

Media and Oppression: Life Skills and Middle Class Morality in Indian Soap Operas

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Abstract

Soap operas (TV Serials) have already occupied the position of a virtual reality module for the middle class families in India. For popular culture has been regarded as the most influential medium of cultural transportation, it is actually the soap that celebrates and (mis)leads the socially accepted norms of all sections' moral codes effectively. In constructing the notions of middle class values and morality, serial plays a very major role. There is always a set of adaptive behavior expected from all individuals in their family and society, which enables them to be a fit wife, mother or daughter. Certain abilities are considered to be life skills by the middle class system focusing on the familial ties projecting all types of conventions in religion and class. In India, serials propagandistically promote a system of well-ordered social and family life, especially that of Hindu families. The attention on the various roles of woman in the family – as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, sister, grandmother and servant are stereotypically portrayed in almost all serials where films have, to a certain extent, neglected this practice. An enquiry must be forwarded to locate the conservative necessity of shaping the family and society always in a quite traditional aspect. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the political inclusions of middle class morality in soaps. To elaborate this point, the paper further investigates the deliberately excluded social and cultural factors of the same medium, interrogating the concept of adaptability as a life skill. The paper further analyses the concept of life skill from a subaltern/marginalized/feminist perspective dismissing its implications of adjustability.

Key Words: Popular culture, middle class morality cultural transportation, life skills, inclusions.

Mass media, through shared frame work disseminates information bringing a rapid change for the traditional communication forms. In 19th century, the intervention of television as one of the major revolutionary media combining pictures and sounds together started providing a sense of reality to the masses supporting established social norms in a correlating manner. “Television is one of the major long term factors that would shape the moral and mental attitude and values of our society.”(Gorman and Mclean, 136) In India, the role of television was to educate when it was introduced for the first time on 15 September 1959. Television appeals to every segment of society with its strong impact on images. It could construct virtual myths of middle class Indian families with the emergence of soap opera in 1984. *Hum Log (We People)* is considered to be the first Indian soap opera, telecasted on Doordarshan in Hindi. The very beginning of the experiment was about the struggles and aspirations of Indian middle class family. Things have changed, the present scenario is occupied by social media and OTT platforms where a number of soap operas are being broadcasted.

Media influences human life on various aspects. Opinions, views and believes of individuals are shaped by the media to a certain extend. This influence increases drastically and there are messages delivered by the media to reinforce existing values and customs. Besides that, media plays a vital role in developing life skills of individuals. Media is useful to explore multiple aspects of the present day life. Media literacy itself has to be regarded as a life skill where one is able to have better understandings on abuse, bullying, political stands, gender issues, caste discriminations, relationship goals and fitness concerns. In the case of movies different social groups interpret the text in different ways being influenced by different aspects. Henrik Kroninger-Jungaberle and others in their article “REBOUND: A media-based life skills and risk education programme” says:

Different people will see (and fail to see) different aspects of a film. The goal of film work is to cooperatively expand cognitive concepts, explore the film scenario and assess the displayed behaviours with the intention of building positive norms and relevant new knowledge. (710)

For New Media platforms, a number of life skills have been nurtured. Blogs develop writing power and critical thinking, when social media like Facebook focus improving social skills and political awareness. Instagram improves one's artistic skills where Twitter embeds the chances of more social connectivity. Altogether, these virtual spaces encourages people to have both technical and communication skills. The set of adaptive behaviors that enables individuals to deal with all demands and challenges of social and family life is said to be life skills in a broader sense.

The term "soap" has been used because, these serials are sponsored majorly by soap companies to get telecasted. TV Soaps are commercial products and they present characters with life-skills like determination, responsibility, maturity, empathy and concern. But the concerns of soap operas over life skills get compromised gender-wise when those are perceived from the perspective of a middle class culture. Some of the life skills which get compromised in this way are critical thinking, self-esteem, self-responsibility, decision making and leadership for female characters. Unfortunately the above given omitted or muted life-skills lead the oppressed individuals towards empowerment. Women empowerment is not a family project (Family is a patriarchal construct)

