

Chapter Two

Women, Media Representation and the Present Study

The present chapter will review some literatures, analyse a range of theoretical frameworks and will study Code of Ethics and Law of Australian and Bangladeshi commercials to understand all narratives of gender roles and racial discrimination. Television is a powerful means to convey information about gender roles in society and various studies have revealed that television advertisements contain gender—stereotypic ideas and images (Lavine et. al. 1999, p.1049). Such images of women have powerful effects: images of gender in popular culture shape our understandings of femininity and masculinity. According to Peach, such images construct and prescribe how women should look, feel, and act, and how they will be seen by others (Peach 1998, p. 119). Images of gender in popular culture contribute to the ‘making’ of women (Zoonen 1995, p. 315). If feminist thinkers wish to envision different and better possibilities for women, our envisioning must be informed by a critical understanding and awareness of current and potential representations. Thus, to understand the politics of representing gender and ethnicity in commercials we need to review some theories and define some concepts. Social scientists see representation from different points of views. Some of these are surveyed below.

Stuart Hall argues, “Representation is the production of meaning through language” (Hall 1997, p. 16). He states that:

The production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds [occurs] through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enable us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events (Hall 1997, p. 17).

Hall extends his discussion of representation by using Michel Foucault's idea of 'discourse' which is not merely, but more than, language. Foucault argues that human beings understand themselves through history rather than through semiotic approaches. Power relations form a crucial part of his understanding:

One's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning (Foucault 1980, p. 114).

Thus, for Foucault, meaning circulates within historical, social and cultural fields of power relations. Hall's analyses this in the following way:

By 'discourse', Foucault means 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about- a way of representing the knowledge about- a particular topic at a particular historical moment.... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language' (Foucault in Hall 1997, p. 44).

Hall summarises Foucault's approach to representation by writing that "the production of knowledge is always crossed with questions of power and the body; and this greatly expands the scope of what is involved in representation" (Foucault in Hall, p.51). An understanding of discourse in these terms suggests that there are hidden politics of representation. The study takes 'advertising' as 'discourse' to understand the historical and semiotic meanings of gender and racial representation in Australian and Bangladeshi commercials.

A common feature of gendered or racialised representation is the use of stereotypes. A stereotype is:

The selection and construction of undeveloped, generalized signs which categorize social groups or individual members of a group.

The crude selected signs used to construct stereotypes usually represent the values, attitudes, behaviour and background of the group concerned (Taylor and Willis 1999, pp.39-41).

Stuart Hall sees stereotyping as a “representational practice”. He points out that stereotyping “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘differences’”; secondly “it fixes boundaries and excludes everything which does not belong”; and thirdly, “stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power” (Hall 1997, p. 258). Stereotypes, therefore, fix representations through a ‘shorthand’ of meanings that maintain inequalities between gendered and racialised groups. This study analyses the stereotypical gender and racial representation in commercials in order to decode these fixed meanings.

For Judith Butler, ‘politics’ and ‘representation’ are controversial terms. Representation is an effective term within a political process that looks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects. Representation then is the “normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (Butler 1999, p. 3). These distortions and assumptions circulate widely in the field of advertising, and uphold myths about women as ‘lacking’ or ‘castrated’.

Butler’s approach draws heavily on both Foucault and feminist psychoanalytic theory. Recent feminist writing on psychoanalysis suggests that in patriarchal societies ‘woman’ is the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning. As such, she is bound to obey patriarchal imperatives (Mulvey 1975 in Bartkowski and Kolmar 2005, pp. 296-297). My research suggests that similar approaches and understandings may also be relevant to the realm of advertising representation. This is not to suggest, however, that cinematic or televisual representations of gender offer access to the ‘truth’ of gender.

According to Lisbet Van Zoonen, 'representation' is a misleading term, because it suggests that there is some reality or truth to be represented. Although it may be less misleading to think of gender as "appearance" instead, this ignores the relationship between the appearance or representation and subjectivity (Zoonen 1995, p. 317). Furthermore, the presentation and representation of gender in the form of body language, dress, make up, hairstyle, use of language, jewellery and so on are important for one's identification both by others and by oneself (Zoonen 1995, p. 313). This study uses these approaches to consider how representations of women are constructed and understood. It is not limited to myths of femininity but also to constructions of 'race'.

Representations of ethnic and Indigenous women in commercials circulate around debates concerning both subjectivity and racism. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that anthropological representations of indigenous Australian women contain an illusory absence of colonisation. Anthropology has instead embraced ethnocentric approaches which consequently disempower indigenous women. These have become 'truth' in feminist discourse and the dominant culture. This kind of representation is reversed only when indigenous women speak for themselves (Moreton-Robinson 1998, p.275-289). Marcia Langton's view is that most Australians 'know' about indigenous people from films, video and television. From the white Australian point of view what indigenous people do or say is extremely different from an Anglo-Australian style. Indigenous people become an object under the 'white gaze' (Langton 1993, pp.23-44).

