

# THE MEDIA GAME

## — Modernizing Oppression

### Report on the Big Business of “Women’s Magazines”

The power groups in any society wish to control wealth and resources by perpetuating inequalities. They devise hosts of weapons to keep the mass of people subservient to them. There are the blatant weapons like prisons and police, and the subtle ideological weapons which perform slow surgery on our minds and teach us that the existing state of affairs is the best and only possible one. Religion and education are two such powerful weapons. However, in capitalist society, the mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and films come to play a crucial role in brainwashing people and forcing a distorted self-view down our throats. So much so that it almost seems as if we have chosen to be oppressed and enjoy it.

The dominant mass media are owned and controlled by big business houses, the government or both. By thus controlling the sources of information, news and the forums of public debate, these power groups can decide which issues to highlight and which to underplay. For example, the mass media in most countries, have succeeded in defining politics as the power game of a few men at the top, thus managing to convince us that politics has nothing to do with our lives, that it is hopelessly beyond the reach of the average person – even while keeping the facade of democracy alive. The major achievement of the mass media has been to alienate people from their lives, their real concerns and problems. It manipulates our minds and choices in such a way that we willingly allow others to take power over our lives. An example of their power to manipulate – they have reduced the concept of democracy to voting for this or that set of rogues who by virtue of our voting, come to tyrannize over us.

The big business and government owned mass media play different kinds of games with different oppressed groups, selling them different self-views and manipulating their concerns. Workers’ struggles are projected as “law and order” problems, collective action against injustice as “mob violence and rioting.” And in this game women are special targets because the subjugation of women is the primary pre-condition for keeping hierarchical, exploitative social structures intact.



*Making a Mockery of Social Concern*

What is the nature of this special attack on women ? Why is it that the owners of mass media produce special magazines for women? What is meant by the term “women’s magazine”? We often assume that these magazines are “for” women. Do we not need to ask : “for” in what sense ? Do they fulfill our real needs ? Are they an expression of the reality of our lives, our experience ? For instance, schools are supposed to be for children but are they really what children want or need ? Do they encourage free development or force the mind long pre-determined pathways ? **How is it that the owners of these magazines are all big business houses and the managers and directors are all men, the women on the editorial staff being only paid employees ?**

How do these magazines define our interests for us ? Why are they interested in so defining our concerns and confining us within certain roles ?

This study of all the issues of Femina, Eve’s Weekly and Sarita over a period of a year, was an attempt to understand what these magazines pretend to be doing and what they are actually doing, what social role they have come to perform.

#### **Selling Us a Self-View**

**Covers:** The first thing that hits one when going through piles of these magazines is their repetitive cover designing. Each cover features a brightly dressed, sweetly smiling woman, baring some portion of her anatomy. Her posture is passive –

she is placed on display like a doll in a shop window. On the cover of Femina's bumper spring issue (April 8-22, 1979), a scantily dressed girl with a coy, tempting look on her face, holds up a huge bunch of grapes against her bare shoulders. The English magazines often feature a woman in a bikini or mini skirt while the Hindi ones have a gaudily dressed and bejeweled woman, invariably exposing her cleavage and bare arms. Bare legs are too much for the Hindi clientele to swallow but not bare bosoms and bellies!

The utmost concession to the topical made on the cover is a woman emerging out of a gift-wrapping like an attractive commodity (Eve's Weekly Christmas issue, 1979) or sitting pretty in the midst of a *rangoli* pattern (Eve's Weekly Diwali issue, 1979). The lead stories are featured on the cover as captions. Often enough, the juxtaposition of caption and picture produces a truly grotesque effect as in the October 1978 issue of Femina where the cover carried the lead story title "Illiteracy" and with it photographs of Miss India in three different, equally revealing costumes. Or as in Eve's Weekly May 19-25, 1979 issue and Femina March 8-22, 1979 issue where "shocking reports" on prostitution go side by side with the visual prostitution of women's bodies by these magazines.

These women are not put on display just to "sell" the magazine though that is certainly one of the functions they perform. More importantly, they are projected as role-models for women. These women, in looks, clothing and lifestyle represent the "ideal" woman of male fantasy.

**Competitiveness :** These magazines constantly encourage women to compete with each other in "feminine" spheres. The fashion pages and advertisements foster this cult : "Super to walk into a room and make everyone else seem colourless" (Vimal fabrics advertisement in Femina March 8-22, 1978). The climax of such competitiveness is the beauty contest which is not only highlighted but sponsored by these magazines in collaboration with other big business houses, for instance Eve's Weekly with Shri Ambica Mills, Femina with Khatau and Eagle Flask. Femina has a regular column called "Unknown Beauties of India" where readers send in photographs, and one chosen by the editor is published every week. The self-view and aspirations of women are shaped through such devices. We are taught to feel that only those women who fulfil male-set standards of "attractiveness" and "womanliness" get honour and recognition.

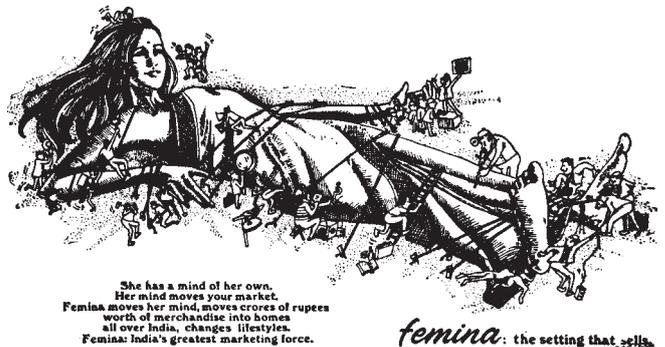
Both magazines routinely hold cookery contests in every single issue. One of the most obnoxious contests favourably reported was a contest for ideal mothers instituted by a Pune industrialist. One mother was chosen for the award because "... she gave birth to a son and thus fulfilled the needs of the family... in spite of being the co-wife, she created an atmosphere of peace and harmony at home and moulded her son into an industrialist... sacrifice of personal ego for the sake of the family qualified her for the award..."

