements for this product, a woman is shown busy doing housework tirelessly. When she develops a back pain because of all the work, her husband tries to cook something. He is shown as extremely clumsy in the kitchen making a mess of everything. The undertone of such a projection

⁷ “Dark is Beautiful”, *The Hindu*, 8th September, 2013.

⁸ The picture has been added at the end of the paper.

⁹ The video of the ad is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzDH5_Ts1CE.

is kitchen is not the normal place for men and men cooking is an exceptional and unwanted case. The husband quickly rubs some Moov on the wife's back and she is on her feet in no time getting back to her household chores. The ad could have shown the man sharing the household work and relieving the wife for a bit. That would have shown a break in the traditional role set out for husbands and wives. But it just reinforces the sexual division of labour which ensures that the wife is back to playing her normal role.

Another ad which is very disturbing on the gender aspect is a Mother Dairy (milk products) ad.¹⁰ The husband is shown shouting at the wife for touching some of his things. The wife sits submissively and tries a meek 'Sorry'. The ad ends showing that it was her son who touched his father's things and the mother took the blame upon herself. The son decides to drink a glass of milk everyday and grow up to be strong enough to protect his mother. This ad normalized too many problematic things. It showed how it is ok for the husband to shout at his wife, how the women is incapable of holding her ground, how it is ideal that she should take the blame of others on herself and she should be revered for that, it ends with how the young kid internalizes that his mother needs to be protected because she apparently cannot stand up for herself. Patriarchal mindset always promotes women as meek creatures in the need of constant protection – first of their fathers, then their husbands and lastly of their sons. And this ad reinforces such a view. Interestingly if the aim was to show that consumption of milk leads to courage, it could have easily shown the wife acquiring such courage. But the repository of such courage had to be the son.

¹⁰ The video of this ad is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0TAHInaWL4.

However ads do not re-inforce stereotypes of women only but it also tries to shape and assert how men are supposed to be. They should be confident, independent, at the helm of decision making and masculinist. So along with telling how an ideal woman should be, it also tells how an ideal man should be. The first example that I would like to point out is that of Wild Stone talcum powder for men. It showed a man behaving in a ridiculous overtly feminine way wearing a pink ladies negligee.¹¹ The background voice asks in a mocking tone, if he is a woman as he is using a woman's deo. This shows that men are supposed to be masculinist and an effeminate man is abnormal. It also gives a peek into the inherent homophobia which often unnecessarily reduces gay men to effeminate ones.

Another ad is about Snickers a chocolate bar, in which a young man who is so hungry starts behaving like an annoying female actor.¹² His friend points out that when he is hungry he turns into a 'heroine' which is loaded with negative connotations like being annoying, bitchy, sarcastic, mean and nasty. Once he eats snickers he turns to his 'normal' self and he is again a 'cool dude'. So the negative qualities are represented by women and sadly very popular Indian movie actors like Sonam Kapoor and Rekha has taken part in such ads.

Ads like Raymond of suiting and shirting shows what it means to be a complete man.¹³ The complete man has to be rich and successful. But to complete the persona he has to be caring, tender and endowed with what traditionally women alone were

¹¹ The link to the video of the ad is
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JicmIq7gMg>.

¹² The ad of this video is available at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf39vt0MKug>.

¹³ The video of this ad is available on
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hv42havE4w>.

capable of. (Chaudhuri, 2001: 381) The complete man will skip going to work to look after his sick child while his wife goes to work. While such an ad may seem progressive at the surface, it builds upon the premise that child rearing is a woman's job and the man doing it is something extraordinary, that is, going out of his way to look after his sick child. There is a romanticization of men looking after children rather than normalizing. It is also portrayed as a favour that a caring husband is doing to his wife.

