

POWER AND ADVERTISEMENTS A FOUCAULDIAN OBSERVATION

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Abstract

With the evolution of new media technology, one of the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Cultural Studies has gathered momentum. The onslaught of technology and media opened up plethora of disciplines under Cultural Studies for scrutiny. Cultural issues and themes are mediated through questions of economy (profit) and politics (power). Cultural studies argue that media plays a vital role in the meanings a community or society generates. Meanings are never fixed but often contested, compared and controlled by power. Of all the major perspectives through which the World is construed, advertising Media Culture is the most influential but least examined object in this ambit. Culture is produced through Television commercials and consumed by society every day all over the world. images, sounds and spectacles produce the fabric of everyday life. These Images are cultural texts mostly taken to have negative influence on society albeit governed by power. This conceptual paper extends the Power vocabulary of Michel Foucault to challenge the exclusivity of this view. Power is conceptualized as omnipresent in a tripartite system of representation, producers and consumers. This paper tries to show how meaning is generated through everyday commercials and how power plays major role in the field of advertising. This paper describes the ethnography of Television Commercials through which the researcher tries to identify the heterogeneity of national identity. At the same time the paper tries to suggest the power tactics and the political stakes involved in the construction of the advertised images that sets the identity of a Nation at large. The contention, thus would be, Discourses and representations determine identity. The paper tries to show how Television commercials create idealized reality by differentiating developing countries with that of developed countries and how power politics is reflected in gender representation. To address these issues, a conceptual framework of comparative orientation through Foucauldian power discourse is proposed.

Key Words: *Cultural, media, technology, advertisements, Discourse, identity, Power, Foucault.*

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Cultural studies argue that culture is about the meanings a community or society generates. Culture is produced through Television commercials and consumed by society every day all over the world. Images, sounds and spectacles produce the fabric of everyday life. As a matter of fact, television is perhaps the most powerful medium of connectivity throughout the world including India. Images are cultural texts mostly taken to have negative influence on society albeit governed by power. Of late, Advertising Media Studies has become one of the disciplines in this ambit. Social reproductions, change, Cultural hybridity, booming consumerism are mediated through television commercials. These changes are nothing but televisionising¹ of India. Television commercials generate meaning through Representation². In his edited book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall elaborates,

Language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged... it operates as a representational system. In language we use signs and symbols-whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes even objects... (Hall 1).

Thus representation itself is language. Through the shared meaning it succeeds in creating shared understanding and so interprets the world in roughly the same way (Recall Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of Structuralism).³ The representation creates discourse⁴ that is based on questions of economy (profit) and politics (power) in advertising. To argue further, Television Commercial creates discourse that structures a person to perceive the things according to what it wants to. Power influences the adverts through stimulating consumer's desire. Body praxis is on the rise that takes up debatable issues. This leads to the question of Foucault's least studied concept 'bio power.'⁵

The paper invokes the concept of bio power (after gestation period i.e. 1976). As a matter of fact, power operates not from top but from below. To limit the scope of the subject Television commercials of India in 1990's and 2010's are compared with cursory references from America and Pakistan.

Foucault on Bio-Power

For Foucault, Power is a 'complex strategical situation'. The domain of knowledge and the domain of exercise of Power are not seen mutually exclusive. From 1976 we may see the methodological shift and the modification of his philosophical perspective of Foucault from Archaeology to Genealogy⁶. Foucault believed in writing history to impact the present time. In his lectures at College de France, Foucault discussed bio power. In fact, the roots of this concept are in 'genealogy of State' from *Discipline and Punish*. Later on, in *History of Sexuality, Vol I: an Introduction*, (1976) Foucault interrogates some ethical questions that concentrate on 'genealogy of the subject.' [From here the book will be referred as HS] In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Foucault elaborates, "... power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production." (Foucault 194) He tried to establish power's otherness. Interestingly, "...Individuals are vehicles of power not its points of application" (Foucault, 1980b:98).

"Bio-power" defines the ways in which power manifests itself in the form of daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline, and thereby subjugate them. Thus human beings constitute themselves as subjects. Thus power over individuals analyses the technologies of the self. Foucault called it a genealogy of subjects in the western society. Bio-power i.e. 'power over life', according to Foucault, is the dominant system of social control in modern society.

