



THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI SERIALS: POST LIBERALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Liberalization refers to a relaxation of government's restrictions, usually in such areas of social, political and economic policy. Economic liberalization is generally defined as the loosening of government regulations in a country to allow for private sector companies to operate business transactions with fewer restrictions. This means opening the doors of Indian economy to multinationals and foreign investment. Post 1991 came the television giants like Sony, Star, CNN and a host of other networks which opened not only economic doors but also two way traffic. They brought in western content in television through satellite and cable-programmes, clothes, culture and ethos to the Indian television viewers. An Indian offshoot of post liberalization was the production of soap operas or serials on a large scale due to a huge increase in television watching hours especially by women, in the afternoons free of the demands of a husband at the office and children at school. These serials were initially copies of 'foreign' ones but gradually moved on to Indian content and stories like the very famous Hum Log and Buniyaad on Doordarshan the State sponsored telecasting network. With the entry of private channels the scenario changed drastically with the entry of K-Serials made famous by Ekta Kapoor. This paper studies the movement of the female protagonists' in the serials post liberalization using the survey method and discusses the impact of these heroines on our future generation.

Key Words: psychological impact, future generations, movement of female protagonists, post liberalization effects.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary serials begin with a female protagonist in a promising manner. The heroine is set out to do a number of things, achieve name and fame for herself in the promos of the show and only in the initial episodes of the story. Soon the serial producers and the directors reach a state in the

story where the marriage of the lead protagonist is beset with unsolvable problems. What follows after marriage is the usual routine fare of problems with in-laws. In this paper two serials one of a promising dancer in the initial episodes of the serial-*Sasuraal Simar Ka* (*The in-laws home-SSK*) and a Muslim social saga-*Beintehaa* – BI—(Limitless-without

boundaries)romantic drama, end up like any other regular serial with strained relations after marriage as the main theme and the lead protagonists' end up having extra marital affairs. The paper discusses how marriage is treated as the be all and end all of life in a girl's life.

Sasuraal Simar Ka-SSK is dubbed in Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu languages. The Tamil version is broadcast as *Moondru Mudichu* in Polimer TV, the Malayalam version is *Sitara* in Surya TV and the Telugu version is aired on Maa Gold as *Moodu Mullu*.

The Hindi serials three decades ago were *Hum Log*, *Buniyaad*, *Nukkad* etc., which had a social perspective in them they represented female protagonists as responsible women doing a good job at the family level. Serials like *Swabhimaan*, *Khandaan*, *Rajani*, *Yeh Hai Zindagi*, etc., portrayed women with distinct identities. Yet they were nationalistic in orientation and tone. They presented a patriarchal outlook of life and were dominantly male in presentation, focus and reach to the audience. Another factor which added to that scenario was the restricted hours of television viewing. Telecast was divided into national hours and regional hours. The national hours hogged the limelight. The regional channel being only one got a miniscule representation through presentation of news.

It is at this point that Liberalization plays a crucial role in the mass media especially television. Post liberalization came CNN, star Network, Sony network, HBO, Cartoon channels and they literally opened the Pandora's Box. Television viewing gradually escalated to 24 hours of the day, continuous and nonstop.

The K-serials were the harbingers of this genre of post liberalization. They were instantly famous because of the very Indian and traditional values they projected. It was like a going back to the roots yet there was a distinct personality casually sneaking out into the open; that of the female protagonist. These 'bahus' were ideal yet distinct with their own identities.

Tulsi of Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Thi (Because the Mother-in-Law was once a Daughter-in-

*Law_KSBKBT)*and *Parvati of Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki (The Story of Every Home-KGGK)*were praised and sympathized with when they were spotted in shopping malls or public places after the successful and popular launch of the above mentioned serials. The impact of the lead protagonists' was so much that common people searching for daughters-in-law looked for look alikes for their sons' to marry. The self sacrificing, patient, loving, caring affectionate daughters-in-law were back in fashion. They cared and looked after not just the husband and the parents-in-law, but also the extended family like as if they were in the 18th or 19th century. The impact of the sufferings of these female protagonists' can be gauged by the fact that when one of the male lead characters *Mihir (KSKBT)* died in the story the audience demanded that he be brought back to life as they could not watch the travails of the widowed *Tulsi*.

