



Being Woman: Representation of Women in a Weekly Magazine of Pakistan

Nayab Iqbal,

Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Barrett Hodgson University,
Karachi, Pakistan

Kaukab Abid Azhar,

Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Barrett Hodgson University,
Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract: *The research study is based on the thematic analysis on a sample of four issues of a leading weekly Urdu magazine. The research study aims at finding out the topics and themes that are presented particularly in the women's section of the magazine. Besides, other sections are also referred to if there is any significant representation of women in those sections. However, the analysis of the magazines reveals that women are portrayed in a specific manner. Majority of the articles only suggest women to look after their house and family or suggest them to make compromises and sacrifices in their lives. The magazine hardly contains articles that can suggest women to have careers or a particular aim in their lives. Moreover, some articles present women as the ones obsessed with physical beauty. Besides, the stories in the magazines portray women as 'helpless creatures', submissive and subordinate as compared to men in the society.*

Keywords: *Gender Roles, Gender Portrayal in Media, Representation of Women, Stereotypes.*

1. Introduction

Representation of women in print media has been an area of research for a long period of time. As magazines are read by a large group of people, therefore, analyzing magazines for finding out gender role portrayal is a common method of conducting research in the domain of language and gender. The role of women is restricted to doing cleaning, taking care of children and looking after their homes and husbands. The entire life of women is restricted to doing household chores and decorating their houses. Although numerous researches have been carried out in this domain yet this is an area of great interest as stereotypes about women still exist to a great extent in different societies.

Although, women are now seen in almost all the fields and the discrimination that existed previously has been reduced to a great extent yet being women they are expected to behave in a manner recommended and accepted by the society. Where men are expected to be the heads of the families and have careers women, on the other hand, are mostly portrayed as only housewives, mothers or homemakers. The idea that women are supposed to behave in a particular manner and are expected to fulfill certain responsibilities is deeply ingrained in our culture. The way the magazine portrays women reflects the mentality of the society and the common gender stereotypes existing in the society. Keeping this view in mind, magazines are



analyzed to find out the main trends in portraying women.

Analyzing different sections of a weekly magazine which is not only for women helps to achieve a better perspective of the way images of women are constructed particularly while discussing women in a magazine which is targeted towards both the genders. Besides, this weekly magazine is chosen for analysis in particular as it has both male and female readership and is a popular and widely read magazine. Moreover, the research study will open doors for a critical reading of this and other such magazines which sometimes subtly and other times overtly reinforce the already existing stereotypes related to women in our society. The research questions of the study are:

- How are females represented in the women's section of the magazines?
- What are themes that are prominent while discussing women?
- Are there any significant topics related to women in the other sections as well?
- If yes, how are they referred to in the other sections?

2. Literature Review

Different definitions about gender have been proposed by the researchers. Cameron (2005) points out that "Gender is not something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life, but an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions." (p.486). Similarly, in this research study gender is seen as something which is constructed depending on the culture and society from which an individual belongs. Magazines play an important part in the portrayal of gender. The topics, themes and language help portray gender and

spread an opinion about it in the society. Evans & Bucy (2010) explored the patterns of authorship and scholarship in two interdisciplinary journals. The semantic content analysis of the magazines revealed that women are found to be publishing less as compared to men.

Besides, Feng & Karan (2011) conducted a research to find out the impact of global and local forces on the portrayal of women's roles in women's magazine in China by analyzing the content of these magazines. The analysis of the magazine's content suggested that women's magazine in China tend to reinforce traditional sex role stereotypes. The results suggested women to be represented in a typical fashion. Moreover, Ford et al. (1998) through the content analysis of an advertising magazine found that women were portrayed as more concerned with appearance and younger than men.

However, a research conducted by Demarest & Garner (1992) suggested a change in the representation of women in magazines. A thematic content analysis of the articles published in two of the weekly magazines revealed a gradual decline in the themes of women as wives, mothers and homemakers and an increase in articles with social, political and economic (career) themes. But traditional sex role models, however, still dominated the pages of most women's magazines.

Furthermore, Shaller (2006) focused on the female athletes in the Media. Through content analysis of sports illustrated covers, she discovered that women in sports suffer from insufficient media coverage not only in regards to their lack of presence in major sports publications but also in their



stereotypical depiction in print journalism.

