

Imaging the Indian Woman in Food Based Television Advertisements

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Abstract— Food and food based activities like cooking, feeding and serving have traditionally been ascribed to women and any mention of food seems to inexplicably invoke the feminine. This paper argues that this very process of subconsciously invoking the female in relation to food is a product of an active and purposeful discourse in popular media that attempts to provide no space for a woman (or a man) to break out of the stereotypes. In the light of food and kitchen being increasingly featured on television in the form of cookery shows, food reality shows and whole channels dedicated to food and cooking, it seems pertinent to examine how food and how kitchen roles have changed— if at all—through one of the most popular and powerful tools of the current times, television advertisements. This paper looks at Indian television advertisements of kitchen appliances, food and food based products to examine the portrayal of the Indian woman, to study the image of the woman conjured on screen. The multiplicity of languages, cultures and television channels in India pose a difficult challenge in choosing the advertisements as being of a national nature, since the term national itself is problematic in the Indian context. The study examines the imaging of the Indian woman as a mother, wife and homemaker across some of the food based advertisements aired on Indian national channels from around the 1980's to the present.

Index Terms— Food, Cooking, Domestic Kitchen, Indian Television Advertisements, Gender, Women, Stereotyping

1 INTRODUCTION

THE reason why advertisements need to be studied closely for content and appearance is because, being popular mediums with a wide exposure, they have the capacity to influence the audience, which in turn tend to create and authenticate certain types of thinking patterns. Ibroscheva (409) holds that gender roles in the media are authenticated through regular, persistent and relentless exposure, which are then accepted as the viewers as the norm. To put it in another way, to borrow from Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological Frameworks", advertisements act as ideological frameworks,¹ within which the society consisting of both men and women are expected to perform.

Previous studies on advertisements and women have shown that women are portrayed in stereotypical gendered roles like mothers, wives, seductress etc. (Furnham & Schofield 1986; Mwangi 1996; Nassif & Gunter 2008). But with the change in social climate and women entering the workplace on a large scale, perceptions regarding women in popular discourse have undergone significant changes (Bailey 99), which has led to a change in the way women (and men) are portrayed in the media and especially advertisements. While advertisements showed a presence of clear stereotyped images in the 90's, explicit stereotyping is on its way out in the 2000s, though they are by no means absent (Gauntlett 65). In his *Media, Gender and Identity. An introduction*, Gauntlett observes that:

to a certain extent, programme makers (tv) arrived at comfortable, not-particularly offensive models of masculinity and femininity, which a majority of the public seemed to think were OK. Producers thus seemed to give up on feeling that they might need to challenge gender representations. (65)

According to Katherin J Parkin, in *Food is Love: Gender and Advertising in Modern America*, food based advertising has worked its web around women in persistent and deliberate manners. Advertisements on food, kitchen and cooking appliances have focussed on efficiency and time saving but they

have not tried to claim that just about anyone can make the food or work in the kitchen:

Copywriters throughout the century embraces a fundamental theme: regardless of the actual work involved, women should serve food to demonstrate their love for their families. Countless ads reminded women that food conveyed their affections and fulfilment of duty to their families. In the hands of women, food is love. (4)

Not only do the advertisements promote the stereotype of the woman-cooking-kitchen triad, they also seem to create different classes and types of women: the loving wife, the multi-tasker mother, the caring wife, the modern girl friend and so on. For instance, women in food based advertisements (or any other advertisement for that matter) possess svelte bodies and perfect hairdos. Even if the commercial shows a woman busily engaged in cooking in the kitchen, her appearance is perfect to a tee, subconsciously putting pressure on "real" women who work in the kitchen, to be as unperturbed, dignified, composed, and at ease as her counterpart in the reel kitchen. All women who cook in the commercials seems to enjoy the whole process. In fact, there is a concerted effort on the part of commercial gurus to sell cooking as a creative, enjoyable, stress free activity, enjoyed and celebrated by women all over.

