Women in Indian Television Serials: Issues of Character, Representation and Acceptance

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Abstract

Television has been the most popular and effective media of mass consumption in India and it has played a key role in moulding and recreating opinions, reconstructing images and dominant cultural values of society. Television serial is the most accepted genre of television programme. Representation of gender and sensitivity in these serials have been questioned consistently as it has been observed television still perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes may be because it reflects dominant social values and reinforces them automatically that seems to be presenting them as 'natural'. Woman is represented to be quiet, gentle, vulnerable and submissive. Ideally they were the most obedient daughters, the sweetest sisters, the perfect mothers and idealistic wives. It is not a myth but a journey that despite all the debates, the serial have contributed massively to the growth of Indian Television and growing audience. This paper is an attempt to find out the impact and reality of its character representation and how television can overshadow the social and educational background of its viewers by giving birth to a mass culture caused by television serials.

Introduction

The television is one of the most prominent inventions of the 20th Century. McQual (1972) has identified four main categories/functions of television: first is to provide opportunity for diversion and escape – from routines and problems. Secondly enriching Personal relationship – the media provide company for the lonely and topics for conversation. Thirdly, influencing Personal identity – the media provide models and values that we can identify with or use as a point of comparison and lastly to opening a world of Surveillance – the media satisfy a need to know what is going on in the world. Television has been a very popular and effective media of mass consumption in India despite of its late and forced entry in 1959 and it has played a key role in moulding and recreating opinions, reconstructing images and dominant cultural values of society. In the last sixty years it has slowly become one of the most acceptable and comfortable way people view the larger world beyond their idea and apprehension, as well as being one of the best ways for the committed audience (which is strongly dominated by women) to escape from the real world and real struggle of everyday life. As Meenu Anand observes, "Of all the popular means of mass media, television has the greatest mass appeal and acceptance. With the advent of satellite television in 1991, the idiot box of 1980's turned into whole new magical world, comprising of innumerable and a wide variety of satellite channels. However, like all other developments lead to certain unexpected changes, television too transformed its viewing as a fragmented exercise. While earlier the entire family was sitting together to watch programmes like Hum Log, Buniyaad in the 1980s..."

Though introductory serials like Hum Log (1984), and mythological dramas: Ramayana (1987-88) and Mahabharata (1988-89) were televised to strengthen the nation building theme added with the promotion of moral values and tradition. Thus the beginners among Indian tele serials enjoyed having a more casual gender-neutral perception at with both men and women seen to share similar screen presence and interest in serials. Acceptance of those serials inspired more attempts with serials like Rajni, Shanti, Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi, Banegi Apne Baath followed by more contemporary K-dominated serials or more recent ventures like Ye Hai Mohabbatein , Diya Aur Baati Hum, Ye Rishta kya Kehlata Hai, Ye Risthey hay Payar Ke, Tarak Mehta ka Ooltah Chashmah, Sath Nibhana Sathiya, Veera, Baalika Vadhu etc. These serials are often dominated by female characters and even most of the time they are the central characters or protagonists representing and portraying their image of 'weaker sex' rather than raising voice for gender equality for women.

Previous Literature

Representation of gender equality and sensitivity in these serials have been an issue of debate and academic discourse from the very beginning as researchers observed television still perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes may be because it reflects dominant social values. But what makes it a major area of concern that in a process of reflecting them, TV also reinforces them automatically seems to be presenting them as 'natural'. In her article, "Feminist Media Ethnography in India: Exploring Power, Gender, and Culture in the Field" Radhika Parameswaran[i] represents a research based on self-

reflexive account of young middle-class women in urban India who read Western romance fiction. The author almost urges to pay attention to find out the politics of representation of audiences in media studies. She explains the power imbalances that can lead to social constructions of gender and sexual identities. Purnima Mankekar [ii](1999) presents a cutting-edge ethnography of television-viewing in India. Mankekar demonstrates how television in India has deeply shaped women's place in the family, community, and nation. She also highlights the crucial role it has played in the realignment of class, caste, conservation, religion, and politics with soft focus on the responses of upwardly-mobile, yet lower-to-middle class urban women to state-sponsored entertainment serials. Dr. Aaliya Ahmed [iii] stresses on the most important purpose of television is to inform, educate and entertain its viewers. She further argues to establish that Television, because of its predominance of visual movement has the capacity of bringing the world into the living room regularly with great authenticity and efficacy comparing to other mass media. As a result of this, television has a more reflective and convincing impact on its audience, particularly women. In this context, she argues because women are categorized and treated as "special audience groups", appropriate measures can be taken in to account to cater to their propensities and inclinations. In this context, problems and issues pertaining to women are shown regularly on television in different programmes rather than focussing on solution and moving generation.

