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### **Engendering familial citizens: Serial-viewing among middle-class women in urban India**

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UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

# Engendering familial citizens

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Serial-viewing among middle-class women in  
urban India

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7/12/2010

Submitted to the University of Westminster in partial fulfillment of the academic  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media and Communication.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a study of serial viewing among women in middle-families in two Indian cities carried out in 2007. It explores women's engagement with a new brand of serial narratives that centralizes the traditional Hindu joint family and places women at the centre of the family as nurturer and custodian of traditional values.

This return to the traditional, the thesis proposes, marks a new conjunctural moment in the evolution of Indian television. This new conjunctural moment, characterized by competitive attempts among private and transnational cable and satellite television to Indianize content, the unprecedented growth of vernacular television and consequently the national circulation of traditionally inflected serials, has come to represent the feminisation of television in India.

The manner in which differentially located women engage with these narratives of idealized family and womanhood suggests certain specific gendered ways in which television mediates women's discursive access to and performance within both family and civic space.

This thesis argues that the feminisation of television in India helps extend the ideal of a familial womanhood on to the civic space, limiting women's access to alternative, oppositional forms of civic belonging and citizenship.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis has been the result of the wisdom, belief and guidance of some outstanding faculty, intelligent peer and the love and support of family. This work began long before I embarked on the arduous and challenging task of ethnographically representing a people and a culture that I apparently already represent. It began with the staunch and tireless faith of one of the most erudite people I have known, my Late father N.B. Mahadevan Pillai. Without him and the memory of his powerful words, I would not have embarked on this challenging journey at a time of great personal loss. The passing of my father in 2005, in many ways, led me to explore the writing and research of a subject that was a defining part of my experiences of growing up in India.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>II</b>
Acknowledgements .....	III
Contents .....	IV
1. <b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
2. <b>Exploring gender through media consumption: Theory in context .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Melodramatic pleasure and gendered spectatorship.....	10
Gender and hegemony.....	20
Indian Womanhood: A historical overview.....	37
3. <b>The Feminisation of Television in India.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Doordarshan and the rise of women-oriented programming.....	55
The regionalization of serials: The case of Kerala.....	59
The k-serial brand and the national presence of familial womanhood.....	64
The shift to 'romantic' stories.....	68
The 'romantic' narrative on Malayalam satellite television.....	70
Brands and mergers: where the nation meets the region.....	71
Feminisation of television and pornographic desire: Locating the male audience.....	74
4. <b>Representing women on Indian television: Continuities and Disjunctures.....</b>	<b>80</b>
Sati as colonial female subject.....	80
Nationalism, reform and representation of Hindu womanhood in cinema.....	82
Womanhood, on national television.....	88
The liberal make-over and after.....	92
K-serials and the hinduisation of femininity.....	95
5. <b>Talking television with middle-class families: Notes from the field.....</b>	<b>104</b>
Field as home, home as field.....	104
The research frame.....	108
Class as constructing the field.....	110
Contextual narratives, contingent identities: ethnography in process.....	113
Multi-sited fieldwork as ethnographic triangulation.....	122
6. <b>The Realism of melodrama: Re-imagining the family.....</b>	<b>128</b>
Melodrama and the location of the sacred.....	129
Reclaiming the sacred: the role of the extra-marital plot.....	131
The 'real' family.....	134

The moral ecology of melodrama.....	140
Melodrama and consumption.....	145
The maternal plot.....	149
 <b>7. The pedagogy and performance of serial-viewing.....</b>	<b>155</b>
Invisible pedagogies: serial texts and middle-class lives.....	157
Learning middle-class womanhood.....	163
Embodying disorder and order: kitty parties and karva chauths.....	182
 <b>8. Imagined daughters of Kerala.....</b>	<b>189</b>
Television and the ideology of 'modern gender' .....	192
Manasaputri: imagined daughters of Kerala.....	209
 <b>9. Conclusion: Serial-viewing and the constitution of familial citizens.....</b>	<b>225</b>
 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	237

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### SERIAL-VIEWING AMONG MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN IN URBAN INDIA

Soap Operas have never been so popular in the Indian sub-continent. From Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and China, soap operas produced for the Indian market are avidly watched in their many dubbed versions – in Sinhalese, Dari or Mandarin - a fact widely documented in the Indian media as the spread of India's 'soft power'<sup>1</sup>. For a decade since the latter half of the 1990s private and transnational broadcasting has flourished in India and programmes catering to women have been the principal drivers of a channel's popularity. Despite the recent spike in the popularity of reality shows based on music both nationally and in vernacular television, soap operas continue to re-invent their themes and retain mass appeal.

When in late 2007, I set out for ethnographic fieldwork among middle class families in the capital city of Delhi in North India and in my home city of Kollam in the South Indian state of Kerala, I was hoping to trace new trajectories and sub-plots in what was already a well-established discursive link – the significant role that State sponsored television had played in the rise of Hindu nationalism in India through the broadcast of the mythological melodramas, Ramayan and Mahabharat. The open skies broadcast policy of the 1990s ended the national broadcaster Doordarshan's post-Independence monopoly and by the turn of the century there was a new conjunctural moment in the evolution of television in India. By the mid 1990s, the growing competition among private players resulted in attempts to Indianize content to cater to the needs of the local audience. This in turn led to the unprecedented growth of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2236945.cms>, dated 27/07/2007; accessed 09/07/2010, 9.30 AM, London.  
[http://www.india-forums.com/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=363605](http://www.india-forums.com/forum_posts.asp?TID=363605), dated 06/08/2006; accessed 09/07/2010, 9.30 AM, London.  
 'Indian Tv soaps charm Pakistan', Rasheeda Bhagat, The Hindu Business Line, March 01, 2004. See  
[\[http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2004/03/01/stories/2004030100010100.htm\]](http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2004/03/01/stories/2004030100010100.htm); accessed 09/07/2010, 9.35AM, London]

traditionally inflected women centric programming. With the assumption of power by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party in 2001, popular engagement with these soap operas and the role of transnational and regional television in the sustained presence and imminent political mobilization of a residual Hindu nationalist discourse became a question of great urgency. In chapters 3 and 4, I have discussed the various dimensions of this new conjunctural moment in Indian television, characterised by the latent presence of a Hindu nationalist discourse harnessed subtly through soap operas and overtly through a string of mythological serials. I also discuss what I termed the feminization of television in India, reflected in the unprecedented growth and popularity of women-oriented fiction, competitive efforts at Indianizing content and the spectacular growth of vernacular television. At the heart of my exploration of this conjuncture is an urge to understand the dynamics that underlie the popularity of such traditionally inflected narratives that idealise domesticated womanhood at a time when women are entering the national and trans-national work force in ever increasing numbers.

In the course of my fieldwork and later in ploughing through data it became evident that middle-class women's engagement with these narratives betray barely any interest in the religious or traditional references embedded in the narrative. While women enjoyed watching extravagant depictions of Hindu rituals and festivals, which were already an integral part of their cultural and religious universe, their sustained and long-standing engagement with the narratives related to the ways in which women characters were positioned within the fictional family, how that reflected on their own family lives and crucially, how it implicated them within non-domestic spaces, particularly the streets of Delhi or Kollam, sites of disorder. In Chapter 7, I discuss how invisible televisual pedagogies of order and disorder animate women's engagement with the soap opera text, and overlap with their perceptions of the familial space and the civic space as sites of order and disorder respectively. Following Nira Yuval-Davis (1997a&b), I forgo the public-private distinction in favour of a multi-tiered concept of citizenship that differentiates between state, civil society and family as potential determinants of citizenship in different conjunctural moments. From this vantage point, I illustrate how television's mediation of women's engagement with the family, has implications for their engagement with civic spaces, particularly the manner in which it reaffirms women's conditional participation in civil society sites.

While research on Indian television has sought to understand the everyday articulations through which women are co-opted by televisual discourses of religious nationalism and gender (Mankekar 1999), of consumption (Fernandes 2001, Lukose 2005), there is little exploration of how these narratives interpellate and position women as citizens; indeed, how women's engagement with these narratives might be discursively shaping them as certain kind of gendered citizens. The linkages among family, gender and citizenship in the urban context remain to be explored in studies of television in India.

A 2007 study by Emily Oster and Robert Jensen on the effects of cable television on the status of women in rural India threw up interesting conclusions about the positive impact of cable tv on women's position within the household and mobility outside it as a result of exposure to urban attitudes portrayed on cable television (Jensen&Oster 2009). However in the urban context, which this study navigates, television mediates women's relationship to and conduct within the family and their access to and conduct in public spaces by redefining the permeability between the familial space and the civic space in specific gendered ways that circumscribe women's engagement with civic spaces. Through an original comparative study of two culturally, linguistically, economically and politically distinct regions of India – Delhi and Kerala – I explore this relationship between television, family and citizenship in contemporary India.

In Chapter 8, 'Imagined Daughters of Kerala', I explore how in the 'progressive', highly literate and socially advanced setting of Kerala, television re-inserts the ideal of a family oriented womanliness through popular soap operas which work to further limit women's full-fledged access to citizenship, a trend that has been historically identified, in what is a misnomer, as the 'Kerala paradox'. In a State known for its progressive gender ideals in education and employment, women's own engagement with television narratives suggest that they seek to find meaning in, identify with and crucially lay claim to ideal and appropriate representations of Malayali womanhood. The chapter explores the manner in which television fiction furthers this 'paradox'.

This is not to suggest that contemporary serials do not invoke Hindu religious and traditional tropes in its representation of women. In fact, the K-serials, produced by Balaji Telefilms, seek to actively construct an ideal of Hindu womanhood by drawing on various tropes central to traditional and post-colonial ideals of Hindu womanhood

– that of the Mata (mother), the Pativrata (chaste wife), the Sumangali (auspicious married woman) and virangana (warrior woman). Yet by centralising the family as the principal narrative focus and depicting it as both a locus of struggle and an ideal to be achieved, K-series offer its women viewers idealised protagonists who live to nurture and protect the unity of the family. In chapter 4, I discuss historically the hinduized representations of womanhood on Indian television and cinema. Further, in a reflection of the techniques employed in mythological melodramas *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* in the 1980s, the melodramatic format of the serials proposes a Manichean good-evil binary in order to convey its polarised notions of womanhood. In chapter 6 I discuss the usage of melodramatic binaries in television fiction and the manner in which it has come to be reflected in television's news coverage too and the ramifications that this widespread circulation of the form has for concerted civil society efforts to create a more equitable democracy. Television's melodramatic turn has also left its impression on the Indian film industry. The recently released and much-awaited multi-lingual production *Raavan*, directed by Mani Ratnam, is a contemporary spin on one of the darkest figures in Hindu mythology – Ravana, the demon king and abductor of Ram's wife Sita, whose effigy is burnt across North India every year during Dusshera celebrations, stands in opposition to god-like Ram, the embodiment of all that is good and just. The Ram-Ravana story remains the most iconic example in Hindu mythology of the triumph of 'good' over 'evil'. Layered with political significance<sup>2</sup> on many levels, the movie *Raavan* inverts the mythological meta-narrative of *Ramayan* to critically represent the Indian State's ongoing battle against Maoist insurgency in many parts of the country; released with a significant difference in the casting order in the Tamil and Hindi versions, the cinematic text deploys the sympathetic and even adulatory approach to the character of Ravana in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a state where the anti-Brahmanical Dravidian Movement took up the task of recasting Ravana as hero and Ram as villain. Analysis of the movie and what it means has created a popular debate, led by the print, television and online media, about good and evil. Articles purporting to discuss the ambiguity and complexity of evil and therefore the need to see Ravana in more sympathetic light end up comparing the mythological figure's good and evil qualities, further reinforcing the pervasive deployment of melodramatic binaries in

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<sup>2</sup> 'Good or Evil? The politics of Ravana' by Ajith Pillai and A.S. Panneerselvan, Outlook India, November 2, 1998. See <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?206444>

contemporary Indian media (I have discussed this phenomenon in detail in Chapter 6: ‘The Realism of Melodrama: Re-Imagining the family’).

In tracing the circulation of the serial form across India and the manner in which middle-class women discursively and performatively engage with the televisual narratives, I attempt to explore the linkages among family, gender and citizenship among variously positioned subjects (Chapter 2). Following Joan Scott (1988) and Carole Pateman (1988), I have approached gender as a field of power criss-crossed by and working along other axes of power and difference such as class and patriarchy. In analysing women’s engagement with serial narratives and tracing the discursive links that this implies among family, gender and citizenship, I follow Pateman’s analysis of the gendering of citizenship in Western liberal democracies as being founded on patriarchal categories of order and disorder; I further draw on Gramsci’s notion of subaltern identity as consisting of different levels of knowledge, often contradictory, and read along with Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, as a junction of both discursive and performative effects. I do not wish to treat subjectivity as a discursive effect but as an unstable, contradictory, shifting conjuncture that allows for a persistent slippage between the discursive and the performative, between common sense and everyday practices. In other words, following Jan Campbell, spectatorship can be seen as a dynamic exchange, an articulation, between the states of embodied and disembodied mimesis (2005).

In analysing the power relations within which such subjectivity is embedded, I go back to the Gramscian concept of hegemony as a consensual struggle waged within civil society in capitalist societies. Discarding the neo-Gramscian interpretation of hegemony as dispersed and de-centered, without involving any specific distributions of power, I explore Gramsci’s central concern with civil society as the locus of hegemony in capitalist societies. Supplementing the centrality of civil society to the analysis of hegemony in Gramsci with Nira Yuval Davis’ conceptualisation of citizenship as variously determined by the State, civil society or family and kinship ties depending on discrete national contexts, this thesis attempts to trace ways in which middle-class women’s serial viewing ties family, gender and civil society into specific configurations of power that entail women’s retreat from resistive civic spaces. I dovetail Carol Pateman’s enunciation of order and disorder as patriarchal discourses that limit women’s full-fledged access to citizenship with Gramsci’s

concern with commonsense and the different levels of knowledge through which the subaltern apprehends the world.

To summarize the order in which this thesis is set out, in the eight chapters that follow I begin with Chapter 2, where I have first laid out the context or the conjunctural moment that I have analytically constructed for the purpose of this investigation and in a three-part review of relevant literature I elaborate the core theoretical stances I have used in the thesis. In Chapter 3, I explore the bigger canvas within which we can locate the rise of women-oriented narratives, suggesting that it is symptomatic of a larger national process of feminization of television, in terms of both content and format. In Chapter 4, I undertake a historical survey of the manner in which women have been represented in Indian television through the national broadcaster Doordarshan in the decades since Independence up until the post-liberalisation era when private cable and satellite networks have become dominant. In Chapter 5, I reflect on doing field work at home as a process of negotiating shifting identities and cultural faultlines that are so central to ethnographic immersion in four locations across two socio-economically and culturally discrete city spaces. In Chapter 6, I explore the centrality of the familial plot in contemporary serials in terms of melodramatic realism, revealing the limitations of realism and the ways in which it facilitates both complicity and resistance among women viewers. In Chapter 7 I explore serial viewing as implicating women in a pedagogy of domesticated Hindu womanhood; subversive performances of the serial narrative in the feminized spaces of kitty parties are ultimately circumscribed within the familial space. In Chapter 8, I explore Kerala's 'gender paradox' and the role that television serials play in shifting the terms of the 'paradox', followed by my conclusions in Chapter 9.

## Chapter 2

### EXPLORING GENDER THROUGH MEDIA CONSUMPTION: THEORY IN CONTEXT

#### Introduction

The theoretical trajectory of this research project draws its impetus from two separate but correlated developments – the recognition of the need to theorize non-Western media by attending to the historical and cultural specificity of such contexts and as a necessary corollary redefine and indeed, re-centre questions of power and agency, in exploring gender through media consumption. In this three-part review that explores gender in studies of media consumption, I argue for historicizing gender in order to deploy it as a principal analytical category and tease out its imbrication in other conjuncturally active discourses, particularly class. While arguing in favour of a discursive notion of hegemony in order to theorise power this review draws attention to retaining the key Gramscian emphasis on the locus of hegemony in specific cultural contexts. Gramsci's unambiguous positioning of civil society as the arena of struggle and therefore as the space for both consolidation and subversion of hegemony is central to my understanding and analyses of mediated processes of gendering. In the Indian context, following Leela Fernandes, I argue that the middle class, understood as a class-in-practice, plays a central role in the politics of gender hegemony. Consequently, any study of media consumption among middle class women in India needs to pay attention to the relationship between gender and class. And finally, questions of power and agency, I argue, need to be theorized not just discursively, through narratives, and by attending to the everyday embodied practice of the researched, but further through the different embodied performances that they bring into play. As the locus of hegemony, civil society becomes the arena for gendered performances of civic (non)engagement or citizenship. By theorizing gender hegemony as operating through both discourse and performance, it becomes possible to analyse dominant gender relations or norms at the level of the local and the experiential. Approaching the issue from another direction, spectatorial agency, when viewed as both discourse and performance, dissolves the dichotomy between the

sociological and semiological levels of analysis and allows media consumption to be theorized as a process embedded within the matrix of everyday life.

In drawing the perimeter of my exploration of gender through media consumption around the South Asian context, I wish to re-emphasise the continued and critical salience of the landmark move within media studies - informed by a larger epistemic turn inaugurated by the scholarly protest against Eurocentrism<sup>3</sup> (Sohat and Stam 1994) – towards ‘de-Westernizing media studies’ (Curran and Park 2000), particularly in the analysis of non-Western contexts and cultural forms. This adversarial approach to the implicit presence of Eurocentrism within media studies scholarship came in the wake of a broader crisis in the representation of the Other within the humanities, specifically highlighted in ‘Writing Culture’, a powerful re-assessment of the contours and meaning of ‘culture’ as objectified through the ethnographic mode of representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In other words, there was a ‘turn to language’ and a resultant problematisation of the nature of representation. The authority of ‘grand theory’ styles of representation seem suspended in favour of a close consideration of issues such as contextuality, the meaning of social life to those who enact it and the explanation of exceptions and indeterminants rather than regularities in observed phenomenon (Marcus and Fisher 1986).

Within media scholarship this has increasingly meant the rejection of “hypodermic” models of media power and effect and attention to the interpretive practices of media audiences. Consequently where gender has been central to the project, particularly in the study of a women-oriented genre such as Soap Opera, the research seeks to show how women negotiate media’s hegemonic construction of the reality of gender difference and argues for a reevaluation of such genres and a reassessment of female audiences (Carter and Steiner 2004).

Thus since the 1980s, soap opera scholarship has been dominated by the active audience paradigm. Feminist interventions, in particular, have sought to understand why women find the soap opera form pleasurable, concluding that the genre was especially amenable to an active process of producing meaning and pleasure. In

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<sup>3</sup> Sohata and Stam understand Eurocentrism as a construct which "sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West. It thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements — science, progress, humanism - but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined" (1994:3).

particular, ethnographic approaches to the study of media have helped soap opera scholarship move towards a post-content or post-text era towards the exploration of audiences as constructions within the warp and woof of cultural and political cross-currents within the nation space and towards a rethinking of the usefulness of the production-consumption dichotomy itself (Spitulnik 1993), particularly by suggesting that modes of consumption are modes of cultural production (de Certeau 1984, Caughie 1986). This has been achieved through ethnographies of production where the recruitment of spectators and imagining the audience in media practice become central concerns (Spitulnik 1993:299). However, as Ien Ang points out, there has been a romanticist tendency within the body of works that celebrate creative ways in which people appropriate media narratives and emphasise resistance in audience reception: “Revalidating the popular alone – by stressing the obvious empirical fact that audiences are active meaning producers and imaginative pleasure seekers – can become a banal form of cultural critique if the popular itself is not seen in a thoroughly social and political context” (2003:364). If audience ethnography needs to retain a critical function, it has to confront the micro/macro problematic and acknowledge that there are structural limitations to what Fiske termed “cultural democracy” and has to in effect return to the question of hegemony, by not merely a theoretical evocation but by a thorough analysis of particular hegemonic fields. Ang points out that the euphoria over the vitality of popular culture has made hegemony unfashionable, particularly in cultural studies circles, which sees the popular as a space outside of and capable of providing resistance to the hegemonic field, when in fact the popular and the hegemonic have no mutual exteriority; “the hegemonic can be found within the texture of the popular” (2003:365).

The dichotomy between structural power and agentic or audience power that runs through studies of media consumption has also been a general feature of the way in which gender has been dealt with within the South Asian context. Approaches to the study of gender in South Asia can be broadly divided into those that seek to foreground structural hegemony by focusing on the “endemic, systemic, unmitigated devaluation and consequent disempowerment of women at every level” and those that seek to highlight the potential and actual empowerment inhering in the lived practices of women and their “multiple modes of living, negotiating and imagining gender identities” (Gold, 2000:204). While the former approach fails to give credit to women’s capacity for reflexive cultural critique, treating it as insignificant and

ineffectual in terms of overhauling structural inequalities, the latter recognizes the disadvantageous position in which women are often placed but finds it valuable to listen to women's own interpretations of their plight, recognizing therein rebellion, subversion and passivity. In other words, scholarship on gendered identity in South Asia has tended to reproduce the structure-agency dichotomy by emphasizing the urgency of one approach over the other. In a useful synthesis of such a polarized debate and in what will be the broad theoretical direction of this thesis, Sherry Ortner argues that the key to representing both structural stasis and agentic change is to recognize the "multiplicity of logics operating, of discourses being spoken, of practices of prestige and power in play" some of which are hegemonic, others explicitly counter-hegemonic and yet others present simply because they are "products of imagination that did not seem to threaten any particular set of arrangements" (1990:45).

### **Part I - Melodramatic pleasure and gendered spectatorship**

The propensity of media scholarship to emphasise the study of texts and later audiences and contexts can be mapped on to the broader intellectual shift from structuralism to post-structuralism. A key analytical strand that runs through scholarship produced as a result of this turn from text to context, one that represents and reflects the multiple facets of the shift, has been the analysis of "gender in media consumption" (Ang 1996:110). At the heart of the analysis of media consumption primarily in terms of the category gender lay questions of how media power influences gendered identity and how women might negotiate media texts. In this section I attempt to outline the ways in which gender has been conceptualized in studies of media consumption, both textually and contextually.

In the wake of the widespread disavowal of the hypodermic effects model in media consumption studies, semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches dissected media texts, particularly popular 'women's genres', in terms of their construction of a multiplicity of often contradicting subject positions for women (Modleski 1982, de Lauretis 1984, Doane 1987, Mulvey 1989, Kuhn 1997).

In an afterthought published in 1981 on her landmark 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey uses Freud's theory of femininity - which notes the complexity of femininity given that it emerges out of an early active, phallic phase

common to boys and girls - to propose that the female spectator might not just concur with the voyeuristic male gaze but might in fact be pleased by the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides as it reminds her of her early phallic phase (1986:29-38). While Mulvey's postulates do seem to interrogate a unitary subject position, her psychoanalytical reading of female spectatorship invokes and fixes the female subject position in terms of the category masculine, affording the female subject only those pleasures that are germane in a masculinisation of the spectator's position. Her use of Freud's theory of femininity leaves the woman in the audience with only those sources of pleasure that are located in voyeurism or narcissism. Inadvertently Mulvey textually fixes female spectatorship, coalescing the positions and identifications of the actual woman in the audience with the positions offered by the text.

Tania Modleski echoes Mulvey in asserting that the very form of the soap opera encourages multiple points of identification. She points out that the spectator doesn't identify solely with the main protagonist who is the nucleus of the narrative but simultaneously with the sufferings of her antagonist as well.

"The subject/spectator of soaps, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no character exclusively)" (Modleski 1982:92).

But as Robert C Allen points out, although Modleski seems to present the mother/reader as a textually inscribed position to be taken up by whoever the actual reader happens to be, she comes close at times to conflating the two (1985: 94). In other words, textual analysis more often than not tended to offer the subject positions inhering in the text as constitutive of the actual reader, in effect confusing the semiotic and sociological levels of analysis (Ang 1996).

The concept of female spectatorship in cine-psychoanalysis, Annette Kuhn points out, elides the textually constructed notion of feminine spectator and the socially constructed notion of female audience (1997). More problematically, the analysis of spectatorship was not concerned with and was consequently unable to orient analysis towards why the woman in the audience might favour certain subject positions over others. The relative power of certain subject positions over others was explained in

terms of the pleasure derived from occupying such positions. Mulvey pushes the horizon of her stance that the woman in the audience is left with no choice but to occupy a masculinised spectatorial position when she argues that identifying with the male gaze might indeed be positively pleasurable in as much as it might occasion a remembrance of the early phallic stage of femininity. And yet the pleasures afforded by forms such as women-centric melodrama, seemed, on the contrary, to foreclose satisfaction. Analysing the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, Mulvey says:

“It is as though the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that escape is closer to a day-dream than to fairy story. Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind tell a story of contradiction, not of reconcillation” (1986:43).

The avant-garde feminist prescription that followed from this was:

“The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” (1986:26).

Janice Radway concludes her reading of the romance in a changed context that emphasised the importance of audience engagement with media texts with what is a strikingly similar prescription:

“We should seek it [the minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest expressed in romance reading] out not only to understand its origins and its utopian longing but also to learn how best to encourage it and bring it to fruition. If we do not, we have already conceded the fight and, in the case of the romance at least, admitted the impossibility of creating a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by its reading would be unnecessary” (1984:222).

Although researching from either ends of the text-audience spectrum and advocating ‘pedagogic’ and ‘recruitist’ forms of feminist research, both Mulvey and Radway also share a common preoccupation with the ideological function of pleasure. This concern is also taken up in feminist research that positions female protagonists of soap opera narratives as role models to be juxtaposed with real women, and inevitably proclaims the regressiveness of the images and the need for progressive role models. In a critique of such research, especially Radway’s analysis of her respondents’ reading of

the romance as escapist, Ien Ang notes that Radway fails to account for the mechanisms of pleasure which is to be found in the pleasure of detail, “the pleasurable of the pleasure of romance reading” (1996:104). She argues for a reconceptualisation of fantasy as not merely illusive, but as a reality in itself that affords the viewer/reader opportunities to take up subject positions that she cannot assume in real life. More importantly, she calls for a departure from analysis that treats women’s images as role models in favour of the treatment of female protagonists “as textual constructions of possible modes of femininity” to be taken up by the female subject (1996:92). However, such reconceptualisations fail to account for why certain modes of femininity might possess greater “weight, resonance, defining and limiting power” within a specific context, defined by a specific conjunctural moment (Hall 1977).

In arguing that subject positions constructed by the text can be seen as possible modes of femininity that can be potentially taken up by women viewers, there is an assumption implicit that women can assume modes of femininity offered by the text independent of the discursive context within which such choice is made. Further, do media texts offer pure modes of femininity to be taken up by the viewer? Might not these modes of femininity be already affiliated with prevailing discourses of class, religion or ethnicity? In other words, how do certain modes of femininity come to possess more material force? Ang’s recourse to a post-structuralist theory of subjectivity - as partial and conflictual and therefore the state of being a woman as a perpetual process of becoming a feminine subject - does not in any way foreclose this question. In an attempt to theorise gendered spectatorship in conjunction with other axes of power such as race and class, Wendy Holloway reconceptualises power as a force that motivates “investments” in particular discursive positions (Henriques et al 1984). Holloway borrows the concept of investment from Freud – who used the German word *Besetzung*, translated into English as *cathexis* – to describe a notion that has both an emotional component as well as an active awareness of the power that might yield as a result of occupying a particular position, but one that might not necessarily be fulfilled (1984). Holloway argues that the concept of investment may explain *the fact that* “other major dimensions of social difference such as class, race and age intersect with gender to favour or disfavour certain positions” (1984:239; emphasis added).

According to Teresa de Lauretis, the notion of investment “may explain why, for example, women have historically made different investments and thus have taken up different positions in gender and sexual practices and identities” (1987:16). But even in de Lauretis<sup>4</sup>, social reality – material, economic and interpersonal relations which are social and in a larger sense historical – lie outside, apart from the subject (Scott 1988: 39). Thus while this might go towards partially answering why a certain mode of femininity might be preferred over another, it maintains gender and other categories of social inequality such as class and race as separate spheres, aligns gender with women’s sphere and implicitly conceptualizes it as a category that can be evoked in conjunction with class or race in a theoretically haphazard fashion, at the discretion of the researcher. In other words, the conception of gender that underlies theories of spectatorship fail to recognize gender as a primary field in and through which power along various axes such as class and race is articulated. While media research has conclusively rejected any understanding of media consumption solely through textual dissection, theories of spectatorship retain their critical edge only when applied in consonance with an expansive concept of gender as discursively constituted by and constitutive of various systems of difference such as race or class in thoroughly historicized contexts. As Joan W Scott argues in her remarkable intervention on gender in historiography, concepts such as class are created through differentiation and historically gender has provided a way of articulating and naturalizing difference (1988:60).

### **Texts in context**

Studies of media consumption that foreground the context in which women negotiate media texts, have chosen the family and the household as units of analysis. Dorothy Hobson’s (1980) pioneering research on the use of media by working class women – housewives - concluded that women valued the distinction between woman’s world and man’s world in their use of media, a fact that reinforced their privatized isolation by reaffirming the consensual position that there are plenty of women in the same situation. In this way, Hobson argued, the media discursively positioned women within the private sphere and reproduced a hierarchical sexual division of labour.

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<sup>4</sup> De Lauretis, Teresa. 1984. *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p159.

David Morley's study *Family Television* (1986) argues that gender dynamics within the family particularly in the consumption of media can help explain how relations of gender inequality in the private and public spheres are reproduced in everyday life. For example Morley found that many women were not interested in national news because they felt it was not meaningful to their lives whereas local news interested them because it gave them news that could be useful in the conduct of their daily lives.

Ann Gray's (1992) *Video Playtime* drew attention to women's particular affinity for the video recorder and the telephone because both these mediums allowed them to share and build relationships within their private world of friends and family. Gray argued that even their gendered pattern of media preference, opting for soap operas and family dramas, was a way of facilitating their friendships with other women.

In all these studies that foreground the familial context in media use or television viewing with the specific focus on examining gender dynamics there has been little investigation into how gender might contextually operate in conjunction with discourses of class, religion or ethnicity. In a significant exception to this, Andrea Press (1991) through her study involving working class and middle class women of different generations showed how class and generational difference influence the way in which women make sense of television programming, refuting the prevailing tendency to represent the audience as active meaning makers and resisters of hegemonic media messages. Although her study takes audience research beyond the text-context dichotomy, it once again reiterates the slippage between the categories of gender and women, with gender being synonymous with women's world. It further fails to extrapolate the nexus between gender and other discourses such as class evidenced in the way women make sense of the media to prevailing gender hegemonies preferring instead to focus on the co-implication of gender and class as part of a linear history of Western feminism. Most importantly the lack of conceptual clarity in the usage of the category gender registers in an equal lack of clarity in the relationship between the categories of gender and class and is weakly redressed by recourse to a substitutive relationship between women and class.

Studies of gender in media consumption are characterized by a lack of clarity in the use of gender as an analytical category. Although studies that do textual analysis, particularly using feminist theories of spectatorship, have questions of power at the

heart of their exploration of media consumption, there is a slippage between the sociological and semiological levels of analysis principally because these theories treat gender ahistorically. The concept of gender that underlies these theories can be broadly termed anti-patriarchal – they are primarily critiques of the sexual objectification of women by men – and fail to treat women as historical subjects. Consequently they fail to show what gender inequality has to do with other kinds of inequalities such as those deriving from class. This is primarily owing to a failure to represent the moment of academic inquiry into gender in media consumption as one that is historically situated; there is a failure to locate the present moment as a conjuncture that can be plotted in the continuities and disjunctures in representations of gender. This failure to locate the historicity of the moment of inquiry into gender results in the documenting-‘Her-Story’ approach, an approach that fails to shed light on how gender operates historically in and through other categories of difference. Within South Asian scholarship, the analytic terrain of gender has been considerably expanded and clarified by scholars working on the imbrication of gender with discourses of religion and nationalism. The location of gender, particularly the analysis of its workings through the categories of religion and nationalism in South Asian scholarship is critically analysed in a historical overview of Indian womanhood in the third part of this review.

### **Spectatorship in cultural context**

The gaze in western feminist film theory necessarily involves questions of power. While looking may always be an act of power, do notions of gendered spectatorship that have risen in the context of film and television in the West work in the Indian context? Vidya Deheja (1997) points out that while the gendered gaze may indeed function in certain areas of secular art, it may be irrelevant in relation to evaluating sacred Indian art. Referring to the female images carved on to the Buddhist stupa of Barhut circa 100 BC, Deheja notes that while the heavy sensuality of the images might tempt one to conclude that they were created for the delight of male viewers, it is important to consider the patronage these works of art received, the audience who appreciated them and the function which the images might have played. The images, Deheja points out, were all commissioned either by women or by monks and the audience would have comprised of male and female pilgrims given that the stupa was a ritual space within the public domain. The images themselves – of semi-divine

beings - seem to have functioned as symbols of fertility. Clearly the female images on the Buddhist stupa do not configure the spectatorial gaze as masculine. More importantly, it is important to pause and ask whether in Indian art the sacred and the secular are neatly divided realms at all.

As Deheja (1997) and several others (Guha-Thakurta 1991; Freitag 2001) have pointed out, in India gender and nation are concepts that are collapsed onto one another to represent the notion of a sacred geography, of the Motherland, most notably in the calendar art and other urban art forms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century . According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, nationalist and patriarchal views on the role of the extended family rests on not only the denial of the bourgeoisie private introduced by the new patriarchy germane in colonialism but more importantly on the rejection of an absolute separation of sacred and secular time, a separation that is foundational to the European idea of history; the denial of historical time was effected “by making the family a site where the sacred and the secular blended in a perpetual re-enactment of a principle that was heavenly and divine” (1997:280-281).

Therefore in theorising spectatorship in an Indian context it is necessary to complicate the neat sacred-secular divide and refer in particular to the Indian concept of *darshan* or seeing (Eck 1985; Mankekar 1999; Pinney 2001). Diana Eck points out that *darshan* “refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred. When Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say, ‘I am going to worship’, but rather, ‘I am going for *darsan*’ ”(1985:3). *Darshan*, is not a passive act of seeing; it encompasses an interaction, a relationship, a profound engagement with the sacred. It entails both seeing and being beheld by the deity (Eck 1985:3). According to Mankekar, the popularity and reverence accorded to the epic melodrama, the Ramayana, might be understood through an engagement with the notion of *darshan*, which was activated by viewers who, episode after episode, saw themselves as literally feasting their eyes on the form of the God-King Ram through a structure of feeling, an everyday mode of religiosity termed *bhakti* (1999:200).

Yet, despite highlighting the blurred divisions between the sacred and the secular that underlies the cultural significance of the sensual in the Indian context, outside the realm of the arts the masculinisation of the gaze is evident particularly in the strategies employed in the reform of traditional dress codes as part of the project of modern Self-building in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in different parts of

India. Himani Bannerji, in analysing the sartorial philosophy that undergirds the dressing prescribed for the Bengali *bhadramahila* (middle-class bourgeoisie women) says that it entailed a desexualisation of the *bhadramahila* who had to be constantly aware of the male gaze and avoid provocative gestures: “The sartorial moral philosophy of Bengal...implies an invisible and constant male gaze at women. The purpose of this gaze, or rather its origin/occasion, is domination, to create an ideological object, a sexually circumscribed ‘other’ ” (2001:123).

The application of very different strategies in relation to dress codes can be seen in the case of the southern State of Kerala. Here, the aestheticisation of the female body to suit the taste of the modern man was encouraged far more in relation to ensuring a stable monogamous conjugality, for it was the responsibility of the new woman to ‘hold’ her husband within the heterosexual arrangement, rather than as a means of attracting male attention outside the familial confines (Devika 2005). According to Devika, in the present time, when institutions such as cinema, television, beauty contests, advertising, fashion etc that project the need to beautify the female body have proliferated, the debate has become polarised with the left radical circles and feminists treating the female body as “requiring only a certain calculable attention in fashioning the Mind-defined Individual” and the conservatives treating it as “primitive raw-material that needs culturing, beautification, bedecking, in order to be acceptable” (2005:489).

Turning once again to the realm of Indian art, late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century representations of a woman at her toilette executed in the Kangra style of painting, places the mistress or *nayika*, literally meaning heroine, at the centre of the painting with her female attendant or *sakhi*, literally meaning friend-confidante. According to Molly Emma Aitken, these kangra paintings are “organised around the relationship between the desiring gaze of the external spectator and the image of the *nayika*”, and “underlined for women viewers the necessity of seeing female beauty with a male eye” (1997:95).

Jan Campbell, in an important critique of theories of the potency of the male gaze, points out that Mary Doane’s theory of the female masquerade which “in flaunting femininity holds it at a distance” gets its subversive edge through a conflation with Luce Irigaray’s more conscious notion of mimicry. Campbell argues that Irigaray adopts a more phenomenological approach that uses a conscious and embodied

imaginary to establish a relationship between a woman and the female image and among women themselves. Following from this, Campbell concludes that “the Oedipal female masquerade depicts the disembodied conflict of the hysteric whereas a playful, conscious feminine mimicry is expressed through a more embodied imaginary” (2005:37). In this way, spectatorship can be seen as a dynamic exchange, an articulation, between the states of embodied and disembodied mimesis.

Returning to the notion of *nayika* in the light of Campbell’s argument, the term can also signify a conscious performative mode of female embodiment in the cultural lexicon of India, where the spectator, be it of a kangra-style painting or a television serial, recognises the *nayika* both as a female masquerade to be desired and as a feminine mimicry to be embodied. Campbell suggests phenomenological mimesis as a way out of the lack of permeability in most accounts of media consumption between the semiological and sociological levels. She argues for a dissolution of the separation between identificatory fantasies and identificatory practices and emphasises the need to see the spectator’s mimetic performance as one that “moves between the text and everyday life, and between disembodied and embodied apprehensions of the star image” (2005:197).

In a discursive approach to media reception, the possibilities of a dialogue between the text and everyday life is well captured in interdiscourse, a concept originally developed by Michel Pêcheux, and explained by David Morley as the space and the specific moment when subjects bring to bear their specific histories in the process of producing meaning from a television text (Morley 1980:64). This interdiscursive space also allows for the play of cultural competencies or discursive strategies, including inter-textuality specific to a culture, which the viewer brings to the act of watching television. Thus contradictory discourses of womanhood emerging from the soap opera text might be articulated into a partial and open-ended embodied discourse of womanhood. While the phenomenological approach elaborated by Jan Campbell specifically in relation to cinema, helps dissolve the separation between the textual spectator and the social spectator, when a generic approach to television spectatorship is foregrounded, the notion of interdiscourse is a necessary corollary that can contribute a more culturally embedded theory of spectatorship.

