

## Portrayal of Women by Media: The Changing Narratives

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### Abstract

Today media has saturated the globalised world. It is all pervasive to the extent of being omnipresent. Right from multiple television sets in our homes to newspaper at the doorstep, radio in the car, huge billboards all around, fliers in our inbox and most importantly this powerful gadget that has enslaved the world today – smart phone in hand – ensure that we are constantly being bombarded with media content in different formats. Media not only inform, educate and entertain us but also advertently or inadvertently influence our perceptions regarding the society that we live in. Researches prove that it is a potent force in influencing our opinions and shaping our beliefs. This paper attempts to examine how today's media portrays the Indian woman. The paper seeks to enquire if the Indian media today reinforces the stereotypical image of the Indian women or it represents the changing role of women. The paper concludes that the Indian media today acknowledges the changing role of the Indian woman to some extent. It also partially covers women-centric issues. However, much is still left to be achieved. Media needs to make more sincere efforts to discuss women-centric issues that help women realize and gain their rightful place in the society. Media should also make more efforts to present women in a progressive manner rather than strengthening the stereotypes.

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### Keywords:

Indian Media;  
Gender Narratives,  
Women Portrayal;  
Stereotype;  
Changing Role.

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### 1. Introduction

India is a young democracy. It is in the 73rd year of independence. A lot has been achieved in different spheres and much is still required. In a young democracy like India which is still in the nascent stage of development, media is expected to play a socially responsible role. In fact, media should be the link between the government and the citizenry. Media is expected to bring up the issues of public importance into the public sphere for further debates and discussions or appropriate action by the competent authorities. It must also aid development of the nation – be it social, economic, educational, rural etc. Watchdog journalism is also important for checking any wrongdoings or emerging trends which are detrimental to the very essence of democracy.

On one hand, the right kind of media content can positively reinforce beliefs that aid in keeping the social fabric intact and introduce changes in our perception of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable; on the other hand mindless media content can prove to be detrimental to bringing about social changes.

There was a time when the media content creation was primarily in the hands of men; thus it projected women as per the man's preferences. Media, that time, projected the role of women as per the whims and fancies of men. Such content reinforced the already existing prejudices against women. However, the

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scenario changed with the coming of digital revolution. Modern technology aided the birth of new media platforms which offered an opportunity to both men and women to bring forth their side of the story. This provided a voice to women. Women started bringing their issues and concerns to discussion boards using the new technology. Thus, the ongoing digital revolution opened new possibilities of accelerating the process of upliftment of women. But if it is misguided and uncontrolled, then it will decelerate the dream of making India an egalitarian society. Hence, it is worthwhile to understand the way in which women are portrayed in media and also the way women-centric issues are taken up by the Indian media today.

The manner in which media of any State treats women issues and the way in which it projects women is partially indicative of the prevailing attitude of society towards women. If not indicative, it surely contributes towards stereotyping women as majority of content consumers consciously or unconsciously tend to believe that media is a reflection of our society. That could be true or far from truth, but there's no doubt that media influences the way we view the larger socio-cultural picture of the society. And precisely because of this reason the depiction of women in the Indian media has always been of interest and concern to the social scientists. In view of all this, one can safely infer that media – from the journalistic point of view as well as other media content like films, fictions, soaps etc – greatly influences our mindset and if used intelligently can play a significant role in aiding social change. To this end, the paper attempts to examine how today's media portrays the Indian woman. The paper seeks to enquire if the Indian media today reinforces the stereotypical image of the Indian women or if it represents the changing role of women. This paper attempts to examine the gender narratives in the Indian media today.

## 2. Research Method

The researcher has collected the data for the undertaken study from secondary sources. The sources included books, research journals, magazines and web sites.

## 3. Results and Analysis

The Indian Media from the journalistic view point has also evolved over the decades. It has undergone an exciting journey from being a mission in the pre independence times to being recognized as a profession in early 70s to where it is today. Today, media is seen as an industry and being an industry, there are economic considerations as well. Also, one must remember that media in our country has been accorded a special status – the Fourth Estate—and this comes with a lot of responsibility.

