

Cinematic Women: Exploring the 'Self' in Select Advertisement

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Gender parity is not just good for women it is good for societies-Angelica Fuentes,

AF Foundation Mexico

Abstract

The world we are living in, is the world that is far away from our expectations. This is not that "Utopian World" of our dreams or which we have imagined in our thoughts. There are certain things that differentiate this realistic world from the ideal world of our imagination. Today I am going to talk about one of those things that clarifies this difference between the two worlds, in this respect I would like to focus on the topic of exploring the self in the cinematic world that can be studied under the topic of gender issues, this is something we have already talked about a lot but still attract us to explore those different aspects which remained unnoticed or unexplored. In this paper I want to talk about the representation of the world depicted in advertisements and its cinematic adaption that shows how it varies from the real world. A few days ago I was scrolling my screen and I got struck by some advertisements which were unrealistically real. Some of them were made to celebrate the spirit of womanhood on Women's Day while others were to celebrate the motherhood as well. Some of them were talking about the concept of beauty and some of them were based on the theme of "imperfectly perfect". No doubt such ads please us for a few minutes, I was also overwhelmed by the initiative of these advertisements then I decided to analyze these ads from the perspective of cinematic women, an exploration of self that can be a subject matter of gender studies as well as cultural materialism also to some extent.

Key Words

Gender studies, Cultural materialism, Cinematic advertisements and Marketing

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These ads portray a world that actually exists nowhere, though I salute to their spirit of celebrating womanhood in different ways, I personally admire their courage to introduce new ideas and concepts that are worth of analyzing as a part of gender studies and cultural materialism. Gender studies is nothing new in literature, it is not just a postmodern theory in literature, rather it was started at the very beginning of feminism and with the thoughts of Mary Wollstonecraft who is considered the first feminist critic who explored gender inequality in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792. She rejected the established idea of the inferiority of women to men, she projected against this notion and talked about the necessity of education for women which is a basic right and need of a woman like a man. Also she proposed that this gender or gender roles and not natural rather they are socially constructed. They are created for their personal benefit.

Later on feministic critic **Simon De Beauvoir** in her famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949 in French and 1984 English), talks about the role of patriarchal society in mystifying and stereotyping the woman folk. A woman is actually constructed by men and this man-made society-

“One is not born a woman but becomes one”- (pg. 267, *The Second Sex*, 1984)

She emphasized that patriarchy has created this difference and inequality between men and women, it is completely socially constructed and somewhere women have accepted this man-made identity of themselves. She believed that sex is biological but gender is socially constructed to maintain this inequality in the society. Anthropologist, Gayle S. Rubin also believed in same theory that *sex is counted sex only when it is culturally determined and obtained*.

It is clearly mentioned that the gender is a system of roles and values that are assigned in the reference to biological traits and functions. The feminist theory believes that this gender is an ideology that is based on social performance and biological differences. Thus we can say that the identity of woman is not the one with which she is born, it is the identity and the role that is assigned to her by this male-controlled society.

Later in the 1980s and 1990s the postmodern feminist critics reconstructed the idea of gender. According to Judith Butler, the gender is not fixed or stable, it is not about the roles and duties assigned or imposed by the society rather it is about performance or roles performed by an individual. This is not associated with women only rather it is equally related to men also and how we enact that role, these roles are not imposed, they can be negotiated or altered as per the individuals. It depends on the different cultural frameworks in particular contexts. Its meaning can be

associated with the repetition of performances; the role is not fixed it is performance-based- **“Identity is performatively constituted by the very expression that is said to be its results”** – (Gender Trouble: Feminism and subversion of identity, page no. 24-25- Judith Butler, 1990)

These expressions are the medium of the representations of discourses that prevail in society. The way men and women express themselves through their behavior, manners, clothing, body functioning etc, unravel their gender. A woman becomes a woman by the role she plays repeatedly. That clearly indicates that gender is decided by your performance only.