## **Part 2 - Gender and hegemony**

Feminists working within the Marxist framework have taken a more historical approach to conceptualizing gender. But they have failed to break out of the materialist strait jacket. Whether they approach gender from a dual systems perspective which draws attention to patriarchy and capitalism as separate but overlapping fields or from a classic Marxist modes-of-production perspective, all explanations for the origins of and changes in the gender system are found outside the sexual division of labour (Scott 1988). Scott's highly nuanced critique of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* as representing unproblematically, even normatively, the masculinisation of the English working class, draws attention to a new conceptual direction in theorizing gender as a system constitutive of other dimensions of inequality such as class.

Unlike Marxist feminists, Scott's reconceptualisation of gender as a historically situated category articulates it as the theoretical vanguard for interrogating a spectrum of inequalities, class being just one. The epistemic logic of her theorization of gender propels the gender system as one that saturates lived reality; it is seen as a primary way of signifying relationships of power, a hegemonic field in itself (Scott 1988: 44). Although Scott conceptualizes gender as a primary field through which power is articulated, and the heart of her theorization of gender as a key analytic tool for historians is that it breaches distinctions of public-private and personal-political rendering it capable of making theoretical forays into areas such as analysis of war and high politics that have been hitherto restricted, given that her principal epistemological ground is history, her study tends to over-emphasise the role of discourse in the construction of gender and class as historical categories. It does not concern itself with gender in and as practice, through the everyday lives of men and women; in other words the question of everyday agency disappears altogether from her account of gender and class. This is because, underlying her theorization of gender and class is a conception of power in the Foucauldian sense, working through "dispersed constellations of unequal relationships, discursively constituted in social fields of force" (1988:44).

Gramsci's theory of power and/in culture, I argue, provides an approach to gender as historically situated and operating through both discourse and people's lived relations. Hegemony, the theory of power that animates Gramsci's analysis of political

conjunctures, addresses the plurality of agents involved in a conjuncture and how the manner in which the Party might intervene effectively in such a complex conjunctural moment, both of which provide theoretical tools with which to analyse ways in which commonsense as discourse (general conception of the world) and practice (actual lived relations) is re-organised to promote an ongoing response to social and cultural change. In this way, gender as an organizing principle can be seen as oriented not just towards the consolidation of the heterosexual norm but works along other axes of difference such as class and patriarchy to consolidate normative discourses of womanhood. However, in drawing from Gramsci, I wish to emphasise the selective nature of my theoretical stance relative to Gramsci's complex oeuvre as, above all, a theorist of the state.

### **Towards a theory of discursive hegemony: problems and prospects**

Ideology has been a key theoretical concept that illuminated the mechanism of power, particularly in Marxist analyses of culture and representation. As Etienne Balibar notes, "the great theoretical lure in the history of Marxism has been constituted by the ever-developing and ever-aborting project of a theory of ideology" (1988:202). This continuing revision of the theory of ideology in Marxist analysis has principally wrestled with the problematic conceptualisation of the production of popular culture as the production of ideology. Such a conception of ideology stretches its theoretical usefulness to breaking point. Further, the theory of ideology is also severely contained by its economic determinism, its overdependence on class and the relations of production as the principal analytic determinants to the exclusion of other important points of reference such as gender. Tracing the genealogy of this concept within the Marxist tradition makes it possible to draw out its continuing relevance to the analysis of popular culture and in outlining critical modifications in its theory.

The various forms in which ideology has been conceptualised within Marxist thought can be placed on a continuum whose extremes include a conception of ideology as opposing world-views rooted in the differential positionings of the classes and a conception of ideology as an instrument of domination (Lovell 1981). Georg Lukacs was a leading proponent of ideology as oppositional world views rooted in class. In this scheme, the proletariat became the epistemologically privileged class, the class from whose point of view the social totality should be viewed as the proletariat's class interests required their thought and consciousness to penetrate the fetishised forms of

capitalist social relations and perceive reality (Lukacs 1968). Thus class position became the equivalent of class consciousness.

At the other end of the spectrum is Louis Althusser in whom ideology becomes a theory of subjectivity and the mechanism of ideology consists in interpellating or hailing individuals as subjects through the function of recognition (1971:85-126). According to Stuart Hall, Althusserian interventions in the theory of ideology, facilitated a gradual but firm disavowal of the equivalence of ruling class and ruling ideas in Marx (1996). However, Althusser's notion of ideology as constitutive of the subject through the function of recognition fails to account for the disruption of and opposition to the dominant ideology. It is also functionalist in that it functions to reproduce capitalist social relations. And yet, theorists who revisited Althusser ended up problematising his theory of ideology solely in terms of the formation of ideological subjects and the only problem with ideology became the problem of ideological subjects (Hall 1996). This, according to Hall, leads ultimately in Foucault to a complete jettisoning of the concept of ideology (1996: 31)<sup>5</sup>.

In the context of a general discursive turn in the social sciences and the mounting criticisms levelled against the theoretical usefulness of ideology, Hall goes back to the early formulations of Marx himself to attempt a 'reconstruction' of ideology as discursive and to establish an "open horizon of Marxist theorising" (1996:44). Inherent in the criticisms is the key dichotomy between the real and the false that has driven critical analyses of ideology. Hall critically re-reads ideology from the vantage point of "modern" theoretical critiques inspired by the nature of language and discourse (1996:35). He sees ideology as the real relations in which people exist and the categories and concepts involved therein as tools to conceptualise their world. Such conceptualisation, Hall emphasised, was not determined by economic relations alone but could be 'expressed' within different ideological discourses (1996:39). He proposes, in the Gramscian spirit, tendential lines of force between classes and ideas where "ideas *do* arise from and *may reflect* the material conditions in which social

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<sup>5</sup> Jorge Larraín extends this criticism to theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean Francois Lyotard, at the vanguard of postmodernism, arguing that they make use of a loose, arbitrary notion of ideology, which they introduce in his words through the theoretical backdoor in their criticisms of meta-narratives. See Larraín, Jorge. 1996. 'Stuart Hall and the marxist concept of ideology' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen eds Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. London and New York: Routledge, pp47-70.

groups and classes exist” but there is nothing inevitable about the relationship (1996: 42).

Beginning with his much celebrated essay first published in 1977 on the ideological function of mass media, Hall proposed a model of media reception where he argued that producers of media content might encode hegemonic messages which the viewer might accept, resist or negotiate depending on a variety of contextual factors. Hall’s theory of media reception drew on Gramsci’s rejection of the equation of ideology with false consciousness and his notion of hegemony as an organizing principle with no necessary class correspondence. Gramsci’s stance on ideology provided Hall and other cultural studies theorists a basis for research into the study of consent at a local and experiential level without abandoning a sense of the wider social and political environment (Martin 1998:123).

However when in a radical post-structuralist effort Laclau and Mouffe attempt to theorise hegemony as wholly discursive, Hall’s endeavour began to seem partial. In their post-Marxian attempt to retheorise hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe turn to Gramsci’s concept of civil society, particularly its relationship to the State (1985). Overall Gramsci posits civil society in opposition to the state (Bobbio 1979). Yet, as Laclau asks: “What should we do, however, with passages such as the following: ‘But what does it signify if not that by “State” should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society<sup>6</sup>.’?” (In Butler et al 2000:48). Laclau argues that the ambiguity in Gramsci regarding the frontiers of the state/civil society is in fact in tune with social reality; it also follows from this that if the state, as an ethico-political moment of society, is not contained within an exclusive terrain, then it is not strictly commensurate only with the public sphere. Further, if civil society, as a site of private organisations, becomes a locus of ethico-political effects then its relationship with the state “as a public instance becomes blurred” (Ibid 2000:48). Ultimately the base/superstructure and indeed the public/private dichotomy itself loses its meaning if the hegemonic effects deriving from one level alters the organisational principles of another level (Ibid 2000). Thus the porous nature of some apparent Gramscian dichotomies complicates the notion of

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. By Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart, p12.

terrain or level. “We are left with a horizon of intelligibility of the social which is grounded not in *topographies* but in *logics*” (Ibid 2000:50).

In arguing for a perspective grounded wholly in logics, the rupture between ideology and discourse is complete as a final break with the base-superstructure metaphor is accomplished. Where Hall sought to articulate discourse with ideology, calling for the concept of ideological discourse, Laclau and Mouffe demonstrate the incommensurability of the two concepts on the same plane, calling for a wholly discursive approach to theorising hegemony. In a discursive approach to hegemony, discourse becomes a tool to explain the logic of power without a priori determining any discourse as ideological. Thus in analysing media reception practices, representations, contexts, audiences and spectators may be seen as a series of social discourses, certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments. As Annette Kuhn argues, “such a model permits relative autonomy for the operations of texts, readings, and contexts, and also allows for contradictions, oppositional readings and varying degrees of discursive authority. Since the state of a discursive formation is not constant, it can be apprehended only by means of inquiry into specific instances or conjunctures” (1997:152-153).

However, notwithstanding this radical attempt at reconceptualising hegemony, in Gramsci’s usage hegemony was not a discursive concept; it was, above all, political practice. It had a discursive element in as much as it operated through the contradictory consciousness or double consciousness<sup>7</sup> of the subaltern. Gramsci called the two consciousnesses Commonsense and Goodsense. According to Gramsci, these are the two resources from which an individual derives his philosophy of life. As philosophy in general belongs to the critical, intellectual order, it coincides with Goodsense. But as philosophy is not a given, general idea, but an intellectual choice made within a particular historical and social context, it builds on the commonsense of the particular phase in history. Commonsense, Gramsci says, is an incoherent, diffuse set of ideas often emerging from the sedimentation left behind by previous

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<sup>7</sup> “The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity...His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” (Gramsci 1971:333).

philosophies. And Good sense is an "intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception" (Gramsci 1971:333).

This concern with the different levels of knowledge and belief that organize people's relationship to the wider social and political environment is indicative of Gramsci's conviction that "it was as conscious subjects possessing differential levels of knowledge that people 'lived out' and struggled to change relations of power and domination" (Martin, J 1998:145), a point sorely missed by James Scott's ethnographic critique of Gramsci's theory of subaltern consciousness. According to Raymond Williams, hegemony goes beyond and includes two powerful concepts - culture and ideology. "Hegemony goes beyond culture in its insistence on relating 'the whole social process' to specific distributions of power and influence" (1977:108). It goes beyond ideology in that it "sees the relations of domination and subordination in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living..." (Williams 1977:110).

The crucial concepts here are hegemony as involving specific distributions of power and as a lived reality, both of which direct attention to hegemony as practice and not just as discourse. To Gramsci, any understanding of the diverse forms of culture, national or international, could not be divorced from politics, as it was bound up with questions of leadership or hegemony, as Gramsci called it (1971). In seeing culture not simply as an epiphenomenon resulting from a particular base of class relations, which had been the structural Marxist way of approaching the question of culture, Gramsci introduced a new way of thinking of culture as a site of power. "Culture is never seen by Gramsci as merely an epiphenomenon, or simple reflection of more fundamental economic relations. While he retains even in his final writings the language of base and superstructure, in practice he transcends this over-simple metaphor of stacked layers" (Crehan 2002:72). To Gramsci the analysis of culture involved breaking down culture into its diverse discursive forms – high or low, elite or popular, philosophy or common sense – and looking at the particular sites in which and the specific articulations through which these discourses cement the moral and intellectual leadership of a particular class fraction(s).

In one of his Notes on Folklore<sup>8</sup>, Gramsci writes how “folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and, in its own way, has drawn from it the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with the previous traditions...there is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore” (Gramsci 1985 in Crehan 2002:108). Gramsci’s emphasis on hegemony as a suffusion of lived reality is evident in the key cultural emphasis of the word, which has rerouted Marxist analysis to the neglected terrain of ideas, values and beliefs. As James Martin sums up, “in defining hegemony as a political practice, Gramsci was keen to point out the complex ideological terrain that political agents confronted....Any hegemony was the culmination of a process of ideological fusion and diffusion in which an economic class broke free from its corporate mentality and merged with the life of the populace” (1998:145).

In drawing from Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe decentre hegemony discursively and refrain from locating it in particular sites or articulations. They theorize society as a totality that is underpinned not by some essential unity, but “as an ensemble of totalizing effects in an open relational complex” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:103) In defining society thus, Laclau and Mouffe reflect Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as something that is never permanently won, but as something that needs to be constantly recreated and defended, but they lose sight of Gramsci’s preoccupation with the location of hegemony. The Gramscian ambiguity regarding the frontiers of State and civil society and hegemonic function inhering in both, is part of a larger preoccupation with identifying the locus of hegemony in capitalist society. As Perry Anderson states, “in the enigmatic mosaic that Gramsci laboriously assembled in prison, the words ‘State’, ‘civil society’, ‘political society’, ‘hegemony’, ‘domination’ or ‘direction’ all undergo a persistent *slippage*....this slippage is neither accidental nor arbitrary”. Indeed, even where Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is discursive – in his notion of the hegemonic order operating through the contradictory consciousness of the subaltern – it still seeks a logic of unity in that it locates consent to a hegemonic order in the double or contradictory consciousness of the subaltern. Gramsci’s

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<sup>8</sup> The spontaneous philosophy of the masses is contained in their language, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content, in common sense and good sense and lastly in popular religion, that is the entire system of beliefs, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting are all collectively bundled under the term folklore. (See T.J. Jackson Lears. 1985. The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities. in The American Historical Review Vol 90, no:3, p570.)

concern with identifying a locus of hegemony is clear from his notes on the ‘Problem of the “collective Man” or of “Social conformism”’, where Gramsci explains the educative and formative role of the State: “Its aim is always that of creating new and higher types of civilization; of adapting the ‘civilization’ and morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production...” (1971:242).

While Gramsci firmly rejected the classic Marxist proclivity towards economic determinism, directing attention to the complexity inhering in any political conjuncture, the anti-deterministic stance in his writings is equally rivaled by the presence of another metaphor – that of ‘organic’ unity, which introduces the element of teleos, a pre-given end, in his historicism (Martin, J 1998). So while the relations of force between the base and superstructure are not pre-determined and might, in a given historical moment, be expressed through highly complex, shifting and contradictory permutations and combinations, the organic unity argument that runs through Gramsci’s historicism means that his anti-determinism is of an ambiguous nature. “In stressing the moment of unity in the totality, Gramsci inevitably privileged the class character of politics because it was classes who represented the ‘rational’ or ‘organic’ foundation to society” (Martin 1998:146). Thus classes are decentred as concrete political agents but privileged as historical actors; hegemony denoted the capacity of a class to ‘univerzalise’ its appeal through the proliferation of ideology at a ‘national-popular’ level (Martin 1998:151). But since Gramscian analysis involves a specific conjuncture, involving several actors and class consciousness itself was a result of education and intellectual leadership and not an *a priori* unity, class in Gramsci is essentially class-in-construction or class-in-practice. Such a view of class helps ground it in the conjunctural moment under scrutiny and pre-empts the possibility of it becoming the final arbiter in the struggle for hegemony. Further given that gender is a primary field constitutive of and constituted by other discourses of difference, in the conjunctural moment under scrutiny, class is displaced as the primary way of signifying relationships of power.

The notion of consent is not wholly discursive either. In order to illustrate this, it is useful to take a brief detour here into James Scott’s critique of Gramsci’s notion of contradictory consciousness in his important study of peasant consciousness in a small, farming community in the Malaysian village Sedaka, where Scott spent two

years (1978-80) researching questions of agency and resistance. Says Scott: “No one who looks even slightly beneath the fairly placid official surface of class relations in Sedaka would find it easy to argue that the poor are much mystified about their situation. Their account of the green revolution and its social consequences is widely divergent from that of the rich” (1985:304). Scott identifies two forms of peasant resistance – everyday resistance and open defiance. Everyday resistance is characterised by its “implicit disavowal of public and symbolic goals...[it] is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains” (Scott 1985:33).

“The struggle between the rich and the poor in Sedaka is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain, and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. The details of this struggle are not pretty, as they entail backbiting, gossip, character assassination.... *What is remarkable about this aspect of class conflict is the extent to which it requires a shared world view. Neither gossip nor character assassination, for example, makes much sense unless there are shared standards of what is deviant, unworthy, impolite*” (Scott 1985:xvii; emphasis added). Scott refers to the practice of zakat or gift-giving by the elite. To the peasants, zakat is no expression of “disinterested liberality” on the part of the elite and their participation in it involves what Scott calls a “*reciprocal manipulation of the symbols of euphemization*” (Scott 1985:309; emphasis added).

In a pertinent Note on Folklore, Gramsci points out that the subaltern cannot possess a ‘systematic’ and ‘elaborate’ conception of the world because their culture is subject to “contradictory development” (Gramsci 1985:188-189 in Crehan 2002:99). Scott’s finding seems to squarely disprove this stance. However, in rejecting Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Scott quotes a relevant passage from The German Ideology: “In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the ruling material power of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual power...”<sup>9</sup> “Hegemony,” says Scott, “is simply the name Gramsci gave to this process of ideological domination” (1985:315). However as Joseph Femia writes, to Gramsci the characteristic nature of the bourgeois epoch was not class conflict, as it was to all

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<sup>9</sup> See Easton and Guddat, Writings of the Young Marx, p438.

Marxists before him (with the exception of Lenin perhaps<sup>10</sup>), but consensus - the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (Femia 1981:32-33; Gramsci 1971:12). So in rejecting Gramsci's notion of contradictory consciousness, Scott in fact illustrates most clearly not only the contradictory development of subaltern peasant culture in Sedaka but also the consensual nature of the practice of peasant resistance. Thus while Scott brilliantly illuminates the practice of agency among the subaltern group through the appropriation of prestige symbols of the dominant group through a reciprocal manipulation of its symbolic value, his notion of the subaltern's everyday resistance as intended to obtain "immediate, de facto gain" is in consonance with the contradictory nature of subaltern consent in Gramsci, whose revolutionary vision called such a form of contradictory consciousness as embryonic and short of a revolutionary consciousness. Further subalternity in Gramsci did not indicate conflict; the subaltern was a subject sought to be constantly co-opted into the dominant framework; this is in contrast to the subalternity defined by scholars in the Subaltern Studies Group for instance, in whom subalternity is a condition that defines the subaltern as a subtractive category<sup>11</sup>, characterized by exclusion and conflict – an idea that rests on the classic Marxist understanding of class relations as oppositional, with the idea of exclusion most strongly manifest in Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's notion of the subaltern, who distinguishes the subaltern from the popular as a "social position without identity" (1996; 2005). The subaltern and people used interchangeably by the Subaltern Studies Group was to Spivak not just the name of a differential space but more specifically a position without access to the lines of social mobility; subalternity in Spivak is in binary opposition to the nation state and to the international civil society. And in this latter sense, she is echoing Gramsci's subaltern.

<sup>10</sup> "In his most (and quoted pamphlet) he puts forward the following argument: 'There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology; ... for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism,... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie'." See V.I. Lenin. 1967. What is to be done? Moscow: Progress Publishers, p.41.

<sup>11</sup> Founding member of the Subaltern Studies group, Ranajit Guha, defines subalternity as "The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite" (cited in Spivak 1996:203). But as editors of the volume (ibid) Donna Landry and Gerald M Mclean point out, Guha's definition is close to Marx's well-known comments on the French peasantry in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire' (1996).

The inconsonance of a wholly discursive approach with Gramsci's discourse becomes evident when in order to fully theorise hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe argue that 'antagonism', their term for resistance, be seen as a metaphor for the failure of difference within a system of difference which language is; subversion can therefore only exist within the limits of language and as its disruption. This is a theoretical stance in line with their pre-occupation with theorizing the emergence of new social movements as discursive moments that prevent society from being "fully sutured". At this point, it becomes wholly discordant with Gramsci's fundamental attempt in the Prison Notes to prescribe revolutionary tactics applicable in different political and historical contexts. More specifically, where does such a discursively constructed notion of subversion leave a concept such as agency, particularly salient in feminist ethnography? How can the everyday life, narratives and embodied practices of women be represented as expressions of their agency, however tentative, rather than as discursively constructed positions that create a subject effect? I explore these questions in the next section by juxtaposing two voices – that of a literary philosopher and Western feminist, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, an ethnographer and post-colonial feminist.

### **Agency and the Subject of feminism**

Judith Butler, continuing in the discursive, Foucauldian tradition states that:

"To claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency...agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field. But if we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, then agency can be *presumed* only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction...The epistemological model that offers us a pre-given subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that *agency is always and only a political prerogative*" - (Butler 1992:12-13).

If agency is a political prerogative, what is the nature of agency that a particular political project – such as Western feminism – sanctions (non)-Western women? In other words, who exercises the prerogative and for whom? Are there other kinds of political projects in non-Western and post-colonial contexts where other forms of agency, other kinds of political prerogatives, need to be explored?

While post-structural feminists bid farewell to the intentional subject, a group of historians in India were working to establish “the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories” (Das 1992:312). The work of the Subaltern Studies Group of historians is testimonial to an emancipatory historiographical project that stands at the intersection of history and anthropology, trying to relocate the agency of change in the subaltern or the so-called insurgent under colonialism. In their attempt to recover the marginalised, non-elite groups or the subalterns under colonialism, in order to clear an enabling space for their voices, the group reconceptualises moments of change which are “pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition (they would thus be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation rather than within the great modes-of-production narrative)” and proposes that such changes be “marked by a functional change in sign-systems....from crime to insurgency, from bondsman to worker...” (Spivak 1996:205).

The Subaltern Studies group has had to rely on elite documentation in order to reconstruct subaltern consciousness. To this end, they argue that the will of the subaltern to resist and question should be read in terms of the crisis that it produced for the colonial authority. Gayatri Spivak, in an attempt to align the subaltern group with the project of poststructuralist deconstruction critically engages with the group’s work and suggests that although their work seems to be a positivist project, it has to be in fact placed in line with the Marx who located fetishization to spin the narrative of the development of the money form, with the Nietzsche who offers genealogy in place of historiography, with the Derrida of ‘affirmative deconstruction’ and so on. “I am progressively inclined,” she says, “to read the retrieval of subaltern consciousness as the charting of what in poststructuralist language would be called the subaltern subject-effect....as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and ‘situate’ the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1996:213-214). Spivak has since distanced herself from the work of the subaltern group, asserting that although the retrieval of the subaltern is a strategy in the service of a scrupulously visible political interest, the subaltern does not speak for (her)self (Spivak 1988). In post-colonial contexts, this understanding of the subaltern has ramifications for a feminist and ethnographic theorization of the social practice and agency of women in their everyday lives.

These ramifications are thrown into sharp relief in ‘Shah Bano’, an analysis by Zakia Pathak and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, of the case of the divorce and subsequent decade-long court battle of Shah Bano, a poor Indian Muslim woman, to claim a modest maintenance amount from her husband. In April 1985, Shah Bano’s arduous legal battle culminated in her being granted a modest sum as maintenance by the Supreme Court of India, the apex court of the country. However, soon after, the issue acquired an unprecedented political dynamic with the party in government losing crucial by-elections in December 1985 as it was perceived as supportive of the court’s judgment, which in turn was seen as an interference in and violation of the Muslim personal law. Consequently, a piece of legislation – ironically called the Muslim Women (Protection of Right in divorce) Act - was passed by Parliament in May 1986 effectively annulling the judgement of the apex court. Meanwhile in a dramatic turn, Shah Bano herself wrote an open letter rejecting the decision of the court.

Pathak and Rajan state that they wish to analyse Shah Bano as a fragmented, female subaltern subject, whose consciousness comes into being through the investments of a hegemonic or dominant consciousness and is therefore only a subject-effect, a term which they borrow from Gayatri Spivak. According to Spivak, a subject-effect is plotted as follows:

“That which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network (“text” in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on....Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogenous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject” (1996:213).

The subject-effect, called Shah Bano, that Pathak and Rajan seek to represent, is gleaned from the “text” of her actions in the law courts, not from her own words or the interviews she gave to the media, because it is not their intention to “recreate” a Shah Bano who is “the origin and repository of her story” (1992:266). Analysing her open letter<sup>12</sup> rejecting the apex court’s decision in her favour in order to assert her

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<sup>12</sup> “[This judgment] is apparently in my favour; but since this judgment is contrary to the Quran and the hadith and is an open interference in Muslim personal law, I, Shah Bano, being a Muslim, reject it and dissociate myself from every judgment which is contrary to the Islamic Shariat. I am aware of the agony and distress to which this judgment has subjected the muslims of India today.” Pathak and Rajan provide an end note to the journey of the letter first published as ‘Open letter to Muslims’ in *Inquilab*, November 13, 1985. The letter, they write, is signed by Shah Bano with her thumb impression, attested by the signature of four witnesses; it was translated into English by A. Karim

Muslim religious identity in the backdrop of Hindu organisations that offered her “protection”, the authors conclude that “her apparent inconstancy or changeability *must* be interpreted as her refusal to occupy the subject position offered to her” (1992:267; emphasis added).

Not only do the authors refuse to “privilege” Shah Bano’s interviews as sources of her subjectivity, but they also refuse to analyse the play of politics and power *at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible*. This would have been possible if they had addressed the on-the-ground politics surrounding Shah Bano’s rejection of the financial award she fought to obtain for 10 years. Such an ethnographic move would have brought out the limits and possibilities of Shah Bano’s agency in relation to more powerful social and political agents. However Pathak and Rajan’s analysis, while not only providing a thin account of subjectivity, is also theoretically and politically weak.

This is critically exposed in the light of a recent instance where a young muslim woman, raped by her father-in-law, was asked by clerics of the powerful Dar-ul-uloom Deoband muslim seminary to not remain married to her husband. Following protests from feminist groups and major political parties, the seminary has backtracked from issuing a fatwa (religious edict) on the matter, but the woman who is at the centre of the controversy has agreed to follow the ruling of the Darul-ul-loom Deoband in any case<sup>13</sup>.

Going by Pathak’s and Rajan’s analytics, they would be inclined to ascribe the woman’s stance to a refusal of the subject position offered by feminist groups with no attention paid to the play of powerful male religio-political agency inhering in the situation. Thus the compulsion that arises out of theorising that uses ‘strategic

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Shaik, in *Radiance*, November 24-30, 1985; It was reprinted in Asghar Ali Engineer ed., 1987. The Shahbano Controversy. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, p211.

<sup>13</sup> “It is hard to believe that this is 2005 and not 1985. Once again we are being reminded that politics matters, women don’t.... In 2005, we see a virtual re-enactment of the politics of 1985 with the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, suggesting that the clerics in Muzaffarnagar, who laid down that a woman raped by her father-in-law cannot remain married to her husband, should not be questioned....At the time of writing, the woman at the centre of this controversy has said that she will abide by the ruling of the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband. It comes as no surprise that she is saying this. Without support, how can a woman have the courage to go against the dominant trend in her community? But her statement should not mean that people accept that nothing can be done. For if no attempt is made to save the woman, then the way will be left open for more such rulings from caste and religious *panchayats*....” See Kalpana Sharma. 2005. ‘Shah Bano re-enacted’ in *The Hindu*, July 10.

essentialism' to retrieve the subaltern Muslim subject, is a separation of the culturally constructed subaltern subject and the modes of agency available to the subject when in fact they are not on mutually exclusive terrain.

“Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction (nor is it a quality one has only when one is whole, or when one is an individual). Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there” (Ortner 1995:186).

In Judith Butler, a similar concern to theorise the constructed as also engaged in construction is manifest as an attempt to bridge the linguistic and the performative: “The force of repetition in language may be the paradoxical condition by which a certain agency – not linked to a fiction of the ego as master of circumstance – is derived from the *impossibility* of choice” (1993:124). In Butler, the notion of appropriation of the dominant culture or norm is a form of agency, “a power in and as discourse, in and as performance” which has to repeat in order to remake (1993:137). Thus for Butler, the “temporal structure” of the subject is chiasmic, it is a juncture of discursive demands, a crossroads of cultural and discursive forces, which creates a space of ambivalence from which there is the possibility of a “reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds – and fails to proceed” (1993:124).

In Butler, what emerges is a conception of agency that is not outside of power structures but one that is enabled by those structures. The self in subjection is the site of an ‘enabling violation’ (1993). Although she calls for a theorisation of agency as not always geared in opposition to power, in what is a hallmark of her progressive politics, Butler’s theorisation of agency has largely been in terms of resistance to/subversion of the (heterosexual) norm.

Drawing on Butler’s notion of agency as her starting point, but also in a significant departure from that notion, anthropologist Saba Mahmood has made an important recent intervention in debates on the theorisation of female agency in non-Western, particularly Islamic, contexts. In her ethnographic work on an urban women’s Mosque Movement, which is a part of the larger Islamic revival movement in Cairo, Egypt, Mahmood argues that the liberal discourse of freedom and emancipation that undergrid feminist scholarship fatally limits its ability to explain conceptions of self, moral agency and discipline that underlie the practices of this nonliberal religious

movement and consequently does not provide an understanding of the desires that animate participation in such a movement (2005).

Stating that her intention “is not to question the profound transformation that the liberal discourse of freedom and emancipation has enabled in women’s lives around the world, but to draw attention to the ways in which its presuppositions have come to be naturalized in the scholarship on gender”, Mahmood calls for an interrogation of not just those conditions under which a feminist desire arises, but also those conditions that give rise to a desire to submit to “a variety of goals”, an approach significantly substantive than the one employed by Pathak and Rajan (2001:208). The rest of her work is an attempt to represent the force and importance of the Islamic discourse of piety in women’s lives and the particular modes of embodiment, the visceral experiences that it entails. In what is a pointer for future feminist scholarship in non-Western contexts, Mahmood writes that:

“In order to explore the kinds of injury specific to women located in particular historical and cultural situations, it is not enough simply to point, for example, that a tradition of female piety or modesty serves to give legitimacy to women’s subordination. Rather it is only by exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination to the women who embody it” (2001:225).

She thus departs from Butler’s ‘progressivist’ stance by reconceptualising agency as a practice that does not imply a natural desire to resist social norms and by criticising “the incarceration of the notion of agency to the space of emancipatory politics” (2001:211). Thus agency is decoupled from change and agentival capacity is seen not just in “those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (2001:212).

In terms of its relevance for audience ethnography, Mahmood’s work resonates with the long-standing commitment of feminist media scholarship to salvage ‘women’s genres’ from the populist/low culture strait-jacket, to dissect the complex mechanisms of pleasure that underlies its popularity. More importantly, her use of the notion of agency, as one that subsumes acts of resistance and works with power in an attempt to understand the desire to submit to Islamic piety, has important inklings for an

understanding of ‘modern’ Indian women’s reception of serials that centralize traditional womanhood, particularly the desires and pleasure that animate their engagement with it. There also follows an important methodological argument that favours a privileging of the categories through which the participants engage with the serials, rather than an imposition of the researcher’s categories on the researched.

In choosing to conceptualise progressive agency in submission and piety rather than resistance, in stasis rather than in change, Mahmood leaves in crisis the place and meaning of resistance in gender studies in non-western contexts, signaling the need for a more open, contingent form of resistance rather than an a priori progressivist notion. However, while Mahmood’s intervention is an important reminder of the need to imagine what it is to speak of gender equality from within the life-worlds that feminist scholars are engaged with rather than assuming a priori what undoing gender inequality entails in these locations, her ethnography fails to provide an adequate account of the ‘impossibility of choice’ that could have made the submissive agency she has depicted possible. In other words, Mahmood’s representation of agency, while avoiding the domination-resistance dichotomy, provides a thin account of the politics of piety by failing to situate and describe the agency of her women respondents in relation to other more influential agents within the movement. Crucially, her reconceptualization of agency completely disengages with the possibility of contradictions or ruptures within the community of women or the movement. Her study does not engage with the possibility that the agency she describes and which privileges a discourse of womanhood organized through the commonsense religious categories of piety and submission might involve contradictions even as it marginalizes other alternative discourses of womanhood. In this sense, the notion of commonsense in Gramsci provides an alternative route to conceptualizing agency as discontinuous and contradictory even as it is oriented towards stasis and continuity. Thus in exploring urban women’s engagement with a familial ideal of Hindu womanhood, Mahmood’s notion of agency helps explore the meanings and desires that animate women’s alignment with the ideal image but does not help explain their disidentification with the text or alternative embodied performances of the text. However, in positing that the emancipatory progressivist politics of feminism needs to first engage with the intersubjective level of being and acting from where political judgments arise in order “to think constitutively and critically about what politics is or

should be about”, Mahmood outlines a new theoretical direction for feminist ethnography in non-western contexts.

### **Part 3 - Indian Womanhood: A historical overview**

The popularity of the serial form in contemporary India has meant a reassertion of two representational trends that have been long popular across Indian cinema and television – the idealisation of domesticated womanhood and the centrality of the extended family. Although what makes the reassertion of these trends palpable is the break it effects with progressive women-oriented narratives on television that preceded it in the early 1990s, it is nonetheless continuous with the hegemonic representations of womanhood and family in cinema and television in post-independent India. This continuity, as feminist scholarship on state-controlled television in India has noted, is seen in the representation of woman and family as bearers of the legacies of the nationalist movement and active participants in the project of nation-building through the greater part of the post-independent period (Mankekar 1999). This part of the review attempts a historical overview of the location of gender in discourses of national identity and how national identity might, in specific historical moments, define gender. Further, while the intersections between the discourse of womanhood and nation both within and outside the realm of visual representation has been explored extensively and is well-established in academic work on ‘Third World’ nationalisms (Sinha 2006), the question of how gender might be implicated in an everyday sense of national belonging through women-oriented narratives on television remains to be explored. Alternatively this part seeks to identify some of the issues relevant to a theorising of the everyday articulation of national belonging through the cultural categories of womanhood and family.

#### **Gender, Nationalist discourse and theories of the nation**

The first of these issues have to do with the relationship between nationalist discourses on women and the theorizing of nationalism. More precisely, it is necessary to ask how nationalist discourses on gender have been located in theorizations of nationalism.

In her path-breaking work ‘Gender and Nation’, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) noted that theorists of nations and nationalism are only hesitatingly beginning to acknowledge the role of gender in (re)producing nations. In fact, most theories of nationalism,

particularly modernist (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1995), have ignored gender in their analyses. General historical-sociological theories on the rise and development of nationalism that characterizes much of the work of the modernist school, fail to engage with gender issues (Day and Thompson 2004). Rather, they stress the role of a hegemonic intelligentsia who “rediscover ‘collective memories’, transform popular oral traditions and languages into written ones, and portray a ‘national golden age’ in the far – mythical or historical – past, whose reconstitution becomes the basis for nationalist aspirations”(Yuval-Davis 1998:23). Among the modernist school of nationalism theorists, Anthony D Smith diverges from the assertion that nations are fabricated and utterly invented. He aligns himself with the earlier primordialist school of thought by suggesting that the *longue duree* of nations are to be uncovered in the cultural symbols of their shared ethnies, an approach he terms ethno-symbolist (1999).

The older primordialist school of nationalism (Geertz 1963; Van den Berghe 1979), while stressing the centrality of kinship ties to the production of the nation, nevertheless fails to acknowledge the salience of gender to the analysis of nationalism, seeing kinship and family merely as building blocks that help construct the nation rather than as institutions that supply the nation-state with gendered subjects for instance. In Geertz’s conception, primordial ties are animated by the participants’ own sense of the immemorial nature of their nation. And in this scheme of things, symbolism plays a central role (1963). Yet ultimately these conceptualisations of nationalism fail to account for the fact that women reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically (Yuval Davis 1997).

Contemporary approaches to nationalism diverge from the classical approach in that they do not focus on the origin and development of nationalism, rather they direct attention to the temporality of nationalism following on the epistemological turn in the social sciences against grand narratives. Thus Brubaker approaches “Nationness as an event, as something that suddenly crystallises rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity or culture” (1996:19). In considering national belonging as a process of continuous renegotiation, Billig (1995) terms it banal nationalism.

These contemporary theorizations of the nation draw substantially from Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of the nation as an imagined community. His work marks the moment of transition from structural and materialist analyses of nationalism to the meanings and effects of a sense of nationality and the intimate connections between personhood and belonging to a nation (Eley and Suny 1996:24). And yet his limited conceptualisation of citizenship as a fraternity of "deep horizontal comradeship" (1983:7) limits the possibility of fully evaluating the gendering of national belonging and locating nationalist discourses on gender in the theorisation of the nation. In an incisive critique of the fraternal principle inherent in Anderson's imagined community, Carol Pateman argues that while patriarchy is specific to the premodern historical period, in the modern liberal state, the system becomes fraternity. While in patriarchy the father ruled over men and women, in fraternity men rule over women in the domestic sphere, but agree on a social order of equality among themselves within the public, political sphere (1988). Feminist scholarship on nationalism, particularly the work of Yuval-Davis (1997), highlight the manner in which nationalist discourses naturalize the differential positioning of men and women in relation to the nation-state.

According to Yuval-Davis (1997), the key dimension of theories of the nation that lies at the heart of their neglect of women as biological, cultural and symbolic producers of the nation, is their implicit division of civil society into the public and private spheres, with the former being marked as male domain and the latter as female domain, which is not seen as politically relevant. "As nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has effected their exclusion from that discourse as well" (Yuval-Davis 1997:2). In other words, the bulk of theorizations on nationalism unwittingly align themselves with hegemonic nationalist narratives of gender and family that assigns these two categories to the private, supposedly apolitical, domestic domain.

In challenging the validity of the public/private divide, feminist scholars such as Carol Pateman on the one hand and postcolonial scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee on the other have made a clearing space from which the subalternity of non-western historical contexts might be redeemed. "The public realm," Pateman points out, "cannot be fully understood in the absence of the private sphere....Civil freedom depends on patriarchal right" (1988:4). Pateman even boldly argues that the

very conception of the modern individual, who naturalises the nation-state, the bourgeois public-private divide etc, belongs to patriarchal categories of thought (1988). Yuval-Davis argues that the construction of the public-private divide is in itself a political act and that political power relations with their own dynamics exist in both spheres. “The most important contribution of feminism to social theory has been the recognition that power relations operate within primary social relations as well as within the more impersonal secondary social relations of the civil and political domains” (1997:80).

In contrast to gender-blind understandings of the nation, theorizations of nationalism that have taken gender and family as significant evaluative categories have also sought to draw linkages across the public-private divide. For example, George L Mosse (1985) linked the rise of the bourgeois family morality to the rise of nationalism in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. His work, Yuval-Davis notes, seems to follow in the anthropological tradition of Levi-Strauss (1969) which has been more aware of the central links between gender relations and social cohesion. “Levi-Strauss has seen the exchange of women as the original mechanism for creating social solidarity among men of different kinship units and thus as the basis of constructing larger collectivities” (Yuval-Davis 1997:14).

