INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture30

Ambivalent Sexism and Sexual Violence

Understanding ambivalent sexism involves recognizing the different varieties of sexism that coexist within societal and cultural contexts. Ambivalent sexism encompasses both hostile and benevolent elements, reflecting a complex spectrum of gender-based discrimination.

Sexism, as a socio-cultural psychological construct, involves people's attitudes, beliefs, and actions, as well as institutional and cultural practices that either promote or reflect gender-based discrimination against women and men. This form of discrimination is not limited to one gender; it affects both men and women. However, in the context of Indian soaps and TV series, there is a notable lack of queer representation, and discrimination is primarily visible in the portrayal of women and men within traditional gender roles.

For example, John Abraham is often portrayed as a sensual or sex symbol in his films, frequently shown shirtless. This sexualization of his body highlights a form of gender-based discrimination that affects men as well. Although this differs from the discrimination faced by women, it still represents a form of sexism.

Ambivalent sexism is characterized by profound ambivalence, meaning that it reflects a mixture of both positive and negative attitudes towards gender. Hidalgo and Royce define it as a set of biases and discriminatory practices that position one sex or gender as inferior. In this context, one gender is often hailed or idealized, while the other is pushed down or marginalized.

Understanding ambivalent sexism involves examining the consistency of both hostile and benevolent elements:

 Hostile Sexism: This involves overtly negative, antagonistic attitudes toward one gender. It often includes derogatory views and blatant forms of discrimination that reinforce the idea of one gender's inferiority.

Benevolent Sexism: This refers to seemingly positive or protective attitudes that still reinforce traditional gender roles and imply that one gender is more suited to certain roles or behaviors. While it may appear supportive, it subtly perpetuates inequality by suggesting that one gender is inherently more deserving of protection or adoration.

Both hostile and benevolent sexism contribute to maintaining gender hierarchies and perpetuate discriminatory practices. By understanding these elements, we can better analyze how they are represented in media and work towards addressing gender-based discrimination in a more nuanced manner.

To understand ambivalent sexism, it's crucial to analyze how both hostile and benevolent forms of sexism are represented in media.

Hostile sexism often manifests as overtly negative attitudes or derogatory views towards a gender. For instance, in the character of Gopi from *Saath Nibhana Saathiya*, we see hostile sexism through her consistent dehumanization and belittlement because of her gender. Dialogues and interactions that imply she is incapable of learning or performing tasks due to her being a woman reinforce this hostile perspective.

On the other hand, benevolent sexism appears more nuanced and seemingly supportive but still perpetuates gender inequality. It involves attitudes or behaviors that, while appearing caring or protective, actually reinforce traditional gender roles and imply inferiority. For example, in *Anupama*, the protagonist is repeatedly told by her son and father that she is incapable of managing things on her own, with a sense of benevolent sexism expressed through the notion that she needs to be saved or helped because of her gender. Similarly, in *Legally Blonde*, the protagonist Elle Woods faces initial judgments that she is merely a "doll" and incapable of succeeding in a challenging environment like Harvard Law School. Despite these judgments, she ultimately proves her capabilities, but the initial assumptions reflect a benevolent form of sexism by underestimating her abilities based on gender stereotypes.

According to ambivalent sexism theory, these forms of sexism—hostile and benevolent—are not isolated but coexist and reflect power imbalances between the sexes. This theory suggests that such dynamics are present across different cultures, not just within Indian media but globally.

In both examples, whether in *Anupama* or *Legally Blonde*, we see how dependency and perceived inferiority are used to justify or perpetuate gender roles. *Anupama* depicts a cultural narrative where women are seen as incapable and dependent on men, while *Legally Blonde* highlights how women's intelligence and abilities are initially underestimated due to benevolent sexism. These representations from different parts of the globe illustrate how gender stereotypes and biases are both challenged and reinforced through media, reflecting broader patterns of sexism.

In *Legally Blonde*, the protagonist Elle Woods faces a situation where her dedication to getting into Harvard Law School is overshadowed by the perception that she is only there to be close to her love interest. Despite her considerable effort and academic success, the focus remains on her personal motives rather than her achievements, which highlights a form of benevolent sexism. This is because her actions are viewed through the lens of her relationship, undermining her intellectual capabilities and reinforcing the idea that her primary goal is to chase romantic interests.

Benevolent sexism often involves women being cast as unwitting participants in a system that offers them provision and security in exchange for acquiescence. Both *Legally Blonde* and *Anupama* illustrate this dynamic. In *Anupama*, the protagonist's dependency on male characters is depicted as a form of submission, while her attempts to gain support are seen through a lens of inadequacy. Similarly, in *Legally Blonde*, the character's achievements are diminished by the perception that she is merely pursuing love, rather than being recognized for her hard work and intelligence.

