

FRAGMENTED PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN POPULAR CULTURE

Dr. Kavita Singh

*Asstt. Prof., (Selection Grade), S. Sobha Singh Deptt. of Fine Arts,
Punjabi University, Patiala*

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Dr. Kavita Singh,

FRAGMENTED
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN
IN POPULAR CULTURE,

Artistic Narration 2018,
Vol. IX, No.1, pp.19-26

[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=485](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=485)

Abstract

Popular culture has invaded our homes and ethos and is constantly shaping our mindsets, behavioral changes, perceptions, ideologies, aspirations and goals. Mass media, T.V., Bollywood cinema, print-media ads, songs and dances perpetuate quick sell cheap thrills through visuals and words to cater to the last man in the street and today popular culture is a reverberating and enthralling industry which thrives on the staple diet of consumerism. Though the debate is not new but the question persists: why the popular culture is not able to go beyond the commodification of women and why female bodies and skin shows are incorporated to sell even a cold drink or an ice-cream? Mass awareness to counter this vulgar and shameless portrayal of women in the popular culture is the need of the hour. It is a happy sign that a large number of dedicated, talented, sensitive and serious women creative luminaries engaged in painting, music, poetry, literature and theatre have taken upon themselves the task to create awareness about the mass victimization, exploitation, harassment, torture, deprivation and prejudices which stand in the way to their progress and development through their remarkable works of art. One sincerely hopes that their efforts will bear fruit and they would be able to create a harmonious gender-sensitive atmosphere at workplaces and in homes.

Keywords : *Popular Culture, Feminism, Feminist, Feminazi, Feminazism, Commodification, Visual and Print-Media, Consumerism, Mass Media, Bindi, Goddess Diana, Bastar Tribe, Polychromatic Sculptures, Video-graphs, Kinnari, Kamdhenu, Hathiyogini Kali, Hathiyogini Shakti, Sati.*

Broadly speaking the 'Popular Culture' can be described as the one that is widespread and has mass following and it is supposed to project the cultural and traditional ethos and aspirations of mainstream populace deriving strength from the components of historical and circumstantial factors, social and psychological environs shaped by tradition, socio-religious and economic values and conditions. But many a times 'Popular Culture' **(Plate No.1)** may carry strongly derogative connotations as the opposite or the debasement of 'high' culture and 'art' proper;¹ or it may be celebrated as a convenient, cheap and lusty readily available assembly-line counter-culture² which thrills but kills. This explains the everyday, unremarkable, and ordinary;³ or it may refer to dramatic eruptions against the established, normative order. It may pertain to the culture of 'the people', in the sense of folk culture; or it may refer exclusively to products of modern mass media in industrialized, capitalist societies, emphasizing their wide popularity, circulation, and saturation; or it may pertain to something in-between- a non-elite subculture which may eventually transform into a mass phenomenon.⁴ In its sense as mass culture, 'Popular Culture' is often identified as an instrument for the imposition of hegemonic ideas⁵ and has the potential to dismantle the well-established norms and ideals. Consumerism and commercial ideologies have been successfully unleashing a mass hysteria coated with the vulgar titillation which has resulted in objectification and commoditization of women as objects of sex as they believe that sex always sells. 'Popular Culture' has invaded our homes and ethos and is constantly shaping our mindsets, behavioral changes, perceptions, ideologies, aspirations and goals. Mass media, T.V., Bollywood cinema, print-media ads, songs and dances perpetuate quick sell cheap thrills through visuals and words to cater to the last man in the street and today popular culture is a reverberating and enthralling industry which thrives on the staple diet of consumerism.

