

Entertainment/Liberation: Feminist Potential of Indian Soap Operas

Dr. Sapna Dogra*

Abstract

The present paper proposes to study the post-cable television era's most famous Indian soap operas like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and *Kasauti Zindgi Kay*, in order to delve into the issue of feminism that is negotiated on daily soaps and to analyze the extent to which the 'passivity' of the audiences is dealt with by the audiences, advertisers and the makers of the soaps themselves. This paper would analyze the contemporary relevance of the so called feminist aesthetics of daily soaps and to find out, if and where lies the feminist potential of the Indian soap operas. The entertainment value of soaps cannot be lost sight of and the social issue of liberation of women can also not be sidelined. Somehow, Indian soap operas have failed to merge the two for purely commercial purpose and have turned out to be yet another upholders of the status quo.

Key Words: soap operas, Tania Modleski, Ekta Kapoor, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*

Introduction

One must bear in mind that the soap operas referred to in the title are not those of pre-cable television era in India such as *Humlog* and *Buniyad* but specifically and particularly the post-cable television era's most famous like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (KSBKBT), *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (KGGK), *Kasauti Zindgi Kay*, *Saat Phere*, etc., or to put it more simply and directly, the genre of Ekta Kapoor's family melodramas. In the year 2000 when KSBKBT went on air, the television audiences of India got hooked onto Ekta Kapoor's 'K' serials overnight, heralding an era of soap operas dealing with the lives of fabulously rich and famous.

It is generally assumed that soaps are meant for non-intellectual, consumerist and passive women. But then how can we actually talk about feminism and women's liberation without actually knowing what most women do every day? They watch television. Both men and women watch soaps daily, though the bulk of the audiences comprises women. Let us look at some titles of popular soaps that have been broadcasted on weekdays on some popular television channels like Star Plus, Sony, Zee T.V. and Colours over the past few year: *Kussum*, *Kaisa Ye Pyar Hai*, *Kajjal*, *Parivaar*, *Kartavya Ki Pariksha*, *Mamta*, *Maayka*, *Banoo Main Teri Dulhan*, *Teen Bahuraniyan*, *Saat Phere*, *Ghar Ki Lakshmi*, *Betiyaan*, *Kasamh Se*, *KGGK*, *KSBKBT*, *Kasauti Zindgi Kay*, *Kumkum*, *Karam Apna Apna*, *Sasural Simar Ka*, *Ye Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, *Ye Hai Mohabbatein*, *Kundali Bhagya*, *Balika Vadhu*, *Saath Nibhana Sathiya*, etc. The issues that these soaps deal with are clearly visible in the titles: family, marriage, motherhood, brides, home, troubles of life, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, duty, parental obligation, or to put it simply the kitchen-sink politics. These are the stuff Indian soap operas are made of.

Serialized fiction is not something new. In the early nineteenth century, writers such as Charles Dickens and William Thackeray wrote most of their novels in serialized form. People found it cheap to read the novels in installments because hardbound books were expensive. Dicken knew his audiences very well and cashed in on that. Even the first soap creators like Agnes Nixon credits Dickens for the development of serial fiction. Dicken's novels and genre of domestic novel resembled soap operas in their multiplicities of plots, sub plots and broad list of characters with each chapter ending in suspense.

The first soap opera was actually aired on radio in the 1930s. In the year 1955, radio era of the soaps came to an end. The first soap opera on television was Irna Phillip's *The Guiding Light*, which went on air in 1937 and was discontinued in 1956. The span of eight years for KSBKBT, that went on air on 3 July 2000 and

* Asstt. Professor (English), Government Degree College Baroh, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh University

was discontinued on 6 November 2008, is not that strong by the soap standards. The Guiding Light remains the most successful and the longest running show in the broadcasting history. In the west, there has been a trend of studying day time soaps as a different genre altogether, as against the prime time serials that are 'read' as masculine in content and execution. But, in contemporary India there is hardly any distinction between daytime soap and primetime serials. Instead there are only primetime soap operas. Soaps telecasted at night can be caught in their reruns during the day.¹

The basic structures and issues of soaps across the world remain the same. The same issues can be found in all successful soap operas: family melodrama targeting women as consumers and purchasers, upholding the stereotypical gender roles. The bulk of the audiences that watch soaps are 'supposedly' women and the content, therefore, and accordingly, is characteristically women oriented.² There is hardly any action on the soaps. The main constituents of an ideal soap are dialogues. The characters talk, talk and only talk. They talk their ways to love, hate, marriage, infidelity, divorce, illness, etc.³ The locations of the soaps are homes and offices and in some stray cases hospitals. Since it is the fortified interiors that form the backdrop to most of the talking, the topics of discussions and arguments are familial relationships, sibling rivalry, romance, marriage, mythological discourses, sermons and everyday domestic talk. In particular, it is the family as the center of attention; family as the microcosm of the society at large.