In another ad of Airtel, it shows a wife as the boss of her husband.¹⁴ It was a good step as it showed a woman in a powerful authoritative position and the husband seemed fine to work under his wife. However the next scene shows the wife going back home early and cooking for her husband. It reiterates the fact that irrespective of being in a higher official position, she has not given up her role as an ideal wife which requires her cooking dinner for her husband. While one can say that being an independent woman she may choose to do so, it will be a more balanced representation if we see ads showing equal number of men working in the kitchen and cooking for their wives. However the irony lies in the fact that whenever chefs are shown in ads, they are always male but the moment cooking stops being an earning job, it is the unpaid labour of a woman in her home.

There have been attempts in recent years to project images of women in positions of power and authority. They try to erase the negative stereotypes and challenge them. However on up close, it was found that most of these so-called challenging and feminist images served only to reinforce the norm and form they were refuting. For example, men working in kitchens are shown as stupid and misfits. Similarly women in positions of power and

¹⁴ The video of this ad is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9BII9nhqTE>.

authority, often run the risk of appearing ‘unfeminine’ or even ridiculous in media. (Adhikari, 2014: 45) These portrayals reinforce gender stereotypes. An authoritative, powerful woman is usually perceived as an aberration and shown as neglecting her duties towards her family. A career oriented woman is greedy and materialistic while a career oriented man is a go-getter and ambitious.

Ads and Objectification

Apart from re-entrenching gender stereotypes, ads also indulge in blatant objectification of bodies. A sexualized portrayal of women allows them not being used as human beings but objects or props in advertisements. Such ads place stress only on the appearance of women which devalues their innate worth. Jean Kilbourne argued that advertising sells much more than the product. She argues that because advertising is so pervasive, it has an immense cultural impact, especially on women and girls. She also stated that advertising objectifies people, turning them into things. (Mitchell, 2007: 99) She further points out that excessive focus on one part of a female body like breasts or thighs dismembers the woman’s body and objectifies her. This effect is demonstrated in alcohol or beverages or perfume ads that use a woman’s body as the bottle. Ads seem to show more often skinny women cleaning the bathroom, making dinner etc. Heavy women are rarely shown in ads and when they are shown it is accompanied by a mockery of their body shape. Women must fight the addictive power of advertisements. (Kilbourne, 1999: 132)

All deodorant ads show women being easily seduced by men based on the smell of the deospray alone. Overtly sexualized images of women are used in ads of deospray for men. It

dehumanizes women to a great extent and portrays them as being directed by the sense of smell and not their capacity to decide objectively which man they want to be with. Ads of deo by Wild Stone and Axe overdoes this by showing men become irresistible simply by spraying deodorant and have women swooning all over him. Arousal of women is ensured by the mere spraying of a deodorant.

Another recent ad of Parag *pan masala* (mouth freshener) shows a man clad in traditional Indian dress of *Dhoti* and *Kurta* explaining the components of the pan masala.¹⁵ Beautiful women are shown signifying each of the spices present in the mouth freshener. While its not overtly sexualized one fails to understand how to equate a woman to cardamom and cinnamon.

The brand Rupa while advertising the thermal wear for man shows a man clad in it being swooned over by women who are skimpily clothed.¹⁶ Considering that it is an ad of winterwear, the ill clad women proves that defying temperature women have to look good and men can be a centre of attraction even when dressed up according to the weather. The ad makers were happy about being able to use the Sanskrit word '*Swaha*' in the ad. It is a word revered by Hindus. However when it came to portrayal of women in the ad it was ok with showing them wearing clothes unfit for winter.

Objectification has not stopped at women alone. Capitalism demands that even male bodies are objectified to some extent. Here we can give the example of Fair and Handsome, a male fairness cream which also shows how men look is important

¹⁵ The video of this ad is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfUEp2r15tk>.

¹⁶ The video of this ad is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lkp79w4CCkE>.

and ads of Jockey sportswear which shows male models with sculpted bodies sporting the clothes.

Transgressions in advertisements

However with a proactive feminist movement and easy access of all to social media where people can express their views, overtly sexist ads has had to maneuver difficult situations. Outcry against sexist ads makes sure that the advertisement agencies do take note. As ads also have to be relevant it has to take cognizance of the changing outlook of the people along with the socio-political scenario. So as opposed to ads that re-entrench certain stereotypes, there are ads which try to transgress set norms. Here we will take an example of a few such ads.