In addition, Koernig & Granitz (2006) conducted a research to find out whether e-commerce advertisements continue to reflect more negative stereotypical sex differences in relation to technology. However, the content analysis of ads in e-commerce magazines revealed that compared to past studies ads for e-commerce products and services portray women more equitably.

Fowler (1979) explored the plot structures and images of the society contained in the fiction of cheap magazines for women. For this reason, one story was analyzed in depth indicating the devices used to signal the preferred meanings of character, plot, action etc. The analysis revealed that the function of domestic stories is to provide how life can and should be lived. Besides, the plot contains a romantic plot which particularly focused on sacrifice and its reward. The heroine in the story distinguishes herself from other women by giving up her own interests for the sake of others. And in the end, as a reward, she finds a true love which others women did not.

Mahsud, Mirza, & Riaz (2009) conducted a research on three Urdu weekly magazines. The findings of the three magazines 'Akhbar-e-Jehan', 'the Mashriq' and 'Nawa-e-Waqt' revealed that all the three weeklies devoted significant space to women pictorial portrayal and mostly showed them with different products like modern dress, long hair and short hairstyle as object of appeal-model, actress, singer, and dancer by all pages particularly by their titles and central fold pages, as compared to their picture spaces to the same showed them in achieved roles (teacher, doctor, social & health worker, politician,

administrator and businesswoman) and traditional roles (mother, housewife, sister, and daughter).

Through the analysis of different research studies it was found that women are represented as beauty objects, housewives or as helpless beings in most of the magazines. Therefore; to see if there is any difference in the portrayal of women in a weekly Urdu magazine this research study focuses on the ways women are referred to in the different sections of a leading Urdu magazine.

3. Methodology

The research study is based on qualitative research paradigm. As qualitative research paradigm is exploratory in nature and helps to gain better insight into the subject, therefore, this paradigm was chosen for the detailed analysis of the magazines. Thematic analysis of the four weekly magazines for a month was done in which the focus was on the themes that were dominant while discussing women. Besides, the way language was used was given extra focus especially in the section of stories 'tiin orte~ tiin kahaniyaa~' (Three women three stories) as the women themselves wrote these stories highlighting a major event of their lives. The way they used language reveals a lot about how women perceive themselves as part of the society.

The title pages of the magazines were analyzed. Besides, the sections explicitly focusing on women were analyzed in detail. The sections like 'tiin orte~ tiin kahaniyaa~' (Three women Three stories) and 'xavatiin' (Women) were the major sections targeting women in general, therefore, these sections were analyzed in detail. In addition, a section named 'cut piece' was also analyzed although it was not a section devoted to women but because it contains topics related to women so it was also analyzed



to find out the common trends of referring to women.

The selection of the magazines was made based on the convenient sampling technique as the issues easily available were selected for the analysis. The name of the magazine is deliberately not revealed as our intention is not to harm the reputation or business of any magazine. Also, to avoid repetition only four issues were made part of the detailed analysis.

4. Analysis

The title page of all the four magazines contains the pictures of female models despite the fact that it is not a woman's magazines but a weekly magazine published for both the gender. The models mostly stood with their smiling face which is of course done in order to attract the readers towards the magazines. The magazine contains sections related to sports, politics, and economics as well besides the women's section which shows that the explicit aim of the magazine is not to focus on the women's issues yet every time pictures of the female models are displayed on the title page of the magazine.

Besides, one of a very well-known section of the magazine Three women Three Stories ('tiin orte~ tiin kahaniyaa~) presents stories of different women. The stories are considered to be the real ones written by females from different areas of Pakistan. The stories that are discussed are always tragic and the way these women write stories mostly portray them as ones facing problems throughout their lives. The major theme that emerges in these stories is the theme of helplessness. Women writing stories represent themselves as a helpless creature facing problems at the hands of others. The ultimate aim of their lives is to compromise with what life has decided

for them. They are almost shown to be submissive and subordinate to the male figures in their lives. The stories are written from an extremely emotional perspective and the rational aspect of it is totally missing. Highly emotional language is used including words like 'majbuur' (helpless) and 'takliif' (problems) and the aim of using language in this manner is to get sympathies from others.

