

GENDERED LETTERS: CONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE THROUGH MAGAZINES

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze how popular women's magazines play a pivotal role in constructing femininity. They educate women on how an ideal woman should be in a very subtle manner. Interestingly the ideal woman is, in most cases, the one who conforms to all the expectations and norms of the patriarchal society with respect to womanhood. Women's magazines, being highly popular, create a feminine space in their own way. They construct and project a definite notion of the feminine which are then assimilated by the readers even without their realizing it.

Keywords: Magazines, beauty, femininity, fashion, appearance

Introduction

Magazines are a crucial ingredient of our popular culture and day-to-day life. Apart from being mere stress busters or relaxation boosters, magazines also play a key role in conveying several social and cultural codes. There are ample of female oriented magazines in India such as the *Femina*, *Women Exclusive*, *Women's Era* etc. Often such women oriented magazines construct a definite feminine space. Through their texts, images and advertisements, they convey to the readers, in a very subtle yet powerful manner, what it means to be a woman- the characteristics of a confident woman, the priorities of a woman etc. However a deeper analysis reveals that they only reinscribe age old gender roles in a new manner and the readers assimilate them even without knowing it. They play a key role in creating the contemporary discourse on femininity. Such an unconscious assimilation of an ideologically constructed feminine world and the desire to inhabit this feminine space in real life proves to be dangerous. Hence such magazines can be seen as "gendered texts" or as "vehicles for representations" (Burton 3).

Magazines and the Construction of the Feminine

Magazines create and popularize a definite notion about what it means to be feminine. In other words, they *educate* women and guide them on how to groom and cultivate themselves as the *perfect* women. The crucial point to be considered here is the type of femininity that these popular magazines construct and propagate. In simple words, the ideal woman is the one who cooks, looks after her appearance well, manages the household, and sets the house well. Gough-Yates points out, "the magazine industry's depictions of femininity are attempts to unify the perceived complexities of young women's lives around coherent, commercially viable, configurations of 'woman' that will appeal to advertisers and readers alike" (qtd. in Burton 1). Through an exaggerated focus on fashion, beauty, relationships, sex, family etc., the feminine world is narrowed down or diminished greatly.

Such a notion about femininity is not conveyed in an explicit manner. Rather they are transmitted in a very subtle way through the articles, images and advertisements that are published in these magazines. Hence a careful scrutiny of the kind of articles that popular women's magazines publish reflects the construction of the *ideal* feminine. This occurs through (a) reinscribing stereotypical female roles, (b) constructing and naturalizing a certain notion of femininity, (c) creating a desire in the female readers to conform to the constructed version of femininity (d) appropriating modern progressive notions of femininity without compromising the traditional feminine space.

Most of these magazines dedicate a large part of their space to items on the domestic affairs such as cooking, managing the house, setting the house well etc. Hence a lion's share of the pages are covered by cooking recipes, fashion, jewellery and clothing, beauty related articles and domestic articles. Interestingly, beauty, fashion and food are the repeatedly occurring sections in women's magazines. According to Burton, these magazines:

Focus on appearance, domestic work, relationships and romance. These may be couched in various modes- letters, features, fiction, true-life stories, advertisements and ad features. They may be framed by various narrative devices: the problem, the autobiography, the call for help, the counsellor's advice. (4)

Such repeated focus on same categories of topics also reduce the vast range of female audience into a homogenous group with similar interest. These magazines naturally assume that the priorities of all women or at least most women are fashion, beauty and domestic affairs.

The 'domestic' section in the magazines are mainly dominated by cooking recipes. One can rightly say that a majority of the women's magazines dedicate a sizeable part of their space to cooking recipes. Some of the most popular women's magazines in India such as *Femina*, *Just for Women*, *Women Exclusive* all have a section devoted to food recipes. This gives young girls the idea that cooking is a very important skill that must be developed by women. In this context, one cannot forget the traditional notion that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach and also the idea of a daughter-in-law winning over her in-laws through her culinary skills.

The next major part of women oriented magazines are occupied by article and images related to appearance. This is perhaps the most significant part of most women's magazines. One can conveniently divide it into texts and images on- a) fashion, clothing and jewellery and (b) beauty tips and (c) other body related articles that focus on appearance. Such articles play a key role in the "external construction of femininity" (Lu ii). Latest trends in fashion have been so highly popularized by these magazines that now one cannot even imagine a women's magazine without thinking of appropriate number of pages devoted to fashion. The ideal feminine in this case is the one who manages to look beautiful all the time, no matter what the situation is or how bad her day is. The body, thus, becomes the prime site through which she conveys her attitude and confidence. Many of these magazines offer tips on how to tone the body to match the 'ideal' figure.