Studies reveal that news and features relating to women get reasonable coverage in the mainstream newspapers and magazines today. Readers would agree that the front page of the morning newspaper does not ignore the gory crimes taking place against women. However, many a times one notices that the crime is sensationalized in order to increase the readership/TRP. Also, the picture is dismal if one talks about media coverage of social issues relating to women like equality of status and opportunity. Going by the statistics, it gets less than 9 percent coverage while sensational stories relating to women get almost 7 times more coverage. The sensational crime stories against women, especially from the upper strata of society, like Sheena Bora murder case not only get a better coverage in terms of space but also in terms of placement. Some recent studies of news stories make us conclude that sex and sensation are the primary motivation behind the reportage.

The English mainstream dailies also dwell on commodifying women. Supplements along with the main newspaper are full of blow ups of scantily clad women. In the vernacular press too, the depiction of women essentially gets a decent share only on coloured pages. Newspapers give space to crime, sports, politics, women achievements etc but women issues in general are neglected.

And stereotyping doesn't stop here. Women magazines have almost ten times more ads and advertorials promoting the likes of weight loss, a fairer skin tone than men's magazines. Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a woman's worth. According to a research study by Oyindrila Basu and Shiva Raman Pandey there are false concepts of beauty and perfectionism that are widespread in India. Their study reveals that TV actors (females) remain under immense psychological pressure to stay slim and slender; which is resulting in a growing tendency of anorexia among them. According to recent reports, over 75% of female characters in TV are underweight, and only one in twenty is above average in size. Also, it is seen that overweight actresses tend to receive negative comments from male characters about their bodies. Today's models weigh significantly less than the average Indian woman. Researches indicate that constant exposure to images of size zero female bodies and body shaming can have adverse effects leading to depression, loss of self-esteem and development of unhealthy eating habits in women.

Depiction of female characters in daily soaps – be it the protagonist or on the periphery of the narrative – should also be a matter of concern to us. Many of the popular daily soaps are depicting women and young females in a manner which is far away from the reality. They are often shown as being involved in conspiracy, illicit love triangles, creating misunderstandings in the family and actively participating in family discords, suicidal love affairs little caring about anything else than the individual matters. The female protagonists would usually adorn expensive attire and heavy gold and diamond jewelry and often unaware of the outside world. This conservative and negative portrayal of women in daily soaps is far from the changing gender roles and social milieu and represents only a small part of the larger picture.

It is also interesting to note how these popular TV serials, through the portrayal of such characters, portray women in a manner that unfortunately does not do justice to the changing role of women in the Indian socio-economic milieu. With the nation claiming to join footsteps in the march towards globalization and modernization where the State, with the help of its existing systems and new policies is aiming to strengthen the position of the marginalized women in our society, it does seem a little out of context to see contemporary TV serials and soaps projecting women more in a secondary role. The stereotypical characters of a wronged wife, a dominating mother-in-law, conspiring sisters-in-law may bear resemblance with a certain reality of society but we cannot ignore the changing and shifting patterns of identity of women within household. With education and exposure, the status of women in the average Indian household is surely changing. Education, awareness and consequent economic independence is giving a boost to today's woman. She is striving to become more confident and is no longer afraid to dream. Today's woman no longer identifies herself with a decked up doll yearning for her man's attention. But many of the daily soaps fail to reflect these changes and remain entrenched in certain deep-rooted notions that are hard to be erased away.

The situation, however, is not abysmal. It can be seen that there's a noticeable shift in the narrative now and we do have some daily soaps celebrating women protagonists for the grit, determination and strength of character rather than their physical assets and attributes. There are soaps on the Indian television that do not hesitate to take up issues typically considered stigmatized. They dwell the storyline on the inner character of the female protagonist rather than their physical assets.

Socially India has come a long way. Surely, even today gender disparity is a matter of concern but things are improving. With education and financial independence, the role of women in society has undergone a sea change. Today's woman is more confident and knows her mind. She's not afraid to question the stereotypes. The 'liberal' storytellers have captured this sentiment too. We have had highly popular and strong female characters like Anandi (who fought against rigid social malpractices or Kalyani Devi who represented transformation from a conservative and regressive mother-in-law to a real hero in *Balika Vadhu*). These daily soaps highlight the strength of character of these female protagonists while celebrating their physical imperfections. They undoubtedly are breaking the stereotypes and sending strong messages to the viewers. Some of these women characters are portrayed to be so comfortable in their skin, in spite of the unjust treatment that they meet not just by the society but also in their family, that it inspires. Be it the short statured Pinky or the dark skinned Purnima or the sexual crime survivor who can not be deterred to approach the authorities on the "social stigma" plea of her family -- they all reflect the changing times.

