

Re-Channeling the Myth of Masculinity: The Emergence of Androgyny in Bangladeshi Media

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Abstract—The myth of masculinity runs in two fold ways; outwardly men are physically strong who are supposed to be responsible for outside affairs instead of the household chores, and inwardly they ought to repress their emotion as being soft spoken or overtly emotional has always been considered as a very 'girly' tendency. However, these myths are now changing and thanks to the recent media where even grocery shopping is being projected as a 'masculine' task. This shift in the conceptualization of masculinity is curiously evident in the Bangladeshi media. The present paper analyzes the ways where these myths have been revised in the contemporary media discourses. Giving a cultural reading of selected advert materials, the paper argues that a conception of androgyny has been curiously emerging in the contemporary media representation of man and masculinity.

Keywords—Masculinity, androgyny, media, consumer culture

I. INTRODUCTION

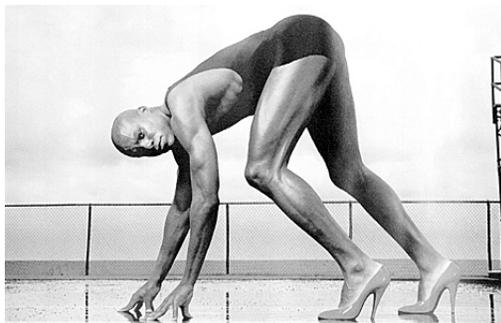


Fig 1 The poster of Carl Lewis of Pirelli Tires, wearing female high heels

IN November 1995, Carl Lewis, a black male athlete was photographed for Pirelli; a tire firm which has a reputation for producing calendars with pictures for beautiful women. Lewis was publicized like a superman idolizing his superbly athletic body; however his 'super masculinity' was emasculated by the invocation of his 'femininity' as he was wearing stylish, red high-heeled shoes. Some people said that it was just an advertiser's joke; some others argued that Carl Lewis has allowed himself to be exploited by the big corporate company. Others argued that he calculatingly embarked to defy the traditional image of 'masculinity' (Hall 234). Their

reactions could have been for one of two related reasons. The pay-off line of the ad was 'nothing without control'. When it was presented in juxtaposition with the part of anatomy identified by the slant of the arrow, latently raises controversies for some individuals. This may be tied with the "control of bodily waste (something rather than nothing) and/or issues of control associated with feminine self of a man" (Hagart 10).

In June 2010, Andrej Pejic, a Bosnian-born, Australian male fashion model was scouted for both the male and female runways at the Paris fashion shows. Unlike Carl Lewis, he was not castigated for his feminine traits and long blonde hair, rather his ambiguous, gender-bending features has bent a major buzz, made him the toast of the international fashion circuit from London to Paris to New York City and beyond. Although at the start he had been casting modeling agencies, designers and directors alike, but everybody was wondering why a woman was presented in men's shows, he was in a little while booked for major editorial spreads in influential fashion magazines such as *L'Officiel*, *i-D* and *Vogue Paris*.

These two cases exemplify that how media all over the world are flouting the myths of masculinity which used to regard male bodies as empty vessels aiming to get filled up by the gender norms passed on to them from their social settings, their families and their peers. This attempt of socialization is changing all over the world. Male are now active participants in internalizing, reframing and reproducing their own versions of masculinities. In recent times this wind of change has also started to blow in Bangladeshi media. Numerous adverts of various products are being aired on Bangladeshi TV channels where tentative steps towards re-evaluating 'stereotypical' concepts of masculinity which cannot be overlooked. In this research I would like to study these recent changes in Bangladeshi media which attempt to deconstruct the gender stereotype, consequently triggers us to refigure the convention of masculinity in the changing perspectives of Bangladesh.

