



Television Commercials and Literary Criticism

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ABSTRACT

This paper named, 'Television Commercials and Literary Criticism' makes a novel attempt to connect advertisements and literature. It does not make a comparison between the two, but applies some literary theories to television commercials. The paper further hints of reading 'low culture' through the principles of 'high culture'. The point it makes is that the changed role of commercials should be studied seriously.

KEYWORDS : commercials, literary criticism, high culture, low culture

Introduction

Man, being a social animal is not free from any type of influencing factors whether it is advertisement, cinema, social media and the like. In recent years, advertising has gained an important role in our society. There happened a shift in taste; a change from mere consumerism into promotion of ethical values. Aims of advertising are different from those in earlier days. Even though, we can't neglect the technique of persuasion, it has become the mirror of society which decides the behaviour, attitude, ideas and ways of living of common people. Like cinema and other entertainments, advertising is directly connected to the lives of common folk. Literature has a profound and considerable influence on society. It is thought provoking, can shape civilization, change political systems, expose injustice, and can lead society in unexpected ways. It plays with the complex working of human psyche. Advertising also play with human minds injecting new thoughts and ideas about the unknown. Advertising is always considered as a member of 'low culture' while literature is of 'high culture'. Here this paper tries to analyse low culture commercials through the theories of high culture literature. The paper discusses some interesting critical theories like feminism, deconstruction and hyper reality in advertising and analyses several advertisements based on these theories.

Feminism in Television Commercials

Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal, to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. In recent years advertisers and their agencies have received criticism from a wide variety of source concerning the manner in which women are portrayed in advertisements. Critics state that the women shown in advertisements are too often only house wives, stupid or incompetent, depended on men, decorative or sex objects, passive, and not involved in making major decisions. Many advertisements portray women models to market their products. Woman who appears on the screen like a lover, daughter, wife or mother is highly stereotypical. Commercials are generally charged for not giving importance to women and they are subsided or marginalized. But recently, there happened some changes in the presentation of women in advertisement.

The changing status of women in society is the reason for a positive change in their female role in advertisement. In earlier times, working women were less in number and women who received higher education and higher opportunities were also numbered. They spend their lives within the tire some household chores by satisfying the needs of the family. They were not free from their cliché roles within the family. But there happened lots of changes in their status due to the influence of feminism and other women empowerment movements. Now it is difficult to find a woman without education and conforming to orthodox women's duties (even though some exceptions are there in the rural parts of India). Society has accepted this change in women and it gets reflected in advertisements. The advertisement of Fair and Lovely can be taken as an example. In this advertisement the father figure compels his daughter to marry a well settled man but she disagrees. The father tries to get rid of his responsibility without giving importance to his daughter's opinion. The daughter becomes confused and thinks that her daddy may be correct. At this confused state another confident woman appears on the screen and advises

her to use Fair and Lovely Fairness Cream and then to take a decision. She uses it, and becomes fairer which gives her confidence to take a correct decision. She tells her daddy boldly that she is ready for marriage but after three years because by that time she will get a job and attain an equal status to her would be. She says 'equal equal'. This advertisement speaks about the new identity of contemporary women and throws light on gender equality which is the integral part of a democratic nation.

The commercials by popular fabric manufacturer Biba apparel which is famous for women's garments talk about the concept of 'new woman'. It opens in the background of a sweet Hindi melody and we can see a beautiful girl, gorgeously dressed, doing make up. She is getting ready for the conventional function before every arranged marriage where a girl meets her fiancée and in laws for the first time and fills their stomach with tea and snacks. They can ask some questions to the 'Polite' girl and the marriage is fixed. Here the girl asks his father how she can select her life mate over a plate of 'samosas'. The determined father becomes thoughtful but doesn't reply. But later, he proves himself a loving and responsible father when he tells the boy's parents that they too would like to come to their house because his daughter wants to see if their son can do house hold chores including cooking. The boy's mother confesses that her son does not know even how to boil water and the only house hold activity that he does is making noodles. The father firmly responds that his daughter can't survive on just noodles. Now the most surprising thing happens. The boy, who was silent till then request the girl's father to visit their house after ten days, so that he will get enough time to learn some cooking. Then they can come and see if he is able or not. The girl is impressed, tension is relieved and every one becomes happy. The advertisement concludes with its message, 'Change is Beautiful'. This inspires us to think beyond conventions and changing conventions for good.