On the whole the world of the soap operas was full of troubles. Problems seem to keep the show moving along. They are not major problems like war, forest fires, outlaw bands, or national security; rather, they are "realistic" problems of shady business deals, illness, young people and drugs, marital infidelity, and so forth. (Katzman 207)

Every soap has one virtuous heroine, the prototype of which is Sita, such as Tulsi of KSBKBT, Parvati of KGGK, Saloni of Saat Phere and Prena of Kasauti Zindagi Kay who is docile, subservient, self-sacrificing, hardworking, 'occasionally' foolish but whom luck and fate support in the very end. Against these are set in contrast the bad women, such as Payal of KSBKBT, Pallavi of KGGK and Urvashi of Saat Phere who are the clever, beautiful, educated, career minded and professional women. Usually, the plot revolves around the vamp's troublemaking schemes, and the central heroine's god fearing and virtuous character that triumphs in the end. It is the very banality of the situation that is so exciting; banality that can be trusted. Never in an Indian soap opera would one find any inappropriate sexual scenes which makes them a trustworthy genre for the conservative viewers of India. Though the soap operas are highly sexed up, sex is only implied. Indian soaps have been the least controversial television genre that has made them the most popular televised genre to be liked and watched by people across time and place. Soaps are associated with propriety; the propriety of dress, language, location is maintained throughout, thereby making soaps the most predictable and the least controversial television genre.

Unlike films that have a particular time limit and promises to reach a resolution, soaps are known to constantly defer its resolution. In the world of instant gratification, soaps refuse to gratify its audiences completely. Reaching a full and final resolution is outside the generic aesthetics of the soaps. Soaps are not meant to come to an end. Soaps start in medias res and continue to occupy what Dennis Porter calls "indefinitely expandable middle" (783). Generally, the only reason for the discontinuation of any soap is its dwindling mass appeal. In such cases, soaps are simply discontinued without telling the audiences the whereabouts of their favorite soap characters. This defining feature of any successful soap opera, i.e., deferred resolutions and narrative dissatisfaction, which is a must for any soap's success because it guarantees and ensures audiences' eternal and persistent return.³

It is crucial however to stress that soap viewers, far from being, "tricked" into expecting a climax that never arrives, profoundly enjoy the extended suspense, which has been refined to an art over years of serialization. (Hayward 91)

Another remarkable feature of the soaps is their pace. Their slower than life pace and commercial breaks make them ideal for daily distracted viewing. Any conflict is talked about in full detail in the soaps and is thought over again and again by the characters. In the world of soap operas, nothing is meant to happen suddenly. Because of its slow pace, audiences can easily miss weeks of their daily soap without losing track of

the main story line. When a new story line is introduced, the earlier conflicts are easily forgotten by the characters, the creators of the soaps as well as by the audiences. Thus, making the soaps the most popular televised genre.

Films are marked by spectator's complete attention on the scene and complete absorption in the narrative. In contrast, television is marked by a viewing that borders on discontinuous and distracted attention. Patrice Petro in his article "Mass Culture and the Feminine: The 'Place' of Television in Film Studies" (1986) says that criticism of art and mass culture works on gendered grounds, i.e., art is associated with activity, masculinity, productivity, whereas mass culture is associated with passivity, femininity and consumption. As against the intellectual cinema is the television, which is outside the domain of high art. Petro supports Dennis Porter (1977) who sees soap operas as a tool in the perpetuation of domestication of women. Petro further says that the televisual form most condemned by media scholars is the soap opera, the form that supposedly appeals only to women.

Television found itself neglected when compared to films and further in television criticism soaps were the most condemned televised form. It was not till Tania Modleski came on the scene that a way for feminist recuperation of soaps was paved. Her works on soap opera have been quite thought provoking and has led to a rethinking of the genre. Beginning with Roland Barthe's hermeneutic code, Modleski sees feminist potential in three aspects of the soap operas: first, its narrative form – disrupted and discontinuous; second, lack of narrative closure – a difference of resolution; third, no fixed spectatorial viewpoint – numerous egos. Modleski's argument is concerned with soap's narrative form and the feminine spectator's relationship to that form only. Modleski has argued that the succession of deferred climaxes in daily soaps finds a connection in the women's endless work at home. She has applied feminist principles to soaps thereby attempting to recuperate the neglected genre. In contrast, Dennis Porter condemns soaps for the failure to resolve all problems.

