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Tracing Gramsci's Hegemony in a Patriarchal India: A Study of Indian Media and Advertising

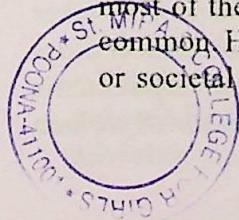
KOMALTUJARE

Gramsci's idea of hegemony is a kind of domination through consent wherein the dominated does not consciously feel victimized and thereby accepts the power and control as natural. Marx's nostrum that every society is a dictatorship is agreed upon by Gramsci, but he expands on this by stating that an ideology is employed in hegemony which enables the leader (or dictator) to inflict oppression upon the led through the popularization and diffusion of the ideas of the ruling class. If the ruling class of the nation is composed of men, it goes without saying that the women of the nation will be severely subjugated through hegemony. This paper will try to see modern media and advertising in India in light of patriarchal hegemony with an attempt to highlight the creation of gender stereotypes and victimization of the female sex. It will also try to briefly touch upon the influence of the visual media on the life of the 'base' of the society as it gets influenced by the 'superstructure'. Using the works of certain prominent theorists, the paper will attempt to cite certain prominent examples from contemporary Indian advertisements and other forms of media in order to point at the gendering of male and female bodies through hegemony as a result of which the patriarchal structure of the society is safeguarded and made perpetual.

Key words: Hegemony, media, Indian advertisements, Gramsci, patriarchy, stereotypes, gender discrimination, female subjugation

Introduction

The theory of hegemony presented by Gramsci in his *The Prison Notebooks* has been subjected to many interpretations over the years, primarily because of Gramsci's inability (owing to his failing health in prison) to elaborate systematically on this concept. However, most of the varied interpretations of this theory bear one string in common. Hegemony is understood on the whole as the idea that men or societal classes are not ruled merely by force but also through



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ideas. These ideas, as history has proven time and again, are those of the people in power (or governance). As Marx likewise states, “the ruling ideas of each age have been the ideas of its ruling class.”¹ This hegemony allows society to mute class struggles in order to keep the equilibrium of the base and the superstructure intact².

If hegemony is a way of keeping societies from collapsing under class struggle then it can be safely assumed that we are still under the hegemony of our current ruling class and that the ideas of our age are passed down from the superstructure which controls us through ideological consent. To quote Gramsci, “The press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it.”³ The key words in this are ‘ideological structure’. This ideological structure that Gramsci highlights in his theory of hegemony is a kind of domination which is not coercive or violent. It is instead that which is achieved through consent where fundamental questioning is not permitted to the dominated classes. It is a way of exercising power through control to create a sense of free, democratic space which no one can question. Ideology plays an important role in hegemony as the ideas (or false beliefs) are so rooted in society that they are instinctive and are never questioned. Hegemony always functions in a way to benefit those that are exercising power. It is an all-pervasive phenomenon and everything that is a part of human society functions as a part of it.

Media and Advertising in India and Hegemonic Patriarchy

Media and advertising in the 21st century can be studied as tools in the hands of the ruling class, controlling masses and propagating ideas among masses. It is therefore not very surprising to see that a vast majority of the advertisements in India try to emphasize gender based stereotypes in order to keep the patriarchal structure intact. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer mention in their essay *The Culture Industry*⁴, everything that you are exposed to is a way of exercising power over you. The books you read, the songs you hear, the movies/ shows/ advertisements you watch, all form part of an ideology that is rooted in the society to exercise hegemony. Nothing is innocent. Everything around us can be located as a part of a larger fabric of power. To explain this further, I will be using the example of representation of women in media. We have all seen women being objectified in movies, TV shows, songs, and advertisements. Whether it is the songs of Honey Singh with lyrics like ‘I swear! Chhoti dress main bomb lagdi menu’⁵ or the Axe deodorant advertisements showing scantily clad women chasing men, objectification of women