Advertising is one of the major media that affects our daily life consciously and unconsciously and contributes significantly in shaping our mindset in a much broader perspective. In recent years, Indian advertising has witnessed a noticeable transformation in the manner in which women are portrayed. The way women are depicted in advertising has changed to some extent, reflecting the changing role of women in society. Women today are no longer confined within the four walls of the household kitchen. Their aspiration to live their dreams against the odds also taught advertisers to think differently. Many of the marketers wisely utilized this transformation process to launch their product and advertisement strategically. There are two ways in which the advertising content is changing. There are a lot more partnerships and native content is being developed. So it's a positive move in terms of being more reflective of their audience. And this way brands also get closer to the content and tap into issues that matter to the Indian women. But again this change is still far from significant.

There may have been powerful campaigns breaking the stereotypes like Aerial (Share the Load Campaign) or the campaign against domestic violence (Bell Bajao – Breakthrough with Ministry of Women and Child Development) or Dabur Vatika Hair oil (Brave and Beautiful campaign) or Titan Raga 'Her Life Her Choices' Campaign or Tanishq jewellery ad that drives the point that even the oldest and the most traditional members of a family can learn to accept change but they can be counted on fingertips. Today, there are some ad campaigns with curvy models. There are also a few advertisements flaunting and celebrating physical

imperfections. However, advertisements objectifying women are far too many. The advertisers still exploit the country's obsession with the fair skin. There are advertisements depicting women nothing more than a commodity. It is high time that the Indian advertiser should hear the warning alarm and understand that incessant exposure to such messages has a negative impact on the viewers and society at large. It also undermines the status of women. How casual do we often take the female gender in the present times can be understood from the recent instance when so-called brand Hardik Pandya's apparent loose talk on a talk show. At that time, Hardik Pandya was endorsing many brands including Gillette. Gillette as a brand took a stand and removed the cricketer as its brand ambassador for the Indian market. What is appalling is that even in 2020 we continue objectifying women. Imagine in the time of Me Too movement, we have ad campaigns glorifying sexual harassment at work. Most advertisers who can not look at women in a progressive and modern avatar – whether it is a fairness cream ad or a jewellery brand that conveys 'getting married' is what every girl dreams of or a mango drink advertisement that uses a woman celebrity in a seductive manner (Slice) are doing a great disservice to the society.

Cinema is considered the reflection of society. It has always been viewed as a significant point of reference for gaining an insight into the prevailing Indian culture. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of the modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. Hindi cinema has influenced the way in which people perceive various aspects of their own lives. It has evolved with the changing times. Anurag Basu, in a recent interview to an FM channel said – We are living in the times of good cinema. Past few years have witnessed the Hindi Cinema breaking the stereotypes related to women and the phenomenon of the Indian Woman 'coming-of-age'.

We have had many films highlighting women issues not just pulling off well but also being box office hits. A decade back, a film without a male superstar could never be taken seriously. But today, we can happily boast of films like Kangana Ranaut's *Queen*, Vidya Balan's *Kahaani* or Rani Mukherjee's *Mardaani* and *Secret Superstar*. The biopics on women sports stars like Mary Kom and *Saand ki Aankh* produced by Anurag Kashyap have also been box office hits. And then we have films like *Dangal* and its oft quoted dialogue 'Mhaari Chorriyan ke chhoron se kam sai'. Today the Indian directors do not shy away from making women-centric films which represent the changing times – be it *Pink* or *Panga* or a film like *Lipstick under My Burqa* or *Sri Devi's English Vinglish*. The Indian film industry surely is not shying away from showcasing the changing times and breaking the stereotypes. Film makers are no longer hesitant to take up often-considered taboo subjects. They are now making women-centric films and often depict a female lead that is not stereotypically beautiful. However, it is pertinent to mention here that despite the progress that Bollywood films have made and the increasing accessibility of these films, objectification of women still continues in most of the Indian movies in the form of item numbers.

#### 4. Conclusion

Media is a potent tool and has the power to influence the mainstream narrative and break stereotypes. The portrayal of women in media has surely improved. The worst excesses have been removed and today the Indian media is taking baby steps towards depicting the portrayal of women and women-centric issues with sensitivity and caution. Change has been initiated but there is still a long way to go. Indian media must wholeheartedly acknowledge and embrace the changing gender roles in the society and also support in efforts to make India an egalitarian society. Media needs to portray women protagonists in a progressive manner.

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