In doing so, the paper concentrates on specific adverts being run in various Bangladeshi TV channels where the advertisers and ad-makers being inspired by the global trends are striding forward to break the rigid convention of masculinity embracing its varied types. Among those types this paper focuses specifically on 'Androgyny,' which can be easily identified in various adverts in terms of language, domestic affairs, traditional, professional aspects and trend. Due to global demand this project also relies on a few Indian adverts

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televised in various Bangladeshi television channels that are being dubbed and lip-synced in Bengali.

II. MEN AND THEIR “BEAUTY SECRETS:” BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES

In an essay titled “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” Fredric Jameson identifies one key feature of postmodernism is that the line between high and popular culture are gone or beginning to fade, in an extended level, which co-relates the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life. In the modern period, the only accepted version of masculinity used to be the absence of any sort of femininity. But in the postmodern representation, the older distinctive bar of specific ‘*nity*’ no longer exists, thus media loses its earlier stereotypes. Hence, Jameson says, “We need only think of the way our sense of history has disappeared, of how our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past. We live in a perpetual present. We might say that the media help us forget the past.” (204-5)

Jameson’s identified features of postmodernism will be recurring devices in this section to understand how this nonsexist representation triggers the audience to re-conceptualize masculinity in the juncture of ‘newly emergent social order of late capitalism’ (193). To accomplish this task this section studies screenplays of several relevant old and new television commercials of various products.

III. ANDRO VIS-À-VIS GYNO LANGUAGE

After 50 Indian female film stars lathering up with Lux, Hindustan Lever has broken away the stereotype for the first time by featuring a male star in the 75 years celebration of the brand. This advert not only changed the feminine face of its second largest selling soap brand to project superstar Shahrukh Khan sitting in a tub of petals along with actresses of yesteryears who have been already featured as Lux models, but it also directs him to enunciate the customary female dialogue of this brand “*Aaj mein aapko batanewala hoon meri khubsuratein ka raaz — Lux. Ab batayein aapka favourite Lux Star kaun hai?*” (I want to tell you about my beauty secrets — Lux. Who is your favourite Lux Star?)

Where in a gynocentric universe 1970s feminist like Elaine Showalter marks a clear-cut distinction between andro (male) and gyno (female) language with a view to construct a separate realm outside the male dominated culture, this advert austere uses gyno-language through a male vocal. Showalter coined ‘gynocriticism’ which is a broad and varied field, and any generalization should be treated with caution. (*Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry, 118) But this advert unifies both andro and gyno language in a single whole where the lead actor emulates style, themes and structure of an established female language. From Fredric Jameson’s perspectives of postmodernism, the dialogue ‘my beauty secrets’

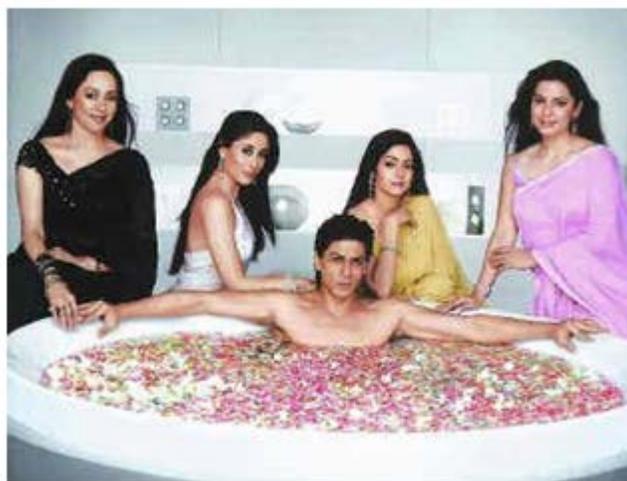


Fig 2: The poster of the Lux commercial where Shahrukh Khan bathes in rose petals

(*Meri Sundarta Ka Raaz*), is not a ‘parody’ (a term that capitalizes on the uniqueness of these feminine styles in this regard with a view to producing an imitation which mocks the original) as the target audience of this commercial has been always female. Shahrukh Khan is favourite with women of all ages. So he imitates the dialogue without any satirical impulse. Jameson calls this imitation as ‘pastiche’—a blank parody. Instead of showing Shahrukh as a macho man riding a horse like the “Marlboro man,” this advert portrays him as a metrosexual male who has a soft feminine touch both in his posture and language which is purposefully done to exert a pull on the female consumer society.