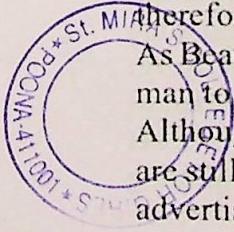
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is evident everywhere in media. Whether or not we consciously take notice of it, we are subjected to such ideologies of women being objects of possession, noticed and appreciated for nothing beyond their physical form and beauty. The roles that women are shown to perform go nowhere beyond the role of an ideal *bahu*⁶ who is only capable of serving to the needs of the family. Almost all daily soaps project women as housewives that are loving, caring, affectionate, vulnerable, weak, and naïve. They are dependent on their male counterparts to be taken care of, not only financially but also physically, mentally and emotionally.

The stereotypes of women are not just limited to their functions as a member of the female sex, but also to their appearance as a whole. Slim, fair, and tall are just some of the many definitions of "beautiful". In addition, women are expected to dress, walk and talk in a modeled fashion to fit the accepted norms. No television show portrays fat, dark, and short women as it is against the set ideology. If at all women appear to look, talk or act in any of the ways that aren't considered becoming of their gender, they are tagged as villains and shunned as undesirable. Powerful and independent women have been tagged as monsters or madwomen for centuries⁷. Therefore, there is not only hegemony of the men over the women but also of some kind of women over another kind of women. All this has led us to split our understanding of Woman into pairs of stereotyped antitheses: saint/sinner, virgin/whore, goddess/monster, nurturing mother/devouring stepmother, and angel/witch⁸.

The society functions to perpetuate false beliefs so that the system does not crumble. Representation of women as the weaker and oppressed sex helps uphold the patriarchal society. This hegemony of the male sex over the female one enables the system to function unquestioned. The ideology in support of this hegemony is so deeply rooted not only in India but throughout the world that women instinctively fall into the stereotypes without once questioning it. The female child is expected to cook, clean and obey silently and no girl dares question it. Even in the 21st C, the female sex is under the hegemony of the male one.

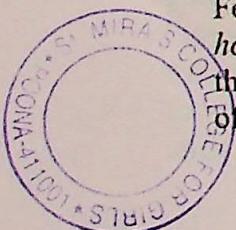
Gramsci's hegemony allows the dominated class to believe they are in power, but they are never really granted this power. It therefore sees a consistent process of accommodation and resistance. As Beauvoir puts it in *The Second Sex*, it is a process of "...counselling man to treat her as a slave while persuading her that she is a queen." Although modern times allow a lot more liberal space to women, we are still far from accepting women as an equal sex to men. An Airtel advertisement released in 2015 is the best example to explain this.



The advertisement shows an independent woman who has attained a professional rank higher than that of her husband. Her husband is her employee, and it goes without saying that this advertisement goes against the traditional representations of women in the world. She assumes the role of the boss, taking charge and giving instructions to the employees. However, towards the end of this very advertisement, the woman comes home and cooks for the husband as she waits for his return. The wife may be the boss at work, but she is still a docile caretaker in the house fitting perfectly into the stereotype of a woman as the caretaker and house maker. Therefore, although the advertisement shows some resistance from the male hegemony by showing a fiercely independent woman assuming roles of leadership, it is still perpetuating the ideology that women, no matter how accomplished in their careers, must get home and assume their duties as an ideal wife because only then is their existence validated. To rid ourselves of this would result in a change in the system which cannot be permitted.

In most Indian advertisements for condoms, the male aims to fulfill his sexuality (active role) and the female is only a means to help him reach that aim (passive role of a seductress). In most detergent advertisements, the husbands are the breadwinners working on jobs while the wives (typically clad in sarees) are the ones doing the laundry. Men in Thumbs Up advertisements must prove how macho they are by indulging in life-threatening stunts while women still "whisper" while on their periods as menstruation is a taboo topic in public. In the MTR advertisement of 2012, the mother has 3 pairs of arms and hands to help her cook 6 different dishes for the different members of the family- a clear testimony of how women can have superpowers as long as those are limited to the kitchen. The list of advertisements and movies building an ideal body image of women is endless. A sense of entitlement to ownership of the female body is also constant in Bollywood songs. Examples of such ownership can be found right from the 1974 Kabhi Kabhi song stating "*ki jaise tuh ko banaaya gaya hai mere liye*"⁹ to the 1994 song '*tu cheez badi hai mast mast*'¹⁰ directly objectifying the female. Each of these serves as an example of ideology that is spread across the society to support male dominance.

