

# Women and The Politics of Modernity: An Analysis of Contemporary Women's Magazines

Veenus<sup>1</sup> Dr. Dharmendra Singh Dhull<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, NIMS University, India

<sup>2</sup>Asst. Prof. of English, CRM Jat College, Haryana, Hisar

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender and the Politics of Modernity: The New Indian Woman in Four Contemporary Women's Magazines Politically and methodologically, this assertive participation of women in right wing campaigns, pulled many of our assumptions into a state of crisis for we have always seen women as victims of violence rather than its perpetrators and we have always perceived their public, political activity and interest as a positive, liberating force.<sup>1</sup>

The normativity of the upper-caste, middle-class Hindu woman is something we take for granted today.<sup>2</sup> However, it is my contention that the formation of a global middle-class in the post- liberalization 90s has subtly disturbed this normativity and set in place a new, although a related one. Dominating the imaginary of the 90s is the figure of the globalized, cosmopolitan Indian, a subject distanced from overtly "communal" markings, from the markings of caste, religion, region and language. While the logic of official secularism in post-independence India had always pushed for such a distancing, the nineties have certainly intensified this process. Within the altered imaginary of a post- liberalization India, the upper-caste Hindu woman and the "educated yet traditional" middle-class woman have come to be re- placed by a figure who, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as the "new woman". The new woman exists in a depoliticized magic space, in a space which, for the lack of a better word, we might call modernity. While she is apparently unmarked in terms of caste, religion and language, a complex and elaborate semiotic system operates to produce her as essentially "Indian" and, in many ways, as the normative new Indian.

Despite the emergence of the "new woman" however, other normative figures which are constructed as representing Indian- ness continue to form part of our national imaginary. In the nineties, we see not only the

formation and the gradual norming of the New woman<sup>1</sup>; we also see the reinforcing of the normativity of the communally marked upper-caste Hindu woman. This reinforcing takes place in many different ways.

One is through an overt or subtle public interpellation and constitution of a Hindu female subject. Notions of "middle-class-ness", of family, and community are often invoked during this process. This chapter attempts to examine the

constitution of these two different, yet, in many ways, related and simultaneous subjectivities in some contemporary women's magazines. *Manqai* and *Manqavar Malar* The Hindu Subject Monthlies published from Chennai, both *Manqai* (which means "Woman") and *Manavar Malar* (which would translate roughly as "A Special Magazine for women") first appeared in 1975. Edited by Vishwanathan Reddy, *Manqai* has a circulation of 49,437 (Source: National Readership Survey, 1995). *Manqavar Malar* is edited by Manjula and Ramesh has a circulation of 49,437 (Source: National Readership Survey, 1995).

The two magazines employ the same generic mix which one has come to associate with women's magazines, carrying fiction (both the short story as well as serialized fiction) and articles on cooking and beauty care. However, what strikes us as different about *Mangai* and *Mangayar Malar* are certain articles and columns which invoke the authority of upper-caste Hindu male religious leaders *Mangai*. for instance, regularly runs an advice column by Jayendra Saraswathi of the Kancheepuram Mutt. Jayendra answers reader's questions which, as we shall see, range from the realm of the spiritual and the sacred to that of the profane from within a highly ritualistic upper-caste Hinduism. Thus, Malarkodi of Thiruvallur writes to *Mangai*'s column "Shri Jayendirar Badilgal" ("Shri

Jayendra's Answers") asking:

Can one adorn the deity of the Kalikaambal temple in Chennai with a garland of lemons? Which day of the week would be the most suitable? (Mangai July 1993: 11)

And Jayendra Saraswathi replies:

As a general rule, Tuesdays and Fridays are good for any form of Kali. It is customary to garland Durgai amman with lemons. (Mangai July 1993: 11)

Mythili Vijayaraghavan of Madras asks :Is it proper to fast an entire day for any kind of Viratam? Or is it enough to fast till 12 noon? (Mangai July 1993: 11)

Jayendra is ready with his answer

:It is auspicious to fast the whole day on ekadasi. On auspicious days like pradosham you can fast until the completion of the puja and then eat. (Mangai July 1993: 11)

Rama of Tanjavur has an interesting question:

Our backyard is really spacious. I wish to buy and raise some rabbits. May I humbly request the guru to direct me? (Mangai July 1993: 11)

Jayendra however does not quite approve. His reply is rather cryptic:

One must not raise rabbits at home (Manqai.July 1: 11)

It is significant that the column should cover such a range of concerns. That Jayendra Saraswathi, whom the Brahmins consider an incarnation of God, should address himself to queries on rabbits says something about the wide reach of upper-caste Hindu religious authority and the consequent vesting of every aspect of life with a religious, ritual significance. The voice of the upper-caste Hindu religious icon is made available to us through the relatively modern technologies of print and photography. The advice column discussed above, for instance, is accompanied by the photograph of a smiling Jayendra Saraswathi (see Appendix III, 1). Pictures of Hindu deities often make it to the cover page of an obvious reminder that of the magazine's focus and its intended audience (Appendix III, 2 a). Photographs are also employed by an article in one particular issue of Manqayar Malar which gives detailed instructions on how to perform "Annakashtami Viratam" and describes the benefits ensuing from it (May 1993: 116). The writer begins by declaring that it is the wish of Shri Ganapathi Sachidananda Swamikal that a puja accompanied by a "viratam" (fast) be popularised. According to Shri Ganapathi Sachidananda Swamikal, the couples who

performed this puja to Anakadevi, an incarnation of goddess Lakshmi, would be blessed with great good fortune. A photograph of the Puja samagri (coconuts, betel leaves, flowers and so on) arranged around the idol of Anakadevi is supposed to aid us in performing this puja (see Appendix III, 2 b).

