

Women magazines and social legitimization of desires of women: An Indian Perspective

Nilotpal Bhattacharjee, M. Phil Scholar, Department of Mass Communication,
Assam University, Silchar

Abstract:

The noted feminist Marjorie Ferguson in her book “*Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity*” argues that women's magazines promote a 'cult', that they socialize women according to certain doctrines and are, in a sense, oppressive. But with the passage of time, the discussions about extramarital affairs, sexual gratification, illicit relationships, dissatisfaction, treachery, etc. that were earlier used to be a taboo for the women have become a common sight in the Indian women magazines. What is strange in the personal columns in particular of these magazines is that it depicts women as having desires, which refers to ‘sexuality’ only. These magazines try to focus on the recent trends dominant in western societies and try to establish and float the recurring belief in the mindset of the Indian women that this world is no more a place for those who lack enough of beauty and sexual appeal.

This paper is an attempt to discuss whether women magazines are socially legitimizing the so-called hidden desires of women. The study tries to look into the inner world of the readers of these magazines and it matters because the readers of these magazines are mostly elite, literate and with a capability to assert themselves.

Key words: social legitimization, sexuality, women’s magazines, physical desire.

Prologue: Women in India have been influenced by a culture, which is authoritative, patriarchal, and family-oriented throughout the history. A soft-spoken and submissive woman generally typifies the ideals of femininity. The women used to be taught to serve the family, obey her father before marriage, obey her husband after

getting married, and obey her son as a widow. It was a kind of social norms that a woman would belong to the family and should not have any intellectually satisfying self-determination.

With the passage of time, the Indian women's role has metamorphosed from a domestic manager to a prime convener. Women have emerged as a potential consumer, ready to redefine her status in the worldwide economy and their contributions to the society are no longer confined to being solely progenitor. In the last few decades, the rapid strides in education and employment have paved the way for drastic changes in the status of women as they have become more self reliant. Significantly, the contents of women magazines have also witnessed a sea change in recent time.

In the beginning, the feminists welcome the idea of representation of women in women magazines with a hope of redeeming their existence with relation to the larger socio-economic structure. Earlier, women's magazines were possessed with the construction of stereotype roles of women, portraying them as living for home, babies, cooking, clothes, etc. (Courtney and Whipple, 1974; Culley and Bennett, 1976; Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham, 1990; McArthur and Resko, 1975). Women have always been traditionally alleged to have been at the receiving end of the whims of the patriarchy and it was assumed that the women magazines would be able to ensure a level playing field for their existence. However, these magazines, notwithstanding the hopes pinned on them regarding the liberation of women have failed to live up to the expectations as these have subscribed to the values of the consumerist society.

Since the last decade of 20th century, different companies started to draw up new marketing strategies and change the way women were portrayed, as women began to view themselves differently (Myers, 1994; Tai and Tam, 1997). Subsequently, new types of women portrayed on the glossy pages of the new women's magazines and they were young, fashionable, and often financially independent women who constituted a valuable market for modern consumer goods (Granatstein and Masterton, 1998; Gough-Yates, 2003; Sylvester, 2007; Narunsky-Laden, 2007).

Gradually, the focus of the women magazines shifted to fashion, beauty and sex (Moses, 2007). The themes such as social issues and career development reflecting the changing lifestyle of women occupied much less space in these magazines than fashion, sex and beauty content (The Pink Ghetto: Why women's magazines get no respect, 2001).

The Indian women's magazines earlier used to discuss about the traditional role of women as homemakers. However, with the passage of time, the discussions about extramarital affairs, sexual gratification, illicit relationships, dissatisfaction, treachery, etc. that was earlier used to be a taboo for the women has become a common sight in the Indian women magazines. As human being, everyone, both men and women, have different desires. Nevertheless, in a typically Indian patriarchal society, it was not acceptable for women to express themselves as they are supposed to be homemakers and should obey a set of social norms.

With the emergence of the era of globalization, the contents of Indian women magazines also gradually changed. The personal columns in particular in such magazines have given the women a platform to express their all sorts of desires and problems freely. This study aims to discuss whether women magazines are socially legitimizing the so-called hidden desires of women by analyzing the private columns of three Indian women magazines- Femina, Sananda and Women's Era. The researchers have chosen the October, November and December 2012 editions of the three magazines. The study also tries to look at the inner world of the readers of these magazines and it matters because the readers of these magazines are mostly elite, literate and with a capability to assert themselves.

The general objective of the research is to find out how the women are represented in the personal columns of these women magazines. The other objectives are to understand what makes them worried about their lives and to understand what kind of women representation exists in these columns.

The study may reveal a significant understanding how women or the readers of these magazines reveal themselves in the private columns of these magazines. The study

would be able to focus on the comparative aspirations of the women of different socio-economic sections since the magazines under discussion cater to virtually different sections of women.

The qualitative content analysis method is used to study the content of personal columns of three Indian magazines for a period of three months with a view that these columns could give a picture of their private aspirations and how they look at their lives. This also explores how the 'traditional homemakers' discuss about their sexual, love and family problems in open platforms that earlier used to be socially unacceptable in India.

All the women magazines of the country constitute the universe of the study. Here the women magazines mean the magazines which chiefly cater to the aspiration of Indian women.


