
UNIT 3 MASS MEDIA AND GENDER

Contents

- 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Understanding Mass Media
 - 3.3 Locating the Linkages between Mass Media and Gender
 - 3.4 Gender Stereotypes
 - 3.5 Anthropology of Media
 - 3.6 A Feminist Critique of Mass Media
 - 3.7 Summary
- References
Suggested Reading
Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- the interfaces between culture and mass media in terms of (re)producing certain notions on gender and shaping gender relations in contemporary societies;
- a basic understanding of mass media with its definitions, characteristics, meaning and scope;
- key issues like; what makes the study of mass media relevant to students and teachers of anthropology;
- the linkages between the concept of gender and mass media;
- the cultural implications of gender stereotyping in the mass media texts of our time;
- how “the audience” is constructed and look into the possible ways in which we can interpret the content and meaning of media representations; and
- finally a feminist critique on the production and representation of gendered images in mass media.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As we live in a world that is “media saturated”, it is apt to say that no one can escape the influence of mass media. Media exercise enormous influence and power in unprecedented ways in our everyday lives. People are exposed to the multiple forms and contents of the media as most of them spend a considerable amount of time in watching television, films and videos or reading newspapers, magazines or listening to music and surfing the Net. And by doing so, most people actively take part in constructing a media culture or cultures, since human capacities to speak, think, form relationships with others and the sense of creating ones own identity are now largely shaped by the media. Marshal McLuhan claims

that the media made the world into a “global village”. Now we are familiar with a range of countries, regions and cultures and the issues and lived experiences of the people of these cultural landscapes (Knightley 1975). The mass media—particularly the visual media and television—has become “the cultural epicenter” of our world (Castells 1996).

The terms “mediation and “media” derive from the Latin “*medius*”e “middle”—assumes two or more poles of engagement. The following discussion will explore the different dimensions of such mediations as part of mass communication, media production and consumption and will underline the crucial linkages with the notions on gender.

3.3 UNDERSTANDING MASS MEDIA

The idea of “the mass” can be understood as a larger public in a very general way. Raymond Williams argued that there were no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses (Williams 1964). In this sense the terms such as “mass society” and ‘mass public” can be artificial constructions that serves the purpose of undifferentiating and homogenising people into a singular category called “the masses”. This notion of homogeneity became more compelling in the early part of the twentieth century with the growth of the mass production and the mass media. This has created a large group of people who consumed almost the same products such as films, music and other common consumer goods. The notion of mass culture became a coiner to these economic and social events of simultaneous consumption of cultural and economic goods.

A medium is a means for communication such as print, radio or television. In this wider sense, mass media are defined as large scale organisations which use one or more of those technologies to communicate with large numbers of people. Historically speaking, the period between 1860 and 1930 was crucial in the formative moment and growth of mass media with the innovations in electronic technology and in chemical industry. The introduction and development of photography, cinema, cable telegraphy, wireless telegraphy, phonograph, radio and television made the mass media industry a powerful cultural entity through which a range of cultural meanings were produced and exchanged.

As mass media rules the modern social life and cultures, there needs to generate an intense academic interest among those who are trying to study culture. Early scholars on media like Paul Lazarsfeld and others seemed to show that media effects are direct and powerful. But most recent research revealed that mass communication is mediated in complex ways and its effects on the audience depend on factors such as class, gender, social context, race, emotional state of individuals and the time of experience among the many more culturally related issues. In short, the relationship between mass media and society is a complex one.

Television, videos, films, radio, newspapers, magazines, comics are all cultural products. Cultural products are different from mundane and material products in the sense they serve as vehicles of meanings, values and ideas and also work as a form of communication. But cultural products like industrial products also need consumers. So there is a constant thirst for novelty in the field of cultural production as mass media need a large number of consumers. Mass media thus

constantly work towards innovation in terms of what is produced, how it is produced and what do these products mean to people.

Mediation refers to the act of bringing together two parties (with the intervention of a third party) by the provision of some form of link in order to convey a message or to provide agreement or reconciliation. A process involved in the channeling of social knowledge and cultural values through an institutional agency to an audience (O'Sullivan et al 1994). In this sense mediation is more than a third party intervention, rather its form and nature of intervention and how does it shape the ways of communication becomes key concerns. In what ways newspapers, radio and television produce common ways of knowing the world? Once the processes and technologies of mediation are subjected to analysis, the ideologies of the media can be exposed.

