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Feminine Portrayal in Media: Appropriate or Not?

Women have long faced discrimination and treated as subsidiary to men. However, over time, owing to the countless voices raised to achieve equal work, ownership, voting and other rights for women, humanity is much closer to a gender unbiased society. Yet even today, visual media, the most common source of knowledge, fails to deliver positive and fair images of women. So, albeit many might argue otherwise, it is an undeniable reality that visual media is biased between the sexes and underrepresents, hypersexualizes, and binds female characters by unfair gender stereotypes and thus, is against my feminist conception.

Before elaborating on why the visual media is at fault, I would bring to light what feminism, according to me is and where is it derived from. Simply put, my feminist conception demands all individuals, regardless of gender, caste, creed or sexual orientation to be considered equal and be allowed freedom in life. However, As C. N. Adichie (2013) describes, the society perceives men as the ruling authorities and sole breadwinners while it is always women who are bound by stereotypes and outdated cultural laws. Furthermore, in conservative regions such as South Asia and Africa, women empowerment is considered a taboo too. Since childhood, women are taught domestic skills like cooking, cleaning etc. only and are distanced from the concept of independence and self-fulfillment. This narrow-minded upbringing of women leaves them subordinated and subject to male superiority, thus denying them their birthright of independence and freedom. Similarly, it is also a sad fact that society has always bound women by "glass ceilings" and prevented them from living their dreams. As W. Maathai (in C. N. Adichie, 2013) says, "the higher you go, the fewer women there are". The economic system, though not explicitly, has always restricted women to "poorly paid positions" (Obama, 2016) and has

maintained a men-only monopoly, enforcing the idea that men lead, while women follow, which is anything but true. I believe adding such stereotypes and boundaries to people's lives is an act of dehumanization and hence, my idea of feminism is strictly against all such shackles and chains and promotes ultimate freedom for everyone.

To begin with, visual media almost always portrays women in domesticated roles and as dependent beings with insufficient physical and mental capabilities (as compared to men). This delivers a very wrong image of who a girl is supposed to be, hence bounds them by unfair gender stereotypes. Firstly, the representation of women in media is as low as "27%" (Smith & Cook, 2008, p.13) which leaves an inadequate character pool to portray women whereby, the media industry tends to portray them as submissive, faded characters like housewives, secretaries who rarely play a significant part in everyday lives. As Smith & Cook (2008) describe, females are more likely to be depicted as parents in media than males. While on the other hand, men (who are already in majority) are presented as masculine, independent and authoritative 'providers' who rarely perform 'feminine' tasks. This portrayal of men as heavenly lords while women as "passive, dependent on men and always enmeshed in housework" (Wood, 1994, p.32) slaves delivers a false image of a woman's power and importance in today's world. The sad reality is that media often portrays women in a very subordinated, dependent and unimportant stencil and thus, fails to highlight important aspects, like intelligence or bravery, of a woman's personality; this leading to a very wrong image of the word 'female' being conveyed to the society and especially to the younger generation; leading to them following the stereotypes and ideas being conveyed by the media. As Henry (2007) rightfully explains, acceptance of the mass-portrayed female identity by characters like Marge is a concrete parallel to what gender conception the new generations are being brought up with. This explains how sharply is exposure to gender stereotypes in media affecting the youngest generation. Therefore, media fails to deliver an equal and strong image of women to the society and instead, evidently contributes to the overall

inequality problem by representing females as reliant on men.

In a similar vein, visual media tends to hypersexualize women irrelevantly, portraying a highly objectified image of the gender. Statistically, women are as much as "5 times" (Smith & Cook, 2008, p.17) more likely to be portrayed as ultra-thin 'Barbie dolls' in sexually revealing clothing, as mere eye candies. Owing to this hypersexualized and objective depiction of women, "Girls may become dissatisfied with how they look" (Smith & Cook, 2008, p.13), leading to women getting bound by pointless body stereotypes too. Likewise, media also almost never conveys the thoughts and conceptions of a woman and instead, restricts their portrayal to mindless, incapable yet visibly appealing beings. Such representation of the female gender demeans the idea of human diversity and overgeneralizes women into a desirable template designed by the patriarchal society for men's pleasure. Thus, media's objectification of women and their portrayal as "subject to men's sexual desires" (Wood, 1994, p.36) leads to them getting vulnerable about their bodies, and also leads to females being considered as objects for sexual pleasure which objectifies and dehumanizes women.

