

# Women and Soap-Operas: Popularity, Portrayal and Perception

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**Abstract-** In the multi-media world of today, television has emerged as an important instrument of transmission of knowledge and information. Working as a complimentary agent to other sources, television has enhanced the process of change by providing timely information about education, hygiene, health, customs and so on. The purpose of television is to inform, educate and entertain its viewers. Television, because of its predominance of visual movement has the capacity of bringing the world into the living room with great authenticity and efficacy. As a result of this, television has a more profound and persuasive impact on its viewers, particularly women. Women are treated as "special audience groups", so that appropriate measures can be taken to cater to their propensities and inclinations. In this context, problems and issues pertaining to women are shown regularly on television in different programmes. Soap operas are one of the most popular genres on television and as a cultural produce, this format is extremely popular among the masses. Soap-operas, inevitably, have attracted a large and loyal fan base. Soaps enjoy a momentous and immense popularity among the contemporary society and they have found a place for themselves and also allow a multiplicity of interpretations to suit the diverse tastes of the dominant Indian middle class.

**Index Terms-** Television, women, soap-operas, popularity, audience.

## I. SOAP OPERAS

The term "soap opera" was coined by the American press in the 1930s to denote the extraordinarily popular genre of serialized domestic radio dramas, which, by 1940, represented some 90% of all commercially-sponsored daytime broadcast hours. The "soap" in soap opera alluded to their sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products; while "opera" suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms. The defining quality of the soap opera form is its seriality. Soap operas are of two basic narrative types: "open" soap operas, in which there is no end point toward which the action of the narrative moves; and "closed" soap operas, in which, no matter how attenuated the process, the narrative does eventually close. (Pingree and Cantor, 1983). Examples of the open soap include *The Guiding Light*, etc.), the wave of primetime U.S. soaps in the 1980s (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*), such British serials as *Coronation Street*, *East Enders*, and *Brook side*, most Australian serials (*Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, *A Country Practice*), and Indian soaps as *Balika Vadhu*, *Uttaran* *Pavitra Rishta* enjoy

immense popularity. The closed soap opera is more common in Latin America, where it dominates primetime programming from Mexico to Chile. In India, *Geet*, *Dil Mil Gaye* fall in this category. These 'telenovelas' are broadcast nightly and may stretch over three or four years and hundreds of episodes. They are, however, designed eventually to end, and it is the anticipation of closure in both the design and reception of the closed soap opera that makes it fundamentally different from the open form. The term itself signals an aesthetic and cultural incongruity: the events of everyday life elevated to the subject matter of an operatic form.

## II. AUDIENCE AND SOAP OPERAS

Soaps in general have a predominantly female audience, although prime-time soaps such as *Dallas* (U.S), *Bade Acche lagte hain* (BALH) are aimed at a wider audience, and in fact at least 30% of the audiences for this soap are male. According to Ang, in *Dallas* the main interest for men was in business relations and problem and the power and wealth shown, whereas women were more often interested in the family issues and love affairs. In the case of BALH, it is clear that the programmes meant something different for female viewers compared with male viewers.

The audience for soaps does include men sometimes but some theorists argue that the gender of the viewer is 'inscribed' in the programmes so the soaps address women in particular. Soaps appeal to those who value the personal and domestic world. Dorothy Hobson argues that women typically use soaps as a way of talking indirectly about their own attitudes and behavior. There is no doubt that viewing and talking with family and friends about soap operas is experienced by many women as a pleasurable experience, and the dismissal of the worth of the genre by many commentators, including some feminists critical of gender stereotyping, is open to the charge of cultural elitism. 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. From being a meek, docile, subservient housewife, she has grown and evolved into a strong individual. She not 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.

Soaps create a world dominated by interpersonal relationship, where characters discuss marital, romantic and family problems. There is little physical violence or crime. The soap opera world seems emotionally hazardous-mainly because of the continual sorting and re-sorting of relationships.

Soaps undoubtedly have immense potential to present positive images of contemporary women, a potential similar to that of other forms of media designed for women's service-newspapers, magazines, radio forums and so on. Soaps focusing on relationships and family life could easily present more story lines and characters, discussing social issues and problems central to their changing roles. Soaps opera writers have contended that part of their mission is to teach the "lesson of life" to their viewers (Nixon, 1972, LeMay, 1982). 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 leave a family – centered world to become an integral part of the work world.

