

## **Regressive or Progressive Apparatus? Representation of Women in Billboard and Print Advertisements in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

*Representation of the woman in advertisements is a signifying practice specially in a discourse such as the print media and billboard whereas advertisements are the main tools for the consumer world to launch or introduce a product to the consumer. A certain system of representation is needed to make a message persuasive and attractive. This paper identifies the regressive and progressive politics inherent in the representation of women. On the one hand, it shows how some print and billboard advertisements debase the existence of woman. On the other hand, the paper also shows how advertisements can promote female empowerment. The regressive side of representation of women can be witnessed when advertisements exhibits women in eroticized, domesticated or stereotyped ways and thus, vulnerable to male gaze. Again, some progressive aspects of representation of women in advertisement can be observed when femininity is celebrated and re-conceptualized, resulting in tacit resistance against patriarchal domination.*

**Keywords:** Representation, Signifier, Signified, Commodification, Stereotype, Female empowerment, Male Gaze, Carnavalesque, Internalization

Advertisement is a main tool to launch or introduce a product and to make a product persuasive, attractive or desirable to the consumer. Generally, consumers of products belong to different ages, sexes, and races or are from different areas and countries. But in the field of consumerism, these distinctions are not maintained. Rather, a kind of strategy is deployed where only females are used as models for all kind of products, even for products for males, old people or young children. In this process women's beauty, body shape, skin colours and above all, their 'femaleness' are given importance, ignoring other aspects of their existence apart from the focused 'femaleness'. So, a type of marginalized, stereotyped, eroticized and gender-based representation is seen in commercial advertisements in TV, print media or in billboards.

Furthermore, by creating a myth through advertisements made by ad makers women are given to understand that 'Beauty' is 'white'; body shape is 'slim'; their glorification lies in 'motherhood' or the erotic gestures and postures used in advertisements are their glorified and glamorized identity (Storey, 1998). Actually, under this representation, there is a hidden agenda of commodifying women and objectifying them for the satisfaction of male gaze (Mulvey, 1999). Women at times try to resist this strategy but most of the time they make themselves 'one' with the process of internalization knowingly, unknowingly or sometimes ignoring the facts. Analysis of advertisements can be a good way to exhibit the hidden politics of female representation that

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debase their existence. At the same time, it can make them aware of their positions through a process that can lead them towards empowerment (Hall, 1997). To find the route to such empowerment, the meaning of an advertisement can be constructed, reconstructed or deconstructed through the concept or meaning associated with the advertisement at its signified level (Saussure, 1959). This paper aims at exposing the regressive representation of women and shedding light on the progressive features of some print and billboard advertisements deployed in Bangladeshi advertisements.

In the field of advertisements, various approaches to female representation are deployed. Of them, representation by theme e.g. class, age, gender, ethnicity or more generally by identity, stereotyping or marginalizing by femininity, motherhood, childhood, nationhood etc. are dominant. Especially in media advertisements on TV, magazines, billboards; these kind of representations aim at specific audiences as well as specific purposes i.e. commodification, promotion of gender biases, and prioritizing patriarchy over females inducing female submission to the consumerism, etc. From this point of view, it seems a woman's real existence as a 'human being' is threatened implicitly or explicitly and is more focused on their 'femaleness'. In some cases, women are found conscious now a days about this fact. However, in most cases, the strong grip of consumerism does not allow the women to be free or even to ignore it. Rather, they become 'one' with this consumer world by a process of internalization in terms of commodification (Tyson, 2008). In this context, we are going to analyze some related billboards and print advertisements as case study from the Bangladeshi perspective at the broader level which can clarify the ultimate situation as far as representation of women in Bangladeshi advertisements is concerned.



