

INDIAN TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS: SELLING AND SAILING ALTERNATIVE NON-STEREOTYPED DISCOURSE

Tapan Mandal ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Panihati Mahavidyalaya, India



Corresponding Author

Tapan Mandal, tmandal026@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Advertising is an audio-visual form of cultural artifact that not only seeks to generate increased consumption of their products or services through 'branding' and 'standardization' of the products but also passes some normative ideas, standardized social values and symbolic meaning to the consumers. So, it has a dialogic and reciprocal relationship with other cultural institutions like family, religion, arts, literature and music, which reflects, shapes, and naturalizes consumers' sense of social reality. Therefore, advertisements act as a political agency to validate and promote established social values and norms like hetero-normative sexuality, docile womanhood, conventional marriage within the structure of patriarchy. But, on the other hand it is noticeable that some television advertising such as "Vicks - New generation for Care", Ads of Mintra, New Biba ad, "Havells Fans- Hawa Badlegi," Rebtel ad, Virgin mobile ad, "Knorr- One night with Karan", and few non-commercial ads such as ad on UN human rights, "Independence Day-#Free the roads", "The seatbelt crew case" covertly as well as overtly subvert the stereotypical social construction of gender and sexuality, motherhood, womanhood and also scaffold an alternative space for the so far "silenced", suppressed, and neglected.

Keywords: Standardization, Hetero-Normative, Patriarchy, Silenced, Docile, Naturalize

1. INTRODUCTION

In consumer culture, a commodity is not simply a material object. Rather it carries symbolic value: of status and prestige. So, consumption is the acquisition of objects and symbolic meanings. The act of consumption is governed by the idea of 'taste', 'status' as taste becomes a marker of identity, selfhood and difference. So, identity solidification is immediately linked to the purchase and the use of commodities. In India after economic liberalization, consumption has been seen as the new marker of identity. So, the identity of individual is not as a national citizen located in the process of nation-building. Instead, the very idea of citizen is modified into a citizen who consumes. So, what we have is a market-driven consuming citizen (Nayar 123-24). In this regard, advertising especially television advertising, an audio-visual form of marketing communication is inevitably linked to the promotion of a product or service. Advertising especially commercial advertising seeks to generate increased consumption of the products or services through branding or standardization of the products. So, its objective is to intensify consumerism. In this regard, the ideas behind ads are of two kinds- firstly to show the benefits of the products and secondly emotions and attentions of the consumers are targeted to seduce or lure them to buy products. Therefore, it not only promotes a product but also passes emotional,

psycho-social values or ideas and symbolic meanings to the consumers. So, it has a dialogic and reciprocal relationship with other cultural institutions like family, religion, arts, music, gender and sexuality. This relationship reflects, shapes, naturalizes consumers' sense of social reality and his or her identity (Nayar). Now the question is what kind of themes or values would be encoded in advertising a product. It has been witnessed that advertisements in India have been functioning over a period of time as a kind of ideological state apparatus to validate and promote established social values and norms like, stereotypical gender roles and identity, heteronormative sexuality, docile womanhood, conventional marriage within the structure of patriarchy to the exclusion of the other marginal voices. So, as a cultural artifact, advertisement in Indian context from the very beginning have been supporting mainstream majoritarian culture, lifestyle and solidifying fixity of Identity.

But recently along with the social activism for the rights and equality of the marginal, the subaltern, and the minor, few TVC and non- TVC advertisements address some rising social issues like LGBT rights and equality, overtly and covertly subvert the stereotypical social construction of gender and sexuality, motherhood, womanhood and also scaffold an alternative space for the so far "silenced," surprised, neglected. So, it expands its area and creates an alternative space and discourse within the popular culture along with its promotion of the products.

2. LET'S DELVE INTO THE HISTORY AND GENESIS OF THIRD GENDER AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN INDIA IN BRIEF