IV. DOMESTICATING MASCULINITY AND MASCULINIZING DOMESTICITY

Referring to Davidoff and Hall’s *Family Fortunes*, Sean Nixon in his essay ‘Exhibiting Masculinity’ states that middleclass men’s ‘involvement in production, design, building, accountancy and insurance’ associated them with certain characteristics and competence, which contrasted with the characteristics of middle class femininity. This contrastive characteristics set man as responsible for the jobs in public sphere and woman to be responsible for ‘creating and servicing’ domestic sphere. Idealizing this notion, in media the portrayal of household also used to exclude men in advertising any sort of active function in the household environment. All domestic products were being featured by female characters even marginalizing man from fatherhood responsibilities. The mid 1990s U.S. fatherhood movement attempts to restore the inevitability of men in families, comprising fatherhood as specifically male in delineation from the feminizing connotations of family concern. In this process, more male actors were encouraged to promote fatherhood-related issues or domestic products in the advertisements, both as television commercials and in billboards.

In Bangladesh, this same tendency can be observed. In recent days Bangladeshi actors Riaz or Jahid Hassan are doing Wheel detergent powder commercials, promoting how to wash dirty clothes without harming the soft skin. Again, Tahsan a renowned singer-cum actor features himself in a very feminine

“Jui Coconut hair Oil” commercial. The participation from Father's side in child rearing is not longer a “woman’s job” and is now also growing concerns in recent media mainly in the context of attempts to reconcile job and family life in dual breadwinner families. In a response to this issue, Lever Brothers introduced a series of adverts entitled ‘Pappu and Papa’ for Pepsodent toothpaste where Shahrukh Khan appears to be a more effectively caring father who can pursue his child in playful way to remain hygienic all the time. But most significantly the advert which strikes the idea of this section is the TV commercial of Pran Curry Power where two men are seen cooking in the kitchen and getting nostalgic. This advert opens through the conversation between them:

*It was my mother who used to cook and was accurate in using the spices
Oh dear! you just reminded me of MY mom*



Fig 3 The poster of the Pran Commercial where two men are cooking in the kitchen

In Jameson’s term this advert is namely pastiche where the past is being remade. In earlier “curry powder” advertisements we could see that the mother sheds tears remembering her son who resides abroad. This advert directly mimics the older plot and provokes the same emotion ensuing a ‘nostalgic mood’—only this time the sadness is rather the other way round.

V. BEAUTIFYING CORPORATE MASCULINITY

In 2005 when Emami launched India’s first fairness cream for men ‘Fair and Handsome’, it made some clamor. Initially it was criticized as a ‘parody’ which pokes fun on the female fairness creams’ famous brand ‘Fair and Lovely’, but later it turned out as some serious scientific issues and proved it as not a matter of joke. The product description says that “men have tougher skin than women. It is more exposed to pollution; UV ray and stress factors, so ‘Emami Fair and Handsome Advanced Fairness Men Range’ products are specially formulated for Men”. A number of researches also showed that 28% of all fairness cream users are male consumers. Moreover, in 2006 “Fair and Lovely” introduces a new brand, ‘Menz Active’, which the radical “need” for fairness face-creams for men is no longer a feminine need. As in the advertisement of “Fair & Lovely Menz Active” we see a job interview where the candidate is a user of the product. As the myth goes, ‘qualification’ is the only fact that constitutes

man’s identity, beautification has nothing to do with it; in a subversive level this advert alters this idea. Attempting a counter-narrative in the screenplay of this advert, we see a confident male jobseeker questions the employers’ panel:

: *Why not somebody else?*
: *There is something beyond qualifications*

The quick cut reveals the secret explaining what this ‘something’ is— it is “Fair & Lovely”—as it helps to add that “maximum impression.” Menz Active is also positioned along the same line as “Fair & Lovely” when it was launched. Menz uses the pay off line “Change Your Story”. Featuring a stuntman this advert shows how he succeeds to become the model after using the brand. This changing story is changing the stereotypes of masculinity by putting prominence on men’s desire to be attractive where in a postmodern world they are not shy anymore about trying to look good, fair and handsome by using fairness creams.

VI. ANDROGYNOUS SYMPTOMS AND EVIDENCES

Our society has always been shaped by the suggestions of the television advertisers who influence consumers’ belief on how people should look or act. In the past, Bangladeshi media used to perpetuate the myth of two-and-only-two genders — a construct which used to exclude many. They had considered sex and gender as an inseparable entity where men were masculine and women were feminine. But interestingly consumer behaviour researchers recognized long ago that some men were more feminine than masculine while some women were more masculine than feminine. This realization leads the recent Bangladeshi media to reshape the consumer society with a view to target everyone. The marketers are challenging the long-held norms and notions about what it means to be a man or a woman. In this new spectrum, there is no longer binary, people are encouraged to work out their own issues in order to be frank about it, acknowledge it, and budge on.

The series of adverts that I have examined as case-studies are just the first fruits of breaking the stereotype. Following these advertisements men in Bangladesh are increasingly becoming conscious of their looks. They do not mind being full-throat by embracing traditional female interests like an overly vested interest in outfits, hairstyles, fashion accessories, manicures, neat eyebrows, spa treatments and so on— something that always been seen as a feminine trait.

VII. ANDROGYNOUS CULTURE IN BANGLADESH

Gender-roles are also immensely redefined and re-understood in these recent advertisements. For example, men are equally part of household domestic works like cooking, washing clothes or rearing children. Furthermore the dress code for today’s corporate world also rejects the gender binary. Eroding the fashion gender lines, the facility for men and women to dress down at work offers more options where unisex dress-codes are being promoted. Examining the genders massages in these adverts it seems Bangladeshi media is applying ‘all things to all people’ philosophy. This visual representation of masculinity palpably offers a negotiation between what is traditionally called ‘absolute feminine’ and

'absolute masculine'. Dr Sandra Bem names this version of masculinity as 'androgyny' which is currently introduced in Bangladeshi media.

As explained earlier, an androgynous male is a more balanced person who is able to incorporate a high degree of both feminine and masculine traits. A "traditional" feminine individual is high on feminine (expressive) traits and low on masculine (instrumental) traits. A "traditional" masculine individual is high on instrumental traits and low on expressive traits. But an androgyny embraces both of them depending on which behaviors best fit in a particular situation which makes them better adjusted, consequently happier.

This inauguration of androgyny in Bangladeshi media has direct connections to changes in country's consumer markets. Where gender has been a significant segmentation and targeting criteria in our local marketing, gender roles used to persist and influence consumer behavior, the behaviors of androgynous male consumers are now clearly defying these stereotypes. Keeping pace with the global trends Bangladeshi male are now updating their wardrobes, piling accessories and jewelry for different events, trying skin and hair care products to look appealing. Further boosted by male fashion magazines like *Canvas* and beauty contests like 'You Got the Look', men's grooming now has a huge market in Bangladesh. To feed the men-grooming wave many stylish and expensive male beauty salons have been established namely Persona Adams, Total Care, and Menz World. There is a well equipped gym in almost every corner in the capital, which shows how men are striving to obtain a good physique. Apart from the menswear, grooming products and toiletries, many grocery products are solely aimed at men with a persuasion to make family life easier.