Advertisements for Mynhra for the promotion of their ethnic apparel collection named 'Anouk' give us vivid pictures of bold women who made their own life. It deals with four or five different advertisements with different characters, but the slogan and the message is same, 'Bold is Beautiful'. This collection includes different themes like 'The Calling', 'The Waiting', 'The Visit', 'The Whispers' etc. The commercial, titled 'The calling' shows a pregnant young woman who is compelled to take leave from her profession due to her pregnancy. A middle aged woman, her colleague talk on behalf of the management since the management can't employ someone who has physical limitation (Pregnancy here) and she has to concentrate on her pregnancy now. But she tells that she can manage both and it is wrong to judge her on the basis of her pregnancy not on her merits. She takes her colleague to her new office, where she is the boss and free to work at any circumstances, declares her independence and resigns from her present job. The advertisement clearly shows that nothing can prevent us if we have real 'Calling' and in order to be successful in life, what we need is boldness and courage.

Deconstruction of Gender Roles in Television Advertisements

Deconstruction of gender roles is a common phenomenon in television commercials nowadays. It destructs and deconstructs gender

based distinction and constructs equal status for men and women. For example, a podgy South Indian man starts wistfully at his Idlis and Sambar and remembers his dear 'amma' adding three different types of Chutney to the delectable fare. His petite companion gets up and plonks a Havells mixer by his plate. Pointing to it, she describes its virtues. Pointing at herself, she tells her husband not to confuse the Chutney grinder with the patni (wife). The wife is not a Chutney making appliance is her message to her husband and the viewer. This makes the viewers think at least for a minute about this message. Deconstruction of a stereotypical wife's image is possible through this particular commercial. Such advertisements help the patriarchal society to ponder deeply on its viles.

Advertisements are notorious for presenting stereotypical images of women as mother, daughter, wife and men as father, son and husband. A stereotype is a thought that can be adopted about specific types of individuals or certain ways of doing things. For example the advertisement on baby products presents a mother and a baby on the screen. The mother takes care of her baby and bathing him, feeding him and playing along with him. The father image is absent in such advertisement. Such domesticated stereotypical images enhance the thought that caring for one's child is the sole responsibility of the mother. The advertisement of 'Comfort Fabric Conditioner' is an example for such stereotyping. In this advertisement, two children are playing together, a boy and a girl. The boy says that his mother is not at home and the girl smells his dress and says that he is lying and his mother is in his home. Some days later the boy says that his mummy has gone for fourteen days and will come next day. All this time, the girl smells his dress. She understands that what the boy said is right. At last the advertiser says that comfort Fabric conditioner gives fourteen days freshness, so the cloths will be as fresh as in the hands of mother. Such advertisements make everyone including small children think that house hold activities like washing clothes is the responsibility of only 'mother category'. In another advertisement, again on a detergent, the son tries to clean his dress by himself. But the grandfather does not let him do that telling only mothers can do such jobs. The mother appears on a tablet screen and gives necessary advice.

As opposed to the earlier stereotyped role of 'mother', deconstructive images of mothers can also be seen in advertisements nowadays. For example, the changed image of 'mother' is visible in an advertisement named 'The Whisper' from 'Anoukh' fabric collection by Mynthra. The slogan of this advertisement is 'Bold is Beautiful'. A bold mother without the help of her husband manages her life well and shows the society around her that there is nothing a woman can't do. She comes to a new place (a flat) to stay there along with her son. The neighbourhood ladies are surprised to see a woman without the accompaniment of a man. They frequently ask her about her husband. She does not give a correct reply. One day, when she was playing ball with her son, the ball got stuck on a tree. She jumped up to get it, but could not. At that time a neighbouring woman came with the comment that if the boy's father was there, he would be able to manage it. She takes those words as challenging and jumps high pushing the ball down. She smiles at the lady and declares that a woman can do anything in the world without the support of a man.

