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New Age Cultural Revivalism and Objectification of Women in the Indian Television.

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Abstract: *Objectification of women is not just a naked porn star selling strawberry condoms, but also a heavy lehenga clad 'Ballika Vadhu' defending her 'modern family'. There is a need to define the objectification of women in the mainstream media. Misogynist patriarchal male directors trying to make women oriented daily soaps without doing their proper homework, is bound to produce regressive image of women onscreen. Often there is a sharp distinction between an obedient, passive and polite housewife who is put in the category of 'good women' and a bad characterless women who is easily swayed by the western influence, and is always plotting to ruin the life of the 'innocent protagonist' who is trying hard to save her joint family from splitting. In each and every episode of almost every fiction daily soap, there is this tendency of glorifying marriage, pregnancy and child birth, glorifying joint family systems, glorifying the importance of 'taking permission' and the need to please each member of her husband's family, each and every aspect of these is the objectification of women. The female protagonists in most of the Indian television serials are less of women and more of a puppet doll wearing the marks of tradition 24/7. Feminists, researchers, and women activists in their numerous works have already identified that family, marriage, joint family system, pregnancy and religion are the pillars of institutionalized inequality which restricted the mobility of women and very successfully stopped the overall development of women as a part of human race. In the present times the makers of television serials put up a pretentious view to condemn the oppression against women, but they don't talk about equality and equity of men and women, they don't discuss the fair representation of women in the public spheres or their representation in the workplace. A saree clad 'married girl' with heavy makeup, adorned with tons of jewellery,*

*standing like a doll can be an innocent bride in the eyes of patriarchal serial makers, but in reality she is a passive disposable woman. This perspective and this representation of women in the Indian television serials and advertisements is the objectification of women. The commercial mainstream channels have strengthened the **gender stereotypes**, Presenting women as weak, passive and tolerant but yet are strong enough to 'be the guardians of Indian Culture'. There's more to women than just being a show piece in the house of her in laws. One important point to be kept in mind is the fact that women are not homogenous group and that woman as individuals manage and react to the difficulties of family life differently. The Indian media gives a very narrow outlook to the social and women issues and as 'writers' fail to do justice to the creativity of plots and women characters, they are those group of creative people who don't dare to push the walls any further and don't question the roots of inequality in our society.*

Keywords: Misogynist, Regressive image of women, Good woman, Institutionalized inequality, Gender stereotypes.

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Often the serials are set in the background of tradition and modernity. Private channels are of recent origin, before that Doordarshan held sway over the Indian audience, but it lost out to the private channels after the liberalization of the economy. With the sole aim of private channels to make profit, there emerged a trend of mega serials, which ran for more than eight or nine years, with different female protagonists belonging to the three generations of women set in a traditional patriarchal family. The type of women glorified here are those who gives preference to her family even if her love and care for family is not reciprocated back to her, who decides to

be part of job market only to improve the economic condition of her family, in short a good woman is the honor of her house and should feel guilty if she is ambitious and if she thinks about herself. Maya Ranganathan (2010) in her paper, 'The Archetypes of Sita, Kaikeyi and Surpanaka Stride the Small Screen' puts forth an important point, " Commercial considerations demand that all 'good' women retain the Indian traditional values despite the trappings of modernity that they carry on their bodies, not all 'mega serials' face the same success. The woman protagonist even if not exactly home bound is to be governed by personal emotions. She may storm male bastions and prove to be equal to men in many fields, but is never allowed to forget that she is foremost a woman and, hence, must accord family and relationships the most importance. Even a bold and courageous IPS Officer is fazed by the emotional problems at home. Despite her capabilities, she does not settle for a strong and capable male, but for one who is perhaps inadequate. Once united with a man in marriage, she does her all to preserve the sanctity of the marriage and remain a devoted wife. Her troubles in the public space come from unscrupulous men, and those in the private space of home, from wayward men and women. The attributes of passionate pursuance of ambition, adventure and liberal attitudes towards sexuality, which have all, by and large, come to be associated with globalization, are reserved for the 'bad woman' who faces her nemesis in the end. In essence, the mega serials, which although at one level seem to deal with the women of today, have a strong tendency to cast women in the moulds of mythological Sita, Kaikeyi and Surpnakha. Much like in Ramayana, Sita wins through patience and forbearance while Kaikeyi and Surpnakha are humbled for their evil thoughts and designs. Sex is still a taboo and while 'mega serials' contain a generous dose of bigamy, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex and love affairs, there is always punishment awaiting those who stray from the straight and narrow. The meek and righteous women who wait and watch are rewarded in the end, while the sinners are annihilated or reformed"

