

# **ENGLISH WOMEN'S MAGAZINES**

**A STUDY BY**

**MEDIA ADVOCACY GROUP**

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# ENGLISH WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

By Shailaja Bajpai

## AN INTRODUCTION

Why have the number of women's magazines increased?

A little over eighteen months ago, there were three English language magazines for women: Femina, Women's Era and Savvy. By April 1997, the number had swelled to seven. The new entrants, in chronological order, were Verve, Cosmopolitan, Elle and New Woman. An eighth, from Spectrum Publications, is expected any time now.

By any standards, the sudden spurt in what is a niche market, was remarkable. No other genre of magazines or kind of publication has experienced such an increase in numbers during the same period. The last new general interest magazine to enter the market was Outlook (1995) which is four months short of its second anniversary. During the same period, Living Media also launched India Plus, a men's lifestyle magazine. And while English language newspapers introduced more pages--especially in the form of supplements--and a few like the Indian Express and Asian Age launched new editions, others like The Pioneer withdrew them.

The reason for starting any new publication rests on the following assumptions: that there is a market for the magazine, and that there is advertising to support it.

## PRINT: NEWSPAPERS

Is there a market for more women's magazines? On the face of it, no. Daily newspapers have increased their circulation and as just mentioned, all of them have added colour/daily supplements covering a much wider repertoire of subjects catering to much wider audience interests. They now carry special features on everything from interiors and fashion to careers, food and personal relationships.\*1

Significantly, women are a major target audience for these lifestyle features: swimwear for women (Pioneer 27 April), beauty tips from Shahnaz Hussain (H.T. 22 April), personal advice from Priya Tendulkar (Indian Express 20 April), recipes, personality pieces ("I want my husband to be my best friend," says Tabu, Asian Age, 24 April), fitness ('More women take to yoga', Hindu 24 April), fashion from Rini Dhaka (Pioneer, 20 April)... the list is inexhaustible and we are quoting only from the major dailies printed in Delhi.

From the point of view of revenue, the print media's share of advertising has not risen though it must be added that neither has it fallen appreciably despite the challenge from television. In absolute terms, the advertising revenue for the print media has in fact increased; but in percentage terms the break up is still roughly the same: 66% for print, followed by TV which pulls in, approximately, 25% of all commercial revenue.

## **TELEVISION**

Then, there is the impact of television. Over the last three years, there has been a phenomenal growth in programming. There are as of now, 9 Hindi general entertainment channels not counting STAR Plus, available to people who have cable or satellite connections. There are at least 6 regional language channels, quite apart from separate movie, sports current affairs and music channels (many of which broadcast 24 hours a day).

Many of these channels have slowly but surely increased their programme content for women. There is now a considerable amount of information and entertainment (to say nothing of the commercials) directly aimed at women viewers. Apart from the daily serials there are also beauty shows, talks shows, cookery shows, quizzes (with attractive household and holiday prizes), fashion programmes and endless hours of films and film-based shows.

The evidence suggests that the woman viewer is emerging as the most important target audience for advertisers and TV channels. This is unexceptional. Globally, women comprise a very important audience segment for those companies which advertise on TV. The daily talk shows and the soap operas developed first for radio and subsequently for TV, were specifically designed for women and companies which wanted to reach out to them.

Major TV advertisers are manufacturers of toiletries, washing detergents, cosmetics and/or fast moving consumer goods such as soft drinks and quick snacks. Since it is the woman who normally purchases such items, it stands to reason that advertisements for these products must be placed with programmes watched by women. Hence, the creation of programmes which women will watch, supported by advertisers reaching out to women.

One recent example will establish this symbiotic relationship between television programmes designed for a female audience and the advertising which supports them. Just this month (12 May) Doordarshan has introduced four new daily soap operas from 12 noon to 2 pm. This brings the total number of soap operas and serials between 12 and 4 pm to eight.

These serials are all sponsored by companies such as Hindustan Lever, Proctor and Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, Nirma, Ayur Herbal products, and others -- all major manufacturers of soaps and detergents, cosmetics and other such household items. To attract such advertisers is a major reason for the introduction of more women's magazines.

## **WOMEN'S MAGAZINES**

In addition to all this attention--in the daily newspapers as well as television being lavished on the female audience--there are three existing specialised women's magazines: Femina, Woman's Era and Savvy. A fourth, Eve's Weekly folded up in 1990. All three have a loyal female following (according to advertising agencies, even men like to read them) and Femina and Women's Era are amongst the most successful magazines in the market. Indeed, media planners at advertising agencies single out the two as magazines which are always near the top of their list.

In the opinion of journalist and media researcher, Nandini Lakshman, Savvy was for the city bred woman between the ages of 18-30; Women's Era was at the other end, appealing to the traditional, middle class housewife while Femina was for the "older woman"\*1. That opinion was expressed in the late eighties.

As we shall see, there has been a shift in focus of some of these magazines and their target audience.

### **Loss of interest in women's issues**

Before going into the advent of the new magazines it needs to be said at the outset that the sudden spurt in women's magazines, in general, has not increased the amount of space devoted to serious issues concerning women. The increase has come in other areas: in the visual content, in the fashion spreads, fitness and beauty features and in the much greater emphasis given to man-woman relationships.

Indeed, throughout the media, print or electronic, there is a clearly discernible lack of interest in serious women-oriented issues. A look at one week's 85 newspapers revealed that crimes against women as a category was the single most important subject concerning women in all the newspapers.\*2 Apart from that, the accent was on personalities, gossip, lifestyles and it must be emphasised, photographs of scantily dressed women, be they Indian or foreign.

The change in attitude towards women has been both quantitative as well as qualitative. Uptil two years ago, newspapers had special gender pages for women's issues.

Sometimes, these spilled over into the development pages, since it is tacitly accepted that women and development issues are intertwined. Granted much of this was very turgid and even boring.

That factor and the introduction of glossier supplements and feature pages by the daily newspapers (a move clearly initiated to combat the onslaught from television and glossy magazines), has seen both gender and development pages sacrificed at the altar of these 'colour' pages.

Why have serious issues concerning women and society, lost out to irrelevant subjects such as American bridegrooms searching for Russian brides (Indian Express, 21 April 1997) One major reason that newspapers have placed more emphasis on subjects such as cookery, beauty, health and fitness is to attract the advertising which was being diverted to television and women's/lifestyle magazines.

According to Ammu Joseph, with the advent of television and advertising being diverted to the electronic medium (late 1980s), marketing divisions took many more editorial decisions and one of them was to ask women's magazines "lighten" content.\*<sup>(3)</sup> In her research of women's magazines "The findings...suggest that the very nature and traditional format of commercial women's magazines inhibit the serious presentation of issues."

The general opinion was that "women are not interested in serious issues" and that if it was absolutely necessary to tackle grave matters, these should be made "palatable through light treatment". Another reason cited by Joseph is that the publishers of women's magazines and their editors, are wary of the women's lib label for fear that it will dampen the enthusiasm of men especially, decision-makers in the ad world.

Joseph's conclusion is that "...as long as society continues to regard women primarily as homemakers--whatever else they may do with their lives-- women's magazines will continue to present and cater to them as such."

### **Possible reasons for the emergence of new women's magazines**

It is in this scenario that one must look at the emergence of new women's magazines and the changes in the existing publications (if any). The following reasons may have influenced the emergence of a new breed of women's magazines:

1. The influence of TV, foreign and domestic, in its portrayal of the urban woman as more liberated, strong and aggressive and often a professional. In serials, in talk shows and even in commercials, there is the picture of *soignée*, well turned out females, living exciting lives which real women aspire to be like.
2. The influence of TV commercials by primarily multinational companies, targeting women. Economic liberalisation in the last 6 years has led to the entry of a number of multinational companies. Publishers wanted to attract their advertising.
3. Economic liberalisation and the media explosion has exposed us to a variety of lifestyles, images, role and products: we are more conscious now than ever before of how we look etc., the clothes we wear, the fashions we follow. And with the entry of stores such as Adidas, Benetton, Ray Ban and a greater availability of international cosmetics, we can look like the people we see in the magazines, and on TV. Women's magazines have cashed in on this need for information and our desire to be better groomed.

4. Niche magazines increasingly catering to niche audiences: there are now specific magazines created for specific readers: India Plus is aimed at men (with advertisements for male products or interests); Mantra targets them too. There are magazines on interiors, and even two new tabloids which only carry advertisements. The educated, urban woman is an attractive niche audience.
5. There are increasing numbers of middle and upper class educated women. And increasing numbers of them in the workforce too. Magazines which provide information, tips about their lifestyles--quick fixes for dinner, interior deco tips, how to combine work with home, as well as features on professional codes of conduct are welcomed by this segment who are constantly trying to balance work with domestic responsibilities.
6. More openness about subjects such as sex. Exposure to television, with its daring serials and frank talk shows, exposure to the latest Hollywood films and international newspapers and magazines, have liberalised our attitudes to personal subjects. Young girls and boys are in need of more information on sex, relationships and the new magazines cater to this need. Magazines thus play the role of a helpline in an urban, modern environment, where women are isolated in nuclear families and have little contact with others than those she lives with. There is a lack of advice from the older generation; magazines fill the void with tips on everything from incest to job applications.
7. Television, exposure to international media, working professionally have all increased women's self awareness and the desire for more information and knowledge on a variety of subject ranging from the completely personal (How to please my husband in bed) to the absolutely public (How to conduct a business meeting). Women today want to improve their status, aspire to be better. The new breed of magazines partly fill a vital lacunae.

## **THE NEW BREED:**

The new breed of women's magazines have different profiles, appealing to different perceived needs.

### **VERVE**

Verve, a quarterly publication, beautifully produced and designed on heavy art paper, claims to reflect "the spirit of today's woman". It devotes most of its pages to personality pieces on well known men and women: Alisha Chinai, Madhur Jaffrey, Naseeruddin Shah and how professional women like Ketaki Gupte have made it to the top. There is a fair amount of fashion, a sprinkling of travel, gossip (about the rich and famous), a literary section and plenty of photographs. Though it has a great deal on women, this is not strictly a women's magazine. It has none of the usual kind of columns on food, recipes, beauty tips or personal problems.

It is well written (often by famous people) and positions itself as an "elite" product, catering to particularly to Mumbai and NRIs. Its greatest impact is its visual quality and its design which leaves all other such magazines far behind.

### **COSMOPOLITAN**

Cosmopolitan is a well known international brand name. Its launch by the Living Media Group marks the fulfilment of an ambition for proprietor Aroon Purie who over a decade ago abandoned plans to publish his own women's magazine, Woman Today, after nearly two years efforts at the drawing board. Cosmopolitan began as an American publications but over the years it has introduced many international editions in English and other languages: French, Spanish, Italian etc.

The editorial content is divided 60-40 between local contributions and pick-ups form the American edition. The promise of Cosmo "is the best that you can be". In this case it is quite apt: the magazine definitely provides advice on how to be the best you can be in the boardroom, in bed and in a crowd. It is aimed at today's professional woman who has to mould herself into a Superwoman, managing home, work and play and always remaining cool, crisp, confident and as beautiful as she can be.

The emphasis is, therefore, naturally on fitness, beauty, relationships and sex. Plenty of the latter: "How to tell if he's Casanova", "Strangers in the night--The morality of the one night stand", "What price love... Just how far should you go to please a man?" are just some of the delectable stories you could read in one issue.

These are accompanied with pictures of men and women entwined, about to kiss, kissing....Pictures of semi-nude men and women adorn even stories which have nothing to do with the subject: for example there was a photograph of a woman in a white, diaphanous dress revealing most of her ample bosom. The subject? "Enjoy being a sentimental girl"!