In this thesis I will take a similar view, understanding the 'white gaze' as a key element of dominant culture's hegemonic power. The present study utilises the above meaning of

representation and shows that advertising operates in spaces of representation, subjectivity and power. Gendered or racialised representations in commercials are shaped differently when a culture or gender is represented by other dominant *hegemonic* power. Antonio Gramsci writes that societies maintain their stability through a combination of “domination” and “hegemony”. Thus, social orders are founded and reproduced with some institutions and groups exerting power and domination to maintain social rules (that is, the police, military, vigilante groups, and so on). Other institutions such as religion, school, or the media encourage the dominant order through establishing hegemony. In addition, societies establish the hegemony of males and certain races through the institutionalizing of male dominance or the rule of a specific race or ethnicity over subordinate groups (Durham and Kellner 2001, p. 7). This study will look for evidence of what sort of domination is present in television commercials.

The following review of literature will act also as a conceptual framework for exploring and interpreting the images of femininity that dominate in advertisements. Tiggemann, Verri and Scaravaggi (2005) write that a thin woman is the media ideal in Australia and Italy. This creates body dissatisfaction and disordered eating tendencies. The article of Howard Lavine, Donna Sweeney and Stephen H. Wagner (1999) similarly concludes that depicting women as sex objects in television advertisements increases body dissatisfaction among men and women. While these articles offer useful insights into cross-national comparisons and objectification, the present study will not emphasize the consequences of representation of thin women on television. This is not just because research on body image, eating disorders and media representations forms a significant literature in itself, but also because this thesis

takes a broader view: how women's bodies are represented is of course important, but women are more than their bodies.

Jackie Hogan (1999) demonstrates that advertisements both reveal the nature of globalization and, at the same time, construct gendered national identities in discourses concerning 'multiculturalism' in Australia and *Nihonjinron* (the discourse of Japanese uniqueness) in Japan. Hogan's work, along with other research into Portuguese and British television advertising (See Pinto and Neto 1998 and Furham and Bitar 1993) offers useful background material on the nature of multiculturalism in Australia and gendered national identities. Similar to Hogan's work, where women are portrayed as passive and conservative in advertising, this study confirms those kinds of stereotypical representations. Stereotypes are found in the advertising of all countries, both western and non-western, but are marked in different ways because culture influences advertising and gender stereotypes differently. (See Mazella et. al 1992, Gilly 1988; Bretl and Cantor 1988; and Peterson 1977).

There is not much work on the portrayal of women in Bangladesh television commercials. However, there has been research undertaken by scholars on print media and television. According to Giti Ara Nasrin (1999; 2006), in the context of Bangladesh television (BTV), commercials mobilise women's presence in ways that marginalise them. In commercials, women commonly scrub their faces, scrub dishes, wash their clothes while singing and dry them while dancing, find the meaning of love in coconut oil and prepare delicious foods for family members. Sometimes a female model is used irrespective of whether the product is targeted to men or women. Nasrin argues that advertisers not only target women as their

consumers but that they also ‘advise’ women what they should aim for. She also suggests advertisements devalue women by selling their sex appeal (Nasrin 1999, pp. 18-28). Furthermore, she argues that the portrayal of women in the Bangladeshi media is both “peripheral” and “negative” and she describes women in Bangladeshi advertising as a “commodity” (Giti Ara Nasrin 2006, pp.164-165). Furthermore, Susmita Chakrabarty describes how women are being used as sexual objects in a supplementary of a daily newspaper entitled “*naksha*” (Chakrabarty 2006, pp. 171-184).

Chowdhury (2006) and Haque (2006) demonstrate that academics and women’s organizations such as *Narigrontho Probortona*, (Gender in Media Forum) or *Nari Sangbadik Kendra* (Women Journalists Centre) are now vocal in protesting about advertisements for ‘Fair and Lovely’, a skin-whitening cream, produced by the multinational company Unilever in Bangladesh. The allegations against the product are twofold. Firstly, it increases racial discrimination by suggesting that whiteness is more desirable. Secondly Hydroquinine is used in this product, which is associated with increased risk of skin cancer and skin diseases (Chowdhury 2006, p. 1 and Haque 2006, p.1).

The above literature review suggests that the media plays an important role in shaping gender identity in the society and plays a role in positioning women’s status. Some of these works also consider the consequences of this kind of manifestation in society.

The present study uses the insights and critical theories of some contemporary theorists from interdisciplinary traditions of post colonialist and feminist thought to bear against a third interdisciplinary arena—media studies. Since this kind of analysis does not easily fit

into any traditional disciplinary framework, the methodology of the present study is a complex one, and embraces both empirical and critical-theoretical approaches. The following theoretical approaches aid in understanding and decoding the meanings of advertisements.