Studies on mass media, especially on television as the most pervasive medium, has enormously expanded in the second half of the twentieth century (McQuail 1994). There are four major distinct areas that can be observed in studying media and they are:

- 1) Media content studies, concerned with the cultural character of media output. This can include the process of stereotyping, biased contents that can promote violence or anti-social behaviour and such effects especially on children.
- 2) The question of ownership and control; especially on the increasing concentration of media production into a few numbers of large corporations and the commercialisation of programming.
- 3) Ideological impact of mass media in promoting a total pattern of life and culture.
- 4) The media practice of agenda setting, distortion and reduction of information.

While connecting media universe with its social and cultural context, the concerns over the issues of democracy, access, social class and gender representations and the emergence of a new public sphere need to be centered for discussion. In order to understand the social make-up of the media text and the media markets, certain key questions can be raised such as: who owns the media? Whose news gets broadcasted? Who all get access? Who are the people often unable to express their voices in the new means of representation? In what ways particular people and cultures are represented?

3.3 LOCATING THE LINKAGES BETWEEN MASS MEDIA AND GENDER

Why Study Media and Gender? In what ways these two are related?

The media becomes significant in its power to represent 'socially acceptable' ways of being or relating to others and its potential to negotiate and produce public recognition, honour and status to groups of people is immense. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner note that in the 1860s, feminists in the UK and USA who were arguing for more progressive and egalitarian definitions of womanhood complained bitterly that the newspapers and magazines of the day either ridiculed or ignored women's lived experiences.

It was during the ‘second wave’ of the women’s movement in the 1960s that systematic research into media images of women flourished. Almost immediately, feminist scholars and activists started examining how women were being portrayed in a wide array of media texts- including cinema, videos, prime-time television dramas, newspapers, pornography, magazines, popular music, advertising and soap operas. The objective was to problematise the media enculturation through anti-women and sexist content that made hierarchical and binary sex-role stereotypes into ‘natural’ and ‘normal’.

Critical forms of feminist scholarship in the 1970s took a critical turn by examining the ways in which media representations supported the interests of the twin systems: patriarchy and capitalism. A critical and productive concept informing some of this research was that of ideology and hegemony. According to Antonio Gramsci (1971), the notion of hegemony presents an explanation of how and why ‘dominant’ classes in society have to constantly renegotiate their powerful positions in relations to the ‘subordinated’ classes. To maintain control and power, these élites have to rule by winning public consent, rather than maintaining their control through coercion or repression. When the hegemonic and ideological ways of being of the powerful are naturalised and made to seem ‘normal’, they are presented to everyone as if no other explanations are possible, thus producing the larger “common sense”.

As Carter and Steiner rightly note “the media are instrumental in the processes of gaining public consent. Media texts never simply mirror or reflect ‘reality’, but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as ‘reality’ (Carter and Steiner 2004). The contents and representations in the media appear to be inevitable, ‘real’ and commonsensical. Thus, media images align with the interests of powerful groups in society. Feminists have redeployed the notion of hegemony in order to argue that most women cannot see how patriarchal values are culturally translated to appear as ‘non-ideological’, ‘objective’, ‘natural’ and ‘non-gendered’.

As we have discussed previously, though sex and gender are not synonymous, they are closely related. Conventionally, the term “sex” has long been used to refer to the biological differences (male and female) while the term “gender” is used to refer to the socially and culturally acquired behaviours and roles (feminine and masculine). Recent debates on sexuality and identity have re-defined sex and gender as existing along a continuum rather than in terms of dichotomous polar opposites as male/female or masculine/feminine (Butler 1990).

As sex and gender get re-defined in different ways according to historical, political and socio-cultural contexts, such productions, reproductions and counter-productions of ideas on those concepts are placed in the media texts for reception. Media act as powerful agents of constructing and representing gender. Both print and visual media, television in particular, are arenas for constructing stable notions of gender through an act of stereotyping. Though the notions of masculinity and femininity vary in different cultural contexts, the media images on these concepts tend to homogenise them in their representative modes and meanings.

Margaret Mead, drawing from her ethnographic studies in Samoa (1928) and New Guinea (1930), has explained that what is understood as masculinity and femininity varies across cultures. In other words, not only do different societies

identify a certain set of characteristics as feminine and another set as masculine, but also, these characteristics are not the same across different cultures. Thus, feminists have empirically demonstrated that there is no essential co-relation between the biology of men and women and the features and behaviours that are thought to be masculine and feminine. In fact the enculturation process has a greater impact on molding children to appropriate such gender-specific forms of behaviour, action, clothing and so on. Socialisation often works as subtle, hidden and at the level of ideology. Enculturation designs bravery, aggression and confidence as “masculine”, and modesty, sensitivity and shyness as “feminine” and the value that society attributes to them, are produced by a range of institutions; and media performs a key role in socialising boys and girls differently along the lines of such norms and values.

