

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture29

### Benevolent Sexism on Screen

Moving on to benevolent sexism, here we will discuss the change in dynamics of visual media and how benevolent sexism has acted and reacted in TV series and soap operas of Indian television. We will also consider ambivalent sexism and the theories around it, as these are central to understanding these soap serials.

To begin with the introduction, popular visual culture in India often includes hidden or benevolent sexism. This can be characterized by several issues. One is stereotyping. Benevolent sexism reinforces traditional gender roles, portraying men and women in conventional roles. Women are shown as wife, mother, or daughter, while men are shown as son, husband, brother, or father. This perpetuates harmful attitudes towards women. For example, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* reflects these stereotypes. The title itself suggests that the roles of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law are cyclical, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Another issue is objectification. Women are often valued primarily for their physical appearance. For instance, Komolika in *Kasautii Zindagii Kay* is objectified, as her character is focused on her seductive traits. Similarly, in *Balika Vadhu*, while the show addresses social issues like child marriage, the female protagonist is often valued more for her looks than her personal qualities or agency.

Komolika, the vamp in *Kasautii Zindagii Kay*, is portrayed as a modern woman, markedly different from the other female characters in the show. Her modern, non-conforming persona contrasts sharply with the traditional roles typically assigned to women in these series. Most female protagonists adhere to conventional societal roles, as seen in *Balika Vadhu*, where the young girl, subjected to child marriage, suffers verbal and physical abuse. This reflects how

objectification and traditional expectations limit women's roles, depicting them as primarily responsible for domestic duties and pleasing men.

The lack of diversity in these portrayals is evident. While female characters may hold various professions—ranging from journalist to doctor to police officer—their roles remain stereotypical and do not reflect real diversity. Despite having different jobs, the fundamental depiction of women remains unchanged, showcasing a limited range of experiences and challenges.

Similarly, under-representation is apparent even among characters with respectable professions. Women in these series, whether doctors or lawyers, are frequently shown struggling to balance their professional and family lives, a portrayal rarely extended to male characters. This disparity underscores the limited scope given to women's experiences and struggles compared to their male counterparts.

Violence in these series often normalizes toxic masculinity. For instance, Arnab Singh Raizada from *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon* embodies toxic masculinity through his aggressive behavior, such as forcibly pulling the protagonist and pushing her against walls. This behavior is framed as an intense expression of romance, perpetuating harmful gender norms and justifying abusive actions.

Sexist language and dialogues are pervasive across soaps and series, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes and gender stereotypes. Dialogues like, "It is difficult; you won't be able to do it," imply that women are inherently incapable, further entrenching sexist beliefs and underscoring the pervasive nature of benevolent sexism in visual media.

The dialogue, "It is heavy. You won't be able to lift it," exemplifies how these series often use language not from a place of concern but as a means of intimidation, highlighting the belief that women are inherently incapable. This pattern of dialogue is repeated across various episodes and series, reinforcing sexist attitudes. For example, in *Dia Aur Baati Hum*, the repeated assertion that "aurat ka kaam sirf ghar sambhalna hai" underscores traditional gender roles and restricts women's ambitions, like the protagonist's desire to become an IPS officer.

The double standards in these series are evident as well. Men are often portrayed as powerful and assertive, while women are shown as submissive and meek. In Pavitra Rishta, the protagonist Archana is depicted as constantly dependent on Manav, unable to make decisions on her own and easily agitated by minor events. This contrasts sharply with the male characters, who are consistently shown as assertive and powerful, even when coming from a middle-class background.

Social impact could be significant if visual culture genuinely challenged stereotypes, promoted diversity, and raised awareness of social issues. For instance, series like Balika Vadhu and Bidai aim to address social issues and feature positive role models, providing a platform for critique. However, the impact is diminished when the portrayal of gender roles remains traditional and unchallenged. The celebration of toxic masculinity, where aggressive behavior is framed as romantic or heroic, questions whether true progress is being made.