Maintaining a beautiful body that matches the patriarchal standards thus becomes the prime feature of a confident woman. Ironically, maintaining a body that fits into the patriarchal parameters of a perfect female body is projected as the feature of a liberated woman. Appearing 'sexy' or attractive to men is another key aspect that these magazines try to emphasize thus once again reinstating the notion of women as glamour dolls or sex objects. In other words, such magazines not only prepare women for the male gaze, they also instill a feeling in them that it is perfectly normal, natural and even desirable to be objects of the male gaze. Taking the male gaze into question, one cannot ignore the fact that the pictures of women in these magazines, who in most cases are those of models or popular film actresses, focus on making them look attractive, sexy and desirable to the male audience. The best example for this is the cover page image in most magazines.

A serious problem associated with this is that it creates in women a tension or an anxiety as to whether or not their body matches the 'ideal' standards. It greatly affects their confidence and self-esteem. Hence the images, advertisements and beauty and fashion related articles in the magazines create a whole set of 'feminine anxieties and worries'. This is followed by severe attempts to match one's body with the ideal one. As Taslima Nasreen explains, for every girl, "if her figure matches the ideal [figure] perfectly, then it is a victory" (195). This is clearly reflected in the kind of queries raised by female readers in the question and answer sections in women's magazines.

Just as a female reader feels anxiety when her appearance does not seem desirable, to men in particular, a conformity to the ideal body standards elicits a certain kind of pleasure. However the irony is that this anxiety and pleasure are both constructed by the magazines as part of the wider construction of the discourse of femininity which is then projected as natural. Burton explains:

The very notion of 'natural' pleasures is itself ideological...various elements of magazines encourage women to be natural (and free), to express their natural femininity and to enjoy the pleasures of being natural. But this pleasure, naturalness or freedom is often constructed (and purchased) through commodities such as skin products, tampons, shampoos, detergents and clothing. Similarly, beauty is also a myth and construction. (17)

Advertisements are another key element to be considered in the construction of femininity. The advertisement space of women's magazines are dominated by those on beauty products, jewellery, clothes and accessories. Such advertisements not only play the innocent role of popularizing the products, rather they give an idea about what are the items that a woman must use. In other words, the advertisements, knowingly or unknowingly, draw up a list of things that a woman cannot do away with. Equally important as the advertisements are the narrative part of the magazines and this would include creative writings such as fiction and poetry, letters by readers etc. These narratives "tell a story about becoming and being a woman" (Burton 3) and seem quite 'intimate' because of their "intimacy of tone" (Burton 21) which gives each reader a sense that the magazine directly addresses her problems and dilemmas. Hence even this intimacy in the style of presentation and narration becomes a clever strategy for alluring and multiplying readership.

Women's magazines are highly popular as they prove to be a perfect spicy mixture of beauty tips, latest developments in the fashion industry, celebrity gossip, and lifestyle features. They turn out to be the magical keys with which teenage girls and women open the door to the world of the feminine. One can say that these magazines construct and project a feminine world that seems quite appealing, desirable and apparently modern and liberated from the patriarchal ties. The question of desire becomes extremely important as it creates a link between what the female readers read in the magazines, how they interpret it and then apply it in their real life. A good majority of the readers would like to conform to the version of femininity that the magazines create. Images of beautiful women shown in the magazines play a major role in creating this desire. Each female reader wishes to be part of this feminine space that is constructed through these magazines. The construction of such a desire in the female readers not only puts into motion the propagation of the constructed feminine space, it also ensures the commercial success of the magazines as the readers eagerly wait for the next issue which they hope will provide them with further tricks and mantras to capture men's hearts and to be the ideal women as the society expects them to be. Thus these magazines prepare and shape women to be exactly as men wish them to be.

Conclusion

Women's magazines play a pivotal role in the social and cultural construction of womanhood. Angela McRobbie points out that despite the enormous popularity of women's magazines, scholarship on magazines, in media and cultural studies, has occupied a less central and prestigious place than scholarship on other media (qtd. in Norval 5). However today women's magazines do incorporate certain really progressive notions. One must keep in mind that one cannot speak of an ideal women's magazine since "to suggest that there could or should be one would be to suggest that there is a formula for an 'ideal' woman" (Norval 49). In this sense, one cannot ignore the contribution made by women's magazines in developing certain progressive ideas about femininity. Some magazines now venture into topics which were formerly considered to be strictly 'male' such as economics, business etc. With more and more women becoming entrepreneurs and successful businesswoman, women's magazines also project the concept of woman as a career oriented professional. This gives modern liberated and educated women readers the chance to negotiate between the various roles that they have to play in the real life.

However such magazines still have a long way to go when it comes to the question of a true female liberation. While an exaggerated emphasis on aspects such as beauty, fashion, relationships and domestic aspects significantly reduces the world of women and the feminine space constructed by these magazines, a more appropriate balance between wide varieties of topics would prove to be more useful and liberating. This would also help women readers to choose what they want thus contributing not only to a wider audience but also to the creation of a more enlightened audience.

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