The visual media also portrays women as physically and mentally weak beings who are unable to supersede men in the walks of life. Be it in a workplace, home or in any other setting, a woman is almost never portrayed as the authoritative figure and is often shown as inferior to men, largely relying on them for everyday tasks, which further weakens the image of females. So, as identified by Wood (1994), according to the depiction in major media sources such as children's cartoon, video commercials and news, "men are competent authorities who save women from their incompetence" (Wood, 1994, p.35), which is completely false. In children fantasy movies, women are portrayed as "helpless" (Wood, 1994, p.35) beings, waiting to be rescued by masculine men, while men dominate the news industry and other media franchises. Similarly, media goes on to objectify women, by portraying them as financially, morally and physically dependent on men for their day-to-day lives, which leads to a very weak image of

women being portrayed. To top it all off, media goes on to portray men as superior and more intellectual beings who are too important to value women and consider it fine to objectify them. This contrast in a man's and woman's image is clearly visible in statements by Henry and Wood. Henry (2007) explains that according to the media, women are biologically destined to bear children only and it is their responsibility to put men's need on top of their own. On the other hand, Wood (1994) describes the man as the powerful authority who is seldom shown doing housework, a task solely reserved for the enslaved women. Analyzing the portrayal of both genders, it may be inferred that media is biased towards men and often practices dehumanizing portrayal of women. Such spineless image of women being delivered by the media leads to a plethora of other problems being faced by women, sexual violence being one of them. Owing to their portrayal as dependent, objectified and weak beings, women are considered vulnerable targets for personal fulfillment and thus, face sexual violence and harassment by men on a day-to-day basis, which significantly adds to their issues in this cruel and biased world. As an outcome of this idea of women incompetence, young girls also grow up with a conception of their inferiority to men, which further highlights the contrast between the genders. So, this unfair portrayal of women by the visual media leads to many problems them, the society considering females weak, vulnerable and incapable being just a few of them.

In reply to such allegations on media, many argue that media delivers the reality of the society and as compared to the 20th century, today is more equal and indifferent. However, the reality is that although things have changed, majority of the media franchises still indulge in anti-feminine portrayal just for the sake of good business. Media might claim to present the reality of the society, but truth be told, in majority of the visual presentations, women are portrayed from a very narrow perspective. As Smith & Cook put it, in today's media, "Women are portrayed with no aspirations, no particular goals, only dreaming about love" (Smith & Cook, 2008, p.17). From this, it may be inferred that media fails to portray a substantial majority of women who

burn their midnight oil to feed their families, who show strength and valor to face the atrocities of the society and those who strive and supersede men in male-dominant fields like science. This narrow-sighted portrayal of females causes an image of women inferiority to be saved in female minds, leading to them subconsciously considering themselves inferior to men in all walks of life. Hence, media, despite its claims, fails to portray the true reality of society and instead, enforces its narrow perspective of women on the malleable minds of the society.

Similarly, some also claim today's media has begun featuring women in powerful and anti-stereotypic characters. Although there is part truth in such claims, still, the quantity of such occurrences in main-stream media is way too low to have an impact. Such lack of women empowering portrayal, as per Steiner (as cited in Beck, 1998), is probably because of lack of women representation at a decisive level in the media industry, an outcome of the glass-ceiling effect senselessly emphasized by the media itself. So, contrary to its claims and regardless of the reasons involved, the visual media industry still favors women objectification and tends to produce content that enforces gender stereotypes and hence, is geared towards men entertainment.

Conclusively, based upon my feminist conception, today's visual media fails to present women in the same financial, mental and physical prowess as men and intentionally objectifies them, binding them by stereotypical ideas. And such situation will prevail unless major reforms at a higher level are introduced in the visual media industry. As per Smith & Cook (2008), to reduce the objectification of females in visual media and ensure an equal portrayal of the sexes, directors should ensure women proportions in their content is increased and the female characters are provided an actual identity with their perspective and intellect being more prominent than their physical features. Hence, unless media doesn't cease utilizing women as eye candies and increase their positive representation, it will continue being against females and hence, my feminist conception.

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