Deconstructive image of in-laws are also not rare in commercials. The new advertisement of Cadbury Dairy Milk chocolate presents a young married woman who is watching a marriage function passing through the street from the upstairs of her house. She is having dairy milk and enjoys eating it. At that time her mother in-law approaches her, and she corrects her sari with full respect. The daughter in-law give her a bit of dairy milk chocolate. After this, the whole situation changes. They smile at each other, come down and join the dancers. The image shifts from a conventional mother in-law, a person who always finds fault with her daughter in-law to a real friend who enjoys with her. It can help each mother in-law to have a deeper thought.

Deconstruction of husband image can be seen in the advertisement of Bharath Matrimony.Com. This advertisement presents a father, mother and son having their dinner at the dining table. The parents question the son about his wife arriving late at night after her job. He informs them about extra work at her office. His father says that there is no need for her to work outside for a living. The son replies boldly that job is not necessary, but she likes to work. His wife overhears this and remembers the time before their marriage when they shared and

accepted each others' likes and dislikes. She recollects the wordings on her profile 'I would like to work even after marriage'. The changed image of the husband who accepts his wife's individuality is very clear from the advertisement.

Hyper Reality in Television Commercials

Hyper reality is an important feature of postmodernism. Hyper reality, the term coined by Jean Baudrillard is the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies. Commercials creating hyper real or an unreal atmosphere is common in this postmodern world. Hyper reality is the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies. Commercials create false images not at all related to reality in order to sell the product. In the advertisement of 'Kuber Kunji' the advertiser says that if we buy and keep this in a particular devotional place, money will come at our feet. Our problems will be solved. They present the product with catchy images, dialogues and this make people believe it. Advertisements on many products like soaps, powder, health drinks etc. provide a hyper reality which fails the audience distinguish between truths and lies.

In the advertisement of Horlicks, a teenage boy is practicing like an anchor while his mother is watching this and asks him what's going on here. He says that the President is coming to his school and he is going to interview him since his project is ranked as the best. The proud mother says that her son is the best and in future he will be interviewed by others because she gives him Horlicks every day. This is the reason for his smartness and intelligence. This is the case in each and every health drink. An ordinary mother who sees these advertisements will surely be moved by them and will buy the product. Such commercials create a sense of insecurity among people and they run for something they lack.

Advertisements on toothpastes and bathing soaps shift us from this real world and will be landed in Disney land. Popular personalities like film stars add flavours to the hyper real atmosphere. In the commercial of 'Close Up' tooth paste, starring the famous actor, who wakes up in the morning, hurriedly brushes his teeth with close up and he feels 'really' fresh. There is a marriage in his neighbourhood. He runs to the function and the coolness inside him (got from close up) makes him dance with everyone. He creates a pleasant atmosphere there. This type of advertisements gives false conception to the public. Advertisements exemplifying a by par real world filled with 'Simulacra' are responsible to an extent for creating unhealthy thoughts in society. Any product, whether it is a chocolate, biscuit, perfume, fairness cream, washing powder, pain killer or anything cannot be sold in society without creating this extra 'halo'. The increasing demand for such products shows that people who know well about this fake nature are attracted towards it.

This paper does not talk about advertising theories, but it explicates a rare relationship between literary criticism and commercials. The paper stresses that advertisements cannot be sidelined in this advanced capitalist society. They should be read along with other disciplines because they are part of our day today life. It goes along with the needs of new generation. Even though advertising cannot be compared to literature, both share many common characteristics in effect. Literature, belonging to the category of high culture is one of the manifestations of culture. Advertising which is considered under the category of low culture is also a manifestation of culture. It cannot be neglected as bad since many convey good messages to society.

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