

Feminist Semiotics of Advertising Media Texts

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics is emerged a major theoretical and analytical approach in the media-driven era of 21st century. In the history of human evolution, use and analysis of signs to communicate have the utmost importance. Before verbal and written linguistic discourse, the use of signs remains in human communication. Semiotics is thought to be a structural and linguistic approach but as Saussure has asserted that semiotics is broad, inclusive and comprehensive in nature and scope, while linguistics is a part of it. Modern media is scientifically and technologically more enhanced and inclusive of various signs through technological gadgets. McLuhan regards 'media is message'. Like language in literature, various audio-visual and graphic signs are employed for effective expression in media texts. Language is a 'sign system' of human communication which is mainly androcentric and needs to be challenged and explored through a feminist perspective. The idea is to study semiotics in feminist context i.e. to be regarded as 'feminist semiotics. The emergence of the feministic approach changed perception in every field of life and brought various possible interpretations. As the signs employed in media texts mainly androcentric, the feminist semiotics attempts to expose and deconstruct them. Advertisements especially, consumer ads either in print or in electronic media are published having the notion of 'art for market's sake' or 'art for profit's sake' which need to be considered and analyzed as 'media text'. In this research article, efforts are made to explore and blend feminist contextual approach with semiotics to analyze advertising texts. There is a multitude of audio-visual and electronic driven gadgets in the present digital world therefore, it needs to be interpreted from feminist semiotic perspective.

Keywords: feminist semiotics, media text, audio - visual media, advertising text, communication, social media.

Semiotics is the science of studying signs used in verbal, non-verbal, oral, or written texts. The terms 'semiotics' and 'semiology' are authorized from the Association of Semiotics from 1974 to be used as synonyms. Semiotics is a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach which includes from logic, anthropology, medical sciences, and aesthetics to zoo semiotics. Semiotics or semiology studies the nature of signs, their structures, and their meanings and objectively analyses them. The object of semiotics is a 'sign' while the object of linguistics is 'language'. The signs either linguistic or non-linguistic form a text. The signs employed or

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used in a text are cohesive and coherent organized syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Only linguistic signs are not enough to be considered but also needs to be considered gestures, body language, pictures, images, photographs, colors etc. in human communication.

This era of media and technology turned the world into a cyber-village. As inevitable, an advertisement is a text which is a systematic combination of signs. A 'sign' as Saussure argues, has two components 'signifier' and 'signified'. A signifier is a sound image and signified is the object. Daniel Chandler defines semiotics as:

Semiotics is 'the study of signs'. Semiotics has not become widely institutionalised as a formal academic discipline and it's not really a science. It's not purely a method of textual analysis, but involves both the theory and analysis of signs, codes and signifying practices. Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation among leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves, although a distinctive concern is with how things signify. (Chandler: 2002: 240 - 241)

Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist proposes that semiotics is more comprehensive approach in his compiled lectures as:

... studies the life of signs within society is considerable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (From the Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be: but it has right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. (Saussure, 1915:16)

Saussure tries to establish the broadness of semiotics and proposes bipartite model of 'sign'. C.S. Peirce, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Yuri Lotman, Morris, Hjelmslev, Noam Chomsky, Judith Williamson, Julia Kristeva, Angela Goddard and others have contributed to the field of Semiotics to establish as a more comprehensive and inclusive approach of analyzing verbal and non-verbal signs in a text.

A media text is needed to be treated as a semiological sign and it's signified as a semiological construct. Language is a 'sign' system which includes verbal and non-verbal signs. An advertising text is full of signs. The signs perform the role of icons, indexes and symbols. Any advertisement either oral or print or in a digital form, it is intended to impart ideas and products to the readers or viewers. Along with ideas or products ads disseminate certain ideological notions as well such as the construct of women, patriarchy and ideology. The ideology of patriarchy is spread systematically through signs. McLuhan, in his famous book, *Understanding Media* (1969) regards 'media as the message'. Consumer ads are intended to promote the products and services or ideas having target groups to deceive and spread ideology

of dominance and creation of concepts and constructs. Advertisements are called a secondary kind of literature because it's a paid communication through print and electronic media. The market controlled culture which sells illusions by constructing the concepts like 'beauty', 'love', 'friendship', 'family', 'ideal home' and also create 'self' and 'other'.