It would be an interesting exercise to reflect on why it is that magazines meant for women should focus so intensely on a ritualistic Hinduism. Also, what does the popularity of such magazines signify in the context of a state which, as we shall discuss in Chapter Five, has historically asserted a non-Brahmin, anti-Hindu rhetoric? One might argue that within the framework of nationalist thought, upper caste Hindu women have always been seen as the bearers of culture and tradition, as gatekeepers of what Partha Chatterjee has referred to as the "inner domain of cultural sovereignty" (1993: 6). However, Mangai Manaavar Malar also signals a Hindutva that has quietly but firmly begun to take root in Tamilnadu a Hindutva which, increasingly, is beginning to gather women of all castes as well as non-Brahmins into its fold.

Critics such as M.S.S Pandian, Geetha, T.V Jayanthi, S.V Rajadurai and C.J Fuller have described the resurgence of Brahmin hegemony and Hindu fundamentalism in contemporary Tamilnadu. C.J Fuller traces the striking change in the politics of religion with a reversal of the early Dravidian movement's hostility towards Brahminical, Sanskrit Hinduism to the coming to power of the AIADMK under the leadership of Jayalalitha in June 1991 (1996). He points out that a Chief minister's Temple Renovation and Maintenance Fund" was set up not long after Jayalalitha came to power. Jayalalitha also announced that a Tamilnadu Institute of Vedic Sciences" would be set up to train temple priests in the vedas and to undertake translations of Sanskrit texts into Tamil. When this was criticized by the DMK, she argued that seats would be reserved in this institute for SCs and STs and that this would open up temple priesthood to the lower castes and that translations from Sanskrit into Tamil would benefit ordinary Tamils. Fuller points out that the institute, the setting up of which clearly negated the ideology of the early Dravidian movement, was presented as though it were a "logical continuation" of it (1996: 19). A resurgence of Sanskrit learning during this period is also obvious from the establishment of the Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Vidyalyaya and International Library as well as the Indian Institute of Indology.

The Hindu Munnani (The Hindu Front) has been the principal organization articulating a Hindu revivalism in Tamilnadu. Hostile to both Muslims as well as Christians, the Munnani organized the first ever Vinayaka Chaturthi procession in Madras on September 2, 1990. This was

obviously an imitation of the Maharashtrian version of the festival. In Madras, the celebration provoked Hindu-Muslim hostilities on more than one occasion. Both Pandian and Fuller point out that the 1992 Vinayaka Chaturthi procession was marked by pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim slogans. Slogans calling for support for the proposed building of the Ram temple at Ayodhya and slogans denigrating Pakistan and Bab Masjid were heard (Pandian "Death in a City of Fools", 1992; Fuller 1996). The Hindu Munnani also issued statements in support of Jayalalitha's temple policy. Allied with the BJP, the Munnani has attracted the support of many Brahmin organizations in Pandian has argued elsewhere that the new strategy for Brahminism in Tamilnadu to regain the power it lost with the anti-Brahmin rhetoric of the Dravidian movement has been the invoking of a "pan-Hindu identity, independent of caste distinctions" ("From Exclusion to Inclusion" 1990: 1938). Hindu communal organizations such as the Hindu Munnani, the VHP, Jan Kalyan, Jan Jagran, Tamilnadu Hindu Temple Protection Committee, and the Asthiga Samaj work by emphasizing a collective Hindu identity and underplaying caste divisions. According to Pandian, the conflict is no longer between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, but between the Hindus (under Brahmin leadership) and the other religious minorities.

How, one might ask, is the spectre of Hindutva connected to the advice columns run by Hindu religious leaders in women's magazines which claim no allegiance to the BJP-VHP-RSS combine? Jayendra Saraswathi, moreover, does not, in any way, conform to our notions of the rabid Hindu fundamentalist. More importantly, given that the intended readers of and Manaayar Malar are "apolitical", middle-class women whose activities are ideally understood to be restricted to the private sphere of the it seems a little far-fetched to visualize them as active political subjects. However, as recent scholarship has demonstrated to us, the Hindu right is marked by the increasing presence and participation of women.

Much of this scholarship, in fact, is concerned with theorizing the agency of women in the Hindu right. As Tanika Sarkar has argued, women's participation in the politics of Hindutva began with the formation of the Rashtrasevika Samiti, the women's wing of the Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) in 1936. Since then, Sarkar tells us, the Samiti has a low public profile, working largely through informal networks, befriending the family and advising her to always defer to the decisions of the family.

The Samiti therefore has a long-term goal and works through an intensive ideological mobilization of middle-class women. Mass mobilization is not the issue and middle-class women form the most important

constituency. Sarkar argues that the Sevika often establishes an informal forum for the discussion of religious themes woven into a larger political fabric (1995: 201). Tanika Sarkar has argued that religion gives women "access to a world of meanings enclosed in epics, allegories or other forms of religious texts that she can interpret and dwell on and thereby transcend her own immediate and closed world of limited experience" (1995: 201-202),

This might well be part of the reason why and Mangavar Malar choose to operate as modern-day religious texts, guiding readers on how to ritually organize their lives and displacing an upper-caste woman's ritualistic practices (normally carried out in the private sphere) on to a shared and visible public sphere, constituted in this case by the print interpellating its readers as Hindu women, in making certain upper-caste religious practices normative for all Hindus,

Mangai and Mangayar Malar are clearly connected to a process of molecular mobilization, a mobilization of middle-class women (Brahmin and non-Brahmin) as Hindu women.