It can be easily recognised aforesaid paradoxes as a noteworthy aspect to understand properly the reasons why audiences find both pleasure but also create conflict to tele-serial content. It's been found that female representation has often been restricted to some preconceived ideas. Names, places and dimensions kept changing not the 'ideas' of different woman rather it has been repeatedly 'ideal' women. One could perhaps argue that physical attractiveness may play more part in their selection than for their male counterparts. The circle of life for women in most of these serials considers 'women' as a social responsibility, a glorified life to live and protect, an economic liability, not an asset anywhere which is considered to be the common social approach in general. (Kumar, 39-40)

A mutual conflict of life-skills can be observed here. Life skills perceived through education always interrogates life skills perceived through convention; but priority of TV Soaps is always convention. This can be the reason why people with educated forward mind-set usually

criticize soaps for their conventional outlook. This phenomenon leads to the quarrels over the acceptability of soap operas in every houses at the prime time. The youth in general would prefer to watch infotainment programmes on television for they are more attached to certain texts that provide useful deliberations on useful aspects of life. What makes the viewers enjoy soap operas is question that need to be addressed. It is through the characters, they identify the presence and absence of life skills using which their likes and dislikes are shaped.

Popular Indian soap operas like *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, *Kumkum Bhagya* and *Kundali Bhagya* are conceived as family dramas in presentation and treatment. *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai? (What is this Relationship Called?)* was premiered in 2009 in Star Plus channel produced by Rajan Shahi. The plot of the soap revolves around a couple Akshara and Naitik from a large joint family in Udaypur. In the beginning, these two characters struggle to understand each other, but it results in their mutual support. There is another story of love and marriage which goes parallel to the central plot. The story line comprises several incidents that cover Naitik's accident, several deaths, births and marriages leading to the creation of a number of characters. From 2011, Tamil and Telugu dubbed versions of the serial was started airing in Star Vijay and Star Maa. It has also been dubbed to Malayalam under the title *Akkareyanente Manasam* aired on Asianet Plus in 2017. It has completed 11 years and more than 3400 episodes creating great influence on family audience, receiving plenty of awards. The soap is now available on Hot Star. Naira (daughter of Akshara and Naitik) is a character who is presented as an expert in martial arts, but has been harassed and kidnapped many times in the show. It is incredible to watch that Naira needs somebody to rescue her when she is in danger. She has been constantly abused keeping doubts over her character by her husband and eventually got divorced. The soap glorifies patriarchy convincing the audience that they highlight the concept of platonic love. Her character has been denied with essential life skills of self-esteem and decision making.

Three types of relationships are cultivated in the serials, kinship, of romance and of social bond. The concept of family is celebrated in which birthdays, funerals, marriage occupy significant place. Women are found to play predominant role in all these. (Burton, 263- 265)

Kumkum Bhagya (The Fortune of Vermillion), was aired from 2014 on Zee TV produced by Ekta Kapoor. It is available on Zee 5 at present. The soap deals with the love story of Pragya and Abhi. The story line kept introducing new characters with the sub-plots of two other married couples. It has already covered more than 1900 episodes with unbelievable rating points and a number of awards. The show invests a major share of its time repeating fight among the characters. Pragya, the central character is portrayed as a lady without fortune. Prachi, her daughter too is presented as a quite unfortunate individual depicting all generations in a pessimistic way. Altogether, the show doesn't consider an optimistic gender perspective. Characters often fight, the hero never meets the heroin and few characters are seen happy. Pragya, being a simple girl with so called cute feminine expressions is a character with conventional middle class life skills such as responsibility, empathy and concern.

Kundali Bhagya (The fortune of Horoscope), the next soap opera was premiered in 2017 on Zee TV created by Ekta Kapoor. The plot is about Preeta and Srishti, the two sisters going further to their journey to re-unite with their mother. When the show got resumed after a break due to Covid-19, it came to the status of the most watched one with more than 5.5 million impressions on Zee 5. Lots of villainous women characters always plotting against the lead characters and they escape from those traps are the recurring actions. The middle class girl falls in love with a rich guy and the predicted results it not positive. "Their beauty is enhanced by strong make-ups, heavy jewelry and jardousi sarees. Women are found to marry in rich households and have nothing else to do apart from dressing and gossiping." (Anand, 3). Her feminine (gendered) family oriented life skills of morality, care and concern of others stand erected on her journey. The creators of the soap never gives her an option to empower herself with self-esteem.

