

## **PARTICIPATION, PERFORMANCE AND PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN MEDIA AND INDIAN WRITINGS: AN INVESTIGATION**

**Sapna Sharma**

Assistant Professor  
K R Mangalam University,  
Gurgaon

**Sheryll** (Co Author)

B.A. (Hons.) English  
University of Delhi,  
New Delhi, India

### **Abstract**

Role of media in today's world is being discussed frequently. It is true that media can act as both a –perpetrator and as a protagonist. It can portray stereotypical, sensational images of women or it can empower women also. Women are mostly portrayed in the light of approval or disapproval. These roles reflect the typical patriarchal mindset where the housewife is favored and women in power are often depicted as villain. Women in the serials appear on screen with heavy makeup, wearing expensive jewelry, ready to attend marriage, party any minute. Women in literature have been based on the myth models from Ramayana and the Puranas. Sita, the silent sufferer, is the archetype of Indian womanhood, the earth mother. The woman is often shown passive, accepting the dynamic role of man in her life. The media professional and writers need to be sensitized on gender issues and system of rewards may be developed for those who are able to portray women in positive manner.

**Key Words:**Media, Stereotypical, Patriarchal, Sensitized

Women's participation, performance and portrayal in media are the three important dimensions of study for the social science researchers of modern time, especially for the feminists. Because for the empowerment and development of the women section, it is very important to give them proper environment where they can raise their voices against the inequalities and the gender-gap they are experiencing in our male dominated or patriarchal societies

Role of media in today's world is being discussed frequently. It is true that media can act as both a –perpetrator and as a protagonist. It can portray stereotypical, sensational images of women or it can empower women also. The term *media* is widely used as a short hand for 'Mass Media'. Conceptually, the media are those technological agencies which are engaged in

the creation, selection, processing and distribution of messages among the people. As a logical connotation, the mass media deal with the day to day problems of the nation and especially of the general people. It contributes towards the emergence of mass society and mass culture.

Since TV represents main stream ideology, the construction of gender stereotypes on TV reinforces the stereotypical definitions of Indian womanhood. Most themes center on a strong sense of good or bad, right and wrong and are mostly painted in black and white with no grey shades. Women are mostly portrayed in the light of approval or disapproval. These roles reflect the typical patriarchal mindset where the housewife is favored and women in power are often depicted as villain. Women in the serials appear on screen with heavy makeup, wearing expensive jewellery, ready to attend marriage, party any minute

Another feature portrayed is the unrealistic “super woman”—super wife, super daughter-in-law and super mother. This superwoman has multifarious qualities—loyalty, compassion and devotion. She is more of an ideal, a superlative rather than a personality. In the roles of a mother, she sacrifices the happiness for her children and family. Protagonists like Purna, Parvati, and Tulsi go to jail or mental asylum for crimes they never committed. The impact of such larger than life characters is so strong that it is nearly impossible to demean their effect. Television has given a new genre of women characters. Women, if not shown portraying stereotyped; superwoman characters, they are shown as schemers, manipulators, home breaker or as vamps. Kidnappings, Killings, creating family dispute and marital disharmony are some of the roles played by these female characters. Practically, each of these negative characters exhibit revenge, greed, deceit and diabolical plots. Another rising trend which is depicted in today’s serials is extra marital relationships. But serious question is that are extra relationships that are casually shown on TV hinting at the acceptance of such relationships by our society? Are we moving towards a society where fidelity is considered no more significant for marriage? How justified is the third man /woman in marital relationships? Do we want to see our girls as idealists, *pativratas* or with traditional Indian values? Do our women face societal pressure to fit into the age role models on one hand and individual aspirations and ambitions to emulate the likes of Kalpna Chawla or Sunita Williams? This calls for a serious analysis of the entire issue of project of woman in T.V and in media in general.

Advertisements are yet another prominent and integral part of television viewing. Portrayal of “gendered” relationships is common in advertisements. Since women’s position and roles are devalued in patriarchal cultures, advertising maintain the status quo in gender relations by reinforcing the sexual division of labor while resisting any radical change on part of women. Men are always shown advertising cars or business products like laptops, job websites, and women are mostly shown advertising domestic products. Like TV, serials, advertising also depicts woman as superwoman who manages multiple roles of wife, mother and career woman and be glamorous as well. Such depictions exhibit these women excelling in their professional commitments, meetings deadlines and achieving success. But the question is doing these advertisements that project woman as working in and outside the house with contentment raise expectations from a common woman. One also observes the media promoting an obsession for having fair, untanned glowing skin among women. Millions of vulnerable girls become obsessed with beauty and are spending hours to catch attention of men.

Advertising seems to be obsessed with gender and sexuality. It thrives on commodification of women. In the exchange between the commodity and the women in advertisements, a woman becomes a commodity too. Women are portrayed as sex objects who are casted to titillate the viewers by exposing their body parts. Women and their body parts sell

everything-food, clothing, cars, computers, men's shaving lotion and underwear. If we talk about news channels, it is said that Indian viewers spend more time watching news than reading it. Most of the TV news channels show rape cases, marriage between two female lovers, forced kiss between Rakhi and Mika etc. Is there any news channel that has a fixed slot, even once a week that highlights issues faced by women in India?

In case of music videos one visualizes image of a woman as sensuous whose sole purpose is to arouse men with the show of bare breast and half naked bodies. Even in children's programmes boys tend to be shown as active, aggressive, rational and girls talking on the phone, playing with dolls, helping the housework. In reality shows, men tell jokes and many jokes are about women.

