

# The Contemporary Mass Culture

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This paper is divided into three parts. The first part of the paper focuses on the analyses of the contemporary culture based on Theodor . W. Adorno's essay "The schema of mass culture". The second part of the paper focuses on the application of the techniques (analysed in the first part) to Adorno's other essay "Free time". The third or the final part deals with the representation of women in Indian television serials in relation with "The schema of mass culture".

Adorno in his essay "The schema of mass culture" discusses how the contemporary mass culture manipulates consciousness. In Adorno's words 'aesthetic semblance (shien) turns into the sheen'( Adorno 53). The primary aim of the mass culture is to promote the right attitude in accordance to what the capitalist industry can supply. Almost everything in the mass culture ( which is very much a part of the capitalist industry ) is oriented towards the realm of 'ideal'.

The capitalist industry is successful in creating a 'poetic mystery' around the product with the help of technology and advertising. The technology is able to cast a spell on the consumers through which 'reality becomes its own ideology'( Adorno 55). This leads to the death of imagination. Imagination is replaced by a technology driven capitalist mechanism. Adorno explains this further by giving an example of the film stars who are recognised by the roles which they are most famous for. Here, we can clearly see a merger between the image and the reality. When the image and the reality mix, the reality has a tendency to assume the culture as its object. But, the problem lies in the monopolistic nature of the culture which leads to the death of individuality. Everything is standardised in the society. This takes us to something which has been produced in past and induces a notion of self-reflexivity within culture. The mass culture promotes everything which has already been performed. The approval and applaud of people is needed for any product to pass the test of mass culture. This phenomenon of mass culture has created such a scenario that an average film advertises its similarity with a successful one rather than hiding it to gain success. All steps are performed cautiously to maintain the realistic harmony between the object and the image. Art is not merely 'art for art's sake'. Art informs us about the reality. The contemporary mass culture works on the principle of the representation of the living reality. I would rather say that the mass culture works on the principle of convincing us that it is representing reality. However, the questions that come to our mind are: How far is it successful in representing the reality? Does it really represent reality ?

'Mass culture treats conflicts but in fact proceeds without conflict'( Adorno 62). For example, a film may deal with end number of psychological problems. But the end product which is presented to the viewers is the one in which all the conflicts are resolved. The mass culture treats conflicts in such a manner to manipulate people's consciousness. As a result of which art becomes impotent of resolving any conflict outside it because of the lack of conflict within art. As we know, art exits because of its ability to transcend the order. This shows how the mass culture makes the prerogative of art ironical. Art has to get rid of any conflict in order to make it a means of material production. Mass culture makes standardization and mass production, the important concerns of art. The notion of 'beautiful' in art is replaced by the notion of 'practical'. Adorno in "The schema of mass culture" compares the new objectivity of art to that of architecture.

He shows how mass culture not only standardises the mass products but also standardises their uniqueness. He gives the example of large family villas in England. I would like to explain this by giving an example of coffee houses. The coffee houses are emerging in India at a very fast pace. Now a days , coffee houses have become a very important part of people's social life. In order to be a part of the contemporary mass culture, one has to visit them. Although, they are not very different from each other, but each through advertising tries to stress on its uniqueness. This shows how the consumers are subjected to the standardisation and they have to adapt their needs in accordance to what the culture industry can supply.

'Advertising becomes information when there is no longer anything to choose from' (Adorno 73). The consumers are generally informed of the history of work's conception. The consumer through this practice is made aware of the hard work that went into it. This practice puts consumer in a paradoxical situation where s/he experiences a conflict between his own experience and the universal information offered to him. I would like to explain this by giving examples from T.V. and film industry. Before the release of any film, the stars of the film promote the film. During the promotional venture, they give information to the viewers regarding the plot of the film and their character in the film. The film stars in many of their interviews have agreed that the promotion of the film is a very important step of film making. The duration of the time that stars take in promoting the film is sometimes equal if not more than the duration of time that they take in shooting the film. They also showcase the making of the film in order to convince the audience to go to the theatres. A very similar thing happens in the reality shows on T.V. The reality shows on T.V. such as 'Indian Idol' claim

that the winner will be chosen by the viewers. But, they play with the people's consciousness. We can find a panel of judges in almost every reality show who give their reviews on the performance of each participant. The viewers are supposed to vote in accordance to the views expressed by the judges on the individual performances. In a way, the viewers are fooled to believe that they chose the winner. But, actually, this is not the case.