Unlike all traditionally end-oriented fiction and drama, soap operas offer process without progression, not a climax and a resolution, but mini-climaxes and provisional denouements that must never be presented in such a way as to eclipse the suspense experienced for associated plot lines. Thus soap opera is the drama of perpetua without anagnorisis. It deals forever with reversals but never portrays the irreversible change which traditionally marks the passage out of ignorance into true knowledge. For actors and audience alike, no action ever stands revealed in the terrible light of its consequences. (783-784)

Such criticism was answered by Modleski who criticized Porter for applying high art vocabulary to low art soaps. According to Modleski, a comparison between classic drama and soaps is doomed to failure. She says that all said and done, entertainment value and wide mass appeal of the soaps cannot be sidelined and one requires a different approach altogether.

Advertising is in the very name of 'soap opera'. The first soap opera that appeared on radio in the 1930s targeted only female audiences and hence the advertisers were reluctant to sponsor the daytime soaps. Consequently, the advertisers were lured by offering big discounts. Some big advertising companies such as Colgate, Palmolive, and Procter and Gamble took the opportunity. Thus was coined the term "soap opera". Apart from bathing soaps, things like breakfast items, cleaning kits and beverages were also advertised during the telecast of the daily soaps. (Cantor and Pingree 37) Other than the commodities that are advertised in the commercial breaks, the soaps depict scenes of wealth and affluence. This is what Ronald Berman has to say about the visual treat that soaps offer:

Current nighttime soaps are very nearly pornographic of wealth. . . the audience is invited to lust after houses and jewels and stock-market options. The women of soaps are not undressed, as moralist might fear, but overdressed. (74-75)

Similarly, Alessandra Stanley says that in Indian soap operas,

Women are draped in silk and encrusted in jewels, a fantasy of wealth that has grown all the more seductive since the rise of India's billionaire class. The formula has lasted for more than a decade because it puts identifiable characters into aspirational settings.

The families of a regular soap opera are the high class with amazing purchasing potentials. Their homes are lavishly furnished; the saris, dresses, jewelry are expensive and fashionable; servants are common sights and houses are always clean and well decorated. But conspicuously, the characters have strong middle-class values, leading to audiences' identification with them and aspiration for such lifestyles. The famous KSBKBT was a primetime soap which revolved around the life of an extremely wealthy Virani family. The middle class reality in pre-cable television serials like Humlog and Buniyaad has metamorphosed to middle class consumerist fantasy fueled both by the advertisements and the affluent settings and characters of the soaps.

It is in the very concept of deferred resolution that advertising finds a permanent place. The creators of the soaps are least concerned with the feminist discourse of the ever deferred resolutions. As long as people watch a soap, the profits are guaranteed to flow in. Tania Modleski's support for the soap's refusal to achieve a narrative closure on feminist counts must not be seen in insularity. The real discourse will emerge when apart from the narrative form the lights would fall on the advertisers–creators–audiences nexus. To quote Jennifer Hayward soaps exist

. . .for profit and therefore institutionalize the impossibility of ever achieving narrative resolution. Tune in tomorrow, same time, same place – the soaps slogan makes visible its economic imperative. . . that soap's increasing recycling of theme, plot and characters reflects larger cultural shifts – in expectations about consumption, for example, and in awareness of limit – its structures is clearly influenced by its production and consumption contexts. Predicated upon the impossibility of closure, ending not with narrative resolution but with a new set of questions, soaps are perfect consumer texts, keeping the real commodity – potential consumers for advertised products – always already in place. (88)

No soap can run for long without advertising and sponsors. The success of the soap lies in a good rating and rating, in turn, depend on the viewer's incomplete gratification. Soaps are targeted at families and the women being the center of the family, focus of attention for both the creators and the advertisers of the soap become the women (as consumers and potential buyers). Family centered women as against the working women are better suited for profit centered soaps. Soap watching requires leisure which is the very domain of the stays-at-home women. To sell their soaps to the sponsors, the soap creators project an insular, affluent, family as an ideal with a husband who is there to provide money and children and a stay-at-home Indian wife to provide the daily dose of gossip for the viewers.