### III. PORTRAYAL IN SOAP OPERAS

Though not as strongly as in earlier years, the portrayal of both men and women on television is largely traditional and stereotypical. This serves to promote a polarization of gender roles. With femininity are associated traits such as emotionality, prudence, co-operation, a communal sense, and compliance. Masculinity tends to be associated with such traits as rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism and ruthlessness. Meehan has shown how on TV, 'good' women are presented as submissive, sensitive and domesticated; 'bad' women are rebellious, independent and selfish. The 'dream-girl' stereotype is gentle, demure, sensitive, submissive, non-competitive, sweet-natured and dependent. The male hero tends to be physically strong, aggressive, and assertive, takes the initiative, is independent, competitive and ambitious. TV and film heroes represent goodness, power, control, confidence, competence and success. They are geared, in other words, to succeed in a competitive economic system. There is no shortage of aggressive male role-models in Westerns war films and in contemporary Indian soap-operas. Soaps have no beginning or end, no structural closure. (Pingree and Cantor, 1983). They do not build up towards an ending or closure of meaning. Viewers can join a soap opera at any point. There are built-in devices to recap on aspects of the plot. There is no single narrative line. In this sense, the plots of soaps are not linear. Narrative lines are interwoven over time. The structure of soaps is complex and involves multiple perspectives and no consensus. Ambivalence and contradiction is characteristic of the genre. This leaves soaps particularly open to individual interpretations.

Television offers a wide range of potential role-models, both positive and negative. Many people find these models of some use to them. It is not inevitable that viewers accept television gender images without question, but many popular commentators tend to assume that they are more discriminating than ordinary mortals. Not all women, children - or even men - are passive victims of patriarchal stereotyping. Though there is little doubt that television presents largely traditional gender images, there is mixed evidence about the impact of such images on gender attitudes and behavior. It is difficult to isolate the role of television, since people are influenced by their whole environment, although there is fairly widespread agreement that over time television seems likely to influence people's ideas about gender roles.

Most significantly though, soap opera's concern with the everyday lives of everyday people and their problems, big and small, appears to be one of the main reasons why this genre is so popular. 'Hum Log', the first soap on Indian television also represented the values, thinking and beliefs of the middle-class Indians and was tremendously popular among all sections of society. (Singhal and Rogers, 2001). The soaps that followed dealt with different issues prevalent at that time. Soaps that gained immense popularity were 'Humrahi', 'Bunyaad', 'Yeh jo hai Zindagi', 'Tamas', 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana'. Telecast at the national level, they were watched by a large section of society across the country. The surveys conducted by various agencies revealed that the viewers rotated their work and leisure patterns around the timing of these soaps so as to avoid missing any of the episodes. These soaps were telecast from Doordarshan which is available throughout the country. However, soaps gained momentum in Indian history of broadcasting when cable television came to India and soaps became a regular fare in television programming. They soon captured the attention of the viewers and these soaps took the top position in the rating scales. For a majority of viewers, soaps are a major attraction for them to watch television for 2-3 hours every day and without any breaks. Each satellite channel approximately telecasts 10-12 soaps everyday of half hour duration and run into 100s of episodes for 3-4 years continuously.

### IV. TELEVISION AND SOAP OPERAS IN INDIA

Television, in recent times, has emerged as the most powerful and all pervading force throughout the world. It can disseminate information with lightning speed and impact, as well as infuse viewers with images and values in subtle and imperceptible manner. Because of its very inherent nature, television not only reflects the values of our society but also influence them. Indications from research suggests that TV has had a significant impact on the personal reality structure of its viewers. (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth, 1989). Television programmes lead to awareness, provide information which creates curiosity in the minds of its viewers. Communication is not only an essential element to the persistence of social order but to look at it more positively, communication can be an effective means to developmental change. There is no denying the fact that television is a major force to be dealt with in our society. Television in India today has acquired newer dimensions, greater popularity and a much wider reach. The satellite invasion of India in 1993 has contributed the most to the multi-lateral, multi-lingual, and multi-channel television system, operating on an elaborate schedule. The moving images of television demand attention and eventually influence the thoughts and behavior of the viewers. Television has entered our life and become an inseparable part of our daily lives.