This paper looks at the most popular stereotypes of women on popular television—the mother and the wife, and comprehends the gendering process by looking at a selection of food based television commercials aired on national television over a period of twenty years, starting from the 1980's. This paper also looks at how the 'look' of the woman in the kitchen has changed from the 80's to the present.

2 OF THE WIFE, THE MOTHER AND THE STEREOTYPES

In the 80's, when consumers in India were faced with problems of pressure cookers explosions, and consequent accidents and even deaths, TTK Prestige came up with a television advertisement that emphasised the safety of their pres-

sure cookers. The commercial captured imaginations with their with their iconic slogan "jo biwi se kare pyar, woh Prestige se kare kaise inkaar (If you love your wife, how can you deny your wife a Prestige?)" The first advertisement that was aired on T.V which used this tagline, shows a couple walking into a home appliances shop. The husband does the talking and the shopkeeper address him as janab ²while the woman is completely ignored. They have come to purchase a pressure cooker, but the husband apparently does not know the name of the appliance, and has to be gently reminded by his wife, in a meek manner, her voice hardly audible. The shopkeeper then goes on to introduce many brands of pressure cookers on his shelf but tells the husband that if he truly does love his wife, then he should only buy prestige because it is the safest pressure cooker around. After all which husband wouldn't want his wife to be safe while cooking in the kitchen?

The advertisement presupposes a meek, obedient, middle class wife, who does not raise her voice in front of strangers, and keeps her head covered at all times. The husband on the other hand, is confident and manly, and naturally ignorant about the kitchen, his wife having to remind him about the type of appliance. To top it off, he is portrayed as the ultimate loving husband, because after all, he has bought for his wife, the safest pressure cooker ever.

Not only does the advertisement emphasise traditional roles for a middle class family, it also again draws the image of a happy woman in the kitchen, with her kitchen appliances. Moreover, it emphasises that the role of the man is to keep the woman in the kitchen, albeit by bribing her with the latest kitchen gadgets.

In 2013, Prestige TTK came out with a series of advertisements that brought back their iconic slogan: jo biwi se kare pyar... The ad-series had two of the best known faces of the Indian television industry: Aishwarya Rai-Bachchan and Abhishek Bachchan. The TTK Prestige site mentions about the advertisement series thus,

"The campaign is targeted at all the age groups. If you take the older age group people, by definition the men do not enter the kitchen and probably they won't. This campaign is expected to trigger a reaction in such older people to walk into the kitchen to help them, even if they don't cook. It will definitely create a huge buzz around the younger couples because already the trend of both getting into the kitchen and using the kitchen as a space for meeting and cooking is already prevalent. It is expected to make it even more better apart from competitive. And for all those whether old or young, if they don't enter the kitchen, I hope this question is going to post a great debate in the house as to why don't you come in and help us."

The commercials that came out does feature both the husband (Abhishek Bachchan) and the wife (Aishwarya Rai-Bachchan) cooking together in the kitchen. However, whenever the advertisements feature the husband (Abhishek Bachchan) to be cooking in the kitchen, the viewer is made to real-

ize that this is not the norm, and that the husband cooking is just a deviation the everyday routine. The fact that the wife who is in the kitchen is Aishwarya Rai-Bachchan, arguably one of the most famous female faces of Indian television, seems to suggest to the viewer that belonging to the domestic space is not so "de-glamorised" at all. The inclusion of a famous face inside the domestic space of the kitchen than other models or actors is a way in which patriarchal hegemony plays out its part in freezing and stabilizing ideologies of gender roles and gender expectations.

During the mid 90's came another advertisement, again by Prestige, for their pressure pans with their by now trademark slogan. The scene is morning rush hour in a family, when the children have to leave for school and the man of the family has to leave for work. The woman in the advertisement who seems to be a wife and mother, is inviting choices for breakfast as she walks in briskly, and confidently into the kitchen. She is bombarded by at least five different demands for breakfast. Unfazed, she goes ahead and prepares everything in a jiffy, with the help of Prestige Pressure Pan, conducting her cooking like a music conductor in a concert. She multitasks the many dishes with panache and as soon as the rest of her family comprising of kids, husband and in laws seat themselves at the table, the table is laden with the breakfast spread. The parting shot is that of a satisfied and proud husband echoing the biwi se pyar slogan. The focus of the advertisement has shifted somewhat in this advertisement from the previous one. Whereas the first one focussed on the safety of the cooker, the advertisement in discussion her focuses on efficiency.