Among all the televised genres, the audiences' interaction is found most active and highest with the soap opera. The audiences engage themselves to such an extent that they write letters to the makers and characters of the soaps giving opinions and suggestions. Creators of the soaps know the pulse of their audiences very well. Ekta Kapoor got back the vamp 'Pallavi' (after the character was 'reformed') only on public demand. Audiences' reaction to soaps is directly linked to their position. Unlike films where the actors are frozen on the screen, and film being a finished product, audiences have no say on the film's story or execution. In contrast, television's everyday viewing brings the audiences closer to the characters of the soap. Leading to a daily, familiar and comfortable interaction. The audiences feel that they have a right over what they watch on television and the clear outrage of people against some soaps supports this fact. The viewer of soaps is in a privileged position. He/She is omnipotent and omnipresent; every situation gets to be studied by the viewers in full detail. In soaps, audiences are not watching from behind the removed fourth wall, but are invited to enter the door of stranger's houses. This brings to mind, Tulsi opening her doors to the viewers and introducing the cast of KSBKB to voyeuristically gaze through the daily turmoil of a family. The viewer can sneak through the houses of the characters, seeing myriad situations, like listening to the “whispered” thoughts of the character. The characters know only a small part of the story but the viewer knows it all. This is what is thoroughly enjoyed by the viewer. Since audiences know each and every character's thoughts, schemes and plans, it becomes difficult to identify with one character, leading to a position of multiple identifications. Even the vamp is a much loved and admired character. As Modleski says,

Since the spectator despises the villainess as the negative image of her ideal self, she not only watches, the villainess act out her own hidden wishes, but simultaneously sides with the forces conspiring against

fulfillment of those wishes. As a result of this “internal contestation”, the spectator comes to enjoy repetition for its own sake and takes her adequate pleasure in the building up and tearing down of the plot. (17)

Soaps require active participation. The question that remains to be asked is that if the audiences are active, what are they active to? And if the audiences write letters to the creators of the soaps asking for less boring soaps, is that “activity”? In order to understand this, one requires a neat distinction between passive and politically active audiences. For the audience who are addicted to soaps, the activity borders on the domain of suggestions and giving pieces of advice. They demand better soaps, better entertainment, good story and less boredom and monotony. This is the level of activity that the soap makers desire. Soap creators want reactions and responses, be it positive or negative. As Hayward says, “If viewers are engaged enough to respond angrily, they're engaged enough to keep watching”. (103)

As against such “activity” one requires a more intellectually and politically charged engagement. Let me quote some lines from a poem “Soap is a Clean Addiction” by a black writer Janice Lowe who is reacting to the portrayal of the blacks in the American soaps. The issue can be related to the Indian soaps where what is shown and what is ignored becomes equally important. Soaps are upholders of upper caste, upper class Hindu morals. The speaker, a black woman, can be easily substituted with a muslim, dalit, homosexual, physically handicapped and other minorities.

it is with pride or fear i admit
to watching soap operas for years
an addiction like candy or difficult men

it is important the two are related
that my favorite shows mess with me

back in the day
when faithful ivory viewers
wrote to networks in protest
of interracial love

we knew
all of us in cleveland
that Dottie
of warm voice and heavy bottom
was one of us

we knew as soon as Delilah
boogied outta new orleans
you were considering revealing
her coloredness

married to a toupeed tycoon
you left her floating
tween father and son

we found her dancing
in striped danskin
to “Maniac” from the movies Flashdance
in weird homage to mixed beauty
you refuse to give families to

we found Dottie in “83”
When Alabama called to tell us
“Guess what, you've got your first Black “Miss America”
We heard Dottie's voice again on the Tonight Show

Vanessa sounded just like her
we were right

did you think it cute
to drop us in towns where hunters
mistake sepia for deer?

as sure as Latino tough guys are played by Italians
(and sometimes vice versa)
we become orphans in Llanview or Pine Valley
The places to go if one wants to adopt

Agnes Nixon
i know I got racial problems
But who you think you fuckin with?

nobody calls us dirty

soap is a clean addition
sort of like herbal tea
once in awhile somebody does the nasty
and the tube heats up

The speaker of the poem is politically engaged who knows that soaps are a tool of capitalism and that it is the viewer who:

are the ones to buy Ajax
Palmolive the Raid the Air Freshener

It is the same story across nations where the 'faithful ivory viewers' write to the networks in protest. Soap operas support the norm and any deviation or any trajectory that runs tangential to the societal norm is destabilized. There are hardly any references to current political issues in a regular soap. The focus is simply on a family (extended families as in ease of KSBKBT, KGGK and Saat Phere) which is constituted by the institution of marriage as a crucial institution that invites criticism from within and without.

