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Beneath the Lines: Re-reading the Women's Magazines of Kerala

Amrutha Mohan

Independent Researcher

MA (2014-16)

Institute of English

University of Kerala,

Kerala, India

Abstract

Mass media, whether it be print, visual or digital acts as one of the most affluent means of communication. Magazines are one of the most popular forms of media which attract a large number of readers. The women's magazines in Kerala are widely circulated among the populace. These magazines which are available with glossy cover pages also carry a bulk of advertisements in it. The content of these magazines including the advertisements is most often soaked with the ideologies propagated by the dominant sections of the society. They propagate elite class ideologies and promote gender disparities visibly or invisibly. Pertaining to the ubiquitous nature of women's magazines in Kerala and its constant bragging about being a friend and guide to Kerala women, the paper tries to unfurl the strands of class hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies that has been interlaced into the discursive fabric of women's magazines in Kerala, with special focus on *Vanitha*, which has a wide readership all over the state.

Keywords- *Class, Consumer Culture, Gender, Patriarchy, Women, Women's Magazines*

Introduction

Mass media plays a revolutionary role in constructing and disseminating messages among the populace. Magazines are one of the popular forms of print media that reaches across a wide range of readers. Women's magazines in Kerala are a ubiquitous entity which is present in all the nook and corners of the state. *Vanitha*, *Grihalekshmi* and *Mahilaratnam* are the most popular among the lot. The title of some of these magazines like *Grihalekshmi* and *Mahilaratnam* itself is a matter of intrigue. The titles like *Grihalekshmi* (meaning "Lekshmi of the House") and *Mahilaratnam* (meaning "Gem of a woman") cement the notion of "ideal womanhood".

These magazines employ diverse varieties of marketing techniques to capture the minds of readers. Despite the regular issues of the magazines covering routine topics, some issues are dedicated exclusively for particular themes, which are emphasized in the cover page of the magazine itself, like Housing special, Jewellery special, parenting special etc. Such special issues of the magazine deal with the current trends in the specialized area.

Most of the articles and advertisements that fill up the pages of these women's magazines tend to create an imaginary space in the minds of audience. The photographs of the houses which adorn the magazine wantonly portray palatial mansions. Their interiors are evinced as clean and fashionably arranged. Furthermore, articles which suggest how to build a two tier house in low cost or what all should be taken care of when you revamp your house are also present. Such renovations proposed in the magazines are usually not a small scale project which could be afforded by the middle or lower class readers. But the repeated images of renovated houses, mansions or palatial interiors create a desire in the minds of readers to possess such apartments. Similarly, some editions of the magazines also dedicate pages for narratives concerning travels to enchanting tourist destinations. To a majority of readers who couldn't afford time or money for travel, such imaginary lands will be a matter of fascination. These women's magazines thus play upon the desires and fantasies of the reading by creating a dream world which is not usually within the grasp of the middle class. Even though the readers are aware of the unattainability of these fictitious worlds the narratives and images regarding them produces a sense of visual gratification for the readers. "Consumer culture necessarily promotes ambivalence; it offers a world beyond scarcity and hardship, the dream of abundance" (Featherstone 24). Thus, these magazines entice the readers by legitimizing elite class ideologies. According to John Fiske, 'Social norms are ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of classes but are accepted as natural by other classes, even when the interests of those other classes are directly opposed by the ideology reproduced by living life according to those norms' (1268).