With the opening up of the Indian culture, dating has become more acceptable. So we have a large number of sites which promote online dating. One such app is called Truly Madly which claims to bring together singles.¹⁷ What is interesting about the ad of this dating application is that it shows women boy browsing and deciding which man she would like to date. It gives agency to women in a society where they continue to be bypassed in decision making. Also it touches although subtly on women sexuality which continues to be a taboo subject. While women are regularly sexualized, it is often from the male gaze. Here we see women asserting their preferences and candidly checking out men.

Another ad that was a big thing in Indian media was the first ad which showed a lesbian couple getting ready to meet the parents. When the Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality in 2009, it opened up the space for homosexuals

¹⁷ The video of this ad is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_hrbzMdlkY.

and the queer community to come out and acclaim their identity.¹⁸ While this decriminalization was stayed by the Supreme Court, there was no going back for the queer community. With the passage of time more and more people gave their voice to the right of sexual minorities to live a dignified life. In such a scenario the clothing line Anouk comes out with an ad where two young urban women in a relationship get ready to meet the parents.¹⁹ This is an interesting transgression which makes the compulsion to acknowledge sexual rights of others. A popular brand putting its name behind such an ad is also a positive sign.

Similarly another ad by the clothing line Biba shows a family of a boy going to choose a bride for him.²⁰ While the boy's mother is happy with the girl and decides to fix the arrange marriage. Here the girl's father intervenes and says that even they would like to go and evaluate the boy whether he can cook or not. The boy's mother says he can at best manage noodles. At this the girl's father says that she cannot live on noodles alone. Here the prospective bridegroom intervenes and asks the girl's father to come and visit after ten days. By then he will learn to cook a few dishes. What is interesting is although this ad is about arrange marriage, it shows a more egalitarian take on marriage whereby we see effort from the bridegroom's side also to match up to the expectations of the girl's family.

¹⁸ "Delhi HC invokes Nehru, legalizes gay sex", The Indian Express, July 02, 2009.

¹⁹ The video of this ad is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv2g2N17KMI>.

²⁰ The video of this ad is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS_wwC8P12I.

Conclusion

Hence if we look at how men and women are portrayed in advertisements we will see that's advertisements have indeed undergone a change. From re-entrenching traditional roles to subverting them in some ways, ads have travelled a long distance. Ads however continue to be sexist and misogynist because most ads are made keeping in mind that the consumer usually is male. This is also because women continue to be economically dependent and men continue to head families and make economic decisions. In short we have not yet shed the shell of patriarchy completely. Having said so, we should also state that such misogynist ads are countered regularly. The society at large does not take such misogyny quietly anymore. There are demands addressing to remove ads which are considered demeaning to women.

Proposing amendments to the Prohibition of Indecent Representation of Women and Children Act, 1986, the ex-Chairperson of NCW, Girija Vyas said the definition of "advertisement" had to be amended too as "there have been many changes in technology in the past years. We wanted the legislation to reflect that", she said. Advertisements will include any notice, circular, label, wrapper or other documents besides visible representation made by means of any light including laser, light and smoke. Indecent representation of women means depiction of women as a sexual object which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interests.²¹

In a patriarchal society, amidst patriarchal structures subversion is overdetermined by such structures. We can hope to see an end to such gender stereotypes being passed around only when there is a complete overhaul of patriarchy. Only then we can

²¹ Girija Vyas.

break the shackles of ideas essentialising male and female qualities. In such a gendered representation a lot of people find themselves out of place, unable to fit in, not exactly appearing 'normal'. All this will change when the flexibility that is inherent in gender identities finds its way in mainstream media advertisements. Till then one will have to regularly grapple with the demands such stereotype images put in place, of what it means to be a woman or to be a man.

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The jewellery ad which has been mentioned in the article read as follows.