In the light of such feminist terms or concepts I would like to discuss some advertisements which will help us to understand this concept of gender and explore the quest of finding ‘self’ in it. There is an advertisement of Prega-news which was released on 27 April 2022, featuring Apoorva Arora, promoting the idea #sheisimperfectlyperfect. This was something new to introduce on Mother’s Day. In this advertisement people are working on their campaign for Mother’s Day, they want to introduce something new and innovative, there is a lady named Radhika in the office who is a mother of a newly born child. Being a mother her role is assigned to her, and she is fulfilling that very well too. She gets a call from her helping assistant and gets to know that she forgot to order formula milk for her child, she becomes restless and starts blaming herself, for how can she forget it. Being a mother it’s her responsibility to take care of her child and if she fails in it, it can affect her child and her performance as a mother too, as other people will judge her for not being a perfect mother. We find that the lady is so traumatized that she questions to herself whether she is a good mother or not. Being a working mother she finds herself helpless. Meanwhile she got a call for a meeting presentation where they were working on the idea of #perfectmaa. This idea is introduced with the help of a picture that represents their theme of Mother’s Day that of a perfect Maa. A picture of a lady having multiple hands, holding multiple things at the same time, which represents her responsibilities as a mother, homemaker and a working woman also.

In this picture we find a working mother who is balancing work and household duties simultaneously. This picture portrays the image of a woman performing multiple roles. She becomes the embodiment of perfection who can manage everything all together. While portraying this picture everybody present in the meeting agreed to this caption #perfectmaa, because they themselves have seen their mothers or wives performing such duties for a long time, and that’s why they call it perfection, they take it like a tribute to their mothers. It proves that the identity of a woman is created by the roles performed by her. The most beautiful aspect of this advertisement

has been presented by the character named Saniya, who disagrees with this idea of perfection. She simply makes it clear that perfection cannot be defined by these roles fulfilled by the women rather such things traumatize females for not being perfect in the roles of a mother, homemaker or a working woman etc. Through this character Prega News emphasized on #sheisimperfectlyperfect because nobody can be perfect, and it is absolutely fine to be imperfect sometimes, one should embrace it wholeheartedly as it makes no difference. This ad adores the spirit of being imperfectly perfect.

Now there is a question of whether this idea of being imperfect is acceptable in the society or not. Whether such ads are just to please the audience or fulfill any role in the reformation of society. Here we can see the impact of cultural materialism-when one of the characters, says that this idea won't work, this won't give them any profit. The idea of cultural materialism flourished on the surface. Cultural materialism is an anthropological and literary theory that examines how economic and social factors shape culture. It emphasizes how material conditions of a society work in shaping culture which includes values, beliefs and practices that explore how power structures and economic systems impact cultural expressions in the society. Here also we can see this materialism is affecting our society and shaping it accordingly. Initially they believe that power discourse lies in the hands of Man only, if you assume it differently, this will challenge the very norms of power structure and economic system as well. That's why one of the characters in the advertisement says that this idea of imperfectly perfect women won't benefit them, because people are used to of such stereotyped things, and they cannot accept new concepts easily. For them, the mother is the symbol of perfection, you cannot challenge their beliefs which further shape the society by assigning particular roles and identities to individuals. Hence identity is constituted performatively.

Next in this row I would like to add another advertisement of Prega news-of Women's Day 2022 featuring Sayantani Ghosh. This ad celebrates the boundless spirit of women that shows #shecancarryboth. It shows how a struggling model is perplexed about her pregnancy as she is quite insecure regarding her career. She believes that this pregnancy will ruin her modeling career. Then in the waiting room of the railway station, she saw three women, one of them was from the corporate sector and was proudly working on her laptop, another lady was struggling as a mother as her newborn daughter was crying and she was making efforts to calm her down. The third character is of a sweeper who is cleaning the room and she advises the mother on how to pacify her baby. The sweeper simply mentioned that she is the mother of three children and fulfills her duty as a sweeper as well. She indicates the

idea of balancing work and life together. Meanwhile the new mother (Sanyatani Ghosh) is poked by the lady who is working on her laptop, she simply asks her if she looks educated but it seems as if she has lost her individuality and aspirations after becoming a mother. That mother replied with a smile that she did not think so; rather this baby had given her a new identity as a mother. She was poked again by saying it's easy for a lady like you who is a housewife, she will get a harsh reality check once she has to manage work and personal life together. Later the mother revealed it was not easy for her to manage work and baby together as she has the responsibility to manage the law and order of the district as the SSP of Jhansi. This proclamation stunned everyone how a woman is balancing work and home perfectly together. Later at the end of this ad, she received a magazine of that model who embraced her pregnancy happily after getting inspired by her.