**Consumerism:** All these contests have the effect of casting

the dreams of women in a particular mould. The winners of beauty contests are extolled as "India's Young Ambassadors" as if women can represent the nation only as "beauties and cuties." And how is this beauty parlour version of attractiveness to be attained? Through a variety of beauty aids and accessories, of course. These magazines try to create and develop in women a craving for more and more clothes, cosmetics, figure developers, exotic foodstuffs so that with the aid of all these, they can become the "kind of women men dream of," In fact, a woman who does not have the "fashionable" figure, face and clothing, is made to feel somehow inadequate, guilty and ashamed. Women are bullied into mindless consumerism, into the never-ending race to keep up with fashion.

Thus these magazines help create the market which is further cultivated by glossy advertising. Sexist advertisements which present women as attractive sex objects and teach them

## Gullible she isn't.



*Gullible she isn't ! But big business is mastering the tricks of trying to make her so.*

that their glory lies in being just that, are not in contradiction with the aims of these magazines which pretend to be "for women".

Half of pages in Eve's Weekly and over half in Femina are occupied by advertisements. Out of these, an average of over 95 percent are for cosmetics, women's clothing, detergents, washing soaps, households appliances, foodstuffs, children's products – that is, they are geared to woman in the role of housekeeper allurer of a man who can make her into a housekeeper.

Very often, the wording of an advertisement and of the article on the facing page clearly complement each other, for instance: "Put roses in your cheeks with Johnson's Baby Complexion Cream" faces a column which advises "Revitalise your winter skin". (Femina March 23-April 7, 1979); prize-winning recipes face an advertisement for Kissan Jams which shows a housewife smiling as all the male members of a family

eat heartily and a little daughter looks on (Eve's Weekly October 28-November 3, 1979); a knitting pattern faces an advertisement for a detergent which is "gentle on your wash" (Eve's Weekly July 7-13, 1979).

### **Fashion – Killing our Real Self**

Many regular columns in these magazines aim at helping the woman convert herself into a desirable and decorative object. The whole ethos of fashion is designed to do precisely this and the language used on these pages makes this transparently clear: "The Glamour of Silk", "Frankly Feminine", "The Million Dollar Look", are some of the captions. Women are taught that their ordinary, unvarnished selves are shabby and shameful. The fashion articles tell us what clothes and what kind of body are "fashionable". The woman must tailor not only her clothing but also tailor her body: "... the hour glass figure is back in fashion. Bosoms and hips are rounded again and tiny waists are emphasised..."

The clothing described is utterly remote from the reality of most women readers, for instance an article that gives the fashion scene "from Poland to Paris" or an array of garments from a Taj hotel fashion parade (Femina January 23-February 7, 1979). However, it is because such articles help the woman to temporarily forget the sordid reality of her life that they thrive. They feed on the illusions of women and on their oppressive lives. They give women something to dream about.

The woman is taught to dream of becoming a more and more perfect wife – an impossible combination of Hollywood glamour girl, Hindi film heroine, "well bred, well educated" socialite and good Hindi *Pativrata*. The impossibility of her ever being able to satisfy these self-contradictory expectations of the male, is the real clue to the success of these magazines. All our energy is sought to be channelized into fulfilling these expectations, if not at the national, then at the local beauty contest level, and if not there, then within our own social circle – to win a husband.

Women's fashion is consciously male-oriented. The good looks and good grooming of a wife are as important an asset to a husband as is her good cooking. Thus one special feature at Diwali time proclaims: "Femina steps into your home and takes over your kitchen and your personality" as if the woman's self in just another room in the house, as is the kitchen.

What are magazines doing through such features except teaching women to live up to the demands of men who advertise for brides as if they were useful appliances: "Smart, beautiful, well-versed in household duties"?

### **"Dressing up" Drudgery**

Similarly, recipes and knitting, crochet, needlework patterns also orient towards an elitist life style, create the illusion of enlivening the monotonous household routine. The captions suggest this: "Be adventurous with salads and dressings... vary them according to individual tastes... you can make a masterpiece from them!" (Eve's Weekly, May 19-25, 1979) or

"If you let your imagination run wisely, you can produce the best of meals" (Eve's Weekly June 9-15, 1979). Thus these brightly coloured patterns and recipes bring the false promise of glamour, adventure and excitement to the woman toiling alone in the kitchen and faced by inflationary prices. They add to the strain on her by forcing her to seek out new methods, new exotic ingredients, instead of producing routine meals.

Housework is a monotonous task not freely chosen by the woman but imposed on her by a rigid sex-based division of labour. What creativity can be exercised in such a situation? The conditions of the housewife's life slowly kill her creativity but the myths fostered by the mass media tell her that it is somehow her fault if she cannot feel joyful and fulfilled in cooking endless meals that are instantly consumed and washing dishes only to have them dirtied again. The harsh reality of household drudgery is disguised as an "Act of Creation" (Eve's Weekly October 21-28, 1979) and the housewife who does not enjoy it is made to feel guilty. For instance, one article berates women for throwing away leftovers through "sheer ignorance and inefficiency" (same issue).

