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1950-1970**

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Gender and Commodity Aesthetics in Tamilnadu, 1950-1970¹

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Abstract

Beyond use value and exchange value, commodities encapsulate semiotic values too. They function as markers of status, domesticity, social discipline, rebelliousness and so on. These functions are contextual, contingent and change over time. In other words, commodities reinforce as well as reconstitute the social world and social values of individuals and communities. Advertisements which appeal to the multiple desires and fears of individuals and communities play a significant role in this process. This paper examines how advertisements for commodities of everyday use such as cosmetics, food supplements, and gadgets manufactured by multinational, national and regional companies, use images of men, women and children to valorise and reconstitute forms of domesticity.

It is impossible to look at modern advertising without realizing that the material object being sold is never enough: this indeed is the crucial cultural quality of its modern forms. If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart or neighbourly. A washing machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward looking or an object of envy to our neighbours. But if these associations sell beer and washing machines, as some of the evidence suggests, it is clear that we have a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available.

- Raymond Williams, 'Advertising: The Magic System'²

Beyond use value and exchange value, commodities encapsulate semiotic values too. They function as markers of status, domesticity, social discipline, rebelliousness and so on. These functions are contextual, contingent, and changing over time. In other words, commodities reinforce as well as reconstitute the social world and social values of individuals and communities. Advertisements which appeal to the multiple desires and fears of individuals and communities play a significant role in this process. As Wolfgang Fritz Haug argues 'commodity aesthetics'³ in the

form of advertisements, not only manipulates the needs and desires of the consumers, it also repackages the human body itself to meet the demands of fetish cult of beauty and ever youth and expropriates the languages of liberation.⁴ The images used by the advertisements “not only attempt to sell the product by associating it with certain socially desirable qualities, but they sell as well a world view, a lifestyle, and a value system congruent with the imperatives of consumer capitalism”.⁵

Literature on the history and culture of consumption practices mainly deal with the consumption behaviour of people in shaping their class and gender identities. Very little attention is paid to the semiotic values of commodities in shaping these identities.⁶ The proposed paper on the other hand, will examine how advertisements for commodities of everyday use such as cosmetics, food supplements, and gadgets manufactured by multinational, national, and regional companies, use images of men, women and children to valorise and reconstitute forms of domesticity in Tamil Nadu during the period 1950 to 1970. This was the period when the new modern nation came into being and the ideas of modern family were being consolidated. The 1950s in particular was marked by the intersection of the new national sovereignty and citizenship and the high diffusion of modern commodities with the proliferation of images of ‘ordinary citizens’ in commercial advertisements.

Advertisements for a variety of products used images of middle-class men and women promising them ‘citizenship’ through consumption. For instance, the commodity campaigns carried out during this period persuaded men and women to buy national products and promote Indian goods to attain ‘true citizenship’. Significantly, during these decades middle-class women were provided ‘new public visibility’ through these advertisements. This is despite their relative absence from the real public sphere.⁷ The three decades are also significant in terms of commodity advertisements shaping the ideas of modern femininity, masculinity and domesticity. Advertisements have reconstructed and reinforced the ideas of private and public spheres and the role of men and women in these spheres. For instance, as Anne McClintock has argued, advertisements take intimate signs of domesticity (children bathing, men shaving, women doing make-up or wearing inner garments) into the public realm. Despite such boundary-crossing between the private and the public, they continue to reproduce the private and public distinction by assigning the former to women and the latter to men.

It is in this context, this paper will deal with the visual economy of

these feminine and masculine displays in advertisements. In particular, the paper will analyse how notions of gender division of labour and space, norms of domesticity such as nurturing children and invisibilisation of unpaid domestic drudgery of women's work are produced in advertisements for various commodities. The focus is on the semiotic values of association between gender, modernity and the commodity. In this sense, this paper departs from the existing scholarship on commodity culture and gender which places its emphasis only on the production of a new aesthetics of 'modern girls' and modern femininity through their use of specific commodities.⁸