There was a story published in the first week of the month named 'kismat ruuth gaye' (Fate Deserted) in which the female discussed how she suffered throughout her life. Her mother was a prostitute and after the death of her mother, her aunties did not let her live peacefully as they wanted the house that she lived in. She got married twice but got divorced as her aunties told her in-laws about her mother's past. However, she tried a lot to get married to a good person but could not do that till the very end of the story. So the theme of women ruining their own nephew's life was shown which portrayed women in an extremely negative light. Besides, the theme of sufferings and helplessness were evident in the story.

Moreover, there was another story published in the second week of the month named 'bharosa abas kia' (breaking the trust) in this column based on a woman's life who suffered throughout her life just because she was dependent on the males in her life. In the childhood, her mother wanted her to study but she did not as she was never willing to study. Her father was a rich landlord and did not get her to marry when she was young because of which she grew older and fell short of good proposals. However, she found a proposal of a man six years younger than her who married her because of her money. He



betrayed her after her father's death and ran away taking all her money giving her divorce. When she gets old, she suffered at the hands of her daughter-in-law. Ultimately, she finds peace when her son returns as her wife left him and then marries a 'siidhi saadhi gao~ ki ladki' (naive village girl) as quoted in the story who respects her mother-in-law. The entire story revolves around the suffering of a woman who is supposed to get sympathy from the readers because of the tragedies of her life. Besides, the end of the story also suggested that all the mothers-in-law should choose a simple and naive daughter-in-law which advocates the idea that only the naive and simple girls are the better options.

In the last week of the month, there was a story named 'yu~ bhi hota hai' (This also happens) written by a woman based on her own and her mother's lives. The story was entirely based on the notion of 'beauty' in fact the major dilemma of the story was beauty. The girl writes about her mother's life and the way it affected her own life. Her mother was extremely beautiful to the extent she was not allowed to go out of her home, to attend school after fifth grade and was not even allowed to see mirror. She was nourished in an extremely protective environment so that she could be saved from all the evil eyes of the society but all these restrictions made her life miserable and finally she gets married. Because of all the restrictions and problems she faced in her life she always wished that she never have a beautiful child instead she always wanted an ugly child. This girl when born was extremely ugly and no one in the family liked her at all. Like her mother, she too faced lots of problems but the reason was opposite. Towards the end of the story, she finds a handsome spouse

who fell in love with her despite her not being beautiful and she lived happily ever after. In the end, she says, whether early or late God always answers your prayers, this was the moral of the story. Firstly, it was a senseless story having moral at all. Secondly, again women were presented as an object as the focus was again on the notion of beauty.

To sum up, all these stories published in this column about women are always based on petty issues. None of the stories are based on something intellectual which represents women as worthless creatures. In addition, the stories are written by females and they always write in a highly submissive language. The tone is always gloomy, hopeless and women are always shown to be in authoritative. Almost, all the stories in this column are based on the sufferings of a woman's life which promote the idea that from the beginning of their lives women are supposed to suffer through different means and they are to get sympathies from the world. None of the stories portrays women as strong individuals who can accept the challenges in their lives and sort out things on their own. These stories advocate the idea that women are supposed to be dependent on others.

The other major section devoted to women is the one named 'xavatiin' (Women). The section is named as Women and is entirely targeted towards the female gender. The section contains recipes under the heading 'rasoi ghar' (Kitchen). Moreover, there are different articles for women in this section. The major themes that emerge in this section are the importance given to physical beauty including tips for fair and fresh skin and hair treatment, recipes highlighting the theme of women cooking and doing household chores only. Besides,



there are articles that present the idea of women as homemakers and mothers only.

There was one article named 'Tajikistan: iskoolu~ me~ bachiyuu~ ko gharelo kaam kaaj ki tarbiyat' (Tajikistan: Girls being taught to do household chores in the schools) on the same page under the sub-heading 'taaza xabar' (Breaking News) published in the second week of month which discussed that in order to control the increased 'divorce rate' in Tajikistan, there is a policy made in which the young girls in schools will be taught to do household chores. The article apparently claims to benefit girls by making them capable of looking after their house, teaching them the ways to handle their lives after they are married but in reality the article, on the other hand, has degraded the importance of acquiring education. Schools are made to provide awareness so that children learn to differentiate between rights and wrongs but such attempts would be enough to highlight the importance of household chores in a girl's life to the extent that even in the schools the aim would be to teach cooking, making rotis so that they don't get divorced once they are married.