Also the TV serials female protagonists glorify the traditions and the greatness of Indian womanhood, and this is achieved via casting a girl in western dress, high heels and loads of makeup. Had it not been for the nakedness of 'western and modern women', Indian women would never have been given importance. Value loaded traditional Indian women versus the western feminism. The typical Indian male serial makers propagate the idea that western feminisms ideals and values lie in encouraging women to be infidels and to dishonor their family

and parents and wear short dresses, in comparison to 'Indian Femininity' which teaches women to be a good Indian girl or a housewife. The television shows meant for women are made, sold and controlled by Indian patriarch serial makers. Thus strengthening the idea that he is saving women folks from the 'dirty influence of westernization'

Regressive, racist and gender biased serials getting a high TRP is a worrisome phenomenon in the sense that these serials are mostly watched by women, in the time slot 7pm to 9pm, the continuous repetition of misogynist ideals glorified under the garb of 'Great Indian Culture and Value' is bound to negatively affect the image, identity, mobility and independence of majority of women. There's more to the literature of objectification of women in media than just the analysis of the Ekta Kapoor soap operas, no one objectifies women the way Ekta Kapoor does it and the other serial makers took a notch higher. With more than 100 channels (in both Hindi and regional language) objectifying women in 'desi traditional style'. Even with the advent of privatization and commercialization of the channels, nothing much has changed in the format of the story plots neither has there been changes in the way women are presented onscreen, except for the fact that there is an added element of 'modernity' in the form of designer house with expensive furnishings and Italian marble flooring, designer jewellery, backless blouse worn by the vamps, new trends of makeup and hair style. And even though some serials eventually start on the note of an ambitious girl who wants to make a successful career for herself but eventually by the eleventh episode the girl falls in love with her boss, but due to lot of fuss ends up getting married to his brother and she being a 'good woman' tries very hard to win the heart of her vicious and manipulative in laws, this sums up the story and creativity of plot of these serial makers. There is more to the definition of modernity than just show casing flashy cars and lofty mansion in a serial, and show casing the richness of the makers of serials. Modernisation is a idea, it is about the maturity of a person's thoughts and beliefs and evaluate each and every thing from a rationale point of view. But the use of rationality is not even the last element in the contemporary soap operas. When the Bollywood decided to improve its women representation approach, it's counterpart the television media decided to take ten steps backward, they not only made women equal to a 'furniture set' but also laid down the sharp definitions of 'good woman' and 'bad woman', who is selflessly attached to her family especially the family of her in laws. The reality of Indian women in the misogynist patriarchal society is quite different from that

represented in the serials. They 1) justified child marriage, 2) justified the fact that the report of domestic violence should not go outside the walls of house, female headed prosperous households and female headed giant firms ruthlessly run by women (which is a very rare case in India), 3) propagating the idea that the aim of sex workers is always to break up a 'good, honourable household, which has a very reputed name', 4) justified male infidelity because he is heartbroken and then falls in love with a 'innocent and pure girl' (thus giving the idea that how men may have a lot of relationships, but when it comes to marriage, they seek a virgin girl), 5) 'vamps' seducing 'the hero' and thus conceiving, but in actuality 'the good moralistic hero running high on Indian values' never touched her. 6) Branding abortion as a bad practice which is often resorted to by vamps and they have easy access to safe abortion and how aborting a child is not a big issue for them. This is very damaging misogynist idea, a lot of women in this country in reality don't have access to abortion, an unmarried pregnant girl is often forced to resort to unsafe abortion and a married woman is forced to accept an unwanted pregnancy and an unwanted child. 7) Private channels trying to be socially relevant and running high on TRPs by showcasing the woes and agony of child brides and widows who are so submissive that they never question the oppressive structure of their home and society.

Carolyn M. Elliott in her Introduction to the book, 'A Space of her Own, Personal Narratives of Twelve Women' writes down, "A seventh grade text book on Indian History makes a perplexing pair of observations about the position of women in the Vijayanagar Empire of 17th-century, South India. It observes: "Women occupied a high position in society. They played an active role in the political, social and literary life of the country". Then follows the statement: 'Sati was very common'. This raises many questions about the meaning of freedom for women in the mind of the author. How can one say that ending of one's life because one's social role of wife is over, even if done voluntarily, represents a high position for women? Is personal freedom available only when one is protected by a male? Can this be called a high position?"

