

# THE SEMIOTICS OF MEDIA, THE PROJECTION OF WOMEN IDENTITIES & THE SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

*One fruitful line of research has been to explore the working of print media and for this semiotic images in the magazines and the “Ideologies” that are associated with these semiotic images have always been a vast subject of interest. To date, frequent research in this field has been carried out in Western countries and on English Magazines. In contrast to it, this paper purports to explore the ideology (ies) and femininity (ies) in Pakistani women magazines i.e. a very popular genre among women in Pakistan and hence it looks at it in local context. This paper, in particular looks at distinctive semiotic features that plays a pivotal role in the publicity and popularity of these magazines among its readers. This study employs qualitative approach and uses random sampling for data collection and semiotic analysis for data analysis. The data is collected over a period of three months (Nov 2006-Jan 2007) out of two magazines (Khwaateen Digest and Shuaa) that made a total of six magazines. Analysis of the data throws light on the fact that women magazines are more than only semiotic and linguistic constructs. They are constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the ideologies and identities of its targeted audiences. The results of this study benefits to the people working in the field not only of Sociolinguistics, but also it is of great interest for Inter-disciplinary studies such as; Gender Studies, Culture Studies and Media Studies.*

**Keywords:** *Semiotics, Ideology, Femininity, Projection, Identities, Women Magazines*

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## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

With the advancement of modern era, media has emerged as a powerful tool to construct or deconstruct, shape or reshape, invent or reinvent certain ideological patterns. This research paper looks at sociological aspect of these media representations in popular women magazines i.e. Khwateen Digest and Schuaa (Nov 2006 to Jan 2007). It is aimed at analyzing not only the construction of femininities but also the formation of ideology (ies) that is formed through these popular women magazines. In this paper, the researcher deconstructs the genre of popular Pakistani women magazines as multi-voiced genre that is persistently constructing feminine ideology (ies) and shaping women identities (femininities) by the use of the powerful tool of semiotics. Women magazines have been regarded as ‘semiotic construct’ that are meant for dazzling gazes “the text as the semiotic product of an institution with its own priorities, interests and assumptions, all of which come together in a product which offers particular discourse(s) on femininity” (Eggins and Ledema 1997).

Semiotics in simple words may be regarded as the study of signs, whereas ideology in common sense is used to refer to any set of beliefs, which appear natural and logical to the people who hold those beliefs. Ideology is not a pejorative term, because everything we know and think is in fact an ideology. The system of signs i.e. semiotics is not an unbiased reflection of the world, but a product of the ideologies of our culture. It means that people’s perception of certain issues and concepts can be influenced by language. Ideologies consist of special representations that define the social identity of a group, that is, its shared beliefs about its fundamental conditions and ways of existence and reproduction (Van Dijk 2006).

Ideology is a term developed in the Marxist tradition to talk about how cultures are structured in ways that enable the group holding power to have the maximum control with the minimum of conflict. This concept of ideological domination leads us to Gramsci’s

concept of 'power and hegemony' (Sharma and Gupta 2009). He defines hegemony as a cruel form of power and later he adds a new dimension to this concept and implies that hegemony is 'domination by consent' because all of us accept the things as they are, as if no one has courage to raise voice or say anything. It may start with simple domination 'ideological domination' (Gramsci 1971 cited in Sharma and Gupta 2009) and it may go to the extent of usurpation of rights. [He defines hegemony as a cruel form of power and later he adds a new dimension to this concept and speculates that hegemony is 'domination by consent' because all of us accept the things as they are, as if no one has courage to rise voice or say anything]. Fairclough (1995) believes that hegemony is the predominance in and the dominance of political, ideological and cultural domains of society.