In ancient India and even in Mughal period (known from the story of Malik Kafur, a hindu eunuch and a slave who was bought by Allauddin khilji), the third gender community occupied a prestigious place in terms of devotion, activity, respect, administration and possession as well. They were very close to kings and queens. According to Rig Veda, there are three types of gender mentioned in Hindu mythology- male that is purush, female that is prakiti, and third gender that is tritiya prakiti. Besides, third genders' contributions towards the betterment of society, their social participation and acceptance are quite evident from the narrative of Aravan from which Hijras or third gender is named as Aravanis and the narrative of Shikhandi who was born as girl but brought up as woman of the epic Mahabharata and from the story of third gender's devotion to Ram and being blessed with the power of blessings by Ram of the epic Ramayana. The Indian ancient Vedic culture and after time also bears testimony of same-sex love as illustrated from Ruth Vanita and Salem Kidwai's re-reading and re-translating Indian written inheritance, mythology, religious texts, Persu-Urdu and Islamic traditions, from ancient up to modern. A drastic change have been taken place as far as the position of third gender and the issue of same-sex love in modern society and more particularly in colonial era are concerned as compared to the ancient times. Social exclusion can be felt by looking at standards and daily activities of TGC. British rulers not only denied civil rights for third gender but also criminalized the whole TG community. Then came The Tribes Act 1871, according to which castrating children, dressing like women, dancing in public –all were crime and punishable (Dasgupta).

"Homosexuality also has been criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860; thereby making homosexual sex punishable by law. To many Indians the idea of same-sex relationships is unknown, even alien. This has been just one outcome of British imperialism and Victorian prudery or morality. They negated our indigenous cultures and histories by drawing a veil between our present from the past. However, homosexuality has a history in this country. It has been documented that references of homosexuality have been found in texts written in 15 Indian languages over a period of more than 2000 years that challenge the stereotype"(Pathak). Homosexuality also finds reference in texts like Kamasutra and Arthashastra which is an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft. Moreover, stereotypical norms and parameters of gender construction especially feminine gender have been implanted by the British and, to some extent, Indian conservative familial culture. Due to the long lasting impact of colonial administration and legal limitation (377) the Indian popular media culture did not show any courage to represent them in positive light before 2000s. But recently television and other media advertisements started to break the essentialized concept of gender and sexuality. The topics of advertisements as a popular cultural text are shaped by emerging issues like civil rights for LGBT community and shape changing mindset of people as well as Government. Advertisements not only bring those marginalized group of people on the screen but also want to reach to them as all inclusive target consumers (Pathak).

Now, let us turn our eyes to few select advertisements and how they interrogate the normative ideas and provide counter-discourse to us.

Advertisements related third gender or transgender:

Advertisers are turning focus on the marginalized transgender community. It can be argued if their goal is to support them but one thing is certain, the positive portrayal of the community in ads is changing the way society has looked at them for centuries.

Vicks- New Generation for Care:

This advertisement is a real life story of an orphan Gayatri and her newfound mother Gauri. It highlights a new concept of family and motherhood that go beyond the biological ties and it obviously touches upon a sensitive topic of transgender gender and third gender rights in India.

This ad or, to some extent, campaign actually strikes the age old deep-rooted notion of motherhood and parenthood as constructed by patriarchy. As patriarchy lives itself on the tricks of binary and inequality between male and female, it endorses directly or indirectly only heterosexual relation, naturalizes only procreative sex, and supports biological parenthood. Therefore, this ad is a challenge to and subversion of traditional motherhood. As love and care are the only essence of motherhood, so anyone whoever is female or third gender, may adopt and rear child with her pure love and compassion.

It also shows empowerment of women because the child wishes to be a lawyer rather than a doctor so that she can fight for the justice and rights for the marginal like her transgender mother and incorporate her in the mainstream culture.

3. INDEPENDENCE DAY# FREE THE ROADS(AD OF RALCO TYRES)

This ad portrays the everyday life of a person from the transgender community in India and shows how they face discrimination at every step of life. In this video a transgender woman expresses her overflowing motherly love for a kid at the bus-stop but she is somehow made to suppress it due to the biological mother's over-concern for her child. Then, she is not allowed to board a bus and ignored by the taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers as well. It connotes that she is not allowed to participate and perform her individual role in a heteronormative monolithic patriarchal space. But a gentleman represented by Ralco tyre company offers her a lift. So the Ralco tyres functions as a metaphoric space for independence, support, and right and freedom in society for the transgender.

3.1. RED LABEL

Brooke Bond Red Label is one of India's largest selling tea brands. In earlier time tea was consumed for refreshment or as a habit. But a tasty cup of Brooke Bond Red Label tea can make India more inclusive irrespective of any differences they may have and this is beautifully encapsulated in the promise "Swaad apnepan ka" (Taste of affinity). The latest ad attempts to address prejudice faced by transgender community and show how a cup of tea helps overcome prejudice. The campaign was launched in January 2016 with six trans-genders and six videos over six months. The songs spoke the language of Red Label. Its debut song "Hum Hai Happy" (We are happy), sets the tone of the campaign. The song recounts its philosophy of being happy, despite the adversity.

