Myth and Media

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Abstract- As Roland Barthes has meticulously explained in his essay 'Myth Today', "myth", according to him, is essentially a type of speech ; it is a cohesive "system of communication" through which an effective message is conveyed. "Myth" is a "form", or rather, a mode of signification into which "society" can be reintroduced through a discourse. This discursive property in a myth assigns to it various "historical limits" and "conditions of use". As Barthes has reiterated over and over again, there are no "substantial" limits to a myth as the substance that the myth contains loses all its connotations and becomes an empty signifier- a "form" devoid of "meaning". However, later in the essay Barthes clarifies: "that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it"- if myth is a vessel, then it becomes a form to acquire a new meaning. In this paper, an intricate analysis of modern popular myth and its application in advertising and news narratives are shown. This paper will also explore how myths evolve and transform. Myths are forgotten, unless they are recreated.

Index Terms- Advertising, Myth, Mythical Interpretations, News Narratives, Roland Barthes

I. INTRODUCTION

Saussure postulated semiology as a "vast science of signs" and any semiology asserts a significant association between "a signifier and a signified". These two terms unite and form a third object- that is the "sign". If the signifier is empty, then the sign is full, because it contains a meaning. Reading or deciphering a myth, again, involves this tri-dimensional pattern with a slight alteration: "it is a second-order semiological system" where the older sign in the first system becomes a mere empty signifier in the second. This regression from the meaning to the form records a striking transformation from a "linguistic sign" to a "mythical signifier". This mythical signifier gives rise to a new meaning which Barthes has termed "signification". The enrichment of this new signification, hence, evolves out of the conflict between the older and the newer meaning- or, in other words, this new signification is the appropriation of the older meaning. Based on various historical, political, societal and cultural connotations, the older meaning of a myth can be appropriated into a new myth, which is again a conscious construct.

II. DOES THE CORE MESSAGE OF A MYTH REMAIN CONSTANT?

A myth belongs to a certain history. It has a sufficient rational justification at its disposal. As Barthes has aptly put: "a constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form" defines a myth. Mythical signification is never arbitrary. It is partly motivated and leads to the creation of multiple analogies that give significance to the myth. Even if the core message that a myth carries remains constant, its signification keeps changing as we keep negotiating with its intention. As a result, a modern myth can be used or extended to create a further signification. Myth, hence, is a conscious construction appropriated by contemporary culture. It may corrupt and distort the meaning, but it does not promote or hide anything. It corrupts the meaning to offer myriads of mythical interpretations unlike science, which gives us a time-bound factual data. Myth, therefore, is neither a confession, nor a lie; neither does it flaunt anything, nor does it hide anything.

III. HOW ARE MEDIA TEXTS DIFFERENT FROM FOLK NARRATIVES?

There is a striking difference between the mythical structures of folk narratives and that of the media. The mythical structure in the media texts depend solely on the industrial and institutional demands. These texts "have to be popular in heterogeneous societies amongst audiences with different and often conflicting social interests and experiences. So television narrative must be more open and multiple than the singular folk narrative with its comparatively tight closure" (Fiske, John: Television culture, Routledge, London, 1987, pp.23). Hence, based on their presentations, the significance of these media texts are analysed and shaped by our past experiences. These texts carry essential social messages that determine and manipulate reality. Once we come across a news that exhibits factual data regarding a certain incident or a visual advertisement that regularises a dominant cultural pattern of consumerism, we endeavour to extract the core social or commercial message that the particular news or the advertisement intends to manifest. These "coherent packages of information" contain "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events." (Gamson, William A., Modigliani, Andre: The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action, Research in Political Sociology, 1987; 3: 137-177; pp. 143.)

However, these mythical narrative forms are not uncontested. They keep changing with time as the purpose and essence of a message changes. This transformation is contextual.

News archives, similarly, preserves history that can be interpreted and reinterpreted. This reinterpretation of a narrative (oral/ textual/ visual) gives it a mythical structure and that offers a different perspective and insight into the original story.

IV. MYTHS IN ADVERTISING: DOES IT CREATE STEREOTYPES?

Myth is a vital mode of communication through which the societal mechanisms are analysed. Diffusion of myths in contemporary world takes place through mass media as "mass communication is the discourse of society, which defines, organizes and determines life in its social or political manifestations" (Hardt, 2004: 3).

In the modern era of technological advancements, advertising has gained immense attention and popularity so far as modern mythical forms are interpreted. Khavkina L. in her monograph '*Modern Ukrainian Advertising Myth*' asserted:

"Social and cultural present-day circumstances demonstrated the durability of the mythological communication phenomenon and sustainability of a myth as a text and a discourse in the various areas of social and historical existence related both to the ideological and mental processes and the social, historical and spiritual and intellectual manifestations of the reality. A mythological way of thinking ended up durable and unbreakable not displaced by a scientific thinking and connected to it in a situation of the formation, broadcasting and functioning of such social communication phenomenon as a new social myths indestructible due to the exceptional ability to solve unresolved (Khavkina 2010, 320)."

