

## “*Jo Biwi se Kare Pyar*”: Changing Figurations of the ‘Housewife Mom’ in Indian Advertisements

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**Abstract :** This paper draws on the understanding of figuration as cultural norms reified through reiterations. The changing figuration of the Indian ‘housewife mom’ is explored here through the trope of housework. Tracking two different advertisements of the same products across forty years, in the medium of television, this paper argues that advertisements proceed with embracing change and creating new markets. Contrary to contemporary middle class women’s actual engagement with housework, advertisements for products related to housework continue to posit the source of expert knowledge in the figure of them woman. As a corollary to this move, (unpaid) housework gets naturalised for women, and becomes a dominant component in mainstream constructions of femininity.

**Keywords:** Advertisements, housework, domesticity, housewife mom, figuration, femininity.

Domestic manuals of the nineteenth century, often written by, and always for women, were the perfect instruments to educate (mostly) middle class women about housekeeping, cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores, in accordance with new scientific knowledge systems. So, if in the United States women were being taught about cleanliness, women in colonial Bengal were also being given lessons about nutritional requirements of young children and the best way to achieve them. How to do housework properly (involving cooking, cleaning, washing vessels and clothes, dusting, ironing, storing food grain and vegetables etc.) — chores that are increasingly carried out by paid help and/ or with this help of more and more sophisticated technology, continues to form a significant portion of most women’s magazines in India, both in the vernaculars and in English.

Women doing housework also comprise the biggest section of women represented in advertisements. In ads for clothes’ washing detergents and liquids, washing machines, dish washing detergents and liquids, toilet and floor cleaners, cooking utensils and appliances, water purifiers and deodorisers, women are both the implied consumers and the represented users of these products. It is through these not overtly sexual, yet beautiful, modestly yet impeccably dressed women, carrying out household labour efficiently, and at times with a little help from other experts, the ‘housewife mom’ (Neuhaus 2), that the products advertised draw their authority from. This paper is an enquiry into the changing figurations of such housewife moms in Indian advertising, tracing the advertisements of two products across historical time and altered contexts.

Going beyond the concept of representation (the subject of narratives), figuration stands for the congealing of ideas, the realisation of such subjects in narratives, through acts of reiteration in culture, albeit volatile and shifting in shape. In our context, that of the housewife mom, the one who does housework, is not merely represented in advertisements, but advertisements play an active role in the creation of the housewife mom—the one who at the same time carries out household labour and is also the source of authoritative knowledge regarding housework. It also has to be borne in mind that advertisements, especially in the visual medium of television, reach a wider cross section of people than almost anything else. Advertisements consequently merit serious study, especially in their ability to adapt to and embody change.

The housewife mom, following Neuhaus, is the figure who “defines domestic life, turning labor into homemaking and helping maintain normative ideals of femininity” (2). In this paper, we enquire into the discursive construction of this housewife mom, in advertisements of products that deal with housework. We will analyse two advertisements each for Prestige Pressure Cooker and Surf detergent powder, one each from the 1960s and 70s and one from the contemporary period. By selecting two for each product we can trace the changes, as well as the continuities in the figurations of the housewife mom.

Prestige, launched as a pressure cooker brand, has now emerged as one manufacturing and selling a wide range of cookware. The tag line nevertheless continues unmodified, “*Jo biwi se kare pyar, woh Prestige se kaise kare inkaar?*” This translates into: he who loves his wife, cannot say no to a Prestige product. Within the space of two advertise-

ments, divided by approximately 40 years in time, the need to establish the superiority of Prestige as a coveted brand no longer exists. In the first ad, a young married couple (Hindu marital symbols prominently displayed on the woman's forehead) visit a shop that seems to stock only pressure cookers. The elderly shopkeeper welcomes them, addressing the man, and enquires about their requirement. The man, albeit the one who will obviously decide which product to buy, and the one who will pay for it, does not have any idea what is needed at home, his wife whispers that they need a pressure cooker and he repeats it to the shopkeeper. He is her interlocutor, between the home and the world, he is also the one who takes financial decisions, hence the shopkeeper's unhesitating and constant, direct address to him. The shopkeeper asks, how much does he love his wife? In the face of this awkward question, husband and wife look at each other, shocked, while the shopkeeper hastens to explain that it is the amount of love a husband has for his wife which will help him determine which pressure cooker to buy. The subtext here clearly is of expense, but the price is never mentioned. Instead, the quality of pressure cooker rises with the amount of love a husband has for his wife, culminating in such love "where her life is more precious than [your] own life", then the husband would surely procure for her a Prestige pressure cooker, '100% safe', manufactured with latest scientific technologies.