The myth of the efficient "ever ready" (same issue) housewife is constantly held up as an ideal before women readers. This ever-present ideal (the smiling mother in advertisements) prevents the woman from asserting her instinctive anger, her realization that her situation of ever-increasing burdens is reducing her to a machine and that she cannot be smilingly efficient but is in fact crumbling under the pressures to be so.

When religion blatantly tells us that it is our duty to sacrifice and serve others, it is easier to challenge this, but when the mass media tells us it is our pleasure and privilege to act all the roles of earner, wife and mistress to husband, cook, sweeper, cleaner, interior decorator, surrogate teacher and fond mother, hostess, entertainer and shoulder for everyone to weep on, we begin to feel there is something wrong with us if we cannot feel any pleasure in these roles.

### **Question Columns – Drugging Protest**

Thus these magazines constantly evade the real problems of women, both at the individual and the social level. However, they all adopt an advisory tone as if suggesting solutions to every problem a woman could face. The advice they give is in the form of "painkillers" for the symptoms without ever approaching the real cause of sickness or even acknowledging that anything is really wrong at all.

For instance, in Femina's column "Health and Beauty", a near-neurotic anxiety is fostered about maintaining a good figure (whatever that may be) and a woman's health is equated to her attractiveness of men. The articles regularly place a great deal of emphasis on dieting, exercising: "Get Back Into Shape" (Femina October 23-November 7, 1979), "How to keep Trim during Pregnancy" (Femina September 23, 1979), "Six ways to Trimness" and "Top to Toe Beauty Care" (Femina 8-22,

1979). But there is no probing into why women tend to be overweight, underweight, unhealthy. Nor is it ever asked why women should worry about their external appearance so much more than men do. Eve's Weekly's "Beauty Bulletin" and Femina's "Beauty Queries" dole out remedies to readers who are worried about everything from acne, thin, thick, straight or curly hair, tallness or shortness, flat or large bosoms, oval or round faces, sharp or blunt noses to oily or dry skin. This dissatisfaction with ourselves and attempt to live up to a male-defined concept of beauty, is assiduously fed by these magazines because it is precisely this dissatisfaction which induces women to keep trying one beauty cream or shampoo or figure developer after another so as to "look young for him" or to look more like the various film stars who model soaps and saris.

Femina has a medical column but it is not focused on women's health. It doles out superficial information on such random topics as "The Dangers of Feasting" (November 23-December 7.) "Living With Chronic Pain" (March 23- April 7) and "Test Tube Babies" (September 23, 1978). The issue of women's health is totally divorced from its social context. In a country where the consumption patterns of women are so conspicuously lower than those of men, and the mortality rates of women so much higher, where medical facilities available to women are so terribly inadequate, what relevance can articles on exercise and fancy diet have to the life of an average overstrained and underfed woman reader ?

### Seeing Through the Eyes of Men

Art is a very important means whereby the vision and self-image of people is formed. It is no coincidence that all the photographers, artists and designer in these so-called women's magazines are men. The visual image of women constantly presented in the pages of these magazines extends from the ever-smiling cover girl to the coloured pictures in Sarita showing women with exposed and exaggerated body contours, to the nude woman surrounded by flowers and butterflies in the Eve's Weekly advertisement for Eve's Annual, 1979. All the pictures in these magazines show women in postures of submission or stasis, displaying themselves and their clothes. We are forced to see ourselves, our world and our experience through the eyes of men.

Even sportswomen and women in male-dominated professions are shown smiling demurely into the camera (Eve's Weekly September 29-October 5, 1979). Even if they are shown in a posture of work, they must have a most unnecessary smile and be dressed in the height of fashion as on the cover of Eve's Weekly October 6-12, where the woman is shown smiling vacantly into a telephone receiver. On the other hand, if she is in supposedly "feminine" line like dancing, she will always be shown in a "pose" as on the cover of Eve's Weekly May 19-25 or Femina April 23-May 7. There are hardly any women in non-pretty-pretty working situations so that even when Femina carried a feature on coal miners, the women were shown

standing in a row, beaming into the camera. On fashion pages, whenever a male and a female model are pictured together, he is in a higher and aggressive position while she is presented as soft and clinging, as in Femina November 23-December 7 issue where the man holds the woman in a prone position draped across his arm.

### Fiction – the Many-Pronged Attack

Nearly all the short stories deal with women's problems and blame women for these problems. Fiction dominates the Hindi magazines. They try to provide entertainment in the form of "light reading" to the housewife whose mind can concentrate and absorb very little, after the day's tensions. Fiction is the sugar-coated pill which can dissolve ideology and patriarchal morality into her bloodstream even while she thinks she is only amusing herself. It can take over and systematically tutor her tired mind without her even realizing it.

The Sarita stories consistently preach the philosophy of deference and submission to the husband. In a particularly obnoxious one, the wife of a scooter rickshaw driver is a little too "westernized" for his taste. She goes out with her women friends and when he comes home late, he finds his dinner waiting and his wife asleep instead of sitting up dutifully to eat only after she has served him. So he invents a girlfriend to make the wife see the wickedness of her ways. When he says he has married a second time, she is reduced to such abject misery that she begs him to bring the other woman home. It is only then that he reveals the truth and says he invented this affair to bring his wife "onto the right path."