Femininity in common sense refers to the 'womanness of a woman' and as it is a stereotype that is constructed in the society, so it may also refer to 'being/doing a woman'. According to (Litosseliti 2006) "gender can be represented, indexed as well as performed". This social construction of gender further leads to the construction of femininities and masculinities. Mills (1995) differentiates between the past and the present view of femininity and says that in the past femininity referred to one's appearance to the detriment of one's intellect and in today's world it refers to the range of stereotypical behaviours that can be ironised and played with. Femininity is generally understood as concept that belongs to someone's private circle of life. Keeping this in mind, although all the private values such as being compassionate, concerned about physical looks, emotional excess, ineptitude with regard to non-domestic tasks have been prominent indicators of femininity; yet with the changes in the last twenty five years in relation to women's employment within the public sphere, these obvious so called markers of femininity are getting difficult to preserve. The changing role of women for example, the excessive social mobility, the right of selection even with reference to their marriages, divorces and conception has had vast impacts on the preconceived notions of

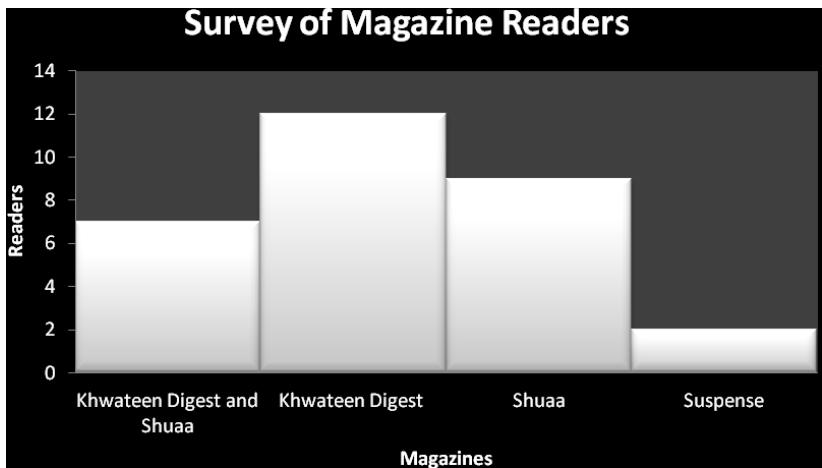
women. Based on the above views it can be argued that femininity is concerned with the concepts and the connotations that are associated with a woman and are expected from her in this patriarchal society.

Data for this research was collected by carrying out a random survey to know about the most popular women magazines. Taylor, Sinha, and Ghoshal (2006) say that surveys are concerned with the collection of information from a specified target population i.e. a defined group of people in whom interest is expressed. And for data analysis, the technique of semiotic analysis is employed. This research paper will probe some of the following questions:

1. How semiotics (i.e. more impressionistic than fiction), used in these popular women magazines, marginalizes the roles of women in all walks of life?
2. How these powerful representations deconstruct / enhance the ideology (ies) of its readers?
3. How due to all such type of representations asymmetrical, gendered and sexist social patterns and practices are formed?

This research is significant because it focuses on one of the most popular genres in Pakistani society among women i.e. magazine. According to a random survey that was carried out at the data collection stage of this research, 30 samples (the women readers) were asked about the most popular magazines and the results drawn are as follows:

**Table 1: Survey of Magazine Readers**



The above survey (Table 1) very clearly throws light on the fact that Khwateen Digest and Shuaa are very popular magazines among the women who read these magazines. It also pinpoints the fact that only literate women (who knows only basics of reading) read these magazines. So far as the access and poor financial conditions of women are concerned who cannot afford to buy magazines monthly, observation of researcher shows that they borrow it from their acquaintances. Another important reason for carrying out this research is that this leisure time, pleasure and satisfaction giving reading of these magazines is having immensely strange impact in forming the thinking of the women readers. Because these magazines although apparently are written for women, but still all the long way they come from, is patriarchal. The setting, the mode each and every thing is set from a male’s perspective.

**ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

The analysis of women magazines is carried out by analysing the three important components of these magazines:

- 1. Magazine Covers
- 2. Ads in the magazines
- 3. Pencil sketches in the magazines

## MAGAZINE COVERS

While analyzing the cover of the magazines Khwateen Digest and Shuaa (Nov 2006 to Jan 2007), I found that the images on the title pages are loaded with deep meanings. Women magazines are generally seen as part of the network of discourses which maintain capitalist-patriarchal definitions of femininity. Although on the title page, there is no use of linguistic expressions except for the title and the sub-title. But it still carries suggestive ideology in it. I will first deal with the linguistic expression on the title page or the magazine cover.