That the woman in the advertisement is the one who cooks, is evident from the fact that she reminds her husband that a pressure cooker needs to be bought, and the shopkeeper's unquestioning assumption that she will be the one using it. In spite of that, she is neither told the reasons behind Prestige being a more desirable pressure cooker (even though it is her safety that is being discussed) nor is she asked to choose what she needs. The husband, both as the financial provider and the decision maker, armed with his easy understanding of the scientific information that the elderly shopkeeper provides him with, decides to buy Prestige. After all, the purchase of Prestige is also the proof of his love for his wife. In this advertisement, the wife figure is denied all forms of agency, she neither speaks, nor does she ever occupy more screen space than her husband. It is possible to argue, like Kim Sheehan, that forty or so years ago, societal roles corresponding to men and women were more defined and less overlapping, with men being breadwinners and women, irrespective of their class. This, and given the fact that the target consumers for Prestige (more expensive than others) would be the middle classes, housewife mom was indeed the stereotypical and representational ideal for middle class women in India.

However, advertisements work not merely through representing the hegemonic ideal of the given time, to be most effective, advertisements need to embrace changes in those ideals, and in society itself, in order to create and incorporate newer consumer groups. The second ad of this series, unlike the anonymous couple of the previous ad, features the most recognisable celebrity couple of contemporary India, film actors Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan. Our knowledge of their real life informs our viewing of the advertisement. We know that they are fabulously rich, and they therefore do not cook, perhaps. And that they are both busy, working outside of the house. We also know that this is the situation in many other households, households that are not perhaps so wealthy or celebrated, but where both the partners work and can employ others to cook for them. But is that what we learn from the ad?

Unlike the previous Prestige ad, nothing really happens here. The interest of the ad lies in the conversation and banter between the two, inside a house, across a kitchen counter. Like 'typical' husband figures, Abhishek comes back late from work and his wife is angry with him. There is no imagination that the wife may also have her own work pressure, and might come back home late, although we know that to be an extradiegetic fact. In spite of the work that she does outside of home (that we know), she cooks. It will be explicated later on, how the unpaid labour of housework is justified by configuring it as inherently feminine. The obverse implication of this is then, womanliness is constituted through housework. Here, Abhishek definitely doesn't need to buy a pressure cooker for Aishwarya, she can probably buy more pressure cookers than him, and she informs him that her Prestige is definitely more reliable than any man. After all, Aishwarya reminds him, "*Jo biwi se kare pyar... woh Prestige se kaise kare inkaar?*" The use of the pressure cooker ensures that housework and cooking continue to be the sole purview of women, no matter what that woman is otherwise. The tagline, inserting the cookware brand within this cosy domestic scene where the trope of cooking is merely used as an instrument to enable the utterance of the tagline, further facilitates the identification of the woman in the ad with housework—undermining all her other, and in this case, substantive identities.

Like Prestige, Surf detergent powder, in the 1970s was considered more expensive than its cheaper and local rival, 'Washing Powder' Nirma. With the introduction of the iconic figure of Lalitaji, purchasing a supposedly better detergent powder at a better price became a matter of "*samajhdari*" or good judgement. Albeit a contempo-

rary to the first Prestige ad, Lalitaji could not be more of a contrast to her unnamed counterpart. This housewife mom, always clad in a dazzling white saree with some variations, her hair neatly tied in a bun, sporting the same red *bindi* as the Prestige woman but without the demure covering of the head, recurring across a series of advertisements, is outspoken, and knows her mind. She is the boss of her household affairs; she scolds her naughty son and the vegetable seller with equal ease. In the advertisement under consideration here, Lalitaji is featured in a market, buying vegetables, rather bargaining with the vegetable seller. A male narrative voice asks her about her buying choices, as the camera pans across the market and zooms in to her. Lalitaji occupies the centre of the frame, flanked by film posters that also include women, but the woman on our screen, addressing the narrative voice and consequently the audience, is more real, grounded and untouched by the squalor around her. The male narrating voice, her young son (the '*nanna nathkhat*') and the vegetable seller are all lectured by her. Her task, as a housewife mom, is to make sure vegetables are bought at a cheap price and she's not cheated during the process of weighing them, her son's clothes remain impossibly white and the choice of detergent powder is indeed based on solid 'facts', as the graphic of one jar holding a kilo of a cheap detergent powder and the other holding half kilo Surf is expected to illustrate. Unlike the Prestige woman, Lalitaji builds her opinion on the basis of available facts, and then shares it with those willing to learn. Her authority over the others sharing the screen space with her gets transferred onto the audience, as they, following the narrative voice, recognise her maxim: good judgment lies in the purchasing of Surf.

