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Societal Attitude and Gender Bias as Reflected in the Language of Matrimonial Advertisements

Pratima Dave, Ph.D.

Men and Women Wanted!

1. WANTED for - 25 yrs old TALL, FAIR, VERY BEAUTIFUL, family oriented, homely, convent educated MBA professional girl alliance from well settled Jain boy sub- caste no bar. send BHP to this PO box no 1192.

2. Affluent & highly cultured brahmin family seeks alliance for their BE, well established son from the parents of good looking, fair, tall, slim, caring, traditional value lover, professional girl from Brahmin famiy.

Relationship between Language and Society

Language is a guide to social reality—it powerfully conditions all our thinking related to social issues, problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world or alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood. They are very much at the mercy of the particular language, which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the

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use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world to a larger extent is built up on the language habits of the group.

There is a direct relationship between language and society. Social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/ or behaviour. Language reflects the matters of regional, social or ethnic origin and even sex. This shows in the choice of words, structures, the tone of the speaker, silences and body language. If we look at it carefully, we realize that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other and even shape each other (Fasold, year)

A Filter to Reality

Language provides a screen or filter to reality (Wardhaugh, 1992). It determines how speakers perceive and organize the world around them, both the natural world and the social world. Consequently, the language we use helps to form our worldview.

The linguistic situation is more likely to be stable in conservative cultures, where male and female social roles are not flexible. Indian society is a male dominated society, where gender discrimination is a common phenomenon reflected in different spheres of life. A female child has to bear the brunt of this. Preference for a male child has religious significance and girls are considered liability and parents are eager to get rid of this liability as soon as possible. Indian patriarchy system exhibits gender bias overtly. Here, we need to understand the difference between sex and gender. Sex is a biological matter of genes and hormones, whereas gender is socially constructed. It is learned. People acquire characteristics, which are preferred as masculine and feminine. Language reflects society so that social division on gender ground is reflected in the pattern of language. Being born as male or female has far reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in this world and how the world treats us (Talbot, 1998).

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Language and the Subordinate Status of Women

Spender (1983) claims that women's subordinate status is reflected in the language they use and the language used about them. Women get conditioned to the extent that they see themselves through men's eyes and try to cultivate feminine characteristics that they expect men to want from them. As a consequence women's self esteem is caught up in their appearance and desirability to others particularly to men. Language of matrimonial ads reflects this trend conspicuously. It establishes the sexism in language, where women are treated as different from and inferior to men. This sex differentiation results in stereotyping of women.

To stereotype someone is to interpret the behaviour, personality in terms of a set of common attributes applied for the whole group. It must be said that stereotyping is most often suffered by minority group i.e. those who are socially subordinate and are stigmatized. In society, it is the woman who gets stereotyped as an object of man's desire. The language of matrimonial ads proves this fact. Here, language draws connection between language and power. It reveals hidden agenda of gendered inequality prevalent in the society. Language puts things into clear-cut categories imposing boundaries, limits and division on reality. This paper is an attempt to probe this aspect of Social reality as presented in the matrimonial ads where the attitude of society and the inherent gender bias is overtly reflected through the language used in them.

Sample for This Study

For this descriptive research project, the sample of 200 matrimonial ads was randomly selected from four language newspapers- English, Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi. Out of that 100 ads were for male and 100 ads for female aspirants. So, it is difficult to

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generalize the outcome with this small number. But, we can definitely reach at a tentative generalization that shows a specific pattern through the language used in them.

Nature, Function and Cost of Advertising

Advertising in general is a public discourse in the sense that it has a mass and indeterminable audience. It is a 'one-way' discourse in the sense that the producer and the interpreter roles do not alternate. The advertiser is the producer, and the audience is the interpreter. The addressee is not specifically identified. The language of advertisement needs attention for critical study. If we read the ads carefully, we notice the structure of sentences is the body of the text. It is the syntax of concise, no nonsense, to the point efficiency and the constructed addresser is individualized. The language used is telegraphic, because giving ad in a newspaper is a costly affair hence; the maximum information is given in the minimum space. A classified ad in English costs around Rs. 7000 to 8000, whereas the same ad in Hindi and other regional languages may cost around Rs. 3000 to 4000.

An important function of ads is of building images, which on interpretation could be honorific or derogatory. Ads reflect modern life style associated with the middle class. The verbal clues are the many expressions for their priorities of the modern life style. In this process of image building, words especially adjectives are used for the 'desired' physical and other attributes of the male and female advertisers. This process of enhancement is crucial for modern commodities. Advertising helps to legitimize contemporary consumerism.