In the company blog, Shiva Krishnamurthy, General Manager, Beverages, Hindustan Unilever, said, "We wanted to create new content for our brand that meaningfully engaged our customers with our brand's purpose – to make the world a more welcoming place, one cup of tea at a time. We wanted a campaign that expressed our brand values, that went beyond tokenism or photo opportunities, something daring and provocative that tackled taboos. This is what attracted us to the idea pitched by the youth arm of Yash Raj Films – Y Films – which saw us creating an ad with a band of transgender musicians called the 6-Pack Band."

3.2. COMMERCIAL RELATED TO HOMOSEXUALITY AND HOMOEROTIC LOVE:

Gay and lesbian themes have been taboo in Indian advertising. This is because marketers felt scared of approaching this sensitive area. They are convinced that Indian society remains largely homophobic and hence they fear a backlash. They have been in a very dilemmatic condition whether they should speak about a subject which is rarely discussed openly in India. Still, few marketing agencies have been bold enough to turn advertising into a 'new,' 'silenced' area.

Fasrack-"Come out of the closetmove on":

This youth brand Fastrack recently launched a lesbian-themed advertisement campaign which became internet sensation. In this commercial, the doors of a pink cupboard spill open, and two hot young women walk out, still fumbling with their dresses and hair. The tagline reads like "Come out of the closetmove on". This TVC aims at telling young consumers to challenge taboos and go out of outmoded societal norms. Through the ad it is clear that Indian advertising is finally beginning to peek out of the closet of patriarchy.

3.3. ANOUK, BOLD IS BEAUTIFUL (AD OF MYNTRA):

This ad published in June 2015 and produced by the agency Ogilvy and Mather shows a lesbian couple who are in a live-in-relationship and how they are apprehensive to meet their parents. It is hailed as a beautiful attempt at showcasing homosexual relation between two girls who engage in love and care and in flirting each other. So, this ad is a bold step because it depicts changing signs of social norms in society. It promotes that sexual orientation is a matter of individual choice and a matter of pleasure, and neither Government nor society should interfere them. So, it is a focus on alternative sexuality that the popular social media is promoting and paving the way in changing the mindset of the people.

3.4. KNORR- ONE NIGHT WITH KARAN

The popular soup brand Knorr has always had advertisements with caring mothers taking charge of the children by serving hot and delicious soups. But this ad is breaking the stereotypes and showcasing covertly homoerotic pleasure between Karan Johar and his friend.

This ad shows Karan Johar is getting seduced by a hot and handsome friend who rings his door bell at 3:00 a.m. Karan who is expecting sexual act to make him feel warmer but prepares soup instead on his friends request.

4. TVC QUESTIONING THE STEREOTYPICAL ROLE OF WOMEN

New Biba Ad: Breaking regressive tradition and propagating a new one:

The father of the prospective bride says that they have to see whether the boy can cook or do household tasks because their daughter cannot marry him if he cannot cook or do any household activities. So, this ad highlights a changing notion of womanhood and empowerment of women by representing that domestic household activities are no more to be performed by the female only but by male also. So the traditional notion of male supremacy and submissiveness of female is being challenged and questioned in the important event like marriage.

5. HAVELLS FANS- HAWA BADLEGI

In this ad, we see a newly wedded couple walk into registered office in which the husband wishes to adopt the last name of his wife. The tagline is very connotative one because it signifies the emerging female power, prestige, authority and identity that are getting solidified in patriarchal social unit as male. However, this ad breaks the conventional notion of male authority in passing surname to the wife.

Although same-sex love and social inclusion and prestigious place of third gender and transgender had been prominent in the ancient Indian culture and mythology, and historical documents and texts, they from the colonial period to the era of last few decades, did not get openly reflected in popular media and also other cultural institutions most probably because of legal pressure, patriarchal social conservatism and more importantly the hangover of colonial capitalism and the sense of morality. But by breaking the stereotypes, the above advertisements altogether scaffold some social cultural ideas and issues which are so far "silenced" suppressed and neglected in the mainstream media culture. And, the advertisements interrogate the normative ideas and provide an alternative space of gender, sexuality, womanhood to the consumers. Therefore, it can be concluded that recent TVC and non TVC advertising is selling and sailing some counter-discourse to the consumers along with its promotion of the products.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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