MISREPRESENTATION OF NON NORMATIVE FEMALE IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE AND VICTIMIZATION OF FAT IDENTITIES: A POWERFUL TOOL OF BIOPOWER

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Abstract

Foucault's definition of power say's that, power is something which is constructed, difficult to resist, pervasive and normalizing force, one which often works both through and within the body, making it a central site of power. By the very concept of biopower what Foucault has in his mind are the diverse methods used to or rather aim to discipline, control and regulate the body. The rationale behind the use of various techniques of biopower such as normalization is that it works in the best interests of the population whether that interest relates to health, well being or lifestyle. Normality is held as the ideal and the aim of the normalizing techniques is to produce individuals who have internalized the discipline and thus became normal. One of the key weapons used by biopower nowadays is media which has a wide reach. Media propagates the hegemonic ideologies, discourses and practices of the society. Media plays the key role in promoting the so called normality established by the society. Unrealistic portrayal of women in media texts deals with the woman's body as a spectacle. This marketing techniques employed by the media to attract more audience thus create negative impact on young women. Young women, influenced by certain body images shown in films and advertisements, believe that being thin is the only way to be beautiful. The discrepancy between media image and the real life image lead these young women to resort to undesirable ways of dieting and exercise.

Keyword: Biopolitics, biopower

1.INTRODUCTION

Under the light of the theories put forwarded by Foucault and his notion of power and to be more specific, those of biopower and biopolitics. Human body is entangled in different power structures. Hegemonic understanding of body along with the role played by the discursive and other practices plays a key role in determining the normalcy of human body. Foucault's, explanation of power is that, it is a network of power relationships that work through discourse and hegemonic knowledge. For him power is not just having power-over something. Whereas Foucault concept of power is that it is constructive, difficult to resist, pervasive and normalizing force, one which often works both through and within the body, making it a central site of power. Not only is normalization one of the effects of power: the exercising of power is also "normalized" as it is often hidden inside institutions and everyday discourses and practices.

By the very concept of biopower what Foucault has in his mind are the diverse methods used to or rather aim to discipline, control and regulate the body. And this biopower is implemented by the use of two technologies and they are disciplinary power and regulatory power. The rationale behind the use of various techniques of biopower such as normalization is that it works in the best interests of the population whether that interest relates to health, well being or lifestyle.

Biopower draws from and produces normalization and exclusion. And the ultimate aim of disciplinary power is

to create "normality" as defined by the hegemonic discourse. Normality is held as the ideal and the aim of the normalizing techniques is to produce individuals who have internalized the discipline and thus became normal. Biopower, therefore, infers a sophisticated means of controlling the body, increased surveillance, disciplining and the creation of a self-disciplined individual who strives for and is rewarded for normalcy. As Foucault says, "the goal is to create "docile bodies" that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 180-182). This kind of project requires careful and constant observation of the body, the setting of boundaries for undesirable and desirable body forms, the determination of what is an acceptable body, or range of acceptable bodies is. The popular method used by biopower to expand and implement its objectives is media.

Unrealistic portrayal of women in media texts deals with the representation of woman's body as a spectacle. Media is strongly criticized for reproducing and extolling representations of unrealistic female figures. As a result young women, influenced by certain body images shown in films and advertisements, believe that being thin is beautiful. The discrepancy between media image and the real life image lead these young women to resort to undesirable ways of dieting and exercise which is viewed as a serious medical problem across the world. The dissatisfaction of body image starts almost at the age of fourteen in girls and it is often associated with disorderly eating patterns at the vital period of physical development. Film and advertisements increasingly focus on woman's looks and grooming. And disproportionate body images of women are often objects of fun and ridicule. This in turn, creates artificial standards for young college girls. Worldwide surveys have produced consistent evidence that a thin body is associated with personal, professional and social success. This impression is nurtured by the media texts which may not reflect the real life situation in multicultural societies of third world countries. Thus, in almost all media texts such as films, advertisements, beauty pageants and women's magazines, the norms of feminine beauty emphasize the ideal of slender body, which the media consumers across cultures try to follow. Thus media creates a kind of make-believe situation by provoking non- western societies to imitate western models. These overt representations of the idealized slender female form have harmful consequences for the self- perception of women who do not see themselves as complying with the stereotypes of feminine beauty. "Certainly cultural beauty in relation to body shape is promulgated to a significant degree through visual/verbal media texts" (Wykes and Gunter: 206). Women feature in media texts more often as slender and sexy. The female body is a spectacle, it is something to be looked at whether real or mediated: it is looked through in the search for female identity. (Wykes and Gunter: 206). The argument that media causes eating disorders assumes not only that representations misrepresent but they inscribe directly women to train and shape and modify their bodies to conform to what very clearly are impossible ideals.