The title of one magazine is “شعاع” and its sub title is “بہنوں کا اپنا ماہنامہ”. Critically analyzing it I can see that the very name of the title denotes that the magazine is “a ray or a beam”. But it connotes as if this magazine is “a ray of hope, of fulfillment, of some sort of satisfaction, or of inspiration for its ideal readers. And very immediately the producer of this magazine determines its consumers in its sub-title. In this way this magazine from its very first impression suggests that this magazine is meant for women generally and for sisters specifically. In this way the ideal readers of this magazine are being reduced to feminine community. The magazines excel in making the readers believe (that) she is an autonomous individual, a voluntary member of classless community of beautiful and successful women, say Eggins and Ledema (1997). McCracken (1993) suggests that ‘women, at the magazines’ luring, experience sometimes real and sometimes utopian sense of community while reading these texts, confident of participating in normal, expected feminine culture’.

The title of second magazine is “خواتین ڈائجسٹ”. The word Khwateen (women) once again is determining its ideal readers and ‘Digest’ word denotes ‘a brief account, a summary’ (Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary). But at the same time this title echoes like ‘this magazine is something that women can digest. In the same way the sub-title of the magazine “خواتین اور دوشیزاؤں کے لئے اپنی طرز کا پہلا ماہنامہ”

is once again constraining its ideal readers i.e. 'women and virgins'. By using the two different terms, the editor of these magazines is consciously referring to the age of women and assumes that its ideal readers are women of older age group as well as virgins. The word 'virgin' refers to the young, beautiful, unmarried and chaste women. So the very title has classified and categorized women in different phases according to their age and the characteristics that are expected from them in this patriarchal society.

Now coming to the pictures on magazine cover, the researcher found that the magazine cover always has the picture of a woman. Mostly that woman is of younger age and has the appearance like "show-piece" or "model". These women are shown in different postures highlighting their angular bodies suggesting certain messages through their body language.

**Figure 1 Images of women on Magazine Cover**  
(Source: Khwateen Digest Dec 2006)



Apparently these embellished representations are meant for female community. But in reality these are quite far from the mundane reality of life of an average Pakistani woman. The models on the title page are shown wearing heavy jewellery as a bride would

wear in everyday life of Pakistani feminine community. The pictures of women on title page are always in bright, glaring and shinny costumes with the application of lots of cosmetic products to enhance their beauty and to make them more attractive for onlookers.

**Figure 2: Images of Women on Magazine Cover**  
(Source: Shuaa Digest Nov 2006)



All this description and the representation of women on the magazine cover of these magazines suggest that this is marginalizing the roles of women because women in these pictures are restricted to only being “show piece” and with all this adornment, it is not physically possible to do the household works. These images are unrealistic and artificial, as it is not possible for an average reader to look like these representations. These images carry ideological meanings because it succeeds in inducing and persuading its ideal readers to look like them.

## **ADS IN THE MAGAZINES**

According to Goffman (1987) ‘the task of the advertiser is to favorably dispose viewers to his product, his means, by and large, to show the sparkling version of that product in the context of



glamorous events. I will analyse the ads under these headings: Objectification, Orientation to Appearance, Heterosexuality, Constraining roles and domains.

## OBJECTIFICATION

Semiotically analysing the ads in these magazines I found that the representation of women in these magazines can be identified with the products. The objectification of women in advertisements even finds expressions in how extensively they are used as objects: as fruits, colourful, juicy and tempting to eat; as animals, identified with the untamed, the natural, the impulsive and the uncivilized. Even if women in advertisements are stylized and beautiful, they are presented as objects, rather than conscious subjects with an autonomous existence. As such, women are represented as available for use, exploitation, mistreatment and abandonment (Leemish 1997 cited in Zubair and Sheikh 2004). And exactly as ads are ideological representations having the values and beliefs of a specific culture where these ads are produced, in the same way the semiotic images in these magazines are loaded with ideology having certain messages for women and as a consequence affecting firstly their thinking and then making it an indispensable part of their life and then in the end forming and shaping their identity.