Analysing postcolonial settings, scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlight the nature of the imagined community at the height of the nationalist struggle for India’s independence from Britain as one that blends “the feeling of community that belongs to national links and political organizations” with “that other feeling of community whose structural model is the [clan or the extended] family” (1988:277). According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the idioms through which anti-colonial struggle has been conducted in the Indian subcontinent has often been in the sphere of the non-modern. “One does not have to subscribe to the ideology of clannish patriarchy,” he says, “to acknowledge that the metaphor of the sanctified and patriarchal extended family was one of the most important elements in the cultural politics of Indian nationalism. In the struggle against British rule, it was frequently the use of this idiom – in songs, poetry and other forms of nationalist mobilization – that allowed ‘Indians’ to fabricate a sense of community and to retrieve for themselves a subject position from which to address the British” (1997: 283).

Evidently, national experiences of the relative importance of the state, civil society and the domain of kinship have been varied, with some ‘cultures of citizenship’<sup>14</sup> evidencing, at certain points, a bigger investment in kinship ties over that of the civil society or the state. Yuval-Davis offers an alternative to the public-private distinction by proposing a differentiation between three spheres – the state, civil society and the domain of family and kinship – as the relative importance of these three spheres could variously determine the construction of citizenship. To quote her at length:

“It is misleading to see in the rise of the ‘modern nation-state’ a completely different form of social organization from the ‘pre-modern’ ones. In many states, especially post-colonial states, one’s extended family and kinship relationships have continued to be used as foci of loyalty and organization. Political, social and probably even civil rights might depend on the familial positioning of the particular citizen (Saudi Arabia or Jordan are probably good examples of such a state but in more diluted forms this phenomenon is spread much more widely, especially when looking at ruling parties’ elites). Traditional social, and especially familial, relations continue to operate and often women have few or no formal citizenship rights. Paradoxically, where familial relations are important in the politics of a country, women who are widows or daughters of political leaders have the highest chance of becoming political leaders, as has been the case in the Indian sub-continent, for instance..... A theory of citizenship which will not only be non-sexist, nonracist and non-Westocentric, but would also be flexible enough to deal with the far-reaching changes in the global (dis)order and reconstructions of state and society... needs to dismantle the identification of the private with the family domain and the political with the public domain; it needs to construct citizenship as a multi-tier concept and to sever it from an exclusive relation to the state” (1997b: 14,22).

### **Early Indian Nationalism and ‘the woman question’**

The second issue, following from the earlier discussions centers on the need to historicize and contextualise the gendered processes inherent in the discursive construction of the nation. “Nations are situated in specific historical moments and are constructed by shifting nationalist discourses promoted by different groupings

<sup>14</sup> In a 2006 essay, Nick Couldry cautions against taking cultural citizenship as a known category in view of its popular currency and instead argues for a closer analysis of the links between culture and citizenship and the different configurations of meaning that an analysis of the culture or cultures of citizenship might uncover. See Couldry, Nick. 2006. ‘Culture and Citizenship: The missing link? In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 9 (3), London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp 321-339.

competing for hegemony. Their gendered character should be understood only within such a contextualisation” (Yuval-Davis 1997:4). The Indian experience is defined by two major nodes of intersection between the categories of gender and nation – the first can be termed feminising the nation and the second nationalising the feminine – both of which served as the ground for the enunciation of Indian nationalism.

Colonialism, especially through the medium of orientalist historiography, not only fostered sectional consciousness along religious lines, but also engendered a nationalist response that harked back to a ‘Golden Age’ of ‘synthesis’<sup>15</sup> in India’s ancient past (Inden 1990); Sumit Sarkar (1983) refers to it as the “nationalist counter-myth”. The proclivity of the colonial historian to romanticise and idealise India as the embodiment of the spiritual, the imaginative and the effeminate and consequently an object to be seduced/colonised by a scientific, rational and masculine West was the very fulcrum on which nationalist discourse came to rest – a process T.B. Hansen calls the “inversion of Orientalist epistemology” (1999:67-71). Thus even for an avowed secularist like Jawaharlal Nehru<sup>16</sup>, Indian culture epitomised spirituality and therefore was plural and tolerant, an argument that was advanced in much more powerful and parochial terms by the founding fathers of Hindutva<sup>17</sup> to advocate a nation for the Hindus presided over by the noble tenets of the Vedas (lit. the root of knowledge). “The idea of holism and encompassing harmony in Hinduism became central to the more politicized ideology of nascent Hindu nationalism”...(Hansen 1999:70). The idea of a pure and spiritual motherland found its most lyrical expression in Bankim Chandra’s 1882 hymn *Bande Mataram* (Salutations to the

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<sup>15</sup> “The Hindu mind, directed by a sensuous imagination that cannot properly relate subject and object, lurches first from one extreme to the other, from a bonkers ritualism to a solipsistic mysticism, then to a nihilistic Salvationism of the Buddha, then to the schizophrenic religion of Siva and Vishnu. Instead of witnessing the triumph of man, reason and spirit, however, we see the triumph of the effeminate, the sensuous and the parochial. After the Gupta ‘synthesis’, the Aryan has spent himself, and by the end of the twelfth century it is time for a hopelessly divided civilization, already overwhelmed by a symbolical mind, to fall prey to the world-destroying will of a fanatical Islam” (Inden 1990:129). As Inden himself trenchantly sums up, colonial narratives of Hinduism often smack of a “degenerative psycho-history masterminded by Hegel”, placing the religion not only in opposition to the ‘world-ordering rationality’ of the West, but also in direct conflict with Islam, the enemy within.

<sup>16</sup> See Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India*, 1980, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp84-100. In it he “quotes liberally from Max Mueller’s eulogies of Indian spirituality, Schopenhauer’s praise of the Upanishads, Romain Rolland’s treatise on the intimate relations between Hindu culture and Hellenic-Christian culture, and so on...” (Hansen 1999:68)

<sup>17</sup> The term, which today denotes a mass-based communally oriented political movement, was introduced into the lexicon of political Hinduism by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a Maharashtrian Brahmin, widely seen as a political extremist, through his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, first published in Nagpur in 1923. See Jaffrelot, 1996, p25.

Motherland) and fired the nationalist-popular imagination like never before. British colonial presence was seen as the violation of the Mother, an emotive association so powerful that its potency almost outlasted its utility. The patriotic energies released by *Bande Mataram* would not rest with the destruction of the colonial Other, it transmigrated itself into various Hindu revivalist movements that were principally in opposition to the Muslim Other.

The theme of the violation of or threat to the Mother was played out in particular through the Gaurakshini movement or the Cow protection movement that arose in the 1890s, which gave a new impetus to the popular imagination of the cow as Gaumata or 'Mother cow', a phenomenon described as the 'nationalisation of the sacred cow' by Therese O'Toole (Copley 2003:95-101). Sandria B. Freitag points out that the cow protection movement was unique in that for the first time it sought to dissolve caste and class stratifications within the Hindu society with the help of a symbol that seemed to embody characteristics that every Hindu, at least in the Hindi belt, could identify with in different ways (Freitag in Ludden 1996:216). But more importantly, as Spivak remarks, in colonial India for the predominantly male insurgents in subaltern movements of rebellion, 'femininity' is as important a discursive field as 'religion' and so "when cow protection becomes a volatile signified in the reinscription of the social position of various kinds of subaltern, semisubaltern, and indigenous elite groups, the cow is turned into a female figure of one kind or another" (Spivak 1996:116).

The trope of the maternal expressed in the body of the nation and through movements such as cow protection existed alongside the centrality of the 'women's question' in social reform movements of the early and mid nineteenth century. However, by the close of the nineteenth century women disappeared from the nationalist discourse. This sudden disappearance of the women's question from the agenda of public debate, as Partha Chatterjee (1997) points out, has perplexed historians greatly. Chatterjee seeks to answer this exit of women from public discourse and argues that it was because by the turn of the century, nationalism had 'resolved' the 'women's question' in the following way: "The relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is to be explained not by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. The reason lies in nationalism's success in situating the

‘women’s question’ in an ‘inner’ domain of sovereignty far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state” (1997:242). This assignation of women to the inner domain was not direct, it was rather the result of a nationalist division of the cultural sphere into two domains – the material and the spiritual - as a response to the ‘civilizing mission’ of colonialism, particularly its designation of the social customs of the Indian people as degenerate and barbaric.

In identifying tradition as degenerate and barbaric, colonialist critics enumerated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women not so much by men as by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices. As Lata Mani (1989) points out in the context of Sati or the practice of self-immolation by widows, this tradition identified by the coloniser was essentially a selective tradition which assumed the hegemony of brahminical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to its dictates. “Indian nationalism, in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the women’s question as a problem already constituted for it: namely, a problem of Indian tradition” (Chatterjee 1997:244).

It is important to note, however, that Chatterjee’s argument about the marking of the domestic domain as a sacred space outside the purview of the modern state did not apply to regions like Kerala - at the periphery of the colonial state - in the way it did to Bengal. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, community reform movements enjoyed enormous clout and the state was in fact called upon to legislate in order to transform the inner-most social spaces of marriage and family by community movements whose major agenda was “the transformation of internally-heterogeneous, loosely structured pre-modern caste groups in to internally homogeneous, strongly bound and mutually exclusive modern communities” (Devika 2006:46). The transformation of the inner space was at the heart of the modernizing process of communities and “the terms of such change, the goals that were set for it and the means advocated, were all strongly informed by the ideology of modern gender<sup>18</sup>” and resulted “not in the undoing of patriarchy but its re-doing in ways that were complex and perhaps more difficult to resist” (Devika 2006:46).

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<sup>18</sup> Ideology of modern gender involves 1) the presupposition of the division of the world into ‘public’ and ‘private’ domains appropriate for men and women respectively 2) compulsory heterosexuality 3) a strong claim to represent the ‘natural’ foundations of human social order for which a great deal of social activity including legal interventions through to modern education is necessary (Devika 2006:56).

Thus as the nineteenth century progresses, women come to symbolise the ground on which the problem of tradition is debated and reformulated; they become the subjects of a new patriarchy that sought to firmly reinstate the woman within the sacred confines of the home, making her the custodian of and active agent responsible for the preservation of a classicised and spiritualised tradition that could withstand the onslaught of Western modernity. The formulation of this ‘new woman’ by a ‘new patriarchy’ is not complete with her reassignment to the sacred space of the home as defender and bearer of tradition. It is only complete when she is made ‘truly modern’, thus becoming representative of a proud and resurgent nation.

Analysing the incipient shaping of the modern state and the modern individual or the citizen in India, Dipesh Chakrabarty points to the classically liberal definition of citizenship that the Indian constitution has embraced, following which the modern state and the modern individual or the citizen should be but two sides of the same coin – a state of affairs that would have in his words signalled the ‘end of history’ for Indians. However this modern individual whose public/political self constitutes citizenship, is also supposed to have a private self “that pours out incessantly in diaries, letters, autobiographies, novels...the bourgeois individual is not born until one discovers the pleasures of privacy” (Chakrabarty 1997:272). And yet this is a peculiar form of privacy, Chakrabarty says, more akin to a deferred public, one that is “always already oriented to an audience”<sup>19</sup>. Indian novels, diaries, letters and autobiographies since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seldom yield pictures of an endlessly interiorised subject. “Our autobiographies,” Chakrabarty says, “are remarkably ‘public’ (with constructions of public life that are not necessarily modern) when written by men, and they tell the story of the extended family when written by women” (1997:273).

With specific reference to colonial Bengal, he argues that the idea of the modern private was fought using two strategies – one sought to contrapose the cultural norm of the patriarchal extended family against the bourgeois patriarchal ideas of the companionate marriage and the second strategy involved mobilisations, on behalf of the extended family, of forms of collective memory that challenged the seemingly absolute separation of sacred and secular time on which the very modern (‘European’)

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<sup>19</sup> See Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, p49.

idea of history is based (Chakrabarty 1997:280). Thus the ‘truly modern’ housewife “would be so auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principle embodied in the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic well-being by whose grace the extended family and clan, and hence, by extending the sentiment, the nation (Bharatlakshmi), lived and prospered...While women’s education and the idea of discipline as such were seldom opposed in this discourse regarding the modern individual in colonial Bengal, the line was drawn at the point where modernity and the demand for bourgeois privacy threatened the power and the pleasures of the extended family” (1997:280-81).

New patriarchy emphasised, with all the force of mythological inspiration, what had become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new woman viz., the ‘spiritual’ qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity etc. The new woman was contrasted with the common woman who was coarse, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to (or liable to be subjected to) brutal physical oppression by males. So for example, formal education became not only acceptable, but a requirement for the new woman who had to acquire all the markers of superior national culture without jeopardizing her role at home, the sacred realm. “Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from its goal of cultural refinement through education as a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject” (Chatterjee 1997:254). Once nationalism fixed the essential femininity of women in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could venture out into the world outside the home without fearing the violation of their femininity. But they had to continue to rigorously nourish the spiritual domain of home with care and attention even as the men had to capitulate to various pressures made by the material demands of the world outside the home. Each of these capitulations on the part of men had to be compensated for by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women. “Thus the new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility and, by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (Chatterjee 1997:256). And as with all forms of hegemonic domination, new patriarchy combined its coercive fixing of femininity with subtle persuasion through the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother (Chatterjee 1997:257).

### **Representing a national womanhood**

The third issue in theorizing gendered nationhood in the specific context of a new conjunctural moment for womanhood in India involves a critical exploration of the confluence of gender and nation in representation. The continuities and disjunctures that mark the representation of women on television is dealt with in detail in Chapter 4 and here I will merely outline some of the key aspects of national representations of womanhood in the conjunctural moment in which this academic intervention is taking place.

As India stepped into the decade of the 1990s, the interpellations between the discourses of gender and nation acquired a new dimension. With the formal opening up of the Indian economy to foreign capital in 1991, economic reform processes set in motion in the latter half of the 1980s acquired a new intensity especially evidenced in a new culture of commodity consumption. Leela Fernandes, in a study of advertisements in print and on television in India in the late 1990s, argues that the aesthetic of the commodity form weaves together narratives of nationhood and development with the production of middle-class identity. Thus in a series of automobile advertisements ‘Man Woman and child and car’ appear to reproduce a sense of order, comforting fears and contradictions that underlie the process of economic transformation. The advertisements implicitly evoke older messages of state family planning that stressed on man, woman, son and daughter as elements of the ideal Indian family, modifying it to provide space for a new member – the car. Thus the new economy of consumption does not derail the nation-state but reworks older ideological narratives deployed by the state (Fernandes 2001). The middle-classes become consumers not just of new commodities in liberalising India but of a new India itself produced through the meanings attached to those commodities (Fernandes 2001:147-167).

Tejaswini Niranjana’s analysis of the economy of consumption promoted by neo-nationalist cinema in India and the manner in which regional cinema feeds into debates about ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ in the national context outlines the location of gender in the interface between nationhood and consumption. “The aggressive neo-nationalism of our times produces and sanctions a new femininity which is targeted

by a national market rather than merely regional ones. The conditions that create larger disposable incomes for certain sections and the proliferation of consumer goods construct also the new patrons of the visual image, who see their innermost desires figured forth as in *Geetanjali*<sup>20</sup>, in tales of enabling death, of a life to be lived solely in the present continuous” (1991: 86).

Surveying the representation of women in women’s magazines and advertising in liberalising India, Rupal Oza (2006) suggests the emergence of a new liberal Indian woman in the 1990s – confident and modern, yet retaining Indian values anchored in the traditional role of women as maternal, caring and family oriented. The consumer and sexual identity of this new liberal woman, Oza argues, is constructed through her relationship with the patriarchal household, helping anchor a new patriarchy consonant with a new economy of consumption (2006:30). As Fernandes (2001) points out, images of the new woman act as socio-symbolic sites for the negotiation of the subterranean contradictions and disruptions of a globalising India expressed through a heightened ambivalence towards processes of hybridization, particularly the threat of cultural impurity inherent in it. The inescapable contingency of remapping the nation and the body politic situated within a global capitalist economy is negotiated through the policing and regulation of women’s bodies. In effect, images of consumption form part of the technologies of vision that prescribe ideal social and cultural practices for the individual, the family and the community, achieved through a (re)articulation of narratives of gender (Fernandes 2001).

However, despite these scholarly analyses of what are emergent signs of a deepening nexus between consumption and gender identity in post-liberalisation India, there is a huge dearth of scholarship on the ways in which class and gender might be imbricated, unlike the wealth of literature that has been produced on the co-implication of gender and religious nationalism and consumption in India. In fact there has been a general decline in class analysis in South Asian studies as such (Chibber 2008). And within the school of Indian history that has most tenaciously engaged with agrarian revolts and peasant uprisings against the colonial state – the Subaltern Studies Group – class has lost its primacy, prompting one of the founding

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<sup>20</sup> A 1989 Telugu film directed by Mani Ratnam, *Geetanjali* is the story of two young lovers, both dying of incurable illnesses, set amidst the swirling mists of a hill resort where the protagonists seem to have gone to die (Niranjana, Tejaswini, 1991, pp 85-86)

members of the group, historian Sumit Sarkar to lament the decline of the subaltern in subaltern studies (1997).

### **Family, Television and cultural citizenship**

In exploring the phenomenon of ‘Bollywoodization’ of Indian cinema, Ashis Rajadhyaksha argues that it needs to be seen as a transition that a segment of the Indian film industry has gone through in its attempts to articulate a new sense of Indianness, “a freer form of civilizational belonging explicitly delinked from the political rights of citizenship” (2003: 32). Television has been instrumental not only in the collective reimagining of the private sphere of family but also in aligning everyday, commonsense discourses of family and gender to broader discourses of class and national identity. As Anjali Monteiro argues, the entry of the national broadcaster Doordarshan on the Indian family scene redefined the familial and altered the relationship of the average Indian family to the larger society and culture, offering a new locus in relation to which identities and power equations can be redefined and reproduced (1998:163). As she explains, through the decade of the 1980s the very act of purchasing or owning a television set became an act of self-definition on the part of the family, an assertion of its identity as a respectable middle-class, nuclear family. Monteiro’s work among the working class families of Kamgar Nagar in Goa provides a comparative perspective on people’s relationship to television in contrast to cinema in the 1980s when television was beginning to establish itself as a household medium. She argues that television unlike cinema was seen as being true to real life and watching television itself was seen as a family event (1998:164).

In analysing the kinship systems and the nature of the family in India, Patricia Uberoi (2006) refers to an important dimension to be reckoned with in the study of the family in contemporary India – this doesn’t have to do with the family as it is, but as it is imagined to be through the media. Terming this realm of the imagined family as the moral economy of the Indian family, Uberoi suggests that it is not just a fixed set of ideals, but a dialogic system “that is framed in terms of a set of moral dilemmas and contradictions, even as it posits the patrilineal joint family as the ideal, ‘traditional’ and culturally authentic form of Indian family life” (2006:30).

In K-series this dialogic moral economy of the family not only becomes the natural diegetic terrain for melodrama, but in animating this moral economy melodrama also

takes up the task of expanding its dialogic horizons – introducing new categories of tensions and counteracting forces that are but ephemerally resolved in keeping with the overall narrative scheme that prevents closure. Thus although the moral universe that characterised the melodramatic mode in Hindi cinema consisted of a Manichean divide between good and evil (Thomas, R 1995) unspecific to the family, the contemporary soap opera form utilises melodrama's Manichean vision to reimagine the family by centring it and making it the very basis of those conflicts. While Brooks' notion<sup>21</sup> of the moral occult - as a concept orientated towards a need for significance - relies on the family for its melodramatic repertoire, the melodramatic mode in operation in the k-series at once refigures and utilises the family. The melodramatic tensions that utilises the family as the basis of conflict and could likely provide intimations of an unviable joint family system are possibly rendered ineffective by the sensational implausibility of the narrative strands that produce those conflicts.

Further, the ideal woman of the serials and the 'Other' woman in the narrative coexist in a dynamic contradiction that serves to rework the tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' while simultaneously facilitating the production of both 'tradition' and 'modernity'. According to George Lipsitz, television has provided a locus for the redefinition of ethnic, class and family identities into consumer identities. These new forms, however, require legitimation and validation, ends that are achieved by invoking "historic memory", by "identifying new products and styles of consumption with traditional, historically sanctioned practices and behaviour" (1992: 77).

W.F. Haug's (1986) arguments surrounding the aesthetic of the commodity form hinges on a circular conception of the relationship between commodity aesthetics or meaning attached to the commodity form and social relationships or a form of collective imagining. Haug argues that while commodity aesthetics borrows its language at first from the fabric of social relationships ie the already existing social and cultural forms, as the circulation of the commodity is consolidated, people borrow meaning or aesthetic expression from the commodity form itself. In other words, if

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<sup>21</sup> In Brooks' view, in the desacralised post-enlightenment world, society required a form in which to express its search for meaning which lay hidden in what he called the moral occult, a repository of meaning that contained the desacralised remnants of sacred myth, a resource that was masked by the surface of reality but one that needed to be accessed if life in a post-sacred society was to be invested with meaning. "The Melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult" (1985: 5).

the serial is in itself viewed as a commodity form, then the circular logic of commodity aesthetics means that the serial mediates the meaning of womanhood and family, supplying meaning to the way in which these categories are collectively imagined.

Looking at it from an other perspective, “the nation is imagined not just through the conventional sites and symbols of nationalism such as war memorials or Independence day celebrations but through the aesthetic of the commodity form” (Fernandes 2001), which mediates to rearticulate the meanings of womanhood and family. It is thus that national culture becomes local, by entering the quotidian spaces of ordinary life, thereby inserting the local and the experiential into the master narrative of “national fantasy”. This aspect of the national culture, Lauren Berlant terms the National Symbolic - “the order of discursive practices” through which “the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright” (1991: 20). In representing a new Indian woman intimately bound up with the sphere of family, television engages its viewers in narratives of familial participation, animating a consciousness of civic belonging that is decoupled from any corresponding imagination of civic agency.

The imbrication of gender and nation needs to be theorised in the light of the specific historical context in which Indian nationalism came of age. As Mrinalini Sinha argues, the future of the scholarship on gender and the nation lies in a “densely historicised analysis of the articulation of the nation in specific historical moments” (2006: 335). Hindi cinema has been the principal arbiter of national identity in post-independent India and as the Indian film industry increasingly orients itself towards a transnational market for its cinema, it becomes the key articulator of cultural nationalism on the global stage (Rajadhyaksha 2003). Yet the currency of women-oriented narratives on television signals a more powerful, everyday process that engenders cultural belonging through the insertion of gender, family and class into new geographies of consumption. As such, a collective re-imagining of the categories of womanhood and family cannot be theorised in isolation from discourses of consumption and class.

## **Conclusion**

This review situates gender as the starting point for the analysis of a new conjunctural moment in Indian television which has seen the emergence of a new trend in the representation of ideal womanhood. After surveying literature on media consumption that specifically focuses on ‘women’s genres’ the review suggests that the exploration of gender through media consumption has been characterized by an ahistorical approach to gender that fails to both situate it historically and clarify its scope and usage. The concept of gender that is implied by media consumption studies can be broadly termed anti-patriarchal critiques of the sexual objectification of women by men, an approach that fails to treat women as historical subjects. By identifying gender as a system constitutive of and constituted by other systems of difference such as class, the review suggests that gender can be analysed as a hegemonic field in itself, a primary way of organizing and co-opting difference along various axes of power. The review argues for exploring the dynamics of gender in a specific conjunctural moment through the Gramscian notion of hegemony understood as both discourse and practice. Lastly, the review clarifies its conceptual use of agency, arguing in favour of understanding agency as simultaneously inhering in continuity and contradiction.

## Chapter 3

### THE FEMINISATION OF TELEVISION IN INDIA

#### Introduction:

When in 1991, Indian skies were opened up to foreign media and the nation's mediascape saw private initiative in broadcasting for the first time, there was little foresight about the kind of programming that would dominate Indian television in the ensuing decades. For the greater part of the 1980s, the State-owned broadcaster Doordarshan had thrived on women and family oriented entertainment. Doordarshan's serial format drew inspiration from Miguel Sabido's Mexican telenovella format with its ambitious objective of combining education and entertainment. Inspired by State policy pedagogic serials on family planning and urban living became the mainstay of Doordarshan's programming through the 1980s.

The 1980s was a period of profound shifts in the political landscape too. The electoral fortunes of the ruling Congress party had been on the decline since the mid 1980s, a period that witnessed the concomitant rise of the Hindu Right in Indian polity. Arvind Rajagopal's study of the reception of the Hindu epic Ramayan first telecast on Doordarshan in 1989 analyses the organic links between politics and popular culture in the context of the decline of the 'Congress' party and the rise of the Hindutva forces represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the late 1980s. With the unparalleled popularity of the mythological melodramas, some of the most memorable representations of secular life – the struggles of ordinary people in 'Hum Log', the inspiring life story of a middle-class girl in 'Udaan' or the strife and pain of communal conflict in 'Tamas' – seemed to increasingly become a thing of the past.

Media liberalisation in 1991 and the arrival of CNN, Zee, Star Plus among others, meant that television came to be dominated by women oriented narratives. However, the nature of these women-oriented narratives underwent a huge shift by the mid-1990s; from focussing on the lives of women placed in diverse situations – as professionals, single mothers, divorcees – and thus reflecting contemporary realities, television came to be dominated by the lives of women placed solely within a domestic setting performing the roles of wives and mothers. For the national

broadcaster, the success of epic serial melodramas *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* in the late 1980s had revealed a new success formula; however with the arrival of private television channels in the 1990s and their aggressive drive to ‘Indianize’ content following the loss of a relatively large section of the Indian audience from broadcasting overwhelmingly Western programming, that success formula began to be emulated on an unprecedented scale. Mythological melodramas started occupying prime time slots, while women and family oriented serial narratives themselves took on a new avatar. The era of the K-serials had dawned.

The K-serials, produced by Balaji Telefilms, and broadcast exclusively on Star Plus as part of its aggressive ‘Indianisation’ drive, inaugurated a serial format that essentially consisted of narratives that centralise the Hindu joint family and ideal Hindu womanhood and position them within a traditionalised setting, complete with a highly ritualised and opulent lifestyle that attempts to represent an elite minority in India - rich, uppercaste and Hindu. While invoking the traditional grandeur and opulence that was the hallmark of the mythological melodramas, the K-serials attempt to narrativise and resolve through its idealised central protagonist contemporary issues that threaten familial authority. The success of K-serials have inspired a new trend in serial narratives in the Hindi language - narratives that re-centre familial or domestic-oriented womanhood have come to dominate Indian television. The televisual hegemony of such women-oriented narratives or the feminisation of television in India today is reflected and reinforced by the success and consequent predominance of narratives that re-centre domesticated womanhood and the traditional family.

Drawing on such a context, this chapter looks at practices within the Hindi serial industry since media liberalisation that have influenced regional practices of serial production, particularly in terms of content. Further, it incorporates some of the latest developments that have taken place in relation to the content of Hindi serials. The last quarter of 2008 saw a shift in the kinds of narratives that were being offered to viewers across the different channels. While mainstream media pundits evaluated the women-centric family sagas as making ‘commercial sense’, a shift in favour of more ‘romantic’ and couple-oriented narratives, complicates such a simplistic evaluation and further signals a shift in the nature of feminization of Indian television. According to Shailaja Bajpai, a media critic, “advertisers and producers know women tend to watch serials more than men and, therefore, storylines with strong, female characters

battling against the odds—and winning—make good commercial sense” (Bajpai 1997:309).

However, my conversations with women informants in Delhi, especially in the upper middle-class location of Sarkar Marg, foreshadowed this shift in terms of a certain saturation and fatigue with long-running sagas of women who go to great lengths to protect and nurture the family. Serials with ‘romantic’ plots and young couples at its centre were increasingly perceived as an alternative to the *saas-bahu* sagas. In these ‘romantic’ plots the familial woman is replaced with the homely girl who needs to become a ‘good’ wife. Interestingly, this shift in Hindi serial output was immediately reflected in Kerala, where Malayalam serials with ‘romantic’ plots have cropped up. This chapter captures this fast-changing serial landscape, paying particular attention to the dynamic and shifting features of serial production and consumption that characterise and contribute to the process of feminization of television in India.

### **Laying the groundwork: Doordarshan and the rise of women-oriented programming**

In the early days of the national broadcaster Doordarshan, which incidentally celebrated 50 years of existence on September 15, 2009, specifically the decade of the 1980s, programming was largely intended to cater to a diverse audience who could be addressed in terms of two major tropes that formed the cornerstone of Doordarshan’s broadcasting policy – development and national identity. The cooption of women into both these twin projects can be seen in all of Doordarshan’s landmark productions in the pre-liberalisation era, beginning with *Hum Log* (We the People), India’s first developmental soap opera. Doordarshan’s fictional bouquet was largely women-centric, featuring remarkable narratives of women’s challenges and successes within the family (*Buniyaad*) and as citizens (*Rajani*); they included narratives about women’s efforts to balance the personal and the professional (*Pachpan Khambe Lal Deewarein*) and their attempts to break down professional and personal barriers and expand their horizons (*Udaan*).

However, these narratives operated within the larger tropes that were central to Doordarshan’s programming. Thus women’s central presence on television was inextricably linked to the project of women’s ‘uplift’ and the need to define her space within the family and the public sphere within the functional paradigm that national

television had defined for itself – as a catalyst for development and a custodian of national identity. Thus *Hum Log* (1984), while conveying its core developmental message of family planning, attempted to define appropriate attitudes for women as their opportunities for work and social mobility began to expand. The serial more or less assigned the familial space and the voice of the patriarch as the principal guiding forces that would lead young women in the right direction. It portrayed independent forays into the glamorous world of movies, for example, marked as a morally ambiguous sphere of activity, as ridden with danger for young women. In other words, patriarchal anxiety about increasing mobility for women that would inevitably come with *vikaas* or development, found a central narrative space in *Hum Log*. Development had to be achieved under patriarchy's close watch.

*Rajani* (1985) is, in many ways, the most potent evocation of the inevitable nexus that would develop between gender and Doordarshan's social and developmental objectives. *Rajani* invoked women's citizenly performance as the cornerstone of orderly socio-political progress for the nation. Rajani, the eponymous protagonist of the serial, is a crusader for civic order and corruption-free public life. In investing in a middle class woman, the crusading zeal to work towards a public life free of corruption and nepotism, *Rajani* drives home the pressing need to harness middle class women in the service of building the nation and civil society. Yet, the serial carefully portrays Rajani, the protagonist, as a non-normative ideal of womanhood by casting her as a single, even eccentric, young woman whose life has been overtaken by her crusading zeal. Even so, in casting her as a paragon of citizenly virtue and courage, Doordarshan made a powerful connection between the middle-class housewife and the task of nation building. *Rajani* was also a critical commentary on and an attempt to define the nature of citizenship and the state of democracy in India in the decade of the 1980s, a decade known for its political churning and shift in balance away from established nodes of power.

In *Buniyaad* (1987), which followed the riveting Partition drama *Tamas* (1986) directed by Govind Nihalani, the focus was on the extended family and the different roles that women played within the family, through the turbulent era of Partition. *Buniyaad* (Foundation) and *Tamas* (Darkness) comes in the backdrop of the decline of the Congress party through the decade of the 1980s, despite a thumping majority for the party in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984.

Both these dramas attempt to resettle and dwell on the riotous beginnings of the nation in the form of post-Partition bloodshed and mayhem. In *Buniyaad*, the senior-most woman member of the family, Lajjo (usually referred to as Lajoji, where the suffix 'ji' is a term of respect) is depicted as a woman confined to the familial space, yet a repository of wisdom, strength and tenacity in the face of great odds and in a time of great suffering. She unfailingly acts on the advice and directions offered by her husband, the family's patriarch Master Haveliram, who works as a school teacher; in contrast their children decide on their own destinies as they grow older, often at great cost to the unity and well-being of the family that has flourished unscathed through the tumultuous era of Partition under the great care of the patriarch. Lajoji's sole objective in life is to hold together the family that she and 'Masterji' (her husband was also her teacher before they fell in love and married; 'Masterji' in Hindi means teacher) had nurtured. In this way, Lajoji is an ideal familial subject and the kind of woman who is needed in difficult times, in the service of the family and by extension nation. Thus in *Buniyaad*, the familial woman is fore-grounded in place of the citizenly woman and in stark contrast to Rajani, who takes all her 'citizenly' decisions by herself, unguided by any patriarchal figure, Lajoji unswervingly holds on to the guidance offered by her husband Masterji, their relationship as husband and wife wholly subordinated to the teacher-student dynamic. And this is a trend that continues with much fervour in *Udaan* (1990), deceptively akin to *Rajani*.

Meanwhile, the late 1980s saw Doordarshan unveil a wholly new ideal of womanhood – in the figures of the legendary Sita, Draupadi and others - through the epic tales *Ramayana* (1987) and *Mahabharata* (1989) respectively. These epic tales introduced a new mode of womanhood unfamiliar to the small screen – that of the sacred, pure woman or sacralised woman. This was because although the beginnings of cinema in India depended in large measure on the mythological stories, given the mass appeal and currency that they already had as part of oral, literary and theatrical traditions, the beginnings of television were closely tied to the goals of State-led development and modernization. The new mode of womanhood collapsed, for the first time on television, categories of gender, religion and nation. While the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* inaugurated a world of cultural myths and legends to a nationwide audience, *Bharat Ek Khoj*, a 1988 53-episode historical series directed by Shyam Benegal and based on Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's seminal work *Discovery of India* (1946), which is Nehru's reflective writing, while in prison, on

India's civilizational legacy, offered viewers a more historically grounded perspective of India's past. Thus the latter half of the 1980s saw an unprecedented narrativisation of the nation's past, a significant move away from earlier development-centric fictional programming. Doordarshan's modernizing imperative gave way to a more thoroughgoing agenda of representing the nation.

In *Udaan* (1990), modernity, gender and nation naturally belonged in the same axis, with the first two categories put at the service of the last. The serial tells the story of Kalyani and her aspirations, driven by an overwhelming desire to restore her father's and her family's pride and honour destroyed by feudal elements who usurp their land and home and leave her father handicapped. Homeless and deprived of their possessions, the family leaves the village and moves to the city, where Kalyani's ambitions of becoming a police officer come to fruition. Under the guidance and inspiration constantly provided by her father, Kalyani succeeds in restoring familial pride and honour. Her official duties put her in the service of the nation and her family; her father who represents the voice of the patriarch continues to direct her in the service of the nation by steering her through the ethical hurdles and dilemmas she faces at work. He becomes the voice of her conscience. Service to the nation and by extension the family and the patriarch form the core of Kalyani's persona and the mainstay of her appeal for an entire generation of women who watched *Udaan*, literally meaning flight. In contrast to Rajani, who takes all her citizenly decisions by herself, in *Udaan*, Kalyani seeks her father's guidance in order to negotiate her professional terrain and indeed her role as a citizen.

In the decade of the 1990s, as the Indian media scene was liberalised, Doordarshan came up with a slew of women-centric narratives focusing on women in a variety of spheres, and in roles that range from single working woman (Pachpan Khambe Lal Deewarein) and ambitious professional (Shanti) to a young widow (Kshitij Yeh Nahin) or a middle-aged businesswoman (Swaabhimaan). India's first privately owned network, Zee tv, owned by Naresh Chandra, came up with superior women-centric drama too – featuring women in a variety of roles, some of them like *Tara* bringing to the fore issues that Doordarshan had not dared venture into – issues such as divorce and extra-marital relationships that complicate any simple representation of the conjugal family. The focus on women-centric narratives got a further fillip with the rising competition among Doordarshan, privately owned Indian networks led by

Zee and foreign-owned channels such as STAR television. STAR, in particular, chose a route very different than that taken by Zee and the other channels. This was the result, principally, of their experience with relatively dismal viewership figures for programmes such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* that were essentially made for a Western audience. Dubbed versions of these programmes soon became the staple on STAR, but even this strategy did not seem to pay off with the audience as Zee continued to claim a major chunk of the audience. The alliance between STAR and Balaji Telefilms takes place in such a context; it paved the way for women-centric melodramas that would be perceived by its audience as thoroughly localised.

### **The regionalisation of serials: The case of Kerala**

Together, media liberalisation and ‘Indianisation’, characterised by competitive attempts by foreign-owned satellite channels to ‘Indianize’ television content, have resulted in the feminisation of television principally, though not solely, through the introduction and gradual but steep rise in the regionally inflected circulation of the soap opera form. The regionalisation of a serial format that re-centres domesticated womanhood, placing it at the heart of the family, was led by the unprecedented popularity of the K-serials. The moment also saw the unprecedented growth of television in the major vernacular languages of India and a new phenomenon in the rise of regional television channels in the south of India, backed by the major regional political parties, resulting in competitive emulation of successful formats and consequent channel wars, particularly in Tamil Nadu.

In Kerala, regionalisation of television led to the birth of Asianet, followed by other channels launched under the auspices of the two major political players in the State, the Left Democratic Front and the Congress-led United Democratic Front. The popularity of women-oriented narratives has been palpable across both Hindi language channels and regional television networks. It was the production house Yantra Media led by Shyam Sundar that introduced the soap opera genre in its present form to the Malayali audience. Shyam Sundar’s *Stree* (Woman) series, on Asianet, became a cult phenomenon, inaugurating the long reign of women-centric narratives on Malayalam television, a trend that has seen the increasing adaptation of serialised novels in print for television.

While most serials adhere to the principal character roles depicted in the print narratives, changes are often brought to bear on the overall narrative scheme in order to allow for the open narrative format that serials in Hindi, particularly those launched by Balaji Telefilms, have been adopting. However the changes in characterisation as well as the overall narrative continue to adhere to the larger Manichean formula that guides serial content. As Shyam Sundar said in a 2004 interview<sup>22</sup>, although each genre has its own unique selling point, “the basic game is in black and white. You should be clear about what is black and what is white. There shouldn’t be any grey areas”.

Serials in Malayalam have been targeting women with melodramatic content that is modelled on the K-serial format. As Shyam Sundar notes, the success of K-serials have had tremendous influence on the kind of serials produced in Malayalam and any attempt at narrating stories that rebel against the Saas-bahu formula does not work. In the Kerala context, according to Shyam Sundar, attempting an alternative to the Saas-bahu (mother-in-law-daughter-in-law) formula, has only resulted in failure:

“We made a soap, *Snehanjali*, with this idea in mind. It had a hero-central structure. That was an experimental project. But it didn't deliver. After 50 episodes, we had to revamp the show and make the subject female-oriented. Even the third version of *Sthree* which narrated the story of three women and the professional challenges they face didn't work. Melodrama didn't deliver there and we had to add family elements to the story to make it deliver” (2004).