Media's role in perpetuating discrimination reflects deep-rooted cultural biases. Mass media often reinforces predominant perceptions, whether intentionally or not, as content is frequently produced with cues from a culture still steeped in bigotry. This ongoing issue highlights the need for more thoughtful representation and critical examination of media practices to foster a more equitable and just society.

Sexism in contemporary times is deeply ingrained in our culture, and it has become a pervasive part of our media landscape. While sexism has always existed, it was once less visible in cinema and other visual mediums. Today, it is presented more overtly, yet how to counteract or challenge sexism is still rarely addressed in TV series and soaps. The portrayal often lacks solutions or discussions on eradication, focusing instead on perpetuating stereotypes.

India's diverse cultural landscape includes numerous gender-related adversities, reflecting a broader pattern of male chauvinist attitudes perpetuated by both traditional and new media. The problem lies not just in depicting sexism but in failing to offer a counter-narrative or solution. Highlighting sexism without addressing how to overcome it misses a critical opportunity for progress.

In addition to TV series, cartoons and films also play a significant role in shaping gender representation. Cartoons, often aimed at children, perpetuate gender

stereotypes by depicting women as inferior and relegated to household chores, while men are shown as powerful and superior. For example, in *Chota Bheem*, a popular Indian cartoon, the character Chutki, a female friend of the protagonist, is often shown performing domestic tasks like packing food. This portrayal reinforces the idea that nurturing and caring are inherently female traits. Meanwhile, *Chota Bheem* and his male friends are depicted as powerful and heroic, suggesting that strength and leadership are male qualities.

Such representations in children's media contribute to the formation of gender roles from a young age. The underlying message is that women's primary role is to take care of others, while men are portrayed as the active, dominant figures. This subtle reinforcement of stereotypes in cartoons underscores the need for more balanced and progressive representations across all forms of media.

It is also meant for men. This is not solely about disparity; men, too, can unlearn outdated notions and learn about more progressive ideas depicted in such cartoons. Disney pedagogy, widely studied, aimed to instill certain behaviors in growing generations. Consider the classic Disney stories like *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. These tales often feature protagonists waiting for a prince to come and rescue them, reinforcing a narrative where women are passive and non-assertive. If students are taught these stories from childhood, they may internalize conforming behaviors, expecting a prince to change their lives rather than taking charge themselves.

Similarly, cartoons not only reinforce traditional gender roles—portraying women as more caring compared to men—but can also shape sexual orientation based on the roles depicted. These portrayals are often heteronormative, rarely representing queerness. As a result, children exposed to these cartoons might grow up unaware of or resistant to diverse sexual orientations, potentially leading to homophobia or queerphobia.

In Indian popular visual media, benevolent sexism is often misinterpreted as merely being charitable. However, this form of sexism is characterized by a paternalistic approach, where individuals, especially women, are seen as needing protection or romantic gestures rather than real empowerment. The two primary forms of benevolent sexism observed are romantic paternalism and protective paternalism.

Romantic paternalism involves a partner who appears affectionate but whose actions are more about maintaining control or reinforcing dependency rather than genuine love. Protective paternalism, on the other hand, involves a partner who assumes a guardian role, ostensibly out of care, but this often limits the woman's agency and independence.

To understand benevolent sexism in popular media, consider how women's agency is frequently portrayed as dependent on men. While it is reasonable to seek support in some areas, portraying women as needing constant male assistance for everything undermines their autonomy and reinforces outdated gender norms. This depiction perpetuates the idea that women are inherently dependent and less capable of independent action.

Where is the woman's agency? It is very limited because she is entirely dependent on the male, and therefore is portrayed as a victim. *Pavitra Rishta* is an example where Archana is constantly seeking Manav's support, reflecting this limited agency. Women in visual media are often idealized. For instance, in *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, Sandhya is depicted as an ideal woman because she balances her role as an IPS officer with managing her household. This portrayal celebrates the notion of women as ideal when they can balance both home and office responsibilities. However, this sets up an unrealistic standard, implying that true value comes from meeting these expectations, which should not be the sole duty of women.