Cosmopolitan has all the usual ingredients of a women's magazine but its raison d'être is to talk about sex, the aim being according to its Indian editor, "to give accurate and reliable information to help our readers make informed choices about their lives"\* (Editor's Note, April 1997). It has articles on famous personalities, careers, driving lessons, tax problems too but the general thrust of the magazine is to be "provocative" with soft-porn pictures and bold, brassy headlines.

### **ELLE**

Elle is the French fashion magazine which has also gone in for international editions. It is clearly a fashion magazine first: In the April 1997 issue, 65 pages out of a total of 147 edit pages were devoted to fashion. The rest of the magazine is split up between sections on food, travel, interiors, personality features, news and gossip. There very little about the man-woman relationship in Elle. There is no discussion on sex. The sexual energy in the magazine is derived from its fashion photographs: these range from the gently sensual to the provocative.

The April issue carried as its cover a picture of an ordinary looking Indian woman in a bikini. But it wasn't her face which interested anyone: it was her lithe, long-legged look with a stomach as flat a straight line which was bound to help sell the magazine. Indeed, mostly all the magazines used what are considered alluring, come-hither pictures on their covers. (\*4)

### **NEW WOMAN**

New Woman, edited by Hema Malini who was earlier editor of a Hindi women's magazine, *Meri Saheli*, seems to be trying to be another Femina. It has the same sort of mix in stories. But an old Femina: personality pieces on successful women, profiles, a first person account on how a mother helped come out of a coma; features on men-women relationships, fashion, fitness, recipes, short stories and an agony column by Malini herself. In short, the works.

New Woman falls squarely into the conventional women's magazine bracket. It is just a little downmarket, it's no where near as stylised and well designed as Femina, nor does it have the same quality writing or photographs. Perhaps it is trying to occupy the space left by the closure of Eve's Weekly. "She's a bit like you" claims its punchline clearly trying to position itself for the urban working woman--not for the upper or upper middle class working woman but for those at a lower wrung.

## **Have the new magazines changed the old ones?**

Clearly, Femina has changed. Quite radically from the magazine it was even 3-4 years ago or under the stewardship of Vimla Patil. However, as the well known saying goes, the more things change the more they remain the same. This is precisely the case with Femina. Though it looks brand new, though it has introduced new features and though there has been a definite shift in emphasis, its basic content is the same. Why tamper with a successful formula?

The most noticeable change is in the look of the magazine. This has been completely overhauled. The design has been "modernised" to bring it up to international standards: new typeface, new layouts. The magazine is glossy, full of pictures of good looking men and women. The design has become fairly seamless; so much so that often it is difficult to separate an editorial page from an advertisement.

Interestingly, much of the change had come long before the advent of these new magazines. Eighteen months ago, copies of Femina had a bold new look. Now those tentative steps towards boldness have become more assertive. There are more and more photographs of skimpily clad women; bolder stories on men and women (for example an article in April issue on a man with a fetish for stealing women's knickers).

Women's health issues: gynaecological problems, women's sexuality receive a much franker coverage than they did previously. These features were carried earlier too, but with a little more delicacy or inhibition. Now, the motto is to let it all hang out. Also, there is at least two foreign stories in each issue now. One could be a personality piece and the other about relationships.

The fashion pages have been increased too. And it is no longer just sarees or salwar kameez as it used to be in a long forgotten past. Now fashion is from well-known Indian designers, men's wear and the international catwalk scene. Indeed, the latter feature is almost identical to what you will see in the pages of Elle.

The emphasis is now towards being much more provocative, to grab the reader's attention: "50 female things that drive men mad!" This reads very much like the Cosmopolitan feature: "Vitality, Secrets of women who captivate". The recipe pages are being oriented towards greater exotica: French baguettes and fine, flaky croissants.

On the other hand, all the old favourites are still there: Pearl Padamsee still gives advice, though there is a new foreign soothsayer (as though we didn't have enough in our own country!); Handy tips, fiction, poetry, travel, career advice, first person accounts: as we said the formula is basically the same. It has been prettied, westernised.

Women's Era looks untouched. It has the same old covers and designs, same kind of stories. Nothing has changed. Literally. The most probable explanation for this is that the people who read Women's Era are not the same as those for Femina or Cosmopolitan or any of the other magazines. It has a loyal, middle class housewife readership which remains seemingly unmoved by all the fuss around it.

The same could be said for Savvy. There is no change in its formula which was always a little sensationalist and full of first person revelations. That was the secret of its success and it has seen no reason to change it.

The fact that these magazines are still capturing advertisements suggests they are correct in staying where they are. The new magazines are also receiving advertising support and there is some degree of convergence especially in advertising for cosmetics and household products (like the new Lizol). There are major differences too: Elle, particularly, is full of fashion ads--and that too of Indian designers (are these complimentary, discount rates or what?). Most of Cosmopolitan's ads can be found in Femina, Elle and Women's Era; Verve has the most upmarket multinational company advertisements especially for watches and by implication, jewellery.

That so many women's magazines are receiving a fair amount of advertising suggest a buoyancy in this niche market. What it also suggests is that women, literate women, are an enormous potential market both for magazines or television. In USA, studies have found that women read more than men and that to some extent explains the increasing popularity and financial success of a number of women writers, Toni Morrison being only the most famous.

## NOTES

\*1.Nandini Lakshman quoted by V.S.Naipaul in India A Million Mutinies Now; Minerva; London Pg.408

\*2 Week under review was 20-27 April 1997. Newspapers referred to: Times of India, Hindustan Times, Indian Express, The Hindu, The Pioneer and The Asian Age. The Hindu carried more than any other newspaper, articles on political and social issues concerning women: major ones included, female literacy rates being incredibly low in India; the role of women in urban, local bodies; a small town where women are encouraged by family members to practise prostitution.

The Indian Express did an expose on boys from wealthy families in Noida, who ran a racket for raping girls; it also carried a story on an Aligarh schoolgirl citing the scriptures for permitting women to enter mosques and an interview with the Pakistan Human Rights Commissioner, Asma Jahangir.

The Hindustan Times also carried Asma Jahangir but apart from another story on the National Commission for Women looking into a housing scheme for sex workers, crime items were its only genuflection to seriousness.

The rest of the women-oriented stories were strictly personality-based and lifestyle features. Asian Age also carried a few serious stories: how the Karnataka government has launched a novel drive to provide financial assistance to SC/ST women in their first pregnancy; an interview with the Kuwaiti Minister for Information, who happens to be a woman; a safe motherhood campaign in Madhya Pradesh. Like the Hindustan Times, The Pioneer carried very little by way of seriousness: other than stories on Guatemalan widows, and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's desire to place women's rights on her foreign policy agenda there were only crime stories, personality pieces and lifestyle features. that leaves the Times of India, the market leader:

\*3.(Ammu Joseph, Who's News. Sage, New Delhi, 1994. Ch.8. Women's magazines)

4. Of the seven magazines, all had women on the cover. Covers of Cosmopolitan, Women's Era and New Woman had no reference to the content of the magazines but all of them were teasers; Savvy was the most unassuming with a photo of Zerbanoo Gifford; Femina and Verve had Rekha and Kamaal Siddhu respectively on their covers and there were stories on them inside too.)

## **ANNEXURES:**

English language magazines exclusively for women:

1. Femina: "For the woman of substance", Established in 1959 (38 volume in progress)
2. Women's Era: - Established 1973 (volume 24 in progress)
3. Savvy
4. Verve: "The Spirit of Today's Woman", Established in 1995
5. Cosmopolitan: "The Best That You Can Be", Established in 1996 (Volume 1 in progress)
6. Elle: Established 1997 (but it says Volume 3 in progress)
7. New Woman: "She's A Bit Like You", Established 1997 (Volume 1 in progress).

(Eve's Weekly, closed in 1990; relaunched as a monthly in 1992 by Vineet Jain -- closed down again)

## **PERIODICITY**

Fortnightly: Femina, Women's Era, Woman Now

Monthly: Savvy, Cosmopolitan,

Bimonthly: Elle

Quarterly: Verve

## **COVER PRICE**

Woman's Era, New Woman Rs. 20

(Women's Era has increased its cover price in the last year: in 1996 April, the magazine cost Rs 18)

Femina, Savvy Rs. 25

Cosmo, Elle Rs. 50

Verve Rs. 150

**COVER LINES:**

**FEMINA**

**MAIN: BODY OBSESSION**

The pros, cons and choices of aesthetic surgery (by which we presume they mean plastic surgery)

**OTHERS:**

Excited by small miracles: The real Rekha

Hot from Milan: the Spring-Summer Collection '97

50 female things that drive men mad!

Her child in another woman's body: the story of Kamal Raj Singh

(all headlines in small caps.)

**COVER PIX:** Rekha in a black and white outfit. All dressed. Reflects a lead interview with Rekha but not cover story.

**WOMAN'S ERA**

**MAIN:** Devilish ways to avoid nuisance calls

**OTHERS:**

How many children to have: one two three or none at all

Care for :your 32 pearls

Agony of employed wives

Spices that spice up your life

Infertility is curable

A new look for your house

**COVER PIX:** An Indian woman with huge pendant earrings and pearls on her neck in white top with V but not enough to show bustline and long hair. No relation to stories inside unless it's: Care for your 32 pearls!

**SAVVY**

**MAIN:** How Zerbano Gifford braved racial hatred and hostility to become the first Asian woman MP in Britain

**OTHERS;**

Putting women in their place --An all woman team of film makers tell you how

Meenakshi Wadhwa takes on NASA scientists

Foreign women fighting for an indian cause

**COVER PIX:** Zerbano Gifford. Relates to cover story

**VERVE**

MAIN: Madhur Jaffery: Tasting her dreams

**OTHERS:**

Naseeruddin Shah's secret desire

Sparks fly on Miss World

Introducing Chennai Chatter

A Mouthful Of Soap: Ashok Banker revisited

For Alisha Chinai love is just a four letter word

Kamaal Sidhu's Ouf-Of-Sync fashion fusion

COVER PIX: Kamaal Sidhu in white head gear which is furrish; v neckline which does expose a tantalising amount of her bosom and a white wrap or dress or shirt around her shoulders. Sulky, inviting expression. Relates to cover story on Kamal Sidhu's out-of-sync fashion fusion story.

**COSMOPOLITAN**

MAIN: Morality Of The One Night Stand

**OTHERS:**

Hot new jobs. Are you missing out

VITALITY. Secrets of women who captivate

Quit dieting forever! Here's how to get slim by eating

Special: Excerpts from Kiran Nagarkar's new novel Cuckold

COVER PIX: Woman till just above knees; dress of safety pins and a black underslip. U neck with bulge of bust showing. And thighs. No relation to stories unless it is to VITALITY, secrets of women who captivate.

**ELLE**

MAIN: Summer '97: What to wear, what to read and where to go

**OTHERS:**

Are you always a Woman?

INTERNATIONAL - catwalk report

Tripping on TANTRA

The ROMANCE peddlers

Ralph Fiennes REVEALED

The latest in BRITISH FICTION

COVER PIX: Indian girl in bikini. Mostly her midriff and bust showing. Model is Vidisha Pavate. Relates to lead theme on What to wear this summer.

**NEW WOMAN:**

MAIN: "I got my son out of a 40-day coma" - A mother's story

OTHERS:

PROFESSIONALISM: Why can't Indians achieve it?

Who do bosses need: PRETTY SECRETARIES

Can male friends wreck a marriage?

When men bitch

Are we creating monster kids?

Companionship and the disabled

COVER PIX: a woman in sleeveless top and shorts with abundant amount of one thigh showing Inside credit says she is Godrej Cinthol super model: Bipasha Basu. No relation to any of the stories unless she is meant to be a pretty secretary!.

Note: Cover pix: Women's Era, Cosmopolitan and New Woman have pix of women which do not relate to stories. Femina, Savvy, Verve and Elle carry pix which reflect contents of magazines.