The phenomenal expansion of Indian television in recent years has influenced people in two ways. First, those living in remote corners have been pulled and merged into the national mainstream. Secondly television has contributed to an unprecedented explosion of information in our times. (Gopal Saxena, 1996) An awareness of the socio-economic developmental plans can be ascribed to the wide-reach of

television. The breaking down of social-barriers can reasonably be attributed to the presence of television in our lives

Waves of dynamic changes have flashed across the canvas of Indian television during the last decade. Earlier Indian television was restricted to Government-controlled Doordarshan only. But currently there are more than 400 channels available on the Indian television diaspora offering round the clock services and multifarious programming to a huge, heterogeneous television audience. STAR TV, ZEE TV, Sony, have been offering variegated programmes of various dimensions and perspectives. Invariably, Doordarshan projected some interesting programmes. They not only included programmes like "Patrika" or "Spectrum" but also number of serials were telecast. These included well known works of literature like "Raag Darbari", "Nirmala" (Premchand), "Pratham Pratisruti" (Ashapurna Devi) "Charitraheen" and "Shrikant" (Sharat Chandra). Epics like "Mahabharata", "Ramayana" and "The Bible" have been among the very popular telecasts. Equally noteworthy has been: Gul Gulshan Gulfam: bearing on the life in a Shikara in Kashmir and other aspects of its social life. (Gopal Saxena, 1996).

"Hum Log" however, was successful in setting a trail for the soap-opera to assert itself with an identity in this country. Along with "Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi" which was packed with fun and frolic, made a substantial contribution to Doordarshan's software programming in those years. Both were immensely popular and became the measuring yardsticks for other serials that followed.

"Khandaan" was yet another popular soap-opera which was telecast in 1985. It portrayed the day-to-day wranglings, intrigues, conspiracies and rivalries of high-class industrialists. Those identifying with the various characters found their own moods and moorings reflected in the soap-opera. "Nukkad" was another sponsored serial on the soap-operatic style, which made its presence felt in India. It portrayed common man's actions and reactions, caused by different incidents taking place in the life of different characters.

However, it was "Buniyaad" which was presented in the true tradition of a soap-opera. Running into 104 episodes, it was woven round the life of a family of pre-partition Punjab. The sufferings and acts of fortitude of those affected were shown in this soap-opera. This was followed by "Humraahi" which was conceived and designed as a purposive serial from Doordarshan. The important aspect of the serial was the emphasis it laid on the status of women in India. Their various problems from early marriage to higher education and other problems were taken up in different episodes of this serial. Clashes between tradition and modernity were depicted. It was a success story and even garnered international acclaim as an effort to motivate people to reinforce the power of social communication. America's "The Soap Opera Digest" attributed it as "Soap in the Service of Society."

There are clear indications that soap-operas are a format which carry great appeal for a large audience. Popularity of soaps like from "Parvarish" (Sony), "Kya Hua Tera Wada" (Sony), "Afsar Bitiya", "Punar Vivaah" (ZeeTV) "Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon" (STAR), "Kuch To Log Kahenge" (Sony) confirm that soaps have come to stay in India.

Watching these soaps has become a way of life. The engagements, both indoors and outdoors are once again

conditioned by the telecast schedule of these soaps. According to Anand Mitra:

"Television and all that encompasses it now implicates popular culture, social, political practices. It is this mature medium that can now reshape Indian popular Culture." (Gopal Saxena, 1996)

Frank and Gerbner (1980), in their study combined market segmentation and need and gratification research in their survey. They present explanation for why people watch that vary from one audience segment to another. Members of the soap opera audience are intellectually limited and watch soap because they are socially isolated, lonely and emotionally deprived. Herta Herzog (1944) reported three reasons for listening to radio soaps.

- a. Emotional release – a chance to know that others have a problem too.
- b. Wishful thinking -they fill in gaps in the listeners own lives or compensate for families.
- c. Advice -practical explanations of appropriate patterns of behavior, useful when confronted with various life situations.

One important area of mass media research is the extent to which television influences viewers concepts of social reality, Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue that television is the central cultural arm of American society serving to socialize people into standardized roles and behaviors. Television accomplishes this through a presentation of basic assumption about the way life is and what values are important. They suggest that television cultivates people's beliefs, about how the world works more through the sum total of interactions, behaviors and values present in television content. 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".

While reviewing soap opera audience, less attention has been paid to how soap operas affect consciousness, especially feminist consciousness. Feminist have argued that although soaps are women's fiction, they present a conservative view of the world. Many of the interactions that occur on soaps are family centered / spouses, parent, child and so forth. Viewers may tend to believe that families are centrally important.

Soap operas are a unique form of entertainment, different from other television drama, although both are broadcast over the same networks. There are suitable differences among the soaps themselves-differences in format, content / expressive elements and audience. As the audiences have changed over the years, so has the content of soap operas, more so by the production mode, which has extended glamour and glitz to this T.V. format.

