Recognizing the Politics of Visual Imagery through Transplanted Traditions in Indian Television Soap Operas

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Television is known to be a powerful provoker and circulator of meanings. The attempt in this article is to read the discursive elements of female soap opera protagonists and find out if they are idealised partly as religious devotees in their whole existence. Wars of production and re-enforcement of meanings are often waged in media space. Therefore an analysis of 'character reading' of the soap operas broadcast in the Hindi networks will help focus analytical attention on different forms of hegemonic power that constitute the text. The objective of this article is to delve into the textual and semiotic codifications used in the characterisation of the protagonists of the select soap operas under study. These codes will help in describing the phenomenon of creating religious devotees in soap operas.

Keywords: Soap opera devotees, discursive practices, dominant discourse, mediated devotion

It is known that people are immersed in a media and consumer society from their 'cradle to grave' (Kellner, 2003) and hence it is very necessary to understand, interpret, and criticize its contents. The ubiquitous characteristic of television makes it an indispensable part of our lives. According to Dennis McQuail (1994), since the earlier days of Mass Communication research, a distinctive culturalist perspective on mass media has been developing. Sometimes our world view is also being shaped by the content of television thereby making us conform to the mainstream system which may also be referred to as dominant system of norms. Hence, it is very important for media consumers to attain knowledge on media trajectories to cope with a mesmerizing cultural environment.

One common picture of contemporary media stresses cultural diversity—a view of the media as highly pluralistic in practices, with no single web of power running through the whole system. But to what extent the relative diversity and pluralism of the media will exist within this mainstream system is questionable. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony is helpful here as a theory of power and domination which emphasises power through achieving consent rather than through coercion. The issue with respect to a hegemony model becomes one of whether and how discursive practices are articulated together within the order of discourse, in ways which overall sustains relations of domination. According to Lazarsfield and Merton (1977) television possesses a broader and normalising power representing conforming to the elite interests. Accordingly they claim that these norms and values work as a kind of symbolic fabric in supplying people 'discourses' for making their social experience meaningful. This will help people find their place in the larger culture. The taking of meaning according to John Fiske (1987) involves the reading of the text as a term which encompasses a wide range of symbolically encoded items such as attire, structured

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social norms and language. Forms and codes based on semiology are analysed to derive meanings and socio-cultural inter textuality. Therefore our aim is to find the avenues of meaning, linguistic analysis of the text in terms of truth which is believed to be hidden there , the discourse and its discursive practices leading to more analytical criticism of the text. This attempt will touch on a theory, a practice, a choice which are caught up in the struggle of men and signs. Here this struggle or activity is referred to the readings of the viewers who either take up the dominant reading or the negotiated reading based on their socio- cultural and ideological frame of references.

Recognizing the Politics of Visual Imagery
Media theorists both past and present have identified the politics of visual culture, be it in films or television. But many of them failed to empirically document how television imagery or media imagery more generally enters into the 'meaning making' activity of the people who use it on a daily basis (Lembo, 2000). Charles Taylor (1992) argues that in patriarchal societies, women folk are coerced in accepting a negative self imagery and a low self esteem. A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the demand for recognition amidst the hegemonic domination. Our identity, according to Taylor (1992) is partly shaped by recognition or its absence often by misrecognition of others. The real damage would be caused if cultural spectacle such as television also reflects a distorted and stereotyped image of women (Ibid).

India, being a land full of epic literatures and mythologies, is dominated by religion and rituals. These activities are very prominent in an Indian's daily life as it acts as a normalising agent for social life. But there is a plethora of variations in their religious affiliations. Again the variations in the degree of religious affiliations vary among individuals particularly among young urban-dwellers. Since social locations are numerous and identities multiple in the cultural studies scheme of things, reading the text is understood to be a quite complicated activity. People have the liberty to accept or reject, even negotiate, in different ways the meaning that discourses will have for them. However sometimes audience refuse to allow the 'coherence' provided by the dominant discourses to become their own meaningfully coherent ways of perception (Lembo, 2000). A female character according to Tania Modelski (1996) is decentered in the soap opera equivalent to her role in the patriarchal family. Here she is decentered, because her identity is realized only in her relationships with her children and husband. The female protagonist is portrayed attempting to accommodate the changing demands posed by these relationships.