Foucault argued that over the past few centuries, Europe has witnessed a decrease in coercive mechanisms of control and an increase in social control through individual self-discipline. Perhaps bio-power operates on our very bodies, channelizing it to self disciplinary practices. Foucault explains, "It categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects" [*a genealogy of subject*] (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 212 emphasis added). Rabinow and Rose, in their research paper, define bio-power:

Bio power, we suggest, entails one or more truth discourses about the 'vital' character of living human beings; an array of authorities considered competent to speak that truth; strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health; and modes of subjectification, in which individuals work on themselves in the name of individual or collective life or health. (Rabinow and Rose 1)

Lazaretto, in his paper, observes, "If power seizes life as the object of its exercise then Foucault is interested in determining what there is in life that resists, and that, in

resisting this power, creates forms of subjectification (recall Althusser's interpellation) and forms of life that escapes its control"(Lazaretto 1). Thus bio power functions through knowledge and desire. Individuals control themselves, though voluntarily by self imposing conformity to cultural norms through self-surveillance and self disciplinary practices. They are more cautious about body, health and hygiene and sexuality. However, bio-power addresses two important discourses, truth discourse and health discourse. Bio- power advocates the body as a site of subjugation and also showcases how individuals are implicated in their own oppression as they participate in habitual daily practices of body and health routine. Foucault calls bio-power as 'governing the self' to 'governing others', a government i.e. governmentality.⁷

According to Foucault, when individuals become subjects, they are scrupulous towards docility of body. However, genealogy of the state provokes and supports coercion. Conversely, techniques of self and techniques of state are confronted with each other where individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves. Thus modern state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence.

These issues are represented through television adverts all over the world. Foucault visualizes bio-power operating from two points: the human species and the human body. Former refers to bio politics and latter manipulates and controls the human body. With disciplinary techniques body is well organized with time, space and daily practices. It is, "the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained; which obeys, responds, becomes skillful, and increases its forces"(Rabinow 180) .With the controlling gaze i.e. Panopticon⁷, body is habituated to external regulation, optimizing its capabilities, increases its usefulness and docility. These discourses create different forms of knowledge. The type of knowledge that is produced influences our behavior and controls our body. Self monitoring is done through practice and discourse.

Case Study

Bio-power gets manifested in Television adverts. Perhaps, these ads showcase how the 'body is one of the sites where power is enacted, contested and resisted.' Each society has its own 'regime of truth' i.e. statements which authorized people make and society accepts. In Indian context in 1990's Indian women were 'happy housewives.' It was nothing but the discourse whereby male chauvinism treated women as 'other', who were always kept on periphery. Man was a centre. Television adverts of 1990's had caring mothers, to cite few, complan, hair oil adverts were telecasted. 1990's represented conventions, motivations and particular perspective. It created discourse that reflected how important family bond was. The representation was mostly from middle class with

least western influence. To contend further, those were the times spectators were not infected with 'voyeuristic gaze' whereas Television adverts of 2010's of edible oil show how some brands maintain good cholesterol and control bad cholesterol. Dental, dermatological, hand care all have become all the very important in 2010's. We find a sea change in the psychology of the society towards body. Individuals realized the importance of 'body', 'looking good', 'keeping good' including desirable forms of behaviour due to Marxism and Consumerism. Foucault in his "Body/Power" notes, "Mastery and awareness of one's own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful" (Foucault 1980c, 56). People invest their time in culturing their body. They are regular Gym goers. They exercise for fitness and believe that their capacities are increased due to physical fitness and they feel fresh psychologically. Through the meticulous work of power desire is instigated in one's body. "But once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency."(ibid 56) Power is also found engaged in counter attack in the same body. However, Power invests itself elsewhere in different forms thus the battle continues. The body revolts in the form of control by stimulation. Foucault's words justify this clearly, 'Get undressed- but be slim, good-looking, tanned!' (Foucault 1980c 57). 'love thyself' is the top priority. The gradual awareness of 'docile body' i.e. subjected and practiced bodies through discipline, that is incorporated by the 'self', revolt in the form of control by stimulation. As a result of this argument, we find TV adverts on body fairness, soap ads and deo sprays that shows one's efficiency increases through it.