Reflecting the Attitudinal Changes

Society is changing at a fast pace. Matrimonial ads reflect this attitudinal change in the society. We must remember that it is purely an urban phenomenon. It is difficult to know

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whether the ad is given by the prospective groom and bride, or is given by the parents on behalf of their children. Matrimonial ads reflect a very important dimension of the present state of affairs on the institution of marriage. Going through them the researcher realized that in spite of the big talk of women's emancipation, there is a distinct social and gender bias reflected in them.

Though advertisement is a very powerful tool, it can have a negative impact on society too. The linguistic signals we transmit about members are highly distinctive and discriminating symbols of public and private identities. The relatively permanent features of language that express aspects of person's physical, psychological identity are- age, sex, body type, personality and intelligence and they are all stereotyped.

Several factors define a person's physical identity- height, build, complexion, facial features, type of hair etc. A woman has to bear the brunt not only of social stratification but of physical stratification too. This puts her in the category of an object in the eyes of men, who decide the criteria for an eligible bride for her. Although her legal position has been greatly improved, but a woman is still bound by ancient tradition of behaviour that emphasize upon the traits of submission, obedience, devotion and absolute dedication to her husband and family. Indian society determines the place and conditions the role of a woman, where she is expected to abide by the norms of the society- the norms decided by men.

Devaki Jain (1975) writeses that a relationship, which plays a central role in enhancing or enslaving a woman, is marriage. The act of marriage is not merely legal, contractual arrangement amongst the Hindus but a sacramental fact. The various factors that conclude marriage, build into its ties, which are permanent and, at least psychologically unbreakable. As most girls are brought up to believe that marriage and motherhood are their destiny, the destiny designed and controlled by men. This affects her individual identity and she has to fit in the mould of an image, which is created by the society,

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which reflects an overt gender bias towards her. This study is an attempt to analyze this aspect and to evaluate its effects on society in general and women in particular. Certain variables were studied to understand this bias towards women.

Findings

Followings are some of the findings of this research.

Education

It is found that education, the most important determinant of a woman's status, did not hold much status in men's eyes. Educational qualification of female advertisers was on the higher side in all the linguistic communities. 42% of them were having professional degrees under different categories-medicine, engineering, MBA, MCA, and other professional degrees. This proves that they did not believe in adding up the degrees for the sake of it, but preferred to be professionally qualified for jobs. There was not a single female advertiser, who did not declare her educational qualification. But what disturbs is that 46% of the female advertisers did not mention any educational qualification 'desired' in men. There could be two interpretations for this:

1. Women in India are still not assertive enough.
2. The 'declared' qualification by them is an indirect indication of the 'desired' qualification in men.

37% of male advertisers did not mention any educational qualification 'desired' in females. Either it shows that the educational qualification of women is insignificant, or in response to men's 'declared' qualification only eligible females would apply. Because it does not mean that they will marry an illiterate woman.

Desired/Declared Qualifications

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This discrepancy between ‘desired’ and ‘declared’ qualifications in male and female advertisers is a clear indication of gender bias towards women. Though, we cannot deny that women’s education is an accepted fact, rather an asset for them as they are competing with men in almost all the professional fields. But, they have to constantly prove their worth, which is accepted automatically in men.

Occupation

The variable of ‘occupation’ reflects society’s gender biased attitude towards women. In the ‘desired’ category of occupation in men, 43% of female advertisers preferred a ‘well-settled’ person without naming any specific profession. This reflects a typical Indian parental attitude where a ‘well- settled’ person would be a provider for their daughters’ needs. The adjective ‘eligible’ also refers to the provider. 14% female advertisers did not mention any occupation as ‘desired’ in men.

46% of men from all linguistic groups did not mention any occupation in women under the ‘desired’ category. But the adjective ‘eligible’ is used and it may refer to a qualified girl, who may be working or may have a desire to work. A workingwoman is an asset today, as she would supplement her husband’s income and raise their living standard. 54% men preferred workingwomen.

Physical Traits

The variable of ‘desired’ and ‘declared’ physical traits both in male and female advertisers confirm the double standard of society. Looks are not important for a man in marriage, but being beautiful is an obligatory ingredient for a woman in marriage. The ads project a woman as an object, a commodity reflecting the consumerist mentality. Consumerism has not left any area untouched and marriage scene is no exception to that.

Advertisements exploit female body even to sell cigarette or gents undergarments. Woman is only a body for media. Her desired physical attributes (by men) are supposed

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to be the most important aspect of her personality. Looks are so very important for a girl in marriage that people could compromise with other things such as –education, dowry, and family status but not with looks.