Again it raises a question whether females are really that efficient that they can manage both work and baby together or it is again something planned for them. It seems as if this role is also assigned to them but through this ad one thing is quite clear that things are changing gradually, females are portrayed as strong individuals who prioritize their careers and motherhood as well, and they show the illimitable spirit of women –

“You are like a stream of river
Which can flow in both directions
You are a mirror
That shows a new reflection”
- #SheCanCarryBoth by Prega news

Another point that may be discussed here is why it is always women who are portrayed as the embodiment of perfection, one who is multitasking, one who can manage everything perfectly.

Somewhere the females have accepted this socially constructed identity and they try to imitate what they see around them and moreover this concept of gender is also not original, it is merely an imitation. As Judith Butler says-

“Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; In fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequences of the imitation itself.”

(“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *Inside / Out* 1991, ed by Diana Fuss)

This paper cannot be concluded without mentioning the theory of “The Ecriture Feminine” by *Helen Cixous* which mainly focuses on the patriarchal control over the language. She simply believed that females have a loss of language because

the language they are using is male-centric only, that's why they have started speaking in "Borrowed Language". In 1975 an essay *Le Rire de la Meduse* published by French feminist writer *Helen Cixous*, which was translated into English in 1976 by Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen as *The Laugh of the Medusa*. This work was considered seminal work in feminist theory; here Cixous introduced the term "Ecriture Feminine" which means feminine writing. In this work Cixous simply concentrates on the dominant patriarchal control over the language which we use deliberately. She challenged this patriarchal structure of the language which she traced out from the works of *Sigmund Freud* and *Jacques Lacan*. As we know they promoted the idea of language that is phallus-centric only. As Freud said women are characterized by a 'lack' that means the absence of a penis, Cixous simply believes that this lack has constrained the women as 'other' and gives way to otherness. She is against this dominant "Phallic thinking". Being an essentialist critic of the French feminist movement she talks about the experience and expressions of females in relation to the articulation of female sexuality in writing and speaking which eventually brought a revolution in the language system. She simply believed that women should write for themselves only, they need to free themselves from this phallogocentric rationalism.

Hélène Cixous indeed presents a compelling perspective on female sexuality, challenging the conventional phallogocentric view that places the penis at the center of sexual discourse. She suggests that women's sexuality transcends the limitations imposed by such a narrow focus, describing it as "cosmic" to emphasize its expansive, unbounded nature. In doing so, she critiques the reductionist tendencies of patriarchal thinking and calls for a reevaluation of how society conceptualizes female desire and pleasure.

Cixous advocates "Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis- (87) for women to reclaim agency over their bodies and sexuality, recognizing the historical repression imposed upon them by societal norms and patriarchal structures. By encouraging women to engage in a new discourse that embraces the complexity and richness of female sexuality, she empowers them to challenge the status and assert their own narratives.

In essence, Cixous invites women to explore and celebrate their sexuality beyond the confines of traditional paradigms, envisioning a more inclusive and liberating understanding of desire and pleasure. She calls for a shift in perspective that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of female sexuality and encourages women to embrace their bodies and desires on their own terms.

This study can't be concluded without mentioning other advertisements that celebrate the spirit of womanhood like- *Dove* which talks about the concept of real beauty in its campaign, despite of having various sizes, shapes and ages, one should focus on natural beauty and celebrate it with positivity. We have a *Bharat Matrimony* advertisement in the queue which raised the concern over the violence against the women, it portrays violence amid the festival Holi that leads to a lifelong trauma, aiming to understand the vulnerability, the raising awareness, changing perceptions, and encouraging actions against such violence. Many other advertisements of Prega News which highlight many more sensitive concepts like "Good news is Gender free", "She is complete in herself" and recently talks about "Women's Commitment". Such advertisements reflect the newness of thoughts and concepts in the cinematic world of women. It is an attempt to explore the 'Self' in this respective world of ambitions, dreams and fulfillment. It gives a new dimension to the identity of women and more space for their choices in relation to their decisions.

In relation to these advertisements I would like to say that this innovative approach is certainly worth of considering enough as they have gathered the courage to talk about the most sensitive talks of the society, related to the roles and identity of women. The shift towards positive and empowering representations of women in advertising reflects broader societal changes and the growing recognition of gender equality. These advertisements are not only celebrating womanhood but also contributing to changing perceptions and behaviors. Brands that create empowering campaigns can have a lasting impact on their audiences and play an essential role in promoting gender equality and self-confidence among women. Top of Form

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