

The Making of the New Woman: A Psycho-Social Analysis of the Impact of Women's Magazines in Kerala

UGC Minor Research Project

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Popular media has a significant but not entirely straightforward relationship with people's sense of gender and identity. Media messages are diverse, diffuse and contradictory. Furthermore, people are changing, building new identities founded not on the certainties of the past, but organized around the new order of modern living, where the meanings of gender and identity are increasingly open. Different aspects of popular media can aid or disturb these processes of contemporary reorientation. Some critics say that the media should offer traditional role models and reassuring certainties, but this view is unlikely to survive. Radical uncertainties and exciting contradictions are what contemporary media, like modern life, is all about.

Implicit in the women's magazines' strategies is the notion of a "new" reader, the highly visible woman of the new Indian economic order who is intended to serve as an inspirational model for the wider, non-working audience of women. Implicit also are notions of what constitutes work (i.e work that is performed in the public sphere), what constitutes liberation, and, consequently, what constitutes the normative subject of feminism. There is a marked self-consciousness in the projection of the "new woman", a self-consciousness that is particularly apparent in the use of visuals. The post-feminist New Woman, secure in her modernity, negotiates her different roles as a modern professional and as a traditional home-maker with playful and confident ease.

Features mostly represent women as people who are independent, in control of their lives. The evidence in the study demonstrates that women are not the puppets that earlier forms of feminism think they are represented as. They have choices to make about their professional and social lives. They are not simply confronted with situations over which they have no choices to make. For instance, the target market of these magazines or the implied readers are a group of educated professional women who have dreams and know what they want in life.

While most of the consumerist persuasion comes in the form of direct advertising, most of it is disguised as editorial material that is in the form of feature articles, advice columns or health and fitness tips. That leads one to the conclusion that advertising has never been a good vehicle for representing women. It has done nothing more than to harm their image and misplace the idea of what it means to be a complete woman. It has never been interested in who women are other than their commercial value. It is also unfortunate that advertising forms such an integral part of popular magazines. This leaves one at a dead end since the media cannot do without advertising as they get most of their revenue from it. So, striving to please both readers and advertisers is a big challenge for magazines and this implies that as long as they depend highly on advertising, chances are that women will still be represented as sex objects and helpless beings.

Images in the media generally project a standard to which women are expected to aspire, yet that standard is almost completely impossible for most women to achieve. Women almost always fall short of standards that are expected of them regarding physical appearance. The pervasiveness of the media makes it very challenging for most women to avoid evaluating themselves against the socio-cultural standards of beauty.

Women's magazines are used as vehicles to facilitate and legitimize a focus on the self and time out from the family and their needs and wants. Women, at both an imaginary and material level, use magazines to carve out alternative spaces that act as a break and a buffer from the typical restraints of home life. Women's magazines enable women readers to enter a 'shared imaginary', that is to say, an imagined community of other women readers who share common experiences and interests.

The paradigm shift from production to consumption in these so-called postmodern times has led to an orientation towards 'fantasy, identity, meaning and protest', and ultimately to 'a new consumer activism' in relation to which women are ideally placed. This postmodern feminist stance focuses less on the oppressive and exploitative power of women's magazines, and more on their liberating potential: media that offer women multiple pleasures, multiple choices and indeed acknowledge multiple identities. Above all, a postmodern emphasis stresses pleasure, creativity and reader resistance. Women's genres are usually cyclical and fluid in form and they tend to comprise women-centred narratives and have a relational and private sphere focus. They are also primarily written by and consumed by women and construct and address a feminine subject. They reflect the deferrals, incompleteness, repetitions and lack of focus so often experienced by women in terms of their work in the home; they typically appeal to fantasy, but offer 'emotional realism'. Escapism and fantasy are key characteristics of women's genres, enabling women to enter ideal worlds which often bear little or no resemblance to their everyday lives. In their utopian appeal, however, these genres may also serve as resistance to the current social order and challenge masculine cultural norms.

A key finding to emerge from the study was that women's magazines were read not only for their content but for what they facilitated and legitimized within the fabric of women's busy lives. They were largely consumed for their experiential and sensuous appeal, and had an important role to play in the context of the fabric of the everyday lived experience of women. These me-times also have transformative potential, in that they allow women to envisage changes to the status quo, and muse on the gap between their actual lives and their aspirational lives. Magazines are thus used to legitimize time out from others. In this sense magazine reading may be envisaged, then, as an act of assertion, protest and resistance to the expectations of others.

Immersion in the world of women's magazines enable women to recharge their batteries, and thus return to their day-to-day world with renewed energy. Also, women's magazines allow them to consider transformation at an imaginary level by offering a multiplicity of possibilities and pleasures; within women's magazine discourse there is an implicit assumption that femininity is always in the making and that womanhood is both a natural state and is culturally acquired through labour and construction. In the context of magazine consumption, the notion of choice and multiple possibilities that now typically characterizes the genre and 'feminine culture' generally, firmly positions women consumers as subjects, rather than objects of manipulation. Contemporary women's magazines thus accommodate contradiction and fragmentation, choice rather than conversion. The genre has become a discourse within which women readers have a proactive, productive and often playful role, continually creating and recreating themselves, negotiating and manipulating the array of possibilities offered to them; women readers are increasingly empowered in this discourse, free, as never before, to consider the many possibilities embedded in the heteroglossic discourse offered to them.