## **WOMAN'S ERA; THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN**

Edited by Vishwa Nath and published by Delhi Press Patra Prakashan, woman's era has a total readership of eight lakhs twenty six thousand, out of which three lakhs twenty five thousand are men (National Readership Survey, 1995). Most of its readers belong to the age group 25-34. The Patra Prakashan, which has cornered the women's magazine market in the country, publishes a chain of magazines in Hindi and English. Among its popular Hindi magazines for women are Saritha and Grihashobha. Advertisements claim that Woman's Era is India's largest selling woman's magazine in English and that it is the magazine that "wise women trust and admire".

The publisher's blurb describes it as a magazine, that "carries women-oriented fiction, articles of general interest as well as on family affairs, exotic, food recipes, latest trend in fashion and films" Woman, Eras produced, as a "clean", practical" Which draws upon "experience" and to advise "ordinary" middle-class women who are looking for ways to cope with "typical women's problems", in-laws, troublesome guests, a husband with a roving eye,

A fine slide occurs between interests and the welfare of the family, and what gets constructed as the concerns, the of all Indian women are, typically, cooking and housekeeping, child care, marital harmony, maintaining a good relationship with one's in-laws and so on.

One reason for the magazine's popularity appears to be its successful rendering of a commonsensical understanding of what constitutes a middle-class woman's problems, the "reality" of their lives. Working from within the limits set by this common-sense, it seeks to advise readers on how best to "adjust" to these "realities".

Woman's Era naturalizes marriage as part of a good, "Indian" tradition and constructs it as the basis of a middle-class Indian woman's existence:

Marriage may be termed old-fashioned by the feminists, but it is the basis of a stable social life...Some people influenced by Western ideology would claim that marriage is not absolutely essential. Feminists and several women's groups also claim that there is no need for people to get married and to lead settled lives. In America and several European countries, many couples do not get married legally and with a wedding ceremony, but just stay together in a live-in relationship...

These relationships flourish in Western countries, but in India, such an attitude would only be looked upon as very "loose living" with no values and meaning. India is a country steeped in traditional beliefs, culture and tradition, where marriage is looked upon as the only mode of adults living together.

(Nawaz, Heera, "Why Marriage?", Woman's Era October 1 1991: 83).

Nawaz makes two claims; one, that marriage is Indian and living together is western and, two, that "feminists and several women's groups" are anti-marriage. She thus constructs feminism as being part of a Bad Western Modernity, that goes against Indian tradition and, ultimately, works against the interests of women.

Articles and stories suggesting that romance is an expression of a transient sexuality that would naturally lead to societal and parental disapproval are commonplace in Woman's Era. In the same article quoted above, Nawaz argues:

...Since marriage is essential, if one opts for a love marriage, all the positive thinking will not work if one has made a bad selection, or, one has been tempted by plain good looks, sexuality (which is usually not long lasting) or just "love at first sight" which is usually transient and not permanent. (Nawaz 1991: 84)

Notions of stability and permanence are essential to the self-definition of the middle-class, a love marriage based on individual whim is obviously not quite safe. A "love marriage" is bound to be based on "temptation" and sexual attraction, and fated to be "transient", risky.

A short story titled "A Change for the Better" by Valsala Balakesari elaborates on this theme. The story revolves around the discord that threatens the inter-religious love marriage of the only daughter of a well-to-do Hindu family, and George, the eldest son of a middle-class Christian family.

A counselor figure in the form of college Meena, who is described as the "only person in those old days who had not been carried away by romantic notions and had urged Suruchi to think carefully before taking the plunge", saves the marriage by advising Suruchi to go back to her husband (Balakesari 1991, 16). In many ways, Meena is the sane middle-class figure who teaches the rich and therefore arrogant Suruchi the worth of middle-class values. In accusing Suruchi of not really loving George when she married him, Meena implies (like Heera Nawaz above) that romantic love is "false" :

"No you did not [love George]. Because if you had loved him, the question of religion would not have arisen you were carried away by all his adulation and worship and you only wanted to prove that you were a rebel, by marrying George. It was a matter of pride and prestige to you....if you love him now, think of him only as a man and a human being, not as a Christian or a Hindu..." (Balakesari, Valsala, "A Change for the Better", Woman's Era October 1 1991: 18).

Meena describes the agency that Suruchi shows in marrying George as a pointless desire to prove her rebelliousness. She posits a pure love that would be radically different from romantic love which Meena believes is self-centred. Love is seen as a humanizing force and the subject of pure love is understood as automatically secular, free from the mediating Factors of religion and community. In upholding of the human being, "not the Christian or the Hindu", the story is consciously. In its explicit coding of George as a Christian and Suruchi as a Hindu and in its emphasis on the class difference between the two, the story offers an advance, ready-made reason for their marital problems. Suruchi is fated to misread George as a Christian, to miss his essential

It takes extraordinary wisdom and insight to this out to Suruchi. The story is also about the waywardness of those like Suruchi who are not schooled into middle-class caution.