Even the shows dealing with history of kings and queens and decisive battles is fraught with glaring mistakes, they are less of history and actual events and more of the propagation of the greatness of Indian Culture, even going to the extent of justifying polygyny, child marriage, bride burning or the women jumping into fire (in the form of 'Jauhar Pratha'), and glorifying the

fact that the true salvation of a married woman lies in being the mother of several sons. The makers of serials such as ‘Chakravartin Samrat Ashoka (which is aired on Colors Channel)’, ‘Maharanapatap’(which is aired on Sony Entertainment), and Jodha Akbar (which is aired on Zee TV Channel) did not do justice to the leading ladies playing the role of protagonist, the biggest proof of women objectification is in the fact that how royal women are always decked up (in heavy clothes and jewellery) and don’t really question patriarchy, don’t question their husband when they keep a large harem of married and unmarried women at their disposal, they question their teaching when they are told that they need to be loyal to their husbands even in their dreams and the same thing is not taught to the men, these women are not given voice to question patriarchy when they are treated as ‘carpet wives’ by their husbands, or when they are disposed of in marriage by their fathers. According to these historical shows Indian woman is great because they can jump in fire to prove their loyalty to her husband, who loves her a lot but he also has three hundred other wives and vast number of mistresses at his service, another feature that makes them great is that they have no sexual desire, if any women who does not follows the rules of feminity laid down by the Indian high caste patriarchy is a threat. In the serial Chakravartin Samrat Ashoka, the serial makers didn’t do justice to any of the female characters especially to the love affair of Queen Noor and Prince Justin, the makers of this show very openly suggested that it is okay if the King Bindusara marries four times but Noor is a beautiful vile women if she decides to have a lover and companion in Justin, and co incidentally all the four queens beget a male child for the king, this raises a lot of questions, first one being how come the queens gave birth to just one child who happens to be a boy? The second question did they neglect their daughters if they had any or were they killed? Or could it be the fact that the makers of serials decided not to give footage to the daughters of the queens? Since the whole show revolves around the struggle of Ashoka to get the throne, and for that he had to compete with his brothers, and daughters don’t claim throne so it would be useless giving them screen space. The makers didn’t properly explain the reason of bitterness of God Mother Queen Helena for the Mauryan dynasty. As widow and as an outsider (so far away from her natal home), it would have been very difficult for Queen Helena to make space for herself and ensure such high rank for herself in the palace politics, as a woman in a patriarchal society I can feel her struggle and pain.

Another serial Maharanapratap aired on Sony Entertainment Channel gives the feeling that it has been made by the folks of right wing religious extremists, trying to reclaim 'the good old days of the great Hindu nation India'. They took the Islamophobia and women objectification at a whole new level, advocating some of the assumptions and stereotypes in the society such as, 'Hindu women are always violated by Muslim men only, and in order to save the honour of royal Hindu women, the system of 'Jauhar' came into being, FORCING THEM TO JUMP IN THE FIRE TO SAVE THEM FROM BEING VIOLATED AT THE HANDS OF THE MEN FROM THE OTHER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY.' This serial achieved a high TRP in the recent times when right wing political ideology is in its full swing, and when in the recent past a bloody communal riot took place in western Uttar Pradesh in the name of saving the honor of women.

The serial Jodha Akbar is another serial that shows the twists of a complicated relationship between Jodha and Akbar coming from two different religious backgrounds. Despite having more than hundred wives, Akbar loves Jodha a lot. In this serial women are presented as a show piece to the king and to the audience. In this show good women are the wives of Akbar and bad women are the nautch girls who are forced in this trade, who are aware of their sexuality and use it to bring down the Mughal Empire. Especially deplorable are depictions of harem and Meena Bazaar depiction where all the wives of Akbar try to impress him, who is an ignorant husband, who does not remember the exact number of wives he had. The makers in their depiction and comparison of Queen Jodha and Begum Rukaiya lay down the difference between a good and wife that is Jodha, and a vile and plotting woman that is Begum Rukaiya who is so evil that she always wants the love, affection and company of her husband but does not gets it because of Jodha which makes her jealous, and hence begum Rukaiya is a bad evil women who destroy the happy homes. A happy home of King Akbar with his favorite wife Jodha and his other hundreds of wives squeezed in a congested harem with their children. This show very successfully defended unwanted and forced pregnancies, polygyny and male infidelity. It also gave out a very defected definition of honor and chivalry.

Ramanand Sagar actually started out with mild objectification of women in traditional way in his several serial he made on mythology and epics, giving them a feminine sweet voice instead of a confident feminist voice. This trend was further explored by Ekta Kapoor in the treatment of her female characters, set in modern world, traditional and rich business family.

And this trend can be even seen today in serial like ‘Ballika Vadhu’, ‘Sasural Simar Ka’, ‘Itna karo na Mujhe Pyaar’, ‘Pratigya’, ‘Na Aana iss Desh Laado’, ‘Jamai Raja’, ‘Doli Armaano ki’, ‘Ishq ka Rang Safed’, ‘Hello Pratibha’, ‘Zindagi ki Haqeeqat se Aamna Samna’, ‘Chhotti Bahu’, ‘Badi Devraani’, ‘Shastri Sisters’, ‘Udaan’, ‘Swaragini’, ‘Satrangi Sasural’, ‘Sarojini’, ‘Kumkum Bhagya’, ‘Tum hi ho bandhu sakha tumhi’, ‘Qubool Hai’, Almost all the serials aired on Sahara One and Life OK.

