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Popular Indian Television Serials and Identity Construction

Introduction

“Identity is a part of a diaspora, a sense of belonging to cultural practices and an ethnic background which seems to transcend place and time. Identity is something which we feel we have, it is to do with how we see ourselves. Representations are very much about ascribing identities to others.” (Burton Graeme 2005: 65). “Identity offers a way of thinking about the links between the personal and the social, of the meeting place of the psychological and the social, of the psyche and the society.” (Woodward Kath 2002: VII). Shaping of identity or construction of identity is influenced by various factors like economic, social, cultural and political. In this respect media also plays a domineering role. The pervasiveness of the media in the 21stC and its role in shaping and constructing identity has assumed greater importance in the contemporary world and a ‘burgeoning scholarly literature’ has developed providing a ‘skeptical view of extreme conceptualisation of the role of mass media. (Gorman Lyn and Mclean David 2002: 1). Identity are constructed through representations. In this respect the “Indian Media is the in-between agent that has the dual potential of ruthlessly perpetuating homogenization of regional

cultures as well as securing the longevity of heterogeneity of cultures from the urban to the tribal sectors.’’ (Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012: 2)

Amartya Sen’s book on ‘‘The Idea of Justice’’ exhibits the role that a healthy media can play in informing, protecting people and forming values and thus contributes in enhancing the quality of life. (Sen Amartya 2009: 335-336 cited in Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012:2) Abdul Kalam portrays the formidable role played by the media in moulding public opinion. The media furnishes ‘views and analysis’ which will suit the individual and societal needs. (Kalam Abdul and Rajan Y S 2002: 292 cited in Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012: 2)

Television - a formidable media

Television is one such media. Scientists consider the evolution and development of Television, as the ‘‘third revolution’’ after the French and Industrial Revolution. It has the potential to ‘‘raid the social life with the speed of volcano.’’ The dual effect of pictures and sound provides a touch of reality. . It is an astonishing medium of appealing the people, that influences the entire life of man and turns the world into a global village. (Chauhan Kanwar 2001: 1)

Television was the output of the 19th century. ‘‘The basic researches which helped the innovation of Television were the researches conducted by James clerk Maxwell and Heinrich Hertz in electromagnetic theory and the experiments of Paul Nipkow in the mechanical scanning disc methods of sending pictures by wire. The initial role of the Television which come to India in 1959 was that of educating but later it served entertainment purposes. (Chauhan Kanwar 2001: 1) ‘‘Television is one of the major long term factors that would shape the moral and mental attitude and values of our society.’’ (Gorman Lyn and Mclean David 2002:136) Ghulam Nabi Azad asserts the significance of Television by saying ‘‘If there is electricity, people will watch

Television late into the night and fall asleep, they won't get a chance to produce children.''
Mahesh Bhatt focuses on the all pervasive, penetrating power of the Television and says
"Television is almost impossible to avoid. It bombards and overwhelms." (Blakely Rhys 2009 :
96)

Television is a highly accepted means of mass media that appeals to thousands catering to
the entertainment needs of all segments of society- housewives, youths, corporate sector,
business man and children. It has a powerful impact on one's ideas, images and values. In this
respect "Indian television soaps and serials have constructed a virtual myth of the contemporary
middle class, upper-middle class and business-class Indian families" (Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012
:105)

Television and portrayal of women in serials

It is obvious that such a powerful medium can either foster gender based discrimination or
encourage women's empowerment through portrayal of women's issues and characters. It is a
bizarre that various stereotypes are used to portray women in Television which puts a note of
interrogation on the issues of women's emancipation. Usually it is found that "soaps are full of
contradictions or dualities." These serials or soaps are near to real life but actually not. Real life
experiences are portrayed by using "naturalistic sets, probable situations and the authentic
appearance of characters." They are melodramatic and have enough potential to satisfy
commercial need and pull audience. (Burton Graeme 2005: 250). "There is a dual projection of
women in these serials. The first group represents women who are 'subdued', 'docile',
'obedient', their main function is 'home making', unhesitatingly observes all rituals like Karva
Chauth and embodies the family's heritage. The image of 'ideal Hindu nari' (Deshpande Anirudh
2009:120 cited in Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012: 110) and 'pativrata symbolising feminine perfection'