Beauty

Beauty, an abstract term is concretized as ‘fairness’ of skin for Indian mindset. Indians are obsessed with the colonial hangover of ‘fairness of skin’. Indian mindset will need centuries to think otherwise. Dark skin is deterrent to marriage for girls in India. That is sad but true. In fact men at least have some reprieve here, even if the pay packet is thick or thin the color of the skin is immaterial for them, but girls have to be fair skinned. Wonder how this skin obsession started!

Skin Colour

There are degrees of fairness- fair, very fair, fair and beautiful, beautiful, very beautiful etc. Does it mean that fair and beautiful are two different aspects of good looks? 88% of men desired for a beautiful woman under different categories. It is heartening to know that 12% of men (8% Marathi, 4% from Gujarati linguistic community) did not mention ‘looks’ desired in girls. Slimness, another Indo- Aryan trait like fairness, has resurfaced. In India healthy and curvaceous woman with wheatish complexion has been the norm for beauty, which was not desired by a single man.

Men’s Insistence of Fair and Beautiful

It is important to notice here that men are so vocal about their demand for a fair and beautiful girl, whereas 85% of girls were silent on this aspect in men. It is due to the deep-rooted socio cultural conditioning of the society, which teaches a woman to be silent and non assertive.

In the category of ‘declared’ physical traits, 71% men did not declare any attribute in them endorsing the view that looks are not important for men, though 19% of them did

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use adjectives such as *handsome, fair, healthy*, etc. There is an interesting dimension to this. Men, too, are getting conscious of their looks. Launching of special fairness cream for men is a proof of the same.

Consequences of Pressure on Looking Good

The pressure of looking good is stressful for girls. To look beautiful is a natural instinct, but becomes problematic when one wants to follow the dictates of others. Girls try to abide by the norm of beauty decided by men. It is ironical that women develop male mindset and behave accordingly. It is a dangerous trait, as it will affect their individuality. It puts men and women under different categories of controller and the controlled. This establishes the fact that men and women are not treated equally because looking good is not conditional for men in marriage. A woman becomes an object in this consumer market. A woman is much more than a body. But, this gender bias affects her role and status in society.

Men Demanding for SuperWomen in Beauty

The same attitude of society with a clear gender bias is reflected in the 'desired' personality traits in both the male and female advertisers. Men have become more and more demanding and they want a super woman with very distinct personality traits to be found in one person. This concept of a 'complete woman' or a 'super woman' is disturbing. Our 'Subhashitas' emphasize upon developing such personality traits in girls as they are in big demand in the marriage market. What is interesting and ironical that the women are expected to fit in the same age-old mould even in 21st century.

Role of Religious Dicta

The following 'shloka' endorses the so-called virtues desired in a 'complete woman'. A woman must be efficient in her work like a minister. She should be servile like a slave. In cooking and feeding she should be like a mother and in bed she should act like a

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courtesan. She must be dutiful. She should be forgiving like mother earth. A woman endowed with such virtues is hard to find.

Kaareyshu mantri karneshu daasi
Bhojyeshu maata shaynesu rambha
Dharmanukula kshamaa dharitri
Bharya cha shadgunyavatiha durlabha
(Subhashit ratna bhandaargarbha)

Please provide a rough translation for the benefit of your readers.

The Characteristic of Cultured, etc.

All the 100 male advertisers wanted a woman under different categories of—cultured, well-mannered, modern, smart, intelligent, caring, loving, all giving, adjusting, simple, mature etc. The most frequently desired attribute in women is the adjective ‘homely’. The dictionary meaning of ‘homely’ is plain or unattractive, but in matrimonial lingo, it refers to a girl, who puts the home first or a girl, who does good house keeping or a girl, whose dress sense is very Indian and who wears traditional dress and not western outfit.

Contradictory Statements/Demands

There were some contradictory categories under ‘desired’ personality traits used by men - such as modern and traditional. A very contradictory remark! It could be very subjective hence, very difficult to analyze. Indian Men usually prefer a woman with traditional values – integrity, honesty, homely, adjusting etc. but at the same time they want her to be modern in her approach. She should be able to accompany her husband in parties and behave accordingly. Dress code for a modern woman should be strictly followed. Sarees should be worn with backless blouse to look sexy. Saree is supposed to be very dignified and graceful attire, which ironically is expected to give a sexy look. How contradictory!

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She has to be modern as a host as well as a guest. At the same time it is a sacred duty of a woman to look after her husband, his parents, family and children.

Silence of Women

Society's attitude has conditioned a woman to be non-assertive in all the areas of life. In response to 100 % males' demand for different personality traits in her 79% of women were silent on this issue in men. 21% of them 'desired' traits in men under the category of – cultured, from good family and non-addictive.