Women’s role in the media industry and their level of participation is one of the major areas of concern. Several studies find the inferior positions and low ranked jobs that women are assigned within the domain of media industry worldwide. Ann Ross Muir (1988) argues that if women are confined to the lower-paid and lower-status positions within the media industry, then there are fewer possibilities for them to influence the content and representation and work against the stereotyping of women. She adds that most television content exhibit a masculine point of view since men dominate and control the industry (Muir 1988).

Drawing from the industrial relationships in media, Stott and Steiner observe that although the working conditions for women journalists has considerably improved in the last few decades, historically women have been desperately aware that majority of their male colleagues doubted their capability to perform ‘serious’ journalism merely because they were women. Some even believed that any woman journalist who became successful did so basically through her sexual availability (Carter and Steiner 2004). This biased view still prevails among many reporters and editors and producers in the media industry across the world.

If we look at the participation of women in television industry, we can see most of the the television industries worldwide are dominated by men (UNESCO 1987). It can be a reflection of gender relations in other streams of life in which women are mostly confined to home. This dominant cultural pattern had a significant impact on the gender configuration in the television industry as predominantly men centered. In the early years of television, there were very few women occupying prestigious position of higher authority and power. The recent decades witnessed certain changes in bringing more awareness towards gender equality in the mass media industries. Television now provides a range of opportunities for women. However, the crucial question remains on the production of gender sensitive content of the media texts. Is there any major shift in the gender stereotyping in the content of television? It may be premature to understand gender equality in the domain of mass media parallel with the increase in women’s participation as media professionals. The relationship between patterns of employment within television organisations and televisual representations are differently located in terms of explaining gender equality. We then need to raise a crucial question; if the presence of more number of women does not correspond with any major shift in organising the content of programme, then what goes wrong? Statistics reveal that in most of the mass media industries across the globe, women are not able to occupy major decision making positions in comparison with men.

Van Zoonen's work on feminism and journalism (1989) shows a clear mismatch between institutional norms and individual intentions in the production of media content. Women journalist who espoused feminist ethics found that although such ideas were included in their training, it seems difficult to apply those ideas in an institutional setting. The organisational socialisation puts tremendous pressures to get back to conventional ideas on gender and as a result of such continuous imposition; women tend to perceive these patterns as 'normal' and thus taken for granted.

Women in Media Industry

In Britain, the 1975 enquiry into equal opportunities carried out by the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians within the industry showed that the position of women had not improved but had deteriorated since the 1950s, when women represented 18 percent of the workforce in Television. By 1975, the figure decreased to 15 percent, with women concentrated in areas such as costume, make-up and production secretary, with very few in technical production roles. In 1986, figures by ITCA (Independent Television Companies Association) found out that out of 306 cameramen (*sic*) only 12 were women; of 269 sound technicians, 8 were women and of 1,395 engineers, 19 were women (Muir 1988). Monica Simms' survey of the BBC in 1985, revealed similar findings. Looking at the BBC top grades, she found that 169 were men while only 6 were women. The BBC today has vastly improved its equal opportunities policy, but even so very few women make it to the top.

Source: Casey et al. 2004. *Key Concepts in Television Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

3.4 GENDER STEREOTYPES

In this section, we will begin with the concept of representation in order to get into the idea of stereotyping. Every human communication contains "signs". A sign can be identified with three basic characteristics. Firstly, a sign has a concrete form. Secondly a sign refers to something other than itself. In other words, anything that tells us about something other than itself is a sign. Thirdly, a sign can be recognised by most people in a society. The physical form (verbal or figural image) of the sign can be called "signifier". The mental association of the sign or what it refers to, can be known as "signified". The process, and products, that give particular meanings to a sign is called representation. The concept of representation is central to the study of media and culture. By understanding the modes and meanings of representation, we can explore the questions of power and ideology. As a term that is frequently used in media studies "representation" or "to represent" can mean the ways of depicting or presenting something for an audience to read or consume. Since an unmediated "real world" cannot be accessible, re-presentation makes mediation possible to reach the audience with different versions of the world. So what we see in television, hear in the radio or read in the newspaper will be a construction, involving decisions about the selection of the content, the placement of the camera, editing the material and so on.