Adorno in "The schema of mass culture" states three stage process through which the monopolistic mass culture works. The three stages are: advertising, information and command. The mass culture successfully merges these stages into one another. It produces curiosity in the mind of the consumer because they are already exposed to half information through advertising. Now, they want to own the product. Hence, the industry is successful in making the curious consumer a victim of its advertising.

The capitalist regime of the mass culture makes the products exhibit sport like characteristics. They have to constantly compete with the other product of the same genre. The mass culture encourages not only the products to compete with each other, but even the consumers are in constant mode of competition. They compete with other consumers by the virtue of the techniques used by the industry. The capitalist industry which governs the mass culture does not want the consumers to behave like sportsmen. They rather want the consumers to behave like the ardent devotees of the product, which is very similar to the way fans follow their favourite sport.

Adorno further explains how the mass culture adopts the didactic function. It teaches people the perfect way to sit, talk, walk, eat etc. The consumers are taught about the right behaviour in the society. Mass culture only accepts the refined behaviour. They might show unacceptable behaviour. But, the actual purpose behind showing such unacceptable behaviour or language is to warn the viewers to not to use it in their real lives. Mass culture in playing the didactic role is playing with people's consciousness in a big way. Everything from the clothes to the language that people use is influenced by the mass culture. The mass culture works in the manner in which it is successful in convincing the people that the product that they are supplying is the product that the consumer dreamt of. Some philosophers in the antiquity talked about the mimetic function of art where art imitates reality. The mass culture deceives people and makes people think that the art is imitating real life. But, actually they are forced to imitate art.

Now, I would like to relate Adorno's theory to his other essay in the same book, that is; "Free time". In "Free time", Adorno states that 'free time depends upon the totality of social conditions'( Adorno 162). The free time now emerges like a paradoxical term because there is no genuine freedom involved. The leisure industry integrates free time with such an ease that people are convinced that they are doing it out of their free will or choice. But, actually, it has been abstracted for them. Similar scheme works in the case of hobby. One must have a hobby in accordance with what the leisure industry can supply. If you have no hobby, you will be ridiculed. Adorno uses the example of camping to show how what the industry wants is forced upon us. So, in a way saying that the culture industry dominates our free time and moulds our interest.

The basic points that come from our discussion of the mass culture of which free time is a part are that mass culture deceives us, making us believe that we are individuals, whereas everything is standardised. The traditional art has lost its autonomy. Art is accepted by the mass culture if it follows the rules of the mass culture. Mass culture has standardised everything which leads to the death of imagination/creativity.

Now, I would further like to explain how the mass culture deceives us, manipulates our consciousness and standardises everything by giving the example of the representation of women in Indian television serials. It is very important to know how a nation which claims of equality represents women in television. When women in India are progressing to be politicians, engineers, IPS and IAS officers, the daily soaps show women clad in heavy clothes, jewellery and make-up. The women are shown to be plotting and scheming against each other. The serials have not evolved from the stereotypes of a faithful wife or a scheming vamp. The stereotypical plots used by the contemporary Indian soaps are: obedient wife, scheming vamp, bitter relationship between mother in law and daughter in law, bitter relationship between daughter in law and sister in law. Although, the stereotypes used in the soaps might bear some resemblance with certain reality. But, they are unable to capture the changing pattern of the evolving women within Indian household. The Indian television soaps rather than emancipating women from the clutches of domesticity, incarcerate them within patriarchy. They uphold the notions of an ideal wife, ideal daughter, ideal mother who is best in managing the house. The working woman of the modern times who shares the household responsibilities with her husband hardly finds space in such soaps.