## V. SOAP OPERAS AND THEIR POPULARITY

Soap-opera is the most popular form of television programming in the world. A large proportion of television viewers watch and enjoy soap-operas. Soap-operas dominate the national audience ratings over other programmes that are telecast. The popularity of soap-opera appears to rest on its

undemanding nature and its preoccupation with everyday concerns. (Pingree and Cantor, 1983). This undemanding nature has been seen as one of the contributory factors to the genres popularity. Most significantly, soap operas concern with the everyday lives of everyday people and their problems, big and small, appears to be the other reason for this genre being so popular. Some soaps, like *Balika Vadhu* (Colors) are referred to as being 'realistic' in that they focus on the domestic and personal, and on everyday concern and problematic issues such as death, friendship, marriage, romance and divorce, personal relationship and the role of the female in the marital home. Soap operas which contain these 'social realist conventions' attract the attention of the soap viewer, who enjoys watching the portrayal of many things that are happening today, including the problems that we face in day to day lives. It can, however, be argued that soap opera owes a part of its popularity to the fact that the viewer even enjoys forming a kind of participatory 'relationship' with the character, and also like to identify themselves with the plots and character. At the same time, they experience the gratification of forming para - social relation with the character. It is due to this formation of para - social relations that enables the soap- opera viewers to gain pleasure from being able to understand how a certain character feels or behaves in particular circumstances, due to themselves having been in a similar situation. This para social relationship can be recognized in its extreme form when a viewer puts himself deeply into a character, so that he can feel the same emotion and experience, the same events as the character is supposed to feel. (Pingree and Cantor,1983).

Another point of identification which the viewer enjoys forming with the characters is that of personal identity. Based on personal experience, it is evident that viewers often use the behavior of a character in order to justify their behavior in a similar situation. In this context, the popularity of soap- opera stems from the pleasures offered by the points of identification presented by the characters. Viewers want to watch what happens to those specific characters locked into specific network of relationships. (Pingree and Cantor,1983).

Soap-opera is also popular due to its continuity, regularity and familiarity. It has been labeled as a 'ritual pleasure' which offers reassurance in its familiarity and longevity, its predictable familiarity being the main force which pulls us in. (Mary Ellen Brown,1994). Also due to the soap being solely based in one place geographical and portraying the lives of same characters in each episode, the viewer can be assured of familiarity and continuity. This familiarity, however does not cause it to become boring because as Geraghty argues, "the presence of well established characters leads to value familiarity and predictability in the audience who relish change and disruption (Mary E. Brown,1994).

The distinct popularity of soap-opera can also be attributed to its "openness" in that it is an open text with no start, middle or end. It is continuous, consistent and open-ended following into the next episode. "The viewer is presented with a range of conflicting viewpoints- interest rests on the juxtaposition of them, in that there's no single answer, and he has to resolve the issue himself" (Mary E. Brown, 1994). The implication is evident that the viewer is actively involved as he predicts and speculates the future events. The resolutions are left open to

viewer's interpretation (Mary E. Brown,1994) and he enjoys it, thus adding to the popularity of the genre.

Talking about television program's and what has happened in them is essential to making a program popular (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth, 1989). It has been argued that discussing soaps can seem to be very therapeutic, as there is some evidence to prove that viewers talk about certain issues in the soaps as a way of discussing their own problems, "with some of the serious issues we have dealt with, they were carefully researched and they have had positive results in the community". (Seiters, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth, 1989)

We cannot escape from the fact that soap operas are one of the most popular genres on television. An increasing amount of research has been carried out as to why this is the case, one important field of study being associated with the uses and gratifications of the viewers. The presence of suspense, where viewers are kept guessing about the characters and their fate also seems to be a major factor relating to the soaps' popularity. Many viewers also like to predict future events, and gain pleasure from doing so.

Remarkably, there are a large number of different characters who all take an equal role in the soaps, although during one episode one may find particular focus on one or two specific characters: it is not usually for too long, before the camera focuses on another character. In this way, the viewer cannot become bored with certain characters and their problems." The popularity of soap opera appears to rest on its undemanding nature and its preoccupation with everyday concerns" (Livingstone 1990). Indeed, it has been argued that the undemanding nature of soap opera can be seen as a contributory factor to the genre's popularity. For example, a regular viewer of a particular soap opera may find viewing an undemanding activity due to his or her familiarity with the plots and characters. This could, therefore, mean that soaps are easy viewing for their fans due to the low level of concentration needed in comprehending each episode, as illustrated here: a person who has been a fan of a particular show hasn't seen the show for years, only to catch up for the missed years by watching only one or two episodes" (Brown 1994).

Soap opera as a genre has been successful in creating a style that fits well with women's discourse and problems. Women in the relationship established through discussion about the soap and in the affective pleasure of watching practice can establish solidarity among themselves that they may operate as a threat to dominant ideological system.