The gender roles it prescribes however, has hardly changed. The husband is obviously the bread winner, and has to leave for work, after having had his breakfast. The kids have to go to school and the in-laws are happy to let the daughter-in law 'rule' the kitchen. The mother-wife is also shown to be quite happy to shoulder the responsibility of cooking for her family, and basks in the admiration that the husband throws her in the end. The commercial clearly suggests that 'performing' well in the kitchen is a sure shot way to impress the family.

In 2013, came a commercial for MTR Ready to Eat Breakfast Mixes. The commercial eerily echoes the Prestige Pressure Pan commercial, in the manner that the wife-mother happily cooks a whole platter of dishes in a jiffy, feeling quite happy and proud to be doing it. At one glance, it might seem that nothing has changed since the 1990's Prestige Pressure Pan—large family, happy woman in the kitchen and so on, but a closer look shows otherwise. For one, while the wife-mother cooked from scratch in the first commercial, in the second, the wife-mother is seen to be using ready-to-eat-mixes. So while the second commercial seems to validate the use of ready to eat food items, probably trying to say that women need not slog in the kitchen, it juxtaposes this thought with the shot of the woman with six arms—an allusion to the Hindu Goddess image. As it goes, Indian goddesses are portrayed with multiple hands/arms, all or some of the hands holding an object, signifying power, or simply symbolizing blessings. The depict-

² Janab means Sir or Mr, also archaic form of 'your highness'

tion of multiple hands conveys all or some of the following: an affirmation that they are different from mere mortals, an indication of various powers and a difference in avatar³. By the depiction of the mother in the commercial in a posture that is sure to evoke the divine, the duty/chore of a woman to prepare food for her family is considered a divine task. More importantly, it suggests that the woman is the natural master of the kitchen. Not only is the commercial emphasising gender roles, but it is also equating the woman in the kitchen to a goddess, affirming her super-woman image. Such commercials manipulate a woman's expectations of herself as Ervin Goffman says in *Gender Advertisements* that advertising implicitly conveys the idea of what or who we should be. When such commercials are recurrently portrayed on the media, they are accepted as the norm by viewers, and the ones who do not seem to confirm to the image portrayed on television are forced to validate themselves in the roles that the media seems to sanction for them.

If the wife in the 1980's commercial was the image of an obedient meek wife, the commercials that came later showcased more outgoing, vivacious women. The space of the kitchen has nevertheless remained more unchallenged than before. It is clearly the woman who rules in the kitchen, and she is made to feel proud of it. The kitchen is defined as the woman's area where men are merely trespassers. If pulling in Abhishek Bachchan for the Prestige commercials came as a welcome change, the tag line of 'jo biwi se kare pyar' took off the so called progressiveness of the idea of the man in the kitchen. Coupled along with the notion of the space is the giant shoes that ad-giants have created for the woman to fit into. A woman who cooks for her family is a super woman, clearly implying that the woman who does not, suffers from a lack of this super-power. Caring for the family and expressing love through food has been ascribed as natural to woman, and being the mistresses of the kitchen, a massive accomplishment.

Advertisements usually endorse, popularize and introduce products, but they also do much more than that. They convey ideas about what we should be, lifestyles and lifestyle choices, what to buy or consume so that it makes you successful in the society, and in a pervasive manner, convinces probable consumers and viewers as to what they should look like, using a certain product or service. Often, the style of advertising is forceful, but the messages that they convey are "cumulative, often subtle and primarily unconscious." One of the most prominent messages that come out of advertisements that endorse food products are that the health of the family is primarily the woman's concern.

