

REALITY OR MYTH: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN TV SERIALS

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Abstract: *Representations are formations, or as Roland Barthes has said of all operations of language, "they are deformations". Similarly, back from the days of media reports on Oriental women being despotic and sensuous, media has successfully presented and caricatured woman-ness. In this paper of mine I will primarily focus on the television soaps and serials of India and attempt to analyse how exactly do they present women and how successful are they in their presentation of 'reality'? Or is this reality a hackneyed one? Therein begins my analysis. The nation which claims to be in the process of "globalisation" or "modernisation" still portrays its women in meaningless piles of costume jewellery and jardousi sarees. When women of India are progressing to be IPS and IAS Officers, all these contemporary "slice-of-life" soaps are still entangled in familial plots and schemes. Even with some attempts to actually portray reality, Indian serials have not evolved beyond the monochromatic dimensions of a faithful wife and a scheming vamp.*

Keywords: *Representation, myth, reality, liminality, subaltern, woman-ness, media, truth, question, stereotype, marginalized, sexuality, programmes, responsibility, society*

Introduction

Representations are formations, or as Roland Barthes has said of all operations of language, 'they are deformations' (Bhabha, 1994). One of the greatest tools of asserting self-superiority and dominance, representation and use of stereotypes has remained instrumental in consolidation of authority over the oppressed down the ages. From colonial to feminist discourse, representation has been very important primarily due to its construction of a fixed image of the downtrodden, marginalized people who occupy the lower seat of the see-saw of power-politics. Stereotypes, as Homi Bhabha points out in *The Location Of Culture*, "is a form of knowledge..that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known and something that must be anxiously repeated". Herein comes the responsibility, or rather the importance of mass-media without which repeatability of notions and their distribution cannot be carried out. In essence, the mass-media are the tools that facilitate dissemination of information to vast number of receivers. But one of the major dimensions of such an approach is the 'way' things or events are reported and presented – and a thorough overview of the content and manner of messages that are publicly (re)presented makes it quite clear that very often media 'mediates' and moulds reality in order to subscribe to a certain pattern. With the technological boom and the rapid advancement in electronic media over the past few decades, media has acquired such omnipotence that it not only propagates notions but has the power to create, construct or demolish certain ideologies. As is evident, representation in media is definitely a vast subject of discussion where the concepts of 'representation' and 'media' are intricately intertwined. Therefore, in this paper of mine I will focus on a specific section of the electronic media in the Indian context - the contemporary television soaps and serials; identify their target audience and study

the ways how they represent women and finally scrutinize the extent to which this projection of an on-screen reality corresponds to the 'actual' reality.

