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The Concept of Women Empowerment in Television Industry and Films The Commercialization of the Concept of Empowerment

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Abstract

The concept of empowerment of women has been in the 'main course' discussion for scholars, sociologists, litterateurs, politicians and common people at large for decades. This resulted in making the said concept so much a commonplace that the popular culture utilizes the concept for various reasons. The paper aims at studying and discussing the empowerment issue as it figures in the television industry. The paper is divided into three sections - the first section offers an analysis of women's issue as they are represented in the films, the next two sections deal with the impact of television soaps and advertisements. Advertisements, films and television soaps exercise a significant impact on viewers across age groups. There are various occasions when the popular culture keeps a woman at the centre and narrate stories.

The general image of a woman in these films and soaps is something like that of 'Shakti'-signifying suffering, tolerance and strength. What is empowerment basically in their view? Do they offer any new dimension to the feminist theory? These are some questions posed in the paper. The paper also makes an attempt to understand the concept of empowerment in the present so called modern scenario. For the empowerment we so far discussed over decades is already attained.

Keywords: Empowerment, Shakti, Popular Culture, Commercialisation, Identity.

Over many decades, the concept of Women Empowerment has been in vogue. I say, in vogue, because it has really and unfortunately become a 'fashion'. I would touch upon some delicate and varying issues which draw my attention when I analyze this concept. It covers in itself the notion of womanhood; the attributes adhered to the notion of femininity and the struggle of a woman to be a "Female"¹ (protest- both silent and violent). In this paper, I

¹ Term used by Elaine Showalter in "Towards a Feminist Critique"

would discuss the issues related to the persistent struggle of women for empowerment and the achievement of some empowerment; its impact on the television industry in determining the status of women as well as the industry's attempt at creating an acceptable image of an empowered woman.

The paper is divided into three sections: films, television soaps and advertisements.

Films: There are any number of Indian films that promote a woman as "Shakti"² and the attributes that go with it are silent suffering, tolerance, woman as an ocean of love and affection and unimaginable respect for the family although the woman is tortured. The first film to discuss in this connection is Raj Kapoor directed *Premrog* (1982). The film depicts a woman's journey from her teen age to marriage and widowhood at an early age. The widowhood is projected as a bane on the woman and that her presence is inauspicious for the other members. As per the tradition she is compelled to confine herself to a dark room, clad in a white saree and living a "spiritual" life thenceforth with all away from the worldly pleasures and basic facilities, like a bed for herself, too. The more is yet to be said that is these all sufferings are bestowed upon her by her own grandmother- a woman herself. After all struggles, the hero of the film tries to bring her out of her ill state and once again she falls in love with life. It leads to a greater disturbances and he saves her life and brings about a new realization for a woman- that of empowerment. But the question is whether a woman needs a man to empower her? And is she really independent when the man supports her? These are some unanswered questions which again speak for her dependence.

About two decades later, we found a sensitive issue touched upon in Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astitva* (2000). It is a revolutionary movie as it asserts the woman's sexuality and the male chauvinism on contrary to that. Aditi, the protagonist, faces a dual insult from her husband and her son when she is confronted with her long forgotten secret that her son is an illicit child. Due to her secluded life in youth, she surrenders herself impulsively to her music teacher whom she never meets thereafter. After twenty years when her husband comes to know this truth, he and the son completely disown her. And here comes the great step of "Nora's protest"³ and Aditi leaves the house claiming for her identity- her *Astitva*. As she claims in the film why is it that a woman is called cheap and the man is still respected despite having multiple affairs outside? Aditi's was not an affair. It was a need of that moment when she had no place in her own life for herself. While considering this in the struggle for freedom, one needs to introspect whether walking out is the only way to be free? When would a woman be empowered and free with all her odds at home? It is not the question of being moral and immoral or right and wrong, but that of the identity and a room for herself.