It is ironical that this trend of portraying ideal domestic women engaged in petty kitchen politics was started by a very influential woman of our times; Ekta Kapoor. The Balaji Telefilms shifted the lens to the family drama with serials like 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi', 'Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii' and 'Kasautii Zindagii Kay'. Another irony arises from the fact that the target audience of such serials is women. Although, these serials have female protagonists, but the representation of women in these serials is degrading. They are merely seen as models of heavy sarees and jewellery.

These serials fail to show the modern, career oriented women. These serials generally focus on rich, elite class women who are married off in rich families. The primary aim of the life of these women is to manage their house. The vamp who is even more decked up than the heroine plays heinous tricks to make the life of the heroine uncomfortable. The heroine is shown as an emblem of sacrifice who can never do anything wrong. In this context, women's achievement in these serials is valued in terms of their responsibility towards running house successfully, settling down in the husband's house, bearing 'male' children and making them into good human beings. These serials uphold the stereotypes already prevalent in the society rather than breaking them. The heroine is shown mostly to be of fair complexion with wide ranging qualities like good cooking skills, loyalty, compassion, devotion etc. Her greatness lies in her negation of her individuality in order to be an 'ideal' wife, daughter or mother.

Now I would like to give examples of specific serials like 'Balika Vadhu' and 'Diya Aur Baati Hum' to show the stereotypical representation of women in television serials. Both these serials are at the top of the TRP ratings.

'Balika Vadhu' airs on Colors TV. It focuses on one of the most pivotal issue of Indian culture, that is; child marriage. The protagonist of the serial, Anandi was married off in her childhood to Jagdeesh. The serial traces the hardships that Anandi goes through from adolescence to adulthood. Jagdeesh's grandmother subjects Anandi to all kinds of mishaps.

She even burns Anandi's Books and does not allow her to study. Although, every time the serial is aired , it shows a clip saying that it condemns child marriage. But, it fails to show that in action. Anandi is shown to be the 'ideal bahu' who is obedient. Anandi is shown to become a teacher and sarpanch. The serial rather than focussing on the social issues related to women, focusses on the kitchen politics with ideal domesticated women. The serial which began as an offset from the regular soaps, soon turned out to be a regular show.

'Diya Aur Baati hum' airs on Star Plus. It traces the life of Sandhya who dreams to become IPS officer. Sandhya is married off even before the fulfilment of her dreams because of the sudden , unnatural death of her parents. Sandha's mother in law criticizes Sandhya for following her dream because she thinks that her dream prohibits her from fulfilling her household responsibilities. Sandhya's mother in law after a lot of insistence on the part of Suraj ; Sandhya's husband agrees to allow Sandhya to go for the training only on the condition that she will fulfil all her household duties even after becoming IAS officer.

Both the serials show a little scope for emancipation of women. Sandhya is allowed to become IAS officer. Anandi is allowed to become a teacher. But, both of them have to undergo a lot of struggle to achieve that. There is no notion of female bonding in both the serials. The women in both the serials, rather than helping the other women of the family, plot against them. Both the serials rather than focussing on the lives of the protagonists as that of career women, focus on their lives as that of 'ideal bahus'.

The serials should stop stereotyping and categorising women into the binaries of 'pitiable bahu' and 'scheming vamp'. They should rather try to show 'real' women of the modern society. The representation of women in Indian television serials shows how the television industry which is very much a part of the mass culture standardises and stereotypes women. They manipulate the consciousness of the viewers by upholding the notions of ideal, sacrificing women rather than showing the modern, intelligent and career-oriented women.

This paper intended to do a critical study of the contemporary mass culture. It analysed the standardising and manipulative character of Indian TV industry keeping Adorno's theory of "The schema of mass culture" at centre.  
(2500 words)

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