Another way of looking at the concept of representation is the ways in which media images lead us to make sense of cultural symbols. This can further lead to an understanding of how different social groups are often depicted in media

texts and how does stereotyping of certain cultural groups and people take place. Media representations thus can be understood as a reflection of reality or maybe a distortion of something “real” or “true”. This implicates our interest to look at how far media images are true to that reality or how far the media distort the reality in order to reproduce certain ideologies. In the various ways of re-presenting the “real”, media texts often get into a consistent form of construction, which makes certain social groups into a fixation; what we call the process of stereotyping. For instance, women are often depicted or seen mainly in limited range of roles such as housewives, girlfriends or secretaries, and in the case of some ethnic minorities, the representation can be predominantly in the roles of terrorists, criminals or servants (in the case of Muslims and Black people). Some scholars argue that the immediate and sharply contrasted reversal of stereotypes as part of media ethics will not serve the purpose. This is because of the complex nature of relationship between representation and reality. One cannot easily recognise what is real and what is representation. So we need to look at various instances of stereotypical representations in order to uncover the issue “who represent whom?” Richard Dyer talks about the importance of looking at the concept of “pleasure” in this regard (Dyer 1985). Who is getting pleasure out of experiencing a media text? Or what kind of pleasure a media text can offer by particular ways of representation and who are the target audience to those representations? Do audience members all get pleasure from media content in the same way? Given the social differences in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientations, it is unlikely that all viewers, readers and listeners would be equally at ease with the modes of representation. Representations are produced and circulated in a social context of meanings in relation with power and ideology. This commonsense of meanings is governed by power which projects certain meanings as positive and denigrates some others.

Stuart Hall invites a question that we need to ask beyond the old notion—that representations are reflections or distortions of something real—and to center the issue whether events in the world really do have a single and essential fixed meaning that is “true” against which distortion could be measured (Hall 1997). In other words, reality has no fixed meaning until it has been represented and particular representation and their meaning are subject to change over space and time. In Hall’s understanding, what we call ‘reality’ does not exist outside of the process of representation (Hall 1997).

Similarly, the concept of sign took a significant turn in Baudrillard’s writing. He has argued that while living with postmodernity, people largely experience and live in a mass-media-produced blizzard of signs. People struggle to distinguish and separate reality from representation with the infinity of signs in the visual and new media texts that form a ‘hyper-reality’.

Stereotypes are some sort of a standard fixation of characteristics attributed to persons, groups and cultures. The term derived from the Greek term “stereos” means solid and “typos” means mark. Walter Lippmann, an American journalist of the early twentieth century developed the concept in his book “public opinion” (Lippmann 1922). Lippmann finds two crucial aspects of stereotypes. Firstly, stereotypes tend to be resistant to change; second, they generally carry a pejorative and narrow range of meanings (O’Sullivan et al 1994). Stereotypes are theoretically identified as inaccurate and simplistic generalisations about individuals or groups or particular cultures. However, most mass media texts

continue to make stereotypical representations. Stereotypes and stereotyping are products and processes that are linked with power and ideologies. Tessa Perkins (1979) observes that stereotypes can often represent certain real social relations and they may be partial, but not necessarily false. So the relationship between stereotypes and social reality is a complex one. For instance, the depiction of women in inferior roles need not necessarily read as a text that tends to reproduce women's inferior status in the society. On the contrary many cultural commentators have argued that media texts construct and perpetuate stereotypes, and there is evidence to support this view.

Who produces stereotypes about whom? This leads to a discussion on the question of representing the other. Who is the other? The representative entity that is situated ones own self (outside ones own gender, race, class, religious and ethnic identities) is "the other". In most instances the construction of the other turns out to be the construction of "the inferior other" by the dominant individuals and groups in the society. How othering is produced in media texts in the form of stereotyping? What is the relationship between media and the existence of stereotypes? The role of the media in agenda setting, gate-keeping and ownership continue to be crucial in the persistence or relegation of stereotypes.

In Indian cinema industries, ranging from Bollywood to all south Indian industries, there is a widespread pattern of stereotyping the image of the female protagonist. There is a notion of homogenising the physical appearance and mental attitudes of women who perform the lead role in Indian cinema. Women were seen as readers of 'inferior literature, subjective, emotional and passive, while men emerge as writers of genuine authentic literature - objective, and in control of their aesthetic means'.

Grose observes the *Sun* Newspaper's visible culture of sex that invaded every part of the paper, including the pages it has from time to time made exclusively for women. In the paper's own version of its history: "The *Sun* called its women's pages filled them with sex. They were produced by women for women. But they were subtitled "The pages for women that men can't resist", acknowledging that there are plenty of topics that fascinate both men and women, like sex" (Carter and Steiner 2004).

Grose's observation can be located within the pages of many magazines that are written by women for women. It shows how women themselves inadvertently collude in the construction of stereotypes. What messages are such magazines trying to send to their readers? Women's magazines tend to fall into mainly two categories: firstly those concerned with home making and child care. The second type concerned with providing important tips to marketing themselves to catch a mate. This division itself makes both categories into a problematic dualism in which the first category of women represent the characters which are homely, pure, chaste, maternal and modest. On the other hand the second category of women stands for the features of amoral, sexual, sinful and danger. These dualism can be observed in most of the Indian films in which there is a presence of two female protagonists—one traditional "Indian woman" who represents the first category (who often becomes triumphant in the competition to win the male protagonist's heart) and the modern/western woman who represent the second category, a symbol of danger that threatens the "Indian Culture".