A much discussed and debated movie of Madhur Bhandarkar, *Fashion* (2008) has another dimension to the empowerment. That is, the protagonist leaves her house in order to

² Borrowed from Rabindranath Tagore's "Home and the World"

³ Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" (1879)

be a super model and at various levels of difficulty, she moves ahead and achieves 'success'. The end of this movie is quite bothersome. When her co model dies at the time of her show, she has to control her emotions and keep walking. In addition, there are many instances in the film which focus that in order to be successful a woman has to forget being sensitive and be 'practical'. She has to tune herself to the way the industry functions, forgetting her individuality. The film also makes one wonder if smoking and drinking mean modernity. Being cunning and shrewd is also taken as the attributes of progress!

Madhur Bhandarkar's *Page 3* (2005), deals with some very delicate issues, like the concept of empowerment which is glorified as the elite women in it mistake this concept of freedom for living a stylish and luxurious life. The best example is when one of the women- a so called social worker attends the last rites of her friend and in such a sad atmosphere, asks a reporter as to when would her video of mourning be telecast. So, these so called empowered women are too busy in their public appearance to mourn.

Television Soaps: This study would be incomplete without referring to the all-time-favourite serials that are made for sheer entertainment, but speak again of how a woman comes in way of other woman's progress. The great vamps in these serials are always busy with their crooked plans. In fact these characters are more glamorous than the leads. Notably these are also the so called empowered women, that is, they are apparently affluent and need not work or earn.

The influence of concept of empowerment is seen on the making of television soaps also. The serials like *Balika Vadhu* on Colors bring forth the ground reality of a serious social evil- child marriage. This serial has been a very popular one. But this popularity is mostly not to condemn the evil but it is taken as a source of enjoyment by the viewers. There came a time when in this soap, the girl- Anandi, actually started loving her position as a housewife and accepted the role that was given to her as a duty conscious daughter-in-law. This is another instance where a woman herself confines and prevents the later generation of women from development. Although young, just because she is a girl, she has to forget her childhood and lead a life much ahead of her age and leaving her education too. Although the aim in producing such serials is some outcome of the problems faced by our society, it unfortunately remained only a pass time for the housewives to watch. Since the serials run over a longer period, at later stages they don't come up with revolutionary results and their basic motto gets sidelined in the process of pulling on with the story.

Advertisements: The first commercial I want to study is, the Vidya Balan starrer Clinic Plus. It portrays a typical problem of today's 'superwoman' (struggling between house and profession). The daughter- a child- in this ad, asks her mother as to why she doesn't have long hair. The mother replies it's because she doesn't get time to manage the health of her daughter's hair since she has duties outside home. Shockingly, the daughter advises her mother to quit the job. This imbibes on the tender minds of the children that their mother's work creates a hurdle in their growth. If that attitude persists, children will never accept the reality of both parents working outside.

Coming to the issue of regular restrictions on the a daughter, the Priyanka Chopra starrer Hero Honda Pleasure commercial shows an emancipatory image of a girl when she wants to step out of house and out of the regular 'Sanskari' (obediently moral) image of a girl. On her way, she is questioned so much about where she is going whereas her brother is not asked anything of the sort. If it would stop at this point, it would be taken as the parent's worry for a girl that is natural. But it takes a turning point when her younger brother- a school boy- asks her where she is going and what time she will be back- in fact with more suspicion. Are we preparing the next generation to follow the tradition of confining woman to four walls and questioning her on every step? In the end, Priyanka ends by riding the bike on streets and questions, "Why should only boys have all fun?"

Even more fascinating is the ad of Wheel in which there is a procession of women's emancipation and the women participants of it claim this way: "Kapde dhote hue auraton ka paseena chhoote, atyachar hai yeh!" (women sweating during washing clothes is harassment), and they go on arresting all the husbands for this 'torture'. They hold the husbands responsible as they did not earlier provide the wives Wheel washing powder. Which emancipation should we call it? If the woman is empowered why can't she buy the powder herself instead of depending on her husband for such a trivial need? Once again it suggests that it is men who should empower women and she cannot uplift herself. This add mocks the whole idea of emancipation.