METHODOLOGY

The survey method with questionnaire was used in researching this question of the heroine. Girls and women in the age groups of 18 and 40 were considered for the study. Women from Bangalore, Mysore, Belgaum and Gulbarga were interviewed and given the questionnaire to make it representative of the State of Karnataka. 25 women who regularly watched these serials were spoken to and given the questionnaire from each city.

The questionnaires were analyzed for the following points:

1. Time spent in viewing serials
2. Effect on the viewer—
 - a) psychological
 - b) change in choice of clothes and accessories
 - c) empathy with female characters

I.TIME SPENT IN VIEWING SERIALS:

This simple question and its various answers literally opened a plethora of answers. In a few joint families it was observed that the daughter-in-law was hesitant to say that she watched any television at all. On being approached in the absence of the mother-in-law, they said they stated the obvious reason for it. They did not want get into the bad books of the mother-in-law. Some women who at first were hesitant to admit that they watched

serials at all, abashedly accepted that they watched serials for up to six hours per day. 72% of the women respondents said they quickly completed their regular chores in the kitchen etc. and sat in front of the television they said it was their daily appointment with the female protagonist which they were not willing to miss at any cost. When asked about how they completed their other duties of the kitchen like flour making, shopping for groceries and greens they said they were free of television and serial viewing on the weekends and hence did it then. One of the factors for not watching television in weekends is the presence of the men and children at home.

CASE STUDY

AMINA BEGUM, age 38 years, works as a maid in different houses in Bangalore. She stated that she began her day's work only at 2.00.p.m. The reason was the timing of the favourite serials that she watched were aired in the repeat telecast from 11.00 a.m. and she did not want to miss them.

II.EFFECT ON THE VIEWER:

a. Psychological Impact:

The women respondents said they would begin watching a particular serial only when they could identify themselves with the protagonist. 52% of them were of the opinion that Simar of SSK was one such character. *Simar* as a young girl before is keen on becoming a dancer. In fact, in the initial episodes she is shown learning dance moves from television. *Simar's* father objects to it as he is against his children watching too much of television especially serials. The respondents said they identified with such a situation as they had gone through the same experience. The lead character is told to forget dance by her future mother-in-law and Simar accepts it meekly. The respondents felt this happens in reality as many girls are forced to give up what they really like to do after marriage.

Beintehaa –the lead protagonist suffers trauma as she has to decide between her friend or husband in many situations. The husband and his family do not support or encourage her in any endeavour. The respondents felt this was a real situation in many Indian families.

CASE STUDY

REKHA DESAI, aged 26 years, completed CA course from a reputed college in Belgaum said, she would rather not marry at all if it meant giving up her career for marriage. She felt it would be too much effort wasted if she came to know after marriage that she would have to get consent from her in-laws.

b. Change in choice of clothes and accessories:

'Hindi daily soap rocks the fashion world' is the name of a paper presented by *Neeru Ghale* and *Rosy Karna*. (2009). They affirm that watching daily soaps regularly brings about a change in the choice of clothes and accessories in women. Another factor that has added to this emerging trend is the easy and affordable way in which cosmetics, accessories and fancy clothes are available both on line and on home shopping on television channels. One can sit at home and order for items, the biggest advantage being returning them if the customer is not satisfied. The survey confirmed this change in response with 68% of the respondents saying they had changed their choice of clothes and accessories.