The stories take outright anti-women stands on such issues as women's employment (she gladly gives up her job because her husband unjustly suspects her on infidelity – Sarita, October 1979), dowry (the older son-in-law is very upset because his wife's younger sister is given a larger dowry than he was given, until they discover that the younger girl earned and collected her own dowry, for which she is highly extolled – Sarita, October 1979), arranged marriage (woman tricked into marriage with a widower who has a child, feels suffocated but ends up in his arms telling him "I want life imprisonment... not freedom" – Sarita, December 1978), polygamy (parents arrange second marriage, helpless son succumbs and the two wives decide to live as sisters with "equal rights", this being presented as reasonable solution to the problems – Sarita, October 1979).

When the woman's problem is presented a little more sympathetically, the conclusion is equally reactionary, as in *Samarpan* (surrender) where the woman, a highly educated science student, marries a professor in her own subject and finds herself rotting at home while he and all her other male friends are absorbed in their work. The solution she discovers is to take an interest in her husband's research, type out his papers and surrender herself to him completely. In *Naya Jeevan*, the husband is unfaithful and neglects the long-suffering wife. When she falls ill, he repents and the "other woman" is made

out to be the evil temptress who lured him away. So, ultimately it is always women who are to blame!

The short stories do by implication admit that women are discontented because the familiar pattern in many stories is that of an unhappy wife who ends up realizing how fortunate she is to have such a good husband and in-laws and how foolish she was in resenting their demands on her (for instance *Joru ka Gulam* in Sarita, December 1978). However, the fact that this point is laboured so much indicates that the resentment is a disturbing reality and the repentance of the wife is the moral which the magazine would like to preach.

Men in these stories usually play the role of all-knowing protectors who intervene when women quarrel with each other as in one story (Sarita, November 1979) where father and son get together to resolve the mother-in law and daughter-in-law conflict. Such presentation seeks to negate the fact that it is the competition for the favour of the powerful and privileged male which divides women in the family from each other.

In English magazines too, fiction is used to uphold the *status quo* after criticising it. Thus Eve's Weekly regularly serializes Mills and Boon novels. The ones chosen for serialization all project the woman as a victim figure who likes to be dominated by the male. Thus "The Passionate Winter" (Eve's Weekly, October 1978) documents a struggle between father and son for possession of the docile woman. It ends: "She felt herself pulled savagely against him (the father) and his lips urgently parting her own as he put his brand of possession on her sweet young lips." In another called "To Begin Again", the heroine is raped repeatedly by the man she is married to, because he unjustly suspects her of infidelity. This he does even though he is openly having an affair with another woman, and his wife is shown to be loving him the more for all his brutality.

The woman is projected as a sex object with no active sexual identity of her own. All the stories dealing with women's problems are set in the context of relationships with men. The assumption is that a woman's basic concerns are sexual, familial, reproductive, and her real problems arise only in these spheres of life. However, there is no attempt to go further and show how the problems arise from the fact that she is confined to these spheres. In fact, solutions are presented in terms of better "adjustment" to the role of wife and mother. As in "The End of a Day" which documents movingly the deeply internalized fatigue of a working woman, but ends most unrealistically with her feeling as if all her problems are solved because the husband and children cook dinner one day when she is unwell and show her some affection. Whenever stories deal with issues that are not domestic or romantic, the hero is man and the woman takes the role of mother to the unemployed youth (Femina, Jun 23, 1978), daughter of the revolutionary (Femina, May 8-22, 1979), or wife to the harassed clerk.

Such fiction is eagerly devoured by women because it atleast acknowledges that problems exist. Stories begin with

the rebellious and dissatisfied woman with whom the reader can identify. When the ending of the story presents a romantic solution, the reader is encouraged to dream and forget reality. The Mills and Boon type stories which pretend love is eternal and marriage a prolonged honeymoon, contradict the living experience of women. But because the reader knows that such happiness is impossible in her life, she learns to believe that her problems are insoluble, she must continue to bear up with them.

Art can perform a very important positive role by suggesting revolutionary possibilities and alternative ways of life. If it persistently presents obviously unrealistic solutions, over a period of time it creates a fatalistic attitude. The feeling is : "Well, change might be possible only through the coming of a prince charming. Since he won't come for me, change is not possible in my life, so I might as well read about him and put up with my oppressive husband."

### **Laughing it Away ?**

If the short stories convey a message of "no change is possible", the humour in these magazines laughs at and dismisses women's problems as too trivial to bother about. "The Little Woman" comic strip in Eve's Weekly shows the woman as a silly, utterly irrational creature. In "The Lockhorns" and "Mooser Miller" in Femina, the wife and her mother respectively are made into laughing stocks. Sarita has a regular comic strip called "*Shrimatiji*". She is presented with a direct anti-woman comment. For instance in Sarita of October 1979, she announces that she has found a job. The husband congratulates her, she then outlines all the new expenses which will be entailed, such as a servant and her transport and they total Rs. 600. He asks how much her salary is to which she cheerfully replies : "Rs. 400." The message is clear : she would be "more economically" employed serving the family but is too silly to realize this. That this is so only from the husband's point of view is of course ignored. Nor are her reason for wanting a job talked about. Her point of view is subsumed in that of the male-dominated family.

The cartoonists in all these magazines are men. A count reveals that at least 50 per cent of cartoons in any one issue of Sarita are directed against women. Women are portrayed as selfish, avaricious, catty to each other and violently oppressive to their husbands. These cartoons are supplemented by "humorous" poems, all written by men, which criticize the woman for her tyrannical conduct or for giving money to her relatives (October 1979). The majority of jokes in the Eve's Weekly jokes column are blatantly antiwomen. Femina has a humour column written by a man called Busybee which presents him as a harassed victim and his wife as a mindless, frivolous fool.