Consequently, the prevailing wind for social changes started to sweep across the country, empowering women and softening the traditional representation of men, while changing the insight of human traits consisting of opposite sex roles to human traits combining two approving sex roles as a legitimate gender. Its impact is one where the traditional masculinity is being refuted not just at the "fringes" of society, but in mainstream lifestyle, fashion, art and media. The traditional hegemonic masculinity version is therefore strongly alive in kicking out the emerging 'androgyny' in both fabulous and stereotypical way.

VIII. REACTING TOWARDS ANDROGYNY

It is interesting to see how masochist people are defensive in the face of these changes. Many of them fear that the moving up of androgyny is the inauguration of becoming woman as man are loosing their desired 'ideal' masculine traits. To them if nothing else, it shows the effect of willingly and deliberately led onslaught on strength of men and women. Now people aspire to become the other gender and remain detached from themselves; "When you can no longer tell a man from a woman, it is the end of the world." Manipulating religious sentiments they claim that magnanimous God created man and from man, women to serve him. Blurring this distinction is against God's plan for us and continuing society. Their

conversations about 'androgyny' finally strain transgender and wrap up with an apocalyptic account of gender ending.

I am always taken back by the audacious cis-privileged comments of anti-androgyny and oppositional sexism as a defense to the gender binary, a sentiment that even permeate within the transvestite community. It is factual that sex distinctions are authentic and a number of are most likely present at birth. Gender is also imperative to our individualities, and it helps us to address ourselves with others. Apart from that, researchers also acknowledge that one byproduct of abolishing gender would be "gender vertigo," a tremulous and vulnerable feeling. But I do not think that this is not insoluble. It would be worth it in the end, if we could adjust and recover. With the oppressive structure of masculinity gone, men will be freer. Therefore I think 'androgyny' paranoia is not apocalyptic. Rather it is an escape from the pressure to conform in daily existence, largely as a result of misconceptions or prejudice, and is a welcome release. An androgynous male does not negate all of those that clearly embody the binary. Differences do not "end" in gender, rather it broadens it. Gender is growing up and it is rapidly moving away from the previous limitations of the binary, in order to encompass a more genuine reality and understanding about the sexes.

IX. CONCLUSION

Media has proved itself as an efficient device to revolutionize the design of gender inequality in society. In terms of Bangladesh, today's media is conspicuously taking interest in exploring the various versions of masculinity. This endeavor is being strongly felt in every walk of life. The term 'androgyny' has become a proverbial term to describe this phenomenon and it has been considered as a phenomenon because the hegemonic masculinity does not welcome variety in its stereotypic definition. Emotion, beauty, fashion and image enhancement have long been the province of women, yet it has become increasingly accepted for men to enter into the territory. And so, the purpose of the research was to identify the recent adverts widely run in various television channels in Bangladesh that contributed the media in promoting androgyny with a view to break the myth of rigid masculinity.

The upshots of this study indicate that this movement has a strong correlation with the consumer market. This is not surprising, considering the strong body of knowledge on the effects of media on male appearance ideals. Through these adverts, men are increasingly exposed to the glamour world telling them, "you don't look good enough" (Pope 4). The significance of outward show is causing men to spend more money on grooming products and therefore, effective marketing through media is the key to attracting and retaining this growing demographic. The blurring of gender roles in society is calling marketers to appeal to both male and female in uni-fashion and household responsibilities. This is tied with the fact that women are working outside the home, and thus men's role as provider in the breadwinner family is in a state of flux. But men are now subjected to be better fathers, better husbands who share an equal hand in domesticity. Therefore

men are now defining themselves through what they consume and what they contemplate and their masculinity is reinforced through the media adverts they are barraged with. This has led men to re-conceptualize their masculinity. Further, because men are not given the discourse to talk about their feeling of inadequacy, they internalize their feeling, which appears to reveal the femininity—a stereotypically considered threat to their social-esteem. Thus, the increasing importance on promoting androgyny through the media now appears as a revolution which gives man space to celebrate their true self.

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