There was another article published in the same week named 'pehluu me~ chipi bethe~ he, ek dost numa dushman' (Sitting beside is an enemy wearing a mask of a friend). The article is based on promoting the idea that women are jealous of each other and they hardly think about the good of other women. The article discusses the women who claim to be another woman's friend actually find ways to harm their friends. The article by providing such ideas as the psychology of women promotes a very negative image of women in the society. Women are portrayed as being more

jealous as compared to men. You would hardly find any article discussing men as gossip mongers or as being jealous of their own friends whereas when it comes to women, they are usually portrayed in a negative light. Such articles are enough to add to the already distorted images of women in our society.

In the third week of the month, there was an article 'xavatiin kis rang me~ achi lagti he~?' (In which colour do women look good?) The article was mainly based upon the research conducted in Central China Normal University in which the pictures of women wearing different colours were shown to men in order to find out in which colour women are more liked by men. The results suggested that men find women to be more attractive in red colour. However, the article added to the negative portrayal of women as women were suggested to wear red just because men liked them in red. This also promoted an idea that the entire focus of women's lives should be to satisfy men, seek approval for them and dress up in a way that is liked by men. Women were promoted as an object of gratification as well as were asked to do things that were preferred by the opposite gender and their own choice as an individual was not taken into consideration at all.

In the last week, there was one article in the favor of women's education. The writer asked the women to read good books in order to increase their knowledge and the writer talked about the benefits of reading in a society. But again there were certain things that added to the stereotypes related to women's education and job. The writer said if women read, they can look after their children in a better way which conveys that because after acquiring education women can look after their



children in a better way, therefore, this is all they should do once they get a degree. Besides, the writer said that in today's world 'bad times' are very common and many women do not get a chance to acquire education so they should prepare themselves and take the exam and get a degree whenever they get time. Consequently, this idea restricts education only to the notion of collecting degrees in which women by sitting at home and cramming notes can get a degree so that they can do the job if required. Also, doing job was connected with the idea of 'bad times' and poverty suggesting that a woman is supposed to do job only if she is in extreme need. So apparently a good article when read by the masses can add to the already existing stereotypes related to the women doing job.

On the next page under the same column, there was an article in which the writer suggested different ways for maintaining a budget to women. The article specifically targeted women saying that women buy things without any need if they go shopping and see something that they like. So different things that women should avoid doing while going shopping were mentioned that would help control their budget. This again stereotyped women as being extravagant. Although, men can be equally extravagant when it comes to buying something that they like but the article particularly highlighted women which are again an evident proof of biasness towards the female gender.

All these articles represent women as obsessed with the notion of physical beauty, the theme of jealousy, women being extravagant, women as a wife, as a mother and as a homemaker are the common themes highlighted within this column.

Under the column of cut piece there are many paragraphs or jokes mocking women in general. There are some jokes as well in which women are degraded to a great extent. Although this column is not for women only but there are some topics devoted to women. However, all the topics portray women in an extremely insulting manner. In the second week of the month, under this column, there were different jokes making fun of women. The page contains a paragraph titled 'taaviil jashn' (Long Celebration) written by a male in which he mocked upon women as a wife by presenting a joke. Similarly, there is another paragraph mocking mothers-in-law. Similarly, in the third week under the same column, there were paragraphs mocking women. There was one named 'aap bhi pochiye' (You also ask) in which there were quotations ridiculing women in general and the idea was to make people laugh by satirizing women. One of the jokes was:

*mohabbat ke lie dil aur a~khe~
chaheye jabke shaadi ke liye?*

*ek qaazi, chaar gavah, ek dulhan
aur ek qurbaani ka bakra.*

*(You need a heart and eyes for
love and for marriage? A qaazi,
four witnesses, a bride and a
lamb that can be sacrificed).*

The innocent man is presented as a lamb that can be sacrificed as he is going to marry a woman. This is just one example and you can find numbers of such examples mocking women in this column of the magazine. What is worth noticing is that in almost all these jokes women are the target of scorn and none of these things are written targeting males.