An advertisement is a text which Morris calls 'an assemblage of signs having cohesive and coherent, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations'. As a text and discourse, an advertisement has the main components: text, image and organization, cohesion and coherence (Sells and Gonzalez). A text gives information about the product which is descriptive information, slogans and the name of the company or the product. An image is the background of the advertisement and the photos and pictures which have certain interpretational components. All the verbal and non-verbal signs are organized in a systematic way having focused on text size, font size, coherence, cohesion and relevance. The employed signs are interrelated to one another structurally and ideologically. The advertisements are literal and cultural texts in this era of globalization and technology. Goddad argues that advertisements should be treated as a literary texts:

Advertisements as literary texts are not aimed at a single private reader. A text is constructed in order to gather clues about who is the main address target (1998: 30)

The major intention of consumer advertisements is profit making converting the readers or viewers into consumers.

Advertisements are selling us something else besides consumer goods column in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves. (Williamson: 17)

The influence and dominance of the English language is remarkable all over the world in this era of globalisation. Dell Spender argues that the English language is man-made and thus male-dominated, gender discriminative and androcentric. The space for women in the man-made language is less and as a vehicle of social and cultural discourse women are treated as others. The language women speak is mainly patriarchal, so women also speak patriarchal language and carry and support patriarchy. The socio-cultural construct of women is patriarchal and dominating, explored through the signs that women are secondary submissive and thus not 'self' but 'other'.

Since the major contextual approaches feminism demands for equality in every field of life and resists any kind of exploitation. There are various types of feminisms like white feminism, elite feminism, Dalit feminism etc which demand to crush the means of exploitation of women

which are displayed and carried out through the constructs. The mainstream media belongs to the elite class and mainly profit making and therefore the constructs and concepts are pro-caste, class and patriarchy.

As commercial art, the main aim of advertisements is to impart message of a product, an idea or a concept and encourage the audience to customers. The emphasis is being given on 'brand loyalty' about a product among the customers. The product advertised in the ad and the customers are inseparable. Advertisements are the main financial support for the so-called main stream media. An advertisement is made more attractive to deceive people to watch them. In creation of any form of art, observation, experience are cultures through which an artist flourishes himself/ herself. The consciousness and images in the minds of an artist are not created in the art form as they are but different from reality. The audio-visual images are shaped on the basis of the advertisers' ideology. An advertiser intends to make an attractive advertisement and increase in sale of the product. 'Women' seem an inevitable part of consumer advertisements in Indian media. From the beginning of the print media ads, a woman has been shown as a commodity. Having fair skin, a male deceiving appearance, pleasure showing in the audio-visual media. It has been assumed that a woman should be attractive and pursuing. Audio-visual media has been made as normal dreamy and entertaining. The mechanism of the advertisement making process intended to attract customers' attention with in a short period of time. In the process of advertising the patriarchal mentality, knowingly or unknowingly, display or propose image as stereotype, commodity and insulting at the same time.

In order to make a profit and animate subliminal position, women in the advertisement and others remain innocent. The image of women in the advertisements, the audience/customer desires the image of women as in the advertisement which allows the audience to think and follow. To deceive men and housekeeping services are the part of women's image construction in the advertisements. This is why the audience /customer desires more from women and when they fail to satisfy, women get victimized by domestic violence. The main aim of advertisements is to impart a message of a product, an idea or a concept and encourage the customers/audience turned customers. The emphasis is being given on 'brand loyalty' about a product among the customers. Regarding advertisements, the product, the advertisement and the customer are inseparable. When we consider financial matter of the world, the importance of advertisement is inevitable and invaluable.

Feminist Semiotics: Analysis of a Media Text

Language is a sign system means signs are male dominated in the male-dominated mainstream media. The so-called mainstream media, print or electronic, mainly belongs to elites and therefore marginal communities (marginal on the basis of class, caste, gender, patriarchy, culture etc.) remain secondary, substitute, subordinate, peripheral and invisible as well. Semiotics is study of signs, inherent of male domination and patriarchy. Feminist semiotics challenges male dominance of sign system and tries to explore domination, and exploitation of woman at various levels through discourse formed. A text is a combination of signs having syntagmatic and paradigmatic links which reveal denotative and connotative meanings. Thoughts, emotions and cultures are constructed through signs which are associated with structural and connotative or associative meanings. So construction or destruction through signs and their meanings are male-dominated, androcentric, or masculine.