Gender Issues Foregrounded

Thus, we see that this study foregrounds the issues of gender bias and male dominance in Indian society. The mass communication media develops an aspect of consumerism. In this 'marriage market' a woman is compelled to possess certain physical attributes and personality traits decided by men. Advertising as a means of propaganda becomes a very powerful medium for shaping the thought process of the people involved in it. This results in a political question, because in spite of their high educational and economic status, it develops in women a tendency to be conditioned by male mindset. Media is wrongly playing this role in generalizing the importance of stereotypes putting a woman at the periphery and the man at the center of social life. Here, man's behaviour becomes the yardstick to judge a woman in all the spheres of life.

Negative Role of Beauty Industry

A report by Shveta Bhagwat published in the column of 'The Sunday Times of India' dated July 23rd 06 endorses the researcher's fears about the negative role of 'beauty industry' towards women in matrimonial scene. Dr. Zaheer Ahmed of Apollo Hospital, Delhi categorically says: ' My matrimonial clientele has increased 50% over the last five years because of the great demand of cosmetic surgery.'

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Dr. Anup Dhar of the same hospital says: 'families come from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi and tell us that boy's side has spotted a defect that needs to be corrected.' The cost of this beauty treatment approximately is:

Nose job - Rs. 30-40000.

Botox- Rs 8000 to 10000 per sitting.

Enhancing cheekbones- Rs 30,000.

Microdermabrasion- Rs 2000to3000 per inch.

Dr. Ram Iyer of Kaya Clinic states in the same newspaper 'our bridal services start post-engagement so by the time the big day comes the bride looks 'perfect'. But, it is really difficult to define the concept of 'perfection' as it tends to be relative. But socially 'perfect woman' should cater to the needs of the male members of the society as they have fixed the norms for it.

Mirroring Reality of the Situation

These trends only mirror reality. Dr. Sanjay Chugh, a psychologist, says 'it is nice to believe one is not judged by looks, but the harsh reality is otherwise. No matter what anyone says, at some level looks do matter in marriage market.'

Marriage has become a conditional affair for men. It definitely demeans a woman and affects her individuality. This gives a danger signal. It will result in stereotyping which should be avoided. Thornkramar and Henery (1983) put this point aptly in relation to social scientific investigation when they say that in the traditional research women are more often conceptualized in singular conditions, while men are allowed an individualism that transcends gender. What we need to insist is that women cannot just be lumped together wholesale. Attention must be paid to the difference between them, which will enhance their individuality. Media being a very powerful mode encourages women

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to see themselves as product or services, which are advertised and aspects of their social world in terms of the meanings, which ads draw on and help to promote (Begnell 1997).

Traditional Positive Myths

This concept belongs to our society's stock of positive myths concerning the attributes of sexually desirable woman and ads signify this concept of feminine beauty of mythic meaning. Iconic signs denoting women in the media very often perpetuate oppressive ideological myths about real women. By emphasizing on the social value of youth, slimness, fairness, tallness it promotes a dominant ideological myth, which is not natural but cultural. Myths have always focused on this aspect of beauty and generated a specific mindset. In 'Durga Saptashati' there is prayer uttered by a man, which establishes the fact that physical charm is the most important qualification for a woman in marriage.

Patnim manoramam dehi manovritti anusaranim
Taarinim durgasansaar saagarsya kuloddhvam
(Durga saptashai Argala Stotram,4)

'Give me a wife who is beautiful, acts according to my wishes, helps all in my family to go to the other end of this sea of worldly affairs. Besides that she should follow her husband's wishes.'

Woman is a Product

This put a woman in the category of a product, a product that has to act according to the wishes of another person. The mythic meaning that the ads generate are focused on 'products' with certain social significance, they barge in our real social world decide our taste, trends and make us a victim of the vicious circle. What is alarming is that women are not just turning themselves into object but they are actively involved in self-creation

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without realizing the consequences of this process. The way the women look is vitally important because the success of social relationship hangs on being desirable and being desirable is all about visual impact. Conventional kind of feminine appearances and feminine ideals are shaped by mass media, fashion and T.V. A feminine identity is to be worked out. A woman has to stand up and take the reigns of her life in her hands and should bank on her strengths as human being and refuse to be 'superwoman' or a 'complete woman' according to the male norms and demand for social equality.

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Navbharat (Hindi)

Maharashtra Times (Marathi)

Loksatta (Marathi)

Sakal (Marathi)

Gujrat Samachar (Gujarati)

Mumbai Samachar (Gujarati)

Janmabhoomi Pravasi (Gujarati)

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