Things and situations drastically changed due to televisionising India. As aftermath of capitalism and Globalization, spectators started seeking voyeuristic pleasure, constituted from considering a female figure in an objectified, sexual way. Females become 'subject' in the capitalistic market. Power affects the society with narcissistic elements and society derives narcissistic pleasure, arising from identification with a male protagonist and his gaze. To be more precise desire plays a vital role in sanctioning these norms through the tactics of power.

The obsession with fit, thin and healthy body is the result of the discourse Television commercials create. Under health discourse, physical fitness, norms of femininity, and obstetrical practices all contribute to the creation of "docile bodies". We less witness it in the advertisements of 1990's. Television is bombarded with images and slogans. These advertisements stimulate desire in human beings to be just 'perfect' and to 'look beautiful.' Salon and beauty parlors are most visited places. Being fit was a prime concern of the Americans. Jillian Michaels is an American personal trainer and famous TV actor who due

to her workouts 'Befit' brought awareness for fitness and exercise. Fit body is normal whereas unfit body is deviance. Dieting and fitness activities are a personal obligation. It is internalized in individuals leading to 'perfect body' and self surveillance. Unfit body is stigmatized as carelessness and unhealthy lifestyle. It creates a moral discourse.

Finally, individuals feel compelled to regulate their bodies to conform to norms. This desire to conform to norms leads them to sustain their own oppression voluntarily. To increase skin's tonal values body lotions are mushrooming in market. Body care is on top. Bollywood divas are in centre of such advertisements. To cite few examples, Fair and Lovely advertisement featured Juhi Chawla (1990's) as a housewife who wished to be fairer and soft skinned; whereas Yami Gautam of 2015's ad is shown glamorous lead actor representing a modern lady Fair and lovely. There was least glamour in those adverts and most of them were acted by housewives. Beauty soap Lux was favorite of almost all the bollywood actresses. Since its induction in the year 1909, Lux i.e. luxury, was heavily advertised in India. 1990's advertisement was less glamorous as compared to 2014.

There has been a socio-cultural change in society over the decades which are evident from the increasing number of women pursuing careers, changing family role structure. The desire to look beautiful with satin silk skin is nothing but bio power playing on individuals. Looking at 1990's Lux advert, docile body was not an issue of serious concern. In early 2000's the focus was shifted from silky skin to a stronger emotional space with the tag line, "Lux brings out a star in you." The aim was not only looking beautiful but also boosting one's confidence achieved through beautiful skin albeit showing illogical comparison. Of late, the campaign talks about femininity that works on the philosophy of 'play with beauty.' The consumers' active stare on beauty was triggered up due to the representation with glamour and romance.

According to Afifa Hamid Ali, "People purchase the product and assume that use of this product will signify change in their lifestyle and growth in their social class and sensual appeal" (11493). The projected advert reflects some modern, developed country than Indian setting if not American landscape. The opening scene takes the viewers to the lavish bathroom bath tub with the skyscrapers at the backdrop where a heroine in her twenties is bathing followed by her sensual gestures alluring the hero. The setting is suggestive of elite class with all the luxuries of bubble bath and continental dinner in the hotel having exorbitant charges. It creates an aura of romance and love. But the fact remains that the advertisement shows unrealistic situation in Indian context. Such representation shows that women with the power of physical appearance receive high status and their mesmerizing beauty conquers the hearts. The advertisement instigates the females to adopt different dressing trends and the desire to be as beautiful as Deepika. The viewers are prone to be lost in the glamorous world. The significance of the purple scarf is also

