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www.the-criterion.com

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Barbie: A Study of Spaces of Consumption in the Global Village

Soumya Mukherjee

Research Scholar, pursuing Ph.D (Indian Diaspora)
Centre for Study of Indian Diaspora,
School of Social Sciences,
University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad- 500046

Increased migration and enhanced mobility of resources, skills and technology has given rise to a global village where boundaries of nations are perceived to be blurred but when it comes to consumerism the nation becomes an essential entity for consumerism to flourish and generate variously segregated spaces of consumption. Life in a global village operates beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions. Therefore, transnational connectivity becomes an important aspect of consumer culture, which mediates the discourses of race, gender and class to produce a homogeneous idea of nationalism rather national identity. Barbie in sari embodies this kind of ethnic yet ethnographic national identity. In this paper I try to get engaged with the consumer culture and the spaces of consumption generated through the interaction of boundaries and the travel of Barbie.

Introduction

In the context of transnationalism, the boundaries are perceived to be blurred but when it comes to consumerism (Consumerism, in this sense, is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfilment which is economically manifested in chronic purchasing of goods and services with little attention to the true need (Verdant, 1997, cited in McGregor, 2002)), the nation becomes an essential entity, where boundaries demarcate the spaces of consumption. Life in a global village operates beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions. “The nexus of culture, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, and class (as well as a number of other social formations), has become entangled with political economy and the transnational movements of goods, bodies, and ideas to produce subjects and identities” (Grewal, 2005, p. 119). Thus, transnational connectivity becomes an important aspect of consumer culture, which mediates the discourses of race, gender and class to produce nationalism. In this way, a homogeneous national identity is produced and Barbie in sari embodies this kind of ethnic yet expatriate national identity. I used the term ‘expatriate’ to emphasize on the Indianness, which is generated through the distance from the homeland. In this paper I have also put a tint of sexuality discourse but the main emphasis is given on the consumer culture.

Barbie, Consumer Citizenship and Transnationalism

The idea of consumer citizenship (a consumer citizen is a consumer who makes reasoned choices based on ethical, social, economic and ecological considerations) along with transnational sensibilities is so much embedded in the mindset of people that the youth identify themselves as cosmopolitan, boundary-less identities with cravings for international brands yet with a local touch. A white skinned Barbie in sari aptly caters to such need, an avenue opened by Mattel itself. When Mattel came to India, it did not produce an Indian or South Asian Barbie, instead it offered a ‘traditional’ Barbie with Euro-American body, wearing shiny sari and a red *bindi*, captioned as “Dressing in all season’s classic sari with exotic borders, Barbie is totally at home in India; where the words ‘all seasons’ differentiated sari from the fashion industry in the West, which is organized around seasonal clothes. Also, the term ‘exotic’ reminded about the history of romanticizing and commodifying difference

(Grewal, 2005). Barbie's presence in India came at a time, when the national imaginary was becoming transnational imaginary, in which diasporic cultural formations created new forms of patriarchy under the conditions of globalization. Indian market was getting accustomed with the liberalization policies adopted by the then BJP government and also the export and import policies were made more flexible to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Diaspora and 'home' were connected in new ways, like never before, in this new economic environment, such that "NRIs were integrated into the political, cultural and economic practices of the Indian nation-state and Indians became aware of their participation in the global consumer culture" (Grewal, 2005). Thus, Diaspora culture in the Indian context was incorporated as a marketing tool to nurture the fantasy of a transnational nation. For instance, promotional campaigns by the Government like "India Shining" (India Shining stands for commercial development, modernization, and westernization of select pockets of population within India) and "Incredible India" (refers to aspects of India which demonstrate [to foreign tourists] its moral values, rich cultural heritage, places of historical interest, and traditional way of life) were designed to attract investments from the NRIs and PIOs and also project a global image of India with a difference to the world community. The nation proposed an identity that connected people through ties of consumption to 'home' as nation-state while not seeing it as a necessary place of return. Hence, we see, new subjects of highly segmented nature and segmented identities were produced. Barbie participated in the gendered segmentation of these new consumer subjects. Suddenly, NRIs in US became valuable as multicultural experts to American multinationals, which is because 'multiculturalism' did not just remain a claim on civil rights but it became a neoliberal corporate project of selling goods to a transnational consumer culture connecting many national identities.