Unlike Lalitaji, the mother in the 2015 Surf Excel Matic ad is a professional and she does not always stay at home. When her son helps another kid fix his bicycle and messes up his t shirt in the process, the older male (a grandfather?) assures him that his mother can clean this up in no time. When the child wants to do it himself, he explains to him that they (the men) cannot wash clothes as well as his mother can. The boy then runs across the house to seek help from his mother, followed closely at his heels by the older male. This application to feminine authority over domestic chores so far falls within the established parameters of other such advertisements. Jessamin Neuhaus argues:

Laundry advertising and corresponding commentary from ad agency and product manager executives in the last decades of the 1900s reveals a renewed emphasis on images of mothers caring for their families and their homes, drawing on and expanding the longstanding marketing history of housewives transforming the labor of laundry into a labor of mother's love and tapping into the expanding twenty-first century "mom market." ... But without a doubt, contemporary laundry product advertising genders homemaking in general and clothing care specifically as female; the almost sole province of the housewife mom. (20)

As the son runs up to his mother to seek help in washing his t shirt, we are surprised to discover that the mother is not actually at home. She is somewhere else, presumably at an office, and can be reached through a video call via a tab. Her mastery of contemporary technology to keep an eye on household affairs travels seamlessly across mediums, from the tab to the washing machine as she instructs the boy and his grandfather to put Surf Excel Matic in the (washing) machine and wait for the results. Unlike Lalitaji, she traverses several identities, even outside of the house. Plus, technological advancement and financial solvency allow her to own and operate a washing machine. Irrespective of that, she continues to be the authority in housework, something that can be witnessed from both the male figures' lack of information regarding how clothes are washed, and the aura associated with 'mom's hand wash'. Notice the clever use of 'hand wash' instead of the more frequent, 'cooked food', as in *ma ke haat ke khana*. Here, hand wash doesn't indicate literally the use of hands, but the mother's hands, as a metonymic trope, stands in for the mother's specialised knowledge and affective labour. As indicated by Neuhaus above, the actual physical labour of washing has been greatly reduced, but the emotional importance attached to it, and the automatic association of women with work in and around the house continues unabated. Housework continues to be viewed as a 'labor of love' (Federici 27). Plus, although the labour of washing is no longer as strenuous, even in this modern household the mother is the one who washes or at least knows which detergent to use to wash clothes well. 'Mom's hand wash' then assumes dimensions that have little to do with the actual act of washing, instead, knowledge about washing and other household chores continue to be a crucial component in the formation of contemporary femininities, informing and constructing figurations of contemporary womanhood, and being constructed by them.

The presence of technology and the absence of actual labour in this advertisement, allows us to enter into a further, omnipresent dimension of middle class households across India, a dimension that is however seldom represented in popular media. That is, the role of a paid workforce in actual carrying out the task ideologically associated with

women. Cooks, professional washers and general household helpers, both male and female, in contemporary India, carry out most of the household tasks that, if one were to merely follow the advertisements, are the unique domain of women. Federici explains the reasons behind the authority of the household moms over housework in the following manner:

The difference with house work [and paid work] lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognised as work, because it was destined to be unwaged. (29)

This codification of housework as not only ontologically feminine, but also related to a certain kind of woman, who would do housework as part of her inherent womanliness, also serves to exclude the men and women, especially in India, who work in other people's homes. While their work is (poorly) paid, they never attain the authoritative stature that the housewife moms do. One does not see adverts in which a detergent powder is recommended because the paid household help prefers it; neither does one see the celebration of a cooking utensil on the testimony of paid cooks. The authority on which these products then rest their claims to superiority, therefore, is inextricable from the identity of the woman as the (middle class) housewife mom. This authority then performs yet another function, configuring the women in these advertisements as essentially housewife moms, over and above whatever other identities they might aspire or belong to.

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