



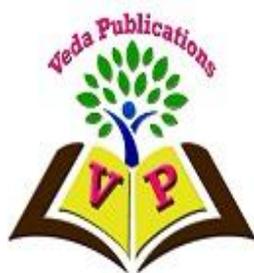
TELEVISION AND CULTIVATION CULTURE: A DELIBERATION ON THE ELITE POLITICS IN INDIAN SOAPS

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ABSTRACT



Television is a substantial resource for the construction of cultural identity, just as audiences deploy their cultural identities and cultural competencies to decode the various genres of programmes in their own ways. All images seen on television, especially daily soaps or serials, are mediated and are monopolized by an elite class who gain profit from the mass reception of cultural stories in the form of entertainment. In the process of attracting more viewership, the contemporary Indian serials present the cultural value systems which are quite different from reality. Through the showcasing of multifarious representations and conventional stereotypes, such constructed notions affect the societal mind set creating deliberate impacts upon the society. There is huge fan following for such serials, from the Indian diaspora, far across the world. Hence, it is important to study the way the content is portrayed in these serials, particularly in India where socio-cultural values immensely influence the lives of people. This paper attempts to analyse how the Indian television industry manifests such serials or soaps as the elite tool that cultivates specific culture among society by catering to the demands of the consumerist forces of the society. The paper also examines the diverse measures taken by the makers in maintaining its popularity along with the multifaceted factors that contribute to such serial's regional adaptations and dubbed versions as well. This research paper analyses the above mentioned objectives with special reference to Balaji Telefilm's *Yeh Hein Mohabbatein*.

Keywords: *Culture, Representation, Soaps, Stereotypes, Television.*

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INTRODUCTION

Television as a mass medium of communication had formed into a common symbolic environment that bound diverse communities together, socializing people into standardized roles and behaviours (Griffin 366). In his seminal essay, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973), Stuart Hall offers a theoretical approach of how “media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted”(128). According to him, the meaning of a text, be it a book, movie or any other creative work, is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader (128). The multifaceted ideologies propagated through the popular television, especially the soap operas, immensely influence the viewer’s perception of the world around them. George Gerbner with the aid of his Cultivation theory explains how social reality gets constructed through the prolonged viewership of the incessant projection of stable, repetitive, pervasive and virtually inescapable patterns of images on television.

“Cultivation is what a culture does,” because “culture is the basic medium in which humans live and learn” (Gerbner 249). Culture is a “system of stories and other artefacts increasingly mass produced that mediates between existence and consciousness of existence, and thereby contributes to both” (Gerbner 251). Television, most pervasive and widely shared story-teller, play a crucial role in the cultivation of beliefs, values and ideologies. Daily soaps, that receive the highest viewership on Indian television, serves as a primary medium through which the common masses gets enculturated. Cultivation research approaches television as a system of messages and preferred to see humans as mostly engaging in story-telling transactions.

Indian Soap Operas are noted for their success in attracting the audience, especially the women, with their dramatic sequences and twists in story lines. In the patriarchal Indian household the role of women is considered vital with issues related to the preservation of culture and carrying the values to the next generations. Heavy television viewers with a prolonged exposure to the images of violence

tend to be affected by the Mean World Syndrome, an idea that the world is worse than the world. Such content shown on soaps, create a fearful populace, especially among women, who tend to perceive a different truth far removed from reality.