Global circulation of products like ethnic Barbie creates a transnational space of contestation over questions of consumption, identity and cultural authenticity (Hegde, 2001). Barbie play is pre-scripted in a way that very narrowly circumscribes girls' play. There is a discourse running underneath the manufacture, travel and the use of Barbie which also governs the play of girls. Girls write fiction through their play (Derrida suggests anything that puts thoughts into action can be called as text, script or writing which begins with gesture or a movement of hand in the air) characterized by the toys which is directed in a way already scripted by Mattel where Barbie, though a part of the fiction, remains as an outsider or a mere visitor. Mattel's marketing strategy uses the 'otherness' of Barbie (intentionally constructed) as a commodity of exchange. Barbie captures the multiple ways in which the global and the national intersect creating a transnational arena of consumption. In this consumer space, Mattel offers Barbie as an ethnic spectacle that demonstrates certain type of "Indianness" promoted through a white female body and sold as the orientalist fantasy of white femininity.

Mattel linked its marketing strategies with the discourses of powerful American nationalism where choice is associated with freedom. The discourses of feminism were further exploited to produce a segmented space of consumption emphasizing on centrality of choice as a goal for liberal feminism. Use of these discourses to promote consumption helped establishing the gendered divisions in consumer culture.

Discourses of Sexuality

Barbie being a part of the patriarchy is normative. It operates within the boundaries of heterosexual normativity. The scholarships on Barbie have rarely touched the queer side of its sexuality. The body of Barbie i.e. the femininity embodied in its plastic structure is very much heterosexual, representing the imagination of a man, with a narrow waist and a sizeable bust line. "Unlike most dolls, she is not a baby to be mothered. She is not huggable, not

squeezable, not comforting” (Wanless, 2001). Mattel conceptualized Barbie to cater to the fantasy of girls. The perception of fantasy of a girl produced a transnational imaginary of a new nationalism where Barbie became a good role model and fantasy object that can fulfil consumer needs (Grewal, 2005). Mattel boasts of its cultural sensitivity represented through its products as it says, “Barbie allows little girls dream”, but the question is what kind of dream does it sow on the minds of girls (Hegde, 2001)? Is it to dream of a perfect (skinny) body? Is it the dream of becoming a shopaholic to look trendy? Is it about white fetish? “Barbie appeared with that all-important ‘ideal’ figure, with her high pointy breasts and her flat belly”. She exemplifies female physical perfection in a society, perhaps globally (Wanless, 2001).

Ethnic Multicultural Consumersim – The Conclusion

The travel of Barbie commodified race and gender difference through multiculturalism. It produced a homogenised, stereotypical national representation. Moreover, Barbie is associated with fashion industry which again generates consumers for the beauty products and glamour items. Transnationalizing incorporates Diaspora fashion to present successful role models. Thus, national notions of female beauty became transnational.

Ethnic groups often resist a dominant consumer culture in a host land, however they participate in consumption to enhance and reinforce their ethnic identities. Thus, Barbie in sari became a symbol of ethnic difference. Although, it was targeted to an emerging consumer segment in India, it also became meaningful for the immigrant population as a means to assert their identities. Barbie in a sari enabled South Asian immigrants in US to give their children the ‘standard’ Barbie that they wanted, but with a difference that recalled their ‘traditional’ culture – an important aspect of the formation of diasporic ethnic identity (Grewal, 2005). Barbie’s travels in India and its attempt to be at home in India participates in the emergence of a new gendered market segment and in economic liberalization thereby initiating discourses of gendered beauty, employment, entrepreneurship and consumer feminism travelling in multiple directions across transnational connectivity. Barbie in sari signifies an opening to understand the production of consumer subjects and consumer nationalisms in a transnational world.

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