Bosoms: In the case of Verve, Cosmopolitan, Elle and New Woman, there is an effort to exploit women's sexuality by highlighting bosoms. In Femina, this issue does not do that but in other issues it does. Woman's Era and Savvy have sobersides pix in this issue but can be more tantalising especially Women's Era on other occasions. This is, presumably also to attract male readers. Therefore, the magazines try to attract men even though they are directed at women.

**COVER LINES:**

*Femina*: a deliberate attempt to tempt with pix of attractive women and cover lines which suggest sexuality or the body. For example, Body Obsession, the cover story, is written with a huge O and smaller words which is suggestive; you have to read the fine print to realise this is about plastic surgery. Or 50 female things which drive men mad.

*Women's Era*: Nothing overtly suggestive or double entendre. relate to different kinds of stories mostly in the advice mode: devilish ways to avoid nuisance calls, how to look after your 32 pearls, a new look for your interior, spices that spice up your life: all provide tips, useful information. The cover pix is suggestive but otherwise nothing here to captivate men.

*Savvy*: Of all the magazines, the straightest. Not appealing to men at all. No sex, though always some sensational lurid details or personal lives of women: sexually exploited etc.

Zerbanoo Gifford has a straight enough headline and so do others: Putting Women In Their place --An All Woman Team Of Film Makers Tell you How; Meenakshi Wadhwa Takes On NASA Scientists; Foreign Women Fighting For An Indian Cause.

*Verve*: Little bit of Oomph: Naseeruddin Shah's Secret Desire; for Alisha Chinai love is just a four letter word but it is the pix that is more alluring than the cover lines.

**Cosmopolitan:** Mostly hot: Morality of the One Night Stand; Hot new Jobs, Vitality Secrets of women who captivate. Three out of five along with pix is sexual. Very attractive to a male reader (they have found many men read Cosmopolitan).

**Elle:** Are you Always a woman is fairly tantalising but other than that there is nothing but the pix. Summer '97: what to wear, read and where to go; Tripping on Tantra, Ralph Fiennes revealed are unexceptional.

**New Woman:** Sensational lead story lines: "I got my son out of a 40-day coma" A mother's story. Are we creating monster kids? sounds pretty drastic too - catches eye. Three other stories suggestive and gossipy: Why do bosses need Pretty Secretaries, can male friends wreck a marriage and when men bitch. Two are very pedestrian: Professionalism: why can't Indians achieve it? and Companionship of the disabled. This is the first issue so it will try to draw attention.

**Conclusion:** There is an overt, blatant attempt to exploit sexuality especially women's in all the magazines covers. Savvy and New Woman go for a little sensationalism; Elle eschews sexual themes or lines only picture is alluring. Cosmopolitan is the most frankly sexual while Femina is trying to catch up. Verve is more sophisticated. Tips on a variety of subjects often make the cover lines.

## PART II

### WOMEN'S ERA AND FEMINA

#### AN INDEPTH STUDY

Two issues of both magazines - Women's Era and Femina - form the substance of this part of the study of women's magazines. The issue dates are

April 15, 1997

June 15, 1997

#### WOMEN'S ERA

FREQUENCY	Fortnightly
PRICE	Rs 20
PAGES	154 in April, 146 IN June -excluding cover
ADS	23 and a half in April issue (in-house ads not counted) 22 IN April, 22 IN June
KINDS OF ADS	2 in-house, including two half page ads inviting matrimonial ads in Women's Era and sister concern, Sarita; ad-cum-subscription for kids magazine, Champak; one page photo competition ad for Alive
COSMETICS	7 plus pullout pamphlet from Freya
HOME APPLIANCES	7
TV	1
PHARMACEUTICALS	1 and a half
CLASSIFIEDS	2 pages
JEWELLERY	1
OTHERS	3 and a half (list of ads in annexure)

"The family is the hinge of civilisation. My stress is that the family should be strengthened, not destroyed. Woman's Lib is responsible for quite a good deal of the disintegration of the family." (418) Vishwanath, Publisher-Editor, Women's Era. (\*)

When V.S. Naipaul, in his book, "India: A Wounded Civilisation" looked at the phenomenon of WE, he saw it as a "counterblast" to Women's Liberation (according to Vishwanath, WE started with the idea to "reach women who didn't read Hindi. It is the English reading, English speaking people who control things in this country. All this feminist Women Lib movement is conducted by English speaking people." -- pg.418).

WE cannot support women's liberation which has always implied a liberation from the home and its chores. WE wants the woman to stay at home because that is where it believes she belongs. In an edit in the June issue, on social problems, it warns its readers against "women activists (who) sometimes accelerate marital discord by instigating women against their men and family." (pg.7). The "urban elite class", as the edit calls it, "add to the miseries of the poor".

## **AGENDA**

Women's Era does everything it can to preserve the sanctity of the family and more specifically, the position of the woman in the family. Good daughter-in-law, good wife, good mother and good mother-in-law -- through its articles, through its editorials, through its agony advice columns. Women's Era wages war on female liberation from the home.

### **Social agenda: Religion**

Here is a magazine not only with a definite agenda, but if we were to describe its role in religious terms, we'd say it was on a crusade. A crusade very clearly dictated by the beliefs of its founder-editor, Vishwanath, who in turn has been deeply influenced by the Arya Samaj movement. Just how deeply can be judged by the fact that while WE is very conservative in its views regarding the family and women, it abhors superstition and blames religion for many of the problems facing India. In the words of Vishwanath, "I think religion is the greatest curse of mankind. ....the oldest profession is not prostitution. It is the priesthood." (pg 418). (\*\*\*)

An example of WE's agenda in this respect can be found in the June issue: there are two articles against religion (Religion Is Not Morality and Give Muslim Women Their Rightful Place). WE does not discriminate when it comes to religions: it is against all religions. It also presupposes that women are normally the most steeped in religion, ritual and superstition. Therefore, WE plays a reformist role, trying to point out the evils of religion in a logical, reasonable (though somewhat patronising) manner.

For example in the article, Religion Is Not Morality, the author writes: "..Our own Hindu religion attaches the greatest importance to birth and one's social position.....But moral principles teach us that everyone everywhere is equal." (pg. 28). In an editorial in the April issue WE wholeheartedly supports inter-caste marriages.

### **Social Agenda: Woman's Place is in the Home**

WE belongs to the same group that publishes the very successful Hindi magazines, Sarita (which sells three times what Women's Era sells, according to Vishwanath in the Naipaul article and Grihashobha.

The predominant concerns of the market leaders in the Hindi women's magazines are the 'good woman' and 'marriage'. And though times have changed and women go out to work, the agenda remains the same, "epitomised in the belief that the only lasting and fulfilling happiness a woman can achieve is to get married and stay married." (pg.156 Shubhra Gupta<sup>1</sup>). "Their message.....: get your act together and fall in line because otherwise not only you but your children will also suffer, as will our parents and unmarried sisters." (Shubhra G.) This seems to be equally true of Women's Era.

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<sup>1</sup> Who's News? The media and women's issues

Edited by Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma; 1994. Sage; New Delhi

The agenda becomes clear by looking at just one article. In the April issue, there is an article entitled, *Agony of Employed Wives*. The three-page article is devoted to how working wives are straining their marriages, neglecting their children and, even ruining their sex lives. "Lovemaking becomes fitful for a working couple," says Janaki, "I am unable to get up in the morning on time if I let my husband make love to me late in the night" (Pg. 10)

Wives go out to work, WE believes, only to earn more for the family (not out of any personal ambition or need for self realisation) "...Money can buy comforts, even the luxuries of life, but it cannot "buy" love and tender feelings between the wife and the husband" (pg 9). Financial compulsions and the strains on the man as the single bread-winner -- reasons which compel so many women to work -- are ignored by the article. Its primary concern is to get women to return to being only wives. Wives, who in order to fulfill themselves can do so only by placing their husbands and families first.

A woman as an individual does not exist for WE.: a woman only exists through pleasing others. Therefore, WE is always primarily concerned with the comfort levels and feelings of the husbands: "...someone who is "always tired" is no alluring partner for any husband...It is frustrating for both, much more for the husband" (pg.9) "One marvels at husbands who are forbearing enough to go on suffering the situation".

The logic to this is quite simple from WE's point of view: a woman's happiness lies in being a good wife and mother and daughter-in-law; a good wife, mother is one who makes husband, children, happy; so she will be happy only if husband, children are happy; they will be happy only if she makes them happy "It is the mother who converts a house into a home." (pg.10) Outside the family, there is no scope for happiness.

Working is actually seen as a tragedy for women: "The few who "marry" their jobs, remain spinsters and spend most of their lives suffering the miseries of that state." (Pg 10) Oh dear.

As for the children, "I have known a family where the 2 boys aged about 6 and 4 "played" for nearly 3 hours outside their house...till exhausted and hungry, when they fell asleep on the verandah of their locked house...A neglected child is almost an orphan". (Pg 10)

Clearly, these things do happen; but does that mean that no woman should ever work? WE does not address itself to such an issue or make any effort to analyse why women work, or present a balanced picture. It has a firm belief in the woman being at home.

Articles such as these, with a strong didactic purpose, are written almost incognito; I.M.Soni, the author of this feature sounds like a man but it could be woman or Vishwa Nath himself; the people quoted are equally vague, supporting a sneaky suspicion that they maybe 'created' speakers: Kalpana Kapoor working in an ad agency, Neeru, Janaki are simply quoted at length without any context; their pictures are not used either.

### **Photographs:**

Indeed, photographs in WE often are simply photographs, random in choice, used to serve the editorial position of the magazine. Example: in this story three pictures are used (none of the people quoted) to reinforce the thematic content of the article. (Please note that even the photo caption is part of the crusade!):

- a) A man, a child and a woman--child in the middle, either crying or laughing (cannot quite tell). Man and woman looking at child and smiling tenderly. Caption: "Spending time with one's family is an exhilarating experience".
- b) Young man and young girl embracing. Caption: "For a loving couple, there is nothing like being together".
- c) Young woman alone -- with pensive air. Caption: "I wonder what has gone wrong with my family life".

There is no attempt in the entire article to present a balanced picture with different points of view. The editorial voice rings loud and clear. In fact, the editorial voice is always at its most didactic when dealing with women and the home.

## **THE WOMEN'S ERA READER:**

If you read such articles, it becomes quite clear that WE is not trying to appeal to the working woman. Its constituency is the middle-middle class housewife; the housewife captured perfectly in a photograph accompanying an article in June issue--a woman who would cover her TV set with a dainty cloth. (Pg 26)

### **Agenda: Household agenda**

Vishwanath and WE seem to function on the belief that though the woman should be a housewife, she must be an educated one, free from the bondage of religion, superstition, and enlightened about her health, her family's health and in personal and social habits. Hence, the accent on 'teaching' articles, articles simply written which advise women on everything from "Infertility" (pg. 30, April) and Colours in Foods (Pg. 51, June) with dangerous toxins to articles on the government's budget and the latest in children's clothes (Toddler Trends). Or as Vishwanath himself has put it: "Rebellion isn't in Women's Era. It's in Sarita, our Hindi magazine Women's Era is more for social affairs. It's educative. Teaching women the simple things nobody bothers to tell them about." (\*\*\*\*\*)

This the reason why most articles in WE are proselytising. The agenda is not so much to inform as to teach. Articles are, therefore, geared towards the household. Unlike Femina or Cosmo there are no tips on how to manage home and career, how to improve your sex life, no features on the angst of the modern working woman.

There are numerous articles on self-improvement ("Simply Organised" pg 11, April), for instance, explains the virtues of discipline and good organisation in day to day affairs), improving the house and its interiors (almost every issue has an article and photo feature on keeping a good home or enhancing its look: "Usher in a new Look" (Pg.85, April) explains how a house may be prettied up by some simple rearrangements. "How safe is your fridge" (pg 41, June) describes the microbes which develop in stored foods). Handy hints on all subjects from beauty to teenage love can be found within the covers of one issue.