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is depicted. The serials are centred on domestic sphere and family relationship and woman's status and position and her success depends on how well she can conduct her household duties towards her husband, in-laws and children. Some sort of a meekness or submission is portrayed and the concept of patriarchal society is highlighted. She is a 'domesticated subaltern' in a male constructed stereotype. The second group represents women who are power hungry, full of vices, heartless and ruthless, (Anand Meenu 2007:3,4) "selfish vamp-like, outgoing and a threat to family stability often dressed in western clothes a female viagra, the supreme threat to male sexual superiority" (Deshpande Anirudh 2009: 200 cited in Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012: 110) engaged in family feuds, extramarital affairs with no care for the outside world. They are manipulators. (Sharma K Sanjeev 2005:4) "Interestingly though women form the central discourse and enact major roles within the familial space, the remote control for their traditional life styles and their complex experiences seems to be entirely in the hands of the male members." (Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012 :110). A sort of marginalisation of women is visible in these serials and soaps.

There is also a third group of women who possess super qualities and endowed with variegated qualities like passion, loyalty, devotion. She is the panacea for all ills. (Anand Meenu 2007: 3)

Another trend that is visible is projection of women with extreme loudness in their costumes and jewellery. "Construction of images of women in T.V. prioritizes elegance, glamour, sexual bodies and charm." ((Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012 :7) Their beauty is enhanced by strong make-ups, heavy jewelry and jardousi sarees. Women are found to marry in rich households and have nothing else to do apart from dressing and gossiping. ((Anand Meenu 2007:3). This is total contradiction of the actual image of women today. "Sartorial images of adult women in chiffons,

georgettes, crepes, gold and diamond jewelry.... elaborately mehendi, patterned arms, legs, feet, dazzling bindis, some spiraling like Silver snakes on the forehead create virtual images that are not noticed in the everyday lives of the people.” (Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012: 105). A report of the UNESCO in describing the image of women in the media says “the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard faced corporate and political climber.” (UNESCO report: 2009). Three types of relationships are cultivated in the serials, kinship, of romance and of social bond. The concept of family is celebrated in which birthdays, funerals, marriage occupy significant place. Women are found to play predominant role in all these. (Burton Graeme 2005: 263, 265)

The Television serials exhibit that there has been a lofty transformation in the way women are projected in the serials. In the 1980s serials like ‘Rajni’ and ‘Uddan’ spoke of strong, determined, women who remained undaunted in untoward situations, and became source of invigoration for women of all segments. Television can be a very effective means for promoting women’s cause and development. But wrong projection of women, in serials where their subordinate position is reflected in their various roles, is not only hurting their dignity but these types of stereotypes and identity construction is leading to identity crisis. “In most of the serials, educated women professional women and independent women were marginalised and the religious non-professional women were fore grounded as representatives of Indian culture.” (Dasgupta Sanjukta et al 2012:113)

Television serials and construction of identity

In today’s world we are debating on women’s position in the society, protesting against rapes, infanticides, dowry system, fighting for women’s right. But we seem to ignore the influence of the idiot’s box on more than sixty crore Indians of all age group.

With an increase in audience, the number of TV serials has drastically increased in the past few years. Most of the women are so much bitten by the hug of soap operas that it has become their only topic of discussions during chaitime, addas, gupshups and kitty parties. TV serials like “ **kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi (KSBKBT)**” and “ **kumkum**” ran almost for a decade and had captivated the entire women popularity of India. So was the popularity that “**once a group of ladies protested on the streets of Mumbai because a character named Mihir in KSBKBT had been killed. The producers were forced to miraculously bring him back so as to lose their TRP**”. (Gokulsing, k 2004: 104)

Therefore, the characters seem to become a part of the daily lives of millions of families all over the country. Such is the extreme obsession with the TV serials that it seems to influence the mentality of all the strata of the society. The in-laws want a ‘**bahu**’ like ‘**Parvati**’ (**a character portrayed in kahani ghar ghar ki**) or “ **kumkum**” who would be docile and sacrifice everything for family’s happiness. They begin to think that the ideal place for a woman is at her husband’s feet; that her only duty is to take care of her in-laws and raise their children. It is indecent for a woman to venture into the professional world and they should let men take care of all the financial matters.

Now here are some of the common features of women character mostly portrayed in 90% of the Indian TV serials.

- The woman in sari with thick vermilion of her forehead, having ghung – ghat is an ideal bahu with likeable appearance.
- The female protagonist always has an innocent face, is polite and most of the time to submissive to elders.