Soaps are also the preserver of gender roles. Men are officers, businessman or bosses and women, apart from being housewives, may be in stray cases nurses, teachers or secretaries. Men are never the trouble makers in the soaps. The plot is usually handled by the saas, bahu, devrani, jethani and the others in the family. In some case two women may fight for a man. Also are popular the plots where men are either dead or paralyzed so that somehow the focus falls on the central heroine or the vamp. Soap without its signature vamp is unimaginable. The vamp, negative role model for women, is shown as clever and is highly manipulative. She can use her sexuality, fake pregnancies and seduce men when required. She is ruthlessly selfish. She is the career-oriented woman, the business woman, the liberated woman who is a threat to the world of soap operas (and supposedly to the society at large). There will hardly be a reference to the education of the central heroine, but vamp's education will be prominently foregrounded.

Feminists have seen these stereotyped women of soaps as a hindrance in the battle for equality. The regular soaps are advice giving machines. Advising the women that their biggest dharma is to see their family united even at the cost of their lives and rights. That the Kartavya of an Indian woman is to be a Kulvadhu. It is the supremacy of the family and family oriented women that is repeatedly stressed. Gone are the days of the serials like Rajni where the character of Rajni stood as a spokesperson of consumerist society or Udaan where Kalyani the police officer, was anything but a teary, helpless, ineffectual, submissive Tulsi or Saloni.⁴

Today the biggest issue is the liberation of women. And for soap operas (whose audiences comprises mostly women) the issues is a natural one. Soaps reinforce stereotypical behaviour of an Indian woman. Dennis Porter has rightly said that 'Soap operas feigns ignorance of medium and their influence'. (787) They can reinforce the traditional, conservative value system. Television and its various products have immense

potential to either work as a mirror for the society or conversely act as a virtual mirror making or showing what is basically wrong seem right. Soaps support domestication of women and are to a large extent, anti-feminist. Television is an instrument of social control and soap creators like Ekta Kapoor⁵ has invented a new age control mantra.

In conclusion, it can be said that soaps are a complex T.V. genre to theorize. Its entertainment value cannot be lost sight of and the social issue of liberation of women can also not be sidelined. Somehow soaps have failed to merge the two for purely commercial purpose. Popular media plays a major role in the ideological construction of nation, womanhood and identity. Soaps do have the potential to present less stereotypical and more positive images of contemporary women after all Rajni and Kalyani were as much loved and accepted by their audiences as Tulsi and Saloni are. Indian soap operas have turned out to be yet another upholder of the status quo regarding women, i.e., the context of “family” and “kitchen” as her domain and gossip as her interest. Soaps are very much cultured by the patriarchy which ensures women's subordinate status within the family. The search for a 'tomorrow' in today's Indian soap operas is lamentably futile.

Endnotes:

- 1 See Cantor and Pingree's *The Soap Opera*. The book distinguishes between daytime soaps and primetime serials. Also, the book gives an insightful analysis of the role of audiences and advertisers in the making of soaps.
- 2 Mary Ellen Brown says that soap operas are like women's talk, gossip and ballads, that exists parallel to male dominant culture, and that “insofar as woman who use these cultural forms are conscious of the form's otherness, they are practicing feminine discourse”. (205)
- 3 See Dennis Porter. According to Porter the time of soaps are “merely incremental”, where “nothing grows or ripens”. There's “no future and no past but an eternal featureless present in which each day looks like the last or the one to come”. (788)
- 4 Purnima Mankekar gives a thought provoking insight into the television, womanhood and viewing politics nexus of Indian television of pre-cable television era. Her primary focus is on Doordarshan on the role it played in education and upliftment of women. According to Mankekar, Rajni and Kalyani are women who stepped outside their homes to “intervene in public”. (118) Also “the heroines of these narratives embodied ideal Indian womanhood because they channeled their energies into reforming Indian Society”. (118) The analysis of feminism negotiated by Doordarshan and the one forged by Ekta Kapoor can be easily set in contrast.
- 5 Raju Srivastava, a standup comedian jokingly called Ekta Kapoor a “serial killer” (pun intended) in one of his shows 'Aisi Ki Taisi'.

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