Here, Shyam Sundar attributes failure to a non-recognition of the fact that women are not only the principal target group but that women-oriented narratives should be about a certain kind of woman – the family oriented woman. Yet, while this format reflects the manner in which the trend-setting K-serial narratives revolve around the large, Hindu joint family and the manner in which the central female protagonist holds the family together against all odds, it also diverges from it. Highly successful television serials in Malayalam do not revolve around a traditional Hindu family but a contemporary nuclear family; it does not have a protagonist whose principal task is to keep the family together. Instead, the central female protagonist is either a daughter or a wife whose place in the family is determined by her performance as an ideal Malayalee daughter or wife. In other words, while K-serials have a strong female protagonist directing the affairs of the family and indeed acting as the cornerstone of

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k4/producer/shyamsunder.htm>

familial foundation, in Kerala currently successful serials such as *Manasaputri* and *Parijatham* narrate stories of women who strive to build a place for themselves within the family through their roles as a ‘good’ Malayalee daughter (*nalla malayalee penkutty*) or wife. Such has been the hegemonic representation of women that has characterised the feminization of television in Kerala.

Shyam Sundar suggests that the growth and success of the serial industry in the regions of India is concomitant with a pan-Indian recognition that there is a parallel process of feminization of television. So, for example, evaluating the success of his sitcom, *Ettu Sundarikalum Njanum* (Eight beautiful women and I) Shyam Sundar suggests that its success primarily derived from the fact that it was not male-dominated:

“From a weekender, it [Ettu Sundarikalum Njanum/ESN] went on to become a daily because of sheer popularity. As a daily, it even beat Asianet's *Kathanar*'s ratings. *ESN* broke the myth that Kerala TV audiences won't react to comedy. Male dominated comedy didn't work on Malayalam television. The TG [target group] is woman and the show should be packaged accordingly” (2004).

Eliminating grey areas in the narrative or making it women-oriented are not fixed formulas for success; neither does it help to persist with the closed narrative format that had been the norm in the heyday of Doordarshan. According to Shyam Sundar, ultimately, a serial is a brand and it is up to a specific production house or director to decide the features that will make their product unique. In his view, prolonging the popularity of a serial is the true yardstick by which to measure its success; indeed the open narrative format introduced by Balaji Telefilms has made it a brand to reckon with:

“The success of a soap lies in making your audience watch the show without complaints. A *Kyunki...* hits its all-time high after four years; that is called success. A serial is a brand. When it is doing well, make all efforts to prolong that success”.

Similarly the tremendous success of Shyam Sundar's *Stree* (Woman) resulted in a series of follow-up serials with the term *Stree* figuring in all of the titles and with the by-then iconic central protagonist of *Stree-I* figuring in most of the later *avatars* of the serial. Madhu Mohan, who directed three serials in the *Stree* series which completed 1,000 episodes with its third instalment in October 2002 suggests that “*Stree* is a branded bottle. Anything you bottle in it will be welcome by the female audience of

Kerala<sup>23</sup>.” In a critical review of the Stree brand of serials, M.P. Basheer, writing in the popular website *The Hoot*, known for its critique of the mainstream media in India, quotes director Madhu Mohan to suggest that the storylines of the Stree series was dictated not just by the preferences of the audience, but the channel concerned, the advertisers and even women artistes working on the programme; Madhu Mohan suggests that this is because “Kerala society always loved the ‘feminine’ aspects of woman<sup>24</sup>”. Basheer also notes the impact that television has had on print as a result of the success of the *Stree* series: “While the first edition of *Stree* was meandering through 390 episodes with a weepy heroine, television down South had begun cutting into print. Among the regional languages that saw the launch of the maximum number of new television channels during last five years were Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada, and the readership of the pulp magazines in these languages registered a slump. The print media was forced to take note of the astonishing popularity of these serials”. It was following the success of *Stree* and the impact it had on print readership, especially of the pulp magazines, that television began adapting stories from the print, in an attempt to further attract a sizeable chunk of the print readership.

With this mantra under its belt Yantra Media has made forays into several Southern regions, working on Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam serials besides trying to create its own niche in Hindi, given that the production costs are much lesser in South-based projects, which according to Shyam Sundar are produced more cost-effective. Cross-regional forays of a different kind have also increasingly become a feature of the regionalisation of television. Serials produced in Tamil for Sun Tv, for example, are often dubbed into Malayalam and broadcast on its own Malayalam channel Surya.

Regionalisation has also inspired a new wave of devotional serials that could have cross-regional appeal. ‘*Swami Ayyappan*’ by Merryland Studios, first broadcast on Asianet, has been dubbed into Tamil and other south Indian languages; in an interview to *The Hindu* newspaper dated June 19, 2009, producers S. Karthikeyan and S. Murugan of Merryland Studios said: “The great thing about mythological stories is that they never become outdated. Ten years down the lane you are guaranteed to get the same popularity, revenues and need”. Thus although mythologicals are more expensive to make, they have been at the forefront of

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Malayalam tv serial makers soften feminism for the market’ by M.P. Basheer, [www.thehoot.org](http://www.thehoot.org), October 28, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

television's success story in the regions and especially in the broadcast of serials in the vernacular languages. In fact, since *Swami Ayyappan* began telecasting in 2007, there has been an unprecedented growth in the number and popularity of mythological serials across Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu. And unlike the days of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the mythologicals do not just draw on Hindu narratives but also from Christian and Muslim legends and folklore. Thus in Kerala, even as the success of *Swami Ayyappan* spawned more Hindu mythological serials such as *Shree Mahabhagavatham* and *Devi Mahatmiam*, Christian narratives such as *Visuddha Alphonsamma*, based on the life and times of Kerala-born St. Alphonsa, and *Kayamkulam Kochchunni*, loosely based on the life of a thief-turned-robinhood figure of Muslim ancestry, have also proved to be chart-busters. In fact, in the course of the telecast of this Christian legend, Sister Alphonsa was canonized by the Vatican and elevated to sainthood, fuelling further the popularity of this serial. "We try and bring an element of the unknown into the storyline and bring a more human touch to the myths by dramatising them. Viewers appear to find such stories fascinating," said Siby Chavara, producer of *Vishuddha Alphonsamma*<sup>25</sup>. The story of Alphonsamma is, more crucially, a marriage of the devotional and the women-oriented genres.

In the simultaneous and competing popularity of both women-oriented narratives and mythological or devotional serials, indeed in the intertwining of sacred and secular imaginaries, television in contemporary Kerala can be seen to leave open interstitial 'spaces for dialogue' between the sacred and the secular in and through the figure of 'Stree', or 'woman'. Contemporary trends in Kerala illustrate that the growth of serials in the regions of India have taken on a trajectory both contiguous with larger national trends and simultaneously unique to the social and cultural context of the regions themselves. In Kerala, television in the post-liberalisation era revives the hegemony of Hindu religious imagery and the possibility of an overall revival of religious and communal sentiment by broadcasting narratives aimed at different religious groups, particularly Christians, the study of which will be interesting and challenging but one that far exceeds the scope of this investigation. The process of regionalisation reflected in religious broadcasting, has been simultaneously characterised by larger post-liberalisation trends in Hindi language programming, the principal one being the focus on representing familial womanhood.

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<sup>25</sup> 'In the name of the Lord' by Nita Sathyendran, *The Hindu*, June 19, 2009.

### **The K-serial brand and the national presence of familial womanhood:**

The K-serial brand has inaugurated a new trend in the representation of womanhood and family on television. The serials have reinstated the centrality of the extended family to melodramatic narratives on television. In analysing the kinship systems and the nature of the family in India, Patricia Uberoi (2006) refers to an important dimension to be reckoned with in the study of the family in contemporary India – this doesn't have to do with the family as it is, but as it is imagined to be through the media. Terming this realm of the imagined family as the moral economy of the Indian family, Uberoi suggests that it is not just a fixed set of ideals, but a dialogic system “that is framed in terms of a set of moral dilemmas and contradictions, even as it posits the patrilineal joint family as the ideal, ‘traditional’ and culturally authentic form of Indian family life” (2006:30). As a 2007 study of K-serials by the New Delhi based Centre for Advocacy and Research concludes, the serials package and market the family as a ‘dynamic entity’ that allows for continuity and change (Ghadially 2007:183-196).

In terming K-serials as a brand, I not only refer to the distinct features that mark these serials from their predecessors on both the national broadcaster and the private satellite channels thus offering a functionally specific product but also to the distinctive experiential field that they constitute with and through their viewers. While the latter constitutes the main body of discussion of this thesis, this chapter looks at their brand value in terms of their functional specificity, particularly the way in which they offer a representation of ideal Indian womanhood that is contemporary but familial, and simultaneously classed and sacralised. This particular representation of womanhood, while drawn from modes of ideal womanhood marked as ‘traditional’, is simultaneously placed within a contemporary context and made to engage with contemporary issues, a trajectory markedly different from the modes of representation of ideal womanhood on both pre- and post-liberalisation television in India. In the case of pre-liberalisation television, as is well-documented and researched by scholars of media and gender, representations of the ‘domestic’ and the ‘public’ woman were overwhelmingly directed by the developmental objectives of the State. Initially in the liberalized media environment, there was a blurring of these categories, with television offering representations of womanhood that broke from the earlier state-driven models and reflective of the societal flux of contemporary India

where women had become increasingly mobile, emerging out of their domesticated roles within the family. As Shailaja Bajpai, a media critic, writes:

“The new woman first appeared on Zee in 1992. In serial after serial on this channel, the urban, elite, outspoken female steadily gained ascendancy. A study by the Media Advocacy Group (MAG) found that, by 1995, women characters from the elite and upper-middle-class category accounted for 90 per cent of all female characters on Zee, 88 per cent on DD1 and 80 per cent on DD2... One of the more progressive aspects of the portrayal of the new woman on television is that, while most female characters are still the hearth-and-home type, dressed up and waiting for a man to waft by, increasing numbers are professionals.... these women act like men in petticoats: they conduct themselves and their professions just as men do in the same positions. Lola in *Daraar* (Chasm, from 1994) is as ruthless as J. R. in *Dallas*.” (1997:305-306).

Bajpai goes on to assert that “this new urban character has become so popular that she has all but eliminated other kinds of women from the small screen” (1997:306). However, in hindsight, this seems to have been a premature and overly optimistic reading of the representation of womanhood encouraged by the evolving trends in commercial television in the post-liberalisation period. In the latter half of the 1990s, not only did the home-and-hearth woman eclipse other ‘kinds’ of women, but the urbane, assertive woman who took what she wanted, instead of waiting to be given, came to be cast as the antithesis of all that is familial and womanly. K-serials have marketed familial womanhood as the centrepiece of their brand identity and commercial success for nearly a decade now. In anchoring this new brand of familial womanhood in upper and middle-class wealth and affluence, the serials make a clean break with the trend on television in the decade preceding liberalisation that depicted the realities of middle and lower-middle class women. Bajpai argues that the modern woman who she claims represents the dominant form of womanhood on television in post-liberalisation India is reflective of contemporary urban reality given that women are increasingly self-employed and visible across the professions. She writes:

“Women in the upper and middle classes have gained professional satisfaction, economic independence, self-confidence, a better lifestyle and sexual liberation. But strained marriages, a higher divorce rate, extra- or pre-marital affairs are also a reality, as are neglected children, professional jealousies and long working hours, to say nothing of male disapproval. Thus it could be argued, as many television producers do, that Indian television serials reflect an urban reality”.

Such a stance leads her to evaluate the womanhood portrayed on television as representing strong, ambitious and assertive women who have to deal with severe

physical, emotional and mental dislocations deriving from a modern consumer society. What is glaringly left out in this analysis is the ground on which the serials choose to play out these dislocations. That in successfully responding to these dislocations, womanhood has to unambiguously be associated with and derive from the familial and the domestic, upsets the description of an unfettered, bold, new womanhood that Bajpai seeks to advance. In fact, the K-serials have normalised the family as the terrain wherein these dislocations need to be addressed and has advanced the mode of womanhood most suited to that task as a new familial or family-oriented womanhood.

Yet this brand of familial womanhood is new in that it is domesticated and public, traditional and contemporary, and above all represents an upper-middle class ethos that is unambiguously marked in terms of religious identity as upper caste, Hindu. And further, even the bold new womanhood that television championed for a short spell as a positive role model has metamorphosed in the K-serials into the antagonist against whom the main protagonist has to protect her family. According to Bajpai, while women admire these antagonists for being ‘mani-pulators’, as John Fiske terms them, and may derive vicarious pleasure from their successes in a man’s world, there lies embedded in the text a dire warning too – that the pursuit of such a model of womanhood ultimately involves a perilous descent into chaos and disorder. As Bajpai writes:

“Television producers, without perhaps wishing to, seem to be saying: beware, this is what happens when women go beyond their position in life; this is the consequence of trying to be more like a man, or too westernized. If that is true, then the new woman on television may be helping to maintain the *status quo*, even as she challenges it (1997:310).”

Thus the representation of womanhood seems both continuous and discontinuous with earlier trends. And yet, as Kalpana Misra and Debasmita Roychowdhury forcefully argue, the continuities in representation are overwhelmingly patriarchal in nature and work to reassert hegemonic discourses of gender that co-opt the narrative resolution of problems that women face in contemporary India within older discourses of tradition and patriarchy. They suggest that the televisual medium, particularly in post-liberalisation India has been contributing to a steady erosion of the progress achieved in relation to highlighting and circulating women’s issues through a historic strategic alliance between the print media and the women’s movement in India.

“The historical legacy of the Indian press—its 'reforming and crusading zeal' — has ensured not simply extensive coverage of women's issues but a crucial commitment to building popular support for them as well... the national press has distinguished itself as a strategic ally of the women's movement in terms of the space and legitimacy granted to editorials, features and articles by and about women, regardless of specific political leanings and affiliations... [In contrast] The power of the visual image and the broad reach of television, even in the short term, threatens to undermine the progress that the print media and women's organizations have made in raising consciousness about women's issues, in lobbying for legislative change, and in enforcing existing laws for the protection and benefit of women” (Misra and Roychowdhury 1997:248).

The retrogressive nature of women's images on television, they argue, stem from the way in which television in the era of privatisation has engaged with the problematic of representing the transition of women 'from tradition to modernity' and the construct of the 'new woman' that it offers in this context.

“Small screen portrayals of the transition of Indian women from 'tradition to modernity' and the construct of the 'new Indian woman' attempt to recreate a hegemonic discourse which would impose new patriarchal constraints of conduct on women in the name of a selectively affirmed 'authentic' tradition” (Misra and Roychowdhury 1997:1).

Thus, although the bold 'new womanhood' on television, particularly in the years that followed liberalisation, offered avenues for narrative scrutiny of issues such as women and the workplace, extra-marital affairs, rape, divorce and so on, that had hitherto been largely left undiscussed on television, the popularity of serials seemed to have reached its high-water mark only in the K-serials where the 'new' woman and her struggles take place on the domestic terrain. After television's successful experimentation with off-beat themes, it seems highly discontinuous that in the k-serials it is neither the work place nor both the home and the outside that is at the centre of the narrative; instead the singular focus in the K-serials is the family and how these contemporary issues and struggles play out within the domestic setting and contribute to nurturing or bringing apart the traditional (joint) family. And yet, as Misra and Roychowdhury point out, serials such as *Tara* that purportedly broke new ground with their content, have actually worked only to reinforce traditional ideologies and existing stereotypes of professional women and the workplace or created new ones. They write:

“...Secretaries, who constitute a large section of employed urban women, continue to be ornamental and peripheral in their projection. Situated mostly in a male-dominated office environment, they are nearly always portrayed stereotypically as the 'part-time' personal possessions of their male bosses with

sexual advances, lewd comments and gestures made to them in the name of comedy. A flirtatious relationship between the male boss and his female secretary is depicted as a norm, and scriptwriters and directors alike display a warped perspective of workplace power relationships involving woman employees. Despite growing public awareness and concern about sexual harassment and exploitation, serials and commercials demonstrate a disregard of their effect on women and young girls by continuing to trivialize or, alternatively, glamorize the issue. Where sexual exploitation and harassment is treated sympathetically, it is isolated and simplified to suit the dramatic requirements of the serial without any serious effort at facilitating an understanding of workplace politics and the complex nature of power relationships. Traditional patriarchal notions of shame, disgrace and loss of honour continue to be emphasized in association with the phenomenon rather than the emotions, perceptions, and rights of the woman who is a victim of acts of male sexual aggression or exploitation” (1997: 250-251).

Although appearing on satellite television as the culmination of serial-making on Indian television by garnering and retaining unprecedented popularity for almost a decade, it is not surprising in the context outlined by Misra and Roychowdhury that K-serials have worked within a framework of continuity with earlier serialised representations of women’s reality, creating its own niche by rebranding the family as the centrepiece of middle and upper-middle class life in urban India and associating an emphatically familial womanhood as integral to its well-being. Women viewers in Delhi’s lower middle-class and upper-middle class neighbourhoods of Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg emphasised the importance of the familial plot and the crucial position afforded for the familial woman in that plot to their long-standing engagement with the k-serials. Their engagement with the serials involved closely following the challenges, struggles and victories of the protagonist and evaluating the actions of the ideal womanhood represented by that protagonist in the context of their own lives.

### **The shift to ‘romantic’ stories:**

As far back as February 2008, such long-lasting engagement with the K-serial narratives have shown signs of saturation, with women respondents in Delhi suggesting that a new crop of romantic serials featuring young couples seemed more refreshing and engaging. By October 2008, this incipient shift in the pattern of serial viewing was reflected in terms of policy, with the termination of many K-serials from Star Plus, its flagship platform. The first Star Plus-Balaji Telefilms venture, *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, even with its unprecedented levels of popularity, was axed by Star Plus owing to differences with the producer Balaji Telefilms. The last

episode of *Kyunki* was aired on November 6, 2008. Several other serials from the Balaji stable met with the same fate. While Balaji Telefilms have suggested that the issue of sole telecast rights had been the bone of contention, the shifting viewing pattern of an audience tired of *Saans-bahu* tales might have made the split between long-time partners Star Plus and Balaji Telefilms easier.

The current line-up of soaps on Star Plus is dominated by ‘romantic serials’ such as *Dil Mill Gaye* (Meeting of hearts), *Mile Jab Hum Tum* (When you and I met), *Kis Desh mein hai meraa dil* (Where my heart is), *Shakuntala, an eternal love story*, *Love ne milla di Jodi* (Joined by love), *Hum dono hai alag alag* (We two are different) and *Shaurya aur Suhani* (Shaurya and Suhani), while the rest of prime time is taken up by dramas that have the relationship of young couples at its centre and a narrative thread that is anchored in romantic love at its core – examples are *Bidaai* (Separation), *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* (What this relationship speaks to), *Sab Ki Ladli Bebo* (Everybody’s pet Bebo), *Tujh Sang Preet Lagayi Sajna* (Tied to you in love), *Raja Ki Ayegi Baraat* (The groom-prince will arrive), *Saajan Ghar Jaana Hai* (Need to go to my lover’s house), *Shraddha* (Respect). As the titles suggest, most of these serials tell the story of how a girl has to eventually transform herself from a lover into a wife and a boy has to navigate the perilous waters of parental opprobrium, among other things, before being able to convince them that his choice of a life partner is correct, thereby making the transition to manhood. Although the romantic narrative is different from the k-serial narrative in that it revolves around the romantic relationship and its future rather than the future of the family which is at the heart of the k-serial narrative, it eventually progresses to discuss the impact of the romance on the families of the couple concerned. In this sense, it follows closely the formula of successful Bollywood movies in the early 1990s such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, which has come to epitomise the ideal compromise between romance and familial devotion.

This Bollywoodean turn in the Hindi serial industry thus marks a return to long-familiar roles for women; in this respect the K-series offered space for a mode of womanhood not visible in Bollywood narratives. But for upper middle-class women in Delhi’s Sarkar Marg, the shift in favour of romantic narratives represented the infusion of fresh subplots into the clichéd domestic narratives that have dominated tv screens for nearly a decade since media liberalisation in 1991. They continue to want *Tulsi*-like characters but also a break from tiring sagas of familial rupture and

disaffection. By offering a different narrative formula within the larger familial canvas, the new romantic narratives seem to fill this very need. The success of the romantic narrative in Hindi was reflected in the circulation of this new format to the South Indian satellite networks.

### **The ‘romantic’ narrative on Malayalam satellite television:**

In Malayalam, the romantic format in Hindi finds representation in *Parijatham*, a story of love and betrayal with an avenging angel protagonist placed at the centre of the narrative. The story revolves around the romantic relationship between the lead characters – central protagonists Seema and Jayapal or JP, which quickly turns out to be a fake and treacherous plot by the latter to trap Seema. However, unfortunately, it is Seema’s sister Aruna who falls prey to the plot. The lead female actress plays a double act as identical twins Seema and Aruna. Aruna is the traditional Malayalee girl – virtuous, soft spoken and eternally forgiving. Her sister Seema epitomises all that could be termed anti-traditional in a young Malayalee woman – she is passionate, outspoken and vengeful. The story is about Seema taking on the role of Aruna for the sake of obtaining for her sister her rightful place as wife in the JP household, following her fake marriage and rape by JP. As is the case with *Ente Manasaputri*, which is essentially the story of how one becomes the good daughter, who will then find a place in the ideal Malayalee family and is in this sense different from the K-serial formula which narrativises the ideal woman’s struggle to keep and nurture the traditional family whose principal stakeholder and custodian she is, *Parijatham* localises the larger romantic narrative formula dominating Hindi language satellite television by narrativising the role of the young Malayalee woman in the constitution of the ideal Malayalee (heterosexual) couple.

In this way unlike the Hindi language romantic narrative which focuses on the process of change and flux endured by the family in and through the process of constitution of the ideal marital union, the romantic narrative in Malayalam side-steps the place of the family in the constitution of the heterosexual couple focussing instead on the kind of ‘womanliness’ that will help constitute the ideal married couple. Thus although *Parijatham*, for example, side-steps the place and role of the family in the constitution of the ideal marital union focussing instead on the kind of womanliness that will achieve that ideal union, the family continues to make its presence felt in the serial as

both facilitating and in need of the ideal heterosexual union through the institution of marriage.

However, the localisation of the romantic narrative in Malayalam television needs to be seen as a fluid and ambiguous terrain and in the larger context of serial production itself in Kerala. Mega serials in Kerala have by and large come to be dictated by the perceived likes and dislikes of the audience; in other words, script-writing, casting and even the scheduling of episodes are all arbitrary and refuse to follow an overall plan. As an article in *The New Indian Express* dated May 21, 2009 trenchantly sums up, by the time a serial is in its 100<sup>th</sup> episode the only factor that connects the current episodes to the ones before turns out to be the title; the directors, writers and even characters would have been replaced many times over in the apparent quest to cater to the audience. There are serials where such commercial concerns take a back seat and instead bring back the cinematic flavour of a well-crafted script and a definitive cast, besides a fixed telecasting schedule to serial production. *Thulabharam* by director Suresh Unnithan is a case in point; based on P. Ayyaneth's novel *Vegatha Pora Pora*, 100 episodes of this serial, adapted for the small screen by noted theatre writer Pradeep Panicker, was shot in a single schedule and the serial started airing in May 2009. According to director Suresh Unnithan, "...most of the serials lack a writer's creative contribution and also the continuity of artists..."<sup>26</sup>.

### **Brands and Mergers: where the nation meets the region**

The popularity of the K-serials have been characterised by increasing thematic divergences, with serials choosing distinct melodramatic formulas to woo different sections of the audience. Thus family melodramas coexist and even compete with romantic melodramas targeted at a young audience. The mythological melodramas have also made a comeback with the successful re-run of *Ramayana* on NDTV Imagine, the ongoing success of *Ma Vaishno Devi* on 9X and a new version of the great epic tale *Mahabharata* produced by Balaji Telefilms – called 'The Story of Our Mahabharat' making its debut on the 9X channel on July 7, 2008.

The growth of the Hindi language serial industry has been accompanied by the rising popularity of the serial form on regional television channels. Asianet, which began

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<sup>26</sup> 'A record in mega serial production', *The New Indian Express*, May 21, 2009; <http://www.expressbuzz.com/edition/story.aspx?Title=A+record+in+mega+serial+production&artid=fyxFAQ/FVLwQ=>

broadcasting Malayalam language programming in August 1993 and has been at the forefront of telecasting women-oriented narratives for a Malayalee audience, has recently been airing Malayalam serials that adapt the narratives produced by Balaji Telefilms, Star's (erstwhile) foremost serial content provider, which has been independently producing content for Surya, Asianet's chief rival in the South Indian television market. On November 14, 2008, Asianet and Star announced a new joint venture called Star Jupiter Entertainment which will own a majority stake in Asianet Communications Ltd. This comes on the heels of Star and Balaji parting ways in August 2008, ending an 8-year-long partnership and with it two of Balaji's flagship productions for Star – *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* – whose final episodes were aired on Star Plus in November and October respectively. This will see an escalation in the battle for the south India regional television market with Balaji looking to buy back its share from Star through a consortium of investors, creating a new joint venture that will launch regional channels in south India, a move that will position Balaji, alongside the Sun tv network as a significant player in the south Indian market.

The redrawing of battle lines in the southern market, particularly through Kerala-based networks, will have important consequences in terms of making a pan-Indian content more widely available to Kerala audiences. The K-serial format is likely to find a wider circulation than before and find itself replicated across both rivals Asianet and Surya in Kerala and throughout the south Indian region. With this the new conjunctural moment in Indian television, that made itself visible, in the later part of the 1990s and since, is seeing a major shift in configuration with a Hindi language content provider now pitted against its former ally, a transnational corporation, in the battle to capture regional markets and expand their national presence. Notwithstanding the wider circulation of the Hindi serial format, already reflected in the arrival of the 'romantic serial' to Malayalam television, the idea of a regional brand of serials or the regionalisation of serials continues to be alive and relevant.

In the case of Malayalam television and Hindi television, an important feature that distinguishes serial narratives across the respective audience groups<sup>27</sup> is the

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<sup>27</sup>The Malayalam television audience and the Hindi television audience do not belong in discrete spheres of viewing practices; indeed Hindi serials are popular among a section of the Malayalam television audience although the reverse does not seem to hold true, except in the case of Malayalee

representation of different social classes. The juxtaposition of different social classes has been a central feature of Malayalam television serials. One of the principal drivers of the plot is the narrative tension that ensues from the inclusion of the middle class and the working class as inalienable elements in narrative progression. Thus for example, in *Ente Manasaputri*, the protagonist and antagonist both start out as orphans although the former is in truth heir to her father's vast business empire; in other words the story is about (the making of) an upper middle class daughter. The narrative, however, privileges the antagonist with the wealth and power of that business empire which she acquires through deceit but above all she siphons away the position of daughter in the upper-middle class household – a position that rightly belongs to the protagonist Sophie; the status of power and familial belonging that the antagonist thus achieves brings together people in two different social classes – the antagonist's real impoverished family and the protagonist's real upper-middle class family – thereby posing the overarching narrative question, namely, what is it that constitutes a good upper middle class daughter, within the twin axes of gender and class.

In Hindi serials, the social classes are never juxtaposed; upper middle class affluence is normative and natural. The less privileged working class has been excluded from the narrative and do not seem to be a part of urban reality or middle class realities in urban India. It may be argued that by juxtaposing the social classes, serials in Malayalam attempt to make the notion of ideal Malayalee womanhood that it proposes normative across Kerala's class divisions; in other words Malayalam serials attempt to co-opt class differences within specifically localised, gendered terms, thereby also defining themselves as a regional brand. In the Hindi language serial industry, it is always an upper middle class ambience that is created to represent ideal familial womanhood. In other words, an ideal womanhood marked as specifically upper middle class and Hindu and perceived by its audience as representing a national ideal is offered as normative across the social and economic inequities of a fractured group such as the Indian middle class.

The upper middle class setting of the K-serials constitutes a crucial element of women's engagement with its narratives, often through contrast and juxtaposition

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migrants who have settled down in the Hindi speaking states of India and can therefore be considered part of the Hindi television audience.

with their own lower middle class or middle class lives. While the lower middle class women whom I interviewed in Delhi perceive the social class represented in the serials as economically belonging in the rich or elite group while choosing to term themselves middle class, the upper middle class women perceive the serial families as representing the business class while they identify themselves as the ‘working’ middle class. Yet, the ideal womanhood portrayed through the narratives seem to override these perceived class faultlines between narrative and lived reality as women position that ideal as simultaneously universal and personal.

In Kerala too, although the juxtaposition of different social groups might make narratives in Malayalam seem more inclusive in comparison to their Hindi language counterparts, the idealised wife or daughter is positioned in a manner that helps normalise that ideal across class divides. In other words, the ideal daughter of the narrative is inevitably welcomed as ‘their’ daughter by working class women as well as upper middle class women. Thus while the serial industry sees efforts at merger and collaboration on a national level, the increasing circulation of serial formats such as that of the k-serial is accompanied by the process of regionalisation of brands, which acts as a strong counteracting force that complicates the circulation of serial formats within the nation space. Ironically, the pattern of consumption of notions of ideal womanhood offered across regionally inflected serials seems to indicate the cooption of social differences such as class onto television’s idealised gender representations.

### **Feminisation of television and pornographic desire: Locating the male audience**

This section discusses a largely unanticipated outcome of the popularity of K-serials - on the world wide web. Besides the innumerable discussion forums where members either applaud or deride the K-serials, with derision being mostly expressed by men, a website has actually succeeded in attracting a large male user base through the appropriation of a leading female character in *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, the most popular and long-running of the K-serials. ‘Savita Bhabhi: The sexual adventures of a hot Indian Bhabhi’, is how [www.savitabhabhi.com](http://www.savitabhabhi.com) describes its pornographic comic strip illustrations of the character Savita Bhabhi, who played the ‘bad’ Indian sister-in-law and mother-in-law who makes life miserable for the protagonist Tulsi in *Kyunki*.

While porn-toon character Savita Bhabhi is not a direct take on the serial character, it draws inspiration from the familial power and authority that Savita Bhabhi, as the eldest daughter-in-law and later mother-in-law, wields within the extended family in *Kyunki*; only porn-toon Savita Bhabhi wields tremendous sexual, rather than familial, authority with the freedom to embark on some daring sexual exploits. All the frustrations that Savita Bhabhi of *Kyunki* seems to embody and consequently directs at the protagonist Tusli seems to have been translated in the porn-toon into raw passion in the arena of sex and desire.

Porn-toon Savita Bhabhi has not only thrown up alternative ways of consuming Indian womanhood but has helped make the State's continuing role in directing sexuality and gendered representation once again visible. In June 2009, the Indian government banned the site which began publishing comic porn strips online since March 2008. An overview of the media response to the porn comic is illustrative in this respect. An article in the *Telegraph* by Matthew Moore dated September 11, 2008 describes the porn-comic series as follows:

The strips, which are humorous, ironic, and by the standards of Western pornography fairly tame, appear to have hit a nerve with young middle-class Indians becoming more open about sexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Pritish Nandy, journalist, lamented the ban on the series on his blog, in the following way:

Savita Bhabhi for me is iconic. She's the woman who can take all her sexual decisions on her own without fretting over them. Over 60 million fans flock to her site every month, no mean achievement for a sari clad desi nari, her long dark tresses parted dutifully in the middle where the bright red sindoor flames, while a mangalsutra dangles between her ample breasts. The idiots who argue that her's is a porn site should go visit what real porn sites look like. To begin with, every porn site uses photographs. Filthy, vulgar, exploitative photographs of actual women, not comic book characters having some harmless fun spoofing the way we Indian men treat our women.<sup>29</sup>

While the irony of the pride of place given to the Mangalsutra (sacred wedding pendant) and the Sindoor (vermillion, worn by women on their forehead as a mark of their married status), symbols of chaste dutiful wifedom, in a porn comic strip cannot

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Moore. 2008. 'Savita Bhabhi: Indians hooked on pornographic web comic', September 11, 2008; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/2797107/Savita-Bhabhi-Indians-hooked-on-pornographic-web-comic.html>, 9.37AM BST. Accessed on December 28, 2009, 03.41GMT.

<sup>29</sup> Pritish Nandy. 2009. 'The assassination of Savita Bhabhi', July 14, 2009, <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/extraordinaryissue/entry/the-assassination-of-savita-bhabhi>, dated July 14, 2009.

be missed, Nandy's point essentially seems to be that Western pornography is exploitative but Indian 'comic' porn is not. And the fact that liberates Indian porn and makes it progressive is that it doesn't use photographs and pokes fun at the way Indian men treat 'our' women. However, the comic strips do not suggest how Savita Bhabhi pokes fun at Indian men; nor does it seem to do anything particularly new to liberate the sexuality of Indian women. Celluloid has done it far more subtly, yet boldly, as Nandy himself describes in his article.

'Savita Bhabhi' seems to occupy an unambiguous space in what is supposedly a sexually liberated world – that of the pornographic comic strip series. There is no hint of ambiguity about her resulting from irony or playfulness that could facilitate multiple interpretations of her; clearly the porn format does not allow for ambiguity. Savita Bhabhi is simply out to seduce every man she meets in the course of mundane, everyday situations that are part of her middle class life. In this context, the woman as extreme seducer is not a male erotic fantasy that is new to the Indian scene. On celluloid, the seducer was always the vamp and consequently dehumanized and objectified; in the online porn comic strip the seducer is the protagonist but her sexual appetites are portrayed as being so insatiable that she even enjoys being 'raped'. And of the 60 million fans of the site at least 4,000 had revealed themselves on a Facebook profile called Savita Bhabhi and an overwhelming proportion of them were men, even as newer fan pages of Savita Bhabhi are added.<sup>30</sup> At the time of writing the final version of the draft of this chapter, however, the first Facebook fan page launched on 'Savita Bhabhi' seems to have been removed. The comments on the incipient Facebook page on the porn-toon did not reveal the comic strip to be inspiring an ironic take on sexuality in India, just sexually explicit comments on the animation; the later fan pages do not seem to have any discussions listed, perhaps due to the nature of comments posted. A new page titled, 'Savita Bhabhi: The Animated Enchantress' seeks to tone down the sexually explicit nature of the enterprise, has an empty discussion page and describes itself as follows:

“A Fan Page Dedication to the Animated Enchantress who has many a times  
been our dates, relieved our stresses and tensions, and satiated the carnal  
hunger of our eyes.

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<sup>30</sup> Another fan page on Facebook is called 'Savita Bhabhi: The Animated Enchantress'. See <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Savita-Bhabhi-The-Animated-Enchantress/305275230107#!/pages/Savita-Bhabhi-The-Animated-Enchantress/305275230107?v=info>

Though banned for sometime by the Indian Govt., this wonderous Bhabhi continued to rule our hearts and our knobs, stimulating our loins with her mere sight.

Brainchild of a wild imagination and followed by thousands, it is an icon of sexuality that pleases all alike. All Hail Savita Bhabhi!’<sup>31</sup>

However the comic strip does seem to have located women’s sexuality on a broader canvas that extends into terrain that was considered taboo to represent – the familial woman seems to have been thoroughly sexualised and revealed to be desiring and desirable. In particular, the familial category of ‘Bhabhi’ or sister-in-law occupies a highly ambiguous space within the family as both chaste goddess (brother’s wife eg. Sita who was Ram’s wife and Laxman’s sister-in-law) and potential sexual renegade (eg., sisters-in-law who elope with their husband’s brothers). That Savita Bhabhi maintains the familial facade while satisfying her sexual desires knocks at the very core of the notion of the traditional Indian family system. In this respect it is continuous with Savita Bhabhi’s role in the K-serials as a character who works to destroy the familial cohesion that the protagonist tirelessly seeks to achieve. Porn-toon Savita Bhabhi sexualises the Indian housewife who is portrayed in serials as ostensibly chaste, marked as she is on the outside with the sindoor (vermillion) and the mangalsutra (sacred pendant), symbols of wifely chastity and monogamous devotion to the husband; the sexualisation of the Indian housewife in the form of *Savita Bhabhi* reverses the desexualised representation of the housewife in the serials and suggests that beneath the ostensibly chaste demeanour the housewife is raring for sexual adventure.

Porn-toon Savita Bhabhi’s choices, indeed moral universe, is directed solely by her sexual desire. It is in such a sexually directed moral universe that the Indian housewife might finally find a male audience. The feminisation of television has helped locate and make visible pornographic desire in the body of the ‘ideal’ Indian housewife. But in banning *Savita Bhabhi* and other ‘obscene internet sites’ by proscribing internet services such as Yahoo, Bing and Flickr<sup>32</sup> from delivering pornographic material through amendments to India’s Information Technology Act 2000, the State, in the era of liberalised media, has stepped in to save the ideal Indian

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Savita-Bhabhi-The-Animated-Enchantress/305275230107?v=info&ref=ts>

<sup>32</sup> 2009. Chamberlain, Gethin. ‘No internet sex please, we’re Indian: Web firms observe new law’, From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/dec/28/sex-internet-india-law>, December 28, 2009, 18.07GMT, Accessed December 28, 2009, 03.30GMT.

housewife and thereby reasserted its ability to define the contours of 'Indian womanhood'.

### **Conclusion:**

Television in India has, since the monopoly reign of the national broadcaster Doordarshan to the era of multi-channel diversity brought about by satellite television since the 1990s, represented the idea of a national womanhood. Television narratives have mirrored the changing dynamic of gendered representation in India, particularly its complex relationship with the State, patriarchy and nationhood. While women-centric programmes broadcast by Doordarshan in the 1980s, reflected distinct State-led attempts to define the ideal citizen-woman, by the latter half of the decade, television's representation of gender was bound up with the category of religious identity, specifically Hindu religious identity.

The liberalisation of media resulted in an unprecedented rise in women-oriented programming, accompanied by profit-oriented attempts to 'Indianise' content. Together, feminisation and Indianisation of television have given shape to a new Indian womanhood that is bereft of the earlier State-led idea of the citizen-woman. The new womanhood offered by television through the K-series is an upper middle class, Hindu housewife whose primary concern is the extended Hindu family which she can nurture only by leading a life of great sacrifice.

This new womanhood, although marked Hindu, simultaneously symbolises a national womanhood as she is placed at the centre of the traditional extended family and thus universalised. Through this new womanhood television re-positions the family at the heart of the notion of Indian womanhood. The liberalised television landscape has coupled gender and family in a manner unprecedented on Doordarshan where the alliance was made in order to serve a larger ideal – that of a strong woman-citizen, who in serving the family or the patriarch, was in fact serving the larger purpose of national good.

