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The Visual Rhetoric of Beauty: A Semiotic Analysis of Female Representations in the Malayalam Women's Magazines

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Abstract:

Most of the cultural artefacts and representations we encounter in our everyday lives play a prominent role in naturalizing and validating caste, class and gender binaries. The women's Magazines in Malayalam can easily pass for one of those seemingly innocent cultural sites which proliferate and legitimize ideologically constructed portrayals of female body. The images of the womanhood they mold and market are instrumental in affirming certain deceptively harmless notions of beauty, rightly baptized by Naomi Wolf as the 'beauty myth'. This paper attempts to analyze the semiotics of the female representations in the Malayalam women's magazines and to probe into their political and ideological implications.

Keywords: Beauty Myth, Male gaze, Ideology, Semiotics, Constructed cultural representations, Othering, Gender stereotypes, Naturalization of binaries.

In every age, when women are at the verge of winning a war against patriarchal conspiracies, a new gimmick is brought forth to colonize and curb their vitality and to ensure that they are distracted or captivated enough to not progress any further. As women have started marking their presence in all those realms which were once monopolized by men, male dominated power structures anticipated an imminent disruption of the prevailing status quo. To prevent all kinds of dissenting voices from being heard and echoed, they launched a new ploy, rightly christened by Naomi Wolf, as the 'beauty myth'. Certain ideals of beauty came to reign the female psyche which still look convincing enough to divert women from their crusades against patriarchal power politics and to weaken all their vigour to fight for their true rights.

Naomi Wolf expounds the concept and analyses its repercussions in her much-admired work, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. As the prominence and participation of women in social and political spheres have been increasing, they are unwittingly driven to attune to certain popular principles of 'beauty'. She comments;

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us... More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers... We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth. As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground. (10)

There are multiple sources from which the 'beauty myth' bombards the society and Wolf decodes them one by one in her book.

Mass media, especially films, advertisements, music and magazines constitute the popular culture and the vital part they play in instilling politically coloured images in the minds of the masses shouldn't be underrated. Slim and white bodies have been legitimized as female perfection and this collocation conceals numerous layers of complex implications. A look from the vantage point of the 'beauty myth' would unfurl their semiotic intricacies that are capable of shaping, sustaining and stabilizing fixed binaries in the categories of class, caste and gender.

Several forms of social, political and cultural disparities parade with a deceptive innocence, in almost all the cultural representations that we encounter and internalize in our everyday lives. As Pramod K Nayar underscores in *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, the objects and artefacts that are used and made sense of by the masses must be taken seriously, as popular culture, for Cultural Studies, is the set of beliefs, values and practices that are widely shared (6). In that sense, the women's magazines in Malayalam can be recognized as a quintessential example of such ideological masquerades. These publications are prominent sites of meaning making in Kerala society. The women's Magazines in our God's own Country have immense political and cultural significance, yet they are scarcely acknowledged as locations of production, consumption and propagation of culture.

The most widely circulated women's magazines in Kerala include *Vanitha*, *Grihalakshmi* and *Mahilaratnam*. One of these celebrated publications defines itself as a guide and companion of women. When one magazine calls woman the goddess of the house, another describes her as an exquisite gem. From the very name and tagline to the content and styling, these magazines encapsulate a comprehensive compendium of womanhood, which effortlessly earns them popularity and acclaim among the target readers. The dexterously laid out contents ranging from food to fashion, establish them as a complete package for women. Other than the usual ingredients like, Parenting tips, celebrity interviews, fitness mantras, inspirational stories, fashion

trends, cooking recipes, the festival special editions are jam-packed with exciting, extra features and articles.

These Malayalam Magazines that have pledged their loyalties to women claim to have captured the real essence of womanhood and are proud to render true service to the female folk in Kerala. But analyzing the semiotics of these magazines, it becomes apparent that the images of the womanhood they mold and market are quite problematic. To begin with, the cover pages are absolutely vibrant, particularly reserved only for the celebrity faces, mostly actresses, clad in bright and trendy outfits. Of course it goes without saying that they are fair and beautiful, as Malayalam film industry has only very little space for dark complexioned heroines and heroes. If a Malayalam magazine for Kerala women portrays absolutely fair and majestically dressed models and cover girls, they are simply marketing a handful of ideologically contrived products as they are fabricating images, which are quite far-fetched from our cultural reality. The common or typical complexion of a Malayali woman is not milk white. Our population of women, though unified by a single language, hails from different social sects and cultural strata and there is an obvious disregard for these undeniable 'differences' from the very face page of these magazines. The negligence towards middle and low class, the differently abled, and the old women are clearly evident. The fringes are made to stay at the fringes but what these magazines boast of is the infringement of such fringes.