Heather Gilmour, in her study on computer games, argues that most computer software now being developed for girls helps reproduce hierarchical gender difference between boys and girls rather than challenging the power structures. She observes that in most computer games, ‘girls continue to be essentialised as emotional, highly social, modest and soft-spoken while males are defined as competitive and technologically inclined’ (Gilmour, 1994).

Such assumptions about gender distinctions are not based on any essential differences between boys and girls, but instead illustrate the ‘ideologies and assumptions of researchers and developers’. Having surveyed 180 students (90 boys and 90 girls) about their genre preferences, Gilmour found that the differences between boy and girl gamers are primarily matters of ‘cultural gendering of leisure and play’, rather than inherent biological differences. While game software developers address girls as a homogeneous, gendered group, girls maintain certain heterogeneity of game preference and use. Gilmour urges on computing experts to go beyond conventional notions of femininity as a monolithic category that inevitably work to restrict feminine behaviour, pleasure and self-definition (Gilmour, 2004).

Gender and Game Shows

Looking at the male dominance in the participation and ownership in the mass media industry, Chaudhuri explains the relationship between the male supremacy in the industry and the masculine nature of representation. Examining game shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* She argues that women are far less likely to apply to be contestants, are less likely to be chosen and are less likely to win large prizes. This observation corresponds with the fact that most programs of this kind are produced, presented and compiled by men. Presumably, most questions asked in such contests have a male orientation. Women contestants may be treated differently from men. So we can argue that even though there is an increase in the employment level and participation of women in the media industry, the larger culture of the industry continued to be masculinist and this eventually make an impact on the mode of representation and shaping the content overwhelmingly masculine in nature.

Source: Chaudhuri, A, 1999. *Who Wants to be a Quiz Show Contestant?* Guardian, 29 November.

3.5 ANTHROPOLOGY OF MEDIA

Anthropology’s role as the self appointed interpreter and representative of the cultural “others” has been dwindled and it was replaced by the global media agencies in the recent decades. The ethnographic accounts that provided knowledge about different non-Western cultures and communities around the world give away a major share of such production to the mass media industry. Anthropologists have been displaced to a certain extent by the big media like CNN, BBC, Hollywood and other global media in the making of ethnography and (re)presenting the “unfamiliar” cultures. In a technology-mediated era, an anthropological subject like marriage has its location more in the internet in terms of arranging negotiations. Countless marriage alliances are channeled through the space of the web. Anthropology in its desire to understand cultures,

thus cannot escape the media as it is one of the significant aspects of contemporary social life.

Against this backdrop, anthropology finds its own analytical space to understand these developments through an emergent subfield known as Anthropology of Media. Among other things, Anthropology of Media engages the readers in an anthropological critique of how mass media are employed to construct and represent cultures (Askew and Wilk 2002). The strength of anthropology lies in its concern with people and their lived experiences. Anthropology of Media is concerned with certain key questions; firstly what meanings do people construct out of mass mediated images and sounds? How do they negotiate embedded ideologies and power politics? What new forms of social interactions have media technologies enabled and how are existing social formations transformed? How are conceptions of space and time altered through the influence of the media? Media anthropology thus comprises ethnographically informed, historically grounded and context sensitive analysis of the ways in which people use and make sense of media (Askew and Wilk, 2002).

As interpretive and symbolic anthropology developed as significant subfields in anthropological inquiry in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the question of the production of meaning became central to anthropological concern. Clifford Geertz was one of the champions of this school of thought. Geertz argued that culture is a system of symbols in which meanings are produced and exchanged in multiple ways. The most influential aspect of Geertz's work has been his emphasis on the importance of the symbolic — of systems of meaning — as it relates to culture, cultural change, and the study of culture. According to Geertz, anthropological analysis of culture has to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. Crucially, Geertz compares the methods of an anthropologist analysing culture to those of a literary critic analysing a text; in fact this methodological turn suggest the way of looking at culture as understanding a mediated text (Geertz 1973). This methodological position in ethnography has brought anthropology and media studies in a common analytical ground.

