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# Commodifying the Body or the Soul? The 'New Liberal Woman' of the 90s and Questions of Identity in Chitra Mudgal's *Aawan*[*]

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**Abstract**

The 90s was an era of tremendous shift in India. The liberalization of the economy brought with it an onslaught of social and cultural changes and not just economic turmoil. The rise of the media industry and the emergence of satellite television particularly changed the conceptions of gender. Television, magazines, and the advertising industry all contributed in their own ways to bring about a change that redefined notions of femininity and masculinity, altered conceptions of beauty, and brought sexuality to the centre stage of discussion. It is not surprising then that the liberalization of the economy is often associated with the liberalization of Indian women. Liberalization is closely identified with freedom from sexual codes of conduct. This, however, did not undo the underlying tension and insecurity of a society that felt perturbed by this rampant display of women's bodies on stage, on screen, and in real life. If the country's borders could not be guarded, safeguarding the symbolic space became important. The country, thus, dealt with what Rupal Oza (2006) calls "anxiety with territoriality" (p. 56). The confrontation between the 'outside' and the 'inside' had to be resolved through a discourse on women's bodies. Discourses that contain while claiming to 'liberate,' creating new stereotypes while replacing older ones. This paper attempts to delineate the changing conceptions of gender in post-liberalization India through a close analysis of Chitra Mudgal's *Aawan* (1999), examining questions of sexuality, identity, and violence visa vis the female body.

**Keywords:** Gender; Liberalization; Media and Culture; Sexual Violence; Sexuality.

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## Introduction

The media of post-liberalization India is replete with images of the 'new liberal woman' and discussions around the 'emergence of a new womanhood' that stands distinct from that of an earlier era, marking India's entry into a new phase of modernity. The 'new' and 'liberal' are a reference to a break from traditions of the past, and a newfound ability to give expression to sexual freedom; making the 'modern' women more 'liberated' than her predecessors. The terms are also closely reflective of the change in the economy. Freed from the constraints of a restrictive state, the market economy gives individuals the freedom to make more choices. Thus, upper-class and upper-caste women, with their ability to buy, gain newfound importance as consumer citizens (Chanda 1991; John 1998; Munshi 1998; Oza 2006; Rajan 1993; Rajagopal 1999). This, however, cannot happen without the "sexualization" of women as "desiring subjects," which in turn threatens the very notion of 'Indian womanhood' (John qtd. in Oza, 2006, p. 30). Numerous narratives are then built to contain this destabilizing sexuality of women which might upset the existing notions of gender and culture.

Through a discussion of advertisements, magazines, beauty pageants and television this paper attempts to delineate the changing conceptions of gender in post-liberalization India, examining questions of sexuality, identity, and violence vis-a-vis the female body. The discourse of the 90s around women's bodies is contextualized by a close analysis of Chitra Mudgals's *Aawan* (1999), whose protagonist, Namita, navigates the market economy as a catalogue model, leaving behind her working-class background, symbolizing the 'new liberal woman' of this era.

## The Ambivalent notion of 'Indian Womanhood'

Advertising of foreign products was not allowed in India till 1994. However, things changed dramatically with the entry of satellite television and the expansion of the consumer base. The expenditure spent on advertising increased with every passing year- US $415 (1992) to US $ 1748 million (2001), to US $4.1 billion (2006), and so did the market share of foreign advertising agencies. By 2006, television was already addressing some 65 million homes in India. To reach a wide range of consumer base advertising agencies strategically modulated their content to suit the Indian value system; hired Indian cricketers and actors for promotion; and customised products as per local demand. Advertising played an important role in bringing about a cultural shift that valued individualism and materialism

(Ciochetto, 2009, p.193-197). Thus, the peasant figure of the socialist era is left behind in favour of the corporate woman and businessman who dominate the conceptions of 'new Indianhood' (Chaudhuri 2001, p. 374). The 'new' man is 'new' in the sense that he is capable of having 'softer' attributes, making him Raymond's 'The Complete Man,' but derives his "power" and "success" from the corporate world (p.381-382). The 'new' woman gains importance not as a woman but as a consumer so that her modernity lies in buying modern gadgets that can aid her in her domestic work. She still needs to abide by the traditional roles of being a homemaker, a mother, and a daughter-in-law for whom home is the priority. Thus, the images are radical without being disruptive (Munshi, 2015, p.573).