### **The "Right" Sexual Behaviour**

However, humour is only one of the many weapons whereby a woman is made to feel ashamed of herself. These magazines have many devices to induce women to behave in the correctly "feminine" way. Her mannerisms and mentality

must be tailored to fit into a male-dominated heterosexual relationship.

The so-called "True Confession" is a regular feature in *Eve's Weekly*. It has the sensational tone of gossip and is used to warn women against straying off the path of patriarchal morality in sexual matters. This function of the "True Confession" seems to be common to mass media in different countries. Susan Brownmiller in "Against Our Will", her book on rape, noticed how the woman who challenged her oppression was threatened in one "True confession" entitled: "I was gang-raped by a group of boys because I took their girls to a women's liberation meeting." Similarly, in *Eve's Weekly* of October 28, November 3, 1978, a girl breaks out of her hostel to run away with her lover who turns out to be a potential rapist and a vagabond. She escapes and the story ends: "I never ventured out again and adhered rigidly to the hostel regulations... This story is intended to be a warning to other young girls like me who may be lured from the straight path by wild promises of freedom and affection." Here is a magazine supposed to be "for" women, using the threat of rape to keep women confined!

Sarita seeks to constrain women's sexuality in a much more blatant way. One particularly revealing article is an eight-page long letter from a male well-wisher to a married woman. It makes no bones about the fact that marriage is legalized prostitution. The writer begins by saying that he has noticed that the woman he is writing to, and her husband, are both living in tension. He talked to the husband Somesh and found that he was angry at his wife's disinterest in sex with him. The wife's explanation was that she felt Somesh just used her to satisfy his desire. He was absolutely indifferent to her feelings, her exhaustion, and grew annoyed if she ever refused to have intercourse.

The well-wisher now proceeds to harangue the wife. He first informs the wife that she has no cause for fatigue: "The reason for your tiredness is not housework but the fact that you do not love this work. You consider it bonded labour and that is why you get bored with it." He then goes on to tell her that the reason for her indifference to sex with Somesh is that "Male and female hormones are differently constructed. Male hormones are excitable and female calm. Sex is not primary in a woman's life but it is primary in a man's... If you, being in a position to give a man what is primary in his life, refuse to do so, it is natural for tension to develop..."

From this distorted biology and psychology which denies a woman's sexuality and her right to choose when to have a sexual relationship, he then proceeds to encapsulate grotesquely male chauvinistic "history". "In ancient times, man used to go hunting and bring food back for his woman. Now the woman is tempted with saris, jewellery, cars, trips, etc... It is a fact that a man is willing to carry the burden of matrimony all his life only for the satisfaction of his sexual desires." After thus declaring man the maker of history and

woman a helpless parasite and receptacle of his lust, the logic is extended to politics: "... Once a man gets excited, he needs an outlet... Today in those countries where an outlet is easily available, the intellect and health both flourish. It is these western countries which win all the Noble prizes and are the possessors of almost all the world's wealth." He does not go on to explain whether increasing rape and prostitution in these countries are part of their achievements, whether their "intellect and health" are expressed in their imperialist activities and sophisticated war technology or whether the women there are quite content with being reduced to "outlets" for men.

He merely goes on to warn the wife that if she does not satisfy Somesh, he will take to masturbation or may turn to other women in his office or might develop ulcers and fall prey to diseases as a result of excessive tension. (The woman's tensions are, of course, of no account). She is exhorted to turn herself into a machine generating energy for her husband: "Sister, you are a source of strength for Somesh. Just as the electric plug point gets activated by the insertion of the pin into it so also Somesh can do anything if he takes strength from you. You can give him 220 voltage electric energy or 440 voltage if you wish to or even more than that. This energy transmitted through sexual intercourse can completely transform Somesh... abstinence means cutting off the wire."

After this inspiring flight into metaphor, the writer comes down to the harsh economics of the marriage bargain: "It is in your control whether to give Somesh sexual satisfaction or not. But he also has something in his control. He can snatch away all your comforts and make your life a curse to you... If Somesh uses you for sexual pleasure, do not you use him for your survival?" And since she is economically dependent on this man, she is told that she must give him what he wants, even if it is with the utter indifference of the prostitute: "It is not enough to say that you are not interested in sex with him. .. There is this difference between the make-up of man and woman that without the desire of the man, you cannot be sexually satisfied, but you can cooperate even without desire. So now it is upto you whether you give Somesh 1110 volts electricity or 220 volts or 440 volts. Your future will depend on this alone" (Sarita, November 1978).

This particular article is strangely forthright in its delineation of the woman's bleak future of submission without choice or desire. Most articles on the subject of sexuality are much more dangerously disguised. A typical one is "Are you your husband's beloved (or mistress) as well?" (Sarita, December 1978). The woman reader is offered advice as to how to keep the "love" of her husband through the most servile and hypocritical behaviour. For example, if he promises to come early and take her out but if he returns late, she should meet him with a smile and a cup of tea. No matter what she may be doing, she should always meet him at the door when he returns from office, she should never contradict him, she should not disturb him when he is reading the newspaper, even to remind

him of things that need to be done for the family or children. The essence of this article is that the woman is to negate herself, her desires, impulses, likes and dislikes, and subordinate herself to her husband's identity and even his whims and fancies. She is advised: "If your husband says: 'Let's go to a movie', you should immediately forget your headache or that you have been cleaning out the store all day and now need to rest. You should make his interests and hobbies yours as well." The reward she can expect is "consideration", an example of which the author gives: "You will see that when you are reading Sarita he will not disturb you by asking for a glass of water...!"