Transplanted Traditions: Gazing at Indian Media Discourses
The media has an authority to typecast people, places and events by enforcing conventional societal norms and marginalising the oppositional behavior (Lazarsfield & Merton, 1977). The concept of 'hegemony', a term for a ruling ideology was coined by Gramsci (1971), is used by the critical theorists to denote the cultural dominance. A multi ethnic, multi regional Indian audience are consistently read the text offered to them through the mass media discourses day in and day out. Numerous questions concerning hegemonic control will be hurled if these millions of audience are offered the visual imagery of only a particular dominant religious discourse. Therefore domination or extensive coverage provided to a single religious discourse in a multi ethnic country like India will call into several questions. The question here is not raised against consistent and repetitive portrayal of a particular dominant ethnic group, if any, but the total absence of the rest others. Questions are also hurled against 'the institutional power of the mass medium' (Gitlin, 1978). According to Gitlin (1978), the preference given by the mass media to particular ideologies and the repetition of certain 'ideational structures' is indicative of the media's preference for ideas and values that harmonies with elite interests. Hence discourses compatible to the elite interest (here

dominant religious discourse) tame and normalize oppositional discourses.

Methodology

Numerous questions concerning mediated ethnic domination will be raised if the multi ethnic, multi regional Indian audiences are offered the visual imagery of only a particular dominant discourse. In order to trace these discursive practices and their implications, an extensive semiotic exploration of the discursive elements present in the characters of the female protagonists of two Hindi serials is undertaken. Character reading is carried out based on semiological codes, such as signifier and the signified, intricacies of the mediated domination of particular cultural discourses over the others is undertaken. While one of the perspective in critical discourse is order of discourse (here religious), the other is the communicative event (here soap operas), which means the form through which the discourse presents itself. And the analysis tries to find out if they do intersect or if one draws upon the other.

      Saath Nibhana Sathiya is an Indian television soap opera that was broadcast on one of the Hindi commercial channels, Star Plus. This soap opera is based on the cindrella style story of the aspirations and turmoil in the life of two cousin sisters named Gopi and Rashi. While Gopi is an illiterate Rashi is modern and educated. Gopi is dutiful towards her family and is very innocent on the other hand Rashi is driven by materialistic desires and serves as antagonist along with her mother who is also the aunt of Gopi. The serial portrays the affluent life of Gujarati family who although wealthy but are bound by familial ties and virtues. *Choti Bahu* is another Indian television soap opera narrating the love saga of two characters Radhika (female) and Dev(male). The story revolves around the succession of 'Rajpurohit' (head priest status) and the property related to it. Radhika is a great devotee of "Kanha" (Lord Krishna), who helps her to overcome all the obstacles plotted by the antagonists.

The Paradigm of Television Text

Arguments have been forwarded stating the ubiquitous nature of television has provided a new kind of cultural experience and symbolic environment. One of the foremost thinker in this regard is Douglas Kellner who in his essay "TV, Ideology and Emancipatory Popular Culture" (1979) argues that ideology is a synthesis of concepts, images, theories, stories, myths in imaginative, symbolic or mythical forms. Such a strategy of image "production-consumption and domination", according to Kellner (1979), follows the logic of advanced capitalism as a system of commodity production, manipulated consumption, administration and social conformity. He also points out that television images and stories produce new mythologies for problems of everyday life. "Myths" according to Kellner (1979) are simply described as stories which explain, educate and justify practices and institutions. It should be pointed here that since myths deal with the most significant phenomenon of human life and enable people to come to terms with death, violence, love, sex, labor and social conflict, television portrayal of religious discourse (here dominant) may replicate itself, allowing further expansion in production and consumption. Here the concept of "bardic television" developed by John Fiske along with John Hartly in the book Reading Television (1978) can be echoed. According to them television performs seven functions in a modern society that the bard performed in a traditional society.

      Much of the activities of the world's great faiths are precisely concerned with the communication of values and ideas using a multiplicity of mass medium. Neil Postman (1985) points out that exclusive consumption of media product will enhance its survival. What Postman (1985) negates in his article, Chris Arthur upholds in his book 'Religion and the Media' (1993), stating that religious education and media are related. Arthur (1993) opines that proper use of media helps in

the dissemination of religious ideas among masses. Argument have been laid out by many theorists that the multicultural societies experience a number of communication flows where the dominant social order undergoes a constant process to sustain its community and value system through mass media that it controls.