Post-liberalisation television has normalised the alliance and depicted it as necessary for its own sake. The family has come to define gendered representation on Indian television. With the regionalisation of television through the 1990s and since, television's role in shaping a national womanhood has become more complex and stratified. Regionalisation has simultaneously led to the proliferation and wider

circulation of the K-serial format and the emergence of localised gender representations. Thus in Kerala, class differences find a prominent place in women-oriented narratives, while the family sits in a subtly different relationship with gender. Ideal womanhood on Malayalam television is not one that is already available to protect and salvage the family but one that is in the making.

## Chapter 4

# REPRESENTING WOMEN ON INDIAN TELEVISION: CONTINUITIES AND DISJUNCTURES

### Introduction

*“Female-ness is not an essential quality. It is constantly made, and redistributed; one has to be able to see the formation of female-ness in each and every form at a given moment or in later interpretations, and see what it is composed of, what its social correlates are, what its ideological potentials are, what its freedoms may be.”*

- (Sangari<sup>33</sup> in Sunder Rajan 1993:129)

This chapter traces the discursive continuities and disjunctures in popular representations of Hindu womanhood and their crystallisation in hugely popular women-oriented narratives – the K-serials on satellite television – with reference to a specific political and economic context characterised by the political prominence of Hindu nationalism and a consumer culture driven by India’s new middle classes. I examine the fashioning of the ‘new’ Hindu woman of the serials by a chronological piecing together of the various stages of evolution of the female subject in the realm of popular cultural representations. From colonial discourses on the practice of Sati or practice of self-immolation by Hindu widows and its reflection in public culture to the figure of the ideal woman emerging from a range of ‘women-oriented’ narratives on the national broadcaster Doordarshan and on satellite and cable television post-liberalisation, this chapter will historicise and contextualise the shifts and changes in the constructs of femaleness in post-colonial India. By femaleness, I refer to the larger category of “social gender” and not just the narrower construct of femininity understood as subject position (Kuhn 1997).

### Sati as colonial female subject

The most important trend in the colonial discourse on Sati or the practice of ‘self-immolation’ by Hindu widows is not the attempt at reform but the spectacular ambivalence of the imperial authorities towards the practice. As Lata Mani

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<sup>33</sup> Kumkum Sangari in response to Susie Tharu in ‘Women Writing in India’, Journal of Arts and Ideas 20-1, March 1991, p57.

documents, the official reading of vyawasthas<sup>34</sup> introduced a specificity of meaning, “a conception of Sati that was specifically colonial” (1989:100). Thus while the colonial administration looked for a scripturally authentic Sati, the indigenous liberal discourse led by reformers such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy too rested on scriptural validity. “In the colonial encounter the Hindu ‘good wife’ is constructed as patriarchy’s feminine ideal: she is offered simultaneously as a model and as a signifier of absolute cultural otherness, both exemplary and inimitable” (Sunder Rajan 1993:47). In the context of the colonial ambivalence to Sati, Sunder Rajan cites an interesting example from a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century jingle advertising a particular brand of Egyptian cigarettes. It ran thus:

“Calm is the early morning  
 Solace in the time of woes,  
 Peace in the hush of twilight,  
 Balm ere my eyelids close.  
 This will Masperos bring me,  
 Asking naught in return,  
 With only a Suttee’s passion  
 To do their duty and burn.”

The jingle is accompanied by an illustration of a burning cigarette in an ashtray: appearing in the swirls of smoke rising from the cigarette is the shrouded figure of the Sati, suggestive simultaneously of a Christian martyr and of a genie from a magic lamp awaiting orders. Indian cinema in the 1920s and 1930s is rife with examples of the currency of the Sati model of womanhood – *Sati Parvati* (1920), *Sati Anjani* (1922), *Sati Anasuya* (1933), *Sati Seeta* (1924), *Sati Savitri* (1927) being just a few examples.

While the commodified discourse of Sati emphasised the trope of duty through self-sacrifice, the overwhelming status accorded to the scriptures in both colonial and

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<sup>34</sup> Scriptural interpretations by pundits or men trained in religious learning. Vyawasthas did not claim to represent scriptural truths, but was by their own admission circumscribed, depending equally on custom as on scripture.

nationalist discourses renders the Hindu widow neither object nor subject but the very ground on which Sati is debated (Mani 1989:117).

The discursive battleground of Sati set the stage for a recasting of womanhood by nationalist reform movements. As the nineteenth century progressed, women came to symbolise the ground on which tradition was debated and reformulated; they became subjects of a new nationalist patriarchy that sought to firmly reinstate women within the sacred confines of the home, making them custodians of and active agents responsible for the preservation of a classicised and spiritualised tradition that could withstand the onslaught of colonial modernity (Chatterjee 1989).

### **Nationalism, reform and representations of Hindu womanhood in cinema**

The construction of a new patriarchy, however, was not solely contingent on the nationalist re-appropriation of tradition. The rise of a different constellation of forces under the broad rubric of religious reform contributed to a conflation of nationalist and religious reforms in the construction of a new patriarchy, achieved through the instrumentality of the Hindu woman. The nationalist defence of the sacred realm manifested most effectively in the Gaurakshini movement or the cow protection movement that arose in the 1890s. The symbolic cow projected by the movement was Gaumata or Mother Cow who was sought to be protected not against the colonial Other but the Muslim Other and this was achieved through what Therese O' Toole calls the nationalisation of the sacred cow (2003:95-101). As outlined in Chapter 3, the discursive field of femininity was central to the cow protection movement which, for the first time successfully galvanised men across divisions of caste and class.

As Partha Chatterjee points out, the hegemonic force of this new patriarchy bred by nationalism is expressed most generally in an inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of women as goddess or as mother. "The specific ideological form in which we know the Sati-Savitri-Sita<sup>35</sup> construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new woman viz the 'spiritual' qualities

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<sup>35</sup> The powerful ideological trio from Hindu mythology representing the dominant virtues of ideal womanhood – self-sacrifice, chastity and unflinching devotion to the husband.

of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity etc. This spirituality did not impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the contrary it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go out into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (Chatterjee 1989:248-249).

In a discussion on emerging visual idioms in South Asia at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sandria B. Freitag points out that a survey of the succession of cheap prints created in Calcutta in this period reveals that: “From the quickly executed one-off paintings sold at the Kalighat temple, to the woodblock printings of Battala, into the calendar art-style lithography that displaced the other two, the figure of woman serves as the central vocabulary for expressing a wide range of aspects of the ‘nation’: she is powerful enough to trample her patron or bring down a temple priest and two *bhadralok*<sup>36</sup> families, even while she represents the vulnerability of domestic honour (prints illustrating the Tarakeshwar scandal<sup>37</sup>); she stands as a trope for both heroic efforts in resisting foreign invaders (eg., the Rani of Jhansi), and the seductions of the modern world of easy money and easy vice (many of the Kalighat pictures and Battala woodcuts show the Babu<sup>38</sup> and his courtesan); most particularly, she enables the personification of the nation through the goddess/mother figure – to be revered and defended at all costs” (2001: 56-57).

As early as the 1920s, the mythological, the historical and the stunt had emerged as major genres in Indian cinema. In the 1930s with the arrival of the talkies and the introduction of music and sound, genres such as the social and the devotional became more popular. Through the pre- and post-Independence periods, popular female characters from Hindu mythology such as Sita, Radha, Savitri and others such as the saint-poet Meera from folklore were used not just directly in mythologicals and

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<sup>36</sup> The middle class of colonial Bengal.

<sup>37</sup> The Tarakeshwar incident revolved around Madhab Chandra Giri, the mahant or head priest of a Shivaite shrine at Tarakeshwar, a place of pilgrimage. The mahant was involved with Elokeshi, wife of Nabinchandra Banerji, who worked in a printing press in Calcutta. On one of his periodic visits to Tarakeshwar, Nabin heard about his wife's involvement with the mahant and confronted Elokeshi, who confessed and pleaded for pardon. The couple were reconciled and decided to leave Tarakeshwar but were prevented from doing so by the mahant's henchmen. On May 27, 1873, a frustrated Nabin killed Elokeshi by severing her head with a fish knife. In the ensuing trial, Nabin was sentenced to life imprisonment while the mahant was fined and sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment.

<sup>38</sup> The Bengali babu or gentleman.

devotionals but, as Soma Chatterji argues, in modern contexts where female characters always represent a pure ideal emblematic of a Sita or Savitri (1998). This was particularly true in the aftermath of the collapse of the studio system in the 1940s due to the booming black economy of the war years, which led to the emergence of independent producers who favoured a new system that gave preponderance to stars, who portrayed idealised qualities of masculinity and femininity (Dwyer and Patel 2002). But as Soma Chatterji points out, while the male icon can be rebellious and shift from an *Awara* (Wanderer), 1951 to a *Jungle* (Barbarian), 1961 to a *Deewar* (Wall), 1973, a star like Nargis even while portraying an articulate lawyer in *Awara*, does so by being an ideal of virtuosity that can redeem Raj Kapoor, the hero (1998).

In fact, it was their acknowledged strength in the spiritual realm and the need to harness this in the cause of nationalism that became the ideological bedrock of women's participation in Gandhian nationalism. According to Sujatha Patel, Gandhi's conception of women's agency was "drawn from a space inhabited by an urbanized middle-class, upper-caste Hindu male's perception of what a woman should be" (1988:378). Consequently, women's problems were not critiqued in terms of the social and material factors responsible but were seen only as an extension of the national problem (Mankekar 1999).

It was perhaps the nationalist alignment of women with the emergent Indian nation that Katherine Mayo sought to make ironic through the title of her infamous book *Mother India* (1927), a vitriolic critique of the social condition of India's women inhering, particularly, in the practice of child marriage. In her scintillating analysis of the micropolitics that played out in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding Mayo's book, Mrinalini Sinha maps an alternative genealogy of the women's question as one that exceeded the distinction between the home and the world, the inner and the outer by focussing on the collective politics of women in the formation of the nation state and the citizen subject of colonial India in the aftermath of the Mayo controversy. She proposes that the various exigencies brought about in the wake of the controversy made available important political choices for the articulation of women's collective agency. She argues that the slippage between woman and nation and the identification of the Indian woman as mother with the nation at large that was central to nationalist and reformist narratives saw a moment of rupture in Mayo's narrative and the controversy that followed, a historical rupture that activated multiple

axes of contingent reformist and legislative endeavours that prioritized the agency of Indian women on questions of individual rights but one that is ultimately elided in a realignment of women with the nation.

Sinha makes an important connection between Mayo's book and Mehboob Khan's film *Mother India* (1957), the gritty story of a woman who places the honour of womanhood above love for her own son. Mehboob Khan had first attempted a similar plotline in his film *Aurat* (1940), which was later remade as *Mother India*. Mayo, Sinha points out, had written that the Indian mother was partly responsible for the sexual atrocities committed by Indian men on 'women of child-bearing age' as mothers routinely practised an 'abuse' on the boy child 'to make him manly' (2007:249). Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, Sinha argues, represents a final entombment of the Mayo controversy within a nationalist narrative that affirmed a seemingly unbroken tradition of Mother India, the identification of the Indian woman/mother with the nation at large (Sinha 2006:249).

The role of Radha, the central protagonist of *Mother India* was one that brought together various shades of ideal womanhood. The film begins with a flashback as the camera closes in on the chapped, old face of Radha who has now been anointed as Maayi, the mother of the entire village, a fitting tribute to her enormous sacrifices for the greater common good of the village. In the retelling of her story in flashback, Radha begins as the ideal wife, a portrayal that is reaffirmed in her dignified evasion of the village money lender's unwelcome overtures to her following the death of her husband and the need for money and the subsequent, almost ascetic tenacity, with which she toils in the field to raise her sons. The cover image used for the souvenir booklet that advertised the film depicted Radha's facial profile emerging out of flames, reminiscent of the trial by fire of the Sita of Ramayana. Another image shows Radha hurling the plough onward, arms stretched, evocative of the heroism of Indian womanhood in suffering and toil. It was captioned, 'The grain of rice on your table does not tell the grim tale of toil which grew it'<sup>39</sup>. As Divia Patel comments, "Radha's heroic struggles were immortalised in one inspirational iconic image that stands for endurance, power and the Indian sense of morality" (Dwyer and Patel 2002:164). Radha's heroic struggles endow her with a position of symbolic power – as the

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<sup>39</sup> *Mother India*, Souvenir Booklet, Bombay 1957, p1.

mother of the village – with which to lead the transition of the village (microcosm of the nation) to a new mechanized age (Dwyer and Patel 2002:161).

The success of *Mother India* was so massive that it resonated through the decades that followed its release. The role of Radha played by Nargis who kills her own son, dacoit Birju (Sunil Dutt) when in a final unpardonable act of Evil he tries to kidnap an unmarried girl, was about performing the ultimate sacrifice a mother might possibly perform – sacrificing one's son in order to uphold the dignity of womanhood - one that was sought to be imitated in varying degrees in films of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, the theme of strong motherhood/womanhood began to be realised in the character of the avenging angel in films like *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (1980), *Zakhmee Aurat* (1983), whose female protagonists were reminiscent of Durga, the eight-armed demon-slaying goddess of the Hindu *devi* pantheon. The avenging angel formula emerged again in the early 1990s, with films like *Phool Bane Angare* (1991) and *Damini* (1993). In such films, the woman as avenger either takes on the mantle of the *Virangana* or the warrior woman - represented in its unmitigated form in the historical character of Queen of Jhansi who resisted British expansion in India - vanquishing her male opponents either by herself (*Khoon Bhari Maang*, 1988) or by directing other men who become instruments of the collective resistance (*Army*, 1996). These vigilante roles essayed by women in the post-Independence period are different in two significant ways from those portrayed in the 1930s by Wadia Movietones 'Fearless Nadia' series in films like *Hunterwali* (1935). While the *Hunterwali* films portrayed the central protagonist Nadia's vigilantism as vigilantism for a number of social causes, the heroism of women in the post-Independence decades were intimately tied to their personal experiences, particularly the infringement and destruction of their wifehood, which remains their primary identity; the *Virangana* role becomes a liminal, transitional role taken on in order to restore the dignity of their primary role as wives. Further, as Nira-Gupta Cassale writes, "while *Mirch Masala* (1985), set in pre-Independence rural India, is able to draw upon a mythology of nationalist resistance, which also, at the same time, 'sanctions and mediates the potentially subversive politics of female resistance', later films like *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988) and *Damini* (1993) qualify women's autonomous resistance by including male partners to witness, support and legitimise their actions" (2000:231). However, these films have been critiqued more extensively for their voyeuristic portrayal of rape.

The pre- and post-Independence vigilante women were different in another sense – they were made for different audiences. Ravi Vasudevan argues that the historical, the mythological and the stunt genres of the 1920s, before the arrival of the talkies, were seen as ‘lower class’, with spectacle as their main offering; the new genres of the 1930s such as the social, the Muslim social and the devotional were seen as middle-class films, offering a critique of Indian society (2000:133). In other words, with movie-going becoming a family event, the power and scope of vigilante or resistive roles by women had to be circumscribed and increasingly allied to the needs of the patriarchal family and indeed the patriarchal nation.

While the incipient years of Hindi cinema reflected the powerful socio-political currents of the time, particularly the movement for Independence, the post-Independence decades of the 1940s and 1950s - considered the golden age of Indian cinema made plausible largely by the system of independent production instead of the earlier studio system - saw cinema begin to articulate the modernization objectives of the Nehruvian State, most expressly through the film *Mother India*. As Rachel Dwyer writes, the decade of the 1950s saw the nation’s media debate, for the first time, the creation of a national cinema and the government’s role in its development (Dwyer and Patel 2002:21). However, government inquiries into the industry led to heavy taxation instead of support and incidentally, it was only in 1960, that the government set up the Film Finance Corporation and in 1961 a National Film Institute in Pune.

By the early 1970s three major forms of Hindi cinema emerged from the omnibus genre of the social – developmentalist state realism, identification-orientated realism of the middle-class arena and the aesthetic of mobilization (Prasad 1998:118). Prasad argues that this generic differentiation was reflective of the fragmentation of the national consensus that had set in by the 1970s, following the Indo-China war of 1962 and the demise of the Nehruvian era in 1964; the resultant political mobilizations had challenged the aesthetic conventions and mode of production of the film industry (1998). During the 1980s, Hindi cinema produced films derived from the ‘aesthetic of mobilization’ where violence was the major attraction. This phenomenon, according to Dwyer, while having roots in the larger political and social trends of the 1970s, marked by widespread student political unrest, was also crucially connected to changes in the composition of the audience caused by the introduction of the colour television in 1982, followed by the increasing availability of the VCR. While the

middle class audience began watching the new soaps on television and films on VCR, cinema halls increasingly came to be seen as suitable only for the lower classes (Dwyer 2002:22).

### **Womanhood, on national television**

The decade of the 1950s and 1960s saw television and radio being discussed as key elements in the State's modernization process that would propel the country from under-development to development. Anjali Monteiro argues that "These new technologies were seen as a means of collapsing the stages in the evolutionary path towards development and as answers to a host of problems ranging from national integration to rural modernization" (1998:158). Under such a discourse of development, television was regarded as a potent vehicle for the transformation of indigenous identities, breaking down traditional values, disseminating technical skills, fostering national integration and accelerating the growth of formal education (Monteiro 1998:158). This intimate alignment of television with the State's developmentalist discourse is in stark contrast to the unregulated beginnings of and evolution of cinema in India. Although the decade of the 1980s saw the introduction of commercial sponsorship of serials and with it a mismatch between the stated objectives of television and the actual direction of television programming which started becoming more urban, middle-class and entertainment oriented, the movement away from the era of Nehruvian socialism towards a more *laissez-faire* model saw, paradoxically, the dismantling of licensing, import and other economic controls begin to coexist with increasing state intervention in family and culture through television (Monteiro 1998:160).

Purnima Mankekar draws attention to the intersections between patriarchal nationalism and the national broadcaster Doordarshan's representations of womanhood through the decade of the 1980s. Examining Doordarshan's first pro-development soap opera *Hum Log* (1984), based on the entertainment-education model of Latin American telenovellas<sup>40</sup> (Singhal and Obregon in Gokulsingh 2004:4), Mankekar points out that while purportedly aimed at improving the status of women, the serial ironically casts all its female characters in an unsympathetic light. For all its national development objectives, *Hum Log*, Mankekar concludes, "reinforces a

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<sup>40</sup> See Singhal, A and Obregon, R. 1999:68. Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas: A conversation with Miguel Sabido in *Journal of Development Communication*. Vol.10 (1). p68-77.

nostalgia for the benevolent patriarchy, order, and harmony supposedly represented by the extended family of the past” (1999:111). Monteiro argues that serials like *Hum Log* acted as vehicles for a new commercialised televisual discourse of development where programmes having a geopolitical dimension – eg., population control – are linked to the welfare and liberation of the family, especially women (1998:161).

*Rajani* (1985), directed by Basu Chatterji, was another serial in the educational mode, which casts an upper-caste, middle-class activist woman as its protagonist. Rajani is shown fighting a corrupt administrative system, domestic violence etc, all in the service of the nation. “Rajani epitomized the confluence of liberal discourses of women’s agency with ideologies of reformist nationalism” (Mankekar 1999: 111).

Another milestone in the national screen presence of women was *Udaan* (1988), a story giving pride of place to women’s ambition. Kalyani, the protagonist is actively encouraged by her father to seek out a challenging profession. As a police officer, Kalyani is shown embarking on the difficult and treacherous path of reform. Throughout, however, her sexuality is subsumed by her uniform. The transgressive nature of her ambition is naturalised and tamed by channelling it in the service of the nation. The father personifies the voice of a national consciousness that Kalyani consults when in moral and ethical quandary. Monteiro argues that the changes in the values, norms and practices of the family that television’s new developmental discourse articulates are devised to lead to a greater integration of the family with the market economy and the state’s programmes of welfare (1998:161-162)

The serial narratives of the early 1980s, marked by the interpenetration of the categories of nation and gender, were followed by the epic soap operas of the late 1980s which, for the first time on national television, discursively linked religion and gender. The telecasting of the Hindu epics, *Ramayana* (1987-1988) and *Mahabharata* (1988-1990) on national television were landmark events, signalling not only a thematic rupture with the serial genre of the early part of the decade but also redefining the televisual discourse of gender and nation through Hindu categories of ideal personhood embodied in the sacred figures of Ram and Sita and in the nostalgic recreation of perfect nationhood in the concept of *Ram Rajya*, the idyllic kingdom/reign of Lord Ram.

The screening of the epics in the late 1980s was symptomatic of a deepening of the nexus between state, electoral politics and television, which became apparent first in the media campaigns unleashed on television for the 1984 general elections. Politics as human interest drama was articulated through the coverage of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's funeral in 1985, following her assassination. Families sat glued to the television bearing witness to the making of history as members of the nation-as-family; in a situation where the state faced a crisis of legitimation given the widespread post-assassination communal massacres of the Sikhs, television concentrated on constructing the myth of the martyr and her courageous successor, son Rajiv Gandhi, in trying to resolve the crisis of legitimacy faced by the state (Monteiro 1998:162). Monteiro argues that the televisual presentation of politics in terms of human interest drama can be seen as an extension of the state's entry into the family (1998:162). As political scientist Arvind Rajagopal brought out lucidly through his book *Politics after television* (2001), Ramayan was telecast on national television at a time when the then Rajiv Gandhi government was being politically attacked for appeasing India's Muslim minority for legislatively intervening in the Shah Bano case<sup>41</sup>, which ultimately, in what was a crude communal balancing act, led to his government allowing the *Shila Nyas* (foundation stone laying) ceremony for a Ram temple to be performed at the disputed site in Ayodhya, the birth place of Lord Ram, where the 16<sup>th</sup> century Babri Mosque, demolished on December 6, 1992 by right-wing mobs, stood.

Rajagopal points out that in the vernacular Hindi press, the Ramayan was referred to as a *dharmic* serial<sup>42</sup>: "The ambivalent connotation of the English language description, with a soap opera as a low or degraded product, is entirely absent in this term. 'Dharmic' in this context refers to matters religious or spiritual, and 'serial' is of course a neologism" (2001: 92). The twin mythologicals or epic soap operas as Rajagopal terms them spawned more of their kind on other private channels. These

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<sup>41</sup> Refers to the case of the divorce and subsequent decade-long court battle of Shah Bano, a poor Indian Muslim woman, to claim a modest maintenance amount from her husband. In April 1985, Shah Bano's arduous legal battle culminated in her being granted a modest sum as maintenance by the Supreme Court of India, the apex court of the country. However, soon after, the issue acquired an unprecedented political dynamic with the party in government losing crucial by-elections in December 1985 as it was perceived as supportive of the court's judgment, which in turn was seen as an interference in and violation of the Muslim personal law. Consequently, a piece of legislation – ironically called the Muslim Women (Protection of Right in Divorce) Act – was passed by Parliament in May 1986 effectively annulling the judgement of the apex court.

<sup>42</sup> The early mythological films were also, incidentally, referred to as Dharmic films.

mythologicals resurrected not only the feminine sacred of the nationalist imagination, but by means of exclusionary narratives, sparked nostalgia for a Hindu golden age that came to a premature end with the Islamic interlude. Writers such as Sumit Sarkar, Christophe Jaffrelot and John Zavos have elaborated the slippage between Hindu and Indian nationalisms, which acquired unprecedented force in the late 1980s. “The politics of gender, community and nation converge most powerfully in the serial’s construction of the Other as sexual predator, and reveal the co-implication of Hindu nationalism and discourses of sexuality” (Mankekar 1999:217). And so, the national ideal of womanhood was sought to be reinscribed in more Hinduized terms through what is national television’s most popular genre to date.

In analyzing the essentialist discourses of femininity in the Ramayan serial, Mankekar emphasises the use of the trope of ‘lakshman rekha’, the protective boundary that women dare not transgress. “While ideal masculinity was depicted in terms of militancy and physical strength, ideal femininity was predicated on the containment of women’s energies....In dominant Hindu discourses on gender, the lakshman rekha is a commonly used trope for the control of women’s conduct.... The primary characteristics of this unofficial, often self-imposed lakshman rekha were containment, sexual modesty, and self-control: once a woman transgresses it, it was said, it is impossible for her to redeem her honour by stepping back into it. The concept of the lakshman-rekha provides the basis for the code of conduct (naari dharma) prescribed for the ideal Hindu woman which, through a critical slippage, comes to represent the ideal Indian woman” (Mankekar 1999:208).

In representing female sexuality, the Ramayan polarises sexuality along the lines of benevolent and malignant. The former kind, best epitomised by the ideal Hindu wife Sita, in fact involves an obliteration of female sexuality or desexualisation with Sita being depicted as the embodiment of chastity, passivity, fidelity to her husband and his clan and above all, forbearance (Mankekar 1999).

While agreeing with psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar’s verdict regarding the “intimate familiarity”<sup>43</sup> of Sita, ethnographic evidence, Mankekar pointed out, showed that

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<sup>43</sup> “This intimate familiarity is not meant to suggest historical knowledge, but rather a sense of the mythical figure as a benevolent presence, located in the individual’s highly personal and always actual space-time. From earliest childhood, a Hindu has heard Sita’s legend recounted on any number of sacral and secular occasions; seen the central episodes enacted in folk plays like the Ram Lila; heard her qualities extolled in devotional songs; and absorbed the ideal feminine identity she incorporates

some women in her audience study contested the depiction of Sita as emblematic of “ideal womanhood”, particularly in contrast with the character of Draupadi, the wilful heroine of Mahabharata. However, all the viewers who discussed Sita as a role model were Hindu women; the Sikh women whom Mankekar interviewed never discussed her as a role model. “Nonetheless, the power of her image may be assessed from the fact that long after the telecast of the Ramayan many Hindu men and women were still debating the extent to which the ‘values’ associated with Sita were pertinent to their own lives” (Mankekar 1999:210).

According to Arvind Rajagopal, the reception of the serial has to be situated in the broader context of the liberalisation of the Indian economy, which made possible an insertion of hinduised imagery into the circuits of commodity culture and enabled the retailing of Hindu identity (1994: 1659-1668). This overlap between Hindu nationalism and an emergent consumerist ethos, although partial, as Rajagopal points out, has resulted in an interesting representational trajectory for the image of the ideal Hindu/Indian woman.

### **The liberal make-over and after**

With the advent of satellite channels on the Indian media scene since 1991 a string of women-oriented narratives were inaugurated whose female protagonists were refreshingly bold and representative of a modernity primarily inspired by a new consumerist ethos generated in the wake of economic liberalisation. The widespread popularity of these women-centric narratives led the Delhi-based television monitoring agency Centre for Advocacy and Research to state in a 2003 report: “we can say without fear of contradiction that television is essentially a female bastion” (2006:184). For the first time on Indian television, serials that celebrated single womanhood, female sexuality, the subtleties and micropolitics of extra-marital relationships and the struggles of working women characters were aired and proved tremendously popular (Page and Crawley 2001; Butcher 2003). Thus soaps such as Tara, Hasratein, Saans, Shanti and Aurat made their mark thanks to central protagonists who struggled and fought against the patriarchal male order in the family and workplace.

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through the many everyday metaphors and similes associated with her name. Thus, ‘she is as pure as Sita,’ denotes chastity in a woman, and ‘she is a second Sita,’ the appreciation of a woman’s uncomplaining self-sacrifice.” (Kakar, Sudhir. 1988. *Feminine Identity in India* in *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, ed. Rehana Ghadially, pp44-68. New Delhi: Sage.)

At the vanguard of independent channels telecasting these bold women-oriented narratives was the Indian-owned Zee channel, whose strategy brought to the small screen a whole array of ambitious working women characters. Meanwhile, Zee's success was in sharp contrast to the losses piled up by Rupert Murdoch-owned Star Plus, which began beaming into Indian homes since 1991 but found itself lagging behind in terms of viewership. The channel embarked on a vigorous Indianisation drive, a move to be seen in a context where "there appears to be a correlation between the state's increasing attachment to globalisation, an increase in expressions of Indian nationalism, and a willingness to consume Indian popular culture to mark out Indian identity and reassure the self and others that they indeed belong... the more heavily embedded a product is with Indianness the more successful it is" (Butcher 2003:113-114). Star Plus' Indianisation drive was led by a new brand of serials produced by Balaji Telefilms and its creative director Ekta Kapoor. This overt emphasis on Indian culture was overwhelmingly represented in the serials through the 'body of the woman' and the 'body of the family'.

Further, this new brand of serials commodify everyday life by stimulating interest in opulent lifestyles and use contemporary narrative situations to represent women within the traditional space of Hindu joint families. This is comparable to the new family films of the 1990s, which Ranjani Mazumdar says, "focus on consumer-oriented families, speaking to 'tradition' yet geared to global mobility".....the interior extravaganza of family films is rooted in landscapes of post-modern fear and anxiety, inciting a series of "overlapping responses, including retribalization, nostalgia, escapism and spiritual return" (2007:110;117). She points out that the scenic interiors of films such as *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (1994), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1999) and *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) combine opulence with neotraditionalist nostalgia for 'family values'. "Inside these projected dreamworlds, we see the performance of tradition, religious and cultural rituals, romance, and familial devotion" (Mazumdar 2007:117). Hindi cinema, through the decade of the 1990s and thereafter, has used the Hindu family as a marker of cultural stability, as the locus of a highly ritualised lifestyle in which Hindu religiosity plays an important role, and as a space where the idea of Indianness is constantly played out. Thus in Sooraj Bharjatya's *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*, the romantic narrative is in fact the vehicle for the coming together of two large families and the family space itself is imbued with devotion, the spectacularization of Hindu rituals and rich traditional costumes, with

the moral universe of the family ultimately saturating the thin story line of the film (Mazumdar 2007).

However, while post-liberalisation family films used the space of the home and the family as vehicles to parade a fetishised Hindu middle class status, the Hindi cinema heroine had metamorphosed from sati-savitri into the “desiring woman”; the heroine had moved into the space of the vamp, a trend the countdown for which had literally begun with the film *Tezaab* (1989) in which the heroine Madhuri Dixit dances erotically on stage to the tune of *Ek do teen...* (One two three...), bringing the largely male audience in the film to their feet. Almost two decades earlier, this was the part reserved for the westernized vamp of Hindi cinema, played by actresses like Helen and Bindu. In a night club scene in the movie *Kati Patang* (1970) Bindu, who is dancing voluptuously on stage is juxtaposed with the heroine who is scandalised by merely watching her perform. However, as Mazumdar writes, the emergence of actress Zeenat Aman in the 1970s marks a distinct shift in the “dichotomized narrative of sexuality presented through a tableau framing the ‘westernized vamp’ and the ‘Indian woman’...by the 1990s the earlier binary oppositions, so dear to the nationalist imagination, had ceased to hold...the heroine now occupied the space of the vamp through a process marked by a public display of desire and an entirely new discourse of sexuality that threatened the old boundaries” (2007:90). However, interestingly, the particular idiom of performance through which this permeability between the space of the vamp and the heroine came about was the ‘item number’, initially with largely rural, folk-based or colloquial lyrics, movements and costumes, that was performed by the heroine for a largely male crowd; lately the item number has also been performed in the *mujrah* style used by the *kothewali* or courtesan figure in films like Muzaffar Ali’s *Umrao Jaan* (1981) which has been remade in 2006. According to Mazumdar, the metamorphosis of the heroine of Hindi cinema needs to be read in the light of a changed dialectic between women’s sexuality, spectatorship and the new imperatives of 20<sup>th</sup> century consumption, which “depended to a large extent on women’s ability to desire, to gaze, and to move freely through the new geography of the city” (2007:91). The home and the world discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and nationalism’s complex relationship to the city contributed in great measure to the circulation of the image of the westernized vamp in Hindi cinema. At a time when cinema seems to have resolved its moral dichotomy, television has centralised this dichotomy on a different axis through its narratives of the new family.

### **K-serials and the hinduisation of femininity**

In a 2004 interview Shyam Sundar, Head of Yantra Media, which pioneered the women-oriented serials in Kerala, beginning with the trend-setting *Sthree* (Woman) on the Asianet channel was asked:

*Can you take up the challenge of producing a family soap sans mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in central roles?*

*“We made a soap, Snehanjali, with this idea in mind. It had a hero-central structure. That was an experimental project. But it didn't deliver. After 50 episodes, we had to revamp the show and make the subject female-oriented. Even the third version of Sthree which narrated the story of three women and the professional challenges they face didn't work. Melodrama didn't deliver there and we had to add family elements to the story to make it deliver.”<sup>44</sup>*

While the privatised post-liberalisation media landscape in India seems highly diverse and fragmented, this quote serves to illustrate that within a specific genre like the serials there has been a gradual whittling down of choices and a proclivity towards standardisation of the melodramatic plot. Such convergence seems unprecedented in the media landscape of a State like Kerala, which has had a unique cinematic tradition that has provided, even at the height of the nationalist movement, alternative and localised discourses at variance with those offered by mainstream Bombay cinema. However, on the specific question of women's representation in popular culture, the Kerala picture reveals surprising continuities with the mainstream. J.Devika writes that women's magazines, which began to appear in Kerala since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, defined for women “a domain projected as direly in need of capacities that were specifically ‘womanly’ – the domain of modern domesticity” (2006:45). She argues in an historical inquiry into Kerala's gender paradox<sup>45</sup>, that since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century modern gendered subjectivities in Kerala have been thoroughly implicated in

<sup>44</sup> Source: <http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k4/producer/shyamsunder.htm>.  
[Interviewed by Bijoy A.K.](#), posted on December 21, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Kerala women are seen as being among the most literate in India, enjoying high social development despite low economic growth – reflective of the Kerala Model of development (Dreze and Sen 1996). Yet despite high human development indices, including high levels of health care, weaker taboos on women's employment and rapid acceptance of smaller families, none of these have brought greater mobility to women or expanded their life choices (Erwer 2003).

the process of shaping governable subjects – and was presented as simultaneously natural (inborn) and social (requiring correct training), individualised (endowments of particular bodies seem crucial to this) and general (implicating individuals in well-defined roles). Women's magazines of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century which proved to be a formidable instrument in simultaneously propagating as desirable for women the project of self-building and the need to stick to sacrificial domestic ideologies, cinema and the hugely popular serials on television “have worked to reinforce modern gender by re-running the theme of sentimental ‘Womanly’ power to the point of ritualising it” (Devika 2006:54).

The female protagonists of the K-series on Star Plus represent the post-Independence ideal of Hindu womanhood to the fullest extent possible. Their traditional role as ideal wives and daughters-in-law and their location within the traditional space of the Hindu joint family become axiomatic to narrativising contemporary issues and conflicts within families that women, cutting across different strata and walks of life, can identify with. Tulsi and Parvati, the central protagonists of *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (KSBKBT) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (KGGK), epitomise a post-liberalisation shift in representational trend on Indian satellite television towards recentring ideal (Hindu) womanhood within the home and the family. Ideal womanhood in the K-series is characterised by both continuities and disjunctures with the norms of womanhood that have hegemonised the representational space of ideal Hindu womanhood in Indian cinema and national television in post-Independence India.

As has been detailed in the earlier section, in the case of television, the shifts and disjunctures in the representation of Hindu womanhood are sharp. Born in the aftermath of a new Indianisation drive flagged off by Star Plus, the K-series have revived several features of television's hegemonic representation of womanhood, foremost among them being the domestication of the Hindu woman, her recentring within the home and her enshrinement as mother.

The Centre for Advocacy and Research, in its 2007 study, reports that K-series package tradition as the expression of choice that the women make in dealing effectively with contemporary issues; traditional solutions seem more attuned to their persona and needs as women living in a large Hindu joint family. Thus, in the serials, ideal womanhood, while embattling many ‘modern’ issues such as infidelity that

confront the family, is always packaged using traditional trappings such as saris and bindis, perform fasting rituals and religious rites, observe customary duties and courtesies and participate and lead family celebrations.

Drawing on evidence available from Vedic literature and the prescriptive text of early India, *Manusmṛti*,<sup>46</sup> Kumkum Roy points out that the most central and common identity envisaged for women is that of wifehood; the notion of motherhood was less central (1995: 10-28). However, social reform movements, both nationalist and religious, placed motherhood rather than wifehood at the heart of their projects. This emphasis on motherhood, as Karen McCarthy Brown notes in the context of fundamentalist ideology, results in a situation where “women are highly honoured as mothers, but they are also forbidden the freedom to refuse this elevated role” (1994: 181). In the K-series, the trope of motherhood has been emphasised in so radical a fashion that the serials have introduced thematic polarities of good mother and bad mother in order to complicate the narrative, a script that makes sense in light of a historic continuity with the nationalisation and sacralisation of motherhood. Thus narrative strands surrounding the theme of adoption tend to articulate ideal womanhood as one that is fulfilled through extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice in order to conserve and protect the Hindu joint family. It is significant that in both K-series adoption is a narrative device that is used to resolve familial tension and conflict created as a result of infidelities on the part of men. Thus Tulsi of KSBKBT is more acceptable as mother to Karan, the son of Mandira (Tulsi’s *bete noir*), who claims Karan’s father is in reality Tulsi’s husband Mihir. The narrative tension between the themes of good mother and bad mother is used to shift the focus from the supposed male infidelities to a resolution of those infidelities through the ideal conduct characteristic of ideal womanhood – namely the benevolent, motherly acceptance of issues born out of those infidelities as one’s own. As U. Vindhya points out, at the heart of this conceptualisation, which can be traced back to the nationalist era, is the

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<sup>46</sup> *Manusmṛti* is among the most well-known prescriptive texts of early India, compiled between circa 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. “It is, however, very different from Vedic texts in terms of language, style, and content. It is amongst the earliest works composed entirely in the popular *anustubh* metre (also commonly used in the epics), a metre which lends itself to easy recitation, memorisation, and composition. It is likely that this facilitated widespread dissemination of its message. Besides, its focus is explicitly broad – in fact, virtually the entire gamut of human existence is brought within the purview of prescription and prohibition.” (Cited in Roy, Kumkum. 1995. ‘Where Women are worshipped, there the Gods rejoice: The mirage of the ancestress of the Hindu woman’ in *Women and the Hindu Right: A collection of essays*, eds Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia. New Delhi: Kali for Women. Pp10-28)

belief that women are the primeval sources of creation (as *nirmatri*) and power (as *prakriti* and *adishakti*)...for a *nirmatri* to therefore demand rights equal to her own creation (men) is to despoil the divinity associated with her status (2007:65).