Laura Mulvey's gaze theory determines priorities and patriarchal ideology and its priorities in filmic representations. Many commentators argue in their research works that viewing pleasures can be different for men and women. More convincingly Mulvey argues, "The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form illusionistic narrative film." The sociological discussions often centers upon the role types (housewife, beloved, vamp, etc) being shade less. Woman was quiet, gentle, vulnerable and submissive. Ideally they were the most obedient daughters, the sweetest sisters, the perfect mothers and idealistic wives. A study of Indian television by Krishnan and Dinghe (1990) observed and came to a conclusion that the general television image of women was: "An affirmation of a limited definition of womanhood as embodied by the physically and mentally house-bound woman, engrossed in the minutiae of home-making, deriving meaning for her existence and achievement from her husband and children. Together with the affirmation and entrenchment of passive, subordinate roles for women, Doordarshan programmes tended to deny viewers an insight into ongoing struggles of women to achieve personhood."

Characters and Portrayal

"The characters in serial are the key to why audiences watch the programs. The chemistry of a serial opera and its audience is one which involves a considerable commitment on the part of the viewers" (Hobson, 2002). It can be easily recognised aforesaid paradoxes as a noteworthy aspect to understand properly the reasons why audiences find both pleasure but also create conflict to tele serial content. It's been found that female representation has often been restricted to some preconceived ideas. Names,

places and dimensions kept changing not the 'ideas' of different woman rather it has been repeatedly 'ideal' women. One could perhaps argue that physical attractiveness may play more part in their selection than for their male counterparts. The circle of life for women in most of these serials considers 'women' as a social responsibility, a glorified life to live and protect, an economic liability, not an asset anywhere which is considered to be the common social approach in general. There were serials like Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin, Udaan, Kuch Rang Payar ke Aise Bhi or Balika Badhu starting with fresh air breaking these taboos and it took a u-turn from the mainstream storyline of the serials but the central characters failed to make their individual mark and sacrifice their life for all, again to cope with the race for TRP! For instance, Tulsi was the protagonist of "Kiu Ki Sans Bhi Kavi Bahu Thi", was a seemingly confident, intelligent woman, who believed to possess the ability to be the CEO of a corporate house for out-thinking other schemers. At the same time she is never seen to do normal activities like reading a book or surfing mobile, she never goes out with friends for get-together or a movie, she never engage in a discussion with any of her friends about what is going on outside the home.

Any experiment with this unspoken settlement can lead the character to a cornered negative zone. Prime time Hindi tele serial 'Jaana Na Dil se Door' (star plus) ended its major crisis and serial with a climax where the aged daughter of the house Kalindi found to be guilty for all the mischievous incidents ever happened in the serial and her justification was thus very interesting as she claims half of her share in the family wealth not as a gift but as a right based on her own legacy. Wherever women are shown as successful outside in their workplace, in the domestic sphere they are frequently and confidently portrayed as unhappy in their personal lives often being lonely, rejected and separated as if professional success and happiness are always contradictory for women only. Thus it becomes obvious to notice such a clichéd distribution of occupational roles lags well behind present day realities in the workplace where women going for every possible opportunities (however challenging or limited these may still be). It is being regularly reflected so many times on Indian TV serials where a strong representation of women characters are seen always plotting to trap into relationship of a boyfriend and husband. Even while satisfying and reflecting society, stereotypical masculinity is portrayed as natural, normal and universal within which any suggestion or indication of feminine qualities or homosexuality is denied, and outside which women are subordinated. This notion of representing 'Human' characters with strong 'natural' sex differences indirectly help to preserve and sustain the inequalities on which the national economic system continues to be based. Typically gays are represented as the symbols of what masculinity should not involve. Stories that involve homosexual characters tend to reinforce conventional values. Even when homosexual men/women are portrayed the central focus tends to be on the reaction of others to this as a 'problem' of the society.