The data for the paper are mostly drawn from two widely circulating Tamil weeklies – *Ananda Vikatan* and *Kumudam* – which were and continue to be popular among the Tamil middle class. Started in 1928, *Ananda Vikatan* has a circulation of about 4,30,000 copies and *Kumudam* which was published from 1947 has about 5,20,000 readers.⁹ The phenomenal readership for these two magazines indicates how they mediated 'mass culture' in Tamilnadu, which during this period had become inseparable from the commodity culture. Advertisements for toiletries, cosmetics, clothes, domestic appliances, food supplements and so on not only used images of women and men but also disseminated modern middle-class values, beliefs and ideologies. As Kathy Peiss has argued, the cosmetic advertisements have not only served an important role as markers of normative female identities, which included the new middle-class values of female individuality but also represented these commodities as of utmost importance for women to constitute their selves.¹⁰

The 1950s: Nationalising Commodities

The 1950s, the decade following Indian independence, was still marked by the euphoria of nationalism as well as Gandhian notions of austerity with an emphasis on use value. Given this scenario, both the national bourgeoisie such as Godrej, Tata, and Bajaj mobilised both national appeal and the utility of commodities to market them. Women who appeared in the advertisements for their products were distinctly marked by costumes, hair-do and make-up, as Hindu/Indian. Importantly, the national companies that distributed multinational products such as Nivea cream, Pears soap, and Colgate Eclat Talc powder, adjusted the images in their advertisements to appeal to the so-called national sensibilities. For instance, the Colgate Eclat Talc Powder used the image of a Bharata Natyam dancer (Fig: 1) and the Ponds cold cream mobilised



(Fig: 4, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.28, no.29, July19, 1953 ; Fig: 5, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol. 29, no.11, March 14, 1954)

the image of an Indian woman in a saree and her forehead adorned with a bindi to market their products (Fig: 2). The advertisements also claimed that the commodities were produced by means of Indian capital and Indian management (Fig: 3).

Occasionally, the national companies fused together different images from the north and the south of India to appeal to certain form of composite nationalism. For instance, an advertisement for the Himalayan Bouquet snow in 1954 presented an image of a North Indian actress in front of a South Indian temple (Figs:4 and 5). The advertisement was also, though in Tamil, carried inscriptions in Hindi.

Two aspects of this nationalism invoked by the advertisements need special mention. First of all, most of these advertisements used women and not men – as the trope for national authenticity. In one of his very influential works, Partha Chatterjee has convincingly demonstrated that the nationalism’s claims to hegemony was grounded on the distinction made between the spiritual / inner and the material / outer world and women being located in the inner world, were crucially implicated as representatives of the national tradition.¹¹ The ‘new woman’ of the nationalist project had to display the signs of nationalist tradition in order



(Fig: 6. *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.25, no.1, January 1950. This advertisement states that the 'soap belongs to mother India; it is a supreme swadeshi soap; guaranteed of hundred percent pure hygiene with no animal fat in it')



(Fig: 7, *Kumudam*, Vol.14, no.16, June 1, 1957)

to be different from the 'western woman'. In the specific context of tropising of women in visual culture, Patricia Uberoi, in her research on the calendar or bazaar art has discussed how images of women worked as tropes for the nation and how the visual medium connected the national values and the ideas of womanhood.¹² This is, however, not to say that women have been denied agency in these representations rather they clearly underlined the role of women in making the nation.¹³

Second, the national authentic was aligned with the upper caste in these advertisements. For example, during the 1950s, the cosmetic producers advertised their products as containing 'no animal fats'. An advertisement by the Godrej for its Vatini Soap claimed that the product, which was a matchless swadeshi soap, belonged to mother India and was of hundred per cent purity since as it did not use any animal fat (Fig : 6).¹⁴

However, there were counter tendencies too in operation.

The 1960s and 1970s: From Use Value to Semiotic Value

By the end of the 1950s, the images of film actresses in the form of drawings were used in the advertisements mainly for cosmetics increased phenomenally. However, this was to change during the 1960s and the 1970s. The advertisements of 1960s and the 1970s marked the increasing use of photographic images of celebrities to lure the middle-class to buy various commodities. An important aspect of the commodity culture during this period is the overt sexualisation and the eroticisation of the commodity. Femininity in this context became a primary signifier for the commodity aesthetics.¹⁷

One of the key aspects of commodity advertisements during these decades, is the projection of images of well-known film actresses from South India - mainly from the Tamil film industry to advertise the famous Lux beauty soap, and later the Ponds beauty products. The mobilisation of the image of film actresses promoted the product by linking these extraordinary looking women in the advertisement with the ordinary people, thus suggesting the possibility of social mobility of ordinary women through the cultivation of glamour.