There are also those where female voices themselves present themselves as objects of male satisfaction like the 2012 hit song Fevicol Se which has a line that reads: '*main toh tandoori murgi hoon yaar.*'¹¹ This example offers a new angle to the domination of the female. Quite clearly, gender discrimination is not merely the act of the male oppressing the female but also that of the female offering



herself as the victim to the male. This lies at the base of hegemony. Hegemony is power that controls through consent. Women are inferior not only because men have made them the "second sex" but also because women themselves consider their inferiority a natural, biological phenomenon. As mentioned in The Culture Industry, 'All the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they (here, women) have seen have taught them what to expect; they react automatically.'¹² The ideology that lies at the heart of hegemony in terms of gender is no different from what Simone de Beauvoir calls 'nurture' as opposed to 'nature'¹³ and what Judith Butler later expands into the concept of 'performativity'¹⁴. Gramsci was quoted by Giuseppe Fiori in 1916 saying, '...he (man) is a product of history, not of nature.' As such, men and women in India at present are perhaps the products of the images of the ideal man and women that media feeds them. The hegemony of the male gender over the female allows smooth functioning of the system so as to benefit the patriarchal structure.

As evident as this hegemonic influence is in Indian advertisements and other media forms, the fact that modern media does (to some extent) try to break away from stereotypically sexist expression cannot be denied. Today we see more and more advertisements encouraging women to take charge of their lives and careers. Titan Raga advertisements of today cover a wide range of themes based on women- choosing their own careers and life partners; choosing whether or not to get married and if they do decide to, then whom to marry, when to marry and why to marry- out of choice or merely to fit into conventional societal structures; breaking the bias that women progress in the workplace not on the basis of their professional skills but on the basis of their physical seductive powers; choosing whether or not to bear a child and realizing that motherhood is not about sacrifice but about growth and empowerment; among others.

NOTES

1. "The Communist Manifesto," *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis Fleuer (New York, 1959)
2. Marx wrote in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1857 that 'the economic structure of society' forms the 'real basis' on which 'rises a legal and political superstructure.'
3. "Cultural Themes: Ideological Material." *Media and Cultural Studies*, Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Blackwell Publishing, 2006)
4. Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. (1944). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

5. Roughly translates as: 'I swear you look like a bomb (ready to explode) to me in your short dresses.'
6. Hindi for 'daughter-in-law' – the stereotype of an ideal wife.
7. Right from the Greek myth of Medusa.
8. Stein, Karen. (1983). Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic. Taken from: *The Female Gothic*. ed. Julian E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden, 1983), pp. 124
9. Roughly translated as: 'as if you have been made solely for me'
10. Roughly translated as: 'you are a fantastic thing/object'
11. Roughly translates as: 'I am like barbequed chicken (for your consumption)
12. Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. *The Culture Industry*. Taken from: *The Culture Studies Reader*. During, Simon. pp 35
13. In her work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir rejects the myth of the eternal feminine and states emphatically, "But we must not only note that the varieties of behavior reported are not dictated to woman by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of the female brain: they are shaped as in a mould by her situation." De Beauvoir, Simone. (1997) *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H. M. Parshley. Vintage Classics. pp 608.
14. In an interview with Liz Kotz in *Artforum*, Judith Butler stated that, "Performativity has to do with repetition, very often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms . . . This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in." She also added, "Gender is an impersonation . . . becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits." In this sense, gender is acquired through impersonation of the ideals that media sets for individuals.

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