The same ambiguity can be observed in the depiction of magazines as well. Meenakshi Thapan (2009) writes that beauty and glamour remain the key features of femininity in a woman's magazine like *Femina*. Through the consumption of beauty items and commercial products, the sensual and the feminine coalesce in *Femina*'s modern and chic look. To ensure that a maximum number of readers are attracted, the magazine promotes a "multiplicity of definitions" of beauty. So, faces are advertised for their naivety and youthfulness, as well as exotic and seductive personas (p.72). The duality is visible in photography as well, with the contrast of images that display untamed sexuality and those that promote subdued beauty (p.74). Thus, ambivalence remains the key aspect of Indian womanhood in the magazine- locating women within their domestic roles while providing narratives of professional women as role models.

**Namita's Transformation**

The protagonist of Mudgal's *Aawan*, Namita, is a 'millworker's daughter' ("*majdoor ki beti*") who makes a transition from the working-class world of her trade unionist father to the glittering world of modelling. The novel opens with a description of the protagonist who is frantically searching for a job to make ends meet. On various occasions, the text mentions the exact amount of money that she would require for this or that purpose. We find her doing multiple low-paying jobs that are both tedious and time-consuming, providing little possibility of economic liberation. Her only possible escape from this state of unemployment lies in the possibility of getting a job through the Employment office. Thus, for her, like many other women of her time, the range of available job options is not only limited but conventional too.

Therefore, for Namita, a chance encounter with Anjana Vaswani of Baba

Jewellers opens a world of opportunities that come her way unexpectedly. It is an alternative world to which she has arrived unknowingly, leaving behind her father's legacy of a working-class existence and a trade union history. The novel, thus, seeks to find out the viability of this new world for the 'millworker's daughter.'

Namita is a nervous, timid girl whose sense of discomfort in public spaces occupies much of the description. She lacks the 'boldness' of her alter ego, Harsha, and the frankness of her friend Smita. As Harsha puts it, she constantly walks around as if she is 'a weakling passed out of women's college'- "*kanya pathshala ki behenji-si deen-heen, susta, sukhi-sadi-si*" (p.54). Thus, not surprisingly, when she meets Vaswani, we find her in a state of utter confusion and full of apprehensions.

When Namita's first modelling assignment is an intimidating task, her real test is to overcome her middle-class sensibilities (p.207). Her job requires her to display jewellery designs and accompany the guests for dinner. Conscious of her deep-neck blouse, Namita is amazed by herself when she informs Gautami (managing director of Vaswani's jewellery company) about the cup size of her bra (p.213). The modelling project would require her to go for an outdoor shoot, which means she needs to fight a battle at home before proving herself in front of the camera. Her mother, who is usually a self-centred and quarrelsome woman, becomes suspicious of the amount of money Namita will receive for a one-day photoshoot-10,000 rupees (almost thrice the amount of what the mother-daughter pair make in a month otherwise). The mother accuses her of selling decency for the sake of money and keeps on babbling about how the misuse of photographs is not uncommon. If Namita has to take the plunge, she must continue to ignore familial objections and overcome her inhibitions. It is during her first night out of her house that she sips her first drink in a five-star hotel, after much resistance. The new work culture requires her to redefine certain definitions. It is not as formal as one would expect an office space to be. It is a bit awkward for her to see her client, Sanjay Kanoi, flirting with her before offering the catalogue project and then travelling with him in his car to the shoot location. When Gautami's self-assured movements and her command over tasks bring a measure of envy to her, a more unsettling experience is the encounter with the photographer Siddharth Mehta, who offers to shoot a portfolio for her in exchange for a casual affair with him (p.293).

All this while, what everyone acknowledges is the unparalleled beauty of Namita's face, which serves as a perfect sample of 'Indian Beauty.' During

her early interactions with Vaswani, Namita is a bit conscious of the way Vaswani looks at her, tracing every detail of her body line; Gautami is amazed at her transformation into a royal princess as she adorned the attire for her first ramp walk; Sanjay asserts she is a perfect example of the 'image of Indian Woman' and therefore the right choice for his catalogue (p.234). Siddharth accepts, not once but twice, that with her well-proportioned body, her sharp features, long-lustrous hair, and her charming smile, Namita is an excellent exemplar of 'Indian' beauty standards (p.292) and that without her, he would not be able to achieve the artistic ideal that is set in his mind (p.437-438).