From the days of Gustav Flaubert's reported encounter with the courtesan Kuchuk Hanem (Said, 95) down through a projection of the exoticised sexuality of the Oriental women in Victorian pornographic novels, Western media has had a long history of typifying these doubly marginalised creatures who were not only the colonized subjects of their European masters but also the ostracized marginalia in a dominant patriarchal societal structure. Deriving from Simone de Beauvoir's perception of woman as the 'Other' to man, sexuality and woman-ness has always been identified as a binary opposition that registers 'difference' between groups of people; differences which are socio-culturally manipulated and transmitted in ways which cause one group to dominate the other (Beauvoir, 2009). This sexuality and woman-ness of these women (or women in general) has always been fitted within male-constructed stereotypes that through their projections and appropriations has successfully kept the 'second sex' as the domesticated subaltern. Interesting it is to note that the popular notion 'sangsar sukher hoi ramanir gune' (the bliss of the household rests in the hands of the woman) is not just a Bengali saying, it is infact the nutshell of the Indian familial pattern where the woman of the household is granted the central position by virtue of her liminality! Even more interesting it is to note how popular TV serials uphold and propagate these very notions that unfortunately clog the path of further emancipation and socio-cultural upliftment. With the nation claiming to join footsteps in the march to globalization and modernization where the state legislatures and judicial systems attempt to emancipate the marginalized women in our society, it does seem a little bizarre to see contemporary TV serials and soaps projecting women more as models of expensive costume-jewellery or 'jardousi' sarees. Moreover, the stereotypes used- that of a wronged wife, a domineering mother-in-law, bitter relationships between sisters-in-law, though bear resemblance with a certain reality of society fails to do justice with the changing and shifting patterns of identity within household. They fail to circumscribe all the career options that are now being taken up by Indian women, new modes of lifestyle being adopted and remain entrenched in certain deep-rooted notions that are hard to be erased away. During the 'good-old days' of Doordarshan, there had been several programmes like 'Udaan' that dealt with issues concerning a woman's struggle, her dreams of becoming an IPS Officer. This was probably the first Indian television show on women empowerment. Inspired by the real-life story of Kavita Choudhary's (the director of this series) elder sister Kanchan Choudhary who after several hardships went on to become the first female Director General of Police, it inspired its viewers and instilled in its female audience a desire for emancipation -beyonds the claustrophobic nets of society. However, with the advent of cable and satellite television and a major upheaval following it, things rapidly changed and serials stopped short of projecting those that could prove beneficial for uplifting these maimed section of the society. The new millennium saw the phenomenal success of the soaps involving family dramas (Kasauti Zindagi Kay, Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi to name a few) championed by none other than Ekta Kapoor. True it is that her Balaji Productions indeed revolutionized Indian serials which now shifted the camera lens from outside to the dark nitty-gritties within a family household. This narrowing down of the targeted domain brought to surface several hidden truths, opened up several new arenas that society needed to concentrate upon. But the phenomenal success of these serials never obliterated the fact that they targetted a certain, specific, economically privileged section of society where the main source of familial income was either inherited property or that amassed by business activities. This particular focus on such women who were married off to rich households often belonging to elite class themselves further alienated these serials from a larger reality- reality that changed over the decade. No matter how 'modern' the women characters were in these serials with respect to their attire and access to technology, the mode of presentation of these women with junk jewellery and designer sarees failed to bring within its territory the struggling middle class. Throughout the decade such typifications and vilification continued with ornamentally decked up women lit up the screen and sensuously dressed vamps exercised her heinous tricks. A recent UNESCO report describes the common images of women in the media: "the glamorous sex kitten,

the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hardfaced corporate and political climber.” The report, released in 2009, states that, at the current rate of progress on stereotyping women, forcibly fitting them into cliché - it will take another 75 years to achieve gender equality in the media. But has this situation changed? If so, what are they based upon (I am strictly focusing on those that are women centred)? Whom are they catering to and how? My attempt therefore will be to analyse the content of modern-day serials and find out the faultlines in their projections. This approach of mine has been inspired by the famous content analysis programme with respect to American television that was undertaken by George Gerbner and his team looking at portrayals of gender, violence, family relationships etc. For my analysis I have taken into consideration the following popular TV serials scoring high on the charts – Balika Vadhu (Colors) and Uttaran (Colors), both of which have their respective target audience and analyzing them I will attempt to come to a conclusion regarding my opinion of media’s projection of women through TV serials and soaps.