If live-in relationships and love-marriages are constructed as threats to a stable, middle-class Indian life, divorce is seen as representing the worst excesses of a Bad Western modernity. For instance, the column titled "I am a Divorcee" uses "true life" stories told to us by divorced women. In these stories, divorce and the "unhappiness"



which follows in its wake is understood to be the creation of a dangerous and anti-woman feminist agency. Inviting contributions to this column, the editor writes:

Are you a divorcee. . wish you'd not gone into it? Woman's Era would like to publish your story... This series, which is open to both men and women, aims at presenting before the readers the causes that lead to the breakdown of marriage and divorce, so that they can take care of their own lives and ensure a happy married life.

(Woman's Era June 2 1992: 81)

The editor clearly solicits divorce stories that express regret. Divorce is very clearly constructed as a woman's "problem" and the solution of course lies in her ability to "adjust" to her husband. In one particular divorce story, the narrator's husband resents her friendship with other men. Haunted by the pain of being neglected by his mother in childhood, he also insists that she resign her job to look after their baby. The narrator, who claims to have been a "staunch believer in women's liberation" in the past, refuses to do his bidding and her son dies owing to the carelessness of the nurse. Her husband is furious and sues for divorce. The narrator writes:

Even today, I often think about my wrecked marriage. And I ask myself whether my pride and my beliefs were more valuable than my home and my baby. Every time I get the answer: "No! "...I sincerely hope that nobody else will ever make the horrible mistake I made.

(Woman's Era March 2 1992: 78)

Stories like the one above, which are obviously used to illustrate a particular moral, appear more authentic because of the particular genre, the "true life" story/the personal confession, which they employ. The "I am a Divorcee" column is framed in a way that allows only for the telling of one particular kind of story, a story that maps the divorced woman's pain and loneliness, the economic ruin that invariably follows her divorce, her regret at having attempted to travel outside the comfortable confines of family and tradition, at her misplaced faith in feminism.

The flip-side companion to the "I am a Divorcee" column is a column called "How I Saved my Marriage". Asking for contributions to this particular column, the editor writes:

Does your husband (or wife) have an infuriating habit, a hot temper, miserly ways, a roving eye or a lazy disposition? But still, since he is your husband, you have learnt to cope with the situation and keep your marriage and home safe and happy. How did you manage this?

(Woman's Era November 2 1993: 44).

Feminism, "Western ideology", "live-in relationships" and divorce are invoked and constructed in Woman's Era as the dangerous, interlinked others of both the family as well as Indian tradition, as threats therefore to women themselves. In holding up the sanctity of marriage, family and community and in producing them as part of an overarching good Indian tradition, woman's Era would appear to share an ideological base with the Hindu right.

As Tanika Sarkar has argued, "hindu patriarchy, uncontaminated by western influence, has once again emerged as the embodiment of preferred values" and women in the Hindu right are required to forget about gender rights in order to maintain the supremacy of the Hindu community (1995: 212). Woman's Era makes similar demands on women, to "adjust" to their husbands and to their family, to preserve their marriages, so that a certain harmony in the larger community is preserved. While this community is never explicitly defined as Hindu, and the magazine's intended reader never overtly interpellated as a Hindu woman (unlike in the case of the two Tamil magazines we looked at earlier), notions of "family", "marriage" and "Indianness" which Woman's Era deploys may be read as part of the larger matrix of Hindutva. Femina; The Magazine for the "Up-Market Reader

The cover story by Andrea Pinto and Ivan Mendes in the August 15th, 1997 independence special issue of Femina profiles "fifty women who've made India". Along with Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha, one finds here the names of publisher Urvashi Butalia, ecologist Vandana Shiva, lawyer Flavia Agnes and Manushi editor Madhu Kishwar, women who are, in some senses, part of a "feminist" universe that most of us in the women's movement would recognize. What, one wonders, does a commercial glossy like Femina have in common with feminism? What one often finds troubling are the points of intersection between our own location as feminists and the "feminism" of Femina. Such a phenomenon, of a commercial women's magazine attempting to coopt feminism, is not unique to our context alone. In fact, the British critic Janice Winship, pointing to the "feminism" of many contemporary women's magazines in the United Kingdom, says:

In the absence of "the women's movement and clear-cut arguments on any given topic, the space is opened up for feminism becoming whatever you, the individual, make of it. This is all very well, perhaps, so long as those feminisms are not reduced to so many forms of ... individualism... (1987: 150)

Winship suggests that commercial women's magazines published in the United Kingdom such as Own and

Cosmopolitan "tolerate and support" some forms of feminism (1987: 21). However, they do not support the "combination of feminism and socialism" that magazines such as Spare Rib represent (1987: 21).

The question that is a sub-text in the work of critics like Winship is: 'Do we read the intersections between feminism and the commercial women's magazine as a dangerous co-option of feminism by the mainstream or as the opening up of energizing new spaces for Posing the question in such a way, asking essentially whether this phenomenon is a good thing or a bad thing is not very useful. It might be more productive to ask for instance how a magazine like Femina produces the effects of feminism. What does its engagement with feminism mean for the movement? How do we respond to the fact that Femina does not take an uncompromisingly anti-feminist stance in the way that Woman's Era does, for instance? How do we theorize the new subjectivity constituted by it?