This century is an age of media displaying globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation in practice which supports the ideology of caste, class, gender, language, culture, economics and social discriminations. The existing social economic, political, educational, linguistic and ideological surroundings or happenings are already affected by the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Through the lockdown and in order to control the COVID-19 virus spread, the new issues are emerged and sharpened. Several questions about human life and how caste, class, gender, region, religious and cultural differences are maintained and even stories of the working communities are enough to access the situation. Among this critical situation, the media, including mass and social media, played a crucial role as propagandist and resistance. Media is interested in creating filmy sensations rather than covering starvation, unemployment and farmers suicide. The media texts include printed form, means, cartoons, advertisements, posters, actual and edited video clips, news captions, reality shows, discussion shows, etc. Marx, the philosopher, had emphasised that the ruling ideas are fabricated systematically and spread by the ruling class. A 'sign' may be verbal, an icon, an image, a photograph, facial expression, dress, colour, symbol etc. Anything that makes sense or an individual can make meaning is a sign. It becomes unnecessary to ponder over the signs employed in the media text present or create other or make women invisible with the example of media text.

Simone distinguishes the two terms 'sex' and 'gender'. The term 'sex' is biological and 'gender' is a social construct. The psychoanalytical feminists consider that 'sex' and 'gender' are inter-twinned or inseparable. Masculinity and femininity are the social constructs which are

proposed through various discourses. 'Gender' is a construct represented in the process of advertising as an individual, family, group, or community of audience which create meaning through how they are presented. The advertisements set fix about themselves who are expected to simultaneously consume the product and ideology. The illusion created through the advertisements is intended to convert audience to customers. For better society, exploitation, brutality imposed on women on the basis of caste, colour, race, religion, region, class, gender and patriarchy must be eradicated.

Since the ages, the awareness of equality, fraternity and solidarity has existed, still the incidents of honour killing, khap/caste panchayats, domestic violence, unpaid labour and dependency of women exist. A systematic power structure plays a crucial role of undercurrents. Feminism in India is not unique and linear having only one concern. The major concerns of feminism are to survey, to analyse, to judge, to criticise and evaluate icons, images, symbols and their representation in literary text, religious scriptures, law books and media texts and caste, class and patriarchal ideologies and also offered alternatives for society based on equality.

The signs, images, icons, symbols, diacritics, paralanguage, colours, models etc. all these are intended to deceive the readers or the viewers. They are psychologically and emotionally appealing which results in to one's identity to be identified with the product. Advertisements are addressed to the users and would be users of the product in order to pursue them.

As stated earlier, semiotics is the science of signs. A 'sign' is a combination of signifier and signified (Saussure). A 'sign' maybe anything that makes meaning. Saussure argues that language is arbitrarily and there is no inherent or natural relationship between the sound image (signifier) of the word and the meaning (signified). A 'text' is formed of 'signs' and therefore, it is necessary to regard signs as the molecules of a text. Feminist semiotics studies and analyses the signs which are employed in a text from feminist perspective because a text is a discourse that carries and disseminates the ideology of exploitation through caste system, class system and patriarchy. Here is an example of the advertising texts analysed from feminist semiotic perspective as follows:



(Source:www.bookmybai.com)

This advertisement is an online service provider of maid, cook, babysitter and caretaker, which reveal gender discrimination through the means of caste, class, gender and patriarchy. This ad consists of verbal and non-verbal signs through highlighting photographs, images, facial expressions, dress, ornaments, their colours, catchy line, and facial expressions showing satisfaction against the background of the maid preparing food and cleaning. The title of the website bookmybai.com is suggestive of possessiveness, patriarchy and authoritativeness. The word 'bai' in Marathi have various connotations: a woman, a keep, a servant, a wife, a mother etc. The meaning also changes according to the regional dialects. The subtitle THE NEW WAY TO HIRE A TRUSTED MAID supports the ideology displayed in the advertisement. The three words in the subtitle two adjectives and one verb: 'new way', 'trusted maid' and 'to hire' are the verbal signs. The new way not the old way of hiring or buying women as an object to work or to serve with the help of new media technology. The old way includes face-to-face interaction first and bargaining for the service charges of the maids which does not thought having dignity. The reliability of maids is displayed through 'trusted maid'. The adjective 'trusted' is attributed to maid means maids are not always to be trusted. The construction of 'trusted maid' suggests caste and class dominance. The verb 'to hire' means to buy certain manual services and not to own. Human Services are treated equal to machines and