The advertisement for Lux soap which was well-known for mobilising the images of actresses represented the soap as ‘cine star’s beauty soap’. ‘The fair-skinned’ actresses, on their part, endorsed the soap for its miraculous power to transform their life by enhancing their beauty (Figs: 11, 12 and 13). For instance, in a Lux soap advertisement, actress Pushpalata claimed that ‘Lux plays wonder in my body’. Besides



(Fig: 11, *Kumudam*, Vol.7, no.22, August 1, 1954 ; Fig: 12, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol. 35, no. 18, May 1, 1960; Fig: 13, *Kumudam*, Vol.11, no.19, July 1, 1958)



(Fig: 14, Fig: 15, Fig: 16, *Kumudam*, Vol.12, no.4, Febraury, 1, 1959)

its appeal to female consumers the explicit eroticism of these images catered to the voyeuristic gaze of men, appealing to their desires and thus inviting them to buy the product. Though these images were sufficiently eroticised they were rendered glamorous only within what was acceptable for the public. Thus it was no longer use value, based on utility, but semiotic value based on attributes such as beauty and upward mobility which animated these advertisements. In other words, the gendering of commodities produced certain glamour for the products enabling circulation and consumption of goods as a symbol of modern social status.

The erotic appeal of the commodity was highlighted through the so-called desirable feminine images and thus such images of femininity became the 'supplementary emblem of the commodity itself'.¹⁸ A local hair perfume company, K.T.R from Thanjavur district presented an image of a seductive looking woman who expressed her desire for KTR products. The erotic appeal of the product was inferred through the image of the erotic woman's expressions of desires. Similarly, another local soft drink company '*sar bath*' produced an image of an attractive woman holding a glass of *sar bath* against her as though she is offering it to her consumer and also as ready to drink it, thus making the act of drinking and the product as seductive (Fig: 17).¹⁹ The erotic appeal of women was sought even for cooking oil with the image of a woman sensuously dropping stuff for frying (Fig: 18).

The Modern Women in Commodity Culture

In the context of the assertion of semiotic values in advertisements, one needs to be attentive to the new kind of images of women which were used in them. In these advertisements, there was an overarching presence of the so-called modern women, commonly adduced as *navayuga penn*, *navanagariga penmani*, *navayuvathi* and by other epithets. These women are represented as elegantly dressed and as combining their self-interest in taking care of their looks with their traditional roles of a daughter, mother and housewife. In the domestic sphere, these modern women are depicted as suave, intelligent and prudent who know how to ‘limit the family’, display intimacy beyond the confines of the domestic sphere, bring up a healthy children, and socialise with other women to become knowledgeable on consumer goods.²⁰ While some of them are presented as spending time in outdoor activities and seeking adventure, they were, for most part, presented as obsessed with their looks. For example, the advertisement for Himalaya Bouquet Talc and Snow presented the modern woman’s daily routine as this: In the morning, she stands in front of the mirror; in the afternoon, she goes out to buy her cosmetics; and in the night, she enjoys her good sleep (Fig: 19).



(Fig: 19, *Kumudam*, Vol.16, no.22, July 10, 1953)

மிருதுவான வண்புவாய்ந்த மேனி
ஆழ்ந்த அலம்பம் முறைப்படி

உயர்ந்த மேனியும் இயற்கையான அழகுமே அம்மக்கு உண்டாக வேண்டும் என்று விரும்புகிறீர்கள். அப்படி உங்களுக்கு உண்டாக வேண்டுகிற சாத்தியமான முறை என்ன? அது 'ஆம் பிரீட்' ஆகும். 'ஆம் பிரீட்' உங்களுக்கு உண்டாக வேண்டும் என்று விரும்புகிறீர்கள். அப்படி உங்களுக்கு உண்டாக வேண்டுகிற சாத்தியமான முறை என்ன? அது 'ஆம் பிரீட்' ஆகும்.