In the 1970s, the focus on the power of the media texts to shape cultural values, behaviour and attitude was subsequently taken up by British cultural studies scholars like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, David Morley, John Fiske, Ien Ang and so on. Earlier, scholars like Powdermaker, Adorno and others concentrated on the idea of production of the media text in relation with power and ideology. The turn towards cultural studies opened up a window to explore media reception in more nuanced ways. Cultural studies scholars questioned and challenged the assumption of unambiguous, unilineal and single dimensional transmission of media messages directly from producers to consumers. The question of power and control remained central to their analysis. However, power no longer was understood as monopolised entirely or exclusively by media producers. Informed by the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Jaques Derrida and others, cultural studies scholars attributed some measure of power to the acts of viewing and listening, the power of the audience to manipulate the text. They reconceptualised the audience members into active subjects rather than automate regulators. This can be seen as an extension of the reader-centered approach adopted in literary criticism. Media audience members were thus elevated to a level above that of passive receptacle. Rather than mere consumers

of the media texts, audiences were recognised as active participants in the production of meaning. However, Stuart Hall and Laura Mulvey refer to the media producers' arena of strategies in constructing the content when it concerns with identities like ethnicity, gender, race and class. With the application of a wide range of strategies such as stereotyping, naturalising, reductionism, binary opposition, erasure, fantasy, fetishism and so on, that the production predisposes and guides the audience to a reading that favour existing power structures (Hall 1981, Mulvey 1989).

Getting back to the domain of anthropological inquiry, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson championed the use of camera (both still and moving) in their study on the Balinese culture and personality in the 1930s. Cultural documentation in the visual form became a key ethnographic practice. Anthropology in its positivist orientation claimed to be a "value-free science" which remained a theoretical illusion. This is partly because of the unavoidable selection the anthropologist has to make among a variety of cultural events. So in a way, looking back or revisiting the early ethnographic representation, one has to look at the text exactly like a mediated content what Geertz has rightly suggested.

However, understanding mass media from a feminist perspective within the discipline of anthropology has a very recent birth. In fact, gender was not a major concern in classical anthropological writings. The early ethnographies were revisited by feminist scholars and problematised the texts for being highly male oriented. Feminist anthropologists like Lila Abu-Lughod, Henrietta Moore, Sherry Otner and others brought to the center the questions of gender inequality, problems of ethnographic representation, male dominance and the nature-culture dichotomy that made women the cultural inferior, as certain fundamental problems within the discipline (Otner 1974, Abu-Lughod 1986, Moore 1988).

There emerged a wide range of attempts to read the media in an ethnographic sense in the Western contexts. Studies on the Hollywood, Disneyland, Western television, popular music and internet have been flourished in academic circles in those parts of the world. However, the Indian academia is still in an early phase of producing such anthropological insights. Though scholars of journalism, mass communication, cultural studies and film studies have made certain significant contributions to media studies in India, the contribution of anthropologists is still minimal.

To mention a few notable contributions, media's perception and presentation of women's issues were discussed by Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma in their edited volume "Whose News?" In this work, certain crucial issues related to Indian women between 1979 and 1988 have been examined such as dowry-related death; rape; the right to maintenance of Muslim divorcees; the re-emergence of the practice of Sati; and sex determination tests (Joseph and Sharma 1994). Sonai Bathla made a study on the media concerns on women's political participation that figured in the news media in India during the Lok Sabha election reviews in the late 1990s (Bathla 2008). There is tremendous focus on the study of cinema in India in recent years. Sociology, film studies and cultural studies made significant contributions in the areas of television, cassette culture and cinema. Peter Manuel, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Madhava Prasad, Ravi Vasudevan, Christopher Pinney, Arvind Rajgopal, Patricia Uberoi, Jenny Rowena, Ashis Nandy, Poornima Mankekar and others are some of the key figures who have

worked on audio visual cultures, texts and representation in India. Robin Jeffrey's work on the Indian newspapers throws light on the space of print culture and its cultural dynamics (Jeffrey 2010). Since there is a significant move towards interdisciplinary perspective in anthropological research in India, the area of media analysis has been gaining momentum in the last few years.

3.6 A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MASS MEDIA

Feminist critiques on the question of representation attempt to understand how television, newspapers and other media texts stereotype, under-represent and misrepresent women's experiences. The major concern was to problematise the male dominated domain of media that needs to be subject to equal opportunities for women.

There is little doubt that feminism has been one of the most influential theoretical turn in academics, particularly on the debates on culture, for the past three to four decades. Feminism also overwhelmingly made significant influence in the area of media studies, demanding for social change and continued to resisting against the male dominated participation and representation in the media industry. As a political and academic movement that consistently threatening the status quo, feminism, to some extent (especially in male receptions), has become a "dirty" word and its ideas subject to a backlash. This is partly because of the misrepresentation of feminist ideas in the media. Moreover, in recent times, feminism has become fragmented (as it could not represent the differences within women in terms of caste, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality) and has found itself under new criticisms and some of them perceived as "from within" (Casey et al 2004).