Representation

In the field of Media and Cultural Studies, the concepts of individual identity and its' representation are the two major key concepts which allow social science researches to treat this as social subjects, to explore the relationship within the social world along integral parts such as nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender and sexuality

(Woodward 1997:). As the notable veteran intellectual actress and activist Shabana Azmi observes "What worries me is that so many women are coming into television as directors and writers and there is still no change (in the stereotyping of women in popular television serials)" Interestingly the Indian Constitution appears to be one of the most progressive in the world, and guarantees equal rights for men and women. But there is another part of evidence from the official statistics and results that are presented in government reports (940 women per 1000 men according to census2011). The Joshi committee (1985) recommended a detailed guideline for DD regarding the positive portrayal of women on television: "The Government must at the earliest formulate clear-cut guidelines regarding positive portrayal of women on television. This portrayal must take note of women in all facets of their lives: as workers, and significant contributors to family survival and the national economy. Women must not be portrayed in stereotyped images that emphasize passive, submissive qualities and encourage them to play a subordinate secondary role in the family and the society. Both men and women should be portrayed in ways that encourage mutual respect and a spirit of give and take between the sexes. In order to promote a positive ideology that is sensitive to women's needs and permeates the total programming and also to have a coordinated, consistent policy it would be necessary for all Doordarshan policy-makers, programming, and production staff to have regular orientation courses that sensitize them to women's issues"

The picture of woman presented by the Indian Teleserials is unchanged in more than one sense. Women still play the same role as wife, mother, beloved or vamp, but the arrangement has changed a lot. And there is no doubt that TV presents the most powerful, attention-grabbing images of gender in India. Though women have played an innumerable of roles but often their presence has been celebrated in a way that their true spirit kept missing. Content dominated by 'male gaze', influenced by these stereotypes of the society; unconsciously the representation can reproduce a conventional 'masculine' perception, resulting in re-establishing dominant gender stereotypes among a large number of obsessed television viewers. Television serials has been accused many a times for serving to promote a polarization as represented in Hindi and regional language based entertainment channels with femininity are commonly associated with basic expected qualities such as emotion, sensitivity, carefulness, co-operation, a compromising sense, and agreement whereas masculinity often tends to be commonly associated with such characters as strong, dependable, rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism, success and essential pinch of ruthlessness. Deepti Malhotra, senior journalist of India Times in her observation on how real are the women on TV finds the tele serials female characters as "Sweet enough to give you diabetes or so conniving that even a hardened criminal would look saintly before her - such are the women that we go back home to. No not the ones in our real life, but those seen on the small screen. The prime time slots on the Indian idiot box are ruled by women protagonists. Strangely enough, even though the characters are mostly homebound, the serials are still considered a celebration of women power!"

Audience and Acceptance

It is not a myth but a journey that serial have contributed massively to the growth of Indian Television and growing audience. Being a visual medium, the impact of television can overshadow the social and educational background of its viewers; more so, in a culturally and economically varied country like India TV still dominates the Media landscape as the most preferred choice of entertainment to the common mass irrespective of religion and culture. Serials in general supposed to have a predominantly female audience though the hidden audience for serials does include men (and probably more than are prepared to admit it), but some communication theorists argue that the gender of the viewer is consciously and carefully inscribed in the programme so that serials can address and appeal women in particular. The exposure becomes really effective as for many women in the villages, this has initially been the first opportunity they've probably seen females with lives outside of the kitchen and home. Perhaps, thus, sex roles as projected in these serials often involve regular cultural expectations, such as that 'ideal' man will look for achievement and dominance, and that 'ideal' woman will be submissive and compassionate. The relationship of individuals in each one of successful television serial is aimed to match these expectations often involves in the intentionally created climax and tensions.