These serials often describe female characters fostering conventional gender equations. They uphold a patriarchal cultural pattern and construct the landscape of family ignoring subjectivity of women. The project of shaping the position of women in society started with religious soap operas like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The creators of *Mahabharata* positively televised the image of Draupati as the creator of Indian civilization embodying the rage of women in her character through which Indian women can have an introspection regarding her

position in family. The serialised *Ramayana* on the other hand conceived Sita as a subservient wife who clarifies the patriarchal doubt about her purity. She is dutiful and is afraid of her husband's public favour. As Mankeker argues that Sita is considered to be a role model for ideal Indian womanhood (246). Here, the concept of "ideal" is a conventional notion constructed by the family oriented adaptive behaviours like responsibility and concern as instructed by the patriarchy.

To analyse the particular aspect of gendered life skill evaluation in detail, an Indian soap opera in Malayalam title *Kudumbavilakku* too has been selected. *Kudumbavilakku* (Lamp of the Family), the Malayalam soap opera premiered in 2020 on Asianet and Disney Hot Star. It is a remake of the Bengali soap *Sreemoyi*. The show is all about a dedicated house-wife (Sumithra) and her struggles to prove her value by re-discovering herself. This soap opera has got six adaptations in different languages in India including Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. The Hindi adaptation of the show has been titled as *Anupamaa*. It is the top rated soap opera of Kerala peaking with more than six million during February to April 2020. ("Malayalam TV")

Sumithra, the protagonist of the show is a so-called dutiful wife doing all the household tasks for the family; but she never gets acknowledged by her husband Siddharth, his mother and her daughter. As the plot moves on, Siddharth is found having another affair with one of his colleagues called Vedika that gradually results in his rejection of Sumithra. Though Sumithra realizes the matter, she "ideally" fulfils all her domestic functions supported by the father of Siddharth. This is just because she still shows responsibility towards her in-laws and she is determined not to leave them under any circumstance. She shows the conventional middle class value of "female maturity", empathy and concern to everyone including her cheating husband, unruly son and teen-aged foolish daughter. After their divorce, Siddharth gets re-married with Vedika. Vedika, the well-educated, employed lady who is always screened in modern dress is depicted as a selfish and crooked lazy contrasting with the Saree wearing Sumithra. With the arrival of Sumithra's old friend Rohith, a successful businessman, she gets empowered as an entrepreneur. Siddharth slowly identifies the real selfish character of Vedika; but this is mainly due to his memory of Sumithra as an ideal wife who took care of his matters properly. In many

episodes of the serial, Siddharth compares the character, behaviour, routine and life skills of Vedika with those of Sumithra and starts admiring Sumithra inside.

The empowered Sumithra grows fast in her garment business while Sidharth and Vedika fall in financial crisis. “In most of the serials, educated women professional women and independent women were marginalised and the religious non-professional women were foregrounded as representatives of Indian culture.” (Dasgupta. et al, 113) Sumithra even helps Sidhartha when he is in crisis which Vedika could not tolerate. The plot mainly revolves around the household issues inside the families distinguishing the characters of Both Sumithra and Vedika. Which of them is the embodiment of femininity? Which of them possess values of morality and empathy? These are the queries continuously seen in the script of the show. For Sidharth, reminiscence of Sumithra is felt when he sees the messy kitchen of his newly rented house. In one episode, he advises Vedika to be a dutiful wife enabling herself in a systematic way. He asks her to cook and manage the interior of the house so that she can be a “good wife” whereas Sumithra admirably manages both her business and household. Sumithra’s villainous mother-in-law Saraswathi is always presented as a potential carrier of patriarchy in her attitude; but she is seemingly happy with her new well-educated in-law. Similar negative attitudes are traced in both these characters; they are envious trouble makers who keep in touch with each other to plot against Sumithra. When the lead character of Sumithra is treated as a meek and empowered one on the process, characters like Vedika and Saraswathi are depicted as immoral liars.