As a political, social and academic movement and a theoretical perspective, feminism foregrounds gender as a significant and important factor of our cultural identity. Gender is regarded as a powerful mechanism that structures our material and social worlds. At particular historical junctures, there were different streams of feminist thought emerged with their own unique stand points such as Marxist, Liberal, Radical, black and dalit feminisms. However, all of them, at different levels, argued that women as a social group have been treated in a range of unfavorable ways by men as a social group in economic, political, educational and social institutions. It is important to note that feminism has seen patriarchy as not just a simple and straightforward question of individual men being oppressive or discriminatory to individual women. Feminism identifies patriarchy as embedded in our culture and social institutions and this might have an impact on individual behaviour and attitudes of men towards women. Media as a powerful institution in constructing and representing gender relations has also come under feminist scrutiny in terms of stereotyping women's lives in the media texts and women's participation in the industry.

Feminist scholars took serious interest in studying the media in the late 1960s and 70s by focusing on sexual politics, gender roles and relations. Significant works like Kate Millet's "Sexual politics" (1970) and Germaine Geer's "The Female Eunuch"(1971) provided a critique to understand issues beyond conventional forms of patriarchy and realised the new modes and structures through which patriarchy is operated (Casey et al 2004).

While the early concerns of feminist thinking tended to focus on women's relative absence in powerful positions within the media industry, in the 1970s feminist concerns were largely on the narrow range of representation of women and the negative stereotyping of their lives. In the mid 1970s, scholars like Laura Mulvey provided with a new way of thinking about the gaze, concerns with positioning of spectators to experience the film or television through male eyes. This is known as the male gaze thesis (Mulvey 1975). The approach is based on the idea that male gaze sexualises women and turns them into mere sexual objects to be looked at. Here looking is understood to involve desire, control or desire to control. The male gaze is tied up with the issues of power. Recently feminist scholarship began to look at the process of stereotyping in a more critical fashion as it is not a simple and straightforward event. The focus also went into the construction and representation of masculinity and masculine sexuality. The relation and the impact of the second aspect on the content and representation becomes a point of critique. Male camera operators, directors and producers have objectified women's bodies and limited their range of roles in which women appear.

Although gender refers to the concerns of both men and women, majority of critical writings and debates, has, until quite recently been, about women's experience and the representation of women. However, recent studies have attempted to widen the scope of gender and media studies by locating the question of representation of men, discourse of masculinity and masculine sexualities. Men, in most media text, inhabit a wider range of roles, that too in the public domains of occupation in the form of professionals, employers, labourers. They appear also in wide range of age, and also in wide range of body shapes and voice qualities. Many surveys on advertisements and programmes in television suggest that women are shown as domestic beings (as housewives or mothers) or as sexual objects or accessories to men (bodies to sell products or assistants to powerful men). The older women representation generally goes along with the notions of cruelty (in the case of mother-in-laws in Indian soaps) or subjects of fun. Women from ethnic minorities, especially dalit and dark skinned women often fail to appear in the characters of "good" or "ideal" woman, but they are mostly depicted as the "other" and as "bad" and "undesirable". Contrast to this, "normal" femininity is depicted as overwhelmingly young, slim, tall, fair skinned and heterosexually domestic. On the other hand, "normal" masculinity has often seen as less restricted and more often associated with action, power, authority and control.

The traditional association between men and sport, news and current affairs has hardly been shifted. Football commentators and their uniform voice quality has reproduced over the years a peculiar taste towards such a uniform and unique male voice that resist to a different voice whether it is of a man or a woman. The construction of an "ideal" female voice in Indian cinema corresponds to this point. Sanjay Srivastava discusses about the singing voice of Lata Mangeshkar and its representation as the "ideal" feminine voice. Lata's voice, a particular female singing voice – with its specific tonality and modulation – became an expression of gender identity in India—the ideal feminine voice, the most desirable voice of the ideal Indian woman. He argues that Lata's singing voice has instituted a very specific identity for Indian womanhood, one which has almost no precedence in traditional forms of Indian music. One music critic has noted that Lata's style has become "the ultimate measure of sweetness in a woman's voice (Srivastava, 2004). This construction and representation of the

“ideal feminine” erase the possibility of representing other heterogeneous women voices in media texts such as in Indian cinema, television and radio.

Advertisements in newspaper and in visual media have a stronger impact on shaping gender images than books on feminism and scholarly experiments on gender equality. Matlin (1987) explains how the media’s misrepresentation of women in advertisements has created plenty of stereotypical representations of women. She observes that women are often shown in a sexual or vulnerable position in order to sell the product, whether it is an advertisement for shaving cream or alcoholic beverage.