DISCUSSION

Gerbner’s theory originated from the observation that story-telling is being increasingly monopolized by an elite class who gain profit from the mass reception of cultural stories in the form of entertainment messages. Institutions of mass communication are owned by social, cultural and primarily economic elites who establish a process of social control by codifying messages in their media. The Indian television industry is ruled by the vision of popular elites such as Balaji Telefilms that has produced successful soaps that intermingles fiction with the Indian cultural content. Ekta Kapoor has evolved as a veteran in sprinkling the essential ingredients that would add to the taste buds of the audience, at the very right time, quite effectively. Ekta Kapoor’s instinct and intuition in conceptualizing her soap stories are indeed commendable for her ability to judge the pulse of the audience. She has rewritten the script of television entertainment for the middle and lower middle classes. This seems to endorse Patricia Uberoi’s view that “a finger on the pulse of India’s middle and lower middle classes is a finger on the pulse of modern India”(7). Through her effective use of extravagant sets, grand settings, decoration and creativity, Ekta Kapoor adds to the visual appeal of the shows, making them a remarkable viewing experience. Though the storylines or the portrayal were not so realistic serials by Ekta Kapoor gained very high TRP as she makes use of some specific tropes and techniques. Audiences, participate in a social process in which they hear and internalize messages of social elites.

The objectification and commodification of woman by the Indian cultural industry is yet another important aspect to be discussed. The fact that they still believe in elite art forms and its ideology and value based implication, forces these capitalists to create popular art forms that communicate value based life passively. Balaji Telefilm’s *Yeh Hai*



Mohabbatein, the prime time soap opera aired on Star Plus, proves to be a remarkable case study of commodity culture and fetishism. There is ample textual evidence from which it can be surmised that the soap eroticizes Brahmin culture. The main target audience of the soap, which is the Hindi heartland, is not privy to the customs and rituals of Tamil Brahmins, especially the Iyers. The producers were supposedly relying on the fact that the North-Indian audience would find these exotic and appealing. It can also be read as an attempt to attract a pan Indian audience, as the South Indians too would be interested in knowing how their culture is being represented.

As is the case with several pieces of Hindi popular culture, the soap makes the fatal mistake of homogenising the entire South- Indian culture. To be precise, it reduced the entirety of South-India's traditions and cultures to that of the Iyers, and advertised the show as a 'North meets South' spectacle in clear view of TRP ratings. Such a representation also feels flat at points, and the characters, caricaturish. *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* does not in fact, present its viewers with a microcosm of India, as is claimed by the auteurs. In an age where every meaningful experience is repackaged as part of mass media and served on a silver platter in front of consumers, the soap is at best what Jean Baudrillard refers to as a 'simulation.'

The caste angle (or the lack thereof) in *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* has to be read in conjunction with commodification. The Dalit or Bahujan community has been historically absent, their voices shunned from mainstream popular media in India. Although Bollywood and regional cinema can be said to witness a cultural renaissance as far as Dalit representation is concerned (*Lagaan* and *Pariyerum Perumaal* respectively) Indian soaps remain resistant to change. The heroes and villains in Indian soaps are both upper caste and most often, upper class men and women. *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* celebrates the heroism, villainy, and the myriad shades of upper caste Iyers and Bhallas in all their glory. It banks on the cultural capital inherent in its upper caste characters. The upper caste elite takes up all spaces

of representation, effectively 'otherising' the lower castes. In that sense, the glorification, exoticisation, and fetishization of the Iyers and the Bhallas marks the contrast with the ensuing silence of the lower castes that much more apparent. In that sense, their absence is the best form of presence. Soaps such as *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* are ingenious tools of cultural hegemony which continuously mediates and reproduces the privileged dominant upper caste hegemony, keeping agency and the power of representation away from the oppressed lower castes.

Ekta Kapoor, an explicit supporter of patriarchy, has efficaciously propagated her patriarchal ideologies through more than 130 soap operas. Apart from the stereotypes of women, either encapsulated within the domestic sphere as wives and mothers or outside the domestic sphere as embodiments of the beauty stereotype - young, slim, fair and objects of sexual desire, there are some specific troupes, commonly used in Indian soaps which are advocated by Balaji Telefilms in particular. The mythological base of Sita Sati Savitri is constantly highlighted in her soaps. The virginity or purity preserved becomes a popular trope through which an exceptionally good mother is projected on screen. Good family becomes the reward for her sacrificial self. Motherhood revered is often seen as a patriarchal motif in most Balaji soaps. The new woman, autonomous and powerful, who breaks the customs of the tradition bound society is often portrayed in a negative manner. She is "free and autonomous" – but "nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assure the status of the other" (Beauvoir 167). The doomed Vamp, defeated in life becomes yet another common trope that serves as a social message, terrorising women audience, warning the masses against drastic the consequences of treading the path of immorality and infidelity. In a way, poetic justice is offered to Shagun through her redemption.