Benevolent sexism, while appearing positive or protective, can subtly reinforce traditional gender roles. It contrasts with hostile sexism, which is overtly negative and rude. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is often wrapped in a veneer of chivalry and support, making it less obvious and potentially more insidious. For example, offering help to someone because they are perceived as incapable, despite their actual competence, is a form of benevolent sexism that is masked as kindness or protection.

This form of sexism recruits women as unwitting participants in their own subjugation, offering them a facade of security while ultimately reinforcing their

dependency and perceived inferiority. It often presents women as weak and incompetent, while men are depicted as strong and superior. This portrayal contrasts with feminist ideals of equality, which emphasize equal opportunity rather than physical power or traditional gender roles.

Benevolent sexism is pervasive in media content and often goes unchallenged. Feminists have highlighted its prevalence and impact, but it remains inadequately addressed. For instance, studies have shown that women are frequently portrayed as decorative objects or trophies rather than individuals with their own objectives. Subtle sexism, which used to be more common, has been replaced by overt sexism in some cases, as seen in characters like Shivay in *Ishqbaaz*, who is depicted as overly protective and controlling. This shift reflects the ongoing challenge of addressing both subtle and overt forms of sexism.

Ultimately, benevolent sexism's impact can be more damaging because it is less detectable and often lauded as chivalry or care, making it harder to recognize and confront. This covert form of sexism reinforces gender stereotypes and perpetuates inequalities in ways that are not always immediately apparent.

Protective paternalism, deeply rooted in societal norms, illustrates the belief that men are naturally suited to rescue and protect women, casting women as delicate and in need of masculine dominance. This idea is frequently reinforced by media, which often portrays men as saviors and women as damsels in distress. Although protective paternalism may seem benevolent on the surface, it can become problematic when it is overemphasized, leading to unintended consequences.

This overemphasis on protective paternalism restricts women's roles and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. Women are often depicted as fragile and dependent, their worth primarily associated with their caregiving abilities. Such portrayals not only cement traditional gender roles but also penalize women who attempt to break away from these norms. Women who strive for independence or take on non-traditional roles may face criticism or be portrayed negatively in media narratives.

Theoretical perspectives on sexism frequently examine three core components that shape gender dynamics. The first component is the power dynamics of the sexes, which highlights the traditional imbalance where men hold more authority

and power. Media often reflects this imbalance by portraying men as dominant and women as subordinate or dependent, a dynamic central to both hostile and benevolent sexism.

Gender differentiation is another critical component, where media representations often reinforce traditional family roles, showing men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. This differentiation perpetuates the belief that men are more capable and deserving of power, while women are confined to supportive roles.

The third component is sexuality, where media representations often emphasize male superiority and control, portraying men as sexually dominant and women as passive. This portrayal reinforces stereotypes about gender roles and sexual behavior, further entrenching the power imbalance between men and women.

Dominant paternalism advocates for male control over women, reinforcing the idea that men should have authority and decision-making power. In contrast, protective paternalism suggests that men should safeguard and provide for women based on their perceived greater authority and strength. While protective paternalism might appear less overtly regressive than dominant paternalism, it still implies that women are incapable of handling situations independently and require male protection. Competitive gender differentiation, a form of hostile sexism, fosters the belief that women are inferior to men. This perspective supports an environment where male confidence is bolstered by undermining female capabilities, reinforcing the notion that men are inherently superior and women are less competent.

Overall, both protective and dominant paternalism contribute to maintaining traditional gender roles and power imbalances. Media portrayals that emphasize these roles perpetuate stereotypes and limit women's opportunities. Addressing these issues necessitates a critical examination of how media representations influence societal attitudes and a concerted effort to promote more equitable portrayals of all genders.

How you boost the confidence of men is by telling them that women are inferior to them. This is related to hostile sexism, which is very rude in nature. On the other hand, complementary gender differentiation emphasizes traditional gender roles for women, such as being a mother and a wife, and assumes that men

depend on women to carry out their responsibilities. Complementary gender differentiation under benevolent sexism shows that women are the ones who require some sort of protection or rescue and assumes that men cannot do things on their own. Heterosexual hostility views women as objects of sexual gratification for men, while heterosexual intimacy idealizes women's sexual purity.

Benevolent sexism appears in various forms, including protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy. Understanding ambivalent sexism involves examining complementary gender differentiation, hostile sexism, protective paternalism, dominant paternalism, and heterosexual hostility. Heterosexual hostility views women as objects of sexual gratification and manipulative, offering pleasure while being perceived as capable of manipulation.

