

Chapter 62

Urban Nepali Women and Experiences of Love, Intimate Relations, and Media

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the influence of media, this chapter explores a variety of gender practices in the era of globalisation. This chapter explores how urban Nepali women constantly negotiate between global flows and local context and the effects of this negotiation on their gender roles, and on their familial and intimate relationships. The chapter analyses the ways media, especially Indian visual media, which is a common source of discussion among urban women, is affecting them and their daily lives. Examining the importance of visual media, films and television in directing new identities and implications of gender roles and intimate relationships, this chapter explores ways urban women of Nepal are negotiating their gender relations and intimate lives in relation to the binary of ‘cultural practices’ and ‘modernity’ through watching Indian visual media.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, women in South Asia have made considerable shifts in crossing the boundaries of ‘tradition’ towards ‘modernity’ with greater access to the public sphere and larger institutional, structural and political changes (Agnihotri 2008, Loomba et al. 2012). Nepali women, just like women in other South Asian societies, have also experienced the intersection of ‘culture’ and globalisation. Therefore, focusing on the impact of cultural aspects of globalisation on local cultural practices, especially using the lens of media, this chapter addresses a variety of gender attitudes and practices¹ of urban Nepali women resulting from that intersection.

Many theorists have shown the complex ways in which media has been influential in the era of globalisation, (Appadurai 1996; Thompson 2011). As Thompson states “...if we wish to understand the nature of modernity-that is, of the institutional characteristics of modern societies and the life conditions

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created by them-then we must give a central role to the development of communication media and their impact” (Thompson, 2011:3).

Certain aspects of globalisation such as mobility and media are directly linked to re(producing) and re(shaping) culture, gender roles and intimate relationships. Moreover, media is a powerful lens for understanding globalisation and modernity. Although representation and participation of women in media has always been questioned and much debated globalisation and modernity of media narratives have affected women’s understandings of relationships and roles.

Turning to contemporary South Asia, it is worthwhile to question whether the globalisation has been able to bring in increased freedom and more opportunities in lives of people especially to those of women in gender roles and relationships within the local context. In reacting to Indian visual media, my interviewees reflected on their ideas and perceptions. The findings of my study uncovered media as an agent of modernity for urban Nepali women, influencing them as they’re (shape) their culture, gender roles and intimate relationships.

The term ‘intimacy’ is understood differently in various cultural contexts, however, in general it refers to the closeness between people. Although I accept and understand that intimate relations can involve family members, friends and kin, in this chapter, I refer to intimacy as one form of gender practice that forms a close connection between my interviewees, married and unmarried with their partners. As Jamieson (2012;133) states,

Although there may be no universal definition, intimate relationships are a type of personal relationships that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognized as close. The quality of ‘closeness’ that is indicated by intimacy can be emotional and cognitive, with subjective experiences including a feeling of mutual love, being ‘of like mind’ and special to each other....[...] It is unhelpful and unnecessary to deny the significance, such as the oft repeated stereotypes and scripts of popular culture and the pervasive popularisations of expert knowledge delivered through mass media.

Media theorists like Meenakshi Gigi Durham et al (2006) posit that understanding culture critically is essential as it provides insights on how media and culture construct and produce gender and roles and identities; however, they further state there is no one perspective or method that can easily contribute to this process.

Now, coming back to the importance of media in understanding nature of modernity in South Asian context, there are some ethnographic works which show how the Third World societies mediate along the boundaries of the ‘global’ and ‘local’ through the medium of media. In the similar context, Purnima Mankekar’s ethnographic study on *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* explores the relationship between mass media and socio-cultural life, national identity formation of women in India, a non-Western context. She describes how everyday viewing of television in India has shaped women’s place within the family, community, and nation and in fact has influenced formation of class, caste, consumption, religion, and politics. Her argument suggests the power of media to redefine women’s roles and identity within the society and nation as a whole. Furthermore, it could be also viewed as the adverse effect that global processes can have on women by reinforcing gender and other ethnic, racial and caste stereotypes.

Another study on globalisation, gender and nationalism by Rupal Oza (2006) conceptualizes the study of gender and politics in India through examining three phenomena: neo-liberal policies, the rise of the Hindu Right, and the consolidation of the middle classes. According to Oza, India’s exposure to globalisation has fostered rigid gender and sexual identities in the name of sovereignty over national

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