The three magazines have been chosen with a view to understand the pulses of women who basically cater to three different sections of the socio-economic status scale. The chosen magazines also belong to different strata in terms of their readership. Women's Era, though an English magazine, tries to address a readership which are middle class and with a middle class aspirations. Sananda, is a Bengali magazine which has got an upper class clientele among Bengali ladies but they are to a certain extent conformist, and tend to exhibit a predominantly Bengali outlook. Femina has a distinctly upper class clientele in line of Cosmo, and the aspirations and the projected lifestyle of its readers are also significantly different. They believe in a lifestyle of their own and it perhaps address to the third generation feminism, the feminism which believes in the cult of power women and tries to consider sexual emancipation as one of the ways to understand their relationship with lives. Whatever be their aspirations, the moot point remains that women magazines are supposed to address the problems of the women as well as their expectation from lives.

The researcher has already stated that a qualitative content analysis has been taken for the purpose of the research. The purpose of the content analysis is to produce a systematic and reproducible finding. Though content analysis is essentially a quantitative approach, but the purpose of the study was suitable for a qualitative

analysis. The questions and answer section of these magazines analysed to find out the predominant trend of the questions.

Since the nature of the research is qualitative, the data tabulation has been done in a chronological way. The content has been analysed with a view to find out the predominant pattern among the students.

The commonest words and phrases that were frequently used by the readers in the personal columns are given below:

 Sexually not satisfied

 Cheating

 Extramarital

 Sex

 Orgasm

 Satisfy

 Husband

 Boyfriend

 Not interested

 Relationship

The most important concern raised by the readers in these magazines mainly dealt with the problems like physical problems, sexual problems, problems related to love affairs, marital problems, family problems, etc.

After a thorough analysis of the personal problems faced by the women, mentioned in the quarterly issues of the famous women's magazines- 'Femina', 'Sananda' and 'Women's Era' - it has been seen that in Femina, most of the readers wrote about their sexual problems, a significant section of them discussed their love problems, and some also talked about various curious issues of their lives, that is a high percentage of people discussing about their sexual life

In "Sananda", which is a Bengali women's magazine, read by women of almost all age groups, the researchers have found that the personal problems in this magazine deals with mainly societal and family problems. Most of them wrote about their family problems, some about their love related problems, and a very few about their old age and one about her curious and mental problem which is a good mix of all both social and sexual problems. Again in "Women's Era" it has been found that, most of the readers wrote about their family problems, a significant section about their love problems and a few women wrote about her sexual problem.

A detailed analysis shows that the users mainly pose questions regarding sexual gratification, dissatisfaction, treachery, extramarital affairs, and some general sexual problems. The age group of this readers ranges from young teenagers of 17 to middle aged married women of 37.

The main keywords that the researchers have found in these columns mainly are "sexually not satisfied", "extramarital affairs", "cheating", "ageing", etc. and it is very strange that these personal columns depict women as having desires that refers to sexuality only. It has been found that the problems that are put up in the columns mainly relate to women, who mainly are housewives and college students and are not only from the metro cities but also from some lesser-known towns of the country.

Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn from the above findings that the personal columns of women magazines are now gradually trying to socially legitimize the desires of women. It is also manufacturing consent among the women to express themselves like men without any fear of social alienation. Moreover, it has been revealed that these magazines, in the name of Feminist ideology, always try to focus on the recent trends dominant in the western societies and try to establish and float

the recurring belief in the mindset of the Indian women that this world is no more a place for those who lack enough of beauty and sexual appeal.

What we can infer from the above is that these three magazine mainly propagate sexuality which sells rather than depicting what women are today in reality they have moved on from where they were say twenty or twenty five years back. Rather than depicting women as strong independent social individuals, these magazines shift focus in depicting them as sexual objects who are concerned only about their sexual needs.

Epilogue: The major problem of the women magazines of today viz. *Femina*, *Sananda* and *Women's Era* is that they all seem to ignore radical feminism and depicting women in a way which can only bring them material benefits and is far from what reality is. Women of today have broken the shackles of a patriarchal male chauvinist society and have risen above sexuality. They are now moving the nation and making a big impact on the major developments of the world and therefore they deserve to be put in a better way.

The keynote of beauty and fashion magazines is an exaggerated concern with physical appearance so that other aspects of the complete human being are undervalued. The women's magazines contain primarily and predominantly volumes of advertisements and sexist writing and are known for the portrayal of women as sex objects, consumers and slaves. Women magazines are mostly elitist and sexist. They are not in a position to advocate the course of women and rejuvenate the socio-political economic and cultural orders.

The targeted readerships of these magazines are the upper and lower middle classes living in cities. Most of women's magazines consistently seek to direct women's energies into a narrow channel to define their concerns, pre-occupations and aspirations with an arbitrarily imposed 'feminine framework'.

The study says that the impression created is that the outside world belongs to men and the issues which arise there do not affect women except indirectly through the

men related to them. It has also been found that women of today talk openly about their sexual appetite and gratifications in a public platform.

While these magazines are what they had set out to be, their fundamental issues remaining the concern of making women saleable in the marketplace and trying to carry favour with the advertisers by provoking their readers to be consumer savvy. But the moot point remains, and that is the most important outcome of this study is that the readers have also subscribed to the vision espoused by these magazines. The study was undertaken too find out the thought process of the readers, but unfortunately the readers turn out to be even more market friendly than these magazines.

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