ஆம் பிரீட்
உங்களுக்கு உண்டாக வேண்டுகிற சாத்தியமான முறை என்ன? அது 'ஆம் பிரீட்' ஆகும்.

அருணோதயம் மூலம்
நட்சத்திரம் உதிக்கும்
மூலம் - தூளி குழுவையும்
இவ்வாறு வாங்கிவரும்படி



காஷ்மீர் புக்கே
மாலிபிகளும் விரும்பும் மலிவானதுகள்

(Fig: 20, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.27, no.11, March 16, 1952; Fig: 21, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.27, no.18, May 4, 1952)

Middle-class women represented in these advertisements were showcased as representing their individuality through their consumption. The language used in these advertisements is explicit on this. Such a representation of women's individualism marked by images of women with elegance and beauty, in these advertisements, invisibilise the domestic drudgery of women. They at once appeal to the semiotic value of the commodities to market them. In a manner of speaking, if hygiene was the keyword in the 1950s, beauty was the keyword in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Commodity advertisements consciously produced the modern femininity as always desirous of beauty with the use of whole array of cosmetics (Figs: 20 and 21). Thus, commodities were employed to reconstitute notions of femininity and new gender values.

Commodity Fetishism and the Cult of Domesticity

Simultaneously, commodity advertisements for household products presented the modern woman as 'domestic woman'. They promoted a new model of domesticity in which women were persuaded to acquire a sense of accomplishment within their home with the help of consumer products. Women were reminded of their domestic duties and the need for an artful selection of products to enhance their family and social status. As one



(Fig: 22, Kumudam, Vol.7, no.22, August 1, 1954; Fig: 23, Ananda Vikatan, Vol.29, no.11, March 14, 1954)

could see images of women taking care of her family (Figs: 22 and 23) -- tending the children, attending to the needs of her husband, attending to her household chores with the aid of modern consumer products are abundant in the advertisements for domestic consumer products.

These commodity advertisements offered images of women as enjoying domestic work with the help of modern gadgets and food products. They often persuaded women to find satisfaction in their confinement at home and seek pleasure in their accomplishments of 'feminine duties' in that space.²¹ In the process, such advertisements continue to reproduce the gendered divisions of private and public spheres by assigning the former to women and by fixing their identities primarily within the domestic sphere. For instance, a woman serving Lipton Tea to her family is full of smiles and without the trace of the burden of the housework (Fig: 24). The motherhood image, the motherly love and care are constantly invoked in advertisements for all the household items and food products with images of women enjoying their domestic chore. The Suryan Mark Flour advertisement reinforced the idea that a woman could bring about happiness to the entire family by cooking delicious food for her family (Fig: 25).

The socialisation among women is suggested in these advertisements

நாத் தேயிலைத்தாள்களிலே
தனிப்பெருமை வாய்ந்தது

லிப்டன்ஸ் ஹிமாலயன் கோல்டன் டீ

தலைவர், அமைச்சர், சிறந்த மனிதர்கள், உயர் அதிகாரிகள், இவர்கள் அனைவரும் இந்த தேயிலைகளை மட்டுமே குடிக்கிறார்கள். இது உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது.

லிப்டன்ஸ்
என் லூவே
நல்ல டீ

LIPTON'S
GOLDEN TEA

அனந்தம் வந்தால் அப்படி
அருமையாக உணவுதான்

சரஸ்வதி எவ்வளவு அழகானவரோ, அவர் குடிக்க வேண்டிய தேயிலை உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. அனந்தம் வந்தால் அப்படி அருமையாக உணவுதான். உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது.

சூன் பிராண்ட்
மைதா, சூழி
ஆட்டா

சூன் பிராண்ட் தேயிலை உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது. உயர்நிலை உயர் தரம் வாய்ந்தது.