Gautami teaches Namita about the magic that emerges out of a woman's body, and that the art of jewellery design is nothing but the beauty of a woman. She tells her how jewellery ends up fascinating the onlooker only when the woman wearing it owns it so that it almost becomes alive (p.214). It does not matter, she says, what the client wants to buy; what matters is what we want them to buy (p.221). Namita's beauty, clothes, and jewellery are presented in front of Sanjay and his wife Nirmala by creating a proper atmosphere, with Pandit Jasraj's music playing in the background. Similarly, Siddharth points out how it is only through a proper combination of location, beauty, and jewellery that one can bring out a picture that would 'put a woman against a woman' ("*aurat ke liye aurat hi chunauti ban jaye ki…unse behtar koi aur na pehne….koi aur na dikhe*!"), and force people to go and buy their products (p.274).

Thus, Namita's journey from being a 'millworker's daughter' to a catalogue model is emblematic of the ongoing discussions in the media about the idea of the 'new liberal woman.' Her break from her conservative background, her newfound liberty in her job (both in terms of economy and sexuality), and her beauty that defines what 'Indian' womanhood are in sync with the social-cultural debate of the 90s.

**The Threatening Female Sexuality**

The Indian state's transition from a closed, guarded economy to a phase of economic liberalization was fraught with anxieties about the 'foreign.' The opening of borders and fear of invasion in the economic realm made their way into the cultural realm as well. Rupal Oza (2006) argues that the threat of the 'Western' and the anxiety about globalization got transposed onto women's bodies, as historically they are the repositories of culture. Thus, the idea of open borders gets juxtaposed with the transgressive sexuality of women (p.24-25). What is noticeable about this anxiety around

women's sexuality is that it is a concern in the 'public' domain and not the 'private.' Controlling the 'obscene,' thus, became the agenda of the state, which carried out morality drives in various parts of the country (p.37-40).

The conflict between women as objects and subjects of consumption is best reflected in the controversy surrounding the 1996 Miss World pageant held in Bangalore. The pageant was an "opportunity for India to be 'exhibited' on the world stage," in front of a 2.3 billion audience. It was a means to sell "a pre-packaged India, ready to be consumed" (Mitchell referred to by Oza p.86). Susan Dewey argues that as an event that relies on women's sexuality and the display of their bodies, pageants have to carve out a space for themselves through notions of respectability and female empowerment. Therefore, during the training process, women are kept in closely guarded spaces, with little contact with anything in the outside world that can harm their public image, like a visit by a male friend or attracting stares from those outside the hotel because of revealing clothes (2008, p. 102-104). The aura of decency is, therefore, a necessary tool, crafted with a lot of care and deliberation. Pageants use the rhetoric of women's empowerment ("*stree shakti*") to strengthen their position, but they reinforce in practice the "concept of female beauty as submissive." Thus, the contestants are directed to be "gentle" in their tone and not speak up in a manner that would make "the guy in the audience (will) throw up his hands," maintaining gender hierarchy (p.127). Contestants are trained on how to avoid threatening male attention without losing their sense of class and etiquette – not to shout like the fisherwoman in public spaces, symbolizing bad behaviour. Dressing up appropriately in public spaces to avoid the gaze of lower-class men is another instruction to be kept in mind- carrying a shawl while passing by a *chowkidar* is therefore essential. Thus, exposure of the female body is allowed in classed spaces only (p. 138).

Television was another source that created anxiety around sexuality. The fact that the source of satellite television could not be 'located' in a specific geographic region meant that no particular country could be held accountable for the intrusion of the borders. Television "blurs the boundaries between public and private" (Rajagopal qtd. in Oza 2006, p. 46), and satellite and cable television blur the distinction between the outside and the home. The threat of the outside is mapped onto the bodies of women. Thus, it can be guarded against by ensuring that the state protects the domain of the home. The body, the home, and the nation thus become interlinked so that "censuring sexual representations of women protects the body and home- and ultimately secures the borders of the homeland

against intrusion." "This mapping of women's bodies onto the borders of the nations and the subsequent efforts to shield the nation from corrupt, Western cultural influences" is what Oza calls "anxiety with territoriality" (p.46).