The highbrow corporate type well educated and pushing management people generally ask you are you a 'Feminist' or 'Feminazi'? When you draw their attention to the disgusting so called creative advertisements like actor Katrina Kaif provocatively caressing a ripe mango and deriving gratification from a drop of juice on her lips to sell a summer drink that mothers routinely buy for their children. **(Plate No.2)** If questioning sexuality, titillation and commodification of women in advertisements, films, television, music chartbusters- all determinants of popular culture that influence society's attitudes towards its women – turns us into 'Feminazis' then more such 'Feminazism' is called for. How else should we respond to chart-buster lyrics like 'I am a Tandoori *murgi*, drink me down with alcohol' (from the popular film song Fevicol Se).⁶**(Plate No.3)** Such songs are thrown on women at street corners and railway stations, in the corridors of schools and colleges, buses and markets to harass and stalk them? So much so even innocent looking toddlers are made to talk in damaging words such as girlfriends are useless they are very demanding

says a four years old boy to a girl of three years in a McDonald's Ad. Though the debate is not new but the question persists: why the popular culture is not able to go beyond the commodification of women and why female bodies and skin shows are incorporated to sell even a cold drink or an ice-cream? Women rights activist and director of Centre for Social Research Dr. Ranjana Kumari says, "*For men there is either an image of Bharatiya nari, coy, shy and helpless or a sexual object for male pleasure*". The image in popular culture, she explains, means "*men aspire to touch and feel her body; readily see other women in that mould also*". "*We live in a segmented reality where some sections of media are in the Dark Ages. Again and again the ad pandits and media mughals persist that sex sells and there is an inbuilt abhorrence for civilized values*", says Prasoon Joshi, a well known adman. The persistence with objectification or commodification caters to their market idiom and they seem to be horribly ignorant about the psychological and moral degradation which harms the very fabric of our society. After the Delhi gang-rape, filmmaker Farhan Akhtar wrote in a weekly magazine: "*I must look inward to see if the industry I belong to could be partially or wholly responsible in propagating this kind of mindset. And I must say, sadly so, the answer is yes.*" There is a thin line between vulgarity or titillation which is crossed, intentionally by the creators of popular culture for their vested interests.

Creative people of this country specially makers of mainstream films and admen seem to be stuck with damning perceptions that first of all woman is a body then everything else either they are intentionally ignoring her new found victories or they have failed miserably to figure out a way of presenting the new woman. "*Portrayal of women in a certain way does lead to wrapped attitudes. Filmmakers do have a certain responsibility about such portrayals and they need to take it seriously*", says a renowned filmmaker Rema Kagti. Whereas Shoojit Sircar filmmaker admits that "*We are late to understand that women should be known for their achieved identity. It is a fault on our part in the industry that we don't portray them in a progressive manner*". In the same breath renowned adman Prasoon Joshi explains that "*It is a two-way traffic but this could be the tipping point for films and ads to start making radical changes. We can't say how to gender-sensitize people when their stomachs are not full*".

Common images of women in the media, according to UNESCO report, are "*the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard faced corporate and a political climber*". Listed in that order, the 2009 report stated that given the present rate of stereotyping women, it could take 75 years to achieve fair portrayal in the media.⁷ Filmmaker Anees Bazmi says: "*there are filmmakers who portray women in derogatory manner. It has a negative impact but they cannot solely be blamed for this because youngsters learn more from the internet today.*" But Dr. Ranjana Kumari, a women's

rights campaigner and director of Centre for Social Research asks why offensive film songs go unchallenged. “*The very word item means ‘maal’ or property. Such words and phrases give the society a frame in which to see women.*” Many film directors clarifying their image say that such songs, roles, ads are willingly performed by actresses as they see it as a display of women’s empowerment and they do it to rake in the maximum money because popular cinema, T.V., ads are a big business. Beside the moral responsibility strict laws can halt the trend.

It is some solace that a silent revolution is being carried out by women themselves with liberated souls and minds ushering in a new dawn in the form of cultural and literary gender-sensitive awareness where they have taken from themselves the task of destroying the image heaped upon them by the popular culture. These sensitive souls are today analyzing critically the issues important to them as well as to the society through their creative works such as paintings, photographs, installations, video-filming, poetry and theatre and while doing so they are engaged in understanding the myths and realities facing them. These women artists, writers, theatre persons and lyricists are contributing their might in salvaging the situations by directing their creative potentials in demystifying certain gender specific issues- right from the importance of a girl child to their deprivation and poverty, education and training, their health issues, violence against women at home and workplaces, their rights and educating and reminding the media of their responsibilities towards women which is the axis around which the progress of a society and a nation revolves.