In its construction of femininity, the serials accommodate shades of various identities that have represented ideal Hindu womanhood – that of the *sumangali* (auspicious married woman), the *pativrata* (supremely chaste wife), and the *virangana* (the archetype of the warrior woman). Encompassing all these identities and from which all these identities derive their source of sustenance is the ideology of *Shakthi* or feminine power. Writing on the ‘paradoxical powers of Tamil women’, Susan Wadley points out that “despite the drudgery and subordination of women’s everyday lives, Tamils believe that Tamil women can, and do, control and alter events – they can save their husbands from death; they can destroy whole towns; they can bring health and wealth to their kinfolk; they can cause poverty and ruin. A woman’s curse is feared, her blessing is sought” (1991: 153). While there are significant differences in the role and statuses of women across India, the quotation from Wadley serves to make clear the essence of *Shakthi* which, by the very nature of the feminine power that flows from it, serves to circumscribe women’s potential to the domain of domestic life. As the Centre for Advocacy and Research points out in its 2003 report, approximately 80 per cent of the female characters in the serials are confined to the kitchen, living room, dining room and bedrooms, entering the “professional space only when they have to save their spouses or family from the clutches of scheming outsiders” (Ghadiyally 2007:188). Thus Parvati of KGGK moved out of her marital family and joined Pallavi (the bad woman) in order to regain for her husband and his family what rightfully belonged to them. Kapur and Cossman observe that “the constitution of the new Hindu woman – a woman who may be educated, and who may work outside of the home, a woman who is strong and powerful, inside her family, and her community – is still a woman constituted through traditional discourses of *matri shakti*, as mother and wife, and of Sita, as chaste, pure and loyal” (1993:41).

Based on a semiotic reading of the epic soap operas *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Prabha Krishnan enumerates the qualities of the ideal mother of the epics. “Though her world-vision is extremely limited the ideal mother is the epitome of selflessness and survival power....This selflessness is compounded of immense survival power and grim tenacity of purpose” (1990: WS112). The *Ramayana*, in particular, rests on

the crucial difference between Kausalya, the good mother and Kaikeyi, the bad mother, the latter being responsible for the banishment of Lord Ram from his throne and kingdom. The most successful K-serial, KSBKBT, adapted this theme in order to deal with the contemporary issue of marital infidelity. The central character, Tulsi, Mihir's wife, is faced with a situation where her husband has a son by another woman (Mandira) who happens to take care of him while recovering from an accident. Having lost his memory in the accident, Mihir forgets he is already married and ends up having a son with Mandira. Meanwhile, thanks to Tulsi's relentless efforts Mihir remembers his family and his wife but despite Tulsi's requests refuses to shun Mandira, although she stakes her son's claim to the family business. At this point, the narrative highlights the key differences between womanhood personified by Tulsi and Mandira through key verbal confrontations between the two. In one of the several high-voltage encounters between Tulsi (good mother) and Mandira (bad mother) in KSBKBT, Mandira who is a business woman in a reference to Tulsi's status as housewife says: "Tum Shantiniketan ke bahar shunya ho" ("You are worthless outside your house, Shantiniketan."). To this Tulsi retorts: "Shunya se brahmand banta hai" ("The cosmos itself came into existence from nothing.").

In another dramatic confrontation between the two, the verbal exchange reaches a point where to the chants of sacred mantras (Vedic incantations), Tulsi declares: "Tum Ma kehlane ke layak nahi ho" ("You are not worthy of being called a mother."). In these two exchanges, signifying the clash of ideal motherhood and deviant motherhood, two important ideological strands emerge. Firstly that a woman must not only give birth in order to be granted the status of motherhood; she must continue to act in a manner that makes her deserving of the status of motherhood. Motherhood is not just biological; it is symbolic. What makes her deserving of the status of motherhood is, above all, her exclusive dedication to the tasks of motherhood; and her simultaneous and total relinquishment of ambition in the world outside the home. Mandira defaulted on both counts; she was willing to use her own son to get even with any one who created hurdles in her path to success both inside and outside the house. The chanting of Vedic hymns as background score to Tulsi's speech is instrumental in aligning the voice of traditional authority (scriptures) with Tulsi's pronouncements. This is a technique common to the first wave of K-serials, including KSBKBT and KGGK which use 'traditional spokespersons', especially the central female protagonist, in conjunction with other narrative devices such as

traditional methods of family bonding, rituals and customs such as fasting in order to resolve contemporary issues.

In addressing her lack of identity and autonomy outside the sphere of the home, Tulsi is shown defending her larger-than-life status at home by using the metaphor of creation. The metaphor naturalises the home as Tulsi's principal area of occupation; it is as natural as the evolution of the cosmos from nothingness. It is also suggestive of a feminine potential that is capable of coming into its own outside the home, but prefers to be contained within the *lakshman rekha* of the home. Tulsi's lack of individual achievement outside the confines of the home is compensated by an exaltation, "which immures the woman and effectively removes her from the arena of decision-making" (Krishnan 1990:WS113). The pivotal characters in most serials are women who are repositories of how things are done within the household. Again and again the women work to restore the core values of the family which are threatened by deviant acts of one or other family member.

In one of the episodes, Om, the husband of Parvati<sup>47</sup>, the female protagonist of KGGK, has an unusually raucous argument with his wife about the latter having favoured her adopted daughter in lieu of her real daughter. The argument concludes with Parvati deciding to leave the house and as she prepares to step outside the threshold of the house, the lamp in front of the household deity is extinguished and outside, nature itself in fury. Before leaving, in lieu of her own presence, she entrusts the house to the care of the gods. Thus the household tasks that she had been doing are elevated to the level of sacred duty requiring extraordinary powers to fulfil. In another instance in KGGK, in depicting the aftermath of the rape of a blind girl by two members of the family, the daughters-in-law are portrayed as bold, independent and engaged in a battle to bring justice to the rape victim. However, this sub-plot finds resolution in the decision of the family matriarch who proclaims that it is the duty of the daughters-in-law to bring their erring husbands back on the right path, thus reiterating women's traditional responsibility as gatekeepers of family honour.

Tulsi and Parvati not only represent ideal motherhood, but also act out the roles of sumangalis and pativratas. They also take on the role of the fierce goddess when domestic imbalances are too far gone. In an episode of KGGK, for example, Parvati is

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<sup>47</sup> Note the names of the couple – Om being a synonym for the god Shiva and Parvati being his divine consort; Shiv-Parvati often find mention in mythology as the exemplary couple.

shown seething with anger, an anger that is made comparable in its intensity to the wrath of the eight-armed demon-slaying goddess Durga who is pictured in the background. The specific deity that embodies the aspirations of the women members of the Hindutva movement is the eight-armed Durga, a militant icon who subsumes Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kali (Sarkar 1995:204). According to Sarkar, the militant role that Hindutva ideologue M.S.Golwalkar envisages for women who join the movement “inverts the usual pattern of symbolisation within national and earlier communal movements. So far, in both, the fetishised sacred or love object to be recuperated had been a feminine figure – the cow, the abducted Hindu woman, the motherland. The reversal of roles equips the communal woman with a new and empowering self-image” (1995:191). But in the serial this is as far as the reversal goes – it acts as a self-image that is empowering only in the context of a domestic dispute, yet again signifying the containment of feminine energy.

## Conclusion

The manner in which discourses on Indian womanhood have evolved through popular modes of representation since the colonial period to the present time reveals areas of significant continuities and disjunctures. The discursive conflation of gender, religion and nation was first achieved in the colonial period through various nationalist and religious reform movements and invoked in visual art forms such as painting and calendar art. Cinema, particularly early Hindi cinema, made use of mythological ideals of womanhood that emphasised the Sati-Sita-Savitri construct; but in the early period there existed a wider range of constructs of femininity. However, after Independence, through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the nationalist conflation of the Indian nation and the Indian woman/mother echoed in Hindi cinema, reaching its zenith in Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India*. With the arrival of colour television in Indian homes in 1980s, the Indian State sought to construct a modern femininity by allying the image of the female subject with the development objectives of the state through the national broadcaster Doordarshan. Since its inception, national television, unlike any other medium including cinema, has sought to weld together the objectives of the state with the representation of gender and family.

In the late 1980s the telecasting of Ramayana and Mahabharata on national television was a watershed in that it symbolised the harnessing of the surplus value of the growing Hindu nationalist rhetoric that attained particular force in the 1980s. By doing what the mythological film could not, namely, bringing the historic memory of the myth to the intimate and realistic realm of the family, the mythological serials on television powerfully aligned discourses of gender, nation and community, achieved through the Othering of non-Hindus, particularly Muslims. While the Ramayana reinstated Sita, represented as self-sacrificing, chaste and devoted to her husband Lord Ram, as emblematic of ideal Hindu/Indian womanhood, the Mahabharata underscored the deep co-implication of discourses of gender and nationhood in the figure of Draupadi and the powerful narrative of her disrobing.

In their 1986 study of 27 television programmes, Krishnan and Dighe concluded that the broad pattern in the construction of femininity on television in that period was that of affirmation and denial; in the K-serials too sacrifices and self-denial are integral to gaining recognition and affirmation as ideal wife/mother/woman. In contemporary soaps the fundamental axis along which conflicts develop and are resolved in order to ultimately reaffirm the centrality of the Hindu joint family is one of rights versus responsibilities. It is through the constant reaffirmation of a woman's duties to the family as wife, mother and so on over her rights that determines the resolution of conflicts and ultimately the unity of the Hindu joint family.

Thus familial disagreements involve expanding and reclaiming the duties of the women rather than their rights so that the gender and power constructs that undergird the joint family structure remain intact. Coming in the aftermath of an upsurge of contemporary, alternative images of womanhood on television in the post-liberalisation period, this trend points to a specific conjunctural revival of representations of ideal Hindu womanhood that seek to naturalise a discourse of traditional womanhood defined exclusively in familial terms as *mata*, *pativrata* or *sumangali*. The critical slippage from Hinduness to Indianness is sought to be routinised by locating the traditional joint family as a site of epic struggles and consequently one that has to be continuously secured and defended by ideal (Hindu) womanhood.

The K-series actively construct a hinduised femininity by drawing on various facets of Hindu womanhood – the mata (mother), the pativrata (chaste woman), the sumangali (auspicious married woman) and virangana (warrior woman) – and by reasserting the home as a woman's primary domain. The dominant discourse that underlies the ideal womanhood that the first wave of K-series such as *Kyunki* and *Kahani* offer for consumption is one in which women are perceived as embodiments of Matri shakti or mother power. Women are strong and powerful within the family and are performers par excellence in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law enacted through the tropes of self-sacrifice, patience and chastity, markers of traditional womanhood in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould<sup>48</sup>.

Contemporary soaps have also reintroduced the heroine-vamp dyad of Hindi cinema as essentially a polarized opposition between women who make the family and women who break it. The patriarchal family had been the principal vehicle in the televisual discourses of 'women's uplift' and national development deployed by the national broadcaster Doordarshan prior to media liberalization. In the post-liberalisation period, these older narratives about the patriarchal family are not jettisoned but re-worked around anxieties regarding familial stability that permeate contemporary middle-class domesticity; with the rise of the new middle class, the family has become the diegetic terrain on which to articulate a new middle-class (Hindu) womanhood.

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<sup>48</sup> The mythological triumvirate of ideal Hindu womanhood.

## Chapter 5

### TALKING TELEVISION WITH MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES:

#### NOTES FROM THE FIELD

##### **Introduction**

This chapter traces the experiential, philosophical and methodological dimensions of six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in four urban locations spanning two Indian cities. I have categorised my fieldwork experience into five different methodological issues representing five different but overlapping stages in the fieldwork. In the first section I examine what it means to do ethnography at home, assessing its implications in terms of the transformative processes that the ‘field’ has gone through in the larger context of globalization and the transnational nature of ethnography in such a changing world. Following from this, I lay out the research questions I posed and define the meanings invested in the term ‘field’ and the consequences this has had for my fieldwork. Next, I trace the contingency that characterised my interaction with families and the routes and negotiations that helped me obtain key informants for my research and the limitations inherent in the process. In the last section, I outline the methods used in the study to methodologically verify data obtained during fieldwork.

##### **Field as home, home as field**

When I travelled to India in September 2007 to begin my fieldwork in Delhi, I was revisiting a city that had fascinated me since I first read about it in history text books in school. At home, in Kollam, then a small town in the southern most Indian state of Kerala, television had been the principal source of nationalist imagery, and the topography of New Delhi was at the centre of the national broadcaster Doordarshan’s repertoire of national symbolism. Delhi’s stately roads, national monuments and historic buildings suffused with an architectural style that is distinctly Mughal and Indo-Saracenic and captured the city’s Mughal and British heritage respectively were all part of this repertoire. And when, in 1997, in the aftermath of media liberalisation and encouraged by the success of epic tales such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, Doordarshan decided to broadcast a historical on Delhi called ‘Main Dilli Hoon’ (I

am Delhi) produced by Nadira Babbar, directed by the Chopra brothers B.R.Chopra and Ravi Chopra and telecast every Saturday, it merely formalised the corporation-turned- national-broadcaster's continuing alliance with the nationalist project. Significantly, the opening score for the serial personified Delhi as a woman who sang, "I am Delhi, The heart of Hindustan, I am the ultimate destination of the weary traveller, Roaming the world for a safe haven." Indeed, this song captures the coming-of-age of the national capital from an imperial fortress to a city that lies at the nexus of the global traffic in people, commodities and images.

The idea of the post-industrial globalized metropolis began to circulate in India in the decade of the 1990s (Chatterjee 2003). But what has been most influential in the spread and currency of this post-industrial image of the city among the urban middle classes has been the intensified circulation of images of global cities through cinema, television and the internet as well as through the greater access to international travel. The post-industrial city or the new city is also marked by the suburbanisation of the middle-class (Chatterjee 2003). The new city, "is characterised by a central business district with advanced transport and telecommunication facilities and office spaces...outside the central business district, therefore, the rest of the city is characterised by an urban space that is increasingly differentiated in social terms, even as it is functionally interconnected beyond the physical contiguity of neighbourhoods (Chatterjee 2003:181). It is also a city that, in contrast to television's epic claims of Delhi as the eternal haven masks, or in some cases barely masks, gaping inequalities. As a pamphlet released in April 2001 by the Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch (People's Rights Advocacy Forum) to protest against the beautification of the city through the demolition of slums sharply reminds us, the voice of the city's poor would say, "I have no place to live, The entire world is mine".

When I returned to this new city and national heartland in hope of understanding the dynamics of television viewing among middle-class women viewers of K-serials, I was also entering and experiencing the tangled skein of my own contextual identity as both the Native, an academic migrant returning to the homeland and the Other, a south Indian attempting to enter into the social and cultural world of north Indian families. And this dynamic of the Other and the Native continuously weaved itself

into the ethnographic encounters I had with my families, and consequently the tapestry of narratives recovered as part of those encounters.

Further, distinctions of home and field, the personal and the professional constantly overlapped throughout the fieldwork process. Traditionally, anthropologists have approached ethnographic fieldwork as a process that requires undertaking a delicate balancing act between the personal and professional given that relationships of intimacy and familiarity between researcher and subject form the fundamental medium of investigation. This balancing act is reflected in their attempt to compartmentalise fieldwork spatially, temporally and textually resulting in among other things, the absence of the ethnographer “as an active and embodied participant” in the social relationships he or she gets immersed in and documents as part of the fieldwork (Amit 2000:3). Yet, while ethnographic research involves prolonged interaction with ‘others’, anthropological discourse itself conveys the understanding thus gained in terms of distance, both spatial and temporal (Callaway 1992:30). This epistemological urge for distancing has been expressed most prominently in the way fieldwork sites were chosen in terms of their distance from the ethnographer’s home. As Gupta and Ferguson explains, this tendency has resulted in a “hierarchy of purity of field sites” (1997:13). Yet ethnographic writing continues to have at its core the task of making the distant familiar by focussing on the mundane and everyday life of the distant and unfamiliar ‘Other’, albeit with greater awareness of the ethnographer’s own voice following the self-reflexive turn in the social sciences post-‘Writing Culture’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

This epistemological paradox is further sharpened in a world where increased mobility of peoples and commodities means that the subjects of fieldwork and hence the field itself has no fixed boundaries. The distinction between ‘home’ and ‘away’ has become blurred by the transnational contexts in which anthropologists and their ethnographic subjects move (Amit 2003). In light of this emerging scenario, doing ethnography at home brings with it the very same epistemological problems that ethnographic research on the foreign fieldwork site has thrown up. Thus doing ethnography on a national scale would involve politicising the researcher’s own shifting and often contradictory identities in different locations within the nation space because home is both political and emotional and inevitably partial; “home is a

selective positioning of the self around one's political allegiances" (Knowles 2003:67).

Returning home to do fieldwork was thus a process that was both challenged and guided by the fluid and contextually contingent identities, both of myself and that of my participants articulated through discourses of class and gender. Consequently, building relationships through the six-month fieldwork process involved constantly negotiating these identity faultlines. I chose to work in two neighbourhoods each in South Delhi, one of the nine revenue districts of the national capital territory of Delhi and in Kollam, one of the 14 revenue districts of the southern Indian state of Kerala, undertaking participant observation and directive interviewing in 10 families, besides visiting less frequently and conducting informal, non-directive interviews with 10 more families. In all, my fieldwork involved 20 households, half of whom I visited at least 4 days a week from Monday to Thursday in order to cover a week's episode of a serial and the rest of the families I would spend time with as and when my schedule permitted it through the two and a half months I spend in each location. Consequently I have divided the households into focussed and non-focussed, focussed being those whom I spend a substantial amount of time with, over and above the half-an-hour that was spent with them from Monday to Thursday watching serials (see Appendix 1, tables 1 and 2).

In South Delhi I chose Kishan Nagar, a lower middle-class neighbourhood and Sarkar Marg, an upper middle class neighbourhood, which I had known from previous visits to the city. However, for the first time, requiring a more deeper engagement with the fabric of their everyday lives, particularly media consumption, I chose my participant families through a process of gradual familiarization by getting to know them by living in Kishan Nagar and choosing to travel often to the nearby upper-middle class neighbourhood of Sarkar Marg. Gaining access to the families themselves without being considered a nuisance took a couple of weeks. Even then, the focussed households were the ones that were more open about talking and sharing their views. Moreover, since my research involved questions regarding a media text, there was always an unspoken anxiety about what might be right to say, among women in both locations. And I had to focus on building close relationships by spending more time with some families who became my key informants in due course before they would share how they emotionally related to the narratives.

### **The research frame**

This research project set before itself the central task of understanding the dynamics of media consumption as a process embedded in the matrix of everyday life, particularly seen through the lives of middle class women in urban India. It proposes that the decade of 1990s and since - broadly referred to as the post-liberalisation period in India – has been witnessing a new conjunctural moment in Indian television, a moment which saw the emergence of a new trend in the representation of ideal womanhood through the “K-serials” on Star Plus, the Indian face of the Rupert Murdoch-owned transnational News Corporation. This emerging trend, characterised by the domestication of the female subject and her recentring within the family and the home, this thesis suggests, might be symptomatic of an ongoing process whereby a certain notion of ideal Indian womanhood and family are deepened and naturalised. This trend is also characterised by the invocation of the joint family system with the mother at its centre, as the natural terrain on which to play out melodramatic tensions inherent in the plot. The research situates this significant conjunctural moment for the representational categories of womanhood and family in the context of a liberalised media environment characterised by the feminisation of television.

In trying to understand this ongoing process that was perhaps naturalising and deepening a particular ideological regime contained in the imagery, characterisation and narrative, I sought a trajectory of inquiry that broadly identified the kind of womanhood that the serials tried to narrativize and then went on to understand the ways in which this narrative or text of womanhood engaged its female viewers. I attempted to understand the dynamics that underlie serial consumption in urban India by specifically looking at how the serials might reinforce a certain way of being a woman, how certain modes of femininity might come to possess greater “weight, resonance, defining and limiting power” within a specific national context defined by a specific conjunctural moment (Hall 1977).

Following on this, the research mapped a theoretical frame that seeks to understand hegemonic processes at work in the reception of these popular ‘woman-oriented’ narratives or serials. Further, in order to fully understand this new conjunctural moment which saw an explosion of the soap opera form on Indian television, I felt it was necessary to understand the circulation of this genre within the nation space and thereby both challenge and complicate the conjunctural moment that undergirds my

research proposition. By choosing ethnography as the preferred research method in understanding media consumption, this research is not breaking any methodological ground. However in so far as this methodology has been deployed in research on media consumption, it has typically been situated within a celebratory, active audience paradigm. This has resulted in a dearth of scholarship that uses the unique potential of ethnographic research to unravel the active, meaning making process of television viewing while also paying attention to questions of media power, the ways in which the hegemonic is present within the texture of the popular (Ang, 2003). When starting out for fieldwork, this was a perspective that I took along with me so it can be put to test – that the hegemonic is always already imbricated within the popular.

It will be helpful at this point to revisit the main research questions that were proposed in preparation for the field work. I asked,

- How do commonsense notions of womanhood, family and national belonging intersect and meet with the serial viewing experience of middle-class families in urban India?
- How do viewers (re)imagine and (re)construct representations of womanhood and family that these serial depict?
- How is national belonging being reconfigured in the ideal of the extended family and traditional womanhood?
- Is the process of media liberalisation, manifested in the ‘Indianisation’ of programming and the ‘feminisation’ of television in India, deepening and naturalising certain representational trends – the recentring of women within the home and the family, reconfiguring of Indianness in the ideal of the extended family whose nucleus is the mother and the ‘Hinduisation’ of visual representations of popular culture?

I sought answers to these questions by situating them within the larger frame of India’s changing mediascape and trying to ethnographically understand serial viewing as a phenomenon that, along with one-stop shopping in malls, eating out at restaurants and weekend holiday getaways, has come to characterise India’s urban culture in the post-liberalisation period. My research takes up from where Purnima Mankekar leaves her ethnographic work on serial viewing in India where she looks at the

national broadcaster Doordarshan and the manner in which discourses of class, religion and gender are imbricated in the serial viewing experience of lower middle class women living in a New Delhi suburb (2000).

However, given the multi-sited nature of the fieldwork and therefore the limited time available for immersion in each location, I would hesitate to term this research ethnographic. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that this study uses certain key ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, key informant interviews and ethnographic triangulation in order to evoke the contradictory effectivity of the hegemonic. I explored the serial viewing experience of middle class women in two urban locations in New Delhi, the national capital, and in Kerala, on the south-western coast, by specifically looking at post-liberalisation soap operas telecast on privately owned television channels Star Plus (Hindi language) and Asianet (Malayalam).

### **Class as constructing the field**

*“Most of the rich people do not need values, most of the poor do not have time for them. Hence, middle class values are what my serials are about. These middle-class values are incidentally in keeping with the cultural ethos of the country. As far as I am concerned, economically I belong to the high class, but morally to the middle class...”*

- Ekta Kapoor, Creative Director of Balaji Telefilms and pioneer of the K-serial brand, in an interview to [indiantelevision.com](http://indiantelevision.com), posted May 29, 2003.

While deciding to focus on the Indian middle class in my attempt to understand the phenomenon of serial viewing, I was plotting my field not just in terms of ethnographically focussing on a social group that has constituted television’s principal consumers since the days of the national broadcaster but also in terms of my own identity as a middle-class woman who had grown up watching and being elated and inspired by serials such as *Udaan* (Flight) on national television since the 1980s. In fact national television helped co-opt my generation into the hegemonic national cultural framework through superior quality Hindi language programming that invoked the middle-class as the centre piece of national belonging by aligning discourses of the State with middle-classness, traditional womanhood and the religion of the majority (Mankekar 1999). In fact, it was my television-derived knowledge of

the north Indian cultural lexicon, aided by my perceived upper middle class status that enabled me to gain access to my informants despite my cultural Otherness as a south Indian. When the makers of the K-serials themselves claim in interviews to the press that the serials depict ‘middle-class values’, it becomes important then to ask whether middle-class women identified with those values and if so to what extent.

In attempting to understand how middle-class women engage with serials, I had to construct my field(s) in terms of how best to capture the middle-class. In terming my field as constructed I am highlighting my attempt to avoid the taken-for-granted assumption, in most ethnographic studies, of the field as an object that is out there. The field is, in the final instance, an object of inquiry that is constructed by the researcher through a combination of approaches that are both intentional and contingent. It is my endeavour here to make transparent the process of knowledge-gathering in and through the field.

In popular media representations the middle-classes are often taken for granted as a class whose contours are easily recognisable; studies of media consumption opt to selectively represent the middle-class by choosing the lower middle class, taken to be economically less privileged than the rest of the Indian middle-class and therefore academically more relevant. This subaltern approach to understanding the middle-class as evident in Mankekar’s ethnography of the consumption of state-owned television for example, does not afford the more nuanced representation of the middle-class and middle-classness as not just a structurally defined class but, following the post-Marxian turn to the discursive beginning in the early 1980s (Jones 1983; Scott 1988), as a culturally and historically constructed identity. In defining class then, there is a need to pay attention to the discursive realm from which people construct their class identity. There is a need to look at the slippages between objectivist notions of class and the native or folk categories that people use to define themselves as a class (Ortner 2006).

In her seminal work on the gendering of the English working class, Joan Scott argues that in defining class as a discursively constructed category there is also a need to look at not only what is included in that category but also at that which is excluded (1988). In her ethnographic study of the new Indian middle class, Leela Fernandes argues that the emergence of this culturally constructed social category in the period following economic liberalisation has been accompanied by a politics of exclusion of

the socially underprivileged sections of society which renders them invisible within the dominant national political culture (2004). This exclusionary politics finds expression not only in the State's attempt to restructure urban space through slum clearance and city beautification, resulting in what Fernandes terms a 'purification' of urban space, but also through the spatial reconfiguration of social inequalities, revealed for example in socially differentiated residential patterns and in the suburbanisation of the middle-class. The post-liberalisation media landscape too, it is apparent, is working in tandem with the State and is part of this politics of exclusion. The working class has altogether disappeared from television's bouquet of fiction. The grim economic and social realities that working class life reflects, it seems, is not pretty or saleable. With these issues in mind, when I decided to map my field in a city whose urban space is highly socially differentiated in what are signs of the emergent new city model, South Delhi, with its exclusive upper middle class and elite settlements differentiated by their proximity to malls and recreational facilities, yet sitting cheek by jowl with the more lower middle class neighbourhoods with their unpaved alleyways and small businesses, encouraged me to approach middle-class as economically a category that is a continuum or spectrum. At the heart of the representation of this social group in media and public discourse is its construction as urbane, consumption-oriented and educated, an ideal that the lower middle class and the upwardly mobile working classes can or must aspire to (Fernandes, 2004; Mankekar 1999).

The middle-class as a discursively constructed social and cultural category, embedded within a discursive field of other categories of social identity and social difference, had to be traced by recording and observing participants' engagement with their own middle-class identity. With this end in mind, I chose two neighbourhoods that could capture the socially discrete urban spaces of South Delhi. Kishan Nagar is a lower middle-class neighbourhood in South Delhi's Safdarjung Enclave, which is in general an elite residential pocket. The flats that comprised Kishan Nagar were connected by narrow alleyways dotted with shops and services ranging from telephone booths and grocery shops to Sikh *gurudwaras* and Hindu temples. Kishan Nagar was a close-knit, highly inter-dependent lower middle class community. The working population of Kishan Nagar was largely employed in small businesses and skilled or semi-skilled occupations as such as in restaurants, as taxi drivers, shop keepers and so on.

In terms of terminology, ‘middle-class’ is in itself an ambiguous category, used both by the upper middle class and the lower middle class, with the former eventually preferring the term upper middle-class and the latter preferring middle class, a label perceived as more legitimate and mainstream. This did not mean that families in Kishan Nagar did not identify themselves as economically struggling to move apace with the rising standards of living visible every time they stepped outside the narrow by-lanes of their locality. Notwithstanding, in identifying the families in Kishan Nagar as lower middle-class I wanted to relativise them not only in relation to the natural contrast provided by the surrounding elite setting of Safdarjung Enclave but also with Sarkar Marg, an ostensibly upper-middle class South Delhi neighbourhood primarily housing the families of central and state government officials who represent the salaried middle-class in the national capital.

### **Contextual Narratives, Contingent identities: ethnography in process**

The process of gaining access to the field in a personal and professional sense, both in Delhi and Kerala, was facilitated by the presence of gatekeeper families and individuals in both locations. In Delhi, I chose to do field work in the south of the city as that was an area that was already familiar to me. I was introduced to families in the lower middle-class community of Kishan Nagar by a friend who was already living in a rented apartment in the locality. I opted to share the apartment with her, a course of action that allowed me to establish warm and friendly relationships, initially, with families who lived on the same floor within a couple of weeks of my stay there, given that I could introduce myself as already known to someone they knew. This made it easier for me to access the families but they were circumspect in the initial days about opening up and expressing their doubts about why I wanted to talk to them about television serials. In the course of my stay among the families, I got closer to a few than others, not only in terms of their openness in sharing and talking but also in terms of their willingness to make me a part of their daily lives and routines both within their homes and outside – their visit to the local market, trip to the temple or to their relatives’ nearby.

All the families were nuclear households with an average of four persons per household and most of my key informants were housewives between the ages of 35-55; in two cases young unmarried women (Rimi and Vanaja), and two working women too shared a good part of their lives and their continuing engagement with

serials; most families were Hindu except a Sikh family in Delhi and a Christian family in Kerala. Thus receptiveness and openness were the principal guiding factors in coming to choose a particular family over others, particularly because my research questions were concerned with trying to understand how women engaged with the serials, but also because time on the field was limited and too precious to be spent trying to gain access to families whose members were not enthusiastic about sharing their views on watching television. However such purposive sampling was deployed in conjunction with the contingencies of the situation, particularly the necessity to immerse myself within the network of relationships within the community by negotiating my way through the micro-politics among families in the community, which I describe below with reference to the Rajput family.

I stayed in Kishan Nagar, familiarising myself with particularly three families who were happy with my visits to their house for reasons that did not always have to do with my research as I discovered gradually. The Rajputs were the first to indicate that I was welcome at their house. They had moved to Kishan Nagar almost 15 years ago from Daryaganj in the bustling Old city of Delhi. Mr Rajput was a security personnel at a restaurant in the city, working in shifts and his wife Komal managed the house. Both husband and wife – were very open and enthusiastic about having me at their house. From the manner in which they would introduce me to people who visited their flat while I was there suggested that they took pride in the fact that they had been chosen as a family for my study. Komal would often tell me to keep my identity a secret as her neighbours would get jealous of the fact that a London-returned was a regular guest at her house. This posed some difficulties – while I didn't want to disregard Komal's suggestion, the research demanded that I become friendly with other families. So I decided to get friendly with women from the flat who came visiting Komal and to whom Komal introduced me. In this way I gained access to five other families who were avid viewers of K-serials, two of whom – the Sathes and the Kapoors - became, overtime, my key informants, principally because of their openness to the research process.

Gaining access to upper-middle class families was not bound up with the kind of micro-politics that characterised my interaction with lower middle class families. Families in Sarkar Marg had a better understanding and were more curious about the research topic than families in Kishan Nagar, principally because of the higher levels

of education. But participant observation in Sarkar Marg was more difficult because the women's schedules were far less accommodative. First, they were more protective about their privacy, with women preferring to talk to me at a time when their husbands were at work. Crucially, most of them had things to do – shopping was the most important item on the list - throughout the day after seeing the husband and children off to the office, school or college in the morning. Unlike Kishan Nagar, which is a self-contained world in itself with all necessary amenities, including grocer's stores, tailors shop, beauty parlour and so on in every street, Sarkar Marg is home to burgeoning shopping malls and is dotted with blocks of flats where families of government officers and civil servants live. Government residential quarters and commercial buildings dominate the skyline. Upper middle-class affluence is palpable everywhere, not the least in the buzz and activity at Afzal Centre, the shopping mall adjoining Sarkar Marg that captures the scale and extent of conspicuous consumption in the capital city. The new shopping mall culture that was part of the lifestyle of families in Sarkar Marg was unknown in Kishan Nagar, where women preferred to buy groceries and milk at the local store and vegetables from street vendors who regularly do the rounds within the Nagar as opposed to one-stop shopping at the more expensive 'Reliance Fresh' outlet just outside the Nagar. Women in Kishan Nagar couched this avoidance of 'high society' culture in a discourse of prudent consumerism.

Given that families in Sarkar Marg were not readily available for participant observations I had to fix appointments. But it was still only too usual that after having travelled to the Marg, which is 30 minutes by road from Kishan Nagar, I would find the flat locked. But gradually I gained access to four families who were enthusiastic about my research. Women from the Deb and the Patel families – Rupa and Lalitha, in particular, became my key informants intimating me of special occasions such as Kitty parties or festivals when a large group of women from the residential community would gather at one of the flats.

In contrast, staying amidst the families in Kishan Nagar allowed me to not only time my visits in a manner that was unobtrusive as far as the routine of the particular family was concerned but also observe closely the kind of work-leisure divisions that were negotiated in each household and gradually be welcomed to participate in family life. However, the factor that was decisive in the kind of data that I got from my

informants was that I was not the only one observing. I was being subjected to an equal if not greater scrutiny by the families among whom I lived and worked. Thus while on the one hand, staying in Kishan Nagar among the families had its advantages in that I was able to present myself through the idiom of both the professional and the personal and in the process not only make my access to the families a matter of routine but also dynamically shift between these roles in my attempt to tread the fine line between familiarity and intimacy, the categories of professional and personal were not that readily separable and as a result the more I was accepted into the families, my professional profile seemed to proportionately diminish and I very soon became aware of a subtle policing of personal behaviour that was seen as appropriate for a woman my age who had been accepted into the private realm of these “cultured” middle class families.

In all I spent over two months among the families in Delhi and in the course of my first month among them, I had become a regular invitee to their lunch, supper and even religious congregations. But it came with a price. Living among the families meant my every movement out of the area was observed and my habit of going out occasionally in the evenings to have food met with subtle disapproval from the women I had made friends with and some of whom were my key informants. Their disapproval was sometimes non-verbal but expressed indirectly through a temporary sense of strangeness in their interaction with me the next morning. When voiced it was done so variously in terms of concern for my safety in the late evenings, in terms of Delhi not being a safe place at night for girls from good families or in terms of how girls invite trouble on themselves by roaming the city at night, particularly when they are dressed in “midriff hugging” clothes such as jeans as opposed to the more modest salwar-kameez (traditional North Indian attire).

As my interaction with the families progressed in terms of the length of time I sensed I could spend with them without being considered obtrusive, my professional and personal facets were becoming increasingly porous and difficult to maintain as distinct. My sense of dressing and putting myself together in general were keenly observed and often commented upon. Western attire suited me but I looked beautiful in salwar-kameez, I was told. There was curiosity about whether I wore sarees. Did I know how to drape a saree? While I sensed that my informants viewed me as a highly educated young woman who had journalists for friends and was herself journalistic in

manner in terms of carrying a Dictaphone around and wanting to interview them about soap operas, and consequently responded to my presence in ways they thought elevated their standing in my eyes and persuaded me to recognise them as intelligent and articulate individuals, I was in turn trying to present myself as someone they could relate to and share their thoughts with about their roles as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law.

I was also acutely made aware of the fact that the personal and the professional were intimately aligned for me in another sense. Despite growing up in the south Indian state of Kerala, I was exposed to Hindi language programming since the very first episode of the first Indian soap opera *Hum Log* (We the people) was telecast on Doordarshan on July 7, 1984. North Indian culture, particularly images of its robust and colourful celebration of festivals was something that was especially fascinating, a memory steeped in nostalgia particularly because it was such a sharp foil to the celebration of festivals in Kerala which had a certain simplicity and even austerity about it. The K-series run entire episodes that narrativise the major festival cycles of North India as occasions that define the middle-class Hindu way of life, weaving together the celebration of festivals with ongoing storylines about a major strain or tension that is threatening to tear the family apart. The celebration of the festival usually becomes an opportunity for the central female protagonist to bring truce to a dispute within the family.

When my fieldwork coincided with the major festival cycle in North India which included Navratri or Durga Puja, Diwali and Karva Chauth, it became an opportunity to not only experience the colour, the gaiety and the embodied performance of festivals but also to experience a heightened sense of cultural otherness that my routine immersion in their life-worlds did not afford. The highly ritualized nature of the festivals meant that there was a lower threshold of events that occasioned performance (Dirks, 1988). On such occasions women not only displayed embodied performances of traditional womanhood but also brought in a highly performance oriented vocabulary to their conversations with me. And in order to maintain my level of access among the community of families, I was constantly challenged to participate in those performances and narratives of ritualized womanhood. Thus through my own Self that was contingent and circumstantially oriented, I was also discovering the performing Self of my informants.

Festivals were also a time when my positioning in an economic hierarchy in relation to my participants was sharply highlighted, especially when I was asked to accompany them to the shops for pre-festival purchasing. I had to assiduously avoid purchasing things that were seen to be expensive and often consent to buying things that they felt suited me or altogether abstain from buying anything so as to not disturb the power equilibrium that had been established and estrange myself from key informants. So while I contextualize the narratives of the participants and attempt to trace the larger picture within which their narratives might be located, such contextualisation is in itself contingent on turning the ethnographic lens on the Self.

All my female respondents were, in general, open, curious and eager participants. My overall interview plan was fluid but in general my interaction with each of them involved a series of informal conversations concluded with a formal interview. In my initial conversations with them, most women averred that they watched serials as it provided them respite from the monotony of household chores. Also, their response to my casual attempts at conversation about the serials was measured and calibrated in accordance with their understanding of my own views regarding the serials. While most of them assumed that my interest in serials as a research subject meant that it was something they could discuss with me openly, others were more circumspect about what I intended to conclude about serial viewing. Would I portray serial viewing as a meaningless activity that women with nothing better to do indulged in or would I record their views on how they engaged with the serials as relevant to their lived contexts and situations?

This anxiety with representation was compounded on another level – their positioning as subjects of an economic class in relation to other women better positioned in the hierarchy and the consequences that this had for their representation as capable women. As Komal in the lower middle class Kishan Nagar told me towards the end of my stay in Delhi when she came to know that I was visiting “high society” families in Sarkar Marg, “my views may not be as good as theirs but you will see that I am different from them, my ideas are different than theirs”. At a kitty party session in upper middle class Sarkar Marg a woman wanted to know, “will you write about us as flimsy women who waste their time gossiping and playing cards at Kitty parties?”. The women wished to be represented in my work as well-rounded individuals for

whom serial viewing was certainly a form of entertainment, meaning and a source of pleasure but nevertheless an activity that they did not participate in uncritically.