Hence Andrew Jakubowicz in his essay 'Media in Multicultural Nations: Some Comparisons' in the book Questioning the Media (1995), presents a critical analysis of media in multicultural nations citing the examples of United States, United Kingdom and Australia. He analyses the cases of these three multicultural nations to depict the sense of nationhood and multiculturalism being portrayed in the media. According to him since these three nations are the conglomerations of many cultural groups there is every possibility of one or two of the groups posing as dominant. Mythologies all over the world talk about more or less similar kind of struggle, climax and victory of good over the evil. Therefore social function of myths persists in our society and is visible in television culture in terms of symbolic and thematic patterns.

Hence the first objective of relation between the representation of characters and the frequency of their religious practices is of great importance in order to dissect the dominant religious discourse present in the soap operas. In order to strengthen this objective the arguments put forwarded by Christianne Brosius (1999) can be echoed. Brosius (1999) argues that the 1990's have witnessed an increasing awareness of the need to popularize Indianess through the Hindu revivalist ideology of cultural nationalism (Hindutva). This, according to Brosius (1999), is done by means of "branding" and displaying a selection of images, metaphors and narratives deriving from broader realms of popular culture.

According to Brosius (1999), the use and packaging of such symbolic means through a communication system can help a community to construct and derive meanings. Members of a particular community will align their loyalties to a given set up of references (moral values, duties and rights; cultural practices such as religious rituals) and a dynamic process of continuous negotiation for construction of community feeling will then take place. It is clear that if a multicultural state is prepared to adopt clear policies that seek to create the conditions for inter cultural communications and social justice then this can result into more just outcomes. But if neglected, this may force the nation to face a major threat. Stewart M. Hoover and Kurt Lungby (1997) attempts a complex approach to examine the relationship between religion and mass media by bringing together perspectives from cultural studies, sociology of religion, media studies, ritual studies and religious studies.

 The ownership and control of profit generating media has an impact in some way or the other over the meaning making activity of the people consuming these media products. Douglas Kellner (2006) helps to develop methods to analyse the nature and effects of the media. The richness of symbolic structure and content in the select soap opera provides a wealth of different readings and appropriations. Three levels of readings are being adopted by Douglas Kellner in this paper and they are "realist level, mythology level and allegorical level". Thompson (1990) argues that rather than examining the role played by media in enforcing an ideological consensus it is important to consider the functioning of the mass media within the broader sociological sphere. It is also undeniable that we are deeply engulfed in a mediatized world of diverse ideas and identities. In order to appreciate the latter we need to understand the former.

Soap Opera: Trajectories of Mediated Imagery
According to Kate Bowels (2000), a soap opera is an ongoing episodic presentation of dramatic fiction presented either on radio or on television. At the beginning of the twenty first century, soap operas became an integral part of Indian culture. The content of Indian soap operas mostly concentrates on the conflicts between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. The polysemic or

multiplicity nature of television as opined by Ron Lembo (2000) helps to provide a potential of meanings which may be realized or made into actually experienced meanings by socially situated viewers in the process of reading of these soap operas. The process of reading, dominant, negotiated or alternative meanings by the viewers will lead to further dimensions of power (Ibid). John Fiske (1987) with this regard points out that any set of social relations will necessarily involve power and resistance, domination and subordination. As cultural or religious groups are neither autonomous nor equal the portrayal of certain cultural or religious group and their discursive practices all through out in the two select Hindi channels will call into question about the mediated domination of these discourses over the other not given screen presence in Indian television.

The Spectacle of "Docile Bodies"
The gender stereotypes, more specifically religious stereotypes represented in television represents mainstream ideology, reinforcing the stereotypical definitions of Indian womanhood (Nandkumar, 2011). While most of these serials are found to be reinforcing and strengthening the gender stereotypes already present in Indian society with themes that centre on a strong sense of binary opposites. The female characters, the protagonists and antagonists are mostly portrayed in the light of approval or disapproval. After undertaking only this brief study of the portrayal and depiction of religious and cultural discourses in two soap operas running in the select prime time slot, we can form a subtle idea about the power relations in our society. We know that discourse is a social act which may promote or oppose the dominant ideology (Fairclough, 1995), in this case the religion and culture. Hence these discursive practices have become institutionalized particularly by media industries. The polysemic or multiplicity of meanings provided by television makes the viewers socially situate themselves (Lembo, 2000).