### Men want Beauty with Brains

The English magazines have to be relatively more subtle in their drilling of the correct "feminine" behaviour patterns into readers' heads, because they cater to a more sophisticated class of women who really believe the myth that they are in no way unequal to men because they have access to education, employment and the vote! In the Hindi-speaking lower middle class, where Sarita is more read, reality is too harsh for that particular myth to be believed. Other myths – those of the perfect wife, mother, daughter-in-law who is treasured by all – have a better chance of survival.

The English magazines dub themselves "thoughtful", "aware" and claim to cater to the needs of the "new woman". By this they mean that they try to equip women to cater to the needs of the "new" man – the businessman or bureaucrat who is no longer satisfied with a dumb beauty for wife. So just the right amount of "awareness" that goes with a convent education is supplied. *Femina*, June 8-22, 1978, carries a special supplement called "Five Steps to a more Confident Personality." It consists of a series of articles: "Look Good", "Develop varied Interests", "Learn and Earn", "Overcome Fear and Friction" and "Self-Motivation leads to Success". These sum up the expectations of the "modernized" man. All impulsiveness and spontaneity are denied to the woman because she is supposed to be aware of the role she is playing every minute of the day and even to the night. This one article intones: "Health, beauty and the ability to look good don't just happen – it needs thought, discipline and yes, hard work... Do you still wear the same look, the same hairstyle you wore two years ago? Don't be afraid to make changes... sleep is your best cosmetic..." The article is entitled "Judging by Appearances" and ends on this ominous note, "Give yourself a beautiful, healthy look, the *appearance* of a person who enjoys being alive..."

The English magazines are designed to make a woman cope with the increasing strains of the nuclear family within which she has to fulfill the newer demands of husband and social circle. The Hindi magazines, on the other hand, attempt to gear women to "adjustment" within the joint family set-up. Thus Sarita carries articles like "The delicate relationship between *nanad* and *bhabhi*" (sisters-in-law) (December 1979), "How to behave with the parents of your husband's first wife"

(November 1979 and "Friendship between women" which anxiously warns women not to confide in each other about their husbands' brutality or their family problems (December 1978).

This obsession with appearing "right" involves fitting oneself into a mental straitjacket. The article advises the woman to cultivate the art of making meaningless drawing room conversation: "Lack of mental stimulation makes you boring..."

Are your professional  
ambitions  
at war with your homemaking  
instincts?



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**femina**  
means different things to different women.

### Legitimizing the double slavery of women

make an effort to meet new people, see a good play or movie, try new food or a new author. You don't have to become intellectual but you should have a lively, well-informed mind..."

### Stunting Women's Intellect

These magazines systematically attempt to deintellectualize women. The only intellectual pursuits recommended are those which will make a woman suitably entertaining to men, and yet not an intellectual threat to them. To be a good entertainer, the woman can "take an interest" in just about anything. As the passage quoted above shows, people, politics, films, books and food are all on one level – they are all made into useful objects for the woman who is herself made into an object. What is this if not a modernized version of the old tradition of woman living only to serve others? The woman held up as a model by these magazines is still nothing in herself – she is valued only if she fulfils the expectations of husband and family, whatever these expectations may be.

This goes a long way to explain the superficial tone of these magazines. Issues are picked up and skimmed over: "What are they doing in *Femina*, June 23, 1978? They are

talking about industry, the media, politics, sex. All part of the expanding world or women.” One is reminded of the male teacher shutting up the intelligent little girl in “The Mill on the Floss” by saying : “Girls can go a little way into everything but they have no depth.”

These magazines seem to be in a conspiracy to prevent women from going into anything with depth or passion. The tone of urgency is carefully avoided even though the issue may be one of life and death like dowry murders. The issue is dealt with – yet. Women should be “well informed” but to get angry, upset, involved in anyway would be most unlady like. And it would also distract women from their life’s work of looking attractive and making the home a peaceful haven for men. It is thus that the seeming illogicality of a smiling covergirl juxtaposed with an issue like rape, prostitution, VD, illiteracy, price rise, can also be seen to be supremely “logical”. The covergirl represents what women are supposed to be preoccupied with; the issue is there only as a concession to “changing times.”

### **Depoliticizing Women**

The consistent tone of women’s magazines is that all women need is “law and order” and stable prices. They total ignore the situation of working class women and tell the middle class woman that her problems in the home, family and workplace are not political problems but individual problems to be solved by better personal “adjustment” with men.

When the mid-term election were round the corner, these magazines were as though in an insulated world of their own, the lead articles being : Consumer Awareness – “know your shampoo”; “Women in Vietnam – some personal observations”; “The Sophisticated Look – a fashion spread”, “Naval wives – striking out on their own”; and “More do it-yourself crafts” (Eve’s Weekly December 1-7, 1979) and “Medium of instruction – a survey”; “Homoeopathy as a career”; “Food fads and therapies for health and beauty” in Femina, December 8-22, 1979.

Even when the reaction does come, it is more of a sleepwalker’s reaction. It picks up peculiar aspects of the situation and dwells on them : “Women politicians – projecting the Bhartiya Nari image ?” which uncritically interviews some women candidates and gives details of the clothes they wear. If this is an attempt to relate the elections to women, why is the question not raised as to why women are so alienated from the social and political mainstream ? These magazines assume that women can only be interested in the personalities and families of a few women politicians or wives of leaders. Indira Gandhi is interviewed and her politics analysed in terms of her role as daughter and mother. (Eve’s Weekly, October 27-November 2, 1979).