These ads also follow AIDA concept of commercialism where A.... is Attention, I...Interest, D....Desire and, A....Action. It describes the persuasive mental process where like the selling products firstly these ads seek the ATTENTION of its ideal readers i.e. women of almost all age groups. Then the readers start to take INTEREST in these ads. They start to identify themselves with the pictures and when they see these glamorized, utopian and idealized representations, they unconsciously develop a DESIRE to look like them. So in the end of this process, there are the actual ACTIONS of carrying out their styles e.g. applying the skin whitening creams, their gaudy dresses, and so on. What McCracken (1993) identifies as the major function of these magazines is that 'Women's magazines

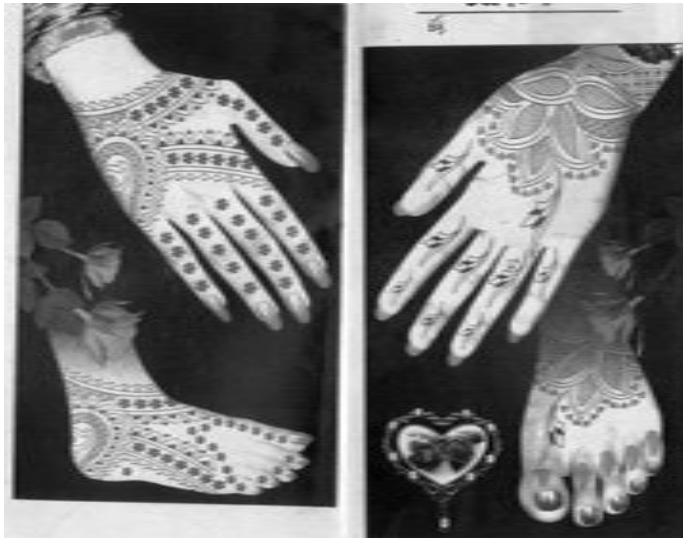
repeatedly succeed in linking desire to consumerism’ cited in Eggins and Ledema (1997). The gestures of the models in these ads are sexually suggestive. They are in passive pose having fixed smile on their artificial seeming faces. All these things are nothing but the object of male gaze.

**Figure 3 Objectification of Woman**  
(Source: Khwateen Digest Dec 2006)



### ORIENTATION TO APPEARANCE

The main focus in these ads is on the representation of women's appearance. In these ads each and every part of a woman's body is highlighted. As we can see in the following ad that the body of woman is pieced up. The hands and feet are embellished with henna suggesting as if it is the main concern of its targeted audiences. And researcher's personal observation also shows that women who read these magazines copy the same style of henna on their hands and feet in real life.

**Figure 4 Pieced up Bodies (Source: Shuaa Nov 2006)**

Mostly in ads, women are portrayed in portrait shots suggesting passiveness and immobility denying any kind of engagement in any sort of action. Not only this, but also most of the ads are of skin fairness creams representing the white and fair-skinned ladies having younger and fresh looks for inducing audiences. This ad has farfetched ideology and social practice behind it. In Pakistani society it is a set ideology that woman should be fair. Firstly because an average woman wants to come up to the norm i.e. 'Heterosexual White Middle Class Western Woman' and they are always fair complexioned. As our society is dominantly influenced by Western community, so in order to come up to their standard women have to be fair skinned even by applying certain cosmetics on their skin. Secondly because it is a discursive social practice that a fair skinned girl can easily get married in a youthful age – a norm for the girls to exist in this patriarchal society. So women have to use all these products advertised in the ads in order to be 'presentable' in this male dominating society. So persuasive function of ads has orientation towards the appearance of women's bodies.