### **Advice;**

Looking at the nature of articles in each issue reveals that upto 14 in the April issue and 11 in the June are advice oriented. Add to that the short stories which are fables, and the cookery and fashion pages (which are, after all, advice on how to cook and how to dress)-- you have a good portion of the magazine devoted simply to teaching readers and giving them sound advice.

## **THE EDIT**

"...Women's Era doesn't tackle social problems. They tackle personal situations." (409). This is not quite true. In its editorials especially, and in the occasional articles religious and social evils are targeted. In fact there is a political and social agenda here that is absent in other women's magazines. This not a frivolous magazine in that sense (except for film trivia). (\*6)

The editorials (two per issue) are a remarkable feature in WE. Other women's magazines don't have such editorials. If they do, the editorial is used to introduce stories in the issue; WE however, has editorials in the way a newspaper has them: to comment on an issue, a judgement, a policy concerning women: in the two issues under study the editorials deal with inter caste marriage, a Pakistan High Court judgement that a woman could marry for love, the absurdity of having a foreign woman as India's PM and lastly, how the proclamation of laws will not remove social problems like dowry, prostitution or child labour.

Given Vishwanath's abhorrence for the control religion exercises over people's lives, WE supports intercaste marriages (and is very critical of politicians, Congress and BJP, who oppose such changes), desecrates Pakistan's Islamic laws which discriminate so heavily against women. It is equally scornful of the possibility of Sonia Gandhi becoming PM. It supports an Indian woman for PM, not a foreigner (though it is at pains to point out that most of the women in this part of the world who have become PM did so because of the "charisma of their father/husband which helped these women reach the top post." (pg 7, June).

Finally, the edit on social evils: it is caught between its conservative world view and need for social change. This is the dilemma for a magazine with its polemic agenda: it has little room to manoeuvre. It desires social change but social change only within its terms of reference. In the edit on intercaste marriages, WE criticised the politicians for not supporting a Delhi Government scheme to award Rs. 25,000 to intercaste couples. In "Government shouldn't be blind", it says that by merely introducing schemes and laws governments cannot change social conditions; it argues that first conditions must be created for change, otherwise laws "often generate adverse effects worse than the evils themselves" (Pg 7, June). It is here that it also weighs in against women activists.

## **Public Concerns**

A corollary to the edit pages which once again illustrates the serious intent of the editor to educate and inform the housewife, is the regular column, Capital Chit-Chat. This deals specifically with problems facing Delhi and its citizens: the dengue epidemic of last year, the latest laser techniques acquired by the Delhi Traffic Police to monitor speeding cars, the de-greening of Delhi and what the government is doing about it, the Malhotra committee on Delhi's building by-laws.

The effort here is once again to provide information about life outside the household. To provide women with a modicum of understanding about events around them. These pieces might also be geared towards her husband or the other men folk in the house, since men are thought to be avid readers of women's magazines.

## **Taking stock**

WE also carries a regular column entitled, "Price Movements": a look at the price of gold and silver in Delhi and London as well as foreign exchange rates and well-placed stocks. No other women's magazine carries such information, though the information is undoubtedly useful to women who are involved in saving money for the family or make investments in jewellery. WE recognises this role of the housewife.

## **Short Stories**

The short story is one of the most important components of WE. Each issue contains no less than 4-5 short stories, each 3-5 pages long. While other English language magazines might carry one or two stories, WE, by having as many as five, indicates the important role it sees for the short story in its agenda. The short story is not included here for its literary merit: it is here as a fable. According to Lakshman: "(In short stories) they live happily ever after. ...Women's Era is very biased towards women. The woman can do no wrong. She is always a good person. She may be a grandmother, or a wife, or a mother-in-law; she is always a good person. ...The readers can identify with each and every situation." (Lakshman) (\*7)

Whether women identify or not, the short stories in WE are keen to instruct them: on how to be a good wife, a good mother, mother in law, etc. This is sought to be done by example (hoping women who read the stories will emulate the heroines). The women, and more often than not the men as well, are worthy characters.

Thus, the short stories follow the same agenda as the rest of the magazine. They're deployed as a second line of attack: where fact cannot teach maybe fiction can persuade.

It should be noted that the stories alone receive an introduction in the contents page. These intros set the moral tone for the stories and in fact give the story away. By simply reading the intro you know what to expect from the story. Also, there seems to have been a deliberate effort to get stories written by people (women?) from different religions.

The 10 stories:

- ♣ The Betrayal (A woman's experiences during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984)
- ♣ The Fatwa (A man is shocked to learn that the woman he has married is another man's wife)
- ♣ A Fruitful Visit (A woman is envious of her rich friend but when she gets to know better...)
- ♣ The Strange Woman (About a rational-minded widow who has struggled to bring up her children)
- ♣ Search for Identity (After relentless search for her biological parents, a daughter finds happiness in her loving foster parents arms)

June

- ♣ As You Sow (The girl is intelligent and industrious but not good-looking so her parents are worried about her marriage prospects)
- ♣ Just a matter Of Time (Coming home with a Hindu girl one day, a Christian boy announces to his parents that they have just got married)
- ♣ The Return of the Native (After spending 15 years in the USA, would a man settle happily in India?)
- ♣ The Girl Who Rebelled (the daughter of a movie star rebels against the kind of life her mother leads)
- ♣ Much Ado About Nothing (A wife fails to understand why her husband takes his work so seriously.)

Note the similarity in concerns and philosophy with the rest of the magazine: against religion and fanaticism, against superstition, in favour of intercaste marriages, pro-family and the husband who works so hard for a living. And firmly disapproving of the woman who sets out to lead a glamorous life, neglecting her child: The Girl Who Rebelled (pg.106) is an interesting example of the kind of stance taken by the magazine.

In the story, the heroine Leela is the daughter of a famous movie star. The mother is wanton (movie stars have to be!) and so Leela "loved her mother but hated her immoral habits". The mother acquires four husbands (excessive even by Bollywood's standards) and her real father remarries "a slut" as Leela puts it. Leela unforgiving of her mother, rebels, leaves her and goes to work as a typist for a big businessman and industrialist, Raj Kumar who, it just so happens, was in love with her mother once.

The mother had forsaken him for the cinema and he didn't want a wife in the film business. Now he finds himself falling for the daughter who obligingly returns his affection. They marry. When Leela tells her mother of her engagement to Raj Kumar, "she raved like a mad woman! She almost died of remorse and sorrow. She lamented that she had been punished for having scorned and rejected you. She had gained nothing by marrying four husbands." And Raj Kumar "knew in his heart he had avenged his humiliation." Thus is an evil woman punished for her ambition.

Once again, the use of photographs is noteworthy (normally short stories have illustrations but not this one): one picture is meant to be of the mother and daughter: the mother is wearing a black shoulderless dress which snakes around the neck and reveals her cleavage. Huge earrings dangle from her ears--she looks Dimple Kapadia-ish. The daughter is attired in a chikan kurta and dupatta. In the picture of Raj and the mother, the mother is wearing a mini-skirt with boots. In the picture of Raj with Leela, Leela is also in a skirt but it is discreetly long.

## **The Crossword**

Only woman's magazine to have one. However, problem here is that the target audience is all wrong. The crossword is difficult to solve, quite beyond the abilities of the housewife being catered to.

## **Readers contributions**

WE's got another agenda: that is to involve its readers as much as possible in the magazine. In every issue there are regular features/columns such as "How I Was Duped", "Husband's Howlers", "My Most Unforgettable Experience As A Bride", "The Incident I Can Never Forget", "Campus Rumpus", "In-laws Outlaws". Readers write in and share their stories with other readers. The incidents or anecdotes are very simple. They belong to the every day experiences of the readers. This is one way the magazine establishes a strong link with its readers and remains very much their magazine.

If you add on the poems and short stories, the letters page and the query pages-- all of which directly involve readers -- the WE is more interactive than any other magazine in the market place.

## **Advertising**

Most of the advertisements are for cosmetics, household items whether it is appliances or masalas. There are a number of in-house ads for other publications from the group: Grihashobha, Sarita, Champak etc.

The placement of ads favour the front of the magazine and are fairly arbitrary. Occasionally, an advertisement like Badshah Masala is thematically placed between the recipe pages.

Many of these advertisements, especially for cosmetics like Coty cream, Ponds Institute, Freya, Lakme, Ultra Doux, Revlon - up market products - and household items such as Domex appear in Femina too.

Though the readership is different, advertisers of women's products don't differentiate. It is assumed by this that the WE reader can afford to purchase these items.

This is all of a piece with features such as the interiors of homes and the fashion or jewellery spreads: the items in those features are expensive. Which means the target audience is in financial terms not middle-middle class but the housewife in Karol Bagh or Punjabi Bagh whose husband is probably self-employed, in the family business or has large, old ancestral properties. It is the mental attitudes of this class that are also reflected in the magazine.

The ads represent products such women can afford. However, the same products define another kind of woman: a modern, career woman, liberated and open-minded. Westernised. There is a profile here which doesn't quite match but given WE's circulation of over 1.2 lakhs the advertisers are presumably trying to widen their base to include the middle class housewife.

## **Entertainment and titillation**

Though WE has a very definite profile and agenda it is not immune to what it perceives as the entertainment needs of the reader. Hence, regular reviews of Hindi films and gossip from Bollywood. The frivolous, gossipy tenor of these is at variance with the rest of the magazine.

As is the tone used in the fashion pages. Here the tone is playful, teasing, titillating tone. "If you can resist the temptation of getting close to the lady in plain salwar and hand-painted kurta with embroidered yoke, you are definitely a saint." (pg 74 June). Curiously, such captions appear to be addressed to the men.

Whereas the rest of the magazine - in its layouts, its headlines and writing style -work hard at being sobersides as possible, like a well in the desert, the fashion and film pages appear for the sake of readers tired of being instructed, taught and advised. The fashion pictures try to be alluring as does the cover picture which is always of a woman trying to give you a come-hither look. Similarly, in the film pages there is always one full length picture of a star, in what by WE modest standards, can be considered daring.

This is WE's recognition and obeisance to the desires of its readers. Bollywood reviews, gossip interest the female readership. So to keep them happy, both are provided. Since there appears to be an underlying belief that men also look at the magazine, girlie pictures on the cover, and in the film pages as well as the fashion pages have also been included as allurements.

## **Agony Advice: Personal**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the agony advice columns in most women's magazines is that the questions are not all that alarming. Which is to say, the majority are fairly routine questions which any GP or sensible person could answer. Many questions relate to stammers, height, good figures (and bad), body odour etc. You don't need experts to answer such questions. The fact that such questions are being asked appears to suggest

- A level of naivete in the readers,
- A fear of asking for help (in case the problem turns out to be of a serious nature, especially when the issue is a health one)
- The repression in our society which prevents readers asking such routine questions publicly or openly.

In WE there are two kinds of columns: Teenache and Personal Column. By having two columns instead of one, WE has quite sensibly distinguished between 'growing pains' and adult problems. Are these columns significantly different from similar columns in other magazines or newspapers? Not really.

## **Teenache**

WE tries to have a mix of questions so that only one or at most two relate directly to a sexual issue. Other questions relate to anything from bad teeth, dry hair and adolescent obesity, to small busts, anxiety attacks, physical impediments (a stammer), attitude to studies and wanting to be a model inspite of parental opposition.

Questions relating to sex: one is about one girl having a crush on another girl; the second is about a boy's enjoyment in watching steamy sex scenes on TV; a third concerns a pre-marital sexual affair.