Woman need to be saved by man becomes yet another popular trope. The masculinity of the hero features through the soap. The typical romantic scenes of the hero indulging in a tough fight rescuing



the damsel in distress features in this soap as well. Raman comes to her rescue whenever Ishita gets into trouble. Raman and Ishita marry and remarry multiple times in the soap. Hence divorces and remarriages are abundant in *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*. The wedding day drama, bride switch and the sudden turn of events are inevitable tropes seen in Ekta's soaps. The show has commendably staged supernatural tracks, kidnaps and death drama that has received much attention. Medical issues are also in abundance. Ishita gets possessed, Shagun suffers from bouts of amnesia, Raman gets paralyzed. Most men of the family are often found missing in the latter episodes of the soap. Few important characters in the show slowly disappear. Overnight aging occurs as a result of the sudden leap but the elder members of the family remain immortal. Actors frequently get replaced on screen and often dupes are made use of to shoot long sequences that portray numerous family members. Adorned with too many villains, the show seems to be the crime capital. Male and female antagonists are abundant in *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*. Shagun and Ashok serve as the primary antagonists whereas Param, Nidhi and even Simi become negative. Post leap features villains such as Sudha Srivastav, Sahil Shah and others.

Yeh Hai Mohabbatein has created indelible imprints on the mind of viewers in terms of ornaments and clothing. The exquisite Kancheevaram silks, the designer lehengas and party wears seen during the marriage functions and other special occasions received from attention. Heavy jewelry, both trendy and traditional were displayed as well. The title track, "*Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*", the soul of the show, was well received by audience. The intense romantic scenes, stunning chemistry between the lead pair and the caressing Bollywood melodies as background scores are a perennial source of entertainment. The very many romantic dance performances, especially by the lead couple Ishita and Raman, seen during the *sangeet* ceremonies, enhanced casted a unique spell over the viewers. The extravagant use of colour and the prodigious setting creates a visual hierarchy that mesmerized the viewers.

Nancy Baym, in her study regarding the Western soaps, has examined that an online community of soap opera fans who constantly evaluates the shows quality and realism in their talk and are involved in struggle over meaning with the writer's vision (97). In case of *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*, one of the most viewed soap on Indian television since 2013, a similar practice is in vogue in the form of online media such as Facebook fan pages, Instagram posts and many others. The American media studies scholar Henry Jenkins has characterized practices such as fan fiction as a type of participatory culture in which fans not only interpret meaning but also create meanings in a moment of fan cultural production (223). The protagonists, Raman and Ishita, whom the fans lovingly address as "IshRa" has received immense popularity, love and laurels within this six year timeline of *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*.

As a result of the massive fanfare and viewership of *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*, a wide variety of such television adaptations of Manju Kapur's *Custody* happened in regional television as well. *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*, has been remade into several languages. *Pranayam* is a dailysoap opera broadcasted on Asianet under Sree Saran Productions in Malayalam, *Manasupalik Mouna Geetham* is a daily soap opera telecasted on Maa in Telugu *Avanu Mathe Shravani* is a daily soap opera shown on Asianet Suvarna in Kannada, *Kalyanam Mudhal Kaadhal Varai* is a daily soap opera aired on Star Vijay TV in Tamil, and *Mon Niye Kachakachi* is a daily soap opera telecasted on Star Jalsa in Bengali. Despite these adaptations there are dubbed versions of *Ye Hai Mohabbatein*, available in the regional languages as well.