*Figure 1: 'Flower Power'*

A look at the of AARONG advertisement (Figure 1) entitled “Flower Power”, reminds us of the three Greek goddesses of beauty, intelligence and power; Athena, Hera and Aphrodite, who seem to be symbolized by the three young girls standing here. Their ‘tempting’ outlook and gesture attract the viewers with their beauty as well as power which is already entitled as “flower power”. “Flower (Girl) power” signifies a declaration of war against this patriarchal society which can be seen as an empowering side of this advertisement. Again, using zero ornament is a signifier of non-violent ideology to renounce their femininity where they refuse traditional female roles of being decked up with ornaments. The use of zero ornaments can be seen as an attempt as ‘de-eroticizing’ here which suggests a renewal of identity or protest.

At the same time, the uncouth standing positions and looking gestures of the three females can disrupt the male gaze. All of them have a front view but only the model standing in the middle casts a complete gaze while the other two have partial front views in the picture which denotes a kind of ignorance to the viewers (Figure 1).

Moreover, flowers are signs of the kind of sensitiveness and loveliness which can overpower hardness and cruelty. This myth has been created by the consumerism of the media through child education, flower marketing, social festivals (rose days, valentine days, anniversaries etc.) and even by the patriarchal domination in terms of media control. Patriarchal people tend to compare flower to women for their softness but it is ironically subverted by the recent idea of “Flower Power” here (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). Flower, which traditionally represents femininity and vulnerability, is now used here as a sign of celebration of womanhood (Figure 1).

Again, viewed from the perspective of female empowerment, the gaze of the three models is substantial. Here, the politics of billboard is that the viewers will always watch from below and subsequently, the models will attain a ‘Godlike’ view from upward. Considering the looking gestures of the females, we find that the girl in the middle have a descending gaze upon the earth while the two other are avoiding their eye contact denoting ignorance to the viewers. This type of gaze represents ascendancy of the models over the viewers symbolizing them as three Greek goddesses of beauty, intelligence and power; Athena, Hera and Aphrodite.

Overall, the three models here give us the impression that their ‘body or beauty’ is not a secret, rather, it’s their ‘power’ to show off, the same way male dominated society exhibits ‘muscle power’ or power of ‘money’ or ‘gun’.



*Figure 2: 'Chumukey Bhalobasha'*

In the billboard marked as 'Bubble UP-'Chumukey Bhalobasha' (Figure 2), a young lascivious teenager girl is seen in the photograph with the Bubble up bottle as a fetish object. Here, beside the commodification of girl (as a product), the advertisement can be seen as empowering factor if the fetish object the Bubble up bottle overturns into a trophy. The meaning can be deconstructed as an 'empowering' representation if we consider she has won the trophy (the bottle) in the right photograph as a sign of patriarchy and in the left photograph she has already won and placed it into her back pocket, signifying the control of patriarchy.

Again, this advertisement implies an element of 'voyeurism'. The audience is initiated here into 'Voyeuristic Scopophilia' (the pleasure of looking or fascination to the opposite sex) (Mulvey, 1999). A trendy hair style, exposure of body parts (abdomen), tops, fitted jeans, bangles, large fashionable ear ring and brown skin of the girl represent the standard feminine beauty through the discourse of voyeurism under the lustrous male gaze which further degrade the 'human existence' of the girl, indicating 'female existence' only.

However, the whole meaning of the advertisement is deconstructed if the fetishistic object, that is, the Bubble Up bottle can be seen as a 'trophy'. In the right photograph, she has won it and in the left photo, she has put it in her hip-pocket (Figure 2).

Again, using the Bakhtinian idea of 'crowning-decrowning' in 'carnival,' we perceive that the use of fetishistic 'dildo' is meant to be an object of erotic pleasure – in the form of a Bubble Up bottle (Figure 2).



