

Media And Women Question: The Contradiction Between ‘Real’ and ‘Ideal’ Women

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ABSTRACT:- Women, the half of the global population, having being persuaded of the images created by media, are in turmoil to preserve their womanhood—is now becoming a question of many of the researchers over the globe. Over the years, media, as it is one of the great contributors to upgrading the human civilisation to a greater extent, are obviously contributing its role—to develop humanity, in the construction of ideas regarding rights, duties, democracy, laws and many core ideas of the modern world. But, side by side, the growing awareness among the womenfolk has made them conscious about the images being produced in media contents, be it print or electronic media, to question media as being coping the patriarchal notion on women and womanhood and regenerating the concept of popularity of male gaze.

Key words:- *male gaze, patriarchy, women, and womanhood.*

In a stringent Patriarchal¹ society, the concept of men and women, being based on “sex” and “gender”, tends to incline on the same in determining the role and images of both men and women. Judith Butler, one of the most regarded feminist of her time, was startled to place and judge men and women on the basis of so called femininity and masculinity and being a post-structuralist feminist in her analysis of men and women—all made her reject the traditional perception of gender and sex. Refusing the traditional notion on sex and gender, Butler, instead, stuck to her opinion that gender is something one performs or acts, which forms one’s identity, is mostly created and recreated throughout one’s everyday life: it’s a repetitive process as Simone De Beauvoir once said “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one”—the entire society, the institutions or organisation, cultures or rituals teach a woman what its mean to be a woman. Mere, binary categorisation as men and women on sex or gender cannot just perturb the women’s position as inferior or deformed sort of humanity. Butler says: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler: 1990, p. 233, as quoted in C.T. Neilson: 2008, p-13).

As long as women live in such a culture saturated with conventions of patriarchal bindings where women having oppressions and inequalities are in pressures to become what society thinks to be. In our media-governed society basic concepts are being formed according to the stories, narratives created by Media² which reach for the individuals or the viewers, who become go-between the mediated stories and the society’s patriarchal thinking. Being the receptor of the mediated stories the viewers start to act like the stories go and gradually the images of men and women get imprinted in the minds of the people. As far as women’s image is concerned, there are myriads of criticisms are still being made by the researchers over the globe. The main problem of the researchers with the media is the stereotypical construction of image of women—which is the starting point of all kind of oppressions and discrepancies of women, where women become a hoax between the “Real” and “Ideal” which ends up with the identity crisis, scholars say, especially the feminists. In entertainment sector media has been placed in a very strong position in today’s mediatised world with being affected everyday life of each individuals, be it men or women—all these make media have the titles of “Mirror of the society” and “Watch Dog”. Media energise the process of social change and social transformation, but with the passage of time, after the advent of the feminist movement various questions are being raised by them complaining media’s portrayal of women. Feminists have flabbergasted with the media’s projection of women sometime as good and

¹ According to Walby (1990 p-20) Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women...the use of the term social structure is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism and the notion that every individual man in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate position (N.K.Johannsdottir:2009 p-1).

² "Media" refers to various means of communication. For example, television, radio, print and new media are different types of media. All these forms use technology to propagate the message (P. Chitra & Neelamalar M.:2013,p-296). In this article, especially, both print and electronic media is being covered during entire discussion.

caring mother or wife or girl friend doing all the household chores and sometime as slim, beautiful and care free rejecting all the social norms. With “The Feminist Mystique”, a new horizon of thinking was arrived in media studies against the patriarchal nature of media towards women. J. T. Wood (1994) says:

In general, media continue to present both women and men in stereotyped ways that limit our perceptions of human possibilities. Typically men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive and largely uninvolved in human relationships. Just as in consistent with cultural views of gender are depictions of women as sex objects who are usually young, thin beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb (p-32). In recent time, the most regular image of women in media is a woman having slim body, stylish get-up and independent care free minded, indulged in entertain the viewers as being objects of entertainment and sex. In other words women’s body has become a blank screen which is open to construction and reconstruction of images in compliance with the surrounded meaning given to men and women. In this regard Neilson quoted like this: According to the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (2003) the idealisation of slimness in women is a very recent phenomenon, dating from the 1920s. It is often argued that the thin ideal is the outcome of successful marketing by the fashion industry, which has become the standard of cultural beauty in the industrialised affluent societies of the twentieth century. (Grogan:1999, as quoted in C.T. Neilson: 2008 p.9). In this regard Mulvey’s “Male Gaze” (1975) perspective on cinema can be served to describing the women’s roles on films being fetching the visual pleasure for the male gaze and in other words women characters are adored in such a way so that it may attract the males. Women characters are chronicled on the experience of the males which is largely based on the socially assigned characteristics or roles being attributed to men and women. Traditionally, males are expected and taught to be tough, active, aggressive and dominant while women are caring, nurturing and passive and most importantly women have to be sexually attractive and beautiful. So its rightly said:

Male characters were described as “powerful, smart, rational, tall and stable” whereas female characters were found to be “attractive, fair, sociable, warm, happy, peaceful, and youthful” (p. 122). Males were more active and independent, smart, and powerful. Women were portrayed as lacking these qualities (Tadesco:1974 as quoted in J.T. Decker:2008 p-9)

The “male gaze,” as she (Mulvey) termed it, assured that films would take the man’s perspective and cater to male patrons, effectively denying woman’s voice and the interests of female audience members (J.T.Decker:2010 p-11). These constructions, unfortunately, limit the reality and what men and women think, feel and behave. So, Wiersma argued: “Constructions of reality take on subjective meaning for individuals. Socially constructed reality may become a self-fulfilling prophecy...once people have ideas or beliefs of what it means to be appropriately male or female; they will behave or engage in activities in accordance with these beliefs. They have thus turned their subjective meanings into objective reality” (p-15 as quoted in J.T. Decker: 2010 p-6). Media, in constructing subjective perspective on gender, play a very crucial role providing role models, scripts and behaviours or activities given to the male-female characters. Viewers being active actors as social being and copier everyday try to imitate the behaviour and life style given to the characters or any description given in both print and visual media without having to think about the originality and reality of the humans, both men and women. So, J.T. Decker writes:

In other words, viewers who heavily watch television and movies are more likely to perceive the world as being similar to the programs viewed than those who view TV and films sparingly. These cultivation effects combine with “accessibility effects,” which are the recalling of moments, messages, dialogue, narrative, and other details in media. Thus frequent consumers more readily recall specific details from what they watch, which are then converted via cultivation effects into schemas for understanding the world (p-9).

The role models shown in both in print and visual media, through contents or pictures, are becoming the “ideal” women for the viewers and even they try to compare the women of their lives with the role models shown in the films or advertisements in terms of body, beauty, style and so on. In recent time many scholars of gender studies fear the consequences of these portrayals of women as this will definitely create a situation of identity crisis for the women folk. The portrayals nothing but reduce women into mere objects, a socially institutionalised concept about women which personify women as inferior to men. Regarding this R.M. Tong quotes like this:

What Wollstonecraft most wanted for women is personhood. She claimed that a woman should not be reduced to the “toy of man, his rattle,” which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.” In other words, a woman is not a “mere means,” or instrument, to one or more man’s pleasure or happiness. Rather, she is an “end-in-herself,” a rational agent whose dignity consists in having the capacity for self-determination (2009, p-16). In fact this harmful “ideal” put forth by the media restricting women to show off their originality as women are human beings and having equal footing with men, put women in the cage of patriarchy, globalisation, capitalism and the other modern systems born out on the base of patriarchy. The standard set forth by the media, with bringing aspiration, among women to become one, ultimately re-energises and generates patriarchy—all totally neglect the emotions and thinking of a woman in real. Being aware of the

harmful effects of patriarchy and capitalism R.M. Tong (2009, p-4) writes: Socialist feminists agree with Marxist feminists that capitalism is the source of women's oppression, and with radical feminists that patriarchy is the source of women's oppression. Therefore, the way to end women's oppression, in socialist feminists' estimation, is to kill the two-headed beast of capitalist patriarchy or patriarchal capitalism (take your pick). In this regard if I try to give arguments in support of women for having equal status with men it seems germane to include those names who posited several rational questions about the age-old oppressions and discrepancies suffered by women. In determining the equal place and status of women with men Feminists like Marry Wollstonecraft, and later joined J.S. Mill, celebrated the rationality—according to them to settle back and free women from the clutches of men. So, Rosemary Tong quotes:

He (J.S. Mill) argued in "The Subjection of Women" that if women's rational powers were recognized as equal to men's, then society would reap significant benefits: public-spirited citizens for society itself, intellectually stimulating spouses for husbands, a doubling of the "mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity," and a multitude of very happy women. Valerie (1998) writing about the First wave feminism mentioned that in 'Vindication of Rights of Women' Wollstonecraft pens it down that an ideal woman is a woman who is active and intelligent blending civic and familial responsibilities, freed from drudgery and debasing frugality. She also focuses on Wollstonecraft's articulation on women and men relationship thus:show that elegance is inferior to virtue', and the 'first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex'. She saw women as degraded by the flirtatious and chivalrous behaviour of their male companions.... (P-16)

So, being a part of patriarchal mechanism Media are supposed to patronising maleness in everywhere and set men as the standard of judging women—the truth once said by Simone De Beauvoir that women are the 'others' or 'inessential' while men are the 'self' or 'essential'. So, it is rightly stated in the following: The category 'woman' has thus no substance, being merely a projection of male fantasies (the 'myth of the eternal feminine') and fears. But since all cultural representations of the world presently available to us—whether in myth, religion, literature or popular culture—are the work of men, women too have internalised these definitions and learned to 'dream through the dreams of men'. Indeed, a 'true woman' is *required* to accept herself as Other for man: she must 'make herself object...renounce her autonomy' (Thornham S.:1998 p-29). So, the clash between the ideal, which created by media for market purpose, to sometime sell the products from beauty products to men's under wear, from shaving cream to car, are the signs of male dominance³, male centeredness⁴ and male identification⁵ where women are trapped as caged birds and real women, who cannot be the way they are, whatever women achieve are judged and compared with men and by the men, because of the prevailed notion of women—between which women are becoming the toys in the hand of men in all the structures, systems (socio-political and economic), institutions of our patriarchy, be it family, marriage, religion, rituals, government or media. Women, through their continuing struggle, over the couple of centuries, are trying get rid of the prevailing discrepancies and oppressions, which are taking the forms of violation and crimes against women in the forms of rape, dowry or dowry deaths, witch craft, honour killings, sexual harassment, battering and so on—but hardly they get positive representations and coverage in media. Though women have a meagre representations in media, if not for anything else, but likely to prove women to be inferior subservient to men, in other words, in men's world, by and large, has been identified as a problem by the social scientists and even harmful also.

To conclude, as the Radical Feminists say patriarchy is the root cause of subordination of women through the ages, it can be said that not only the patriarchy's legal and political structures should have to be uprooted but the social and cultural institutions also have to be overturned from the society to liberating the women from the bondages of illogical environment. So, it is rightly said that:

In order to be liberated, women must reject femininity as it has been constructed for them and give it an entirely new meaning. Femininity should no longer be understood as those traits that deviate from masculinity. On the contrary, femininity should be understood as a way of being that needs no reference point external to it. Full personal freedom for a woman consists, then, in her ability to renounce her false feminine self in favour of her true female self (as quoted in R. M. Tong: 2009 p-3)

³ Patriarchy is male dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men. When a woman finds her way in such position people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule and wonder how she will measure up against a man in the same position (Allan G. Johnson: 2005 p-5).

⁴ Patriarchy is male centred in the sense that there is always a focus on men, what they do and what they say. (ibid)

⁵ Patriarchal societies are male identified in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity. For example we regularly use the word "Men" to identify "Human Beings" (ibid).

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