

REVIEW ON “A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN’S MAGAZINES”

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Abstract

The book under discussion, “A Critical Discourse Analysis of South Asian Women’s Magazines” written by Linda McLoughlin, Department of English, Liverpool University, UK, edited by two renowned writers, Helen Sauntson (St. John University) and Allyson Jule (School of Education, Trinity Western University), published by Macmillan Publishers Ltd in 2017 is a worth reading, with a full analysis of different ads regarding women's health and beauty products. The writer applied Fairclough's (1989) model of the CDA for textual analyses of qualitative data collected from South Asian Magazines from 2009 to 2015. The writer discussed Fanon's (1963) psychoanalytical framework (the idea of color in the colonial world), Labov and Waletzky's (1967) theory of narrative, Spender's (1998) belittling terms, often used to describe women's talk like chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch, whine, gossip and Debora Tannen (1990) theory of “report talk” (Men and women have different speech styles). Hall's (1980) and Morley's (1980) model of decoding/encoding was cited for the interpretation of Focus Group Discussion.

The book explored the idea of beauty, which means “white skin” in the world of advertising. In the consumer market, the well-documented body of women has been presented as a commodity, which is used to sell everything, from razors to beauty creams etc. Historically, British Asian Women were constructed as “other” docile, victims of their society, stereotypically portrayed as weak and subservient. The focus of the writer in this book was also the language, layout of the magazines, and semiotic analyses. The writer presented two levels of analysis of the text. First, the macro-level analysis explored magazines within the context of social changes referred to as ‘neo-liberalism’, ‘postfeminism’, ‘postcolonialism’, and ‘globalization’. Secondly, the micro-level analysis aimed to identify the particular linguistic, semiotic, and inter-discursive features of magazine texts, such as the rhetorical structures.

The writer discussed the two types of magazines in this book; the first type of magazine was printed in the U.K., and the second type of magazine was printed in India. The UK magazines were “Asiana” and “Asiana Wedding”, whereas the Indian magazines were “Femina” and “Cosmopolitan”. Asiana and Asiana's Wedding were for Asian women who want more. Femina was the first English magazine for Indian women, which aimed to guide progressive women. Cosmopolitan, the largest magazine in the world, with 61 international editions considered “the Bible” for young women. These magazines were the guiding stars for the South Asian women to help them remain beautiful, young, slim, smart, attractive, hot, white, and productive.

The background of South Asian Women’s magazines was colonialism, nationalism, and post-colonialism. Interestingly, the writer had given much importance to Spivak's (1994) idea of subaltern and Said's (1994) idea of Orientalism. Rapid economic prosperity in South Asia brought social and cultural changes in the lives of women. They wanted to look more beautiful and exercise power in the world. In reality, it was the birth of the new woman in a patriarchal society. According to Chatterjee (1989), the new woman was quite the opposite of a common woman who was vulgar, coarse, loud, quarrelsome, and devoid of moral superiority. These new Westernized “Eurasian” women tried to show their superiority in the world by educating and beautifying themselves. South Asian women in the UK enjoy prosperity and freedom, whereas in India and Pakistan, women still have to face aggression and maltreatment. Sinha (1994) cited the famous slogan, “India cannot be free until its women are free, and women cannot be free until India is free”.

The first advertisement in the magazine was about the luxury handbag “Phive Rivers”, titled “Mancrafted”. The image of the five men with muscles was working with the bag. They were cutting, caressing, rubbing, hammering the rivets, polishing, and giving them the finest shape. Untouched by machines. Made by men. The language and semiotics of the ad took the women into the world of fantasy, where they imagined that the strong-bodied men were rubbing their bodies, not their handbags. The other important idea was man-crafted vs machines. We have associated machines with modernity and handicraft with tradition. The unique selling point of this advertisement was that the artisans were crafting a piece of art, which gave a unique look to the product. The idea of “Commodification” presented by Fairclough (1992) was another important aspect of the magazine. According to the writer, the commodities they offer were bags, perfumes, dresses, watches, jewelry, beauty creams, etc. But the most valuable commodity was the human body, especially the body of a woman.

The second advertisement was about the skin-lightening cream, in which a famous Bollywood actress, Sonam Kapoor, presented beautifully. In another advertisement, an “Eurasian” girl, Katrina Kaif, was presented as the perfect commodity for skin-lightening cream. These two Indian actresses encouraged South Asian women to use skin-lightening creams. Miss World, Aishwarya Rai, was the most targeted model for “Femina” and “Cosmopolitan.” The editors of the magazines had selected specific wording and theme lines for Miss World, like elegance in attitude, almond-shaped eyes, shiny, long hair, and full, mature lips, etc. These famous actresses and models of Bollywood were used as commodities that helped to get maximum profit and gave awareness to South Asian women about how to wear makeup.