worth appreciated. In fact, the colour connotes royalty between the two and a sign of love. Dressing style of the heroine is also worth noticing. She wears a backless top with the skirt with full exposure to legs. With her physical beauty, she seems to seduce her male counterpart. The impact of alien culture makes the women objects of sensuality and she herself is branding her a sex object. All the soap adverts of recent times appeal the sensual desires of the viewers and slim body with beautiful looks is the irresistible desire of the females. Cosmetics adverts propagate 'looks' that create burning sensation. One can cite the example of Eyetex Dazller where eyes, lips, fingertips cosmetics are advertised in American context. The dazller woman is utterly sensuous and her facial expressions invite the viewers towards her. Of late, in consonance with bio power, the nudity of women on display through advertisements certainly speaks volumes how body is given all importance. It is a status quo. Virat Kohli's Fastrack advert created a furor for its intimate scenes took place in the cockpit of a plane. The desire to look beautiful or loving oneself makes viewers absorb images from adverts without being skeptical. According to Gerbner, this is nothing but 'cultivation effect'. (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorieli 10). This effect is visible if compared TV adverts of 1990 to 2010's. In their research Courtney and Kippler observed that women were projected in home setting whereas men in the business setting. But the difference was less compared with 1990's. However, some of the adverts project lustful, vulgar and indecent image of women that convey wrong message to the society. Body cautiousness is ingrained in all irrespective of gender, religion, cultures and boundaries. The products which men use are advertised by women in a very lusty way where they become commodities. But viewers love the way they are represented and meaning is generated. The germination and culmination of bio power lies here with us. Engage, Axe and Wild Stone deo ads are the best examples of Foucauldian 'subject'. These products picture body at its best in a very derogatory, indecent manner at the same time most vulgar and incestful advert. In these adverts men's invasive behavior towards women are welcomed. In fact they love to be seduced. Body herein is the site of subjugation. Thus they are self-disciplined and self-surveillance is observed. In America Maybelline cosmetics demonstrate how women are desirous for disciplined gorgeous body. Thus Foucault has rightly pointed out (body) Knowledge does not simply emerge... but is produced and maintained in circulation in societies through ...practices. (Mills 79)

Jen Pylypa suggests that bio power creates health discourse. The gaze of power is thus emanates from bathroom scales to mirror, cosmetics, gym workouts, hair salons, dining table and dressing styles. Power plays a major role. Body Weight is a serious concern of all. New running shoes, clothing is essential to live healthy life.

Thus focusing on knowledge and desire as the agents of power and self discipline and self surveillance as the instruments of power mechanism, Foucault opens new ways of

understanding power other than state's imposition to repress and control. With bio-power, Foucault suggests how bio-power works over individuals and succeeds in stimulating desired desire.

End Notes

- 1) Marketing Communications Expert Santosh Desai in his interview, quoted to say in *Understanding India* (Chattopadhyay 2014, 14) "if you were to transport your television experience into rest of your life, I think much of the change is a televisionising India." As compared to Nineteen nineties one may see the obvious growth in Indian Television. It is now ubiquitous in both private and public spaces.
- 2) Representation is one of the central practices that produce 'culture' and a key moment in the circuit of culture. Representation can be an image, sound, visuals, and concept. This becomes the language of that culture. The holistic approach of it thus generates meaning. Representation presents the world in such a way that we can understand it.
- 3) In Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* that was written by his colleagues after his death and based on students notes discussed the linguistic terminology wherein he propagated the theory of sign, signifier and signified. Linguistic Sign is nothing but concept and creates acoustic meaning. Signified is a concept and signifies is Acoustic image. Both are mental entities.
- 4) Foucault uses 'discourse' in a specialized sense to indicate a unified mechanism of producing, circulating, consuming and controlling both knowledge and power. It also proposes that in our daily activities, the way we speak and write is shaped by structures of power in our society that is defined by struggles and conflicts. Sara Mills defines it, "Discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality." (Mills 55) And Foucault argues that it also constrains our perceptions.
- 5) According to Foucault, bio-power is an essentially modern form of power and its purpose is to exert a positive influence on life, to optimize and multiply life, by subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. It is just a tactic whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which are thus released would be brought into play.
- 6) Genealogy was coined by Nietzsche. Foucault considers it as an 'ontology of ourselves', that is, to turn that analytic gaze to the condition under which we, as individuals, exist and what causes us to exist in the way we do.
- 7) It was the French semiologist Roland Barthes who first articulated an understanding of governmentality one that was distinctly and analytically elaborated by Foucault. For Foucault it was a study the 'autonomous' individual's capacity for self control. It is

linked with political rule and economic exploitation. It represents the 'rationalization of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty.' Through it he endeavors to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence.

- 8) Panopticon is an architectural device that was described by Jeremy Bentham, a 18th century philosopher. It is a way of arranging people in such a way to see all the inmates without the observer being seen enabling maximum visibility. Thus according to Foucault, he argues a new form of internalized disciplinary practice occurs. It controls the behavior. Though there is no oppressor to observe the behavior, it is internalized by an individual curbing his behavior as if under a close watch.

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