Balika Vadhu

An Indian television series that airs every Monday to Friday at 8pm on Colors TV, it deals with child-marriage that had been a prevalent practice in several parts of India continuing even today in many a rural place. The serial focuses on the character Anandi, who was married off in her childhood and traces her journey through all kinds of situations down through adolescence to adulthood. Within the mainplot concerning the story of Anandi in the house of her in-laws and how she epitomizes all the virtues that defines an ‘ideal bahu’ in Indian society, there has been various subplots concerning other women (mainly those suffering such evil practices as child marriage or being child-widows) and their journey towards emancipation. Among many such subplots that have added on to the bulk of this serial, there is the plot concerning the marriage of Jagdeesh (the person with whom Anandi was married off at an early age and together they spent their childhood and adolescence through many a colourful lane) and Gauri (another girl who was married to Jagdeesh in her childhood forcibly by Jagdeesh’s grandmother, the powerful matriarch Kalyani Devi). This subplot is my concern-primarily because of the way Gauri is presented as a wicked home-breaker, a villainous woman tyrannically destroying Anandi’s life. True it is that Gauri should not have married Jagdeesh even after knowing the truth that he is the same man to whom she was married in her childhood; this would have an apt protest against the cruelties of society that seals the fate of many a hapless woman. But then again, with her very choice of marrying the person whom she has fallen in love as an adult, within the legal-precincts she projects her strong individuality. It is Jagdeesh who hides his true identity from his fellow friends in the medical college where he studies and later works, it is he who decides to leave Anandi and marrying Gauri decides to leave Jaisalmer and settle down in Mumbai, it is he who toys with the emotions of all those who raised him up -but ultimately at the end of the day, it is Gauri who is presented as the fountain-head of all problems. Is it not natural for a pregnant woman to feel insecure to see her husband get friendly with his first wife? Is it not natural for her to expect a happily married life as much as Anandi deserves it? Then why is the focus always on how well Anandi conforms to all the stereotypes that characterize a ‘good woman’ - Anandi as the dutiful daughter-in-law taking care of the household, Anandi as the ‘sarpanch bitiya’ of the village and a faithful wife who remains mum even when her husband leaves her and goes away? Is it because media still wishes to cater to that India which deifies its women who emblemise self-sacrifice and vilifies them who try to assert an independent voice of their own? From the survey that I conducted I came to know that a large section of audience (of this serial) are home-makers who too are constricted (very often) within the territories of their home. So they can very well sympathise with poor Anandi suffering the brutality from her ‘sautan’ Gauri-they have absolute pathos for Anandi who had left her studies midway (willingly) for serving her in-laws better and now, with her life in ruins attempts to bring enlightenment in the villagers by spreading literacy. But what about Gauri? Even after having a definite identity of her own as a medical practitioner and the legal wife of Jagdeesh, she is always ‘represented’ as the “Other” woman in the ‘happy-life’ of Jagdeesh-Anandi when it is a fact that much like Anandi, she too had to bear the brunts of

a social malpractice. This division of projection, of presentation makes it clear once again that more often media attempts to fall back to propagating ingrained stereotypical notions and securing their own positions. My analysis is that the prime reason for the differential presentation of these two women characters lies in the basic inculcated truth amongst Indian women (mostly rural) that, to be considered a 'good woman' you need to choke your own desires and conform to the expectations that society holds for you. And this is precisely the same reason that even after proposing to voice out against the social malpractices that ostracize a woman, this serial too resorts to catering to popular expectations i.e. project the 'other woman' (Gauri) as a scheming plotter and erase out the mistakes committed by the man in question (Jagdeesh) so as to bring back the idealized, publicized and glorified concept of a home. Even when the fountain-head of all problems is Jagdeesh himself, it is Gauri, the pregnant wife of Jagdeesh who is given a cold shoulder by her in-laws (who favours Anandi), it is she who suffers torments and is denied the very little shred of sympathy. This cementing of faultlines that are often very much palpable, so as to secure its audience, questions the very productivity of media's 'truthful' representation of the women.