Matlin describes how the medium is an important force in shaping reality it is these stereotyped representations that help to shape women’s opinions of what they should look like. Often girls and women forget that, and become sensitised by advertisements (Carter and Steiner, 2004). We must study advertisements and their surrounding texts together; analysing the concurrent and convergent meanings they construct and circulate about the constitution of gender.

The problem with the “hot” content

Many of us, the internet users, are now caught in the web of Youtube in terms of our experience of video watching. Some scholars argue that the internet spaces, like the social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, personal blogs, and video sharing sites like the Youtube are enabling spaces for marginalised groups by offering emancipatory potentials. The basic assumption behind this argument is that everyone gets a possible space to create his or her own content that can resist and challenge the dominant and hegemonic representations. But when we look at these virtual spaces, most of their fields continue to remain with anti-women, anti-dalit and racist content. For instance, if you type any (celebrity) woman’s name in the Youtube (or any such) search box, the top most leading suggestions/options would be “hot”, “hot videos” ,and “sexy” after those particular woman’s names. But this would not happen when you try with a male name.

In a sense ranging from Arab Spring movement to the Anna Hasare campaign, social network sites like Facebook and Twitter have been a revelation in connecting with people. Recently a group of youngsters, in the name of “change.org” a portal for social change has launched an online campaign for the removal of sexually violent content in those very social networking sites like the Facebook. The group has found that there is a large amount of sexually violent content floating in such virtual spaces to demeaning women (Tejaswi, 2012).

Examining the visual spaces with reference to sexual content and pornography, Robert Jenson explores how the sexual charge is connected to the ideology of male dominance and female submission that is central in contemporary commercial pornography (Jensen, 1994). He argues that whether a pornography user feels guilt and shame or is proud of his use, the result is generally the same: the use of pornography continues to sexualise and objectifies women and reduce them into mere sexual bodies for male pleasure. He further explains with a subjective account on the effects that pornography had on him. Based on his experience, Jenson argues that:

- Pornography is an important means of sex education.
- Pornography constructs women as objects, which encourage men to see women in real life in that same way.
- Pornography creates or reinforces desires for specific acts, most of which focuses on male pleasure and can cause female pain.
- Rather than unlocking sexual creativity, pornography shapes and constrains a person’s sexual imagination with its standardised scripts.
- Race is an important aspect of pornography, reinforcing the view of women of colour as the ‘exotic primitive’.

For Jenson, the concept of authentic sexual desire is problematic; there is no pure, natural sexuality that is not mediated by culture. Here he simply contends that pornography is a force that can shape desire and that we should be concerned with how men may be conditioned to desire sexual acts that are humiliating, degrading and sometimes painful for women (Jenson, 2004).

Sources:

- 1) Tejaswi, A. 2012. “Youths Fight it Out Online”. *Decan Chronicle*, April 19, 17-19.
- 2) Jenson, R. 2004. “Knowing Pornography”. in C. Carter and L. Steiner (eds), *Critical Readings:Media and Gender*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

3.7 SUMMARY

In this unit, we have examined how gender-based social images that are transmitted through media have a powerful impact— though not straightforward and simple—on the larger cultural domain. We began with the basic understanding of the development of the mass media and the features of the media industry and the modes of representation that media perform in different contexts. The crucial linkages between media and the construction of gender were explored. The issues related to the construction and representation of masculinity and femininity in media texts were discussed with relevant examples from both Western and Indian contexts.

The nature of media industry and the occupational division between genders and the related inequalities were foregrounded with a view to understand the crucial question; “who produce the media content, and for whom?” It is evident from the above discussions that contemporary media, especially television is not a monolithic entity. Gender representations are neither simple nor the audience readings of the text are rather complex and multi-dimensional.

In this unit, we have discussed why the field of media and gender is an interesting and relevant field within the discipline of anthropology. The discussion on media and gender from an anthropological perspective thus demonstrates; even though there is a huge difference and change found in the economic and social status among certain sections of women, women as a social and cultural entity are still in a structurally subordinate position to most men. And this cultural equation gets reflected in the construction and representation of gender in the media industry as well as in media texts. Feminist theorisation has clearly had a transformative impact on the fields of anthropology and media studies.

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Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

- 1) What is mass media? What are major areas of concern in media studies?
- 2) What are the factors that lead to the marginal role of women in the media industry worldwide?
- 3) What is stereotyping? Write a feminist critique on the gender stereotyping in media by citing examples from the Indian context.
- 4) Write a brief history of anthropological investigations in the areas of media and gender.