Sexual intimacy in benevolent sexism involves women's sexual purity and, through other means such as showing love and care for the family, constitutes romantic intimacy. Protective paternalism and gender policing are also crucial topics. Sudhir and Jayaraj argue that romantic paternalism, with its paternalistic and overprotective notions, reduces women's agency to that of victims, which is adverse to gender equality.

For example, the fairy tale trope of romantic paternalism, where a prince saves a damsel in distress, contrasts with modern narratives like "Damsel," which features a protagonist who rescues herself without male intervention. Similarly, "Wolf in Knight's Armor" is a common film trope glorifying male characters while subjugating female characters, perpetuating sexism. Hindi films often reinforce romantic paternalism and the damsel in distress trope, portraying women as helpless and in need of a male savior.

In "Snow White," the prince's kiss resurrects Snow White from death, as the poison is removed, and she is hailed as saved by the prince. This narrative highlights how these tropes have been situated in culture. Additionally, "Wolf in Knight's Armor" depicts male protagonists committing crimes such as abduction, physical violence, verbal abuse, objectification, and sexual harassment against women, yet they are celebrated and rewarded with the lead woman.

In a way, he is a thug and still ends up with the woman. What does this justify? In "Wolf in Knight's Armor," the title suggests that he is a wolf in the body of a knight. Despite being a good fighter, he ultimately engages in physical violence, verbal abuse, objectification, and sexual harassment. Yet, he still gets the girl. Both tropes present women as victims, and protective paternalism as a form of benevolent sexism is evident in these films.

These portrayals might seem like a warranted viewpoint to an uninformed section of the audience, but they could have long-term detrimental effects on gender equality, as the discriminatory objectives and confirmatory biases associated with women are difficult to eradicate. Viewers, especially children or teenagers, may internalize protective paternalism and gender policing, accepting these biases and conforming to traditional roles.

Rampant benevolent sexism, disguised as romance, love, or protectiveness, reinforces biases related to gender policing and protective paternalism. Consequently, people may adopt these conforming biases.

In conclusion, benevolent and ambivalent sexism are prominently represented in soaps and soap operas. However, due to activism and social media, there is growing backlash against rampant sexism in media. Benevolent sexism also masquerades as gender policing in mainstream Indian movies. Reviews of Hindi movies reveal how women are encouraged to conform to traditional gender norms through rewards and punishments. Women who adhere to societal norms—being chaste, submissive, docile, polite, husband-worshipping, nurturing, and family-oriented—are rewarded. Conversely, those who do not conform are punished with intentional discrimination, isolation, verbal intimidation, social ridicule, or sexual harassment.

Regarding sexual intimidation and relationship violence, benevolent or covert sexism is prevalent. For instance, in "Man Ki Awaaz Pratigya," the misogynistic hero treats women as mere sex objects and forces himself onto a woman despite her refusal. Such misogynistic representations and normalizing abusive behavior justify toxic masculinity. Contemporary media portrayals continue to romanticize and normalize these behaviors, which can be categorized as benevolent sexism and largely fall under ambivalent sexism.

Stalking and gender violence, when intertwined with romance, present a troubling narrative. Even if not involving physical violence, intimidation through derogatory language can be perceived as romantic intensity. Stalking is often portrayed as a heroic trait in mainstream Bollywood films, where such toxic behavior is normalized. Additionally, the victim of rape is shamed rather than the perpetrator, reinforcing media sexism.

A disturbing trend is the decrement or waiver of punishment for rapists if they agree to marry their victims, an extra-legal measure still entertained due to widespread internalization and stigmatization. This practice reveals a deep-rooted stigma where the victim must negotiate with the perpetrator and, in some cases, marry them to lessen the perpetrator's jail time or even avoid it altogether. Such stigma is rampant in media portrayals, glamorizing rapists and promoting marriages between victims and their rapists, effectively endorsing the rapist's behavior.

Many popular actors like Prem Chopra, Ranjit, Shakti Kapoor, and Sunil Grover have frequently portrayed rapists and eve-teasers in cinema. While these actors are labeled villains, others like Varun Dhawan, who played a character pursuing a woman aggressively in "Badrinath Ki Dulhania," are positioned as heroes despite similar problematic behaviors. This inconsistency raises questions about how these behaviors are portrayed and perceived.

Trivializing rape, as seen in Bollywood films like "Three Idiots," where the word "balatkar" is used humorously instead of "chamatkar," further illustrates the normalization of rape-related language. The use of such terminology in a comedic context desensitizes audiences to the severity of sexual violence and reflects a misogynistic attitude.

Objectification and dehumanization of women are recurrent themes. In some films, women are portrayed as illiterate and ridiculed, such as Gopi's character being belittled in her family. Contemporary sexist film tropes include item numbers, which have expanded beyond films to series and soaps, romanticizing sexual abuse. In intimate scenes, aggressive behavior is sometimes depicted as acceptable, masking sexual abuse as a form of intimacy.