As a magazine whose intended audience is the upper-middle class urban woman, Femina was among the first women's magazines in India to be in the genre of the "leisure and lifestyle" magazine rather than in the genre of the advice magazine. Today, we have a host of such magazines beginning with Hema Malini's New Woman (which is priced the same as Femina) and the much more expensive Verve. upmarket rival, Femina. Which

first hit the stands in 1959, has a total readership of eight lakhs sixty thousand. The fortnightly, which is published from Bombay by Pradeep Guha and is part of the Bennett and Times of India group, was edited by Vimala until 1993. Since then, it has been edited by Sathya Saran.

Columns such as "I am a Divorcee" and "How I Saved my Marriage" clearly code s Era as a magazine that is in the genre of the advice magazine, a conservative and non-modern magazine. Its support of "arranged marriages" and its critique of marriages" reinforces its marking as old-fashioned.<sup>7</sup> Era English is marked as whereas English is far more American, far more global.

It seems almost inevitable to read the identity of as constituted in opposition to that of s Such an opposition is partly inscribed into the different ways in which the two are marketed, and the ways in which their intended readers are constituted by the magazine industry. Till recently, Femina was marginally more expensive than Woman's Era. However, both magazines are now priced at It is not in terms of economic status, however, that the magazine industry defines and describes readership. In fact, the middle-class base of the readers of English magazines is taken as a given.

There are other bases on which the readership of magazines such as woman's Era and its rivals Femina and Savvy, are marked as different. Rebecca Pothan, Deputy Manager (Marketing) at the Madras office of Femina. claims for instance that while both Feroina as well as Woman's Era essentially cater to the same "economic group", the "psycho-social" profiles of their respective reader- ships are very different.<sup>8</sup>

The Femina reader, according to her, is a fashion-conscious urban "upper class" working woman interested in both career as well as home. The Woman's Era reader, on the other hand, is usually a "bored housewife" with "a lot of leisure time" whose life is focussed on her home and family. Femina. she argues, "sells youth" as opposed to the more preachy Woman's Era which "sells wisdom". Market analyst Mona Rai argues that Femina offered advertisers a more upmarket readership than its "shabbier looking competitor", which, given its "deeply conservative editorial mix", targeted the "traditional middle class housewife (1995: Like Pothan, Rai invokes the difference in the "psycho-social" profiles of the Femina reader and the Era reader. In the language of market research then, the "young, modern, fashionable and liberated" reader of Femina (who, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as the "new woman") emerges in opposition to her Other, the "preachy, old-fashioned, conservative" reader of Woman's Era. construction of the "new woman", a woman who is always already "liberated" given her class-caste status and her upward nobility and given the global nature of the post-liberalization new middle-class, is part market-survey lore and is understood to constitute its success story. In an effort to survive the onslaughts it faced from an immensely popular woman's Era whose circulation in 1983 had risen to one lakh copies, usurping Fentina's status as India's largest selling English women's magazine, Femina was forced to re-think its format (Rai: 1995, 78).

Woman's Era was not Femina's only competitor. The magazine also faced competition from the newly-launched Publications' slated as a magazine for the "up-market" reader, the "liberated" working woman Responding to the competition it faced from both Era as well as Savvy, Femina Decided "to widen its audience beyond the traditional reader" and to target the modern woman (Rai: 1995, 78) Its articles and stories began to focus on "strong-willed and career-minded women" and its cover stories took up "social issues". (Rai: 1995, 78). Such a move was not very successful and sales continued to plum Rai's analysis is that while Savvy appealed to readers on the upper-end of the spectrum, Era prospered because of its appeal to the lower-middle class and Femina was left "in the middle", its positioning unclear. Given desire to retain its up-market image, it could not share the same ideologi- cal space as Woman's Era. Once

again, Femina was faced with the task of changing its format so as to increase readership. Implicit in this task was the project of constituting the reader anew.

As Rai tells the story, Pradeep Guha, the publisher of femina consulted a 1989 study on working women by the Market Research agency "Pathfinders" which showed that the "target reader's" interest showed a clear shift away from family and home to personal care. It was felt that the Woman's Era formula would just not work with this "target reader". The management decided to re-orient the magazine towards the "working" woman. At the same time, however, there was a deliberate attempt to be "non-preachy" and "reader-interactive".<sup>10</sup> In the words of editor Sathya Saran, the new Femina which hit the stands in March 1992 was "chatty", instead of being "pedantic" (Rai, 1995: 79).

Speaking of the new Pothon tells us: Unlike which is aggressively feminist, Femina takes a balanced position, promoting feminism only in a mild fashion and amongst a host of other things" (Personal Interview, August 1996). Implicit in its 1992 re-launch strategies is the notion of a "new" reader, the highly visible woman of the new Indian economic order who was intended to serve, in the words of C.G Varghese, Chief Manager of Femina. as an "aspirational" model for the wider "non-working" audience of women (Rai, 1995: 79). Implicit also are notions of what constitutes work (i.e work that is performed in the public sphere), what constitutes "liberation", and, consequently, what constitutes the normative subject of feminism. There is a marked self-consciousness in projection of the "new woman", a self-consciousness that is particularly apparent in its use of visuals. Thus, model Meghna Reddy is literally presented to us as the "new woman" (Appendix III, 3 a). Such a self-consciousness is far more obvious in the naming of Hema's Malini's women's magazine as New Woman (Appendix III, 3 b).