As I gained greater access to their everyday lives, women were willing and eager to share their deeper engagement with the serial narratives. I found that my participants readily commented and drew upon the dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions in the serial narratives, reflected in the sharply delineated characterisations of positive and negative female roles, when discussing their own life situations and responsibilities as mothers, wives and daughters. It was in this blurring of reel and real narratives that the depth of the women's engagement with the serials became apparent. Below are two tables with the list of the principal families and the women whose views constitute the core of this thesis. Table 1 is a list of focussed (F) and non-focussed households that were part of the study in Delhi.

Table 2 lists the households studied in Kollam, Kerala. I have put [key] in ellipsis next to the names of those who were my key informants.

**Table 1: Households in South Delhi; focussed households indicated (F); none of the women interviewed in focussed households are working outside the home and all but one family is Hindu. The Kapoors are a Sikh family.**

Family (coded)	Area	Profile	Members interviewed	Names (coded)	Occupation Of husband
Rajput (F)	Kishan Nagar	Husband (51), wife (46), 2 sons (25, 20)	Wife, Husband	Wife – Komal [key] Husband-Chauhan	Manager at restaurant
Kapoor (F)	Kishan Nagar	Husband (60), wife (54) daughter (28) son (36)	Wife, daughter	Wife-Raji Daughter-Rimi [key]	Taxi driver; owns 2 taxis

Sathe (F)	Kishan Nagar	Husband (33), wife (30) daughter (6)	Wife	Vijaya [key]	Computer technician
Deb (F)	Sarkar Marg	Husband (42), Wife (39), Sons (15;10)	Wife	Rupa [key]	Government officer
Patel (F)	Sarkar Marg	Husband (52), Wife (48), Daughter (24), Son (26)	Wife , daughter	Lalitha [key], Liya	Government officer
Agarwal	Kishan Nagar	Parents 2, daughter 1	Wife	Priya	Real estate broker
Bhatteja	Sarkar Marg	Parents 2, daughters 2	Wife (working in a govt. office)	Sheila	Government officer
Krishnan	Sarkar Marg	Parents 2, son 1	Wife	Damini	Retired army official
Gupta	Kishan Nagar	Parents 2 son 1 daughter 1	Wife	Shilpa	Runs grocery store
Narain	Kishan Nagar	Parents 2 daughters 2	Wife	Rani	Electrician

**Table 2: Households in Kollam; focussed households indicated (F); none of the women interviewed from the focussed households are working outside the home and all focussed families are Hindu, except the Putriveedu family who are Christian.**

Family (coded)	Area	Profile	Members interviewed	Names (coded)	Occupation of husband
Kayarupiri (F)	Thoppilbhagam	Husband 53, Wife 48, Son 27	Wife	Ponnamma [key]	Manages Coir-spinning
Nanis (F)	Thoppilbhagam	Husband 36, Wife 34, Daughter 10, Grandmother 68	Wife, grandmother	Nanimani [key] Ammumma	Railway worker
Valiyaveedu (F)	Thoppilbhagam	Husband 41, Wife 36, Son 12	Wife	Veetamma [key]	Working as security guard in Sharjah
Putriveedu (F)	Jawahar Nagar	Husband 58, Wife 51, Daughter 24, Son 23	Wife	Kunjamma [key]	Gulf Returnee
Pazhayaveedu (F)	Jawahar Nagar	Husband 48, wife 44, daughter 23	Wife	Varada	Bank officer
Penveedu	Thoppilbhagam	Parents 2 Daughter 1	daughter	Vanaja [key]	(Father) Coir spinning
Babyveedu	Jawahar Nagar	Parents 2	Wife	Baby	Grocery business
Padmaveedu	Jawahar Nagar	Parents 1, Son 1 Daughter-in	Wife	Padma	School teacher

		law 1, girl child 1			
Rediarveedu	Jawahar Nagar	Parents 2 Son 1	Wife	Lekshmi	Bank clerk
Ammaveedu	Jawahar Nagar	Parents 2 Son 1 Daughter 1	Wife	Ammu	Retd. Governm en-t officer

### Multi-sited fieldwork as ethnographic triangulation

In trying to ethnographically understand the ways in which women engage with serials and consequently examining serial viewing itself both as an aspect of urban living and as a reflection of the Indianisation and regionalisation of television, I felt I had to move beyond the traditional single site or one lifeworld ethnography towards a method that would allow me to trace the continuities and disjunctures in reception within the nation space. Further, as my study specifically looks at how the themes of womanhood and national belonging may be co-implicated in the process of serial viewing, it follows that these notions may be particularly closely aligned in locations close to the nerve centre of national political life – in this case the capital New Delhi. And in locations far removed – such as the deep south of India – notions of woman are likely aligned overwhelmingly to regional and sub-national identities such as Tamil or Malayali. Moreover, the various ways in which women engage with serial narratives could be determined by the dominant gender discourses circulating within specific social and political contexts and consequently reveal, in different contexts, different ways of engaging with the textual discourses of womanhood.

Such a counter-intuitive hypothesis called for a fieldwork design that went beyond the dichotomy of the lifeworld and the system or the local and the national. Further, only a multi-sited ethnography would be able to make sense of the circulation of the serial form within the nation space and thereby make sense of the processes of Indianisation and regionalisation of television that characterises the new conjunctural moment. As George Marcus explains in another landmark methodological intervention since ‘Writing Culture’ “strategies of quite literally following connections, associations and

putative relationships are at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research...The distinction between lifeworlds of subjects and the system does not hold and the point of ethnography within the purview of its always local, close-up perspective is to discover new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols and everyday practices can continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas" (1995: 97-98).

So in addition to Delhi, I chose Kerala as fieldwork site for both academic, political and personal reasons. Kerala has been widely known to have a paradoxical growth pattern with high social development indicators despite a weak economic base, a pattern popularly referred to as the Kerala Model (Raj 1994; Dreze and Sen 1996). At the forefront of factors responsible for this paradoxical growth has been the rapidly declining fertility rates since the 1970s and Kerala's changing demography. Increase in women's literacy and non-domestic employment has been considered the principal factors determining fertility and mortality outcomes and the high literacy rates among the women in Kerala in comparison with the rest of India has been suggested as the reason for their 'high status' and their central role, historically, in social development (Jeffrey 1992).

However, the high status of Malayali women was another paradox in that rising levels of education among women was concomitant with increase in domestic violence, rising suicide rates among women due to familial discord and dowry-related deaths. New measures of women's empowerment and autonomy in terms of access to and control over resources incorporated into the National Family Health Survey 1998-99 revealed that Kerala lagged behind Gujarat in terms of all the measures of autonomy - household decision-making, freedom of movement and access to money. This paradox, as Mridul Eapen and Praveena Kodoth (2002) write, should be understood by engaging with the socio-cultural institutions such as families. They argue that the dominant persuasion of families today, particularly their role in regulating access to material and social resources, is patrifocal. Calling for a demystification of the so-called high-status of Kerala women, they explain that "alterations in marriage, inheritance and succession practices have changed dramatically the practices of erstwhile matrilineal groups as well as weakened women's access to and control over inherited resources. Alongside this, changing levels of female employment and the persistence of a gendered work structure have limited women's claims to 'self-

acquired’ or independent sources of wealth. Emerging consumer practices are extremely important here for they reach out directly to emerging norms of masculinity and femininity and are crucial to the consolidation and reinforcement of a patrifocal ideology” (2002:7).

The decade of the 1990s and since have thus been a period that has seen the Kerala model being subject to scrutiny, especially in terms of women’s status. The period has also been witnessing a crucial change in the media consumption patterns among Kerala women with the rise of vernacular channels such as Asianet and Surya and the growing popularity of narratives of domesticated womanhood that have become staple programming for these channels. In what is almost a reverse of the evolution of national television where mythologicals pulled in a nationwide audience, in Kerala the trend of serial viewing has recently been complemented by the rising popularity of mythological serials and reality shows. The rise of mythological serials – both Hindu and Christian - in Kerala and the possibility of an associated realignment and consolidation of religious communities is a topic that deserves independent research as it is outside the scope of the present project which cannot do justice to it.

Thus the location of two more fieldwork communities in Kollam, Kerala, stems from my interest in providing a more complex picture of the rise of the serial phenomenon in India and also from an interest not in direct comparison but in suggesting implicit differences that may be there between the reception of serials in the capital city Delhi, at the centre of national life, and the reception of the same media commodity, broadly speaking a melodramatic genre that has a women-centric narrative, in Kerala, at the geographic, political and cultural margins of the Indian State, primarily in order to look at the circulation of a particular media genre within the nation space in an attempt to both challenge and complicate the conjunctural moment that undergirds my research proposition. Through such a comparative approach in the choice of a particular social group and multiple fieldwork sites, I have tried to validate and test my findings.

I chose 10 families in Jawahar Nagar and Thoppilbhagam in Kollam repeating the method I had used in Delhi, using a mix of purposive sampling initially coupled with snowballing techniques to identify more families who were receptive and willing to share their narratives than others less willing. Yet again while Thoppilbhagam is a small residential, largely lower middle-class and working class community whose

residents are either employed in or employ people in the coir-spinning industry, Jawahar Nagar is an upper middle class residential community located near the law courts and whose residents are consequently mostly white collar workers and salaried professionals. Kerala's urbanisation processes have been different from the rest of the country in that the state has an urban-rural continuum, with the spread of urbanisation being lateral rather than horizontal. In other words, urbanisation has been less due to an increase in density due to migration into the city space and more due to the spread of urbanisation to the suburbs and the rural areas.

Multi-sited ethnography, in addition to enabling a more complex approach to the connections between the lifeworld and the system, the local and the national and so on, also calls for a constant disruption of the them-us dichotomy of conventional ethnography because it requires more "nuancing and shading as the practice of translation connects the several sites that the research explores along unexpected and even dissonant fractures of social location" (Marcus 1995:100). Further, in multi-sited fieldwork, the ethnographic centring of the subaltern point of view is challenged and the resistance accommodation framework that has organised a large body of research is decentred in favour of a

"reconfigured space of multiple sites of cultural production" in which question of resistance are not forgotten but simply subordinated to questions about the shape of the systemic processes themselves and complicity with those processes among variously positioned subjects (Marcus 1995:101).

Lastly, multi-sited fieldwork takes ethnography towards a de facto comparative dimension. To quote Marcus at some length:

"Comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation. The object of study is ultimately mobile and multiply situated, so any ethnography of such an object will have a comparative dimension that is integral to it, in the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) 'worlds apart' (1995:102).

Using discourses on the media, in the media, was another method I used to obtain data. Working with families in different locations across two States, widely divergent

in social, economic and political terms means that it required all available fieldwork time. So although my initial plan involved interviews with producers and Star Plus officials, given the strict limitations on time spent on the field together with the difficulty of gaining access to these people I chose to rely on material already available in the public realm. I drew upon published interviews with producers, directors and script-writers of contemporary serials to support my observations and interviews while on the field.

The advantage in extracting interviews that have already been published was that the terms of these interviews were broadly defined by what is perceived as a success or alternatively a failure with the audience. This means that these interviews are audience-oriented, giving important clues to how producers and script-writers are influenced by and incorporate feedback about the relative success of a particular brand of serial in relation to others. In other words, these interviews helped isolate the specific elements of a particular brand of serials that are perceived as being effective with the audience. This evidence was, in turn, incorporated into my interviews with participants.

Further, since these interviews were given in an industrial context rather than an academic context, they provided rare insights into the way in which certain serial scripts, for example, are privileged over others as part of creating serial brands. Script-writers admit that interviews in the mainstream media help leverage their scripts, especially where they have not been successful with large production companies like Balaji telefilms, in order to attract new producers. Further, published interviews are a source of insight about individual agency involved at various levels of serial production and the preferential discourses that ultimately help make the serial a brand. Lastly, given the difficulty of gaining access to people within the serial industry, recourse to published interviews seemed a resourceful way of coping with the limited time available for immersion in the field and gaining access to the private space of families across two disparate sites.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter by qualifying my methodology as one that uses ethnographic methods. This is principally bearing in mind widespread criticism by mainstream anthropologists that the defining feature of traditional ethnography – long term immersion in the host society – is being whittled down by studies that are purportedly ethnographic but do not involve long-term immersion in the field. In this study, the field itself is understood as methodologically and discursively constructed and making transparent the reasons for and implications of constructing the field is a crucial determinant of what is thrown up in the field. Middle-class was methodologically used as a category with which to construct the field across four different locations, allowing for comparisons in the deployment of gender constructs as part of different viewing strategies. It was defined as a class that is not just structurally but discursively constructed and this dimension was sought to be brought out through descriptions of the setting and people's positioning within such a setting. Through ethnographically exploring the narrative engagement of variously positioned viewers of these serials, I wanted to understand the shifting contours of middle-class womanhood in post-liberalisation India.

My research questions and sub-hypotheses were continually interrogated on the field through my interaction with participants. The shifting and often contradictory identities that I had to both foreground and encounter while interacting and participating in the daily lives of my participants, sometimes as researcher, at other times as friend, confidante, girl-next-door, Londoner or south Indian in Delhi has been decisive when negotiating a fluid research design in the field. In order to understand serial viewing within the context of liberalisation and the rise of regional television and more crucially represent the complexity of women's engagement with serial narratives about domesticated womanhood in different social contexts, I chose to work in two locations – Delhi, at the heart of national political life and Kerala at the periphery of the Indian nation. Such multi-sited fieldwork was also part of my attempt to assess my data through triangulation. To this end I also accessed discourses on the production of the serials and the intended audience from interviews accessible in the wider media and used them in interviews with informants.

## Chapter 6

### THE REALISM OF MELODRAMA: RE-IMAGINING THE FAMILY

#### Introduction

The nature of television programming in post-liberalisation India is marked by one pervasive feature – the explosion of women-oriented narratives. The decade of the 1990s saw the unprecedented rise of the Soap Opera form. Today, in terms of sheer numbers, let alone popularity, this form dominates television in India. However, while this popular turn to the serial as it is popularly called, is a new phenomenon, Indian audiences were introduced to the genre much before. The national broadcaster Doordarshan telecast the first ever soap opera Hum Log (We the people) in 1984, kickstarting a soap opera format which combined education and entertainment, following Miguel Sabido's Mexican telenovella model. While Hum Log sought to educate its audiences on issues such as family planning and gender equality (Singhal and Rogers, 1990) and continues to be remembered as one of the best serials to be ever broadcast on Indian television, as Purnima Mankekar notes, for all its development objectives, Hum Log reinforced a nostalgia for the benevolent patriarchy, order and harmony supposedly represented by the extended family of the past (1999). Today, over two decades since Hum Log first came on TV, the nostalgia-inspiring extended family of the past has not only come alive on Indian television, but is in fact reigning the popularity charts. And soap operas are leading the charge, reaffirming the traditional joint family as the natural site on which to play out and resolve emotional conflicts coeval with modern, urban life.

The K-serials, produced by Balaji telefilms and telecast in over a dozen Indian languages across the country and overseas, reinstated the extended family as the locus of melodramatic tension and narrative with their first success story *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* or KSBKBT (Because the mother-in-law was once daughter-in-law) and followed it up with a train of serials with plotlines that revolved around large joint families. The k-serials arrived on the heels of progressive and bold women-oriented narratives that expanded the horizon of women's representation by affording women a variety of roles that did not confine them to a particular mould as mother, housewife, daughter-in-law and so on. With k-serials Indian women seem to have come home to

roost. In depicting this return to the extended family of the past, K-serials have deployed melodrama in a way that was never associated with the soap opera form in India. In this Chapter I argue that by exploring the manner in which the k-serials have deployed the melodramatic mode and the particular historical and social context that has allowed such a deployment, it will be possible to clarify the naturalness or otherwise of the linkages between melodrama and family as a representational concept within a specific cultural milieu. It will facilitate the exploration of ways in which women re-imagine the ideal of the Hindu joint family that is placed at the narrative centre of the serials and the reclamation of which constitutes the central source of narrative tension. It will also allow for a reassessment of the polarised debate on melodrama as a reactionary versus progressive cultural form.

### **Melodrama and the location of the sacred**

Peter Brooks' (1985) re-evaluation of the melodramatic form on its own terms in the now seminal work *The Melodramatic Imagination*, recovers it as a modern form that rose out of the loss of pre-Enlightenment values and as a response to a bourgeois social order that locates the moral in the personal (Gledhill 1987). In Brooks' view, in the desacralised post-enlightenment world, society required a form in which to express its search for meaning which lay hidden in what he called the moral occult, a repository of meaning that contained the desacralised remnants of sacred myth, a resource that was masked by the surface of reality but one that needed to be accessed if life in a post-sacred society was to be invested with meaning. "The Melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult" (1985: 5).

As Gledhill points out, although this notion of the moral occult could be representative of an idealist bourgeoisie ideology, in Brooks the concept of the moral occult is developed into "a need for significance, the terms of which are historically relative, rather than as a set of specific ideological ideas" (1987: 29). Echoing the notion of melodrama as a pursuit for significance, Christine Geraghty (2006) calls for a reassessment of the British soap opera *East enders* in melodramatic terms rather than in traditional realist terms, which she says do not provide an adequate explanatory framework in a historical context marked by attempts to fill a vacuum created by the loss of a sense of family and community. She suggests that there has been a turn to melodrama in *Eastenders* and posits this shift as an exposition of a society under siege (following Bauman 2002) characterised by the disintegration and

loss of community structures and a consequent tendency to resort to “biographical solutions” (Geraghty 2006). In personalising the moral, following on the demands of the bourgeois social order, melodrama identifies the personality with emotional and psychic states. The family then becomes the ideal resource that provides melodrama with a repertoire of such personifications and being the breeding ground of these very identities, the family becomes the ideal site on which to act out these identities. “For melodrama, working less towards the release of individual repression than towards the public enactment of socially unacknowledged states, the family is a means, not an end” (Gledhill 1987:31).

The manner in which middle class women in urban India engages with the familial theme suggests that the family might function as both a means and an end within the melodramatic narrative – it is a repository of meaning, a sacred resource and therefore timeless but simultaneously fragile and conflict-ridden, in need of salvation through the efforts of the central female protagonist. In analysing the kinship systems and the nature of the family in India, Patricia Uberoi (2006) refers to an important dimension to be reckoned with in the study of the family in contemporary India – this doesn’t have to do with the family as it is, but as it is imagined to be through the media. Terming this realm of the imagined family as the moral economy of the Indian family, Uberoi suggests that it is not just a fixed set of ideals, but a dialogic system “that is framed in terms of a set of moral dilemmas and contradictions, even as it posits the patrilineal joint family as the ideal, ‘traditional’ and culturally authentic form of Indian family life” (2006:30).

While Komal and the other women in Kishan Nagar recognised the enormity of the sacrifices made by Tulsi, Parvati and other serial heroines, those sacrifices were evaluated not as isolated acts representative of ideal Hindu womanhood but as acts necessitated by the family and for the sake of its unity. While explaining why Tulsi, despite being an ideal Hindu woman, had universal appeal among women cutting across religious divides, Komal points out that family and relationships are universal themes that women can identify with: “I’m not saying I will become Tulsi or that I will imbibe all her qualities but I will try to live with my family the way Tulsi lives with hers. Only then peace can prevail in the family. Otherwise there is no peace. If someone is *ulta* (troublesome) then she also becomes *ulta*; but only to reform them...she becomes like that only for a few days.” Thus even when Tulsi acts in a

manner contrary to her ideal self, it is seen as an exigency that becomes necessary for the preservation of peace within the family.

### **Re-claiming the sacred: The role of the extra-marital plot**

While extra-marital relationships have largely been taboo territory in Hindi cinema, the K-serials explore its various dimensions, particularly its fall-out on the Hindu joint family, by presenting a carefully detailed rather than sweeping narrative of the micro-politics of marriage, a path rarely undertaken in cinematic forays into the subject. This does not mean that the detailed exploration is by any means reflective of a narrative that is path-breaking in its treatment of women – like Hindi cinema, K-serials demonise the ‘Other’ woman who has caused a crisis in the family but unlike cinematic explorations of the theme, K-serials focus not on the narrative denouement but on the emotionally subtle decision-making processes that the ideal female protagonist affected by the deception has to undertake in order to resolve the crisis. This processual treatment means that in K-serials extra-marital plots work to set the dialogic limits of the moral economy of the joint family.

Despite this, women in Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg, crucially, see it not as an issue that affects the central female protagonists and the course of their individual lives and selves but as an issue that threatens to tear apart the family itself. In fact, it was astonishing to observe how the intimate treatment of the issue failed to invoke protest or indignation from women against the depiction of the eventual acceptance of male infidelity by the central female protagonists; instead there was ready acceptance of such a narrative resolution as a fact of life.

The faintest hint of criticism came from Rupa, who spoke of how the serials were a source of knowledge about how to raise a family properly with the exception of the extra-marital plot which she explained was absurd - suggesting its treatment is excessive - but realistic. “Our life is smooth...but there are a handful who do this. They are a minority but they are around...I know of a family where the beautician from a parlour used to visit the house to provide her services and ended up having an affair with the woman’s husband.” In Rupa’s view the extra-marital plot clearly represents a facet of reality but a reality that applied only to a minority. There is also the sense of a distinction she attempts to make in her narrative between normal, dignified ‘Us’ who merely watch the extra-marital plot on television and hear it on the

grapevine and an inferiorized, minority 'Them' whose lives actually involve that dimension of experience. The serial text seemed to position her as a morally indignant upper-middle class woman whose family was well above the perils of the extra-marital plot.

Most women in Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg saw the extra-marital plot as representing a challenge to the integrity of the joint family and followed the plot closely in order to see how the central female protagonist acted to reinstate familial order and well-being. Komal explains, "she [Tulsi] is prepared to do anything for the family...if there is peace in the family you can do anything to keep that peace. She suffered Mandira thinking Mihir is after all my husband...she even adopted Mandira's child as her own but even they were not good to her in the beginning but then even Karan came around and started to love her...this is our culture...you will get all kinds of people here." It is significant that Komal suggests that no price is big enough when it comes to securing familial harmony because after all she lives in a culture where you find all kinds of people and therefore a woman has to be able to deal with all kinds of people. This commonsense cultural explanation helps her make sense of Tulsi's reconciliation with Mihir's extra-marital relationship and appreciate and identify with her ability to manage relationships within the extended family. It also leaves her open to appreciating new narrative spaces that introduce new challenges to the integrity of the joint family.

Sheila, a working woman from Sarkar Marg, however, identifies the extra-marital plot not only as part of the serial's family centric narrative but as epitomising the qualities of the central female protagonist Tulsi. She says that the extra-marital plot in *Kyunki* touched her far more deeply than any other narrative thread. "When she finds out about Mihir and Mandira, she leaves Mihir. But then when she understands the whole picture, she takes him back as her own. So it shows how a lady no matter what her husband does can forgive him. So she adjusts and I was really touched by that quality in her." She supports her view by drawing on the commonsense notion that adjusting is integral to life. "Life is about lots of adjustment. Both have to adjust a bit," she explains. Thus even here Tulsi's qualities of forgiveness and reconciliation highlighted through the extra-marital plot become meaningful, above all, as resources needed for leading life itself. Her view needs to be further contextualised in the light of the fact that she spoke of how each episode of *Kyunki* was discussed during lunch

breaks at the office and how marital infidelity was often discussed as a social problem – “Yes we discuss it a lot and we talk about the way in which marriages are failing these days. And how families are being affected by that.” Thus once again, through discussion in spaces outside the family, marital infidelity becomes a social problem that yet again collapses the lot of the family and the lot of women on each other. Discourses of gender are thus constantly co-opted by the discourse of the familial, which thus defines the discursive limits of the narrative and constitutes a hegemonic discourse.

Further, the melodramatic in television soaps do hark back to a moral occult in as much as it sacralises the family in the process of refiguring it by borrowing elements from the mythological melodramas telecast in the 1980s. In fact, the tremendous success of *Kyunki* brought about a phenomenal rise in the demand for sacred household emblems such as the Holy Basil plant, after which the main female protagonist has been eponymously called Tulsi<sup>49</sup>. The shifting location of the sacred has been used as melodrama’s canvas in contemporary Hindi language cinema too. Discussing the 1999 movie *Hey Ram*, Ravi Vasudevan directs attention to the manner in which “the sweep of melodrama’s manichean, bipolar universe is refigured against the grid of contemporary political systems....an arena far removed from the original contexts of the melodramatic mode which negotiated shifts in social experience away from the certitudes of traditional hierarchies and concepts of the sacred. Of central concern here is the changed location of the sacred itself, now transposed, onto the domain of nationhood” (2004: 306). In the K-serials the sacred has come to be located within the familial. But how is the traditional Hindu joint family made contemporary, given that the nuclear family has come to be the norm in India’s urban centres? How does the melodramatic mode negotiate the traditional with the contemporary? What are the discourses that mediate women’s reception of the serial and helps construct the Hindu joint family as contemporary and real? As Lauren Berlant explains in her incisive critique of Janice Radway’s original work on romance reading, “the ideology of domesticity that still pervades contemporary culture’s representation of women’s ideals is at once powerful and increasingly at odds with the practices and possibilities of contemporary life: all the more reason not to shut out these contradictions but instead to push the dissonance between the various “reals” within which these women

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,168529,00.html>

live” (1987:350). In the next section I explore these various dissonances that permeate women’s re-imagination of the familial.

### **The ‘real’ family:**

Thomas Schatz’s insightful essay on the particular expressions of family life that American family melodramas of the 1950s introduced is particularly resonant in this discussion on women’s perception of the real and ideal family.

“After the war, then, the traditional image of marriage, the home, and the family was undergoing more self-critical reflection....Films no longer simply used familial conflicts and interrelationships to enhance some external complication (a crime, the war, some social event) but focussed on the social institution of the family itself as the basis for conflict” (1991: 154).

Among women in the lower middle class community in Kishan Nagar, there was never a discussion on the family type portrayed in the serials – no one thought to make a distinction between their family as nuclear and the serial family as joint – simply referring to the *parivaar* – the self-evident family unit. Occasionally references were made to the fact that the serial families were rich while theirs were modest, middle class families.

However in the upper-middle class community in Sarkar Marg, women readily referred to the fact that the serials portrayed a joint family system which did not correspond to their reality – that of the nuclear family. However despite this, women in both places found a common emotional connection with the serials in the relationships portrayed. The serial family was above all a metaphor for the timeless sense of *parivaar* or Indian family. This factor overrode the obvious markers of class and type that set the serial families apart from their own. The milieu of relationships depicted in the fictional family of the serial made the latter real and allowed it to co-opt variously positioned women viewers into the familial narrative.

The joint family becomes a metaphor for family unity, although ironically, families in both *Kyunki* and *Kahani* are hardly depictions of familial harmony or togetherness. As Ien Ang writes on watching *Dallas*, it is useful to bear in mind that soap operas never romanticise family life; in fact the imaginary ideal of the family as safe haven in a heartless world is constantly shattered (1985). What could then account for women’s desire for this form of family life notwithstanding their ironical engagement with it? Ang suggests that this can be explained by the fact that although the viewers are

invited to identify with the idea that the unity of the family is a living condition of prime importance, such an identification need not coincide with a real attachment of the viewer to the ideology of the family: “it is a component of the fantasmatic game the viewer begins when he or she enters into the narrative” (1985:69-71). In this way, Ang leaves the ‘fantasmatic game’ entered into by the viewer unproblematised, primarily because her methodology involved only the textual analysis of letters written by viewers of *Dallas* rather than an exploration of their engagement with the soap opera narrative in real time. Consequently, her account does not consider the discursive milieu that permeates and mediates women’s engagement with the soap opera narrative.

In my conversations with women in urban Delhi, the disjuncture between the de-romanticisation of the familial through conflicts and women’s perception of the serial family as an ideal and their desire for that ideal seems to be resolved through an erasure of familial conflicts through the countervailing force of the efforts of the central female protagonist to reinstate familial harmony. Women’s perception of their own class positioning was another factor that mediated their engagement with the joint family. Lalitha, whose husband is a senior central government officer, lives in Sarkar Marg. She does not work outside the house and lives with her husband, young daughter, aged 24, and son, 26 in a two-bedroom apartment in Sarkar Marg. When I first met Lalitha in October 2007 she had been a regular viewer of *Kyunki*. But when I met her four months later, she had started watching other serials and admitted that she increasingly preferred to watch the new breed of romantic serials “meant for the children”.

Her views suggested that she had begun a process of disidentification with the narratives of family and domesticity that the K-serials offered. Her critique of K-serials thus provide an interesting vantage point from which to analyse the ‘real-ness’ of the extended family depicted in the K-serials and provide insights into why there has been increasing disidentification with the narrative and a general shift in viewership away from the K-serials, the two most long-running of which – *Kyunki* and *Kahani* – were taken off air in November 2008.

According to her, the most influential aspect about *Kyunki* has been the Hindu joint family that is at the centre of the narrative:

“We could see how a joint family is to be maintained at a time when nuclear families are the norm. Three generations live together, in love and harmony, and this is very inspiring to anyone. But this is not realistically possible in today’s world. It is not possible for three and four generations to live under one roof. But still it was nice to see that you had other family members who were supportive of you through the good and bad times. There would be someone to support you. I liked this aspect. But I also felt that no one could live an independent life. You have to be really disciplined to lead this kind of life – everyone has to meet at the same time, have dinner together at the same table. So this style of living is inspirational but in real life this is not always possible. My brother and his wife live in Delhi but they don’t live with us. This is not possible in a working class family – even if I desire it and want it, it is not possible. It is perhaps a possibility among the business class. Both *Kyunki* and *Kahani* are about the business class....I agree that the joint family has its importance. For example, I live here in Delhi; my brother too lives in Delhi, but separately. If we were living together, then we could have saved a lot of money.”

In this account, Lalitha’s engagement with the familial narrative is mediated not only by the conjugal-nuclear family that constitutes her domestic reality but also by the economic realities that underpin it. It is a careful appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of family life. While Lalitha acknowledges the joint family mechanism as both an inspirational and practically feasible form of family life, the key factor that seems to discourage her is that the joint family seems to be better suited as a way of life for the elite. She chose to identify herself as working class, with the business class in the serial being the ‘Other’ class; on being specifically asked about her class identity she placed herself within the middle-class, saying “where it is single hand, it is middle-class. If both husband and wife are working it is upper middle-class. Actually it is all the same class, but if both are working it is much more easier when it comes to money matters...we can fulfil everything.” Here Lalitha discursively constitutes the middle-class family as representative of certain patterns of consumption and gendered division of labour.

While none of the women in the lower middle-class community of Kishan Nagar, where I found far more avid viewers of the K-serials in comparison to Sarkar Marg, rejected the joint family mechanism as an elite form of family life, Komal’s husband Chauhan echoed Lalitha’s views on a rare occasion when he came forward to give his views while his wife was being interviewed. I had not observed a single occasion when Chauhan had watched the serials but, nonetheless, he had strong views about their influence. According to him, the serials were creating rifts within families. “Families are drifting apart,” he said, “being spoilt, because it’s about business; they

show a lot of stuff about business... So because of this families are being drawn apart. And people are implementing stuff from the serials in their own life – ‘It’s happening in serials so I will do the same with the other person’, seems to be the mantra. Families are being spoilt...people are not watching it as entertainment, but are adopting it as real life.”

Further in the conversation, she also suggests, in contrast to her earlier stance, that it is necessary to have discipline in the family:

“It is important to have discipline in the family. Even if you are just four people living together, there has to be some discipline. Ours is not a big family, but if the children could have food at the same table it would be good. This can be done. People could come together at least at dinner time. So all these things [in the serial] are exemplary. It shouldn’t be that I eat when I want and other family members eat when they want”. In her own family, on most afternoons I noticed that she had lunch on her own. Her daughter Liya would be gone for tuitions to prepare for the Civil Services Exam and would come back and have an early dinner by 7pm. And her husband would be back from work by 8pm and have dinner by 9pm, while she would sit for dinner after serving her husband. When Liya was home in the afternoon, mother and daughter would have lunch in front of the television, in the bedroom adjacent to the drawing room.

Lalitha’s gradual distancing from the joint family as ideal became particularly evident in the fact that initially she had admired Tulsi of *Kyunki* for her ability to keep the family together, explaining that as the central feature of the narrative that interested her. However when I met her four months later, she had become ambivalent about Tulsi’s role. The ambivalence implicit in her views on discipline in the family was also reflected in her views on the efforts put in by Tulsi to maintain familial harmony. “In today’s day and age, Tulsi is not possible...it seems hypocritical that someone should sacrifice so much – to build a family, to build relationships. This is not reality,” she emphasised. But went on to praise Tulsi, saying she admired her confidence and her devotion to the family. “I love her confidence – her belief that she can do anything for her family, her refusal to approve of any kind of wrong-doing, even if it means separation from her husband. Her belief, even when she is misunderstood by her entire family, that the truth will be eventually revealed. I liked

the fact that if someone really believes that the truth will be revealed sooner or later then indeed it will – even if it is at a cost.”

Most significantly, she disidentified with the ideal of the joint family by rejecting the notion that it was possible for a woman to single-handedly manage all the conflicts originating within the family. Here, the mechanism of erasure whereby the joint family was maintained as an ideal, simply did not work. Furthermore, there is a simultaneous, although partial, disavowal of both Tulsi and the Virani family as emblematic of ideals.

“It is not possible to keep the family together all by one self; only by enlisting the support of the family and carrying the family along. Some family members are supporting her in her endeavours [to keep the family together]. It is not possible for a human being to achieve this on one’s own. But she takes all the burden on herself – ‘let every burden be my lot, but not the family’s’ – seems to be her attitude. But despite this, she has suffered at the hands of her family. There have been many misunderstandings. It is difficult for her to keep track of every incident, every one’s need within the family. I feel a human being just tires him/herself out after a while. It is not possible for *me* to think of every person in the house and be understanding of everyone’s needs and desires and to keep the family going that way. This is perhaps not possible (emphasis added).”

Here Lalitha is clearly disillusioned with a narrative that seems to place enormous responsibilities on Tulsi so that familial harmony can be always restored. The realness of the serial family is judged not by the depth of the metaphoric identification it evokes with the common sense North Indian *parivaar* – simultaneously ordinary and ideal - but through an evaluation of the realistic possibilities inherent in the efforts of the central female protagonist to hold the family together. Crucially, she seems to suggest that despite all the sacrifices that Tulsi makes for her family, her contribution remains not only unacknowledged but worse, misunderstood. Lalitha’s views evidence her deep and critical engagement with the story. Such an active involvement, including critical self-debate, reflection and exchange about the role and significance of the joint family mechanism and a woman’s positioning within that arrangement, suggests that contrary to Ang’s notion, reimagining the familial is more than a ‘fantasmatic game’ the viewer enters into. It is a dialogic process deeply embedded in and determined by the discursive realm – (inter)textual, emotional and material -

within which viewers are situated; it is also a dialogic process that constantly tests the discursive limits set by the televisual text. However, significantly, Lalitha does not couch her evaluation of Tulsi's enormous efforts at holding the family together in gender-specific terms, but refers to it as exemplifying the human condition itself. So despite the unambiguous gendering of the familial, the narrative seems to have succeeded in normalising it so much so Lalitha decodes Tulsi's situation as symbolic of the human predicament. Although Lalitha's views do not amount to a critique of family as woman's sphere, they do reflect her increasing disidentification with the serial discourse that tries to normalise the enormous efforts of the female protagonist to resolve conflicts that perpetually disturb the established familial universe. In this sense, although she does take for granted the serial narrative that depicts family responsibility as naturally and normatively redounding on the woman she is simultaneously aware of and accepts the constructed nature of the ideal family. Thus although yet again the dominant familial discourse successfully coopts and sublates discourses of gender, its idealism and constructed nature are not left uncontested. In other words, the family is seen simultaneously as a locus of struggle and an ideal to be achieved.

Thus in K-series the dialogic moral economy of the family not only becomes the natural diegetic terrain for melodrama, but in animating this moral economy melodrama also takes up the task of expanding its dialogic horizons – introducing new categories of tensions and counteracting forces that are but ephemerally resolved in keeping with the overall narrative scheme that prevents closure. Thus although the moral universe that characterised the melodramatic mode in Hindi cinema consisted of a manichean divide between good and evil (Thomas, R 1995) unspecific to the family, the contemporary soap opera form utilises melodrama's Manichean vision to re-imagine the family by centring it and making it the very basis of those conflicts. While Brooks' notion of the moral occult - as a concept orientated towards a need for significance - relies on the family for its melodramatic repertoire, the melodramatic mode in operation in the k-series at once refigures and utilises the family. This makes the family in the K-serial not just a site of meaning and significance – the source of the moral occult in Brooks' conception – but also a site where meaning is transformed and re-created through an audience within a contemporary urban setting. The melodramatic tensions that utilises the family as the basis of conflict and could likely

provide intimations of an unviable joint family system instead work to establish the dialogic limits of the moral economy of the family while re-claiming it as an ideal.

### **The moral ecology of melodrama**

In contrast to the self-evaluating stance evident in television melodrama in relation to the family, Hindi cinema has tended to underwrite the dialogic aspect of the moral economy of the Indian family through erasure of tension. Uberoi's ethnographic study of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* (What am I to you?), the Bollywood success of the early 1990s whose box office record remained unbeaten for a long time, reveals a process of imagining the family in which viewers happily comply with the erasure of tensions if it helps sustain the image of the ideal traditional joint family (2006:138-168).

Notwithstanding the self-evaluating stance taken by soaps in representing the family, the centrality of the joint family as the ground and the very basis of melodramatic conflict seems to sharpen the impossibility of escape and critical distancing. Noel Carroll analyses American family melodramas of the 1970s and points out that "Emotion is engendered in the audience by means of characters who, for a given period of time, fail to see or refuse to acknowledge the rightness of the symbolically reconstituted family proposed by the plot" (1991:186). This emotional identification however is made possible by an idea of family that is shared by the audience. Thus while the Indian audience imagines the ideal family through the soap opera, the very idea of the family purveyed is at once an ideal that is shared in some ways. Uberoi points out that the moral economy of Indian family relations is not based on the ideal of the pursuit of individual self-interest, but rather on the ideals of selflessness and altruism, duty and sacrifice (2006:33). In the k-series this translates into melodramatic tensions identified with personalities that are selfish vs selfless, sacrificing vs demanding or self-disciplining vs self-indulging.

Rupa of *Sarkar Marg* identified her family as nuclear and therefore as sharing little with the joint family of *Kyunki*. Yet the notion of togetherness central to the family narrative was appealing.

"We are a nuclear family – my husband, two children and I. So there is little by way of comparison or identification... But I like the fact that everyone puts in effort to stay together, to remain united. Everyone tries to ensure that no matter what they will not be separated. That effort to stay united is what is appealing. The old system is crumbling. People are forgetting what it was like

to live in joint families. I feel that this is a desirable way of living. There are many advantages, especially when it comes to the upbringing of children”.