CASE STUDY

HARISH KUMAR, aged 30 years, cloth merchant, based in Bellary, district states that the demand for clothes similar to those shown/worn by heroines on television is so great during festival seasons that his business is tripled. He depends on his young daughter who watches television serials and guides him on the best selections for the season.

c. Empathy with female characters:

The lead characters in both the serials suffer after marriage. The problems are caused by the in-laws. The issues are related to the joint family. About 67% of the respondents said that showing joint families is not a real life situation. Now-a-days nuclear families are the norm; they had doubts about making compromises after marriage as the heroines in the serials did. They felt the joint family system was not practical. The women said, they could empathize with the situations of the heroines, as they too had suffered similarly at some point or the other. They waited eagerly for the telecast of the next episode. They discussed the fate of the heroine, the next move she would make, the alternatives available to

her etc., with friends, neighbours. In some cases the empathy was so much that it has led to negative feelings about marriage.

CASE STUDY

RAKSHA, aged 21 years, completed bachelor's degree, her parents are trying to arrange her marriage. She refuses to 'see' boy who comes to her house, stating that, she wants to interview her would be in-laws first, and then consider marrying the boy. This is the fear generated by serials about in-laws in the young impressionable minds of female audience.

DISCUSSION

As we have seen from the above, the impact serials have on women audience. Young girls who watch serials imitating their mothers now will grow up considering the lead protagonists' as their role models. Since the problems post marriage and extra marital affairs are regularly shown day in and day out and watched by their mothers' little girls will consider them as normal. Why should marriage be portrayed as the only solution? If it is portrayed as a solution then why depict so many problems? What are their chances at marriage? What is the effect on their understanding at such young age? Is exposure to such content good?

In an era of moving forward and developing with such empowering tools as education, awareness of rights and freedom to do what girls want to a limited extent why do serial directors continue with such out dated content? Serials that motivate, inspire and educate girls to do something better for themselves; serials with a social conscience are non-existent. Serials can be shown depicting women facing odds and overcoming them to be successful in life. It is not dearth of real life heroines that is the cause for such poor content in present day serials but the race for high TRP's. TRP's and TAM'S play a great role in obtaining sponsorship which is the ultimate goal of serial makers. When a woman producer Ekta Kapoor can give her nod to such daily soaps content as *KSBKBT* and *KGGK*, what can be expected of other producers?

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

CULTURAL HEGEMONY

According to Antoni Gramsci an important Marxist thinker, Cultural Hegemony is a means of maintaining the capitalist state. Hegemony, according to Gramsci is a ruling class device to establish and maintain control. Capitalism maintains control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also through ideology. Gramsci also states that the capitalist class ties cultural values through folklore, popular culture and religion.

Television serials are a popular and favourite form of popular culture liked and watched by millions of people throughout the world. As a result of watching serials Cultural Hegemony is being extended to the drawing rooms of common people every day. If one takes a closer look at the content of these serials they are a copy of western serials. The concept of family has undergone a sea of change in the west. There are regular families, families with two men –a gay relationship with a child (*Modern Family* –Star World), family with single parents etc., therefore serial story content in India is also imitating the west and cultural hegemony follows.

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH:

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) states there is a tremendous power of the unconscious on our conscious life. The conscious mind is only the tip of the iceberg. A person's social desires that are socially unacceptable are repressed and pushed into the unconscious. Freud discusses a tripartite structure in which the human psyche as

1. Ego –conscious part of the mind
2. Id---biological drives
3. Super Ego---censor or conscience

So Super Ego is always repressed, it does not do or let the Ego perform what our minds really want to do for the sake of social harmony. Therefore according to Freud, the ego is the link between the Id and the Super Ego.

What is the impact of the unconscious on the conscious of the viewers watching these serials day in and day out? A closer study by trained psychologists' will surely answer such questions. The paper closes this discussion with one last case study as told by a clerk who works in a civil court.

CASE STUDY

SAVITA, aged 18 years, daughter of retired police inspector, completed schooling, elopes with a young boy, who works as a mechanic. Parents on both sides accept marriage and provide financial support willy nilly. The marriage ends in divorce a year later as the girl says her husband is not like the 'mechanic hero' she had seen in a serial she had watched regularly. Life has become an experiment for this very young girl.

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