The English magazines often avoid taking a stand by using the opinion poll on almost any issue from elections (Femina, October 23-November 7, 1979) to the generation gap or topics like “Do women take their own decisions?” (Femina March 23-

April 7, 1979). By and large, they take an anti-agitational stand when covering worker, student or other popular movements unless they are so far back in history as to be “harmless.” Significantly, agitation in men’s colleges like that in St. Xavier’s was relatively more sympathetically reported (Femina February 23-March 7, 1978) than the SIET women’s college struggle which ended with the hope that students would compromise with the management.

The editorial stand on women’s issues is ambiguous and undergoes changes in shade as individual editors come and go. Thus currently Eve’s Weekly takes a relatively more pro-women stand than does Femina on issues like housework, choice of marriage partner, career for women, the retaining of her own name after marriage. But again the editor is still capable of saying “Husbands’ help is an attitude of mind; it does not necessarily mean actually entering the kitchen.” And that is precisely where all the “modern” attitudes of such magazines begin and end – just short of touching the reality of women’s lives.

The women’s movement in the West receives relatively less hostile coverage in the last few years because it can be kept at a safe distance from Indian reality. But when discussing women’s issues in the Indian context, two methods are used. One is through feature articles which almost always take a “patch-up”, not even reformist stand. For instance, “Is the Patriarch Abdicating?” in Femina October 8-22, 1978, seems to imply that the working woman’s “liberation” is responsible for her double burden and that earning is better left to the patriarch. Sarita, on the same issue, openly declares that higher education for girls is a waste of money since they are going to end up in the kitchen any way and will only feel more discontented if they get fancy ideas in their heads.

Sometimes by default these magazines do come up with a good write-up on women’s issues. But this seems to be more because feminists in India could find no other media to reach out to other women. Thus the ironic anomaly of a good examination of the anti-women stereotypes in fairy tales, in a magazine which serializes those much more pernicious fairy tales which go by the name of Mills and Boon romances.

### **The Exception which Confirms the Rule**

These magazines regularly highlights the achievements of some “exceptional” women who have made it to the top in various fields. Again, the choice is absolutely indiscriminate – from film stars, who are regularly glorified, to an Indo-French fashion model, to a coal magnate’s wife who kindly does social work to alleviate the havoc wrought by people like her husband, to an occasional freedom fighter and revolutionary like Kalpana Dutt or Preetilata who is not presented as a role-model because her exploits are set in a safely distant and romanticized past which is at no point likened to the present.

These usual women are not presented as representing an alternative way of life, a rejection of accepted sex-roles, but usually as freaks who have “achieved” the exceptional even

while perfectly fulfilling the role of wife and mother.

In most of the interviews, great stress is laid on the domestic aspect of their lives. A random sample includes a teacher whose 'three children have benefited both from her love of teaching and her flair for unusual cooking' ("World of Eve" in *Eve's Weekly* November 25-December 1, 1978), a social worker who "despite all her activities, is a perfect housewife and feels it is important for a woman to be a good home-maker" ("Eve Today" in *Eve's Weekly*, October 13-19, 1979), a YWCA president who "does not approve of married women working if it is at the cost of neglecting the family and home..." ("Women in Focus" in *Eve's Weekly* November 10-16, 1979).

The net result of all this is to confirm the myth of equality in the mind of the overstrained housewife who can only admire these superwomen from a distance and wonder how they manage to cope with housework as well as a demanding vocation. To her they appear so "exceptional", so far from her life's experience that they do not act as role-models but merely maintain the belief that it must be possible and therefore it must be her own fault, some inferiority in her which makes it so impossible for her. When occasionally a real positive is presented, as of Damyanti Chauhan who was her family's sole breadwinner from the age of 11 ("Person of the Fortnight" in *Femina*, March 1-22, 1979), the effect is deliberately negated by a conclusion which consigns the story to the realms of unreality and neatly fits the woman into an accepted role: "Damyanti... has successfully demonstrated that her youthful energy can be channelized in fruitful ways and, as in all fairy tales, Prince Charming in the person of Ashok Asher has recently claimed her hand."

*Eve's Weekly* has a column called "Passing Through" in which foreign women visiting India are interviewed. Again, the distancing effect is used when a feminist active in the women's movement is interviewed.

The experience of such a woman is not so presented as to inspire or sustain other women. She is not shown as a woman struggling to break out of given rule and structures. The experience is deliberately impersonalized, distanced, swamped in the pattern which glorifies achievement and competition. If the photograph of a Gloria Steinem and that of the winner of a cookery contest are both given equal prominence in a particular issue, then they are seen as exellers in different "fields." And if only the "achievement" rather than the struggle is highlighted, then naturally to the average reader it seems that winning the cookery contest is more within her reach than is writing a book on the rights of women.

Women who have fought individual or collective battles against injustice are not shown as contributing to a movement or a cause. The reader is forced to see them from outside. The purpose of such interviewing is to give information but never is the woman so written about as to show that her struggle has in common with the struggles of other women. The difference rather than the commonness between the exceptional women

who is trying to opt out of oppressive roles, and the reader, is stressed, so that the feeling of sisterhood is never allowed to surface.

Sarita often comes up with near-paranoic attack on women's groups, *mahila mandals*, and the idea of women's liberation. In one piece called "Women's Liberation Movement", the women are shown ready to tear each other to pieces (Sarita, October 1979) and in *Shrimathiji* of Sarita November, 1979, the women's meeting becomes occasion for exchange of recipes and knitting patterns.

### **Readers' Response – What Women Do Not Want**

It is often declared that these women's magazines give women what they want, the implication being that if and when women wanted something different, the mass media would obligingly star producing it. However, readers' response as mirrored in letter to the editor, does not bear out this theory that women are perfectly satisfied with what these magazines offer them.