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³ To give an example, Lord Shiva can be portrayed with two hands or four. In the latter, he is referred to not as Shiva, but as Natraja, the lord of dance. Similarly, Lord Vishnu is depicted with four hands, but in his *Vishwaroopa*, or the complete form, he can be depicted with a 1000 hands. Similarly, for goddesses, the symbolism changes with what they hold in their hands.

In commercials ranging from cooking oil, to tea and readymade noodles, women are always the servers and givers, while the men and children are the ones who are taken care of. This stereotype has changed little over the years, though the overall look of the advertisements have become more in tune with the modern times.

In the commercials for cooking oils in India for example, there is a notable change in the image of the female protagonist in the commercials. In the Sundrop cooking oil commercial that came out in the early 90's, though the mother is cooking in the kitchen, she is shown less frequently than her son who takes up the majority of the reel space in the 32 second commercial. The locale of the advertisement is restricted to the indoor, mainly the kitchen. The tagline of the commercial, 'healthy oil for healthy people' clearly stands for the boy in the commercial who prances about with high energy, while the mother/woman is the one who is expected to provide the 'health' to the family.

In another commercial for the Saffola cooking oil that came out in 2013, the wife-mother is shown to be worried about her husband's health. The product is introduced only towards the end of the commercial, which prompts the wife to switch to a healthier brand of cooking oil to take her of her husband's heart. The commercial features a younger, more modern woman and the locale has shifted from just the home and kitchen to the public sphere. The idea of the working, independent and smart woman is weaved into the commercial, but all it really does in the end is re-emphasise the stereotype of the woman as the nurturer and the carer.

The welcome break to commercials that treat women as synonymous with cooking utensils, kitchen and cooking are the Havells cooking range commercials (2013) which come with the tagline "respect women". The ads that promote coffee-maker, juicer, air-fryer and mixer grinder all feature the woman in the commercials refusing to meet their husband's (or the man in the commercial) demands for more or different food by claiming to not be kitchen appliances. While most kitchen appliance commercials previously claim to reduce the burden on women, but nothing more, the Havells ads actually challenge the man to take the place of the woman in the kitchen since cooking has been made so convenient by the products advertise.

But then, in July 2014 came out the Airtel Smartphone Network advertisement that featured a woman in her twenties as the boss of a company, and her husband her immediate junior. If anyone thought that the commercial was a pro-feminist one, the twist comes when the wife-boss goes home earlier than the husband, and then lures him home by cooking for him. The ad which started on a fresh note, ended on the same cliché ridden gender role of the husband working late at night and the wife waiting for him with the dishes she has prepared. Apparently, stereotyping of women and food have changed in form, but not in content.

4 CONCLUSION

From a study of popular advertisements on TV that have been aired since the 1980's to the present, it is quite clear that gender stereotyping of the women in the kitchen is an active discourse. Though the Havells advertisements have challenged this in a certain manner, it is still to show the man actually entering the space of the kitchen. Of the some rare advertisements that did figure the man in the kitchen, the audience are made to feel that the man cooking is a rarity—a treat, while the woman cooking is natural and ordinary.

Most of the commercials presuppose a hetero-normative family, where the male is the head and the female the sub-ordinate partner. The commercials, whether be for food, food based products or cooking appliances, cater to the woman as consumer. But ironically, the woman consumer is intended so that she might take care of the family using the product advertised. Also interesting is how a woman cooking and indulging herself never becomes a part of the narrative of the commercials. The cooking is always by women, but always for the family and the husband.

This paper only looks at advertisements that have been featured on national television. A look into the regional channels in India is necessary to get a more streamlined analysis of gendering of food and women in television commercials. It seems prudent to continue this research into the gendering of women and food on popular media to understand how the hegemonic power of patriarchy works, on even the most basic and essential of all commodities—food.

a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions. Authors are strongly encouraged not to call out multiple figures or tables in the conclusion—these should be referenced in the body of the paper.

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