- If a woman is in western clothes, in many cases she is depicted as someone with law moral character. She is the devil who has affairs with married men and creates complications.
- A woman is always shown to be financially dependent on her man. Men are the dominating and rule making members of the family. A woman is supposed to consult her husband before taking any major decision.

It is true that these serials will not portray women so as to elevate their position in the modern world. Why can't the producers show a courageous woman IPS officer or a successful business woman? Because in doing so they may lose a large population of viewers who find it extremely difficult to accept the professionalism in women's attitude. If one side of the coin depicts this picture then the other side of the coin gives an opposite picture. In the span of just 10-15 years since cable connection became available, cable or satellite penetration has reached 60% in Indian states such as Tamil Nadu mainly to watch the serials, even if the average income of the household is below Rs 100 per person per day. The growth of television in rural areas has had been a large effect on a wide range of day to day lifestyle behaviours. Seeing the city lifestyles portrayed in the serials, villagers have started educating the girl child and stopped social evils like female infanticide and so on. Soaps have an impact on Indian society, with regard to national integration, identity, globalization, women and ethics.

Some feminist theorists have argued that soap operas spring from a feminine aesthetic, in contrast to most prime time television. Women are stereotyped in soap operas but the image of the modern women has changed gradually now – a –days. From being a meek, docile, subservient housewife, she has grown and evolved into a strong individual. She not only excels

in her profession but is also an able homemaker. This change is partially if not fully perceptible in the soap operas shown on Indian television.

On the other hand it is also perceptible nowadays that serials in general have female audience but now-a- days atleast 30% of the audiences are male because of the changes taking place in the Indian serials. Now are also paying attention that not to focus mainly on producing ‘saas – bahu’ melodrama but also produce something different so that the male viewers also get attracted to the serials. For example, a serial aired on sony television “ **Bade Achhe Lagte Hain**” has gained immense popularity not only among female viewers but also among the male viewers.

The use and construction of this reality necessarily feeds into and grows out of the ideologies and practices that form everyday life. Teleserials are part of women’s lives. To quote the woman who has ruled Indian television viewing in the last few years, “**Men don’t want to develop a long term relationship with any show. For them TV viewing is a sporadic activity**”. (Ekta Kapoor 2003: 10). Telenarratives are simply replicating the norms of patriarchal gender organization such that these are even more firmly entrenched in the lives and realities of men and women who inhabit this society, socializing them into roles that will keep this gender ideology operative and flourishing.

Feminists might think in terms of exploring that telereality is a potent tool. Are all women who watch even those teleserials that seem to be constant reinforcement of patriarchal gender ideology in its most blatantly undisguised form, victims of false consciousness or are some of them using these realities to engage with their own immediate experiences?

Conclusion

Thus in conclusion, it can be said that, soaps undoubtedly have immense potential to present positive images of contemporary women. Soaps are an example of women's literature that supports the status quo regarding women's place in the social order women's concern in soaps are changing somewhat. Many women live a family centered world to become an integral part of the world.

Television is a cultural commodity. At the same time, it is a vision mirror reflecting society and in turn being modified by society. Soaps portraying interpersonal problems, crisis in the family, balance between career and home, modern yet traditional in belief and values have gained immense popularity among masses. It can be said that soap operas in some ways have given women their voices. Media are very effective, powerful and influential in disseminating new knowledge, useful for behavior change among women, thus influencing women's empowerment, building their identity. The Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) outlines two strategic objectives in regard to women and media that are aimed at promoting women's empowerment and development-----

- i) Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making through the media and new technologies of communication.
- ii) Promote a balanced portrayal of women in media. Women feel connected to the soap operas since they can relate their own personal and business life to the soap.

The viewers sustain a steady relationship with the characters that relate to themselves and these characters help the viewers find their own inner self. Femininity is also shown by the way "the viewer is positioned by the narrative". Also a lot of beauty and glamour is attached to the

different roles of women. This offers another “textual contribution of possible modes of femininity on which women can draw when constructing and reconstructing their feminine identities”. (International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications: 2012).

Indian soap opera emphasise the process of decision making showing the plethora of details and nuances in the articulation of problems that advance the plot lines. If one is reading from a dominant perspective, one could say that women are only interested in the trivial details of everyday life and soap operas therefore, reinforce problematic aspects of women’s lives. Another way of reading is that soaps value the fabric of women’s lives. Women in contemporary soap operas are given powerful positions in different contexts. This genre of television programming can be an effective tool for creating awareness about the changing dynamics of society.

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