

One Gender, different Realities

Breaking Women-Images in Media that bind

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During the UNDA-OCIC meeting in Delhi on Asian Cinema and Women, one point of discussion was how stereotyped images of women transformed by media and specifically in the visual medium film, contribute to perpetuate a limited and also false perception of women's reality and life context. Interestingly, in several statements such as "Asian women don't want or need the same deliberations as Western women" or "Western women in the context of consumerism culture are utilized as mere sex objects", it became clear that there is a demand for different portrayals of women in the South and women in the West. There is not one common applicable global "women image".

History has already been the venue of distinctions between women of the South and women of the West namely their different "vita". The different stories of Western and Southern women on strategies according to live contexts, but also various role demands posed by varying life situations, cultural and political influences and finally and most important, the double bound dilemma of race and gender mainly faced by minority and especially Southern women.

The women's movement itself has meanwhile realized that the propagated "global sisterhood" has to be differentiated when it comes to analysis and finally conclusions on women in principle, and portraits on women's realities. In many painful discussions it has become clear that women in the South in certain situations will tend to solidarize with their men rather than with white women, which is not only a consequence of common historical experience e.g. colonialism and slavery, but also because of the ongoing discrimination of Southern folk by Western folk. Too often it completely slipped from the minds of white women that they themselves are representatives of politics and structu-

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Women in the South often demand a strengthening of the family values

res which have oppressed the people in the South, hence also the women. The institution family, which for many white women is considered to be 'the' place where for them oppression, limitation and servitude takes place, for women in the South, this place often turns out to be where they can receive self-affirmation, self-development and protection against the outside world. Hence in opposition to the white women critics of patriarchy, who struggle for a deliberation of family responsibilities, the women in the South often demand a strengthening of the family values, in order to transform self-consciousness and dignity to their children.

Sexism as the typical and mere white category of analysis

Even if most of the women in the South are aware that with this approach they exist in the limbo, they are of the opinion that sexism as the typical and mere white category of analysis, is not enough to describe their situation. As a group, they live in an exceptional position in the global society. Because they are the ones most strongly concerned with sexist, racial and class specific oppression. At the same time they are that group, which has not been socialized in such a way to be able to adopt the role of the oppressor/exploiter. White women and men of the South have "both opportunities". They can operate as oppressors or as oppressed. Men can be victims of racialism, but sexism allows them to operate as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women can be victims of sexism, but racialism gives them the ability to operate as exploiters and oppressors of people of the South.

The multiple oppression of women in the South needs to be recognized

The multiple oppression of women in the South needs to be recognized by realizing that racialism, sexism, class- and caste oppression are closely connected, and that only a complex analysis of the multiple oppression of the Others would be a fair treatment.

So-called Third World women have been portrayed as one homogeneous sociological group

But as things stand the Western film-makers have in the majority failed in realizing women's reality in the South. In many films so-called Third World women have been portrayed as one homogeneous sociological group which has led to a stereotyped picture of women in the South often transformed into the cliché of the poor, uneducated, hard working, but still happy women from a remote region of the world. From the beginning, women are set into the concept of belonging to a powerless group, so to say existing outside or at the periphery of history.

Women in the South have been portrayed in Western films mostly through summing up different, fragmentized examples of cruel oppressions taking place in so-called developing countries, which suggests - as a kind of natural solution - that only in the West it is better, or improvements have already taken place regarding gender equality and women's living conditions. The one-sidedness of this point of view and the stressing of single cultural phenomena has caused among Western women viewers an image such as when receiving the keyword "India" then automatically thoughts on widow-burning and dowry-murders come to mind, Africa will be related to female circumcision or Southeast Asia respectively to female flesh-trade.

Short-cut portrayals of Southern societies and the respective role of women.

This "Weltanschauung" can be considered not very far from the white male optic, where many associate with Southeast Asia the picture of sex massage salons, and imagine hot love affairs in Kenya. The unreflected transformation of stereotypes and assumptions of role-behaviours of Western society has led to short-cut portrayals of Southern societies and the respective role of women. Hence critics request, that if Western film-makers are dealing thematically with societies and dynamics concerning women of the so-called Third World, this should be done with great care by respecting also the differences and complexity in these parts of the world. Hence respecting the dignity of "the other" instead of abusing and violating the power on self, on others, on nature which - according to Fr. Gaston Roberge: "...is, no doubt... the capital sin of the Christian West. And that sin is glorified in film after film. Violence, indeed, has been made a value." ■