சென்னை சென்னை சிவன் சிவன் சிவன் சிவன்
சென்னை சென்னை சிவன் சிவன் சிவன் சிவன்

(Fig : 24, Kumudam, Vol.19, no.31, June 2, 1966; Fig : 25, Ananda Vikatan, Vol.33, no.40, October 5, 1958)

சலவை செய்யும் கடிகாரம்

பெட்டிஜென்ட்: சக்தி செறிந்தது

பெட்டிஜென்ட், சலவைக் கடிகாரம் போலவே செயல்படுகிறது. 50% அதிக துணிகளை அதிவேகமாக சலவை செய்கிறது. — பெண்மணி, சாதாரணக் குடிமகன் திரை

NEW det
detergent washing cake

(Fig: 26, Kumudam, Vol.25, no.11, January 6, 1972)

as a mode of sharing knowledge about and endorsement of new products which were claimed to reduce the burden of domestic work, such as washing clothes. For example, the advertisement for New Det, a detergent, alluded to the magical power of the washing soap that could unburden the overworked woman (Fig: 26). The image of a happy woman who holds her husband's washed white shirt conveys that she could make her husband happy with the well-washed white shirt.

In an advertisement titled as 'gossip time', a woman expresses her worry about not having made any snacks for her children returning from school and her friend says that during such 'crisis' she buys 'Kwality's Golden Biscuit' packet, which is 'economical and a time-saver, other than being nutritious' (Fig: 27). Commodities were also presented as taking care of women's anxieties about household work and child care. The arrival of various milk powders such as Ostermilk and Glaxo were presented as if they were meant to relieve the worried mothers (Figs: 28 and 29).



(Fig : 27, Ananda Vikatan, Vol.54, no.22, June 3, 1979)

As Anne McKlintoc argues, the commodity fetish masks the domestic drudgery of women by claiming with its



(Fig : 28, Ananda Vikatan, Vol.26, no.8, February 25, 1951. The advertisement for Ostermilk has this caption : 'Good News for the Worried Mothers'')



(Fig : 29, Ananda Vikatan, Vol.29, no.17, April 25, 1954. A worried woman confesses that she was shocked to learn from her doctor that she had become responsible for the illness of her children, her husband and that a tinned Dalda oil which is full of nutrition helped her save the family)

‘magic’ of relieving the consumer woman of the household drudgery. In one of the advertisements for household appliances, the Kleertone company provided the following image (Fig: 30):

A woman chained on her leg, a symbolic representation of her slavery at home, is offered gadgets that ultimately frees her from the

தூரமாய், தூயாய் வாழ்வேன் அடிமையாக அல்ல.



அங்குப் பதனும் வீட்டுவேலை—
இதுவே என் கதி! சமைத்தல்,
தலக்கல், கழுவுதல், என்னைவறு
தொலிந்து விடலாமா என்று
நோன்றும் சிலசமயம். அக்கா
நான் மையத்தில் வந்து
சுப்பாத்தினால், இவ்வாறிட்டால்
என் கதி என்னவாதிருக்குமோ.
“க்ளியர்டோன் இயந்திரப்
பெட்டியும், கெட்டிங் வரவிக்
கொள்கோன்” என்றும்.
அதுதான் நான் க்ளியர்டோன்
சாதனங்களை வாங்கிக்
கொண்ட விதம். வீட்டுவேலை
இப்போதெல்லாம் ஒரு
சைமனாக இருப்பதில்லை.
எனக்கென்றே நாய்ப்பாக ஒய்வு
நோம் மிகுகிறது க்ளியர்டோன்
விறகையால்.

இப்போதெல்லாம் என் பக்கம்
கடுகடுவே கண்டு
அளவளாவவும், பெருகு
சாயும் போது காரில்
கீட்டிக் கொண்டு உட்காரவும்
ஒய்விறது. என வருக்கும்
குழந்தைகளுக்கும் பக்கத்தில்
இருக்க நோம் தருகிறது
க்ளியர்டோன் எனக்கு.
குடும்பத் தலைவிக்கு
வேறென்ன வேண்டும்.

மனிமணியான
க்ளியர்டோன்
சாதனங்கள்
மனம்போல் ஒய்வுதரும்
மகிழ்ச்சியொடு உமக்கு

தி நேஷனல் ரேடியோ &
எலக்ட்ரானிக்ஸ் கோ. லிட்.
பம்பாய், உத்தரகோட்டை,
கொச்சி, இர்தோர்
கெந்தரப்பாட், பெங்களூர், தாய்நூர்.



Creative Unit-A 1658 -Tam.