TV in the 1990s, Purnima Mankeka (2004) argues, made a shift from the social to the intimate, displaying a "fascination" for the intimate (p. 418). In the words of a viewer, "the change from Rajani to Tara" sums up the shift that occurred from 1980s TV to that of the 1990s (p.422). *Rajani* (1985) was about the dutiful wife, also interested in correcting "social ills" like corruption, domestic violence, etc. (Mankekar referred by Mankekar), while *Tara* (1993) narrates the unconventional life of its protagonist. *Dard* (1993, Zee TV) and *Kora Kagaz* (1998, Star) dealt with emotional and sexual frustrations experienced by women within marriages (p. 422). Similarly, other serials like *Ghutan* (1997) and *Sahil* (1996) questioned the sacrosanct status given to the institution of marriage; *Hasratein* (1996) dealt with the sexual needs and desires of women. Doordarshan, too, with its afternoon series, tried to capture the attention of the female audience with shows such as the 1995 *Swabhiman* (the protagonist is a mistress with two children out of wedlock). On similar lines was ZEE TV's *Shanti* (1994), where a daughter tries to get back at her mother's rapists. There were also shows that dealt with male desire and sexuality, for example, the talk show *Purush Kshetra* (Oza, 2006, p.62-63). What these new characters did was to blur the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' women, bringing sexuality to centre stage.

The anxiety over this change was reflected in the parliamentary debates of the time, in newspapers, and in magazines. It is interesting to note that the discourse of anxiety around women's bodies and sexualities is such that the difference between the Right, its conservative interpretations of culture and gender, and progressive women's associations somehow gets erased. The ideologies of the two get conflated while discussing what constitutes 'obscenity' and 'vulgarity.'

It might be useful here to mention MTV, which remained extremely contentious because of its gendered representations and was in a way an emblem of cultural intrusion of the West. MTV's female VJs, with their fit bodies, stylish haircuts, low-cut dresses, and candour in voice, became cultural icons and role models for the younger generation. However, MTV India continues to privilege male artists in contrast to women, mostly dancers. An important aspect of media is that the male dominance on screen comes along with an "implicit male spectator of music videos fan-

tasies," "evident in the many images of women 'waiting' in bedrooms, or laid out on beds, while, in contrast, we view the active male artist, who is the object of identification, singing on his motorbike" (Cullity and Younger, 2004, p.103). When the persona of women is diminished, they remain the object and not the subject of discussion.

**Transgressing Boundaries**

Like Tara, Namita is drawn into a relationship with a married man whose claims to innocence rely on the notion of the 'bad wife' and an unhappy marriage. For a minute Namita becomes aware of her friend, Smita's warning about rich old men who trap young women by taking them out on lunch and dinner. However, the idea that she is the 'complete woman' ("*sampoorna stree*") capable of endowing love to a suffering (and powerful) man is too tempting an idea to resist (p.283). The comparison with Sanjay's wife, who is no ordinary woman but a successful businesswoman has an intoxicating effect. She pays little heed to Harsha's warning that it is not new for married men to posit 'women against women' for their benefit ("*stree ke virudh stree ka morcha*"), (p.305). On the contrary, she rationalises her choice by emphasizing 'that a woman who does not know how to take care of her married life, is bound to see it get destroyed, and no other woman can be held responsible for this' ("*jise apna ghar sawarana nahi ayega, uska ghar ujdega hi*"), (p.496).

There are numerous indications in the text that suggest it is not wise to put one's faith in a capitalist. She is constantly warned about the potential threat of this new world by several characters, but most importantly by her trade-unionist father, who believes that a 'capitalist's sympathy can never be evoked without being ensured a compensation paid through your blood' ("*pratidan ka lahu piye bina punjipati ki anukampa santusht nahi hoti*"), (p.73). Forgetting her father's warning that a 'jeweller and a businessman live neither on their share nor their profit, it is in their nature to satisfy their greed by snatching away other's share of bread' ("*sunar aur vayavsayi na apni lagat khata hai, na laabh. Dusro ke muh ka niwala hi uski antadiyo ki laplapati bhuk hai*"), Namita falls for the diamond merchant Sanjay (p.310). A more direct warning in this context is offered by Siddharth. He points out that even though he had asked her for sexual favours, he is different from Sanjay, for there is no duplicity in his behaviour, which is not the case with Sanjay, who is thoroughly a 'fraud' ("*thag*"). Sanjay is someone who would wipe out any trace of guilt from her heart by trapping her in the name of 'love,' making her submit to his will without any form of direct coercion so that it would neither look like he is 'victimizing'

her nor would she feel she is doing something 'immoral.' This, he says, is a 'consumerist mentality,' and not what he proposed. This is 'consumption with consent.' Thus, the warning 'there is danger ahead' ("*agge khatara hai*"), (p.438).