The cover pages of these magazines are usually adorned by the flawless fair face of an actress. Even though *Vanitha* publishes articles on women who have exemplary achievements in scientific, administrative, social or academic fields, none of these women are selected for the cover pages. Sometimes, male celebrities, especially actors also occupy the cover page. *Vanitha* boasts of being the first magazine in Kerala, to bring a transgender on its cover page. Even when we applaud their initiative, it has to be noted that such an inclusion happened only a single time. The socio-political situation at that point of time in Kerala played a significant role in this 'progressive' step taken by the magazine, as the problems pertaining to LGBT communities were widely discussed and debated in media and by public in general at that point of time. Even in such a situation, the magazine was careful not to choose a dark skinned figure from the transgender community. Also when the

magazine brags of its non-conformist act of including a transgender in its cover page, it can be deemed as another sort of marketing strategy which persuades the reader into believing that the magazine have something exclusive to offer. Whatever be the ideological underpinnings we can appreciate their effort, but should be aware that the problems of the marginalized communities don't end with such an inclusion in the cover page, they should be accepted into the mainstream and their miseries must be alleviated. Furthermore, it has to be underscored that no magazines were 'courageous' enough to bring lesbian or gay couples on their cover pages. This again highlights how these magazines which are basically a commodity to be consumed by the readers reveal a politics of segregation while representing the marginalized communities.

Some of the frequent write ups that are apparent in these magazines seize the reader's attention by posing certain questions in the form of titles like how to make a good fish molly? How to stitch this cute frock for your little angel? How to get a fair skin without using chemicals? How to get long beautiful hair? How to look after your baby? How to decorate your interiors? The articles regarding enhancement of beauty and dieting also fills the inner pages of the magazines. Recipes usually prepared by women and cooking tips are also regularly included in the magazine. Latest trends in fashion and specially designed outfits for festivals like Onam, Eid and Christmas or the fabrics and colours suiting each season of the year are also displayed. Size zero models wearing ultra modern or specially designed costumes adorn these pages which prove to be a significant attraction for readers. Again, such a representation pertains to the upper class who can afford expensive outfits, suiting their moods, seasons and fiestas. The last pages of the magazines are usually devoted to news of celebrities, about their public and private life usually referred to as the 'gossip columns'. Peeping into another person's life and being satisfied by having a glimpse of it is a character which is usually attributed to women. Such gossip columns legitimize these stereotypical notions about women. Heated discussions on social, political or economic matters that are happening around the globe are not regarded as a woman's cup of tea.

Most of these magazines are replete with advertisements which "generate a desire for fulfillment (through consumption)" (Storey, 1989; 119). Majority of the pages in these women's magazines are punctuated with plethora of advertisements. They are also enwrapped with culturally constructed meanings to be decoded by the consumers. They act as the most alluring bait put in front of the consumers to sell the products. Advertisements are carefully designed and structured to cater to the anxieties, desires and pleasures of the readers and hence exert significant influence on them. "Advertising" according to Schroder is "the engine of consumption" (141).

These advertisements mostly cater to the construction of feminine identities and gender roles pertaining to male fantasies. Advertisements of Textiles, Jeweller's, under garments, kitchen utensils,

washing powders and detergents are the most popular among these advertisements. Huge Chunks of pages are dedicated to advertisements of ladies' inner wears. Fair skinned, partially naked, thin women in sensuous postures are displayed in most of these advertisements. It is evident that the target of such advertisements is not women readers but is purposely annexed to satisfy the male readers of the magazine.

The family portrayed in all the advertisements strictly adheres to the notion of heteronormativity. A happy family in these magazines is a fair skinned family, in palatial background with a sturdy male figure as its centre. The female figure, preferably the wife is submissive, mostly leaning to her husband's shoulder for support. The advertisements of a popular apartment used to adorn the first pages of *Vanitha* last year. The advertisement displays a sturdy confident man in his executive outfits, and the airplane in the backdrop suggests a journey abroad. The tagline of the ad proclaims that 'when you have travelled the world, you will feel home at' this palatial apartment. A female figure is present in another part of the ad, but, she is not travelling anywhere. She is static and is cosily sitting with her husband and child, enjoying the familial bliss. It is not quite sure whether the couple is married or whether they are having a live-in relationship. But the advertisement projects a hetero normative family and presents a woman who is intimately associated with the familial space.