Highlighting the Gender Inequality and Male Indifference

Though to my mind great artist Amrita Shergil was perhaps the first woman artist in India aptly known as ‘Mother of Modern Art in India’ who had sown the seeds of liberation of mind and body of women way back in 1929 through her sensitive portrayal of the condition of women in her paintings filled with pensive looking powerless groups of women silently engaged in doing the mundane chores of daily life toiling and suffering without a glimmer of hope.⁸

Self-realization and Recognition of Women Power

Amongst the stalwarts is internationally renowned artist Bharti Kher who proudly proclaims ‘*Yes I am a Feminist*’. (Plate No.4) Bharti has a fascination for things large and small- from the hearts of blue sperm whales to ‘*bindis*’ shaped like sperm underlining the fact that a woman is power and a creator; a representative of god and a messenger of peace and harmony. The skin speaks a language not its own these *bindis* are like skin- an epidermal filter to convey the psychological and physiological melodies and maladies lurking deep under a women’s skin that is her mind.

Sense of Protection and Safety

In another work she has captured the all prevalent vulnerability though she aspires for a cake shown in this work underlining the fact that she is a person too and has desires. She is shown carrying a gun which means many people carry guns not because they are necessarily aggressive but because they feel the need for protection. Feminism is a symbolic gun which relates to her safety and protection as ‘Goddess Diana’ carrying a bow and arrow in the masterpieces painted during the renaissance period in Europe.⁹ **(Plate No.5)**

Dissemination of Knowledge Channels

Another artist of the same clan is renowned artist, sculptor and filmmaker Navjot Altaf for me she says “*Feminism is a way of life, a critical awareness of the word as a woman. I have constantly been interested in the existence of several knowledge systems and how some are always glossed over by the dominant males. I have always tried to manifest this plurality as she has worked extensively with tribals in Bastar and continue to probe how environmental concerns often pose questions of development.*” Her sensitive polychromatic sculptures and video-graphs are full of sarcasm, wit and intellect and she uses deep wisdom found in the mythical tales of tribal women whom she finds more liberated than their urban sisters. Understanding the systems created by knowledge providers lack in their effort to equally distribute the halo of light in the context of women. Thus the real sufferers who are lurking in the darkness of ignorance are women.¹⁰ **(Plate No.6)**

Fears and Insecurities

To sum up the essence of this truthful submission, I wish to quote the words of great woman artist- Anupam Sud and I quote, “*I paint the female body as I am most familiar with it. It is my territory. It isn’t glamorous for me as it is for men. For women, it’s a source of existence and pain. Men can’t understand the fear associated with the body. For them, night can be beautiful. For a woman, it is scary if she is alone and somebody approaches her in the darkness-what is looming out there? She feels insecure.*”¹¹ **(Plate No.7)**

Gender Prejudice

Exploring sensitive issues like modesty and femininity can be as complex as intriguing. But for someone as Gogi Saroj Pal, who considers art as her religion, adding a touch of reality to feminism with the stroke of a brush is just a way of life. Described as the first feminist woman painter of modern Indian art, Gogi Saroj Pal has consistently explored the condition and lives of women through her paintings. Taking up issues of gender prejudice in inimitable style, she flawlessly breathes life into her figures using painting brushes and a rich palette. In her paintings, Gogi Saroj Pal explores a vast reserve of India’s myths, fables

and folklore. But she was not content with *Ganesh*, *Durga*, *Mahisasurmardini* and the like. She was among the first to recover significant mythical figures and forms, prominently the 'Kinnari' (female version of the centaur) (**Plate No.8**), 'Kamdhenu' (half-woman, half-cow), 'Hathyogini Kali' and 'Hathyogini Shakti'.¹²

Sufferer of Patriarchal Horror

Artist Vasudha Thozhur's 'Untouchable' recalls the Hindu practice of 'Sati', in which a widow commits suicide on her husband's pyre. In her transgressive treatment of this patriarchal horror, Thozhur paints herself seated defiantly on a burning pile of wood, inviolable and untouched by the flames. (**Plate No.9**)

The promising names who are engaged in telling the story of a woman through their canvases are a brave breed and they include Sheba Chhachhi, Anju Dodiya (**Plate No.10**), Nalini Malini, Shukla Samant, Nilima Sheikh, Anita Dube, Shilpa Gupta, Rekha Rodwittiya, Rini Dhumal, Vasundhara Tiwari, Jaya Ganguli, Jayashree Chakravarty, Rummana Hussain, Mithu Sen and so on.

