

THE mass media everywhere is busy making large profits from advertisements that depict women as sexual playthings in a playground reserved for men only. Great havoc is being caused by the 'culture of consumerism' that is promoted by an unholy alliance between industry, the ad agencies and the media.

There are several types of ads which use women and particularly women's bodies. Among them are ads for articles used by women, such as bras, sanitary towels, cosmetics, saris etc, which are all modeled by glamour girls and promise good looks and charm to plain looking girls whom nature has not endowed with what the advertiser thinks is "beauty".

The cosmetic ad comes to a woman like an angel, telling her the secrets of "beauty". It proclaims, "Behind every beautiful face there is a secret." The secret could be Ponds cream, some foundation formula or satin textured lotion to entice the right man with the right job and right connections.

Cosmetic advertisements obviously do not project women who are not "pretty." They seem to imply, in the words of Dana Densmore, "If you are truly ugly it is always an offence against your role as a woman. You can never be truly feminine if you are born ugly. Ugly women are always an affront to both men and women, trapped as they all are in the myth of feminine beauty."

These ads also seem to say, "How dare you be ugly? You are a woman, an object, you exist only to please the eye and yet you fail so utterly..."

The cosmetic ads make women seem like dolls and puppets whose sole occupation, in fact whose life-mission is to look beautiful and seductively 'feminine'.

The image created by ad men reduce women to bodies. The ad for Feminique – "the world's most successful figure developer" – claims, "Now more than 20,000 women in India believe in Feminique, because they can see the difference." Every Feminique ad shows women like Phiroza or Meher Hussain, or even a bunch of brides, all with big

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Don't Sell Our Bodies To Sell Your Products

smiles and bigger breasts, saying, "I developed a beautiful figure in just eight weeks!" Phiroza says Feminique is "the secret of filmstars and beauty queens in Europe and America".

Woman thus becomes a "feast" for the eye. The important quality in women is not the mind, the will, the talent or ability but the supreme quality of appearance, while for men it is character, personality and intelligence that matter most.

The distorted picture of women encourages men to feed their carnal desires on female flesh. Women's bodies become playthings to be selfishly manipulated for personal pleasure, not mutual satisfaction.

Most ads claim that a certain brands of sari, make up or perfume will "attract" men. Binny's chiffon claims that it has a "special kind of magic spell." It suggests that women should "mould every curve and bewitch Him completely". In such advertising the very basis of a relationship is made out to be as superficial as a brand of make-up that is smeared on for a couple of hours of evening entertainment.

Certain ads for men's clothing are more directly offensive like the ad which depicts a man in a suit with a "tamed" woman sitting at his feet. The old notion of marriage as a master-slave relationship is thus reinforced. When men and women are shown in the same ad, women usually occupy a lower position, implying that the male is the dominant sex.

Another image which is constantly perpetuated is that of women as housewives. In ads for household appliances, detergents, health tonics, men are seldom shown doing housework, or even sharing it with women. The subordinate role of woman as domestic servant is invariably

stressed. An ad for pickle reads : "A pickle that tickles the tongue: the way to the bridegroom's heart."

Even the "respectable" national dailies cannot resist the temptation of making money through ads which show a callous disregard for women's dignity.

Commerce and production when carried out through private enterprise become profit making activities conducted with cut-throat competition, in which everything, even the human body and mind are reduced to exchangeable, saleable commodities.

In a developing society, socially relevant propaganda can provide an impetus to social change. But the manner in which advertising is manipulated in our consumption-oriented, competitive system not only arrests the development of social consciousness, but actually damages it. This is particularly true of the harm done to the movement for the emancipation of Indian women.

Commercialism, Consumerism and Capitalism perforce make women willing agents of their own degradation, but women must try to understand the mechanics of the system that makes them their own worst enemies. So far, the chief architects of the personality of women have been men, but it is now high time for women to chart out their lives on their own terms. The women of India should petition, protest, gherao or launch a civil disobedience campaign against those who are guilty of playing striptease with women's bodies. Conditions also need to be created to enable women to stop seeing themselves through men's eyes. They must go through a process of introspection and consciousness raising, a process in which men, like women, will be helped to liberate themselves to look upon women as equals and not as lumps of flesh for sale to every customer.