Advertising often constructs stereotypes in the minds of the consumers and it tends to manoeuvre them into thinking differently. In other words, advertising can create an alternate reality through which our thoughts and beliefs are manipulated. For example, several beauty products assign certain gender roles and complicate the opinions about one's skin tone. These commercials deliberately create binaries between dark-skinned and light-skinned women and indirectly determine their roles and positions in the society. 'Fair and Lovely' is a celebrated beauty product that has been widely acknowledged as one of the best beauty creams in various parts of India. Unfortunately, the brand promotes a distorted idea of 'beauty' and its promotional advertisements establish a strange relationship between women and marriage. It subtly portrays how a woman becomes eligible for marriage only when she becomes "fair" and "lovely". This atrocious prejudice and discrimination against women with a dark skin tone has been normalised across the country.

Contemporary advertising is an interesting area of study in which the presence of various myths can be traced and analysed. Experts are of the opinion that myth serves as "a behavior model"-"the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities" (Eliade, 1975:8). Hence, when an advertisement is mythified, it reflects the collective human consciousness that has a pervasive impact on the society at large. Myth, thus, has a universal nature and is cultivated

in various eras and civilisations. For example, the popular image of a "Warrior Woman" has been reinterpreted in contemporary feminist texts and in the promotion of a popular television drama 'Desperate Housewives', the characters have been depicted as women warriors. Thus, we can say, myths "perpetuate ancient archetypes under new interpretations." (María del Mar Rubio-Hernández in 'Myths in advertising).

V. "EMOTIONAL BRANDING" IN ADVERTISEMENTS

"Emotional Branding" primarily connects the target audience with the product and thus enables the customer to associate his life experiences with the utility of the product. In several television commercials of "Cadbury Dairy Milk", we have identified a narrative that instantly connects the audience with the popular brand of milk chocolate. Even Indian commercials such as the famous advertising jingle of an antiseptic cream "Boroline" or that of a brand of coconut oil "Shalimar" have reformulated the traditional Indian sentiments through their narratives. This emotional branding of certain products is culture-specific and encloses a collective human sentiment that has a plethora of representations. These advertisements have undoubtedly turned into myths because through them a strong message is conveyed.

VI. MYTHIFICATION OF PRODUCTS

As Barthes aptly pointed out, some objects such as cars have earned a mythical dimension as they are "consumed in image, if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (1979: 88). False promises offered by the television commercials to the consumers have probably been responsible for the mythification of certain products- "The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: 111). Advertising, thus, reinforces certain myths that are recreated in modern discourses.

VII. MYTHS IN NEWS NARRATIVES

News is undoubtedly a social construction as it endeavours to retell the familiar social narratives from a cultural point of view and reinstates the core values of a society. Cultural identities are constructed through news narratives under the influence of a "dominant cultural order" (Hillel Nossek and Dan Berkowitz in 'TELLING "OUR" STORY THROUGH NEWS OF TERRORISM').

The integrity and communication prowess of news reporting should always be taken into consideration but certain news channels often create an illusion of unbiased reporting that secretly favours only the influential people of the nation. As a result, knowingly or even unknowingly, certain news reports give rise to a few misperceptions related to the actual events that the majority solemnly internalises. As news consumers, hence, we are obligated to identify the key myths in broadcast or print media.

VIII. SELECTIVE NEWS REPORTING AND SENSATIONALISING RAPE CASES

Selective news reporting often associates itself with certain social taboos and unnecessarily creates discriminations against people from low caste or minority groups. Contemporary media has a tendency to sensationalise facts in order to cater to a larger audience. For example, the sexual crimes in India offer a grim picture of a dysfunctional society. But often some cases get subsumed beneath other highlighted stories. After the gruesome rape of Nirbhaya, a 12-year-old Dalit child was mercilessly raped in Kushinagar before her parents, a woman was gangraped in Alwar and another 12-year-old child was sexually assaulted by a vicious cleric in Meerut. Unfortunately, these media reports were not followed in detail and given much importance. Why? Because news narratives offer sensational stories to incite their target audience and some stories surprisingly gain a lot of momentum. News narratives also successfully trivialise the violence against the victim by flashing headlines like "six men gangraped an eight year old girl" or "two men raped and mutilated a woman". Hence, the viewers are often encouraged to turn a blind eye to the sexual perpetrators. The rapists are dehumanised and no more share the spotlight with the victim. Instead, the graphic details are sensationalised to the point that those gory descriptions are scrutinised and analysed everywhere. Most of the news coverages follow this same pattern of reporting. Victims are "subvertly held complicit in their own ordeal" ('Linguistics of Blame: Rape Reporting Remains Sensationalist' by Sumedha Pal) as the criminals are absolved from blame and are rendered invisible throughout the narratives.