Social problems are accustomed to be solved on individual level. It is in this regard the socio and cultural traits present in the character of the protagonist conforms or deviates it from the dominant or official discourse. These stereotypical roles reflect the typical patriarchal mindset, where the housewife is an ideal woman with primary concern on family relationships (Nandkumar, 2011). Although the protagonist are portrayed as superwomen but her identity is created in relation to an invisible heavenly support. All of these produce more or less strongly marked social difference which relate among each other in a complexity of ways that always involves the dimension of power and finally conflict of interests (Fiske, 1987).

The portrayal of "good female characters" and their discursive practices all through out in the two Hindi serials call into question about the mediated domination of these discourses over the other not given screen presence in television codes. It is apparent that there is stereotypical representation of gender roles on television as its images largely reflect traditional patriarchal notions of gender. Women are still typecast in traditional roles, and stereotypically represented as dependent, docile and extremely religious.

In order to bring herself and her family out of any sort of problem, the protagonists Gopi and Radhika resorts to prayers and literally begging in front of the religious deity. The female protagonists are portrayed as either dutiful wife or dutiful daughter-in-law whose priorities lie in her domestic chores as well as her devotion to religious practices. The protagonists are almost every now and then shown devoted to the service of their deity of worship even sorting refuge during the time of distress. While the protagonists both Gopi and Radhika are identified as docile, submissive and helpless characters unlike the antagonists. They are also depicted resorting to heavenly blessings of their religious deities for outrunning demonic forces of the antagonist or any hurdles that are being created on their way. These depictions rather give us an impression of the female characters as solely dependent on external patriarchal power for resolution of any hurdle devoid of their rational

and independent decision making capacity. Moreover the character of the protagonists (here Gopi and Radhika) cannot be understood as individuals existing in their own right but as textual relations with other characters. The characters of both the female protagonists is defined by their relationship of similarity and deference to other characters. The lead ladies of both the serials under study are married in wealthy families grounded in Hindu traditions. Both the two female protagonists exhibit the "feminine characteristics" within the patriarchal discourse. Some of these feminine characteristics are identified by Sandra Lee Bartky (1997) in her essay, Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power.

The stereotypical representation of women as "dependent, docile, and extremely religious" is a procedure of "internalization" of "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1979). This aspect is readily internalized by the producers of the serials and hence the repetitive visual imagery of these "docile bodies" in the form of female protagonists is undertaken by them to reinforce this docility. It was Foucault (1979) who tried to identify the imposition of discipline upon the body with the operation of specific institution and hence when the female protagonists are repetitively portrayed performing religious rituals to settle matrimonial bliss, imposition of religious disciplines upon the female body is attempted. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men (Bartky, 1997). This will add up to the dominant gender arrangements where women's subjective realizations will be restricted within an ensemble of systematically depicted practices. Internalization of religiosity is attempted to structure the patriarchal construction.

These soaps are violative of woman rights also and highly encroaching upon the space created by women. The female protagonists are portrayed as one dimensional figures. Their public sphere and the private sphere cannot be differentiated. Their portrayal as dutiful wife and dutiful daughter-in-law with priorities lying on domestic chores and devotion to religious practices are rather process of internalization meant for the audience. The portrayal of the power of a particular Hindu religious deity in overcoming their distress is leading to various readings for the audience. The audience will either read these meanings as the domination of a supreme heavenly power over human beings or the female protagonists are docile and submissive to the powerful force. There is no portrayal of their public life and this acts as the public private dichotomy or public private hierarchy considered as a founding condition of female oppression. This dichotomy results in women's objectification and confinement, privatizing their functions within the home while privileging the role of men as decision makers in the public sphere (Uberoi, 2008).

Again the representation of purchasing of a commodity to practice this devotion towards their religious deity by the two protagonist is an encoding of 'capitalism' (Ibid). The naturalness with which two fit together in the text of the select soap operas is evidence of how these ideological codes work to organize the other codes into producing a congruent set and coherent set of meanings that constitute the common sense of a society. Women have never had so much of a derogatory stance as it has happened with these soap operas. It is highly restrictive of their free space and in line with neo liberal economy and the spirit of globalization, these soaps have become violative of new politics, destructive in nature for the emergence of cultural free space.

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