**Sexual Violence and Commodification of Women**

Sexual exploitation alone is not what the masculine heart of the capitalist desires. The real thing to possess is a woman's womb. We are told that Sanjay desires to have a child through the means of a woman of 'noble' birth. He, later on, reveals that he could have easily bought any prostitute or even Gautami for this, but he wanted a 'pure' woman who could 'love' him (p.539). It is only after Namita's miscarriage that Sanjay's true identity is revealed. His mask of civility and tolerance is removed only at the final movement when he knows he has been defeated in his schemes. His methods of winning Namita's confidence are close to market techniques of buying a consumer's trust and interest. Thus, he takes her out to fancy restaurants, buying time that will allow him to engage in polite conversations. Sanjay's motives are far more complex, and his methods are way more subtle than the working-class Pawar (also in love with Namita), who is crude in his behaviour and therefore easy to reject. So, he not only uses emotion to win Namita's confidence, but he also makes use of fear as a tool- threatening her by referring to '*Tandoor Kand*' (a murder case in which a husband killed his wife), (p.526). Not only do his softer aspects give in to the more brutal, murderous instincts of a violent man, but he also showcases that he is, in the end, a businessman. Refusing to accept Namita's plea that she did not abort 'his' child, he is angry because the businessman's investments have not paid the way he expected them (p.538-539).

It is at this moment that Namita realizes how much of her relationship was part of a deal, that she becomes aware of her status in the market economy. In comparison with the prostitutes of 'Jago Ri' (a left-wing trade union initiative), she says, she has sold herself at twice or four times their rate. Amazed by the calculations of her 'kindred buyer' ("*sahridya kharidaar*") she must return to the world she came from (p.543). Following the example of her maid Neelamma, who has her own story of getting lost and then finding a life of dignity, Namita too needs to leave Sanjay's house, where her identity is limited to being a mistress who could provide him with an heir.

Thus in *Aawan*, Namita's relationship with Sanjay portrays an extreme

case of the process of commodification of women's bodies, wherein her womb is for sale. The novel warns against the false sense of 'liberty,' sexual and economic, and points out the potential dangers of such transgressions. However, that does not mean a return to conservative traditions of the past, but a more nuanced understanding of one's labour and sense of identity. Having faced the ugly truth of the capitalist world, and having realized that its liberating potential is a mere lie, Namita must return to her working-class background; and realize her father's lesson on the 'value of labour' ("*shram ki mehata*"), (p.481).

It must be noted here that the novel rejects not just the claims of liberty by the market economy but that of the left-wing working class as well (Kavita 2020). Namita derives her strength from the women in her life- the surrogate mother figure Kishori Bai; Shah Behen of the women's labour organization (*Shramjiva*); Vimla Ben of the Left-wing labour union; her friend Smita; and her maid Neelamma. Sisterhood seems to hold the key to women's liberation in the novel.

**Conclusion**

With the advent of advertising, women become central to the narrative of market and consumption. However, the 'newer' notions of consumption have to be aligned with the values of Indian culture so that women have the 'liberty' to choose from a range of market products, but only to help them fulfil their duties in the domestic space. Magazines too remain ambiguous in their representation of 'Indian womanhood' where sensuality and femininity are defined in a way so as not to upset the existing gender notions. The rampant display of women's bodies on screen, on stage, and in real life creates a sense of anxiety that unites both Right and Left in their critique of the state, which is held responsible for the cultural invasion by the West. In TV particularly one sees a discussion of taboo topics and relationships, altering the notion of an 'ideal' woman, making sexuality central in defining the identity of both men and women.

Thus, across different forms of media, advertisements, magazines, TV and beauty pageants, one can witness that the identity of the 'new liberal woman' is still located within the confines of home, with her 'modernity,' 'liberal' sexuality, and consuming desires simply being embellishments on the exterior. A study of these various mediums suggests a confrontation between the national and the global, with contradictory discourses directing the notion of 'new womanhood' in a system that is mostly patriarchal.

Namita's journey in *Aawan* from a 'millworker's daughter' to a catalogue model exemplifies the dangers of the transition, offering a grim perspective on the idea of the 'new Indian woman,' and her 'liberal modernity.' Though Namita is able to transcend the socioeconomic boundaries that limit her as an individual, she fails to emerge as a truly empowered character as the text emphasizes the limits of capitalistic emancipation. Her body and soul are both for sale in a capitalistic world dominated by patriarchal men. Her body being an object of display is a means of earning profit while her love life is a sham with a businessman hiding in the garb of a lover, aiming to control her womb. Sexual, physical and psychological violence threatens the very possibility of women trying to carve out an identity for themselves. The novel undermines the carefully crafted image of the 'emancipatory' potential of the market economy and the notion of the 'new liberal woman.'

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