(Fig: 30, Kumudam, Vol.27, no.50, October 3, 1974)

501
சலவை சோப்புகள்
வீட்டுச் சலவை
வேலையை சுலபமாக்குகின்றன

501 சோப்பின் சிறப்பம்சம்
தூய்மைப்படுத்தும் வலிமை
செம்பு, கயிறுகளைச் சுலப
மாகச் சுலபமாக்கும் வலிமை
பிடிசலவைக்கிற
சலவை சோப்பை உப
யோகிக்கும் நல்ல
ஒரு சலவைப்போது
சோப்பு.

இந்திய மூலதனத் தயாரிப்பாளர், இப்பெரிய
சந்திரன், இப்பெரியவையே தயாரிக்கப்படுகிறது

(Fig: 31, Kumudam, Vol.7, no.22, August1, 1954)

குடும்ப
மிக்க
உணவு
தயாரிக்க
உகந்தவை

சா மு ண்டி
வளம்பதி
உபயோகிப்பதில் உகந்த சோப்பு

நந்தி
வளம்பதி
உபயோகிப்பதில் உகந்த சோப்பு

ரேடியோ
மார்க்கெட்
உகந்த சோப்புகள் உபயோகிப்பதில் உகந்த சோப்பு

இந்திய மூலதனத் தயாரிப்பாளர், இப்பெரிய
சந்திரன், இப்பெரியவையே தயாரிக்கப்படுகிறது

சந்தனமணமன்றும் இது!

“சந்தன சோப்பின் உகந்த சோப்பின்
விலகும் உணவம் இப்பெரிய” என்பது
நினைவு அமைத்த சோப்பு ஒன்று
என்பதற்கு.

இவருக்கு உகந்த சந்தனம்.

மேட்டுர் சந்தன சோப்

மேட்டுர் கெமிகல் & இண்டஸ்ட்ரியல்
கார்ப்பொரேஷன் லிமிடெட்.
மேட்டுர் ஆர். சி. சேலம் திண்டிவனம்
மேட்டுர் கெமிகல் & இண்டஸ்ட்ரியல் லிமிடெட்.

(Fig: 32, Kumudam, Vol.8, no.21, July 20, 1955; Fig: 33, Kumudam Vol.7, no.22, August1,1954)

slavery. Interestingly the advertisement assures women that wifehood and motherhood are enjoyable and liberative when these gadgets are used. The 501 bar soap of Tata company claimed that the soap reduced the burden of women washing clothes (Fig: 31). Images of women enjoying their household chores and finding happiness in their motherhood roles are central to various commodity advertisements.

Advertisements were also suggestive of new bondage that women can forge with the help of products, learn lessons about modern living so on. For instance, the sunlight soap produced images of women in conversation, learning lessons from each other on the benefits of using this soap. The Glaxo milk powder advertisement elaborated how a worried mother who could not see any change in the weight or growth of her child conversed with her friend, also a mother, who introduced her to Glaxo products which ultimately helped her child gain weight and energy. Soaps, oils, utensils all of them advertised images of happy and content women who sought the same from their household chores through the use of these commodities (Figs: 32 and 33).

Commodity advertisements associated commodities with new domesticity, individual pleasures and thus consciously produced images of new woman and new forms of socialisation. However, as Gloria Steinem has observed, advertisements subscribe only to a very limited values and ideas of femininity that promoted dependency, women's obsessive concern with beauty and dedication to domestic roles, fixation on family and fear of technology and so on.²²

Men and Masculinity in Commodity Culture

Although studies on commodity culture and gender have in general focused mostly on the images of women, commodity advertisements have equally presented and produced ideas of new malehood and masculinities which once again reconstituted as well as reinforced the pre-existing notions of ideal men and their roles in private and public spheres.

These advertisements presented men as sources of knowledge about different products, while women were presented, in contrast, to learn about them through experience. Similarly, while men, in these advertisements, were providers of knowledge, women were seekers of knowledge. For instance, an advertisement for Dalda cooking oil presented a man teaching his wife about the benefit of this product, while the woman is proud of learning the 'lesson that [her] husband taught'.