In gestures, postures and in familial roles women are portrayed as fragile and submissive. Men are absent in most of the advertisements related to baby care, cooking and washing. Advertisements of food products display how women are intimately related to the space of kitchen. Their physiognomy is marked with a jovial expression. They never seem to have a dull, complaining and stressful face. Absence of males in most of these ads indirectly tempts the reader into believing that he is in the public sphere. The private space of kitchen is the realm of women. In some advertisements, women also take up the role of a 'dietician', who takes care of her husband's health by using quality cooking products.

Women are also portrayed in dummy postures in the advertisements of household utensils and products. A woman sitting in sensuous posture is depicted in the advertisement of a popular brand of tiles and has superficially nothing to do with the advertisement. But such a representation is a deliberate one, as the reader unknowingly compares the glossy fair skin of the model with the glowing texture of the tile or marble.

Advertisements of textiles and jeweller's are displayed in such a way that it structures the imagination of its readers. Fair skinned, ultra thin brides decked up in gold and silk have already affected the imagination of Keralites. Such advertisements rekindle the desire for pompous weddings, not only by these images, but also by the taglines that suggests that the bride decked up in gold is a princess. Such advertisements profess that beauty, modesty and dignity of the bride is highlighted by

her precious accessories and outfits and it has nothing to do with their personality or profession. A pioneering Jewellers' advertisements which were featured in *Vanitha* salute epic women like Sita, Jodha, Noorjahan and Draupadi not only for their beauty but also for being good partners for their husbands.

Another popular advertisement is that of the fair skin products. They proclaim that being dark is a sin. In order to be successful, girls have to be fair. The advertisements emphasize that a little more melanin pigmentation in skin can hamper your upward mobility in society. The advertisements of fair skin products like *Fair and Lovely*, *No Scar* and *In-shape* (product to make belly look flat) emphasize smooth skin, lean figure and flat belly as perfect parameters of beauty.

It is evident that the advertisements in popular women's magazines project and propagate denigrated, distorted and disciplined images of women. Women in magazine advertisements are intimately associated with the private spaces of home and bask in the glory of domesticity. The models are skinny, fair and tall, and fit into the perfect parameters of beauty myths constructed by patriarchy. Solidifying Erving Goffman's suggestions in his work *Gender Advertisements*, women in all these advertisements are relatively smaller when compared with men, have a withdrawn gaze and are more often characterized by a gesture of touching themselves. They are depicted in such a way to cater to the male voyeuristic pleasures. They always appear as fragile, shy and submissive and present themselves like mannequins- in quiescent postures, with smooth and flawless skin- with ersatz smiles- But, without imagination, intellect and judgments. The image of woman that emerges from these advertisements are therefore, "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home; (...) It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?" (Friedan 32).

Conclusion

Thus, women in magazine ads are enwrapped in the private spaces of home and domesticity. Employed women are rarely portrayed. Even if depicted, the advertisements has proclivity to depict working urbane women, who are engaged in white collar jobs. Moreover these advertisements portray elite class ideologies and life style. "A commodity is reduced to a sign when abstract qualities are represented as a product or object. The object comes to stand in for particular emotional or social status" (Nayar, 126). Hedonistic pleasures are glorified and the readers are tempted to adhere to these pleasures. Advertisements whether it appears in print, visual or digital media are thus discourses which are engaged in a process of ideological conditioning

Popular women's magazines of Kerala have thus taken up a discursive structure. Specific codes of 'femininity' and masculinity' are encoded in its structure. Not only it contributes to the ideals of patriarchy but also adversely influences the female imagination, by injecting the notions of an ideal femininity. Thus women's magazines of Kerala act as harbingers who promulgate class and gender biases. Women's magazines which act as both medium and message should shed off such biases and double standards. They should throw light into the miseries and survival of the marginalised sections of the society irrespective of their caste and class. Rather than inculcating the mythified notions of feminine beauty and defining stereotypical roles for women it should focus more on their emancipation. If magazines wipe off such blemishes caused by biases it will lead to revolutionary changes in the perceptions of the society and will ultimately helps in remoulding and redefining the society.

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