The advice in two cases is quite pragmatic: WE says a crush is a normal adolescent occurrence- so stop feeling guilty (this is very important advice since the most damaging aspect to such problems is guilt). (Pg 99, June)

Premarital affair: WE warns against such affairs: "You should realise that when you have sex without commitment, you put yourself, in a vulnerable position." Advises that young, first year college girl should stop the affair. Trying to be fair, W.E. points out that the man may think the girl is too young for marriage and should complete her degree. (Pg 34, April)

In the question related to watching TV, however, WE appears a bit off the beam: to tell a young boy that he should stop watching TV is like telling him not to breathe! "Read good books instead" and think healthy thoughts is the rest of the advice: this is completely impractical, morally uplifting though it might be. (Pg 99, June)

## **Personal Column**

Again questions here are not strictly about sex. Most women's magazines have a plethora of questions on all kinds of sexual behaviour-- as we will see in Femina. The questions in WE seem to concern adjustments and readjustments in life. There's the case of the lonely widow and young mother, of a daughter embarrassed by her mother's interest in her new uncle, of a woman supporting her ailing mother and young brother but in love with a man who wants her to move away from them...or the wife having problems with her mother-in-law. Then, there is the shy person who wants to break out and the handicapped girl who thinks her fiancee finds her sister more attractive than herself.

In all such case, WE is calm and soothing. It is not judgmental though it cannot resist the temptation to moralise with little homilies: "When we come into this world, we do not come with any guarantees that life would be easy and pleasant for us. We often have to face problems and when this happens, we should do so in a manner that shows our strength of character, maturity and courage" (Pg.34, June).

True to its reformist leanings, WE advocates widow remarriage; but it also supports the woman who is looking after her mother: it does not advocate leaving the ailing mother for the fiancee in another city.

This may reveal WE's concern that a woman should not just be a good wife, but good daughter too. Again, in the case of the infatuated mother, WE takes a very accommodating stance quite at variance with much of the tenor of the rest of the magazine: "Though your father is to be admired, your mother could not have had an easy time either. Your father probably wasn't able to give her the warmth and tenderness that every marriage needs. So don't judge her behaviour too harshly." (pg 34, June).

WE quite rightly also believes that love cannot be forced, that "breaking up is better than leading an unhappy life together. 'Thus, it advocates that the handicapped girl speak to her fiancée frankly, "don't be emotional and don't cry" and if necessary, walk away from him."..there are many fish in the pond." Sound, unemotional advice. (Pg 34, June)

In the case of the mother-in-law being cold and silent to the daughter-in-law, WE blames the mother-in-law and tells the daughter-in-law to concentrate on cementing her relationship with her husband. (Pg 107, April)

On the basis of the two issues being studied the questions selected and answered do not seem to have any hidden agenda. The advice is the kind almost any mature adult would hand out. However, occasionally, WE's slip shows through. In another issue, there is a question about the height of a girl who is getting married. The girl is worried that her fiancée might object to her being almost the same height as the him. (Pg 99, April)

WE begins by being sensible: that height is irrelevant to marriage (and it adds that many great people have been short people); but it ends up by saying that if the girl is determined then she should tell her parents to call off the nuptials. This is a regressive piece of advice: it suggests that WE might have some sympathy for the position that a woman should be shorter than her husband! That would be in keeping with its general position of a woman being subservient to a man.

### **GENERAL COMMENTS:**

WE is a no nonsense magazine with few pretensions. In every aspect -- design and layout, cover, cover lines, headings and intros, photographs and the manner in which the magazine is written -- WE is straightforward, simple to the point of being boring. All the layouts follow the same basic pattern. So does everything else. This simplicity is exemplified by one feature, entitled: "Infertility". This is so direct, simple, that there is no room for confusion over the subject of the article. Unlike other magazines and Femina in particular, there is no desire to be clever. The idea is to be easily accessible to its target audience.

As pointed out earlier the photographs and captions are sometimes editorially in consonance with the point of view of the article. This is unusual.

However, as has also been mentioned the photographs, very ordinary in quality, are normally lacking in artifice. Only in the fashion pages, the cover picture and in the Bollywood pages, is there any effort to excite, entice or appear alluring.

Though there is no coda to the flow of articles in the sense of a thematic progression, there is an effort to place most of the feature articles in the first half and the regular features, columns more towards the back of the book. The two issues were paginated in a fairly similar way--give and take a few stories or columns. Recipe pages, the fashion spreads, for example, appear in almost exactly the same position in both issues.

WE is always having special issues. Almost every second is a special issue: in April there was a special travel issue for the holidays; in May there was a "healthy, handsome body special." Is this designed to receive more advertising?

Naipaul agrees with Gulshan Ewing, former editor of *Eve's Weekly*. EW does not intimidate its readers. EW is didactic, says Ewing, "...The women who read *Women's Era* are really intimidated by magazines. They'd rather pick up magazines like *Women's Era* that don't make them feel uncomfortable. When we (*Eve's Weekly*) write about bride-inspecting, we get all het-up. And we tell the woman, the girl, that she doesn't have to go through this. But she can only revolt if she is educated enough to be economically independent at some later stage." (pg 406)

To which Naipaul says: "That was the point: that for a girl or woman from that background with that education living in those 'surroundings', the idea of revolt was fantasy. *Women's Era* was addressed to those women."

Naipaul wrote that many years ago. Since then, though, the essentials of a woman's life has often remained drearily the same, outwardly there have been changes. The urban woman especially in Delhi is increasingly in a work situation. She is educated enough to find some employment. Therefore, rebellion is not a distant drum beating somewhere else; rebellion is beating in many hearts around us. We can safely question the premise that revolt is only a fantasy: it is increasingly a reality.

This raises the issue that while women have changed, *Women's Era* attitude hasn't. It doesn't address the needs of a working woman from any background. It addresses the needs of the middle class housewife, not only in Delhi (to which it is mainly targetted but to those in smaller urban cities, say Kanpur, Ahmedabad.

Yet such is the agenda that its owner, publisher sets for the magazine, that while it does everything to encourage the woman to stay at home and tend to her family and everything to discourage her from taking up a career, it conversely addresses serious political, social and civic issues which other women's magazines ignore. This gives it a unique blend of the micro and macro worlds. Its agenda is clearly to teach housewives both about their homes and the world around them. These housewives are the mothers of the next generation and by ridding them of religious superstitions or teaching them about politics, would help their children grow up more enlightened and well educated. That is *Women's Era's* great strength.

<b>FEMINA</b>	APRIL 15, JUNE 15, 1997
FREQUENCY	FORTNIGHTLY
PRICE	RS 25
PAGES	170 IN BOTH ISSUES
ADS	53 IN APRIL 15 ISSUE; 57 AND A QUARTER PLUS 8 PAGES INFOMERCIAL IN JUNE 15 ISSUE

KINDS OF ADS	APRIL
COSMETICS	13,
FOOD AND DRINK	7
CLASSIFIEDS	5 PAGES
BATHROOM FITTINGS	2
LINGERIE	3
BANK, WATCHES, AIRLINE, T-SHIRT, CLEANING DETERGENT, MEN'S SHIRTS, DATING, SLIMMING TABLET, JEWELLERY, HOTEL, TRAVEL, TV SETS	
ALL 1 EACH	

Women's magazines "exist primarily as commodities and as the vehicle for advertisements of other commodities."\*(1) (pg.88) This aptly defines the new look Femina. The oldest women's magazine in India (first published in 1957), Femina remains the highest circulated English language magazine for women (1.32 lakhs). The bible of the middle class woman throughout its long career, the magazine has undergone a complete overhaul in the last few years, making it almost unrecognisable from its former avtaar.

Nothing unusual here, given the strides made in design and visual layouts. What is unusual is that the magazine seems to have chosen as its new identity one that is far from unique: indeed, its look and content define it as a less cosmopolitan version of Cosmopolitan-- or let's say, a less sexually provocative version of Cosmopolitan. With a little bit of Elle thrown in for good measure. It's as if these two American magazines, Indian versions of which are being published since last year, have become the standard bearers for Femina now. Ironical, that the oldest Indian women's magazine should now be modelling itself on new, foreign transplants.

Most magazines, especially women's magazines abroad, continually stress their difference from each other by offering a distinctive "lifestyle". But in the case of the new look Femina, this distinction is increasingly be erased. Its lifestyle or "consumption patterns" are more and more those of Cosmopolitan's. And its fashion pages (upto 24 pages in the April issue) are a blend of Cosmo with Elle.

To give a few examples. Here are some headings and intros:

- \* "Manstyle; coping with Libido blues (zip...zap.. zoom! you're over 35 single and dating or married. But suddenly the fizz seems to have gone out of your sex life. Check out remedies to bring the zing back into your life);"
- \* "Women are my life force: Govinda";
- \* "One step ahead of the man: what makes a guy want out of relationship".

These are the kinds of tantalising headlines/intros you'd expect in Cosmopolitan. But they're all from the June issue of Femina, which also carries a cover story on keeping your body in shape even as the years catch up with you, a quiz on assessing your confidence and a feature on 7 ways to wreck your career. Three of these articles are from foreign sources (this foreign sourcing for articles on man/woman relationships, sex-related stories, profiles of stars like Brooke Shields and quizzes has become increasingly popular in Femina - further indication of its attempt to meet Cosmo on its own turf).

Next, turn to the fashion spreads, the recipe pages, the keep fit work out advice and beauty tips: the first two had a previous life in Femina but in terms of layouts, they're now far more luscious and sensual, tactile--and sometimes definitely out of place in the Indian context (e.g. Haute Knot, June Issue --pgs 20-21-- which shows you how to tie a sarong--but how many Indian women know what a sarong is let alone wear one?). The fitness pages literally look right out of Cosmo or any other glossy foreign women's magazine. Just as does the 'Salon de Beaute' (a French affectation), a foreign, syndicated feature on eye care.

### **VISUAL CONTENT**

The visual content of Femina has witnessed the most striking changes: the paper quality has been upgraded, the photographs dominate nearly every feature, they're glossy, designer-photographs with almost always a kick in them.

Often, like in Cosmo, they have very little thematic unity with the story they appear with (in April issue, Trends has a picture of model Madhu Sapre in a short top barely inches away from the swell of her bosom and a cloth wrapped around her waist but posing in such a manner that the full left leg is bared. "sexy enough to set one's pulse racing". She's modelling clothes by designer Sangeeta Desai but it isn't quite clear what the garment is, or why another design could not have been used except that this is the most provocative.

Similar use of photographs in June issue in Manstyle in which a guy has his hand inching into his trousers with a suggestive pout. The text below reads: "you're married, you've been dating the same woman for years now. You're in a live-in relationship. Yet all of a sudden something is amiss. What stood up once, now droops (a more unfortunate though perhaps deliberate turn of phrase, will be difficult to find).....the headaches begin, the fatigue is felt, And if, yes, if, you do manage to get it together (thought they were going to say "get it up"), it's more a bore chore than great stuff." What the photograph has to do with all this is quite obscure.

Increasingly, the magazine has pictures of younger women in Western clothing, where previously there were more matronly and ethnic chic women. Another innovation is the number of boxed items, subheads and text in bold (please refer to lead in June issue: "10 years off your body"). This lends the magazine a snippety, busy look, so much part of the foreign magazine culture.

All of which suggests that Femina is permitting another magazine to set or define its agenda for it. The consequences of this are still to be felt in the market place or in advertising. Circulation for the magazine remains the same (virtually). And advertising support continues to be very high. But certainly there is some confusion over its present identity.

It now appears to be chasing an upper class, youthful, cultural identity, while its readership remains essentially the middle class housewife and in more recent years, working woman. The confusion is compounded by its look which is now definitely more modern and youthful. The question is: has its readership changed alongside?

To look at the dilemma in another way: is Femina in danger of losing its constituency by chasing another? The problem here is that Cosmopolitan in other western countries is very much a middle class, professional woman's magazine. However, in India it is currently being perceived and I would imagine, read by the upper class, and the younger women. That's because the definition of the middle class is very different in India than in the West. Here for example, to base the definition solely on financial assets or consumption patterns would be erroneous. Middle class consumption patterns might be the same as in other countries but at the cultural level, the middle class is very Indian.