In the magazine published in the fourth week of month, there were jokes again directed towards the female gender.



Three was one about 'misaali shohar' (Exemplary Husband). In this joke the mother suggested her daughter to marry a scout because scouts are trained to do all their work on their own from the beginning. Besides, scouts are habitual of taking orders and doing things as they are commanded to do. The first thing that majority of the readers will do is that they will read, laugh on it and move on. But what we do not realize is that through reinforcing the negative image of women by these sorts of jokes, the masses are made to think in a stereotypical way when it comes to thinking about women. Through such jokes, women are always portrayed in an extremely negative light and people end up judging women as someone who is lazy, want a well-off obedient husband and want to end up living their lives doing nothing that is worth it. All they want is a well-established husband and sit and enjoy their lives in their cozy bedrooms. Then, there was another joke making fun of a girl driving a car, the aim of which seems to be targeting women drivers in general. This adds to the stereotypical image of women being bad drivers. This is generalized and applied to all women and people end up judging women as pathetic drivers which in turn represent women as inferior to men in another aspect of life.

Another striking thing that was found in this week's magazine was that there was an article in other section of the magazine about Father's attention in children's lives named 'bacchay baap se kya chahty he~?' (What do children want from their fathers?) in which fathers were asked to take out some time for their children. They were suggested to express their love for their children as a father's support is very important in children's lives. One point in the article

mentioned that the men living far from their families should establish them as much as they can before getting married so that they can spend good time with their children along with their careers whereas you will hardly find such suggestion in any article in which women are asked to spend time with their children or look after their homes. When the articles are written suggesting women to look after their home and children, the entire article is based upon the household chores and tips are given for making their husbands and children happy and satisfied. The article in no way talks about women concentrating on their careers or tips for managing their professional work and household work together in a balanced way.

One noticeable article was published in the column 'tehqiq' (Research). As the name suggests the article was based upon different researches and the topic was 'sinf-e-nazuk ba muqaabla sinf-e-karaxt-xavatiin xud etimaadi se mehruum kyu~?' (Female gender versus male gender: why do women lack self-confidence?) The article suggested that although women are commonly seen in almost all the fields now and even in universities there are more females as compared to males yet they lack confidence. Instead of women's success in academic life, men are hired on good posts and salaries when it comes to jobs. The reason behind this is that women are afraid of accepting challenges, they are afraid of criticism and they tend to seek approval from the primary years of their lives. Contrary to this, men accept criticism and they do not think a lot like women whenever they get to hear any negative comments on their performances. Moreover, there was a study discussed according to which



women do not find themselves to be deserving a good post until and unless they themselves realize that they have excelled in their fields whereas men think themselves to be confident enough to do good jobs even if they have 60% of the knowledge related to their fields. There were biological differences discussed as well according to which there is a release of a hormone Testosterone in males because of which they gain more confidence as compared to females.

Although the article made enough references to biological and psychological studies for discussing the differences between male and female yet I personally feel that the article again reinforced the idea of presenting women as a weak gender and on the other hand, it again presented males as a superior being. The major thing which gained my attention was that there was a very consistent pattern followed in almost all the four issues of the magazine that articles and columns together help portrays women as a submissive and weaker being as compared to the males in the society. This can have a very negative impact on the readers especially females who can assume that they cannot do anything more than looking after their house and children. Had there been anything motivating women and explicitly asking women to work for the betterment of the society, it would have had a better impact on them as part of a society.

The striking thing that was observed was that women's representation in things like sports and politics was very less as compared to men. Moreover, women were given more space while discussing the things related to household and there were more articles related to women discussing the ways of living a good life. So the articles were

more based on either teaching morals to the women or giving them ideas for making their house or marital lives good.

5. Conclusion:

The major focus of this research study was on finding out the trends of referring to women in a weekly magazine. However, the detailed analysis of the four issues of a leading weekly magazine revealed that despite all the efforts done to promote gender equality stereotypes related to women still exists in the society to a great extent. The magazines by portraying women in a stereotypical fashion reinforce the idea of a female being inferior to men in our society. Therefore, the research study suggests that efforts shall be made to avoid the stereotypical and negative representation of one gender and equal representation of both the genders shall be made in as many domains as possible.

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