The fashion pages of Femina are perhaps the best visual indicators of Femina's change of format and once again, a comparison with Woman's Era seems necessary. The Woman's Era model is typically dressed in a sari or in a salwar kameez (an outfit that is perceived as modern and fashionable, yet non-western), wears her hair long, often in a plait and sports an elaborate bindi or, sometimes, even sindoor (Appendix III, 4 a and 4 b). Only rarely does a s Era model wear casual western clothes, though even when she does, jeans is as far as she will go (Appendix III, Figure 5). She is marked as "caste", (mostly) North Indian, and Hindu. However, ethnic chic is deployed as a sign of Indianness and used as a sign of the modern in the fashion pages of Femina (Appendix III, 6 a, 6 b and 6 c). While the Femina woman sports "ethnic" Indian clothes with an easy grace, this in no way compromises her

ability to carry off western clothes (Appendix III, 7 a and 7 b)

The Femina - photo feature (see Appendix III, 8 a, 8 b and 8 c) featuring Sandhya Chib (Femina Miss India Universe 96) stresses the role-playing that only a post-feminist modern woman can afford to indulge in:

When the mood demands I can be the perfect Indian beauty -classical and demure...

Practice makes perfect - and posing pretty is as easy as pie. (Femina May 8 1996: 52-53) The post-feminist Femina woman, secure in her modernity, negotiates her different roles as a "modern" professional and as a "traditional" home-maker with playful and confident ease.

It is also important to recall here that Femina has been organizing the Miss India beauty contest every year since 1964. In the post-Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai years, the Femina - Miss India contest has become an important metaphor for Femina's post-feminist politics.

In an article with the rather revealing title "Miss India: The Search for the Complete Woman", editor Vimla Patil suggests that Femina organized the Miss India contest as part of its project of empowering the Indian woman:

Femina worked to establish a new genre of super womanhood in India, so that nothing would stop ordinary women from achieving and acquiring extraordinary success...

The Miss India pageants soon became a part of Femina's success story....An ode not only to beauty but to the complete woman...

Girls who had the looks, the intelligence, the right style and confidence realized that it was possible to dream of fame and fortune. . . the show has become a festival...devoted to the quest of the complete woman.

Over the years, the Miss India title has been the gateway to the glitzy razzmatazz world outside both nationally and internationally. (Vimla Patil, Femina. April 23 1992: 6-8)

In Woman's Era. fashion and personal care is stitched together with the notion of economy in a way that is meant to appeal to its intended audience of lower middle-class and middle-class women. By encouraging the use of "kitchen cosmetics" such as turmeric paste and cucumber and promoting non-designer Indian and western clothes worn with accessories that are often mass-produced and affordable, Woman's Era packages beauty care, and fashion to suit lower middle-class incomes and life-styles. The magazine also emphasizes the work behind beauty care as in the article quoted below:

...Skin care is a bit like housework; it is tedious and repetitive, it takes time and energy and also, like housework, it only shows when you don't do it ...the best beauty treatment for your skin doesn't lie in a jar, or a bottle, or a facial sauna, or even in a diet of the purest vitamins...

(Singh, Chandra "Skin Care" Woman's Era. November 1992: 102) .11

The figure dominating the imaginary of Woman's Era is that of the educated and modern woman whose "modernity" is carefully channelled towards making her a "pleasing companion" for her husband, a skilled housekeeper, and a good mother. Even fashion is marketed as a "woman's duty towards her husband" Fashion then comes to exist in harmony with Good Indian Tradition:

Some women simply let themselves go after having children. They put on weight and become unrecognizable from the pretty women they once were.

This is something a wife must avoid if she wants to retain her husband. A man meets so many attractive, poised and intelligent women outside his home that he is likely to compare his wife with these women at some stage or the other...

Some women feel that their wifely duties cease at being a good cook and a housekeeper. No, it does not. The modern husband is much more demanding.

He wants an intelligent, beautiful and smart mate who will walk proudly by his side, take interest in his work and share his interests. ( Tanushree Podder, "The 'Other Woman' Syndrome", Woman's Era. March 1 1992: 13).

The Woman's Era woman is ideologically reminiscent of the social reform movement's middle-class woman. For Femina however, being well-groomed and well-dressed is often part of the larger liberal project of boosting the modern woman's self-confidence.

If Femina's fashion pages constitutes the magazine as the more "modern" and "bold" than Woman's Era, its position on feminism achieves the same purpose, though far more dramatically. Part of Femina's larger project of projecting an "up-market", "upper-class" image is its co-option of feminism. Such a co-option is effected in many different ways. One way is by valorizing individual women as "important" and "different". This is the strategy used in the article "Fifty Women Who've Made India" cited earlier.<sup>12</sup> Another way by which Femina achieves the co-option of feminism is by marketing it in the form of "post-feminism". Universalizing the visibility and social mobility that

some upper-caste women have acquired in the context of a growing cosmopolitanism, post-feminism assumes the liberation of all women. The normative subject of post-feminism is the English- educated, urban, upper-class woman whose agency is expressed in terms of her fluency in English, through her public visibility and attire, even through her participation in the liberal discourse of "free choice" and individualism.

The July 1996 anniversary issue of Femina carries an article which indexes the "changing face of the Indian (read, the Femina woman) and the constitution of the new (Femina) woman of the nineties. Tracing the trajectory of the working woman and the story of "women's liberation", the writer, Sita Menon, brings us to the present moment:

Come the 90s, and you see a radical change in the woman's thinking. Her earlier passionate outbursts dimmed, she neither has the time nor the inclination for rebellion.