**Figure 5 Fairness...A Standard (Source: Shuaa Dec 2006)**

## HETEROSEXUALITY

The concept of heterosexuality is emphasized time and again in the ads of these magazines. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary it is to feel sexually attracted to the people of opposite sex. The researcher herself being a part of Pakistani society has observed that here heterosexual relationship is the only acceptable norm in man-woman relationships. This is the only destination of woman. And so a woman is expected to be a good wife, a good mother and a good daughter. A woman who meets these standards of patriarchal society is successful woman and one who possesses good moral character. But again what is a good moral character; virginity/ chastity or sexual abstinence prior to marriage/ outside marriage? And if a woman is not able to fulfill these criteria, she is considered as a bad woman and one who possesses loose character. The ideology in these ads preaches heterosexuality as the norm for women using them as marriage materials. The following ad reflects that a family is of primary concern for a woman. She does not have

her individual identity. Her identification and the recognition in the society is just because of her family.

**Figure 6 Heterosexuality as a Norm**  
(Source: Shuaa Digest Jan 2007)



## CONSTRAINING ROLES AND DOMAINS

These ads clearly categorize and classify the roles of women. It is quite evident from the magazines that all the ads them it are related to the domains of women where the roles of women have been constrained and restricted. Most of the ads carry food images and magazines have the regular sections of cooking recipes. So these ads are in a way constraining the roles and domain of women that is the house and the kitchen where they should always be ready to serve the family. This is how these ads unconsciously inject into women's thinking that this is their only identity, their only destiny and the only reason to exist in this patriarchal society. And finally this process forms the feminine ideology.

**Figure 7 Woman and Her so-called Domains**  
(Source: Khwateen Digest Jan 2007)



### PENCIL SKETCHES IN THE MAGAZINES

Pencil sketches are abundant in these magazines. These pencil sketches are shown on the content page of every magazine. And whenever a story or short story starts, there are two pencil sketches (one on the title page of short story and the other one on the next page of the same story). These pencil sketches carry ideological meanings like ads. These pencil sketches are suggestive as they depict the whole story merely by the lines in these sketches.

In these sketches women are portrayed in the most stereotypical postures wearing long and traditional dresses having startling and dazzling looks on their faces. Their features are always sharp and their eyes day dreaming and waiting for a prince charming. Mostly either a man or a child will be there, although in the background but still exercising the same power and authority that he has in reality. Again the women in these sketches belong to young age groups exposing youthful looks and seductive expressions on their faces.

Drawing on Goffman's (1987) analysis of gender commercials in the book *Gender Advertisements*, I have analysed these pencil sketches using his terminology.

### **Relative Size**

Gender discrimination can be seen in these pencil sketches. The pencil sketches where a man and a woman are presented, it can be noted that the man will always be the heightened one. This apparent physical difference causes great breach in the attitudes of the people in this male dominating society towards women. The relative small size of a woman makes her inferior in this patriarchal society and the researcher analysed that intentionally people make this difference prevalent in the pencil sketches. And further this difference sets the ideology of women. And as women try to identify themselves with these pencil sketches, this ideology works and women unintentionally develop a sense of inferiority complex.

### **The Feminine Touch**

The feminine touch is another way of exposing different parts of female bodies i.e. fragmented bodies (McCracken 1993), (Zubair and Sheikh (2004)). Most of the sketches are given the feminine touch. This feminine touch is significant perhaps because as Goffman (1987) says 'just barely touching of the kind that might be significant between two electrically charged bodies'. This feminine touch is once again to induce the onlookers to itself. For instance, when a woman is portrayed in sexual pose that is also connected to a violent image, we continue to connect women, sex, and violence even as we "reject" the message, says Duffy (1994).