IX. HEROIC ARCHETYPES IN BRAND STORIES AND NEWS NARRATIVES

Journalists represent a society. Their constructed news stories and their discourse relate to the mechanisms of the larger discourse of the culture of which they are a part. In many media narratives, we have come across the heroic archetypes where a "hero" embodies the ideals, the principles and the values of a society. These heroes have often been worshipped and treated as celebrities. 'Douwe Egberts' is a Dutch company that markets a famous tea brand called 'Pickwick'. This brand once conducted a campaign called 'Tea Topics' which showed a series of audiovisual stories featuring customised tea labels. In one such brand story, a frustrated young girl misses her mother's presence in her life as her mother gets increasingly busy with her smartphone. Pertaining to this growing emotional distance, the girl takes her mother to the woods and gives her a tea bag with a label on which a question is printed: "Could you please turn off your phone for 1 day?" This simple and subtle gesture resolves all the complications that kept them apart. This archetypal role of a "Hero" is played by this young girl who successfully unites with her mother without any animosity or misunderstanding, and this brand campaign enables her to accomplish her goal.

Similarly, as the outbreak of the Coronavirus has wreaked havoc on the global order, the doctors and the frontline health workers have been held in extremely high regard. The news channels are repeatedly celebrating these health care heroes who have risked their own lives to treat the Coronavirus patients.

X. JOURNALISM IS A PERFORMATIVE DISCOURSE

As journalism is regarded as "a performative discourse", journalists become the storytellers while reporting and investigating facts. It is very interesting to note that these news narratives emphasise "the way journalists shape their identities around meeting the needs of the public." But, similarly, it also takes into consideration how journalists need the public "to see value in the news being produced. In maintaining this social contract between journalists and their publics, journalists need to demonstrate to an audience that their work is worth the investment" (Conboy and Eldridge 2015). Like for example, recently, various parts of Bengal and Orissa were devastated by the Super Cyclone 'Amphan' and the news reporters were the unsung heroes who reported live from the outdoor locations during the storm. Even, the news anchors kept highlighting the video clippings collected from the reporters over and over again.This is how a relationship is established between the journalists and the viewers when the news reporters play a significant role in addressing a plethora of social issues.On countless occasions journalists have exercised their immense performative power in revealing the "true" facts and figures so that the news consumers find their narratives convincing. That is exactly the reason why the viewers find it so shocking when some alien sources provide different information and invalidate the news narrative which the viewers have followed for a long time.

In 2013, hackers in Montana forcefully "broke into the Emergency Alert System of Great Falls affiliate KRTV and its CW station" (POLITICO) and warned the viewers of a zombie apocalypse. The engineers of 'The Montana Television Network' started investigating the matter and soon the truth was out. No pictures were flashed during the broadcast. There was only an anonymous male voice that addressed the viewers:
"Civil authorities in your area have reported that the bodies of the dead are rising from the grave and attacking the living." This voice repeatedly warned all the people not "to approach or apprehend these bodies as they are extremely dangerous."

These hoax stories and fake news circulated mostly on social media, unreliable news channels and tabloids have shaken the viewers' blind faith in media narratives.

XI. POLITICAL MANIPULATION IN NEWS NARRATIVES

Politics is an integral aspect that explains the power structure of a nation. Television has been actively used "as an instrument of political manipulation" (Viktorija Car in 'Myths in Media Texts'). Like for example, communist countries before the beginning of the 21st century controlled access to various information gathering tools and television networks. The Communist Party filtered information to satisfy its needs. Countries like Croatia witnessed a massive transformation from a totalitarian economic system to a liberal market economy. The impact of globalism and technological revolution gave rise to multiple undiversified media. Most of the television channels and radio stations launched similar programme schemes catering to the same audience and featuring mainly "cheap talk shows and soap operas" (Viktorija Car in

'Myths in Media Texts'). This was how news was privatised and even politics was personalised. Today news is nothing but a product sold to its target audience.

XII.   POLITICAL ADVERTISING

With the advent of digital media platforms, political advertising campaigns have succeeded in influencing millions of people. Targeted advertising on social media can address a certain segment of active social media users who would probably ignore offline political campaigns. Numerous mobile applications design these advertisement models to allow targeting. The consent of these viewers are consciously manipulated as they are constantly "fed with information to vote for a particular party" (Kiran Chandra). Social media platforms particularly focus on micro-targeting and hence these online political advertisements are circulated extensively before the elections.

Donald Trump's digital strategist Brad Parscale invested a lot on Facebook advertisements during his political campaign. He carefully chose customized audiences based on their online activities, ethnic affinity, common qualities and mutual interests. The campaign was successful in generating multiple ads and creating 100,000 landing pages.

XIII.   CONCLUSION

Myths are appropriated and recreated by different cultural and social factors. Advertising and news narratives have explored various mythical possibilities to manipulate the collective opinion of the people. The basic purpose of conveying a core message is what these media stories aim to serve. "In most media texts all around the world master-myths, like Jack Lule's seven master myths, can be found: the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the Other World, the flood" (Viktorija Car in 'Myths in Media Texts'). Since the media is extremely powerful and can majorly regulate our lives, it is very important how the media platforms build up these narratives and use the mythical structures. Myth is essentially a "cultural construction" and it is very crucial for the media to be consistent in applying myths in their texts. Controversial or confusing narratives can affect the social attitudes of a particular group of people and that is the reason why these narratives are supposed to be straightforward and somewhat believable. Media narratives, therefore, promote commercial appropriation of modern popular myths.

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