She is head-firmly-on-shoulders practical, yet can be as delicately vulnerable as the next person. What attests to her maturity is that she isn't afraid of showing herself for what she is... Her effort is to strike a happy, workable balance between home and career. (Sita Menon, Femina July 8 1996: 10)

Once we are informed in no uncertain terms that "single mother-hood, divorces and soured relationships" were the results of a women's liberation movement strategically confined to the 70s, we are invited to meet the post-feminist "90s woman who has successfully avoided the traps of feminism even as she retains her individuality.

She is an independent and liberated woman who has outgrown feminism. She has made her peace with tradition and is too practical and balanced to be a feminist. Recall Pothan's description of Femina as unlike the "aggressively feminist" Savvy.

## REFLECTIONS ON "FEMINISM"

What makes Femina's success story interesting is that it is also the story of the way in which a certain brand of "feminism", or "post-feminism", if you will, is increasingly becoming hegemonic, vis a vis notions of what constitutes the "conservative" and the "old-fashioned", vis a vis also what constitutes a "pedantic" and "passe" feminism.

What then has made post-feminism a marketable commodity? I would like to suggest that the emergence of a globalized modernity and of a new economic order has been conducive both to a "superwoman" style feminism and the post-feminism analyzed above. A rapidly



globalizing Indian middle-class, partly the result of the Indian government's economic policy of "liberalization", has strengthened the coding of the upper-caste Hindu as the secular-modern self. The expansion of the private sector has largely Favoured the upper-caste, English-speaking elite. The cosmopolitan consumer of the global' middle class, whom Satish Deshpande aptly terms the new "darling of the national" is comfortably distanced From caste and discourse :

The figure of the cosmopolitan is the unexpected or the term, one that is relatively unprecedented in Indian ideological history. Its clearest representative is perhaps the ubiquitous figure of the Non Resident Indian, the closest approximation to a modern hero that the Indian middle classes possess. The cosmopolitan is a more inclusive term, however, and refers to all those Indians (whether resident or not) who can and Do consider themselves to be citizens of the world. For obvious reasons, this tribe is restricted to the "creamy of the urban middle and upper middle classes, and is thoroughly (perhaps "global- would be more accurate) in its outlook. For this group, economic challenges are not confined to the Indian economy, whether these involve decisions on the income/production or the expenditure/consumption side. This group, which consists of the Indian middle class elite, may be said to have joined the global middle class.

(Deshpande 1993: 27-28)

Even though the Mandal Commission's report and the furore that followed in its wake succeeded in putting caste back on the nation's agenda, the English-speaking urban elite, belong- ing to the growing private sector and the "cosmopolitan" remains, in a sense, untouched by Mandal's implications, unable to acknowledge his/her own embeddedness and complicity in a casteist politics. What we have is an ideal climate of "moderni- ty", a climate in which a highly individualistic, assertive and visible post-feminist politics can grow.

Tanika Sarkar has drawn our attention to the fact that women who are part of the Hindu right and are allied with the forces of caste oppression, are also part of the new economic order (1995). Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana have argued that there is a need to prise out the alliances between the Right and the subject of liberal humanism (1996). It is important to recognize the overlap between women in the Hindu right and women of the new economic order. Both women are part of the same social base and share a certain confidence and assertiveness bestowed on them by their class/caste status. In different ways, they emerge as speaking a powerful new feminist language. They appear to be "natural" feminists, in a sense. However, and again, in different ways, both

groups of women take anti-feminist positions. While women in the Hindu right are more likely to see feminism as dangerously western and threatening the structures of family and marriage, the women of the new economic order perceive feminism as outmoded and unnecessary for they are already "liberated". Both groups of women are essentially complicitous with structures which legitimize caste oppression.

Such a convergence of all that constitutes our present modernity ("secular" Hinduism, liberalization, an anti-Mandal discourse) with the "feminism" indexed in a magazine like Femina is troubling for many different reasons. How does the norming of the post-feminist subject in Femina reflect on the "caste-lessness" and the lack of regional specificity of most contemporary feminist discourse? How does our own cosmopolitan's affect our feminist praxis? These questions become particularly relevant to us as feminists located within English Studies, a disciplinary space that in itself seeks to norm us as "modern" subjects, subjects of liberal humanism.

To place in question the kinds of female subjectivity and agency available to us today, to disturb the normativities of the new woman and the woman of the Hindu right, necessitates a look at other subjects who have not constituted the "subjects of feminism". In the case of this particular project, this will involve a recovery of female agency as it was articulated in the first four decades of the twentieth century — with the nationalist movement and with the counter-nationalist Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu.

## NOTES

1 Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, "Introductory Remarks," woman and the Hindu Right; A Collection of Essays, ed. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995): 3.

2 See, among others, Uma Chakravarti, Whatever Happened to the Vedic dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past, "Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on south Asian History and Society, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty (Delhi: OUP, 1996) and the essays in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds. Woman and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995).

3 See M.S.S Pandian, "Death in a City of Fools" EPW, 27. (43 & 44) (October 24, 1991): 2352-2353; M.S.S Pandian, "From Exclusion to Inclusion: New Face in EPW, 24.11

(March 18, 1989): 551; and S.V Rajadurai, "Neo-Brahminism: An Intentional Fallacy?" EPW. 28. (3 & 4) (January 16): 2437-2440; V.Geetha and T.V Jayanthi, "Women Hindutva and the Politics of Caste in Tamilnadu," Woman and the Hindu Right: A Collection of ed. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995); CJ Fuller, "Brahman Temple Priests and Hindu Revivalism in Contemporary Tamilnadu" in South Indian Studies (January-June 1996): 2-34.