If the tag lines are to reflect the real content, adjectives like fair, elite and young should be added to them. The various female communities of Kerala are supposed to come under those specific categories and undergo homogenization. A special feature on a strong willed acid attack victim can appear on the inner page. Her trials and tribulations might be elaborated in detail. The readers might even be asked to emulate her invincible spirit. But still her face would hardly make it to the cover page of the magazine. The countenance that graces the face page has always been that of a fair, young lady. Because indomitable will is not a marketable material but an attractive, spotless and wrinkleless face is. This is what is known as 'to fail to practice what one preaches'. One of those hit magazines recently chose a transgender as its cover page model and it was glorified as a revolutionary act from the part of the publication. It was doubtlessly a brave initiative. But a politically conscious reader might find the boldness in that act a tad difficult to digest considering its timing. It turns to be another veiled hypocrisy, as it was a time the LGBT protests came to limelight and gained momentum. So one might find that particular cover girl stunt not exclusively different from a teenager posting a click with his or her mother in the social networking profiles on mother's day. When this marginalized people were suppressed and silenced and were left to rot in the dark allies of repugnance, the aforesaid magazine didn't care or dare to voice their misery. So the magazine's daring venture appears to be a premeditated appropriation of what currently has the scope to garner attention and promotion in market.

One of the regular elements of these magazines is the pages that celebrate current fashion trends. They are usually the most colourful pages as well. Once the spell of those lurid pages and vivacious images is broken, the contradictions between what these magazines claim to be and what they actually are, slowly come to light. The layouts definitely celebrate womanhood; but their definition of the term 'woman' is quite biased. Those are the pages for an upper class lady to flaunt her wardrobe of rare edition outfits, pointed heels and peppy accessories. The models have the perfect body and flawless facial features and they look like directly imported from some gyms or zumba classes. There the periodicals fail to rise up to set an example as "a woman's magazine that positively feature round models, short models- or no models at all, but real individual women" (Wolf 83). They make the elite, young and fair the norm and strategically ignore the other sessions of female populace of Kerala. Here the 'beauty myth' is packed in glitters and is delivered directly to the female minds. As a return favour, it affirms all the political categorization and social segregations.

The 'Othering' of women, which these magazines are supposed to defy and demolish, is ironically given a facelift by creating a new 'Other' within the already 'Othered'. The middle class and lower middle class women, the aged women, the dark and brown complexioned women and their success sagas only appear in special articles. Their faces cannot be the identity of these magazines, so they are not even admissible in the back yards of fashion ramps. The common women who look up to this magazine would neither feel guided nor befriended (as the taglines advocate), instead a sense of inferiority will slither in. The clothes, not even the accessories those pages display, are affordable for them. They have neither the looks nor the riches to fit in to the definition of woman the magazines create. The bar is set so high that these women might feel as they are leading a worthless life. They standardize or legitimize what they put forth as womanhood. Thus these cultural 'artefacts' prove to be instrumental in reinforcing the binary of haves and have-nots, upper class and lower class, high caste and low caste, fair and dark and young and old. Thus they employ a scheme that almost looks like a 'divide and rule' plot to rule the female psychology.

This brilliantly masked cultural chauvinism of these publications misleads women. They are not allowed to be comfortable in their own skin. Instead they are internally colonized by certain images of beauty which Wolf accurately underscores as 'social fictions', which keep the existing male-centered power grids in place. She observes that an ideologically designed mass culture of women springs to action by making women feel bad enough about their faces and bodies to spend more money on worthless or pain-inducing products than they would if they felt innately beautiful (84). Their lives are made to oscillate between the urge to look physically and sexually desirable and the disappointment in failing to attain this goal. A girl who has been psychologically conditioned from childhood would feel that being beautiful is the true meaning of being a woman and she develops a tendency to spend more money on her body. As Wolf says, "Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they

are kept in self-halting, ever-failing, hungry, sexually insecure state of being aspiring beauties”(66).

These magazines also contribute their share in fixing gender roles and in legitimizing preconceived stereotypes. It is true that they often contain multiple features about successful women from various fields. But the vocations they advocate or promote for women are the stereotypical ones. Women are definitely allotted space for creativity, but mostly in the kitchen and the garden. She can freely develop new delicacies as the innovations in cooking are invariably encouraged. There are frequent features and fixed pages to teach cooking and stitching. Her creativity is curtailed to embellishing homes and satisfying the needs of her family. Stitching is indeed a profitable occupation these days, but it is not the only pastime a woman has, apart from the other prescribed ones like cooking and gardening. The crucial point is that the women are taught to stitch clothes for kids, that too mostly for daughters. Can't women make clothes for themselves? It seems more like a mother bequeathing a legacy of being a beautiful spouse and a dutiful mother to her daughter. From the magazine's marketing point of view, they are creating a specific consumerist culture of related or connected customers who can carry on the legacy. It becomes more or less an imposed tradition that progresses like a chain reaction, from the present reader or the mother to a prospective reader or the daughter. The idea is that mothers will read the magazine and make clothes for their baby girls. When the daughters grow up, they will continue the process. Thus the magazine as well as the ideology it propagates will go on unceasingly.