John Berger famously suggested that in art and advertising, “men act and women appear”. He explains that “men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at. This turns her into an object – an object of vision or a sight” (Berger 1972, p. 47). Women’s bodies are continually constructed and reconstructed. Laura Mulvey states that as material objects, women’s bodies are “to be looked at” (Mulvey 1975 in Bartkowski and Kolmar 2005, p. 299). Mulvey and Ann Kaplan differently demonstrate that dominance or submission structures affect women’s images where they figure as passive objects of male desire (Kaplan 1983 pp. 315-20, Mulvey 1984 pp. 361-66 cited in Petersen 1997, p. 50). Women are displayed as sexual objects and are viewed through erotic spectacle: “from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, She holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey 1975 in Bartkowski and Kolmar 2005, p. 299). Women then are subject to the ‘male gaze’. The notion of the ‘male gaze’ is an important deconstructive tool in the interpretation of signs which carry discriminatory codes of gender.

The study uses this ‘male gaze’ concept and extends its circumference from male to female and even to animals when they, as viewers of a woman in a commercial, become the bearers of the look. Images are constructed in commercials in such a way that viewing is always gendered: even when women look at these images, they are seeing them from a ‘male’ point of view. Viewers are (implicitly) always men.

In his book, *Gender Advertisements*, Erving Goffman suggests that advertisements are ‘multivocal’ or ‘polysemic’, meaning that they may bear more than one piece of social information (Goffman 1979, p. 2), which may include codes of gender order in society. Although Goffman’s analysis focuses on print advertisements, television commercials, which also rely on the interaction of signs, images and verbal messages can be analysed using Goffman’s idea.

Butler sees gender as both produced and performative. She argues that “if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse” (Butler 1990, p. 136). This production is performative. Butler says that gender performativity is not only about speech acts but also about bodily acts. The relation between the speech and bodily acts is a complicated one, which she calls ‘chiasmus’. For Butler speech has a bodily component – speech is produced by people with bodies. Interpellating speech has corporeal effects – speech acts have such profound determinative effects that they can literally, corporeally, wound people: “words enter the limbs . . . bend the spine . . . live and thrive in and as the flesh of the addressee” (Butler 1997, p.159). Following Lacan and Shoshana Felman’s views, she asserts that “the body gives rise to language, that language carries bodily aims and performs bodily deeds that are not always understood by those who use language to accomplish certain conscious aims (Butler 2004, p. 198).” The ‘chiasmus’ she refers to, then, is the gap between the bodily acts and the speech acts, aims and deeds. The study judges gender performativity in commercials from the bodily acts, speech acts (jingles, dialogue, voiceovers), and the gaps between them.

These theoretical frameworks will be employed to understand and analyse women's secondary positioning in advertisements. For constructions and representations of race and nation, Stuart Hall's definition and description will be used. Furthermore, the writing of Aileen Morteen-Robinson and others will be used to identify racial discrepancies in commercials.

The study will investigate some Code of Ethics and Laws enacted to regulate representations of sexism and racism in Australian and Bangladeshi commercials. According to the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), the Code of Ethics aim to ensure that advertisements are legal, decent, honest and truthful and that they have been prepared with a sense of obligation to the consumer and society and a fair sense of responsibility to competitors. In section two, the code states that "Advertisements shall not portray people or depict material in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability or political belief" (AANA 2006, p.1).

Bangladesh regulates advertisements through the legal framework. Law for banning obscene content in advertisements was enacted in 1963 (Act no.12) for printing media (Mass Line media centre, pp.33-35). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the government by President's Order on September 13, 1972 (Order No 115 of 1972), took over the Pakistan Television Corporation Limited and named it Bangladesh Television. Article 9 of the Order provided that "The Government shall manage and administer the affairs of the undertaking vested in it under Article 4 in such manner as it deems fit." On May 24, 1986, the President by an Ordinance (Ord.

No. XXXII of 1986) established the National Broadcasting Authority (NBA) bringing both radio and television under its administrative control. This Authority consisted of a chairman and members who regulate standards for advertisements (Mazumder 2005, p.1).

According to the draft of *Bangladesh Broadcasting Act 2003*, an advertisement “means any public announcement intended to promote the sale, purchase or rental of a product or service, to advance a cause or idea or to bring about some other effect desired by the advertiser, for which broadcasting time has been given up to the advertiser for remuneration or similar consideration.” This draft provides all rules and regulations for programs and advertisements of broadcast services, including terrestrial, satellite and cable. Advertisers must keep sexual conduct and violence within accepted boundaries to promote tolerance and respect for religious and ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged group and to respect religious views. According to this draft, there are penalties such as losing the broadcast license and going to court if advertisers breach the code. The Authority may order the termination of that broadcasting activity, a fine and/or the confiscation of the equipment used in the illegal activity (BNNRC 2006, p. 1). However, this is still in the process of being enacted by Bangladesh government (GKP 2006, p.1).

Now that relevant background literature, theoretical context, code and ethics regarding commercials in both countries have been introduced, it is time to put them to work. The next chapter begins the task of analysing gendered representations in Australian and Bangladeshi television advertising.