Middle class India does not by and large, speak English; even if it speaks the language it doesn't speak it well; the middle class woman converses mostly in Hindi, watches Hindi movies and eats Indian food. Middle class India is traditional like all middle classes, but traditional in an Indian way. Thus, it may aspire to purchase the commodities promoted in a magazine like Femina or Cosmo but many of the articles on sex, or how to cook lasagna might meet with less enthusiasm.

The middle class woman may dream of becoming a Cosmo girl who to her appears to be living a better, more beautiful lifestyle. "Aspirational" is how editors and publishers see it (curiously, Tv producers use the same term for justifying their soaps about opulent, business families). But what happens then to Femina? Can the same middle class woman now aspire to a Femina which looks and reads increasingly like a Cosmo which she perceives as being a notch or two higher than Femina (perhaps also because of its foreign character?). If Cosmo becomes the new aspiration then how does the reader cope with Femina's new image which is itself aspiring to Cosmo's image? All a little confusing.

The other and opposite way of looking at this is that the magazine and its readership are reconciling the old with the new. The new Femina is trying to be both the old Femina (by still sticking to many of its old favourites like fiction, first person accounts, fiction, recipes, handy hints) with new dimensions (in features on man/woman relationships, sex related articles, fashion spreads and visual look). Will it end up by belonging to neither this nor that but hanging in the balance precariously? Or is it in fact defining a new kind of Indian woman magazine reader who likes the old stuff but wants the new look and ingredients, too?

To give a personal example of this dilemma: In June 1997, I began to contribute a fortnightly column called Current Affaire to Femina. It is a wry, trying-to-be-amusing account of imaginary conversations amongst women and how different women react to different issues. It is fictional to the extent that the women named are composite structures of many real women. It fits into the new look Femina which appears modern and more open. However, after three of the columns appeared, I received a fax from Femina editor, Sathya Saran, saying that the reader-response had not been good and they were considering dropping my column.

Earlier, I had written a piece for Cosmo on being a single woman who had not got married. It was written much in the same wry fashion as the Femina pieces. That feature was welcomed-- in fact better than I had ever expected. All of which seems to suggest that I should have written the Femina pieces in Cosmo. Which means that though Femina's content, look and visual taste is like Cosmo's its readership is not.

Femina is less well coded than Women's Era in terms of its editorial content. For one, the separation between editorial and advertisements, further compounded by the presence of infomercials (as in the June issue) is now almost seamless. Often an advert looks like an editorial page and vice versa. From a marketing strategy this makes abundant good sense: as was stated in the beginning, pleasure in a woman's magazine derives from consumption of its editorial content and the commodities it promotes. If you consider recipes as adverts for good or unusual food (and then as advice columns on how to cook them), you see how thin is the line between edit and advertising in any women's magazines.

The compulsions of commercialism often result in curious and contradictory results. In the April issue there is an interesting feature on Bangladeshi labourers in Malaysia taking up with local women of Tamil descent and then, often, abandoning them (the article appears a little out of place in a magazine increasingly devoted to grooming and relationships-- pg.92).

There is only one photograph in the two page story. It's of a woman in sheer silver, sleek as a Ferrari and a diamond stud in her ear. She appears in a quarter page advert for Revlon. The manner of the ads placement defines no boundary between the ad and the story. But even more incongruous is a Revlon advert with a story on poor, pregnant abandoned women. Surely, the ad does not fit the profile of the story? Or vice versa?

Second, Femina appears to be in a constant state of flux. Of course there are many regular features, but every fortnight there are new entrants and exits. In a sense this gives the magazine a variety and heterogeneity, an open endedness with different genres and kinds of articles all coming together between one cover. On the other hand, it does rob the magazine of a cohesiveness--something Women's Era has more of. It's as if anything goes now at Femina.

Thus, in the April issue, there were articles on plastic surgery, men with underwear fetish, a profile of Rekha, one of Brooke Shields, a feature on the assets of a spider, a look at one of Delhi's better known schools, Mirambika, a first person account of renal failure, a male doctor who specialises in breast cancer diagnosis, Bangladeshi men in Malaysia wooing Tamil women, a clothes designer of boys clothes, a change in the attitude of nurse midwives in Mumbai, highlights of the 1997 budget and the latest in fashion from the ramps of Europe and USA (a direct lift in the visual presentation from Elle, pgs.156-57).

## **AGENDA**

The agenda of Femina appears to be what Ellen McCracken\* has defined as "how the contemporary consumer society (has) chosen to see women in order to sell more goods and services." Traditionally, women's magazines, firmly situate women in the domestic setting or as close to it as possible; some like Cosmo and now Femina try to combine the housewife with the career woman. There is very little in terms of the civic or public and political in these magazines (which is what makes Women's Era so unusual) because if a woman is devoting herself to "the domestic sphere" as \* Ros Ballaster and Co., say, then there's little time for "productivity in public life". Femina might profile well known women in the public sphere but it doesn't deal with political or public issues.

### **Cover: Setting the Agenda**

Like Cosmo, Femina normally places on its cover "an idealised model of physical beauty" as McCracken calls her (though it also transforms well known women like Shabana Azmi into models). This cover photo "whets" our appetite for what is to be expected inside. It also signals to readers and more importantly perhaps, to advertisers what to expect of the magazine.

Like so much that will follow inside, this picture of a beautiful woman, works on readers' sense of inferiority which will help soften us and make us more susceptible to the articles inside (on fashion, beauty care, fitness, health, especially) and the advertised commodities which also seek to help us achieve "our ornamental perfection". This perfection is not restricted to striving for perfect womanhood (a la Western definition) but also a perfect home (hence features on interiors, products for the home and ads on household goods).

### **Agenda: Visual Appeal**

In Femina, the editorial agenda is very firmly linked to the visual look of the magazine. There has been attempt, earlier, to give examples of this. Ever since the magazine was overhauled, its visual design has become perhaps its most important personal statement. The glossy paper, the lush pictures--not only in the fashion and recipe sections but throughout the magazine lends a visual sumptuousness.

Stories often become incidental. It is only, really, in the regular advice columns that editorial matter prevails over design.

If you look at the main stories in both issues under study, you will note the impact of the visuals. In April, the two main articles on aesthetic surgery (a polite way of saying plastic surgery) and Rekha, it is the pictures and layouts which draw attention. In the latter there are pictures of Rekha in different flamboyant, self confident poses modelling the clothes with elan and casualness. This sets the tone for the article by editor Sathya Saran which describes Rekha as a quietly self assured person.

In the aesthetic surgery story, extensive use has been made of the photo-shop, altering photographs, giving them an almost psychedelic effect. The article, a combination of foreign and Indian sourcing, is in depth providing pros and cons and personal experiences of women who have undergone the surgery.

In the June issue, the lead piece "Take 10 years off your body: here's how," is full of pictures of women representing good health and vibrancy at different ages: twenties, thirties and forties. The article itself is quite disappointing not really explaining all the changes which take place as you go into menopause especially (most Indian experience this during their forties). Also, the fifties are considered a crucial period and there is no mention of that at all. That would be too old for a magazine now sold on youth.

Youth. The entire visual look of the magazine is to stress on youth, beauty with a 'feel good' attitude. Even articles on serious topics get this look--as is the case with the article on aesthetic surgery. And if the article itself cannot be prettied up, there is an advert next to it to do the job--the article on Tamil women and Bangladeshi labourers offers the best example. Don't worry, be happy is the feel of Femina.

Thus in every instance, the visual message of the magazine supersedes and often contradicts the editorial content. Look at the story in the June issue, At Your Sewa (pg.97), is an account of how the Self Employed Women's Association, (SEWA) Lucknow, has changed the life of so many poor women who work there. The article is a wonderful example of female empowerment but the visuals have two models in SEWA clothes, the second in a saree with a shoulderless blouse (or god forbid, without a blouse!). Though several of the women who work at SEWA have been quoted, there is no picture of them, or Runa Bannerjee who began it.

The reasons for this visual statement overriding editorial content is quite simple: as was stated in the beginning the women's magazine is really a lure to advertisers. Then it is to lure readers to use the commodities in the adverts or in the stories and failing the latter, to be inspired to use products from advice in the stories. Hence, in 'Eyes Right' (June pg.35) the entire article is really a promotion for eye shadows, mascara, liners etc. It is followed by 'A Cover Up' (pg.38) which is an invitation to visit a 'makeover studio' especially Deepa Verma's from whence, Divya Chauhan, Miss India-Asia Pacific 1997 emerged, "transformed into a confident and gorgeous looking woman, ready to leave a lasting impression."

Here lies one of the contradictions faced by all women's magazines of this kind. On the one hand, there is the visual message which is powerfully positive and there is "the positioning of women as the repository of ...virtue defined as essentially domestic and private bound to the family ideals of affection, loyalty and obligation," (\*Ros Ballaster and Co). On the other hand, the entire editorial premise is based on either personal problems (overweight, eye care) or other domestic crises in the lives of real women: violence, child rearing, illness, poverty.

To put it differently: if Femina were to deal with the SEWA story by giving pictures of the poor women who work there, it won't be alluring to advertisers; it will also not inspire readers to use the products being promoted by the advertisers. Lastly, it would not fit the idealised image of womanhood that women's magazines try to promote. Femina is not Manushi. There is a conflict here -- one Femina and others have not yet been able to reconcile.

## **AGENDA:**

### *The man-woman relationship*

Femina now carries more articles on relations between the sexes and sexual relationships than ever before. This has become a major part of its new agenda. Advice on sexual matters was always a part of Femina but the new articles are different: they are based on the belief that men and women are forever in conflict but also always in pursuit of one another.

Thus, there is the article on whether men dislike women who come on too strong; on what gifts men and women give each other, the little things in a woman which annoy a man, the signs that a man wants out of relationship, men with fetishes about women's clothing and how to bring the zip and zap back into your sex life.

For an Indian woman (or are these directed at the men?) who never talks about her sex life this new openness at Femina could be quite welcome. On the other hand, it isn't what she wants her children reading. Another dilemma. Some of the articles based as they are on foreign sources, don't apply to the Indian context: i.e., the article on fetishes 'Got your knickers nicked lately?' (April issue, pg. 32) is derived from Singapore sources.

Women in India do not normally hang their underwear out to dry in a verandah or any public place where anybody other than their husband might see. So why carry such articles? Could it be for titillation rather than information (there are lines that read: "the man was sniffing her bra and masturbating into her panties"--not for the kids or the women but this might just arouse some men.)

The other articles are in the advice category. Especially in terms of explaining men to women and women to men. If anything, the articles reveal the distance between the sexes. For example, the article on gift giving (June, pg.23) illustrates how men think women only want a gift that is expensive and women think that men don't appreciate the significance of giving or receiving a gift. The eternal conflict of the sexes, is used here to give the article some excitement.

These articles even as they try to explicate one sex to the other really end up proving that finally there is no understanding or complete reconciliation. Women's magazines are seemingly constructed and draw part of their attraction from the irreconcilable differences between the sexes.

## **Regular columns**

The regular columns/features in Femina are essentially divided between advice columns by 'experts' and those by personalities (Dr.S.Kothari, the sexologist and Pearl Padamsee, the theatre personality, typify the first and second types). Then there are the news-based or review pages.

Femina has extended the advice column to cover all kinds of domestic or personal issues: from financial and sexual to looking after pets and plants. The information based columns such as *What's In*, *What's Out* and *Newsflash* are based on trends in India and women's news items from abroad. The regular advice columns, plus the recipes and fashion pages, form the core of the magazine around which the rest is built.