The new generation of women artists is also not lagging behind and there is a wisp of fresh air blowing cross their minds and hearts and new windows are opening up to welcome the new awareness which is crumbling the age old edifices of monumental male-oriented prejudices and biases about the one half of the population of this world. Awareness of women's rights is a step in right direction which will ensure peace, safety and security while she performs her duties as an equal citizen in society. She deserves monumental support and encouragement in connection with her rights and privileges. Visual media and artistic endeavours undertaken by the writers, poets and painters can facilitate and restore her rightful status in the modern world which is full of pulls and strains and a mammoth hindrance on the road to achieve excellence in women's development.

References

- Mitra, Ananda; 1993, *Television and Popular Culture in India: A Study of the Mahabharat*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p.52-60
- Storey, John; 1997 (1993), *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 2nd edn, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, London/New York, p.130-134
- Jain, Kajri; 1995 (1992), *On the Every-day and the National Pencil: Calendars in Post-colonial India*, Journal of Arts and Ideas, p.27-28: 57-89
- Uberoi, Patricia; 2006, *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.4
- Kazmi, Fareed; 1999, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p.67-68
- Koppikar, Smruti; Not a Fair Portrayal, *Hindustan Times*, September 8, 2013.

Ibid

Mago, Pran Nath; 2000, Contemporary Art in India- A Perspective, National Book Trust, New Delhi, p.37-38

Raaj, Neelam; Yes, I am a Feminist, Times of India, Delhi, April 30, 2010.

Dam, Abhirup; Reflections on Self and the World, The Sunday Guardian, September 28, 2013.

Menon, Anjolie Ela; 2001, Autobiographies, Sheer and Raw- the Body, Outlook, The Weekly Newsmagazine, New Delhi, p.37

Sharma, Moushumi; September 12, 2011, Celebrating Womanhood with a Brush's Stroke, The Asian Age, Delhi.



Plate no. 1

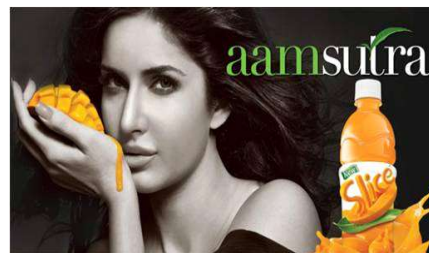


Plate no. 2



Plate no. 3



Plate no. 4

FRAGMENTED PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN POPULAR CULTURE

Dr. Kavita Singh



Plate no. 5



Plate no. 6

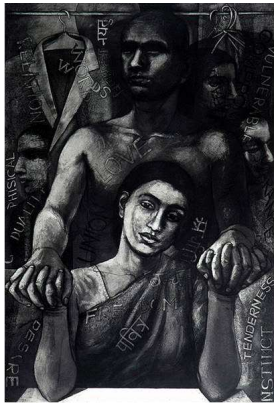


Plate no. 7



Plate no. 8

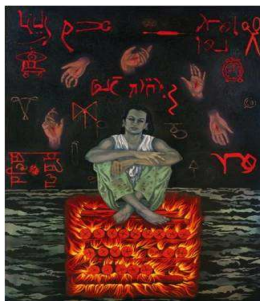


Plate no. 9

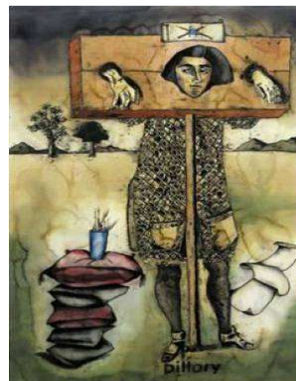


Plate no. 10