Readers come up with critiques of various aspects of these magazines. One letter protests against the exploitation of women's bodies on the cover (*Femina* March 23-April 7, 1978); another criticizes *Femina's* conservative stand on the case where an employed woman was allowed to live separately from her husband (October 23-November 7, 1978). Another letter criticizes *Femina's* feature on the hotel industry saying that working conditions of women employees who actually keep the hotels running, should have been exposed (August 8-22, 1978). One reader gives a detailed account of how fortune-telling columns are a hoax, because different magazines predict contradictory things in the same week (November 8-22, 1978). One very significant letter in the November 23-December 7, 1978 issue criticize *Femina's* concentration on cosmetics and recipes and gives statistics on the deteriorating life conditions of most Indian women who cannot even afford toilet soap. A letter in the same issue denounces *Busybee's* male chauvinist attitudes and demands to know what business he has to be writing in a women's magazine. Fiction too comes in for criticism – a letter in the December 23, 1979 issue condemns "The Song of Anasuya" for presenting the two female characters as nothing more than sex objects.

Readers often demand more radical and in-depth study of issues that have been superficially treated in the magazine. For instance a reader talks of how men actively discriminate against women in matters of employment (*Eve's Weekly* March 12-18, 1979). Another praises the *Eve's Weekly* special issue on children but points out that the only real solution to the problem is a just and egalitarian social system (February 3-9, 1979). Another in the same issue insists that rural, not urban children, are the more deprived, therefore the feature should have concentrated on them. So also on political questions. Whereas *Femina* published an article sympathetic to Maneka

Gandhi as a loyal wife, a reader protests against her allowing her prejudice as a wife to interfere with her objectively as a journalist. (August 8-22, 1978). Examples could be multiplied.

The point, however, is, how do editors react to the readers' awareness and alertness? In *Femina*, letters are printed without replies. Once again the practice of awarding prizes to the "best" letters makes out the purpose of correspondence to be competition rather than discussion and debate. Subtitles are used as a kind of comment on the letters, like "Down with Libbers" in *Femina*, October 8-22, 1979. Another instrument cleverly used to belittle women's issues raised by readers is the cartoon illustration. Thus in the *Femina* of April 23-May 7, 1979, a reader writes about how disheartening it is that women are not allowed to take their own decisions, evening such crucial matters as choice of marriage partner. The cartoon accompanying this shows a girl saying to her astonished mother: "My decision is final. I *shall* marry Iqbal, or Peter, or Arvind..." So also when a reader writes an angry letter about the harassment she faces when riding her bike to work, the cartoon shows a girl with a plunging neckline looking helplessly outraged by several leering men. The net effect is to make the woman look ridiculous.

Even when readers raise fundamental question about the contest of the magazine, it is not thought necessary to reply. The comment made with deep seriousness is ignored and the magazine pursues its old policy unheeding. On the other hand, those suggestions which further strengthen the framework within which these magazines operate are acted upon. For instance, the "Unknown Beauties of India" column was started at the suggestion of a reader. In *Eve's Weekly*, letters are briefly answered by the editor but again questions are never thrown open for debate. So all one gets is the editor's personal opinion on the issue and there the matter ends.

In *Sarita* we have the significant phenomenon of an overwhelming majority of writers and letter writers being male. Thus the breakdown is: 4 out of 11 letters and 9 out of 25 articles by women in November 1977; 5 out of 18 letters and 5 out of 25 articles by women in November 1978; 4 out of 11 letters and 6 out of 21 articles by women in October 1979. The trend is clear. In *Sarita*, there are three pages for letters and debate is more seriously conducted but the woman reader has been more absolutely reduced to a force-fed recipient.

The overall attitude to readers is that they had better remain readers. Their participation is only required in entering contests, answering occasional quizzes, cutting out and following paper patterns, and solving crossword puzzles. The shying away from discussions is evident in the space allotted to letters. It is 3/4 page in *Femina* and 1/4 in *Eve's Weekly*, which divides them into two sections- one for general letters and the other for reactions to specific features. The space for letters is fixed and never overflows while for recipes, the minimum space in both magazines is three pages and this constantly expands into five or seven at festive seasons or for

special cookery features. Similarly, the minimum space for fashion is five of six pages which is often expanded.

The aim is to daze readers into passive spectators absorbing images rather than to activate them. Because an active equation with readers would threaten the flimsy structure of "happy womanhood" sought to be upheld by these magazines. The experience of too many readers would demolish this structure completely.

### **Changing and Staying the Same – The Vicious Circle**

While what goes by the name of women's education fosters the habit of mindless "mugging", light reading of the "women's magazine" type encourages the practice of "skimming through". The effect on women's mind is that the habit of concentrating on reading material is never allowed to develop. The mind accustomed to a diet of coloured images and Mills and Boon type romance over a period of years, not only becomes enfeebled but crippled – unable to focus or actively interact with and criticize reading material. The analytical power is lost and only the absorbent capacity remains – the ability to remember small details which grows with systematic "following a pattern" whether it be that of a cardigan or that of a story with an expected "happy ending." However, the fact that readers refuse to uncritically swallow all that is doled out to them, that they resist all the debilitating, dissipating effects of the mass media is the most hopeful sign.

Claiming to be "concerned, involved, alive", these magazines do not say "concerned with what", "involved with what." However, ironically enough, the "changing image" of women sought to be projected by these magazines is not just an image but a reality. Readers are in fact coming alive to their own concerns and also to the games that the consumer-oriented mass media try playing at their expenses.

— *Manushi Collective*