## VI. SOAP OPERAS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Soap- operas are proving to be especially influential in developing countries. They can improve marital communication, advise people on HIV and AIDS prevention, and counsel children about how to get along with their parents. Researchers in Ohio University, in their study of a radio soap-opera broadcast in India suggest the programs can carry effective educational messages and change mass behavior. According to Arvind Singhal, "if the message is appropriate and the problem is common, you reach a large number of people with this communication". Soaps -operas needn't be perceived as a

mindless genre. Viewers have an ongoing relationship with characters so they become an important part of their daily life. His studies have also drawn from the social learning theory, which suggests that human beings don't always learn directly from the humans, but learn from observing characters in mass media. Evidence was seen where a radio soap -opera was used in Northern India-where population problems were increasing and soap operas changed the perspectives of people on a number of issues. Researchers at University of Mexico and Ohio University analyzed feedback to the themes in "Tinka Tinka Sukh" (Happiness lies in Small Things). It was a 104 episode program broadcast in 1996 over 27 radio stations to an estimated tens of millions of listeners in the Hindi speaking region. Topics included community pride, equal treatment of boys and girls, marital issues, empowerment of women, educating women and many other gender themes. Nearly 150,000 letters were received; including a letter signed by an entire village that noted the soap-opera encouraged better treatment of women and increased school attendance among children in the village.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Media are very effective, powerful and influential in disseminating new knowledge, useful for behavior change among women, thus influencing women's empowerment variables as well. Hum\_Log in 1987, which reached an audience of 80 million promoted smaller families and equal status for women. Humraahi focused on the rights of women to equal education and employment, to choose their own marriage partners, and to determine whether and when to have children. The exposure of woman to media, media portrayal of women in the media, are some of the important dimensions to be analyzed to examine the role of media in women's empowerment. Exposure to media, particularly television because of its visual aspect causes knowledge accumulation and behavior change among women reflecting the participation of women in decision - making, inter family communication and role-negotiation of women at home which can help in achieving better quality of life. 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-1) increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision - making through the media and new - technologies of communication ; 2) promote a balanced portrayal of women in the media.

Television is a cultural commodity. At the same time, it is a two vision mirror-reflecting society and in turn being modified by society. McLuhans medium is the message holds true even in the new millennium. Genre of soap -opera has over the years made rapid development in terms of content, presentation and production. Issues like rape, extra marital relationship, murder which were considered taboo even to be talked have earned acceptance in the social setup of our country. People no-longer switch off their TV sets when a situation of this type arises. They are curious to see how the issue is resolved. But soaps portraying interpersonal problems, crisis in the family, balance between

career and home, modern yet traditional in beliefs and values have gained immense popularity among the masses.

It can be said that soap operas in some ways have given women their voice. Discussions about soap-operas provide an outlet for a kind of discourse in which problems about women can be heard. Paradoxically, soap operas are still spoken of as trash. If women's lives and women's stories are to be taken seriously, then women genres need a serious look.

Women feel connected to the soap operas since they can relate their own personal and business life to the show. The viewers sustain a steady relationship with the characters that relate to themselves and these characters help the viewers find their own inner self. Watching soap-operas is more meaningful to women. They are a reflection of the viewer's life. It helps the viewers deal with their own problems and it motivates them to do what normally women consider the impossible to achieve and do. Femininity is also shown by the way "the viewer is positioned by the narrative", who analyses the character he is watching. This makes the viewer utilize the skills she is watching being enacted. Also 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". Consequently, women can relate their life and themselves to soap-operas.

Television has transformed our social and cultural environment. It has transformed the relationships between public and private spheres and between physical and social spaces. It has made the world visible and accessible in new ways. What is it there in television that makes it such a potential object for ushering in change? It is a reasonable question because television is neither malleable nor neutral object. Television comes pre-packed - a combination of complex communication of sound and image with powerful reality and emotional claims. Television is constantly available in almost all homes. It can and it does occupy a potential space throughout an individual's life, though with varying degrees of intensity and significance. Television has become the most persuasive and pervasive means of information diffusion in society. The medium of television plays a very significant role in bringing about change among people. Television has the potential and strength to act as a 'modern information multiplier' which can help people in smoothening the process of national development, economic growth and social development. The part played by television, through its varied content, as a galvanizer in the spectrum of change cannot be overlooked or ignored. The need of the hour is to harness its potential in the right direction or rather than let it be a trite reflection of society's lowest common denominator.

Indian soap opera emphasize 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 already 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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