According to Chapkis (1986), “Beauty is associated with popularity and power”. According to Lal (2003), winning the Miss World contest for Rai was not a happy accident. It was the “Femina” that initiated the campaign for South Asian and Indian women to participate in the Miss World context. After winning the Miss World Context by “Ash”, the beauty industry flourished in India. Now, the slogan was “white is right.”

Another important linguistic feature of the book was the coinage of new terms like Vampy Doll, Porcelain Skin, Wine Stain Lips, Star Fish, Girl Warrior, Hot Flame, Eyes of Heaven, Smoky Spartacus, Circus Ringmaster, etc. The description of the “starfish” was associated with the whiteness of the Indianness. According to Reddy, “This shell-studded creature swims with her blue saltering eyes, which gaze beneath the water. Her plum orange lips

glisten as the sun hits them.” A very unique feature of this book was to highlight the sponsored project of the magazine Vogue to teach beauty skills to Afghan women. Mclarney (2009) titled this project “Beauty without Borders”. They introduced “Hijab Friendly” fashion for the Afghan women.

In the chapter “Men’s Voices in Women’s Magazines,” The writer explored how male voices were heard in South Asian women’s magazines. Most of the writers, editors, and columnists were women, but the owners and the advertisers were male. Thus, men hold bigger and stronger positions in women’s magazines. Another interesting thing highlighted by the writer was that the women were more interested in male columns. Through male writing, they studied the psyche of the man. The writer quoted the example of the columnist Mubashir Malik (writer of the “Asian Women Magazine”) who wrote about the growing trend of men wearing makeup in his well-liked column “Man Talk of Metrosexual Healing”. Mubashir Malik refers to David Beckham, a well-known footballer, who was famous for his Metrosexuality. He has also discussed Bollywood actor Salman Khan as a “ hyper-masculine character.”

The reader’s letter to the editor and the problem corner (sexual and emotional) were also part of these magazines. The amazing thing was that these magazines printed men’s letters, full of agony and painful stories. Another very interesting thing the writer has mentioned in these magazines was the use of the word “Bitch”. This word was back in fashion in a new style, as quoted by Moore (2014), “The label ‘bitch’ had traditionally been used as a derogatory label for a woman, but recently, some women used the term self-affirmingly to express their assertiveness and independence.”

In the last chapter, “Readers’ Responses,” the writer collected the data from focus group discussions. The focus group discussion aimed to discover the participants’ insights, gender, and cultural identity. The same idea was presented by Alasuutari (1995) that the focus group discussion encouraged the people to talk about things that would otherwise remain outside the conversation.” The focus group discussion took place in the North West of England and Bangalore. There were six group discussions of different age groups from 21 to 45 years, with 6 to 8 participants. The writer had conducted the focus group discussion on the aesthetics of Beauty and the Concept of Whiteness, Empowerment, Hijab, Language and Image of Magazines, Dressing and Makeup, Male and Female models of India, Husband and Wife relationships, and Commodities.

This book is beautifully written and covers almost all the issues related to women through studying South Asian Women's Magazines. However, the book lacks certain details. For example;

1. The title of the book is "Critical Discourse Analyses of the South Asian Women's Magazine," but 90% of the book is about the Indian models, writers, and editors. The title of the book can easily be substituted as CDA of Indian women's magazines.
2. In South Asia, we have many countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, etc, but the writer hardly mentioned the women and fashion of these countries. Only once in the book, the writer mention a Pakistani model, Iman Ali. In the same way, the fashion project about Afghani women was discussed once in a book.
3. Instead of discussing Femina and Cosmopolitan, the writer gives more value to other magazines that are not included in the methodology of the book.
4. The views of the Indian women about fashion and style cannot be the views of all South Asian Women. It should not be generalized for all.
5. The writer skillfully applied the Fairclough (1989) model of CDA, but was unable to apply the Focus Group Discussion properly because the data collected from the group discussions were ambiguous.
6. The writer discussed the Hijab but failed to provide information about the importance of the Hijab. She discussed it once like "Hijab friendly fashion" but never explained the term.

The layout of the book, data collection the way the writer interpreted the ads in the magazines and the application of the CDA show that the writer is well-grounded in the theory and practice of the relevant field. Especially the way the writer interpreted the woman's body as a commodity in the field of fashion and style is, no doubt, admirable.

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