Uttaran

It is a daily soap on channel Colors that went on air on December 1, 2008 and tells the story of two friends with diametrically opposite backgrounds. Where **Tapasya** is the daughter of a wealthy aristocratic couple, Divya and Jogi Thakur; **Ichcha** is the daughter of their poor, live-in domestic help, Damini. The character of Tapasya is the vilified alter-ego of Ichcha and bears a strong sense of individuality mixed with an equal proportion of pride and haughtiness. Closely resembling Catherine the Shrew, Tapasya 'Thakurain' is well aware of her societal status and talents and is proud about them. Built along the typical notions of a spoilt-brat of a wealthy father, Tapasya is a stock figure who torments the life of Ichcha, the adorable poor girl. This caricature is a patterned projection of the women-folk who can basically be categorized into either the 'bad' woman who ravages and destroys; and the good one who is meek, modest and most often very soft-spoken, homely, caring and nurturing.-and not beyond. In a modernizing nation like India where the chief responsibility of media should be to upgrade its content so as to match the reality outside, is not the character of Tapasya, the out-spoken independent girl itself a travesty of reality? It brings us back to the unnoticed truth- all such women who do not fall into the clichés that society carves out for its women are always the transgressors and hence needs to be either removed from the system to restore order or be moderated in a way acceptable to society. Back from the days of Eustacia Vye in Egdon Heath with her unbridled self-expression of her ambitions and emotions to characters like Tapasya, all such women have always been considered beyond the normative boundaries of the society. They are either transformed so as to fit into the patterns of society or removed away. Tapasya's marriage with the handsome, wealthy Veer (who was about to marry Ichcha), the pivotal point of the story, was projected in a way so as to enforce the meanness and cruelty of Tapasya. But very little was developed with regards to the reason behind Tapasya's action - her desparateness, her helplessness and her emotions were cleverly shunted so as to focus on the now ruined life of Ichcha. A character beyond redemption and sympathy from its audience, Tapasya is however very close to reality. During my survey, as an answer to my question, some of my friends commented that they found the character of Tapasya 'grounded in reality'- with basic human follies and shortcomings and added that it was 'wrong' to forcibly present her as a 'vamp of some sort' when what she is actually doing is prioritizing herself beyond any superficial social constructs that bind her ambitions and desires. This again brings to light the cleavage in the presentation of the 'reality' in context of Indian women and questions the very ground of a woman's identity in developing India.

Inference

What distinguishes these two serials is their setting- while *Balika Vadhu* is set in rural Rajasthan and its traditions, *Uttaran* encompasses the urban elite and various complexities of modern life. However even in their multifarious approach, they fail to tread beyond the common constructs of ideology that typifies a woman to be good or bad and falls short of presenting the wide range of reality that envelops modern existence. The Joshi Committee Report in 1984 had urged the need for “the incorporation of the ‘women’s dimension’ in all programmes” and “the need for a separate focus on and for women” (Kumar, 2011). True it is that these serials are centering their contents on the lives of women but in the process of their presentation, they cannot get rid of their bias of categorizing women into socially acceptable divisions. By presenting real-life situations with sharp demarcations of good and bad, these serials are deviating from modern reality where boundaries between the victim and the victimizer get blurred. Filtering these diverging characters through the monochromatic lens of the norms of society, these serials in fact block the non-judgemental, unbiased response from its audience. The truth boils down to this that in the garb of presenting real condition of women in the Indian context and attempting to speak for these subalterns, these serials are just conforming to some of the deep-rooted commandments that control the social structure of India. Deliberate presentations and calculated deformations highlight once again that no matter what, free-spirited women will always be labeled as transgressors; that’s the notion society is entrenched with and that’s the reality people will expect media to portray. However, on the other hand, those enlightened about the disharmonic nature of a human character will consider any such flat representation of good and evil in the modern era as a travesty of reality. Since it’s the woman’s question, these crevices in the pattern of projection become even more problematised. The question arises as to who are those that are to be uplifted from the marginalia - is it Anandi or Gauri? Is it Ichchha or Tapasya? Who is to be condemned- the woman who is presented as the vamp or the societal norms that create such situations? As an answer, we can just heave a sigh, for nothing better can actually ever present the real, pathetic, oppressed condition of women – it is way too diverse and multidimensional. Then the responsibility falls on the shoulder of the media to stress the causes which create such aberrations in human behavior rather than going for the stereotypical projections of woman-ness and woman character. The serials must stop categorizing Indian women either as the pitiable ‘bahu’ or the interpellated ‘saas’ or maybe, the home-wrecking ‘bahaar waali’. It should tread beyond such divisive binaries and attempt to present a coherent and conducive picture of the ‘real’ women of today- attempt to inculcate in them the attempt to overcome stifles and join the mainstream of nation’s progress. Only then can these serials be considered as having importance in an actual system of society and only then can they succeed in their agenda of improving living conditions of these violently oppressed section of society.

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