While some portrayals may seem to promote women's safety, they often reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and undermine equality. The objectification

of women—from sensuous framing and male gaze to female fridging and pawning—further perpetuates these stereotypes and undermines genuine efforts toward gender equality.

Other concerns, such as female fridging and pawning, are linked to the male gaze and propagate sexist intertextualities. Traditional tropes like the damsel in distress also persist in contemporary narratives. For instance, in films like "Damsel in Distress," these sexist intertextualities are relevantly portrayed and positioned within modern contexts. Heterosexual intimacy contributes to gender inequality by placing the responsibility for intimacy solely on women, while men play no role in this dynamic. By promoting gender role structures that offer intimacy and security within heterosexual relationships, gender inequality is reinforced, limiting roles to one gender.

Benevolent sexism includes the idealization of women, protective paternalism, and a desire for close relationships, all of which involve traditional views of women in specific roles. Benevolent sexism creates an idealized image of women, supported by protective paternalism and a desire for relationships where minimal sexualization is involved.

On the other hand, hostile sexism encompasses dominant paternalism, disparaging attitudes, and heterosexual hostility. Dominant paternalism, as seen in characters like Mr. Bhalla in some series, reflects a disparaging attitude where the male character's anger issues impact female characters, reinforcing stereotypes like Punjabi men's aggression. Both types of sexism—benevolent and hostile—aim to uphold patriarchy and conventional gender norms. These serials perpetuate the notion that women should manage the household and family values while men are the decision-makers.

The theory of ambivalent sexism highlights male dominance and heterosexual interdependence as enduring elements of gender relations, continually promoting both hostile and benevolent beliefs. This theory underscores the dominance of males and the interdependence between genders, although the nature of this interdependence often reinforces traditional gender roles. While ambivalent sexism persists, it creates specific issues for women and fails to achieve true equality. Explicit sexism objectifies women, reducing them to mere objects rather than autonomous participants, thereby rejecting their human agency.

Another issue with implicit sexism is that it labels women with derogatory terms like "slut," whereas explicit sexism objectifies women, reducing them to mere objects rather than autonomous participants and denying their human agency. Explicit sexism undermines women's autonomy and reduces them to mere objects. Women's idealization and symbolic annihilation are prevalent in the male-dominated Indian media industry, manifesting as female under-representation, stereotypical characterization, and secondary roles such as mere mothers or romantic interests. This symbolic annihilation results in women being relegated to supporting characters with stereotypical roles, as opposed to having significant, autonomous presence.

In contrast, older shows like "Shanti" provided women with more agency, unlike the current trend where women are often sidelined and portrayed as submissive. "Good" women are depicted as domesticated, unambitious, virtuous, chaste, and family-oriented. These women are often shown as additional and dispensable characters—mothers or benevolent goddesses—perpetuating unrealistic and harmful expectations of motherhood. In some portrayals, a mother's role is exaggerated to the point of self-sacrifice, which further complicates the discussion of benevolent sexism.

Television shows, advertisements, and video games perpetuate various forms of sexism. Unlike films, which are limited in duration, television dramas have the time to delve deeply into high moral grounds, melodrama, and domestic narratives, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Popular TV series often feature young women from middle-class backgrounds falling in love with affluent males, highlighting themes of socioeconomic disparity. Shows like "Saath Nibhana Saathiya" and "Gum Hai Kisi Ke Pyaar Mein" depict female protagonists overcoming challenges to prove their worth, reflecting benevolent sexism and maternalism, where women are expected to manage domestic roles while men provide material support.

In print media and advertisements, benevolent sexism and objectification persist. For instance, advertisements for crockery often feature women, reinforcing maternalism, while fashion advertisements objectify women as objects of desire. The portrayal of men in ads, like Axe and Wild, often highlights controversial and detrimental aspects of female representation.

Disney animated programs have been criticized for the symbolic annihilation of female characters, with examples like Cinderella and Snow White waiting for male saviors. Despite efforts to improve female representation, Indian cartoons such as "Chota Bheem," "Motu Patlu," and "Mighty Raju" still fall short, reinforcing misogynistic stereotypes. These shows fail to provide diverse and empowered female characters, often depicting them in supportive or secondary roles.

Studies by Stermer and Burkley have exposed sexist video games, showing how benevolent sexism is promoted and how objectification impacts both men and women. Objectification of men reduces their well-being, attractiveness, and social esteem, while the objectification of women contributes to increased hostility towards them. Hostile sexism is more prevalent among men than benevolent sexism, which poses a threat to women's advancement in the workplace. Awareness of benevolent sexism is crucial to prevent its use as a tool for maintaining gender inequality.