The serials are centred on domestic sphere and family relationship and woman’s status and position and her success depends on how well she can conduct her household duties towards her husband, in-laws and children. Some sort of a meekness or submission is portrayed and the concept of patriarchal society is highlighted. She is a ‘domesticated subaltern’ in a male constructed stereotype. The second group represents women who are power hungry, full of vices, heartless and ruthless. (Datta and Nandy, 3)

All the soap operas listed above are family dramas. Women characters are always stereotypes representing them as weak gendered individuals. Meanwhile there are empowered

female characters too in the show. This dual projection of women creates a contradiction in the plot using melodramatic sequences and piercing back ground music. Obedient home making females are contrasted with selfish manipulators. For popular culture has been regarded as the most influential medium of cultural transportation, it is actually the soap that celebrates and (mis)leads the socially accepted norms of all sections' moral codes effectively.

There has always been a set of adaptive behavior expected from individuals of any community which enables them to be a fit wife, mother or daughter. Certain abilities too are considered to be a part of life skills by the middle class system focusing on the familial ties projecting all types of conventions in religion and class. In India, serials propagandistically promote a system of well-ordered social and family life, especially that of Hindu families. The attention on the various roles of woman in the family – as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, sister, grandmother and servant are stereotypically portrayed in almost all serials where films have, to a certain extent, neglected this practice.

The Indian soap operas in general uphold the virtues like virginity, honour, modesty, through their female characters. Ideology like “pativrata” (literally translated as a wife who is vowed to her husband) exerts a very powerful influence on Indian soap operas. This ideal of “pativrata” is always romanticized through various rituals. These rituals (like ‘karwachauth’) again place women in the familial context; thus limiting their self-identities. While the earlier soap operas on Doordarshan had created gender perceptions in the context of social problems, the new breed of soap operas started the trend of representing women in the context of the house and the hearth. (Das, 76)

An enquiry must be forwarded to locate the political necessity of shaping the family and society always in a quite traditional aspect. Efforts of the corporates to market their product on the prime time through various advertisements, manipulating the cultural aspects of conservative Indian thoughts is to be identified. The inclusion of middle class (upper middle class) in soap operas itself is a matter of concern. They seldom talk about life in lower middle class or poor families. They are deliberately excluded because of many reasons. Indian soap operas need

commoditized female bodies projected with costumes and jewelry which cannot be presented in a plot moving around poor families.

Sartorial images of adult women in chiffons, georgettes, crepes, gold and diamond jewelry.... elaborately mehendi, patterned arms, legs, feet, dazzling bindis, some spiraling like Silver snakes on the forehead create virtual images that are not noticed in the everyday lives of the people. (Dasgupta et al, 105)

The concept of adaptability is considered to be a prominent life skill in Indian soap operas. A lady/girl who is not able to be adaptable in her new circumstance, especially at her husband's house is regarded as someone who is devoid of a much important life skill. So the concept of life skill forms a subaltern/marginalized/feminist perspective dismissing possibilities of liberation from the unfavorable patriarchal domains. At the same time, liberated/empowered women are also get represented in a few soaps like *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, *Everest*, *Airlines*, *Parasparam* (Malayalam) etc. These shows portray lives of ladies with aspirations and their victories. "...Many soap viewers particularly appreciate stronger female characters and find pleasure in relating them to their own positions" (Bruin, 48). Joost de Bruin, a senior faculty in Media Studies from Victoria University, New Zealand has conducted a study on how soap characters of a particular show *Shortland Street* are classified and evaluated by the viewers based on the absence and presence of certain life skills. Bruin argues:

In line with this, Livingstone's (1998: 137–39) interviewees appreciated characters who were family oriented and moral, while they disliked temperamental and complicated characters. Characters' ability to deal with their personal problems determined their likeability. David Buckingham (1987: 186) found that complex characters were liked and simpler characters were mocked by his interviewees, who organised characters in terms of their morality and authenticity (1987: 188). (47)

Bruin could identify viewers classifying the characters according to their reflections on life skills. He, with help of some students of his University conducted a survey on this topic collecting information from the regular viewers of the show *Shortland Street*. The following result of the study is very surprising:

In line with previous soap audiences research, interviewees appreciated the stronger female characters. They were generally praised for their capacity to stand up for what they believed in. Female characters who combined this trait with other commendable life skills were particularly valued. At the same time, female characters who were seen as lacking life skills were heavily criticised by many interviewees, and it seems that female *Shortland Street* characters are judged more harshly than the male characters. Female characters who made supposedly ‘wrong’ life choices and complained about their problems were ridiculed and sometimes even threatened with physical violence. Praise for stronger soap women was thus overshadowed by ridicule of weaker soap women. Interviewees also stressed that they would not tolerate these kinds of women in their own lives. There seems to be more pressure on women than men to master the life skills that the interviewees found important. (54)

Viewers classify the characters as Likable (adorable) and annoying based on their successful indulging in life skills. The major audiences from middle class families do favour life skills of determination, responsibility, maturity, empathy and concern with due respect to conventional familial bonds when judging the female characters of the opera. Even if the characters are stronger and empowered, they will be judged and criticized if they lack the so-called qualities of “ideal Indian womanhood”. But do these characters possess critical thinking? Self-esteem? Are they self-responsible? What about decision making and leadership? These questions are out of syllabus.

Empowered Sumitra (*Kudumbavilakku*) may not get appreciated if she determines to leave her “domestic duties” like what Ibsen’s Nora has previously done soon after identifying herself as an mere physical object. Deepthi IAS, a famous soap character of Kerala (*Parasparam*) is a differently perceived one. She is televised as a stronger, efficient police officer and a lovable wife and daughter-in-law (but domestic duties get compromised for she is an IPS holder). Still she is an obedient and caring individual inside the family so that she can have all sorts of life skills attributed. Willpower of the lead character Kasthuri’, (*Neelakkuyil*) the tribal girl to be a doctor gets fulfilled, but her journey to this is presented as a too difficult one,

serving a rich family. Her character possess all the “ideal” qualities which make her suffer several abuses as a servant girl. The concepts of Ideal wife, ideal daughter-in-law and ideal servant lead to judge the female characters of these soap operas as “likable” or “admirable”. The criteria that determine judgement is their efficiency in life skills. All of them are moral and family oriented.

Annoying characters of soap operas on the other hand lack desirable life skills and are led to a negative judgement and evaluation. The character of Vedika in *Kudumbavilikku* is evaluated as annoying considering her irresponsible and immature treatment of family life and household performances. She is an angry, immoral character just similar to Saraswathi, her mother-in-law. Viewers often relate characters of soap operas to real-life people and to themselves. As Bruin observes: “Interviewees seemed particularly annoyed with characters who reminded them of people they knew from their own lives who had a lifestyle of which they disapproved.” (53)

Viewers’ interaction with emotions of the characters ultimately lead them to a real life like experience where they wish to judge every behaviour. The characters altogether, when taken as a community is identified with the concerned audience community. Female characters, being the subalterns are judged more harshly during the process of identification. Though media is a platform for representation, soap opera functions as an oppressive agent inside it. Promoting various kinds of religious customs, rituals and believes, females are very often televised as individuals living for the sake of domestic peace and familial harmony. Shaswati Das points out:

The tradition continued in those soaps that addressed the issues like dowry, adultery, female infanticide, and similar social injustices towards women. These pro-social soap operas that are gaining popularity with the Indian audiences again seem to nurture social rather than the personal identity of Indian women. Although soap producers sometimes focus attention on personal identity formation but often it gets submerged in tradition-bound social roles. (77)

Severe criticisms are being raised against the treatment of relationships in soap operas from many corners. The State Government of Kerala is seriously considering to introduce censorship for soap operas to examine the content for deleting certain segments of conservative and unscientific elements in the script. (Cris) The anti-progressive and superstitious nature of

soap operas must be wiped off while the disgusting comedy shows that propagate sexism and racism are also to be taken care of. No award has been declared to any TV serial at the 29th Kerala State Television Awards announcement on 1 September 2021. Jury finds no soaps to have the quality to be considered as the best one among the category. It was reported that certain shows lack both technical excellence and artistic value. (“Jury Finds”) Though soap operas are not created with info-educational purpose, the viewers do engage them for deliberations of life skills. The inconsistent and emotional family dramas employ regressive accommodation for women to ‘educate’ her systematically with no social commitments.

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