no responsibility of the owner at all. The couple in the left side photograph, happy elite couple having economic and socially affluent with smiling faces in informal attire while on the right side the happy, smiling young maid having a rolling pin in her hand, wearing an apron are bridged parallel with the caption DIAMONDS ARE USELESS! Addressing the audience or customers GIFT YOUR WIFE A MAID. DIAMONDS ARE USELESS and GIFT YOUR WIFE A MAID these two short sentences in capital letters show the notion of consumerism. Diamonds, not gold, or shares, because diamonds are unproductive, not alternative for human labour and hence important. Ornaments are important for the maid as shown wearing earrings, bangles, manga sutra etc. In the sentence GIFT YOUR WIFE A MAID, the ‘maid’ is already commodified through the signs employed in the advertising text. Gifting or presenting one woman to another, only the identity difference on the basis of class and patriarchy. The upper or elite class woman is not paid for her work at home as well. The verbal signs in capital and big font size and the non-verbal signs, colours of the word ‘maid’, colour of T-shirt, the colour of maid’s dress have syntagmatic and paradigmatic bond which show patriarchal dominance as if the owner also buys the maid physically along with her service. The model of the maid shown in the text hides or makes invisible the actual maid. The other characteristics of the advertisement of the website: No Advance Payment, Corporate Entity, Background Verified, Safe Reliable and Easy, Availability of 10,000 maids and Hassle Free replacement. Gifting articles on certain occasions is a kind of social discourse but a woman that is a feminine gender identity is presented in this advertisement as market commodity to make another woman happy. Here a woman belonging to lower socio-economic strata of society and lack any means of earning and hence opts to serve as a maid. It seems a new form of slavery that needs to be abolished. Below these signs, the services provided are characterised suggesting Hire a hassle free maid – Visit bookmybai.com. The maid has no voice and thus she is subaltern. Women are sold to the diet industry through media (Goddard: 1998). This ad constructs a woman in form of maid reviews the ideology of gender discrimination, reminding the controversy of Nirmala Yadav and Megha Khole which took place in the so-called cultural and sophisticated city Pune four years ago. It also reminds a viral video of an uneducated maid who tries to clarify herself of earnings or wage. Regarding representation in media, Rajat Kapoor in the preface of *Woman In Media* (2011) states as:

Globalisation, market economics and above all, fast strides in technology have epic did virtually all the facets of life be it religion or education, politics are employment, fashion or healthcare. With the advent of computers and telecommunications, media has also under gone a sea of change. (I)

Judith Williamson considering ads as cultural artefact, asserts in *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) the need of going beyond literal meanings. For Judith, ads ubiquitous and inevitable cultural artefact of life.

The title of the website bookmybai.com suggest booking a bai or a maid is similar to booking a cinema ticket or a circus show. Recently, the apps Bulli Bai and Sulli Deals were made available to exploit women. The two women are shown in the advertising text: a wife and a maid. The woman shown as wife is modern, educated having no sign of marriage such as mangalsutra or bindi and her hairstyle. The other signs: the maid in saree, married, wearing bangles, kumkum mark on her forehead, rolling pin in her hand, wearing a kitchen apron etc. present her social, economic and cultural status and, thus, controlled. Here caste is invisible because of the market strategy of profit-making. The maid shown is young, married and happy with her work and masters, but in actual from a minor girl to old woman the maids are serving. The two words 'my' and 'maid' are red in colour. The colour as a sign establishes syntactic and paradigmatic relations in this advertising text and supports the ideology of women exploitation. The maid is owned by the employer my maid not anybody else's (It reminds Robert Browning's famous dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess*). The demand for a trusted maid reveals the reality of what is required but how much to be paid to the maid is hidden.

In consumer ads, caste identities are intentionally kept hidden which is one of the means of exploitation. Those women, their families and caste communities do not possess the sources of earnings and for survival. They talked to serve for the dominant and elite class caste communities. The advertising text seems a surface of water having little bit a difference of waves but does not show depth where socio-cultural undercurrents which mobilize the surface. The market presents women with the product advertised. Ads are addressed and aimed at certain individuals or groups depending, gender, language, ethnical community, age such as kids, youths, adults, elders etc. Male voice is dominant and authoritative while women are subordinate, receptive and submissive. Herman Wouk on consumer advertising points out that next to food, shelter and clothes, consumer goods appear an individual's agenda these days as:

Advertisements are any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor. They consist of text and image(s), organized in a manner which strengthens the interplay between the verbal and the non-verbal elements. (2005:7)

Thus, consumer advertisements, either print or electronic, try to represent women through signs. These signs, either linguistic or non-linguistic, verbal or non-verbal, are mainly androcentric or masculine, and therefore, they are patriarchal and construct women from patriarchal perspective. Dell Spender argues that English is language of superiority and man-made and therefore representation of women is male-dominated. The construction of women is market dominated patriarchal ideology, and exploitation through signs in texts remain continue. A text needs to be analyzed in contexts. Here, this representative advertising text is a systematically organized group of signs which reveal the contemporary reality when studied or analyzed in contexts. The signs organized attractively and systematically in the text are only deceiving at surface level but the undercurrents of women exploitation are caste, class and patriarchy.

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