Serials such as ‘Ishq ka Rang Safed’, ‘Jamai Raja’, ‘Sarojini’, ‘Sawaragini’, ‘Pratigya’ actually defended the practice of stalking the girl, in the name of true love from the boy’s side, and his love was so true that the girl not only loves her from the bottom of her heart but also marries him, and shut out the reasonable protest from the side of her mother, and if her mother tries to protect her from a bad marriage, she is a evil. All the serials mentioned above portray that women if want, they can take control of their lives and change the course of her life, and if she is truly a great Indian woman, she will very politely and very calmly win the hearts of her all her in laws. Women do take control of their lives and they do change the course of their lives which comes at a great cost. Because in this country there is thing called institutionalized rape and institutionalized violence against women, to straighten them up when they begin to go astray, and it is called honor killing, people beating up their women and no one cares. I guess the serial makers have stopped reading the statistics on the gender based violence and cases of unreported sexual assault. Another major problem with the theme and plots of these shows is that they often show a powerful authoritative woman in the role of a corporate boss (as shown in ‘Doli Armaano Ki’, ‘Jamai Raja’, ‘Tashn-e-Ishq’) or as a leader of a khap panchayat (as shown in the serial ‘Na aana iss desh laddoo’) who is respected and feared by the clan of misogynist men, each and every episode of this serial was a very bad representation of oppressed women, even in the representation of the ‘loose women’ trying to end the marriage of her sister. Now the way the ‘corporate women leader’ or a woman with a successful career are presented in a very peculiar way, feeding the famous derogatory assumptions and stereotypes 1) they are bad mothers, who are so busy in making money and career for themselves that they neglect their child and don’t spend time with them. What these makers don’t understand that in this materialistic money economy, it is essential to have money to pay the bills, to pay the home loan and to pay for the education and for that people need to work hard, and it is a very wrong assumptions that in this

whole process people (especially women neglect their child). A home or a shelter is a important step towards ensuring a safe future for the children and then comes the education. 2) These corporate women are very arrogant because they are wealthy and successful and run a 'rich firm', which is again a wrong assumption and presentation of successful women, because in reality only 2.5% women are represented in the elite club when it comes to the ownership of giant firms. 3) These serials shows women wearing sleeveless blouse (or for that matter any outfit), and go anywhere and everywhere. Especially in the serial, 'Jamai raja' where the lady by the name of Durga Devi wears sleeveless blouse, goes to police station, does investigation in desolate places without getting sexually assaulted. I am not judgmental about her clothes or make up, but the bitter reality of this country is that roaming around the city in a sleeveless blouse or for that matter even in a long burqua can get any women raped; this is a very big reality of this country happening on a daily basis. 4) In the serial 'Na aana iss desh laddoo', it is shown that a woman runs a khap panchayat with the assistance of her five grown up sons, now the first default in the serials concept is the fact that misogyny of khaps are so high in real life that women are not even allowed to attend it, so how can she become its leader and how will she order female infanticide? Another technical fault lies in the depiction of the practice of female infanticide, when the other parts of the country have already resorted to the technology for the purpose of female foeticide. The whole village in this country travels in expensive SUVs, use mobile phones, trade in sophisticated weapons but don't use technology for abortion!

Pitting women against women, getting sky high TRPs by showcasing the grief and helplessness of the 'pure hearted loyal protagonist'. One stereotype that gives so much cover to these biased shows is, 'Aurat hi aurat ki duhsmann hoti hain'. Now this has a very different theory and its origin lies in the sexual division of labour and gendered space. Within the system of patriarchy, the congested domestic arena was allotted to the women and the task of conquering the outside world and making a name for themselves was the responsibility of men. So this is where the real problems start to emerge, when women are strictly made to live in the four walls of house, and they have to share this very little space with other women, children and sometimes men, so this causes irritation and tension, often women try to control or capture the space of other women. Besides a lot of study have put forward the fact that when women are in charge of

the house economically and when they have a standing in the family, all the children in the family get equal education and access to nutritious food.

I don't deny the fact that the format of serials has always remained unchanged, but they are very slow to recognize the changes that are changing the society especially when it comes to women. It is a difficult trick to portray the different evolvments of womanhood in India without provoking the religious extremists or the guardians of culture. With recent spates of moral policing and the violent attempts at to censure the media is a worrisome cause, but does not mean that channels and serial makers should indulge in magnifying and advocating the negative stereotypes and assumptions against women.

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