*Figure 3: 'Bodle Dao Rupkotha'*

In the billboard advertisement of 'Meril Splash' (Figure 3) entitled 'Bodle Dao Rupkotha' (Changing the Myth), a young beautiful girl and a young man is seen in opposite direction in front of a castle where the title 'Bodle Dao Rupkotha' suggests the empowerment of the women. As for example, we came to know from the traditional myth of Cinderella that a prince falls in love with the beautiful Cinderella who is constantly under the control of her evil step-mother. But in the end the prince rescues Cinderella from her evil mother, marries her and becomes a princess, and the two live happily ever after. But here, by the title 'Bodle Dao Rupkotha' the traditional myth has been reconstructed where the princess threw her hair so that the prince can climb into the castle. Though the ultimate rescuer here is the prince-charming again but by 'throwing her hair' the princess suggests that the stereotyped myth has been challenged. Again, 'focused beauty' (stereotyped for commodity) of the girl in her big portrait against the boy's small portrait negates the stereotyped representation of the girl as inferior to the male which is suggestive of 'female empowerment' over patriarchal supremacy. In the traditional mythology, patriarchal power is always exhibited to the female as their 'savior' from danger. Here, in the billboard advertisement (Figure 3), the idea is reconstructed as 're-defining myth'.



*Figure 4: 'Fire Power'*

In the print advertisement of Sharee by AARONG entitled 'Fire Power' (Figure 4), the representation of the model (with one open arm as well as underarm with most part of the right frontal side) suggests a voyeuristic and erotic representation. However, her 'beauty' can be seen as power which burns the 'anchal of the sharee' and turns it into black to justify the title, 'Fire Power'. Here, the power, 'beauty' has been submitted to the commodification through the process of internalization.



Figure 5: 'Nido'

We further find some stereotyped representation at the connotative or secondary level in some print advertisements. Here, in the cover of the milk 'Nido' by Nestle (Figure 5), a happy mother is seen with her child signifying the stereotyped idea of 'motherhood' as child rearer, caregiver or loving 'mother' which is confined to female only. A gender biased representation of child rearing is also there where 'father' is kept apart from the idea of child bearing. In the field of consumerism, mother's breast feeding concept has been justified exhibiting the 'exchange value' (included in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded) of the advertisement which is substituted by 'Nido's 'use value' (what it can do). The advertisement also occludes the role of the 'father' in child rearing.



Figure 6: 'Wheel'



Again, to illustrate a stereotyped and gender biased politics in case of cloth-washing, the print advertisement of 'Wheel soap' here suggests engaging 'female' only in household works as well as displays the 'beauty' concept as a part of commodification (Figure 6). In the connotative level, the Bengali text 'notun shaje' (new look) gives the stereotyped concept of woman's new outlook (shaje) in which they are unnecessarily represented as beautiful to the patriarchal world. 'Beshi kapor cache' (opportunity to wash more cloths) can be seen as a confinement in household chores instead of outside work. The white blank space between the concerned product, 'wheel' and the women suggests that 'wheel' makes the clothes 'white'. At the same time, casting of a 'fair' model even in a household chore persuades the urgency of 'fairness' as well (Figure 6).



Figure 7: 'Fair and Lovely'

'Fairness' concept has been a very enduring issue in society and is inseparably related to the 'so-called' existence of the female. Under the primary disguise of business purpose, this print advertisement of 'Fair and Lovely' (Figure 7) shapes the idea through the text of the title that "The power to shape my destiny lies in my hands". This suggests that she (the girl) can be a 'power' only when she will use her hands to use the beauty cream, 'Fair and Lovely'. The stereotyping female urgency of being 'fair' is very much present here. Hence, the women are in 'real' crisis of existence trapped by their 'darkness' which is shown deliberately by the black and white frame under this persuasive process of internalization that is, becoming 'one' with the concept of 'fairness'.

On the contrary, a very recent TV commercial of 'Meril Splash' soap has come up with the idea of resistance against this so-called 'fairness' concept (Figure 8). This advertisement is launched with the slogan 'Shoundorjo gayer ronger noy, fresh maney sundor' (Beauty lies in the freshness not in the colour of skin) which exhibits the empowerment of woman where typical beauty concept is subverted to freshness instead of the skin colour, white on this occasion.