## **Pearl Padmasee's Home Truths--The Personal Advice Column**

The personal problems are obviously dominated by sexual problems. These problems are also of the more perverse kind: a girl in love with her father, a girl abused by her brother, and most alarming of all, a 15 year old boy involved with his mother and then with his 17 year old sister. It seems only those with this kind of problem like to write in. This 'in-house' sexual activity seems to be an indication of the repressed sexual lives Indians live and how this repression has resulted in a lot of incestuous relationships. Of course, most magazines, Indian and foreign, have been accused of fabricating such letters/situations in order to titillate readers. Interestingly, the new openness at Femina is more in line with these kinds of letters than the old format.

Padamsee's advice is a horrified 'no'. She advises an immediate stoppage and even visits to the psychiatrists because such problems are really beyond her ken. Other problems are of marriage engagements not quite working out, questions of physique (especially the bust) and sexual harassment. In the June issue three letters pertain to the latter.

Padamsee's normal stance is fairly practical: she counsels against early decisions on marriage, advocates safe sex and the use of condoms always. Very politically correct. Occasionally, she seems to miss the point. She tells the girl being forced to have sex with her brother to forget the past and look forward to her impending marriage. The point is the girl is scared that her future husband will discover her loss of virginity and is scared of his rejection. Padamsee does not address the issue.

She is also archaic and sometimes wishful in her thinking. A 16 year old boy wants to have sex with a girl in his class. "...we in India are not ready for full fledged sex at...15!" (April issue). Statistics released by the Ministry of Health would tell her that we are not only ready but many teenagers of that age and younger are sexually active.

Padamsee's advice is supplemented by sexologist, Dr. Prakash Kothari and gynaecologist, Dr. Pratima Chipalkatti. Mention must also be made of the regular graphic column on the horoscope page which shows a woman giving herself a breast check. Alongwith regular articles on women's health, Femina's agenda here is clearly to educate women about their bodies.

### **Editorial: Sathya Saran: Me to You**

Clearly, at the moment, Femina is trying to be all things to all women. It carries articles pertaining to all levels of interest and concern to women. It tries for seriousness through articles such as the one on Bangladeshi women in Malaysia; it profiles women achievers in all fields; it gives you health and beauty tips, household advice, man-woman relationships, features on travel, fashion, cookery, reviews, fiction, opinion.....the list is endless.

This variety allows it to appeal to almost all readers, though it must be reemphasised that whereas the tone is chatty, a sort of "me-to-you" in a cosy conversation, there is a distance between as Ros Ballaster and Co. puts it, "the social and economic reality (of the reader) and that projected by the text she consumes.." (pg.90).

This hiatus is complemented by a hiatus between the visual feel of the magazine and its contents--already dealt with in some detail above. Nothing is more incongruous in this respect than the editorial by editor Sathya Saran. An edit is normally meant to explain the contents of the magazine, (like in Cosmopolitan) or set the tenor for the magazine. Saran's does neither. It is almost an expiation. Personal and professional.

The subject matter is based on a personal experience or reaction and the widens to a more general topic with a homily often attached at the end. In June issue, Saran is embarrassed by her own lack of fellow feeling for other human beings--especially the most deprived in society. Or there is an overwhelming sense of loss--for past traditions (April issue), attitudes. The reflective, self analytical tone in Saran's pieces and the topics which concern her, are not reflected by anything else in the magazine: either in editorial content or visual look.

The magazine has an ostentation--in the quality of the paper used, in the type of photographs, in its headlines and stories. The civic sense Saran displays in her own pieces is missing in the magazine she edits.

### **The feminist agenda**

You'd say Savvy has a feminist agenda. At Femina, like at Cosmopolitan, there is a confusion or conversely, an attempt to marry the professional woman to the personal one. If there is one article on "Seven ways to wreck your career" (June issue), there are any number on how to improve your looks, and your love life.

Historically, Femina has soft-pedalled serious issues: Eve's Weekly was always more likely to deal with dowry deaths than Femina. This continues to be true today: female empowerment of any kind is not Femina's agenda. Issues facing and concerning women currently--female infanticide, the falling sex ratio, depiction of violence against women in the media, increased occurrence of reported rape, 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament, 60 per cent female illiteracy--none of these issues find space in Femina. As explained before, women's magazines don't deal with political or civic issues. Femina is no exception (but Women's Era is).

### **First person accounts/profiles**

This is definitely one of Femina's central attractions. And it is a left over from its earlier format. The confessional article, the real life story of women's triumphs over adversity establish an interactive relationship between the magazine and the reader. It bridges a gap much of the magazine sets out to widen.

Thus, whether it is Charmaine Shackleton's moving account of how she recovered from a debilitating accident (April issue, pg.147) or Ashwini Noronha's courageous life as a woman who is bald (June issue, pg. 158) or Leena Tyagi's fight with renal failure (April issue, pg.89), there is in every issue almost an attempt to provide profiles in courage. These articles give the magazine an emotional appeal and also perhaps act as examples for readers' to be inspired by.

Similarly, there are profiles of well known women and achievers (not necessarily famous)--one way or another. In one issue of the magazine you can find both types: from film actress Rekha (cover, April issue) to actress Brooke Shields (April); from Promila Bahri who runs an eco friendly boys' wear shop (April) to Kamal Raj Sing, who donated her eggs to help someone else (April). Women personalities fill Femina --the articles are written in a positive mode, sometimes the women are offered as role models and there is very little critical analysis.

But then there is very little that is critical of women in Femina at all.

### **Advertising**

The ads are fairly evenly distributed throughout the magazine though there is a slight bias in favour of the front of the magazine. Ads however, are placed with no editorial correlation: they're random except on the recipe pages (eg. Kissan tomato puree on the Recipe Contest page-- June issue) and the occasional other piece (eg. ad for Toshali Resorts on page facing story on holiday travel to Bahamas). The greatest number of ads are for cosmetics, followed by food.

The ads in Femina, as stated earlier, meld with the editorial in manner that often make one indistinguishable from the other so that you don't know if you are reading a story or an ad: eg. Pillow Talk ad in June issue looks like the first page of a story; so does the Mexx ad (same issue).

But the most striking example of this appears in the April issue: look at the ad for Pond's Institute (pg.60) and the first page of the profile of Brooke Shields (pg.151): they're not merely indistinguishable, they're almost identical. This clearly establishes what Femina seems to have become: one integrated, holistic commodity for consumption. (Also to be noted is the fact that often pages such as the two mentioned above, don't have page numbers even though they may be editorial pages: ad pages don't carry page numbers).

Footnotes:

1. Turning It On. A reader in *Women & Media*; edited by Helen Baehr and Ann Gray; 1996; published by Arnold, Hodder Headline Group; London & New York. Article: 'A critical analysis of women's magazines'--Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron. (pg 87-96) from their 'Women's worlds: ideology, femininity and the woman's magazine' (Macmillan 1991)
2. The Cover: Window to the future self. By Ellen McCracken from her 'Decoding women's magazines from Mademoiselle to Ms' (pg. 97-100); Macmillan; 1993

"the world of the magazine (cosmopolitan) is one in which men and women are eternally in opposition, always in struggle, but always in pursuit of each other." (pg 87)

Cosy, intimate tone in edit writing "we women" -- a shared experience between all women. "The effect is to make of producers and reader one group." readers contrib sound same intimate note. --88

women's mag: defining women: content and theme.

central: ``centrality and desirability of men in all women's lives and...recognition of men as a problem for and threat to women" (pg.88)

A version of femininity offered by the magazines "woman as the repository of the nation's virtue. virtue is here defined as essentially domestic and private bound to the family ideals of affection, loyalty, and obligation, to domestic production or housekeeping. yet by dint of their very posting of woman's existence as beset by `problems' in need of resolution of attention through the medium of the magazine, women's' magazines are forced to confront the undoubted realities of `family': domestic violence, poverty, illness--which directly conflict with the imaginary ideal projected in such a construction of `woman'. (pg. 88-89)

-women's mags continually stress their difference from others-- cosmo girl different by her ``consumption pattern" or ``lifestyle"

--lifestyles portrayed in these magazines beyond the means of the reader. Publishers and editors see readers as "aspirational" -- a level of fantasy here.

``A gap emerges between the readers social and economic reality and that projected by the text she consumes"; the model of femininity is ``contradictory"; reader addressed foremost as a consumer of text and commodities in mag to become (pg.90)

Women's magazines firmly situate women ``in the domestic sphere or in close proximity to it." Veer between those which try to coalesce professional and private and independent women and those `` which encourage them to resist any pressure to leave the home." (pg.91) - harp on the high cost to women of pursuing paid work.

--absence of public and civic and politics. "Reality is the world of the family" (pg.91)

passive goodness, personal service to others, and devotion to the domestic sphere preclude productivity in public sphere.

the pleasure of consumption;

heterogeneity of the magazines: juxtaposing different genres, mixing print and photography, offering a range of `characterised' voices. --no need to read back to front, ``open-endedness - not time bound in articles either.

there is an excitement in consumption of the magazine and the commodities promoted in the texts. (pg94)

cover- ad for the mag; defines its cultural form.--how we distinguish one magazine from the other.--most covers try to create "an idealised reader image of the group advertisers seek to reach by using the photo of a woman usually a close up of her smiling face." a male presence acknowledge in pose, clothes facial expression  
etc. Cosmo emphasis in cover on Sex. Femina  
just less. Less cosmopolitan version of Cosmo --to continue its appeal to a much wider audience  
cover photo "whets appetite" for what is to follow. usually "an idealised model of physical beauty (by whose definition?)

works on our sense of inferiority--this makes us more susceptible to the articles inside (offering beauty advice) and the advertised commodities.

we must strive for ornamental perfection on ourselves and our homes--for ideal womanhood.  
cover to attract advertiser and increase circulation.

"cover how the contemporary consumer society (has) chosen to see women in order to sell ore goods and services" (as according to Berger's ` a record of how x has seen y"

Part 1

An overview of the women's magazine in 1997

An inversion of the initials for Eves Weekly. Grihashobha (1979)--is published by the same Delhi Press group --said to be highest circulated women's Hindi mag (Who's News--1994). Grihashobha sounds like a Hindi version of WE in its editorial mix and policy. But, according to Who's News, it is much more explicit about sex, masturbation, etc..

Who's News:

Audience:

6. Content analysis: not too indepth but some idea of each magazines focus.

--Page numbers

--Ads to edit ratio

Colour to b/w

Features: nature of stories and pages devoted to them/regular columns

--Layouts of stories:

Editorial: what it says

7. Look at old issues of Femina/Women's Era -- specifically issues before the arrival of Cosmo and Elle. Try to see how these magazines have changed, if they have. In terms of layout and stories.

8. Look at one week's newspapers and see how much there is about women/gender issues. Especially look at the supplements. Earlier papers like Pioneer, and Indian Express had special pages for women/gender, development (which often dealt with women). See if there is a change. There should be: women are no longer in the news. Except in fashion, fitness etc. Look at what the daily newspapers offer.

9. Conclusion: Women's magazines today. What is common to all and what is different. Should perhaps suggest the role of television in this.

-----6. CONTENT ANALYSIS:

AGENDAS:

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Agony Aunts:

1. New Woman: Hema Malini. Column called Confidante. "The agony is ours, the ecstasy yours. So over to Hema Malini."

First letter about a woman who after a disagreement left husband and then discovered she was pregnant. What should she do?

Hema says the young are "impulsive and brash". no preaching. Find a new man, choose "thoughtfully". No point looking for husband. could be remarried-more problems. Meanwhile, get your kid close to your father --needs father figure.

Second letter: college romance, guy refuses to get engaged, sleeping with other girls.

Hema; you're too young for commitments. He's young likes to show off. Concentrate on your studies, get a career, you may outgrow him. Don't pressurise him, you will get confidence from excelling in your studies.

Third letter: Girl tried to commit suicide, I am a failure at everything I do. Split with boyfriend because he couldn't handle relationship--involved in his work. He's planning to marry a friend of mine. how can I get him back?