### **Function Ranking**

In these sketches we see that there are great differences in the functions that are assigned to man and women. In this picture (fig-8) we see that the man is getting ready to go outside perhaps to do some work. And the woman in the sketch is sitting in passive pose at one place. She is lost in some thoughts and on the other

place, she is sad and it seems as if she is thinking on some household works. So a man is practical and is busy in public affairs and a woman is represented as nothing but the emotional creature. 'Women are sexy; Men are successful' says (Nilsen 1990). Witkin and his colleagues found that females were more likely to see the stimulus and surrounding field as a whole while males were more likely to separate the stimulus from its context. He named the behavior of males as *field independence*, thereby perpetuating and strengthening the image of male supremacy; he named the female behavior as *field dependence* and thereby perpetuated and strengthened the image of female inferiority (Spender 1998). The appearance of the man suggests as if he is an intellectual person. His dressing and posture suggests that the person is professional one. His patronizing look and the frowns on his forehead reflect the power and the authority that the man wields in the life of the women presented in the sketch. The position of his is spread but tightly closed lips show his taunting and degrading attitude towards the women presented in the sketch. The woman in the same sketch seems to be the sexual object and the object of pleasure and satisfaction for that man.

**Figure 8 Functional Domains of Men and Women**  
(Source: Shuaa Digest Jan 2007)





## The Family

The basic unit of an average Pakistani community is family. And woman is the one on whom depends the entire family. In these sketches the reproductive roles of women are emphasized within the structure of patriarchal family. A woman in order to be respectable in this male dominating society must be able to bear children. A sexual division of labour in the reproduction of ideology thus appears. Men produce it directly through the control of public speech, and women indirectly through the reproduction of children in the institution of the family (Kaplan 1986 In (Cameron 1998)).

**Figure 9 Family as the unit of patriarchal hierarchy**  
(Source: Shuaa Digest Nov 2006)



## Ritualisation of Sub-ordination

Being subordinate is ritualized in almost all the communities of the world. But in Pakistan it is much more evident. At some places subordination is the sign of humility and giving reverence to others. Whereas head erect is a sign of unashamedness. So at such places male take the advantage of subordination. As in these pencil sketches most of the time men are presented in the backgrounds and at lower positions than women. But still this physical lowering down makes them superior in patriarchal scenario. Because the

whole discourse is patriarchal and it is the set ideology of people that in every case men have supremacy over women.

### **Licensed Withdrawal**

Mostly in these pencil sketches the women are shown crying in desperate and pensive moods. This apparent despair is the reflection of their internal feelings where they feel that they have no identity in this patriarchal society. This licensed withdrawal psychologically leaves women in vacuum where they have no one to console them. As a result they have to depend on others (obviously men) who are present there.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This research shows that the female images are more in numbers than the rest of the images. These images pre-dominate male images, the images of beauty products, images of food and children. And the reason of abundance of female images is that these magazines are meant for women readers. The message from these magazines that a reader assumes is that women are for men, for raising children, for using the beauty products in order to be 'presentable' for men and for keeping his house i.e. (cooking food, cleaning and washing etc). These are all the stereotypes of femininity that are having serious repercussions on feminine identity. Semiotic analysis shows that semiotic representations of women in ads, pencil sketches and on the magazine cover is really humiliating and disgusting. Although apparently, these magazines are meant for female consumers, but the sexuality and the seductive poses suggest that this is meant for male gaze. Another thing to be noted is that the pencil sketches and ads are all identical. The portraits of females in the ads and in these pencil sketches can be compared with each other in terms of the women representation and in terms of the ideology that they depict. As most of the semiotic representations are concerned with women as passive recipients, so these representations marginalize the role of women

in all walks of life. It marginalizes the role of women from two perspectives:

- The women are shown wearing heavy jewellery, and with this jewellery and the dresses, it is not physically possible to participate in the activities of life.
- The semiotic images are impressionistic in the sense that the whole range of images that is present in these magazines is related to the so-called domains of the women. The food images, the images of beauty products-all are related to women-thus suggesting that woman's domain is nothing but these things.

Data analyses very clearly show that these media representations are deconstructing as well as building up the new ideologies of its ideal readers. This research paper also has implications for further research in this field. Because it is just the pioneering work and there is lot to be done in the genre of Pakistani women magazines. One thing more that the researcher found is that these magazines are stigmatized. The attitude of the people towards these magazines is very negative. Even when I used to carry these magazines, I often came across the remarks like: "Have you also started reading these magazines?" An element of shame is associated with these magazines. That's why most of the magazine readers read these magazines secretly by hiding it from others. A research can be carried out on this aspect of magazines as well.

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