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The Feminist and Postfeminist Impact on Indian Advertisement and Cinema: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving impact of feminist and postfeminist ideologies on Indian advertisement and cinema. It examines how feminist discourses have challenged traditional gender roles by promoting women's empowerment, individuality, and agency, while postfeminism has introduced new complexities by blending empowerment with consumerism and aesthetic appeal. The study highlights how advertisements and films have gradually shifted from objectifying female bodies to portraying women as decision-makers and independent individuals. However, it also critiques how postfeminist narratives, though appearing progressive, often reinforce subtle stereotypes by commodifying empowerment. The paper provides an overview of changing female representations through selected examples from Indian media, showing how commercial and cultural forces shape public perceptions of womanhood. Ultimately, it reveals the contradictions between the advocacy of gender equality and the realities of market-driven visual culture.

Keywords: Feminism, Postfeminism, Indian Cinema, Advertisement, Gender Representation, Female Empowerment, Media Culture.

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The Feminist and Postfeminist Impact on Indian Advertisement and Cinema: An Overview

Over the recent years feminism has come to have a new significance in popular culture. We have bestselling feminist books like *Lean In* (Sandberg) and *Unfinished Business* (Conrad). Popular magazines make it a habit to launch 'feminism issues' worldwide, promptly announce their feminist identities, and pro-women stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment. Such issues thus become newspaper headlines and topics for primetime news. Feminism has thus become 'popular' (Banet-Weiser), and has achieved a 'new visibility' (Keller & Ryan)

Before the coinage of the term 'feminism' in 1960, the feminist discourse had been named 'women's rights'. The first of the three waves in feminism extended from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. It was represented by writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. From 1960 to 1970 was the second wave. During this period the feminists have exhibited a kind of extremism to achieve equality and freedom for women. Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter and other feminist theorists proclaimed "activism" as a female virtue.

The third wave of feminism, which began in the mid-90s, was informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. It destabilized many constructs like "universal womanhood," body, gender and sexuality. The unique feature of this phase was that the young feminists readopted many habits, such as high heels and lipstick that the first two phases of the movement looked as signs of male oppression. They also refused to think in terms of "us-them." Third wave feminism tends to be global and multi-cultural. It also defies artificial categories of gender and sexuality. The emergence of fourth wave of feminism is caused by the realization that the third wave is unduly optimistic. Feminism is no longer an academic area, but part of public discourse.

The term 'postfeminism' came into being in 1919 when the so called radical feminists declared, "We're interested in people now – not in men and women, that moral, social, economic, and political standards should not have anything to do with sex, that it would be pro-woman without being anti-man" (Scott 1061). The term gained popularity after the New York Times magazine published "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation" written by Susan Bolotin in which she reintroduced the term "Post-feminism." Within the academic paradigms post feminism can be located in connection with post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.

The Indian film and advertising industry has been male dominated and male oriented for decades, though some positive signs of gender equality have begun to be seen in recent years, both in film making and in the content of films and ads. Despite the existence of a body of feminist film making in India, the women protagonists in Indian films have often played defined, conformist roles dictated by the Indian values. Most of them were uni-dimensional characters depicted either in white or black. Taking the clue from religion or mythology, the film makers made women characters the epitome of virtues and values, moulded in the pattern of archetypal Sita image. Such depictions in cinema only helped the institutionalization of patriarchal values. Such submissive women who are willing martyrs for their families can be seen in films like *Gauri* (1968), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) etc. depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families.

As the impact of feminist thought began to influence film makers more assertively right from the last decades of the twentieth century, there came a group of film-makers who have decided to remould the stereotypes set by mainstream cinema, and also to explore and treat subjects from the women's perspective. *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Chameli* (2003), and *Dirty Picture* (2011) are a few examples. The credit also goes to new generation actresses who were not unwilling to accept bold roles. They also forced the cameras to shift the focus from the women's body to her identity as an individual. Film scholar and author Shoma Chatterji

says “Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society. The ordinary woman was hardly visible in Hindi cinema.” (121). The impact of feminist ideology on film makers has, to a large extent, liberated Indian female characters from this confinement.

Female actors play a leading role in the field of advertisement today, which shows that the marketing industry is also affected by the post- feminist ideology. The Ayurveda cream advertisement “Warrior Princess” directed by Carole Dennis depicts a warrior maiden sent to battle after the cream being rubbed on her forehead. The focus is on female courage and enthusiasm. Titan’s advertisement ‘Woman of Today’ to sell their wrist watches features the Bollywood actress Nimrat Kaur. Using the tagline ‘Her Life Her Choices’, the company tries to convey the idea that a woman also has the right to make the choices of her own. Most of the newly launched Indian advertisements try to emphasise women identity as evidenced by an ad for Havells ceiling fan. A couple is registering their marriage, and the husband takes the last name of the wife. The ads in the post-feminist mode try to avoid stereotypes.

Characters in the films in post-feminist mode also deviate from the stereotypical pattern. In traditional Hindi cinema there have been two categories of female characters. The first is the type who supports the lead actor in achieving his goals. The second is the one who fights patriarchy as it has wronged her. Post-feminist female characters belong to neither category as exemplified in the films of Zoya Akhtar. Her female characters do not come as minor elements in the story of the male protagonist, but have their own lives and struggles. But they are not engrossed in the struggle against patriarchy, but they struggle hard to carve an identity of their own.

In Akhtar’s 2009 film *Lucky By Chance*, the character Sona rejects her cheating partner even after he renders an apology. Laila in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) defies the society’s expectations on her. She follows the dictates of her heart, indulges in flirting and refuses to be permanently attached to any man. *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) has Ayesha who comes out of her husband’s shadow and runs her own business despite her parents’ displeasure. These women are assertive in the sense that they refuse to tie up their fortunes and sentiments with those of their male partners. Modernity and liberation of women are signs of social progress in feminist discourse, but post-feminism focuses more on the futility and shallowness of issues selected as feminist, and on the resulting aberrations in contemporary feminist discourse

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