Gender policing rewards women who conform to traditional norms and punishes those who do not. Protagonists are often portrayed as chaste and docile, receiving rewards such as marrying their ideal partner or achieving professional success. Conversely, non-conforming characters, like Meenakshi in *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, who schemingly defies traditional norms, face constant punishment and are portrayed as problematic or evil.

Heterosexual intimacy often reinforces gender inequalities by promoting traditional gender roles within relationships. Women are depicted as securing intimate relationships by conforming to traditional values, which can perpetuate gender inequality by suggesting that their worth is tied to these roles.

Objectification and dehumanization are evident in characters like Gopi from *Saath Nibhana Saathiya*. Gopi, an illiterate girl married into a business family, is constantly belittled and punished by her mother-in-law, Kokila, and her husband for her lack of knowledge. This portrayal reduces her to an object of ridicule and highlights the objectification and dehumanization of women.

Sexual intimidation, including stalking, sexual assault, and relationship violence, is depicted in shows like *Pratigya*. The protagonist's husband stalks her and exhibits violent behavior, illustrating how such intimidation is normalized in media portrayals. Similarly, *Ye Hai Mohabbatein* features a protagonist who frequently shouts at female characters, further exemplifying how sexual intimidation and power dynamics are portrayed.

These examples demonstrate how visual media often perpetuates traditional gender roles and biases, presenting a skewed portrayal of women's roles and experiences.

There is no real attempt to address or correct problematic behavior. When protagonists exhibit flawed behavior, the focus should ideally be on how such behavior is challenged or corrected. Unfortunately, the portrayal often leaves the issue unresolved, reinforcing flawed perceptions rather than offering constructive solutions.

An example of this is *Pehredaar Piya Ki*. In this series, a young boy marries a teenager, and their relationship includes inappropriate behavior by the boy. The series faced significant backlash for its representation, highlighting the lack of boundaries in depicting benevolent sexism and its impacts. Such portrayals fail to address the problematic nature of the behavior or offer a corrective perspective.

Complementary gender differentiation, which prescribes distinct but supposedly complementary roles for men and women, often reinforces traditional gender norms. Men are frequently depicted as decision-makers or supportive husbands, while women remain confined to roles such as sacrificial wives or dutiful daughters-in-law. This differentiation perpetuates traditional gender roles rather than challenging or evolving them.

The analysis of benevolent sexism in Indian visual media reveals that the audience is a diverse mix of cultures, influenced by globalization and Western

media. Despite this diversity, sexist dialogues and explicit notions are pervasive across all regional languages and media. Films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Haseena Maan Jayegi*, and *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* often feature problematic representations of relationships and gender roles. For example, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* includes a storyline where stalking is normalized, while *Haseena Maan Jayegi* implies that a woman's eventual agreement is inevitable. Titles like *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*, *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania*, and *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* further signal male dominance in relationships.

These patterns reflect a broader issue in Indian visual media: while there is significant representation of traditional gender roles, there is a lack of meaningful critique or transformation of these roles.

There is no explanation as to why women's names are often omitted in these discussions, but the misogynistic maneuvers presented through films and other media forms are clear and evident. Media culture frequently uses familiar songs and tropes to woo female characters, falling into the same traps of sexism repeatedly.

The analysis shows that such representations are widely accepted and hailed. Films like *Arjun Reddy* and *Animal* receive significant attention and viewership, indicating broad public acceptance of their portrayals. However, contemporary times have seen a rise in backlash due to the influence of social media. Social media platforms serve as tools for countering the acceptance of sexism and misogyny, facilitating active feminist activism and raising awareness against gender discrimination.

Despite this, covert benevolent sexism continues to be produced and reproduced in media representations, indicating that while there is growing resistance, the underlying issues remain prevalent.