The conjunction of the product with masculinity, power and nature need to be noted here. The commodities through the associated meaning of masculinity, power and control acquire the value.²³ Significantly, advertisements for various cosmetic products reinforced the idea that a woman acquired her value through the use of commodities whereas the commodities acquired their value through men using them. The telling example in this case is the advertisements for Lifebuoy soap. The value of the soap is projected through images of male athletes and hardworking muscular men who are purposeful in their action. In other words, the choice of Lifebuoy soap by these men imparts a semiotic value to the soap (Figs: 34 and 35). The advertisement mobilized this semiotic value to attract new consumers. Similar is the case with the advertisements for the Blue Gillette blade and 7o’Clock blades, which claim that its users are successful men or men qualified for higher posts.

The first advertisement (Fig: 36) states that the world over successful men use only the Gillete blades. It assures the male consumer that he can easily join the collective of desirable modern men of the world by using these shaving blades and that it can provide him more happiness than just acquiring wealth. In the second advertisement (Fig: 37) emphasis is on invocation of the values of frugality and prudence which are considered natural qualities of men to be utilised while purchasing commodities. These commodities also assure men upward mobility and persuade them to consider the care for male appearance for such mobility.

The images of men in the commodity advertisements associate an appropriate masculinity with productiveness such as men producing for the family and for the nation and also producing a self that leaves a legacy beyond the self.²⁴ The advertisement below (Fig: 38) emphasizes the importance of health, wealth and good physique as important



(Fig: 38, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.29, no.46, November 14, 1954)



(Fig: 41, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol. 29, no.46, November 14, 1954; Fig: 42, *Ananda Vikatan*, Vol.33, no.14, 1958)

whose image is reflected on the sunglasses of a woman who is struck by his attractive look (Fig: 40). The moving motorcycle symbolically represented his ride to success.

Images of individuated modern men acquiring malehood and embodying powerful masculinity proliferate the advertisements for health tonics and potions. For instance, the visual above invites the consumer to partake in building an ideal masculine body through the consumption of an ayurvedic tonic (Fig: 41). One finds that a number of advertisements constantly engage with muscles of men not just to reiterate the ability and power of masculinity and of men to perform their provider and protector roles, but also to demonstrate how commodities can mark out muscles as important for separating ideal and ‘other’ men (Fig: 42). Therefore commodities create the desirability for muscle building among men. As Alan Klein states, ‘every man is engaged in a dialogue with muscles’²⁵

Conclusion

In this paper through the use of advertisements for various commodities, I have attempted to illustrate how various commodities were signified through the association of them with ideologies of gender, nationalism, modernity and development. In doing so, commodity advertisements have not only deployed certain hegemonic values of femininity, masculinity and modernity prevalent among the new middle-class but also resignified them by bringing in and adding new values

of liberation, independence and freedom through consumption and commodity culture. For instance, ideologies of motherhood, domesticity, feminine beauty and sexuality were comfortably conflated with notions of ‘women’s independence’, ‘male individuality’ and so on. Drawing upon the modern conceptions of domesticity, public sphere, citizenship so on and at the same time assigning ‘traditional’ and ‘localised’ meanings to the practice of consumption, these advertisements have associated desirable lifestyles, sense of the modern self, ideal femininity and masculinity with commodities. This has produced new commodity aesthetics, which on the one hand, reinforced the ideas of the divide between the public and private and the latter as women’s legitimate space and on the other, new ‘public visibility’ and ‘consumer citizenship’ to women.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for the South Asian Studies, Fukuoka, Japan, 2009 and at the Workshop on ‘Exploring Gender : Redefining the Field’, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, 2011. I thank the participants of both the events for their valuable suggestions and comments. In particular I wish to thank Haruka Yanagisawa, Takako Inoue, Toshie Awaya, Uma Chakravarti and M.S.S.Pandian for their encouragement and critical reading of the draft paper. The advertisements that appear in this paper are copies provided by Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai. I am grateful to them and the usual caveat applies.
- 2 Raymond Williams, ‘Advertising: The Magic System’, in Simon During ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge , 1993), p. 422.
- 3 In this paper I use the term ‘commodity aesthetics’ as formulated by Wolfgang Fritz Haug.
- 4 Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, Translated by Robert Bock, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- 5 Douglas Kellner, ‘Reading Images Critically: Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy’ in Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (eds.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader* (London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), p.127.
- 6 See for instance, the collection of essays in a recent volume on the History of Consumption in South Asia. Douglas E.Haynes *et al.*, (eds.), *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*, (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 7 For an insightful observation about how commodity advertisements were shaping the women’s alternate public sphere in the absence of women’s presence in the political sphere, see, Abigail Solomon –Godeau, ‘The Other side of Venus : The Visual Economy of Feminine Display’, in Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds.), *The Sex of Things : Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*,