Many narratives on TV are still perfectly designed to be interpreted from a general masculine perspective. Viewers (irrespective of men/women) are frequently invited to unanimously identify with male characters and to objectify females. Even the girls learn from most TV that it is a man's world, and learn to displace their own perspective. On the contrary, contemporary television web series has attempted to explore taboo subjects like sexuality, infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relations etc. through the digital next generation platform, web series like 'Four More Shots', 'Made in Heaven' have shown the courage to go beyond myths and compulsive idealism of women characters' representation. In this process it has given a new dimension, a new set of class politics of representation and a politics of femininity, which does not care to recognise the efforts and travels of the ordinary woman who tries to perform a delicate and an accomplished balancing act between her domesticity and her own aspirations. Contemporary serials like 'Dahleez' (star plus) where the protagonist is a solicitor fights for her own belief to the end even going against her husband and in laws and finally wins the battle outside and inside the home with a happy ending or 'Kuch Rang aise Bhi' (sony) showing the protagonist Sona to be a proud single mother full of dignity and self-respect and finally ending just in time with a happy twist where her husband, the male protagonist, Dev decides to be the active caring parent to their children to give professional space and freedom to his wife. Latest version of *Mahabharata (2014)* tried to be unconventional in representing female characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Shikhandi and others with importance and individuality imposed on. Whereas *Everest (2014)* tells the story of Anjali Singh Rawat's determined journey to conquer her own Everest that is to win her father's acceptance as he rejected her because of her womanhood. Though these exceptions (often very short lasting in terms of episodes and various programme rating hierarchy) are not enough to build a consistent notion against the mainstream but it's definitely indicative indeed that to young women in India, TV serials still represent a medium that can

influence positive changes to the traditional mindset slowly. Meenu Anand rightly describes "Media can act as both a perpetrator and as a protagonist – it can either be an accomplice to gender based discrimination by portraying stereotypical sensational images of women or it can provide balanced coverage that empowers women while exposing acts of gender bias." The programme researchers and producers of the mainstream long living serials (in the form of serials or mega serials in the terminology of the Indian television world) intends the content targeting, for the most part, women or housewives to be more specific as their consistent committed consumers and audience.

Programme makers are continuously monitoring the feedback of the audience to design their programmes to attract women viewers. But there are few questions getting carried forward, how are the women reacting or reacting at all finding themselves being projected in these programmes or how do they adopt or accept their portrayal in TV serials as typical non-intellectual and stereotyped show-icons. In a survey done as part of this study, 60% of those who watched at least two hours of these TV serials categorically opposed such negative characterization of women. Audience who are less exposed to the outer world watches more TV serials which was approved by the results coming from the analysis as housewives and aged audiences are more addicted to serials, as the leading occupation of the sample audience is housewife (35.69%) and the lower sample is engaged in business and others like self-employment etc. As Buerkle-Rothfuss and Maryes argue "There appears to be an important relationship between what a person watches on soap operas and what he or she believes to be true about those aspects of the, real world which tends to be portrayed with exaggerated frequency on soap operas". The audience are conscious about the impact of these serials as more than half of the respondents (52%) think serials are having both positive and negative impact on the society and women audience are greater in numbers, do believe so too.

Conclusion

Being a visual medium, the impact of television can overshadow the social and educational background of its viewers; more so, in a varied country like India TV still dominates the Media landscape as the most preferred choice of entertainment to the common mass. New age mobile apps of these entertainment channels are well accepted by the new generations with different viewing pattern and habits with the same addictive adhesive. It really has to be admitted these serials have immense influence on the continuous process of shifting values on Indian society especially when it comes to the question of gender representation. Television serials if expected to be reflecting society then gender discrimination at home, relationships or workplace and inferior status of women in general have been consistent drawbacks even the Smartphone and equal and balanced gender representation haven't been the same to be achieved as a needed occurrence. On a positive note, the growing presence of more women in the senior positions in the mainstream media houses has been a welcome change but not been truly accompanied by a much needed positive qualitative difference in the approaches women are represented especially in news, advertisements and tele serials. Researchers observed over the years that media and society both are inter-related and affect each other in many hidden ways. Sometimes media communication is guided and expected by society and on

some occasion media content have the dominance with its content and influence over society and sometimes the responsibilities are equally distributed between media house and audience as audience is equally conscious about their choices.

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