The magazines that seek to empower and enlighten the women of Kerala seem to have taken for granted that ladies cannot excel in art and literature. It is surprising to see that there is no room for the female artist or writer in a publication that revolves around women. The capability of a female to engage in creative imagination and artistic enunciation are cleverly undermined and conveniently ignored. Even though female writers and artists are royally ignored, these periodicals regularly publish female centered fiction. Of course an episodic novel accompanied with alluring drawings of female characters that never fail to highlight every curve and every projection in their bodies, add up to the charm of the pages. Ironically, the very magazines that lay emphasis on offering strength and support to the community of women commodify them. The sketches of female characters in the novels and novellas are perfectly structured and shaped to feed the masculine dreams and desires about the female body as Laura Mulvey puts it, “male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (837). Thus even the female readers unwittingly observe their own body through a ‘male gaze’ and engrave those hour glass body shapes in their minds as the enviable perfection a female is supposed to achieve. The ‘beauty myth’ is fed into their brains through these cultural and ideological machinations.

Some of these magazines have pages allotted for gossips from film and entertainment industries in one of the final sheets, just like a dessert after a grand meal. It is the finest topping, as gossiping is always said to be the woman's thing, her monopoly, and her forte. There is no page for featuring sports affairs, introducing latest automobiles and brand new technologies. There is not even a single page that gives relevant political updates too. If at all any of these make an appearance, they are included in the gossip columns. Because they do not go hand in hand the qualities attributed to women. They are essentially masculine interests. This tendency can be read as purely a result of fear or anxiety as politically alert women can be potential threats to the existing patriarchal equilibrium.

There is another page that reinforces yet another female type casting; 'the joy of motherhood'. It caters to the interests of children, which includes stories and puzzles. To be precise, it is a special column meant for mothers. The descriptions on the page cloyingly ask the mothers to read and even enact the stories before their kids. Some magazines even have pages for printing the pictures of beautiful mothers along with their kids. It does not matter whether you are a house wife or a working woman, if you are a mother, then you are responsible for the emotional, intellectual and the overall behavioral growth of your children. The over emphasis on the duties of a mother even inculcates a sense of guilt in working mothers for not being able to give their entire time and attention to their growing kids. Those pages reflect the same ideology of a typical TV commercial of a washing soap or detergent powder that praises 'the magic of a mother's hands' which are capable of defeating any stain on clothes and taming any cuisine at home. While the society frees fathers from such everyday tasks, the social and cultural identities of mothers are chained to them as motherhood has always been the tested and proven medium to restrain women.

The gender roles are asserted again when the pages overflow with ads mainly of jewels and clothes, beauty creams and baby soaps. Numerous pages contain small columns of beauty tips. The crash diets and skin care products thrive on the females' desire to look beautiful. If women learn to be complacent with their body shape, size and colour, many industries like fairness creams, beauty soaps, branded lingerie and food supplements will crumble. The extreme pressure to be fair and young is fuelled with the tips to lighten the natural skin tone and the excessive desire to look slim is aggravated by providing crash diet plans. Being not slim yet healthy is not considered as sexually attractive. Being not fair complexioned, yet smart is not treated as physically desirable either. In fact it is the 'beauty myth' that smiles on the pages of those magazines and lures more and more women to its world of fabricated images. As a result, "During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty" (Wolf 10).

All these seemingly normal representations are so beguiling that they directly insert readymade images into our thought system leaving no gaps to think. It becomes difficult to see

through the glossy content that readily gets etched on the psyche of the readers. The magazines present ideologically corrupted images of womanhood and tactically establishes such meticulous manipulations as the irrefutable norm. As a result, a plethora of constructed images and manufactured notions about womanhood find their way to the personal and collective consciousness of women.

One might wonder what these magazines have to offer a woman to boost her confidence to embrace her true female self and to identify and explore her talents. On the contrary, they feed the masculine fantasies about the female and invalidate all those bodies that fail to cater to those ideals. With the predisposed representations of female beauty and sexuality, the common women in Kerala become more vulnerable to fall prey to the profit intended definitions of beauty. The imparted message is that there is an inextricable connection between physical beauty and social standing and there lies the magic of attaining the consensus of women themselves to be internally colonized and held hostage.

The only way out is to recognize the lies and traps and reject the choices offered by the 'beauty myth' through various light-hearted and routine mediums. Women's magazines are just one of those seemingly harmless vehicles that proliferates the images of 'beauty'. Commodification of female bodies is possible only when women consider themselves as sex objects that should look appealing to men and the myths of beauty sell only till women find themselves ugly and inferior. Beauty should not be a tyrannical force that victimizes and exploits its consumers. The connotation that choosing to be real and natural is the direct opposite of making oneself look beautiful is a mistaken one. So to get over the hangover of the 'beauty myth', the binaries should be dismantled. If one finds it difficult to do it, those ideals can be made powerless at least by refusing to subscribe to them. It is true that visually appealing and enthralling representations of beauty are too pervasive in our society, to not catch our attention. But the fact is that 'beauty' is admirable and desirable, only until it doesn't become the 'beast' that invades our consciousness.

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