It is basically, the patriarchal dominance of the family that influences the media industries to represent the male ideal of female appearances and the roles of the women. Besides, it is not only the media industry that describes and determines the image of women's bodies but also other industries such as fashion, beauty, fiction and even finance, all of which are aspects of the dominant capitalist culture. We are increasingly made to live in a 'publicity saturated culture' which is referred to as 'information blizzard' by Baudrillard (1983). By this term, he means that in this culture, the images and the messages refer to each other rather than to any external reality. He further states that the gap between and reality is so significantly wide that "we are living in a society of excrescence, that is, that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives" (Baudillard, quoted by Wykes and Gunter). Innumerable signals and messages are being produced and transmitted by the modern mass media within short time that they never acquire any meaning and significance for the people involved. In this process of bombarding the spectators with so many images the print and visual media across the world endeavor to sell themselves by selling sex and slenderness. Women, as a part of this business continue to feature as promoting these two aspects of feminity. Increasingly, the woman can survive as a model in advertisements as long as she maintains her size, shape and adheres to the style preferred by men. Companies sell their product by advertising the body image of the woman. Consequently, she is promoted from the status of a model to that of a heroine on the silver screen (obviously

not by her histrionic talent) to flirt with the hero and make a large income. No doubt, women have a right to work, earn and at the same time be sexually liberated but it is unfortunate that she has to do it only to construct herself as desirable to men. In this process, they use their earnings to buy the beauty as well as the body, represented by the media. Hence, both women's sexuality and earning power, which satisfy the liberated sensibilities of the female audience, are to a large extent, controlled by the common interests of patriarchy and capitalism, which are exploited by the media to the full. Women are buying their gender identity but it is described in accordance with the masculinity at the heart of patriarchy and the corporate power of the beauty industry. The message is that to become a popular and rich star, women must have the kind of look which allures men. Research shows stereotyping of women by media significantly affects the minds of young women and if they are not thin and slender then it increases their dissatisfaction with their own identity and worth. The dominance of body aesthetics correlated with sex, success and money in the commercial world of film and advertising is affecting the way young girls think about their career in the world of fashion, beauty and fame.

Studies on TV/ film-viewing audience show that glamorous body representations have greater impact on women spectators than on men. Moreover, it is the nature (quality, context and type) of the films/programs. Which is more significant in affecting the young women's minds towards a thin body image rather than the amount of exposure to these texts? The abundant focus on size and shape especially in the case of film heroines sideline other aspects of a woman's personality such as histrionics, facial expressions, adaptability and the like which are more important terms of evaluation and comparison. In this whole scenario, what appears to be incontrovertible is that young college girls under the influence of the media sometimes react more negatively towards themselves by following unscrupulous eating habits, while the adult women exhibit a more holistic sense of self-identity. In urban middle class societies obsession with weight is increasingly growing in the young girls. Many slimming centers charging exorbitant prices have cropped up, alluring young and middle aged women. Hence the media representation of female body image is very narrow and one-sided and exploits weak and psychologically disturbed young girls. In short, these images are politically oppressive and commercially exploitative.

The mass media's representation of womanhood sets limits and controls on the woman's individuality and the value assigned to them, by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable. This leads us to an important realization – that in reality, nothing has changed since the time of the second-wave feminism, other than perhaps what is indicated by legislation. In conclusion it seems that although women are competing with men, they are still over burdened by a sex saturated culture in which almost everything is measured according to physical appearance.

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