Figure 8: 'Meril Splash'

The scenario is optimistic for women so far who have been suffering inferiority complex resulting from dark skin colour (Figure 7) and struggled with their existence as 'human being' not being 'fair'. Now, if we carefully observe the female model of this new 'Meril Splash' soap advertisement, what we see (Figure 7)? The female model of concern here is also an ambassador of 'fair beauty' here. Her presence in the advertisement with visible 'fairness' apparently contradicts the title, 'Shoundorjo gayer ronger noy, fresh maney sundor' (Beauty lies in the freshness not in the colour of skin). So, this attempt to resist so-called 'fairness' concept is nothing but a business concern in disguise under the cover of 'female empowerment'.

Beside the pictures of billboards or the print advertisements considered here, the 'text' of the advertisement also represents women as eroticized. For instance, the slogan of Bubble UP written in Bengali, 'Chumukey Bhalobasha' provokes a kind of desire in viewers' mind for the female model (Figure 3). However, the meaning of this kind of text can be deconstructed or reconstructed to add 'power' to female identity. As for example, the advertisement of Aarong entitled 'Fire Power' denotes 'beauty' as power of women (Figure 4) and 'flower' symbolizes the female empowerment against patriarchy in the advertisement entitled 'Flower Power' (Figure 1).

However, it is a fact that the regressive aspects of representation in advertisement cannot be totally deduced. As we have seen, most of the advertisement is exploitative exhibiting the female body and curves, erotic costumes, even what is not seen or told about them here is clearly visible. Females are objectified here— may be directly, or through the male character's gaze, or through the consumer's gaze or they are symbolically eroticized. Even the 'text' used in the advertisements makes themselves juicier, more voyeuristic spectacles and desirable. Here, females are not only subjected to 'Voyeurism' but consumerism as they are confined in Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' (a strategy of the authority towards the prisoners as the guards cannot be



seen, and the prisoners never know when they are being watched) (Foucault, 1995). Laura Mulvey's discussion of the 'male gaze' is relevant here.

The females, confined to the regressive representation of the advertisements can deconstruct or reconstruct their identity taking the idea of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'Carnavalesque' into consideration as well as renouncing their femininity (Brooker, 2003). According to Bakhtin, Carnival offers a new mode of interrelationship between individuals. People who are separated by tightly packed hierarchical barriers enter into free and familiar contact on carnival square" (Hawthorne, 2003). There is a motivation during carnival time to create a form of human social configuration that 'lies beyond existing social forms' (Hawthorne, 2003). He also argues that one can understand his own culture being an outsider of a culture. His idea of 'crowning / decrowning' in a 'carnival' is also significant here. 'Crowning' of a King in a carnival is to give him honour by the mass people and at the same time, 'decrowning' him refers to take that honour back. The use of zero ornaments as renewal of identity and protest (Figure 1), the uncouth standing positions or Godlike looking gestures to discomfort the male gaze (Figure 1) or negating the traditional female role in household chores (Figure 6) etc. can be used as empowering tools derived from Bakhtin's idea of defying hierarchical barriers. Here, advertisements are akin to 'carnival square' where the participating females protest against the king (symbolizing male gaze, patriarchal domination or advertise makers) as in Bakhtin's essay 'The Carnival and The Carnavalesque'.

Furthermore, most female models participating in advertisements of different commercials are of very young ages for target male gazes or audiences though the products (i.e sharee in Aarong advertisement in Figure 1 and 4) are certainly not made only for young girls, and are rather, for grown up females as well. Ensuring the participation of females of all ages, this kind of regressive aspects can be lessening.

Above all, it is apparent that some advertisements are regressive while others can be seen to be as empowering to an extent. Mainly because of commercial concern, the regressive sides are promoted often overpowering the progressive sides of the advertisements. In this regard, this paper tries to specify the regressive representation of women as an issue of concern. At the same time, it unearths some empowering aspects from some of those same advertisements. As meaning of those advertisements is arbitrary and multi-dimensional, the representation of women in the aforementioned Bangladeshi advertisements can be renounced, reconstructed or sometimes deconstructed as empowerment.

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