Hema: you seem to be a self absorbed and melancholic person. Take charge of yourself, your life and get out of this mess. Become strong. This "creep" isn't worth your while, if decides to marry your friend.

Fourth: working mother of 2 girls worried about kids being molested to and fro from school.

Hema: talk to other parents, teachers, get to know school ayah, chowkidar, call when kids expected home and talk to your girls.

Fifth letter: old man laments not appreciating his wife while she was alive. Lonely, misses her.

Hema: "Life's most profound truth." Appreciate people when it is too late. Your selfish interest made you miss her. Do something constructive. Build a library, set up a trust in her memory for needy people.

Sixth: guy who doesn't want to risk having children because of the bother and the pressures it would put on marriage. Wife wants kids.

Hema : "I'd say your thinking is very fascist." Kids bring couples together....

Seventh: woman in my office over confident and aggressive. Unpleasant to me. I like pleasing others.

Hema: stop trying to please others. Do what you think is right. If this woman dislikes you, it is her problem not yours.

Sensible advice. Very much about self assertion. Independence, studies, careers. Thinking of yourself. Putting yourself first. Not the men or anyone else around.

Women's Era:  
Teenage:

4 sexual fears  
sucking thumb  
intercaste marriage  
beauty problem  
studies

Information:

-that masturbation is does not cause weakness and nervousness.

Advice: two levels: psychological that this fear can cause unnecessary guilt;

clinical: seek advice of physician to ascertain you do not suffer from anaemia low blood pressure.

Problem area: After reassuring that everyone has masturbated, it says, ``You will automatically cease to do it when you get married"--incorrect. Not linked merely to getting married.

Airy advice: lead full active life, etc.....: this is  
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Thumb sucking: right about traced to insecurity and anxiety in childhood.

Adv: two levels: practical: wrap thumb in bandage; clinical: go in for hypnosis or psychotherapy

Problem area:

Airy advice: Once you resolve your mental conflicts, guilts and fears, you will not feel the urge to suck your thumb==how is she going to do this?  
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Flirtatious brother in law to be:

Interpretation, diagnosis often rather than information. In this case, interpretation, you have misunderstood.

Advice: Don't complain to sister, complain to parents and let him know you know what he is doing.

Problem area: "If the young man turns out to be undesirable, ...it is better to call off the engagement now itself rather than repenting at leisure." Spurious advice: how are they to establish his undesirable character so fast?

Attempt to cover all aspects: first say, you could have misunderstood and end up with breaking off. How is the young girl to move from A to Z so quickly?

Intercaste:

Information: reminds girl that there is a question

of conversion here.

Problem area: to say that her marriage will irreparably blight her marriage if she marries without parental consent. Is this a modern temperament??

Beauty spots:

Information: these could be freckles that could disappear after adolescence.

Advice: Two levels: clinical: consult skin specialist

Practical: avoid sunlight

Lewd guy:

Information: guys like this thrive on reaction of victims

Advice: Practical: move away from window casually, put up lace curtain, tell parents

Psychological: don't project guilt on yourself

Fear of flying:

Info: fear is natural in young girls and men --imp. to mention that both have fears.

Unrequited love:

Advice: practical. raises the right issue of why marry someone who doesn't want you--it will end in bad marriage; also, not to marry anyone else till you are over this guy.

Boy smiles:

Information: Just because a boy smiles doesn't mean you have to have an affair with him.

Prediction of friend that you will not graduate: WE always against superstition and cant: the lines of the palms unimportant

Favourite advice: be social, have friends....

Father womanising:

1. Mother not naive but helpless
2. Tell woman's husband
3. Confront father
4. Mom agrees, then threaten separation
5. Talk to mother like a friend
6. Between the two of you you should be able to bring father around

Very odd.

Bigamy

Advice and tone strange:

You should have controlled yourself: spurious advice because she didn't.

Rid the idea of being a concubine: telling her she is a slut!  
How would woman feel receiving this kind of talking down attitude.

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2.W.E. like a wedding cake is tiered:

--bottom layer: instruction, political, social (edits, serious opinion pieces, Delhi public affairs, budget articles)

--1st. layer: fables to teach (short stories)

--2nd. layer: household education (hygiene, interior decoration, etc)

3rd layer: personal tips (beauty, fitness, jewellery, fashion)

4th. layer: advice: (marital/sexual advice, teen age advice, child challenges)

5th. layer: Interaction with readers: vignettes from readers lives

Icing:-Entertainment: Bollywood stories and gossip

## Media Advocacy Group

### Addressing Sexuality

Advice columns in print media. Dec.1997

A cross section of newspapers and magazines in English and Hindi were studied for this evaluation. Other publications such as the Indian Express and New Woman also carry advice columns. On television and radio, there have been a few programmes of a similar kind but Dear El (featuring Priya Tendulkar as the agony aunt) has been stopped on El TV.

The study conducted provided some of the following findings:

--The majority of those who wrote in for advice were women. In Women's Era and Cosmopolitan, they were all women. In Femina too, the majority were women. In the newspapers, the ratio was much more even.

--As far as the women are concerned, the overwhelming majority were in their teens or twenties. In contrast, a substantial number of the men (as a percentage of male respondents) were in their 30s and 40s. Very few men wrote in to the Hindi publications.

--Almost two thirds were single women and men. Again, there were more married men than women who wrote in.

--It is difficult to pinpoint the background of the people writing in. Most of them do not give any indication of their socio-economic status, religion, educational or professional status. Only, occasionally, when it was pertinent to the questions did some reveal that they belonged to an "orthodox" background, Muslim family (in intercaste love affairs). One or two indications of status were provided by references to having a driver, living in a house with a garden. But these were very few and between. Obviously, every effort is made by those who write in to conceal their identity.

--letters came from all parts of the country and at least in the cases where the city was identified, the maximum to a publication came from the city of its strength in circulation. For example, letters to the Asian Age were predominantly from Calcutta and the eastern cities where it enjoys higher circulation than in say Delhi. Still, over a third of writers did not identify their city -- or the publication did not.

-- Nature of questions:

It has to be noted that the categorisation of questions has been a little arbitrary and broad because the nature of problems within each category was so varied. Also, in some instances there were overlapping categories --sexual problems could also be child abuse. We have tried to categorise questions according to the exact question asked rather than the problem sometimes confronted by the advice-seeker (these are not always the one and the same thing.)

As the table indicates the major issues relate to emotional problems, marital/domestic affairs and discord and sexual matters. The affairs of the heart relate mainly to inter-family affairs or those with family friends and neighbours. There are some affairs that related to professional colleagues but these were few.

The rest of the questions on a random sampling could relate to anything from a stammer to beauty tips and career ambitions.

The nature of the questions sometimes relates to the person answering them. In the Hindustan Times, Dr.Achal Bhagat is a psychiatrist and nearly all the questions he answers, are of the clinical kind: depression, obsessive compulsive neurosis, schizophrenia, etc. Similarly, pearl Drego's column in The Pioneer is specifically related to Parenting and children's problems. It is to be noted that Pearl Padamsee and Bina Ramani, celebrities in their fields of theatre and handicrafts, answer mainly emotional and sexual questions.

Three of the advisers have not been identified (in both English and Hindi). Upon inquiry, the publications have said they do consult a doctor/specialist but chose not disclose the name.

The number of questions answered varied from a maximum of six in Asian Age and sometimes Femina, to one only in the Pioneer.

Most of the questions were fairly clear. There were some however, that were open to conjecture and interpretation (example enclosed).

Answers.

In the accompanying data, we have raised questions on a number of issues. All of these questions have arisen after reading and analysing the questions under study. In order to provide some background to concerns arising out of the answers, here are some comments on the analysis of the answers:

Certainly there is a question mark over some of the columnists and the criteria for selecting them. Answers provided by Bina Ramani and Pearl Padamsee, or even Women's Era and the qualified Psychotherapist, Dr.Sanjay Chugh (enclosed are examples of each of the below)

a) do not always answer the question. In the example from Padamsee supplied here, note that she does not answer the chief concern of the girl which is that she is scared her husband will discover she is not a virgin, and secondly that she might not conceive because she used to masturbate. Padamsee addresses neither of these fears.

b) answer the question a trifle flippantly:

Chugh is only half serious in replying to this question which he obviously feels is not so serious. However, the letter expresses an underlying fear of disobeying and going against her parents wishes. That is the fear, Chugh should have been addressing but does not.

c) answer the question incorrectly by giving incorrect information: in the example given, here, it is incorrect that masturbation will end automatically with marriage.

d) pass judgement rather than give advice. Bina Ramani passes judgement in a case of incest, saying the mother is unfit to be a mother. However, the writer has not asked for moral judgements but practical advice out of the situation.

e) contradict themselves. In one case, Padamsee is advocating love and sex at a young age, in the one above, she says, ignore them and study.

f) is insensitive. Again the Ramani example enclosed displays extreme insensitivity to the problem of sex with an older relative which she advises should be treated lightly.

What are the credentials of the people who hand out the advice? Since in three cases, we do not even know who is proffering the advice, the responsibility of either the publication or the unknown adviser is minimal.

Often the predilections, the biases, beliefs of the adviser surface too. Another problem is that these letters must appeal to a general reader as well as the specific writer. So the advice, is general, and can inherently the adviser has a problem of marrying the two.

Being a doctor doesn't necessarily mean that one is qualified to answer questions, especially since the questions cover such a wide variety of subjects: enclosed is an example from Dr. Sanjay Chugh. The question pertains to mistreatment of a woman in her marriage by her husband and her in-laws. As is evident from the reply, the adviser contradicts himself continually and he makes no concrete suggestions. One isn't sure of the nature of the advice being proffered. (Example enclosed.)

This doesn't mean that all the advice is wrong or bad which are qualitative judgements very difficult to define. Enclosed are examples of what maybe thought to be pertinent advice which answers the question directly or helps dispel the fears of the writer. The examples are from different advisers which means that there can be no blanket judgement of anybody. However, it would seem preferable that in clinical matters, at least, there should be some minimum qualifications.

Another point that arises out of the letters and answers, is the number of questions answered each week. Six are obviously too many if the adviser is going to treat the subject matter with any degree of seriousness. This is the strength of Drego and Bhagat who deal with only one and two questions, respectively.

Subjects chosen: the data reveals a propensity to discuss matters which are sexual and even titillating. The question that arises is that on what basis are the letters chosen? For example letters on incest, masturbation, extra-marital affairs, are quite common and the questions asked are often very similar. Yet week after week, they appear in the columns. Are these chosen for titillation, are they giving people reading them voyeuristic pleasures?

Some of them are even semi-pornographic in description. When the rest of the publications, be it newspapers or magazines in which these columns appear, steadfastly eschew four letter

words or sexually explicit language, why is it permitted in these columns? This is especially with regard to the Hindi columns (discussed separately).

Biases also can appear. For example, Women's Era is firmly of the opinion that a woman's place is at home, second to her husband and subservient to the needs of her family, parents etc. Thus many of its responses are coloured by its philosophy. Other advisers have similar problems and this raises the issue of it being impossible to receive completely objective advice.

There is also a lack of information in the answers given. This is often because there is little information asked for in the letters. Interestingly, advisers do not provide names/addresses of organisations, NGOs or individuals who might be able to provide more information/insight for the problems raised in the letters. Eg., alcoholic problems could be referred to Alcoholics Anonymous, or domestic violence to women's organisations.

The fact that so many people write in asking for advice on various subjects suggests another facet of Indian society: a degree of repression within families and in an environment that is still feudal and conservative. Much of the advice proffered could be elicited simply from friends or relatives. Much of it could be given by any average, mature person. Or even a friend. The fact that letter writers are turning to columns indicates the lack of education on subjects such as sex amongst people and the lack of openness in society.