Women in literature have been based on the myth models from Ramayana and the Puranas. Sita, the silent sufferer, is the archetype of Indian womanhood, the earth mother. The woman is often shown passive, accepting the dynamic role of man in her life. A woman is therefore inculcated with the idea of martyrdom of pride in patience of need to accept a lower status through mythical model of Sita, Savitri, Gandhari. Rabindernath Tagore seems to be the champion of emancipation of women. Most of his works concentrate on the plight of widows, the anxiety of modern educated women for equality and freedom, the complications arising out of prevalent orthodoxy and conservatism and the social problems inflecting the mental domain of fair sex.

The women characters of his novels represent different facts of Indian womanhood. His vast range comprises crooked woman Harimohini, ideal woman like Anandmoyi and sweet young women like Suchitra and Kamla. In portrayal of women, Tagore resembles SaratChanderChatterji. Binodini and Damini are widows, exploited and humiliated by their kinsmen in the name of tradition and religion. Due to education and social consciousness, these women assert their individuality and fight for their right to love and family happiness. By the turn of last century, the rapid stride in women education brought to the fore, a class of woman not prepared to accept the moral and social code of decadent male dominated society, asserting their individuality and fighting for equality of sexes.

Bankim Chandra Chatterji's "Rajmohan's wife" is the first novel in Indian English which depicts the problems of the suffering Indian wife. Tagore's plays tell of his creativity, innovation and experiment. It is the culmination of his quest that establishes his venture to recognize the status of women in society. Women are recurrent figures in his plays as Vasathi in "The Ascetic", Aparna in "Sacrifice", Princess Chitra in "Chitra", Prakriti in "Chandalika". Tagore creates Sumitra as most beautiful woman and yet sensible enough to sacrifice for the welfare of the State.

"Hate me, King, hate me, forget me I shall bear it bravely-but don't Break  
your manhood against a woman's charms"

R.P. Jhabvala is concerned with the psychological state of Indian women who undergo inexpressible sufferings in their marital life. She points out in her novels how agony in the mind of these women results from frustration in love, infidelity betrayal, divorce and disintegration in their marital life. Anita Desai dives deep into their working of protagonists and brings to light the hidden depth of human psychic mind of Indian women. "Cry, the peacock" is a story of an Indian woman Maya who undergoes traumatic experiences obsessed by forebodings and mental tension. Similarly Shashi Deshpande reveals the revolutionary sentiment of her woman characters. In the "The Binding Vine" she presents woman as a spineless wooden creature subjected to male domination. She concentrates on the portrayal of pathetic and heart revealing

condition of women in male dominated society.

The other novelist who won Booker Prize for literary achievement is Arundhati Roy. In her novel “The God of Small Things”, she evaluates the psychology of women in typical Indian social clime. The focus is on the traumatic experience of Ammu, who is terribly shocked and upset due to her foolish marriage with a Bengali young man. Roy has used psychoanalytic Theory of Freud to unveil the agonized mind of women characters.

Equality between women and men will not be achieved by legal change alone. How our society, our culture, communities and individuals view women and women’s equality will make a huge difference. In other words, people – including women themselves – have to believe in and support the idea that men and women are of equal value and worth. We need to see an end to narrow or negative attitudes about women and outdated stereotypes that maintain inequality and limit both women and men.

Tackling Media Sexism campaign of EVAW of which we are a member has given recommendations and these recommendations call on the government to examine Lord Justice Leveson’s proposals and to consider instituting a new press regulation regime which:

- Allows third parties to make complaints; and allows for thematic investigations as well as those on individual cases
- Has clear guidance about women’s equality in the text of the new code; and has accountable representative(s) of the equality sector as member(s) of the new body
- Makes newspapers’ membership of the new body compulsory
- Requires consistency between the broadcast watershed for sexually explicit material and newspapers.

The indecent Representation of Women Act 1986 provides for the regulation of representation of women in media. It prohibits the indecent representation of women through advertisements, books, paintings, figures or in any other manner. In spite of the laws, gender concerns in media is a serious concern today. Continued incidences of obscene depiction of women in TV and media call for a debate on the need of effective laws against it. Since Media is considered as the Fourth Estate, its function is to act as a guardian of the public interest. The media professional and writers need to be sensitized on gender issues and system of rewards may be developed for those who are able to portray women in positive manner.

## REFERENCES

1. Anand, Meenu (2006) *Commodification of Women; The Irony*. “Women’s Watch” Vol.3, Issue 3, April- June 2006
2. Nigam Shalu (2002), *Women, obscenity and the law*, *Legal news and views*, Vol 16 No.12, Social Action Trust [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/policy-research/attitudes-media-culture/](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/policy-research/attitudes-media-culture/)
3. Choudhury, M, (2000), *Feminism in Print Media*, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 2007
4. Desai, N, & Krishnaraj, M, (1990), *Women and Society in India*, New Delhi, Ajanta Prakashan.
5. Desai and Patel (1990), *Indian Women: Change and Challenge in the International Decade, 1975-1985*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan.
6. Jha, R: *Women in Print media: Initiating New Perspectives*, New Delhi, (1992), Northern book center.
7. Keval J. Kumar, *Mass Communication in Media*, (1998), Jaico, Bombay, pp.140-143.