Pranayam, the remake of *Ye Hai Mohabbatein* in Malayalam, chronicled the love story of Sharan, a Menon and Lekshmi Iyer, a Tamilian who marry each other for Sharan's daughter Malavika's custody and gradually fall in love with each other. The soap failed to receive much viewership as it failed to create the magic of *Ye Hai Mohabbatein*. The show got wind up in 2017 with the completion 524 episodes .At the same time the dubbed version



of *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* titled *Mounam Sammadham* had a successful run on Star Plus. The show discusses explicitly some of the modern aspects of western culture with regard to man-woman relationships that are rarely portrayed in the regional Malayalam soaps. Certain notable instances include the depiction of the concepts of pre-marital dating, break-ups and living together. "These soaps proved to be a great setback for the regular regional sagas and transformed the image of Malayalam television industry by giving a contemporary twist to romance. The intense romantic scenes, the stunning chemistry between the lead pair and the caressing Bollywood melodies as background scores act as the triple entities that make the dubbed soaps a visual treat that result in a very high Television Rating Point (TRP), often making them the most popular shows ever aired on Malayalam channels" (Georgy 4). They often extend beyond their professed time slots, resulting in one hour shows that have achieved immense popularity within a short time span.

The dubbed soaps present a very different cultural background especially when it comes to traditional rituals. Owing to India's rich cultural diversity, wedding traditions differ slightly according to the regional boundaries. The colorful and vibrant north Indian wedding involves a lot of fun, frolic, celebrations, rituals and holy ceremonies that are totally dissimilar from those practiced in the southern states like Kerala. The various aspects of North Indian weddings *Sangeet*, *Mehendi*, *Varamala*, *Gath Bandhan*, *SathPher*, all not much familiar to the Kerala culture, arouse immense interest and curiosity among the viewers. Recently South Indian marriages seem to have emulated these North Indian ceremonies such as *Mehendi* and *Haldi*. This is indeed a huge impact of the dubbed versions of popular Hindi soaps that reach the Kerala Household. Even the Malayalam soaps imitate the grand costumes and jewelry portrayed in such soaps.

As television has become globalized, so the place of television is in the constitution of ethnic and national identities have taken on a particular significance (345). Social identity theory suggests that an organization can change individual behaviours if it

can modify their self-identity or part of their self-concept that derives from the knowledge of, and emotional attachment to the group (Turner 33). Indian soap operas aired across the continents serve as such an identifiable organization that connects thousands of immigrants through satellite television. They evoke nostalgia, memory and longing for their homeland among the Indian diaspora worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Despite the efforts to portray the realistic image of a woman, the 'vestigial notion' of the perfect wife-perfect daughter in law drawn from previous soap operas remains deeply rooted in *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*. Indian soaps are responsible in no small measure for pigeonholing Indian women into the ideal of the *sarvagun sampan bahu*. A catch-22 situation is evidenced with respect to Indian soaps and their impact on mass culture; soaps driven by the profit motive feature the above mentioned feminine ideal to cater to the masses but the very act of such a representation keeps the 'ideal' alive in the minds of viewers and makes sure that it survives. Although soaps cannot be faulted for the construction of the *kulastree* ideal (as it can be traced as far back to the Indian epics and puranas), they cannot shirk responsibility for its 'reconstruction' and their role in sustaining this vicious, self-perpetuating cycle is palpable. In spite of the witty tagline of Star Television Ltd. ("*Rishtawahisochnayee*") and their claim to depict a much more modern outlook of women, the content on empowerment of women is often missing in soaps, resulting in negative portrayals like caricaturish female villains. Class differences, gender differences, and the element of gossip etc. dominate most of the soaps and continue to fuel the imagination of the masses. To a great extent, all images seen on television soaps are mediated and are monopolized by an elite class who gain profit from the mass reception of cultural stories in the form of entertainment.

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