4. See, among others, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society. ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty (Delhi: OUP, 1996); Tanika Sarkar, "The Woman as Subject: Rashtrasevika Samiti and the Ram Movement," EPW. 26.35 (August 31, 1991): 2057-2062, and the following essays in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia ed. Woman and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995):

Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism"; Tanika Sarkar, "Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses: Family and Organization in Hindutva Politics"; Sikata Banerjee, "Hindu Nationalism and the Construction of Woman: The Shiv Sena Organizes Women in Bombay"; Teesta Setalvad, "The Woman Shiv Sainik and her Sister V.Geetha and TV Jayanthi, "Women, Hindutva and the Politics of Caste in Tamilnadu".

5. Pointing to a related though different form of such a displace- V.Geetha and T.V Jayanti in their article "Women Hindutva and the Politics of Caste in Tamilnadu," Woman and the Hindu Right: A Collection of ed. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995) have argued that the "elaborate, patterned and culture and marking of women's lives that is now sought to be displaced and re-produced in realms beyond the household by the activities of the BJP-RSS- VHP combine" (1995: 245-246). As evidence, they describe the organizing of annual Vilaku Pooias (a lamp-worshipping ritual) during the Navarathri celebrations involving 1008 women by the VHP in Tamilnadu, under the aegis of a school network run by the Vishwa Hindu Vidya Kendra (1995: 246). The women carry lamps in a procession through a city before consecrating the lamps to Goddess Ambal iconised as a huge sacred lamp. The authors argue that the VHP has several other such spectacles involving the public participation of women in a "Hindu" ritual.

6. Interestingly, this seems to be true of most "women's" magazines in the Indian context. Femina for instance has a total readership of eight lakhs sixty thousand, out of which nearly half, that is, four lakhs twenty six thousand are men (Source: National Reader- ship Survey 1995).

This is perhaps because, as compared with women, a greater percentage of men are English-educated. Also, their purchasing capacity is higher than that of women. These facts are contrary to commonsensical perceptions of certain texts as "women's" texts.

7. The romantic relationship leading to "love marriage", a self- arranged marriage that follows a period of courtship, has come to be regarded as the secular/modern alternative to the family - arranged marriage, or the "arranged marriage", as it is popularly known. The arranged marriage is understood to be symptomatic of traditional patriarchal structures, in that it removes all freedom of choice and agency from the couples concerned, and women, we are told, are the worst sufferers under this system. Also, since "arranged" marriages take place only between couples who belong to the same caste and community, arranged marriages are coded as non-secular, perceived as reinforcing caste, class, regional, linguistic and religious divides. Romantic relationships leading to a "love marriage", however, are placed in binary opposition to arranged marriages, and are seen as inhabiting a secular space, a space of freedom, choice and modernity, a space, one might even say, of feminist agency. The discourse of romance and love marriage is enabled by a secular-modern disavowal of factors such as caste and community.

8 Personal Interview with Rebecca Pothan at Madras in August 1996.

9 See Mona Rai, "Drop Your Inhibitions", Advertising and Marketing, Volume 7, No.1 (April 15, 1995): 78-80.

10. Personal Interview with Rebecca Pothan at Madras in August 1996.

11. Woman's Era's also fashions a lower middle-class modernity through stories which Amita Tyagi and Patricia Uberoi aptly describe as "post marital romances" or 'romance after marriage' stories (Manushi Vol.61). These stories begin by describing the problems a married couple face in their relationship. After the occurrence of some dramatic event or through the efforts of a mediator, the couple is happily reconciled and back to "being in love". As I have already pointed out, Woman's Era treats romantic love outside of marriage as morally suspect, as something that is not part of Good Tradition. Post-marital romance stories work by surrounding a pre-existing relationship of marriage (often family-arranged and therefore between people who belong to the same caste, class and community) with the halo of a romance, achieved towards the end of the narrative after some difficulty. The element of romance then lends a touch of modernity to the stories. However, this does not disturb the sign of Good Indianness, which, in this case, is

marriage.

A call to readers (specifically, parents of young men and omen) inviting them to place advertisements in its matrimonial columns as well as in those of its counterpart in Hindi, *Sarita*. perhaps best epitomizes the Woman's Era style Indian modernity:

Searching for brides and grooms? The traditional priest and the family barber have become out of date and a thing of the past. Matrimonial columns in *Woman's Era* and *Sarita* provide you with an opportunity to establish contacts all over the country for brides and grooms for your sons and daughters and other relatives. Being essentially upper class magazines, *Sarita* and *Woman's Era* are widely circulated all over India among the intellectual and affluent classes... (*Woman's Era* 2 June 1992: 67).

In coding the "traditional priest<sup>1</sup> and the 'family barber' (both caste-specific occupations) as " out of Date and a thing of the past<sup>1</sup>, *Woman's Era* represents caste as non-modern. It proceeds then to replace caste with class; the message of the advertisement is that class rather than caste is the category that should concern one in arranging a marriage. As proof of its fitness for the task of a marriage broker, *Woman's Era* de- scribes itself as an "upper class" magazine.

**12.** This is also used, though in a much more dramatic fashion by *Femina's* other rival, *Savvy* which regularly features the "Savvy woman of the month". In fact, this strategy of presenting us with "superwomen" is what gives *Savvy* its defining identity.