(Berkeley, California : California University Press, 1996), p. 117. In the case of India, the post-independent period had seen declining participation of women in the political process virtually invisibilising their presence while commodity advertisements provided high visibility to images of women. On the decline of women's political presence see, Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on Status of Women* (New Delhi : Government of India Publications, 1974), p. 301.

- 8 See, for instance, the special of issue in *Gender and History*, which carried several research papers from a project 'Modern Girl Around the World'. These papers exclusively deal with the representations of 'modern girl' and the role of advertisements in shaping modern femininity across the world. The 'modern girl' as situated outside the domestic sphere, being concerned only with her appearance and refining of her body is explored through a detailed study of the cosmetic advertisements. See, *Gender and History*, Vol.17, No.2, 2005. Whereas, I find that from the 1950 onwards a large number of advertisements in the Tamil magazines were concerned about women's role in the new domesticity. Infact advertisements promoting food supplements, domestic gadgets and life insurances so on projected the images of modern woman and reinforced their new domestic responsibilities. Equally a large number of advertisements concerned themselves with masculinity.
- 9 I have gleaned through advertisements from both the magazines that were published between the period 1950 and 1979.
- 10 Kathy Peiss, 'Making Up, Making Over Cosmetics : Consumer Culture and Women's Identity', in Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds.), *The Sex of Things*, p. 313.
- 11 Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1993), pp.116-134.
- 12 Patricia Uberoi, "Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No.17, 1990, P. WS-46.
- 13 For a similar argument on representation of gender and nation in the advertisements in France see, Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth Century France', in Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds.), *Sex of Things*, p.81.
- 14 Harminder Kaur argues that in the competition with foreign brands of soaps such as Palmolive, Indian industrialists began producing non-fat vegetable oil soaps to cater to the needs of the 'staunch Hindus' and thus captured the Indian markets for soap. Harminder Kaur, 'Of Soaps and Scents : Coporeal Cleaniness in Urban Colonial India', in Douglas E. Haynes *et al.* (eds.), *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*, p. 262.
- 15 Anandhi . S., 'The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement, c.1925-1948', *Social Scientist*, Vol.19, Nos.5-6, May-June 1991.
- 16 Similar is the case with the advertisements for Blue Gillete Blade and Seven 'o'

Clock Blade which assured the common man of the economical worth of buying and using them. The advertisements claimed that these blades could be used repeatedly and thus save his spending on the barber -- besides making him an attractive male. (see, advertisement for the same in the section on Masculinity)

- 17 For a detailed analysis of women as signifier of sexualisation of commodity see, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Other side of Venus : The Visual Economy of Feminine Display', in Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds.), *Sex of Things*, p.104.
- 18 Abigail Solomon –Godeau, 'The Other Side of the Venus', p. 104.
- 19 For a similar semiotic reading of images in advertisements see, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing : Based on the BBC Television Series* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).
- 20 Associating women and their consumption as part of making of new family and class goes back to colonial times. However, the proliferation of the images of modern Indian women in the commodity advertisements, both as part of the new family and as independent women in the public sphere, were significant during the post-independent period. For details of politics of consumption and the making of the new family, see, Abigail McGowan, 'Consuming Families: Negotiating Women's Shopping in Early Twentieth Century Western India', in Douglas E. Haynes *et al.* (eds.), *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*, pp. 155-184.
- 21 For a similar reading of the consumption culture see, Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices', p. 83.
- 22 Gloria Steinem, 'Sex, Lies and Advertising', *Ms. Magazine*, July / August, 1990, pp. 18-28.
- 23 Douglas Kellner, 'Reading Images Critically: Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy' in Gail Dines and Jean M. Hermez (eds.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media : A Text- Reader* (London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995).
- 24 Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth- Century France', p. 74.
- 25 Alan Klein cited in Jackson Katz, 'Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity' in Gail Dines and Jean M. Hermez (eds.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, p.139.

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