A more recent example would be the mother in the Vikram Classic Tea ad who is a representative superwoman whose son proudly introduces her to his friends with all the various chores she handles swiftly without getting exhausted. She is seen running with a smile throughout the half minute ad and is delighted to have worn the 'wings of energy'.

The Analysis of the Impact of the TV Industry: These are some of the instances that give us broad idea as to how the notion of empowerment is used for various purposes. Advertisements especially skillfully use it to make their best sale as the women folk are moved and inspired by the claims that they make and the questions that they pose. It doesn't of course restrict to the women buying the product, but also to have its long lasting impact on their personal life. The housewives especially, tend to have serials as the only popular source of entertainment. This leads to their misconception of the concept of freedom as something that is glamorous. But, does the common woman expect this empowerment? The movies discussed and the serials too show the empowered women moving around in elegant cars and so much time they waste in their make-up and other things, doing no constructive work. As seen in the ad of Wheel, the women empowerment concept is mocked at.

The findings of some of the feminist scholars second the view that women in television are stereotyped.

"In India, women in television still perform traditional roles of washing clothes, almost invariably serving food to adults and children, and are often shown as craving jewelry, using cosmetics, and displaying clothes. Even professional women seem to be obsessed with the power of fair and hence

lovely skin, glossy long hair, and a slim body. A daughter therefore reprimands her mother and urges her to give up her job in office if she is unable to nurture her daughter's hair due to her job." (Dasgupta et al. 10-11)

The question remains as to how long are we to discuss the same issue of empowerment? Since the economic empowerment is already achieved, most women manage the home and the job simultaneously and more than an empowerment factor, it is a financial necessity that both husband and wife earn. But this issue didn't stop here and the freedom issue is getting new and more complex dimensions: managing house and career which is not so easy since she has to prove herself to be 'ideal' in both places. In this struggle she tries to find a room for herself which is hardly achieved. And on the other hand there are those women who belong to the elite class and go with an 'imaginary' glamorous emancipation.

A working woman gains identity of her own at her workplace. But as soon as she steps out of it, she is identified with some man generally: as somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, mother, daughter-in-law, etc. Then who is she herself? Her identity gets confined to some relationships and her own self doesn't matter much. The television industry is re-creating the images of Sita and Savitri in a new fashion. In fact media can help in solving some of the issues. Doubtlessly, *Balika Vadhu* on Colors had commenced with such intention. But as the episodes moved on, the story became turned out to be commercial melodrama. Advertisements also create some such images in order to attract consumers to their product. Women are made to believe by these ad makers, filmmakers and serial makers that they are not empowered and they must claim their rights. However the disappointing fact is that most of the time they tend to portray an imaginary freedom and a false empowerment. Woman is presented as being proud when her husband 'allows' her to create a place for herself in society. It clearly suggests that she still doesn't have a decision making freedom. The major decisions are still at the hands of men and men only. There is hardly any togetherness in this matter between man and woman. And generally women are seen promoted and uplifted by the male partner and the woman takes it more or less as a favour and she keeps compromising many other things at the cost of this favour. Tragically, Tagore's *The Home and the World* too adheres to the notion of woman's exposure to a place called 'world' is her negligence and moreover deception of the 'home'.

In this way, the concept of empowerment itself is commercialized and that is the reason why there are so many discussions going on about women and their empowerment. The television industry has very tactfully selected the empowerment issue as it emotionally touches every woman's personality, thus their popularity gets increased and remains in an unshakable place so long as we stop talking of empowerment. And it would be hard to define empowerment. It varies according to the persons, situations and backgrounds. There are various levels of empowerment and so far only the economic one is achieved. We need to still wait for a revolution when women in Indian society will self-empower into more holistic personalities.

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