According to Rupa, the joint family provided a moral framework that was non-existent in the contemporary family. It was a moral framework founded on doing what was right for the family rather than the individual. It was this moral framework that would help bring up her children in the right way. But above all, she was touched by the ethos of togetherness. In particular, she said she recalled an incident where Tripthi, one of the second generation daughters-in-law of the Virani family, plotted to throw everyone out of Santiniketan, the family house, and succeeded in doing so. The manner in which the family members stayed together and found strength and hope in each other was something she felt would remain etched in her memory for a long time.

“...The existence of these stories reinforces prevailing beliefs in the idea by symbolically rehearsing a faith in the family through fictions that train, or, at least, further inculcate audiences in this particular way of ordering everyday human events” (Carroll 1991:186).

In harnessing family as the site of and material for melodramatic conflict, it is made natural, part of the nature of things. The conflicts themselves become taken-for-granted aspects that need to be resolved within the framework of the family. Writing on the American nuclear families of the melodramas of the 1970s, Carroll points out that “the nuclear family – the favoured form of human relationship in this ethos – is also part of the cosmic order. If damaged, it restores itself. This process is given as natural in a context where to be natural is right and vice versa. The family plot in melodramatic fiction structures human events in a way that exemplifies and endorses the ideology or ethos it presents as natural” (1991: 189). In this scheme of things, melodramatic excess becomes a means of only reaffirming faith in the family, never as a means of re-evaluation of faith.

The valorisation of other-regarding virtues and the sanctification of the family through melodramatic tensions that reflect the moral economy of the Indian family is enunciated in particular through the Good-Evil dichotomy. Indian melodrama, particularly in the way it has been mobilised in Hindi cinema, has always tended to emphasise the positive function of Evil. Analysing three landmark movies – *Kismet* (Destiny), *Aawara* (Vagabond) and *Sholay* (Flames) – Wimal Dissanayake concludes

that they seem to reaffirm the positive function of Evil insisted on by traditional Hindu mythology (1993: 189-204).

Lionel Caplan's ethnography on the popular culture of evil in South India suggests that the Hindu conception of Evil is hierarchical and complex, tending not only to the blurring of good and evil in the body of the demon-turned-god-like-protective-deities but also to the attribution of wrong-doing or wrong-faring to external occult agents, unlike the dominant tendency of the protestant movement in the very same region of South India to internalise guilt and interiorise Evil. While the tendency to externalise Evil in Hindu tradition seems to sit well with the melodramatic mode, the Good-Evil dichotomy in contemporary soap opera is hardly a dynamic one that highlights the positive role of evil or allows for a blurring of the two categories. The notion of Evil seems fixed in as much as the tensions within the moral economy of family relationships seems fixed and polarised. However, the plenitude of oppositions along the Good-Evil axis that the melodramatic narrative affords also introduces ambiguity and the possibility of multiple readings.

Thus while arguing with her neighbour Vijaya during a joint serial viewing session with the latter, Komal counters Vijaya's arguments regarding the extreme polarities of good and evil in the serials as unrealistic by pointing out that Tulsi had herself plotted to escape from the mental asylum after she was put there by scheming family members by making a map and digging her way out of the asylum and homewards. To Komal, this particular narrative thread seemed to represent an experience outside the perimeter of her own domestic setting but she sought to reconcile it as part of Tulsi's proactive, even *ulta* (manipulative), methods of keeping the family together in the face of the fact that she was being hauled over the coals by those within the family arraigned against her.

Their argument ran as follows:

Vijaya: On one hand, there are some extraordinarily good people and on the other there are excessively depraved people – and it is simply not this way in real life.

Komal: You will find this in families – there is always one person among ten who is utterly depraved.

Vijaya: But there is no one who is so depraved as to commit all manner of crimes – take a woman, any woman – Kumkum or Tulsi or Prerna – these

women can never do any wrong, while a woman like Komolika is a den of vices – this can never be. No woman can be so bad; there will be at least a few good qualities.

Komal: But I never liked *Kasauti* (*Kasauti Zindagi Ke or The vicissitudes of Life*) because no woman can ever murder her husband no matter how awful he is and that too on Karva Chauth. No matter how depraved the husband, a wife can never harm him. But in this serial they show that Anurag is stabbed with a knife by who was it? Can't remember the name.

Vijaya: It is difficult to keep track of all the names and the different roles.

Komal: But I remember everything... they are now showing the fourth generation. She is now a grandmother and her grandchildren are also married.

Vijaya: And they are thinking of getting Anurag married.

Komal: But I've stopped watching this serial now...I watch *Kyunki* because I have learnt something from it. That it is possible to be a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law and sister-in-law like Tulsi.

Vijaya: But aunty, no human being can be so perfect. No mother-in-law can ever be so nice to her daughter-in-law.

Komal: It is possible...my mother-in-law was like that with me.

Vijaya: Those daughters-in-law who plot to send their mother-in-law to the mental asylum – that is not possible either.

Komal: Yes they send her to the mental asylum. But Tulsi plotted to escape from the asylum. She made a map and dug her way out of the asylum.

Vijaya: But...

Komal: Listen, listen, she did manipulate and plot her way out of the asylum didn't she?

Here Komal asserts her view that even though Tulsi is the epitome of ideal womanhood, it does not mean that she is not capable of strategising and plotting to get even with those opposed to her. This way, she attempts to redefine Tulsi's ideal as realistic and one that is capable of responding to all kinds of challenges. In reinterpreting Evil as a challenge to be met Komal is simultaneously able to invest meaning in both the ideal protagonist and her antithesis. Most importantly, Tulsi's actions are always justified by the end – ensuring the well-being of her family. The discourse of the ideal joint family becomes the overarching source of realism that sets the stage for the polarised extremes that drive the narrative.

As Gledhill argues melodrama's Good-Evil polarity has to be seen in relation to the discourses of realism that melodrama so skilfully employs to convey its polarized notions. She suggests that melodrama draws on discourses of realism that are best placed to facilitate its function as a public forum that will help make the world around us morally legible.

"In this respect melodramatic desire crosses moral boundaries, producing villains who, even as the drama sides with the 'good', articulate opposing principles, with equal, if not greater, power. In so doing, it accesses the underside of official rationales for reigning moral orders – that which social convention, psychic repression, political dogma cannot articulate. Thus whether melodrama takes its categories from Victorian morality or modern psychology, its enactment of the continuing struggle of good and evil forces running through social, political and psychic life draws into a public arena desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of the publicly acknowledged world" (1987:33).

However, it is precisely this melodramatic turn in television fiction that seems to be reflected in television's news coverage too. And it is in this realm that the more regressive effects of the melodramatic turn become evident. In an opinion article for *The Hindu* dated February 18, 2010, investigative journalist P. Sainath illustrates the implications that television's melodramatic turn has for concerted civil society efforts to create a more equitable democracy.

"Every issue is now reduced to a fight between individuals, heroic, villainous or just fun figures. So the complex issues behind the shunning of Pakistani cricketers by the Indian Premier League are reduced to a fight between Shah Rukh Khan and Bal Thackeray. (As one television channel began its programme: "Shah Rukh stands tall. His message to the nation ..."). The agonies of Bundelkhand are not about hunger and distress in our Tiger Economy. They are just a stand-off between Rahul Gandhi and Mayawati. The issues of language and migrations in Maharashtra are merely a battle between Rahul Gandhi and Uddhav Thackeray. And the coverage is all about who blinked first, who lost face."

Sainath's final analysis of the rut that has set into corporate media coverage in India today is that it has been increasingly Bollywoodised. However, this does not explain why news coverage has become personalised and melodramatised in the decade of the 1990s, also the decade that saw television advocating melodrama in an unprecedented way. I suggest that in light of television's melodramatic treatment of women-oriented fiction, it is obvious that melodrama has become the normative format for televisual fiction. and that the melodramatic turn in news coverage needs to be seen in this context - as a trend that is increasingly institutionalising the reduction of issues to

battles between personalities who are poised on the extreme polarities of a good-evil axis. In the process the real conditions that cause these polarities, continue to be masked by superfluous personality feuds. The public forum that is apparently created through such melodramatisation is emptied of political relevance and further marginalises the already marginalised sections of society. Realism, then, is clearly also a matter of class. Melodramatic realism, in the case of the serials, is then simply a middle-class phenomenon. The public forum that Gledhill talks of is then comparable to a civil society whose constitution is specific to the middle-class.

### **Melodrama and consumption**

Picking up an earlier thread where I suggested that in contrast to the early days of Indian serials, the family in contemporary soaps seems to have become a self-critical field, the very basis of conflict and consequently the chief catalyst for melodramatic narrative, there is clearly a need to account for this disjuncture. Chuck Kleinhans suggests that analysing family under capitalism is a better way to understand melodrama given that the rise of bourgeois family melodrama was concomitant with the ascension of capitalism (1991:197-204). According to him, in the bourgeois era, in contrast to all other earlier historical epochs, the family becomes the central area of personal life; removed from material production, it becomes the prime site of consumption and leisure, an area of respite for alienated labour. "The family becomes a centre of subjectivity, cut off from the world of action and decisions. Home is for passion, suffering, sympathy, sacrifice, self-attainment. Work is for action, doing, for the money which pays for the home... The family is supposed to achieve the personal fulfilment denied in the workplace for adults and denied in school for children. At home everyone becomes a consumer trying to get a bigger slice of the emotional pie" (1991:199). In this scheme of things, it is only inevitable then that women become the primary agents that facilitate this differentiation between the home and the workplace, the site of consumption and the site of production. Kleinhans points out that one of the most persistent structures of bourgeois domestic melodrama is the pattern of the woman sacrificing her personal achievements, career, happiness, independence and so on for the well-being of the family. In the K-serials, however, there is some narrative tension generated through the plot's emphasis on domesticated womanhood and contemporary social realities where middle-class women are increasingly armed with higher education and are becoming part of the work force in large numbers. In an

interesting exchange between Aarthi and Kiran in the serial *Kyunki*, these narrative tensions are brought to the surface. In episode 109, Aarthi, an accomplished and ambitious daughter-in-law of the Virani family and Kiran, her husband, discuss the possibility of Aarthi helping Kiran with their family business:

{Aarthi Virani is in her bedroom reading a magazine while her husband has just returned from the office.}

Kiran (in a loud voice): Aarthi!

{Aarthi is still reading the magazine and does not hear him. Kiran walks into the bedroom.}

Kiran (smiling but in a tone of complaint): I have been calling you!

Aarthi (Smiling and apologetic): I am sorry, I did not notice.

Kiran: Of all things why are you reading a magazine at this time of the day!?

Aarthi: There was nothing else to do so I thought I'd browse a magazine!

Kiran: Of all people, you're telling me there is nothing to do?! It's the inauguration of Amba Bhavan tomorrow (new business venture of the Virani family)! And you are sitting here? Is there no work at home?

Aarthi: Oh, dear, I was bored so thought I'd read a magazine. In any case, there is no work in this house that I can do. Tell me what is there to do?

{Servant comes in with Kiran's evening tea.}

Servant: Kiran *bhaiyya* (brother), here's your tea.

Kiran: Thankyou Raghu.

Aarthi: Here you go, even your tea has arrived on your heels. If the plants are to be watered, Baa (grandmother) does it. Aunts do all the work in the kitchen. Then what is left for me to do? Now even the vegetables from the market are bought by Raghu.

Kiran (Laughs): You are too much. By the way, you are like the queens of yesteryear. You get all the comfort and leisure reserved for the queens. You have become the queen of this house.

Aarthi: But darling, I don't want to be the queen of the house. I am just your queen. I want to live like an ordinary woman, why don't you understand?

{Kiran sighs and shows disinterest in the conversation}

Aarthi: I want to be an equal partner helping you with the business when you take over.

Kiran: When I take over the reins of the office, we'll see. But please keep the peace for now.

{Aarthi is now piqued.}

Kiran: In any case, those problems that occurred in the Aligarh factory have scared me. I don't want a repeat of that.

Aarthi: Kiran, such problems don't happen all the time. I can assure you no such problems will occur now. Why don't you agree to my wish. Please don't deny me.

Kiran: Ok. I will *think* (emphasis) about the matter. Ok? (Smiles).

{Aarthi doesn't seem pleased.}

Aarthi: Whatever. Ok, how is Hemant *bhaiyya*?

{Conversation about the welfare of other family members follows.}

In this conversation, Aarthi is depicted as a wife leading a life of comfort and ease for which she is barely thankful. Instead, in what comes across as unreasonable she wishes to be a partner in her husband's business, notwithstanding the loss caused to the business due to her managerial failings. Her husband seems more keen on her helping out with family affairs, rather than the business.

In an earlier episode, the unchallenged centrality of the family, particularly the relationship between women's career and educational aspirations and the place of the family is underlined by Amba Virani, the eldest woman member of the family. In episode 101, Amba Virani or Baa as she is fondly called, has arrived at her fashion design class after a hiatus. When asked why she had not been attending classes of late, she explains that as the eldest member of the Virani family there is much familial responsibility on her. The student group, mostly comprised of young girls, calls Baa *daadi* or grandmother. They inform her that the prestigious Paris design contest is now open and one girl will be chosen as India's representative to travel to Paris and showcase the country's talent abroad. Soon, the instructor reveals that the 'chosen girl' is Amba Virani.

Back home, Baa is relaxing with all her sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren in attendance in the living room of the Virani household. Everyone has ostensibly gathered to listen to an important announcement. Baa then reveals that she has been chosen to represent India at the 'Grasim International Designer Competition' in Paris and proceeds to give all credit for the wonderful turn of events to Tulsi, the central protagonist and perfect daughter-in-law of the Virani household, for encouraging her to join the fashion programme at this age. Baa's sons proclaim that it is an occasion

for pride for they can now call themselves the son of a mother who has already done so much and proved herself (presumably as a mother).

Analysing post-independent Indian cinema, Paul Willemen takes the case of the film *Andaz* (Style) and lays bare its appeal as a modernisation melodrama in the context of a dominant strand of Indian nationalist ideology that was aligned to the discourse of capitalist modernity (1993: 179-188). Indian television, particularly the national broadcaster and later the private channels, have by and large broadcast serials that do not recreate the sharp oppositions between the inside and the outside, and the roles that men and women play, although as Krishnan and Dighe (1980) have critiqued, programmes follow an affirmation and denial pattern where women are pervasively portrayed as self-denying in order for their womanhood to be affirmed.

However with the advent of K-serials following the opening up of the Indian skies in the early 1990s domestic melodramas across private channels are about domesticating the woman, recentring the family and relocating the sacred within it, in effect setting up the home as the realm of moral and psychic transactions, the chief site for the consumption of emotion and affect. In the sub-plots described earlier, the home and family are repeatedly reaffirmed as the domain of prime importance.

And in the conversation from Episode 109, Aarthi, as an accomplished woman is capable of helping her husband with his business or indeed being an entrepreneur in her own right. Yet she is depicted as being unreasonable in her desire to help with the family business even when there is little domestic responsibility to be taken care of as other women in the household are already at it. Indeed, the suggestion seems to be that she needs to find something to do in the house instead of reading a magazine. In addition, an earlier mistake she had committed at business makes her less dependable. When women take up opportunities outside the home, it is in the realm of glamour and fashion, which may be easily pursued alongside familial responsibilities by for example, missing out on a few fashion classes. What is more, pursuing an interest such as fashion allows women to realise the middle-class dream of international travel, a pre-eminent marker of globalised modernity in contemporary India.

The consumption of emotion and affect is, in a parallel fashion, reflected in the advertisements that accompany the serials. Large hoardings that dot the urban landscape increasingly depict products ranging from automobiles to diamonds in

affective terms. It seems to have provided a locus for the redefinition of class and family identities into consumer identities. The new forms of consumption, however, require legitimisation and validation, ends that are achieved by invoking 'historic memory', by "identifying new products and styles of consumption with traditional, historically sanctioned practices and behaviour" (Lipsitz 1992:77).

Melodrama, with its nostalgia for the certainties of the past, seems to perfectly conspire with the soap opera form in naturalising the ongoing consumerist boom in India. And the woman seems to be the ideal vehicle for such naturalisation. Mary Anne Doane writes that "the increasing appeal in 20<sup>th</sup> century to the woman's role as perfect consumer (of commodities as well as images) is indissociable from her positioning as a commodity and results in the blurring in the subject/object dichotomy" (1987:13).

While middle-class women in Delhi and Kerala mostly said they paid little attention to the advertisements that accompany the serials, preferring to do some pending housework in the meantime, those who did watch the adverts felt that the adverts represented a truer reality than the serials themselves and were in fact a world in themselves. However, incitement to consumption seemed to more strongly emerge from the serials themselves, especially in the case of lower middle class women who while expressing their desire and amazement for the life of opulence depicted in the serials also seemed aware of their class positioning and inability to attain that life.

### **The Maternal Plot**

Of all the roles that the woman - as the primary figure that directs the site of consumption - takes on, the role of mother is installed right at the heart of the family. According to Tania Modleski, the very form of the soap opera encourages multiple points of identification. The spectator doesn't identify solely with the main protagonist who is the nucleus of the narrative but simultaneously with the sufferings of her antagonist as well as near and dear whose roles are not always in sync with that of the central figure. "The subject/spectator of soaps, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no character exclusively)" (Modleski 1982, Cited in Williams

1991:321). While identifying with the chief controlling protagonist makes the spectator feel empowered, multiple identifications divests the spectator of power, but increases empathy (Williams 1991:321). These multiple points of identification dovetails neatly with Kleinhans' suggestion that melodramatic oppositions are at once dense and illusive producing deeply structured ambiguities which can be expressed and interpreted differently (1991:202).

In other words, melodrama's structural oppositions are suited to the diffuse manner in which soap opera's representation of motherhood as the centre piece of the family drama is received by the spectator. The melodramatic narrative structure with its oppositions woven around the central subject position of motherhood can generate shifting spectator positions and prove either subversive or complicit, depending on the pleasure gained from assuming positions of power or empathy. However the subversive or complicit positioning of oneself as a subject of power or empathy is always structurally determined by the family, whose fate occupies narrative center-stage and seems to ultimately determine narrative interest. Lalitha's shift from the family melodramas to the new crop of 'romantic melodramas' is illustrative in this respect.

Besides *Kyunki* Lalitha had started watching another serial *Saat Phere – Saloni Ka Safar* (Saloni's journey) on Zee tv, Star's principal competitor, because the latter told the story of a young woman steering the family she was married into through difficult times. However, when the story began to portray Saloni, the principal character, as reverting to a child-like state, unable to fulfil even her own basic needs, Lalitha felt that the narrative was too far gone. She felt she could not tolerate watching a mature woman behave like a toddler. "She was about to have a baby and she herself becomes one. The public can never accept such a turn of events. I cannot tolerate that serial anymore. I have stopped watching it. I cannot stand Saloni saying 'Mummy mummy I am hungry, Mommy mommy I want to take a bath'. If Liya comes upon it even by accident while flipping channels I ask her to immediately change it."

Lalitha's strong reaction to Saloni is ironical in view of the fact that this character seems to have given expression to her concern about the consequences of too much responsibility on the woman to hold the family together. Yet Lalitha has unambiguously repudiated Saloni, while retaining her idealism with respect to Tulsi, who single-handedly manages the Virani household through enormous trials and

tribulations. Her rejection of Saloni's disadvantaged and dependant existence is quickly applied to her daughter Liya, whom she isolates and protects from that particular mode of being a woman. Lalitha's pervasive ambivalence about the k-serial narratives can be symptomatic, above all, of her refusal to fully occupy the different subject positions – complicit and resistive - offered to her as a viewer.

Crucially, her disillusionment with the family narrative was drawing her to another kind of narrative - a new crop of romantic serials that are centred on the lives and loves of young couples (who are depicted as part of large thriving families). "These days I prefer to watch romantic serials such as *Dil Mill Gaye* (Meeting of hearts). It feels good. It is a welcome change from all the tragedy and the weeping," she explained. In shifting her allegiance to the romantic serials, Lalitha was seeking an escape from the misery and distress that had come to epitomise the family melodramas and yet it was an escape that allowed her to remain engaged with the familial plot that is crucial to these new romantic narratives.

However, more importantly, her contradiction and ambiguity about Tulsi and Saloni seemed to speak to her desire for alternative modes of womanhood - that did not burden women with all the responsibility of family life or portray them as helpless, dependent and a burden to the family. And despite the shift in Lalitha's viewing preferences, the family continues to remain the principal narrative anchor and familial womanhood remains a dense node of identification and transfer of a commonsense of womanhood.

Melodrama has been seen as a women's genre and a lowly one at that, especially in its manifestations in soap opera and that has been in a sense the reason why it has been disregarded as a form worthy of critical study. Gledhill suggests that rethinking melodrama's relationship to shifting discourses of realism is a way of assessing melodrama's exclusive and consequently misleading articulation with women's genres – be it woman's film or the soap opera. In an incisive analysis of the manner in which melodrama's deployment has been acknowledged only where it was not seen to be in alignment with dominant discourses of realism, she explains that in Victorian England, emotion and sentiment were aligned with expressions of realism and idealised as virtue, although they were simultaneously assigned to the feminine realm as they constituted a threat to the ideology of masculinity.

But as Gledhill writes, “the obverse side of idealisation was fascinated horror at the prospect of the heroine’s fall and subsequent degradation. Victorian patriarchs could weep publicly over the female victim, in demonstration of renewed feeling and virtue” (1987:34). But by the turn of the century, the recovery of realism and tragedy as categories demarcating high culture from low culture resulted in a remasculinisation of these categories.

“Realism came to be associated with (masculine) restraint and underplaying....The gestural rhetoric of melodramatic acting was displaced by ‘naturalist’ performance styles. Tragedy and realism focussed on ‘serious’ social issues or inner dilemmas, recentring the hero and claiming tragic value for the failure of heroic potential. Sentiment and emotiveness were reduced in significance to ‘sentimentality’ and exaggeration, domestic detail counted as trivia, melodramatic utopianism as escapist fantasy and this total complex devalued by association with ‘feminised’ popular culture. Men no longer wept in public” (Gledhill 1987:34).

When cinema began to be constituted as a realistic medium, realism had come to be associated with action and violence, with codes of action and taciturnity justifying the gangster and western melodramatic rhetoric and further legitimising it with the help of prestigious critical labels. It was only the woman’s film, Gledhill points out, that was identified with melodrama, “siphoning off this pejorative ascription from Hollywood’s mainstream product” (1987:35).

Thus in representing the figure of the woman through the soap opera, melodrama has to speak to the shifting criteria of relevance and credibility that the dominant discourses of realism demand, while also negotiating the terrain of discourses thrown up by the lived realities of women’s lives – discourses that contest and converge with patriarchal domination. In analysing the representation of motherhood in the K-serials, melodrama’s simultaneous articulation of these different discourses can thus be seen as symbolic of the contested nature of womanhood – as a signifier for the culture and as a historically gendered point of view. However, this does not mean a linear relationship between melodrama and the socio-political exists because melodrama comes in contact with the socio-political only at the point where it triggers the psychic. So ultimately this only suggests “a disjointed relationship between aesthetics, pleasure and ideology in melodrama” (Gledhill 1987:37).

## Conclusion

The particular dynamics through which melodramatic effect functions in specific places and times highlights the need to contextualise what is a universal form. Ana Lopez, analysing the workings of melodrama in a Latin American context, suggests that while there might exist a universal melodramatic impulse, it exists only as specific manifestations within specific historic contexts and social moments (1991: 596-606).

In India, this 'moment' is characterised by the unprecedented success of family melodramas whose hallmarks include the domestication of women and the re-sacralisation of family and womanhood. And the moment is situated in an economic context marked by aggressive competition among local and foreign media players to nationalise and regionalise content for a market characterised by high-consumption in the wake of economic liberalisation. Socially, India is currently a context characterised by a reaffirmation of identity in markers of Indianness, the most dominant ones being the traditional woman and the family (Butcher 2003). The dominant discourses that underpin the categories of woman and family circulating in India today are certainly ineluctably brought on to the terrain of the psychic and the personal in the family melodramas telecast on transnational television. Yet as Lopez argues, at specific moments, as it is in the case of Latin America, texts of popular culture can become sites of hegemonic resistance, even while they represent attempts at social control. "Whereas the 'dominant' in the developed world is a system that actively rewrites, incorporates and coopts differences and its own margins, we can argue that at specific moments in Latin America the establishment of dominant media/popular cultural forms should be valued as itself constituting a break with cultural imperialism..." (1991:604).

The soap opera in India did emerge at a time of great change and flux; it coincided with the opening up of the Indian skies to foreign competition and a corresponding inundation of programming produced in the west. The phenomenon of Indianisation was the inevitable outcome of a middle-class resistance to western programming and at the same time has sustained itself over a decade now because regionalisation or localisation is ultimately a very profitable enterprise for transnational companies.

Thus as a representational concept television's Indian family has evolved from being a referent for larger issues beyond its perimeter – for example as a site for playing out the objectives of the nation-state as in the case of Hum Log – to a field that has turned inwardly upon itself. However, this apparent shift from statist realism to social realism masks underlying linkages with class and gender; melodramatic realism about families in contemporary Indian serials essentially depicts the real and aspirational dimensions of India's middle-classes. Further, the relocation of the sacred within the family, the sensational implausibility of transgressive elements within the plot and the ultimate impossibility of escaping the scene of the family tend to produce conveniently complicit resolutions and undermine and subvert any creative reimagining of the ideal Indian family.

## Chapter 7

### THE PEDAGOGY AND PERFORMANCE OF SERIAL-VIEWING

#### Introduction

In exploring the various levels of engagement that women bring to their serial viewing, this chapter brings within its remit two distinct but interrelated phenomena within the context of what I have proposed is a new conjunctural moment in Indian television since economic liberalisation and the opening up of the Indian skies to foreign competition in 1991. This new conjunctural moment, characterised by competitive attempts by foreign-owned satellite channels to 'Indianize' television content, saw the proliferation and popularity of women-oriented narratives overtake all other genres. With the phenomenal rise in television viewing owing to the proliferation of satellite channels and cable networks across the country and particularly evident in the regionalisation<sup>50</sup> of television – the growth of regional and vernacular channels particularly in South India – women-oriented narratives have also become a defining genre of television in India. The pervasive presence of women-oriented narratives cutting across the regions is symptomatic of what I have termed the feminisation of television in India.

In this chapter I argue that within the context of a three-pronged conjunctural influence resulting from the liberalisation of Indian media, the Indianisation of television content and its corollary – the feminisation of television – Indian womanhood is being reconfigured and re-imagined in and through a pedagogy of domesticated Hindu womanhood. This is in stark contrast to the pedagogy of the citizen woman that characterised the national broadcaster's bouquet of women oriented narratives telecast through the 1980s. This chapter specifically explores the

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<sup>50</sup> Daya Kishan Thussu refers to the trend as localization. See 'The 'Murdochization' of news? The case of Star TV in India' In *Media, Culture & Society*, Jul 2007; vol. 29: pp. 593 - 611. I have called it regionalisation to suggest, in the spirit of Robin Jeffrey's seminal analysis of the manner in which over half a century of print capitalism in India has simultaneously fostered a vibrant regional language press while consolidating a pan-Indian identity, that in broadcasting too Indianisation and regionalisation are corollary processes and that the soap opera genre has come to epitomise this unique feature of Indian broadcasting. See especially Jeffrey, Robin. 1997. 'Advertising and Indian-Language Newspapers: How Capitalism Supports (Certain) Cultures and (Some) States, 1947-96' In *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 57-84.

manner in which women articulate discourses of class, gender and family in positioning themselves as subjects of serial pedagogy. Drawing on recent work on globalisation and the middle-class in India, it suggests that the traditionalised and idealised female protagonists of the serials become socio-symbolic sites where discourses of middle-class consumption and desire converge, facilitating a televisual pedagogy of womanhood that encourages “internalised gendering perceived as ethical choice”<sup>51</sup>, while serving to erase the contradictions that underpin the new conjunctural moment. This chapter examines non-familial, but domestic, women’s spaces which, even while engendering resistive moves, both discursive and embodied, co-opt them within the normative hegemony of familial womanhood.

In exploring the effectiveness of this pedagogy of domesticated womanhood in the first section I examine how the producers of K-serials position their narratives within the discursive framework of middle-class ‘values’, especially the various ways in which the serial text deploys the patriarchal category of disorder in representing middle class womanhood. In the next section, with the help of themes that dominated women’s conversations about the serial narratives, I attempt to depict ways in which women in Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg learn ‘familial’ womanhood. I draw on ways in which women imaginatively subvert serial narratives of ideal womanhood in their re-telling of the narratives through resistive performances of womanhood in non-familial spaces.

In the third section, I present the case study of a young woman whose conversations about the serials tended to revolve around the depictions of women’s ‘disorder’; women’s repressed desires, the potential infliction of rape and sexual violence that is always implicitly present were themes that recurred in melodramatised renderings of her own intimate personal experiences, in the sexualised urban milieu of Delhi. Then there is the other kind of exposition of disorder, the performative kind, where upper middle class women embody subversive womanhood by turning their monthly held kitty parties into theatrical sites of mimicry and performance; both subversive and idealised representations of womanhood in the serials become subjects of kitty party performances, levelling as it were women’s narrative engagement with the serial’s principal binary oppositions between ‘good woman’ and ‘bad woman’. Juxtaposing

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<sup>51</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakrabarty (1988:272). Translator’s preface and Afterword to Mahasweta Devi, ‘Imaginary Maps’ in *The Spivak Reader*.

these discourses of disorder in the context of the celebration of Karva Chauth, a pre-eminent ritualised performance of women's orderliness, I attempt to bring into sharp relief the manner in which women negotiate the order-disorder pedagogy of the televisual text.

## **7.1 INVISIBLE PEDAGOGIES: SERIAL TEXTS AND MIDDLE-CLASS LIVES**

While most landmark studies of the reception of popular culture refer to learning as one of the outcomes of reading the romance (Radway 1984) or women's magazines (Hermes 1995) or watching Egyptian melodramas (Abu-Lughod 2004), dealing with it progressively as learning, repertoires of knowing and pedagogy, the notion of televisual pedagogy still remains to be explored as the centrepiece of viewer engagement with the televisual text. Radway's original work suggests that repetitive engagement with the romance narrative is tantamount to a ritual of hope through which readers learn to believe that men are able to satisfy their needs fully. Besides, Radway's women respondents admit to learning about real world facts in the light of the powerful verisimilitude with real places and people that the romance universe offers. However Radway's more politically resonant argument that the romance teaches women to associate female identity with the social roles of mother, lover and wife – a potential dissatisfaction with which has led them to seek recourse to the romance narrative in the first place – is only partially effective as it draws less on her respondent's views and more on Radway's own textual analysis of the romance's 'conflicted discourse' (1984:186-208).

Joke Hermes' ethnographic foray into the consumption of women's magazines subsumes learning under a methodological category she terms repertoires or ways of talking about reading women's magazines. Hermes explains her respondents' views through categories such as the repertoire of connected knowing, which portrays readers as impressed but collected; the repertoire of melodrama, which portrays the reader as overcome; the repertoire of practical knowledge, the repertoire of moral duty and so on where she admits, "the margin between being impressed and learning, and having a good cry, is a small one" (1995:47). Yet it is precisely this thin line between repertoires, rather, the inter-connectedness between repertoires that needs to

be explored in order to trace the manner in which macro-discourses inform the lifeworld of magazine readers and the act of magazine reading. In other words, how does the narrative structure or the text of the magazine and the discourses that animate it set the stage for such repertoires of reading and may in fact condition them? Although a macro-repertoire of learning seems to inform many of the repertoires that Hermes outlines in representing the lifeworld of her readers, the analysis does not represent and account for the discursive overlaps among them. Indeed any acknowledgement of such a macro-repertoire would have undermined the fallacy of meaningfulness, the thesis that provides the author methodological justification to avoid textual analysis altogether. Thus in atomising representational themes “reconstructed” out of her data as repertoires, Hermes does not apply critical scrutiny to the faultlines that separate those repertoires and consequently does not identify the macro-structures that reside within micro-episodes, effectively rendering her ethnographic representation of magazine reading partial.

Lila Abu-Lughod’s rich ethnography of the production and consumption of Egyptian television serials takes up the educative function of television in a much more complex and holistic way as part of an ethnography of nationhood. However her primary focus is on how television - as an instrument of the Egyptian State - and the televisual text are part of a larger discourse of national pedagogy and does the work of constructing modern national subjects rather than gendered subjects. The manner in which televisual texts are not only imbricated in but also produce and reinscribe (gendered) discourses by working with and through differences (of class, ideologies of domesticity etc) to help construct subjects of pedagogy remains to be explored. In the Indian context, a tentative beginning was made in the direction in Anjali Monteiro’s ethnographic study of middle and working class communities in Goa in the 1980s where, based on her observations and interviews, she explains that “expectations of ‘reality’ and ‘learning’ combined with the ubiquity of choice associated with the televisual image give the medium a unique location within the familial space...television becomes a panopticon in reverse where watching others becomes the means for controlling oneself” (1998:106).

This early discourse of State sponsored television as a source of knowledge continues to inform the manner in which women in Delhi and Kerala engage with serial narratives telecast on satellite television in the post-liberalisation period. Televisual

discourses on women's roles and responsibilities are perceived as forms of invisible pedagogy. I use the term invisible pedagogy, drawn from the work of Basil Bernstein (2000), to draw attention to women's evaluation of televisual discourse on womanhood as a non-hierarchic process of learning. I also use the term pedagogy in the sense Bernstein deploys it:

“Pedagogy is a sustained process whereby somebody(s) acquires new forms or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice and criteria, from somebody(s) or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator. Appropriate either from the point of view of the acquirer or by some other body(s) or both” (2000:78).

As I will demonstrate, this non-hierarchic pedagogy is characterised by a re-contextualisation of the patriarchal binaries of order and disorder, which in turn facilitates the articulation of middle-class womanhood as simultaneously ideal and ordinary, dominant and normative.

### **7.1.1 The orderly woman**

Alongside the patriarchal equivalence between nature and female, male and culture, Carol Pateman identifies the disorder of women as fundamental to patriarchal and liberal thought. It is individual and social, private and public, because, as Pateman says, “women have a disorder at their very centres – in their morality – which can bring about a destruction of the State”. It stands in opposition to and heirarchized by patriarchal order – which is in fact an erasure of the metonymic substitution of patriarchal order as effect rather than cause. In Delhi and Kerala, women frequently illustrated this discursive logic by attributing the lack of safety that confronts women on the street as a result of them disbanding gendered orderliness. Hegemonic womanhood – conceptualised as a discursive node wherein the ideal and the ordinary, the dominant and the normative coalesce - thus symbolises the patriarchal order and is pitted against the subversive moral disorder of the ‘Other’. Disorder thus becomes a vantage point from which to survey order; it makes order legible. In order to explore the gendered constitutive strategies that help represent the pedagogy of the televisual text as non-hierarchic, I first examine the idealised representation of womanhood or ‘orderly’ womanhood in the K-series.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the K-series have signalled the emergence of a new trend in the representation of ideal Indian womanhood, a trend characterised by the

domestication of the female subject, her recentring within the large, extended family and the home and her traditionalisation through the figure of the mata (mother), the sumangali (auspicious married woman), the pativrata (chaste wife) and the virangana (warrior woman). The dominant discourse that underlies the ideal womanhood that the first wave of K-serials such as *Kyunki* and *Kahani* offer for consumption is one in which women are perceived as embodiments of Matri shakti or mother power. They are exhorted to be strong and powerful within the family and are performers par excellence in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law enacted through the tropes of self-sacrifice, patience and chastity, markers of traditional womanhood in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould<sup>52</sup>. This strikingly echoes the observation that Kapur and Cossman have made in relation to Hindutva's conception of women: "The constitution of the new Hindu woman – a woman who may be educated, and who may work outside of the home, a woman who is strong and powerful, inside her family, and her community – is still a woman constituted through traditional discourses of matri shakti, as mother and wife, and of Sita, as chaste, pure and loyal" (1993).

U. Vindhya notes that at the heart of such a conceptualisation of womanhood is the belief that women are the sources of creation (nirmatri) and power (prakriti and adishakti) and therefore "for a 'nirmatri' to demand rights equal to her own creation (men) is to despoil the divinity associated with her status. The conception of feminist agency that undergrids this representation is animated by the ideal of 'nari shakti' or woman power, rather than 'nari mukti' or emancipation of women" (Ghadially 2007: 65).

The New Delhi based Centre for Advocacy and Research, an independent television monitoring agency, in its 2007 study of Hindi soaps observes that the situations of familial conflict that are central to the narrative progression, work in specific ways to textually reaffirm 'responsibilities' rather than 'rights' for women (Ghadially 2007). I argue that this reaffirmation of responsibilities over rights is achieved through a re-dispersion of order and disorder as corresponding with or having equivalence with responsibility and rights respectively. The ideal protagonists tirelessly perform their responsibilities while the antagonists demand their rights.

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<sup>52</sup> The mythological triumvirate of ideal Hindu womanhood.

The producers of the serials themselves position the narratives within the larger canvas of middle class morality, thus expressly claiming to align discourses of womanhood and class. In a 2003 interview, Ekta Kapoor, the creator of K-serials, said: “Most of the rich people do not need values, most of the poor do not have time for them. Hence, middle class values are what my serials are about. These middle-class values are incidentally in keeping with the cultural ethos of the country. As far as I am concerned, economically I belong to the high class, but morally to the middle class”<sup>53</sup>. Here, the producers who constitute an economically elite group are speaking for a subaltern group – middle class women – with whom they claim ideological unity and whom they claim to represent but who cannot refuse that idealized representation. Here subaltern does not connote subjecthood, but after Veena Das (1992), I wish to treat subaltern as perspective, a vantage point from which to evaluate the interaction between elite-produced texts and middle-class lives. The articulation of subaltern agency then becomes a question of relocation and re-inscription (Bhabha 1992). This is because middle class womanhood exists discursively at the intersection of the dominant and the normative, the ideal and the ordinary, the complicit and the resistive, the visible and the invisible.

The subalternity of middle class womanhood then, is relative, contextual and contingent, rather than absolute. Spivak’s distinction between the popular and the subaltern argues for attending to, in her own words, a more impervious subaltern. Spivak writes that subalternity is a position without identity. “Subalternity”, she says, “is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action” (2005:476). Thus according to Spivak, categories such as class, race or gender would, in the absence of “institutionally validated action” or as a result of “unrecognizable resistance” exist as constatives rather than performatives, a condition Marx describes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in relation to the small peasantry in France as follows: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (Marx in Spivak 2005:476). And yet she reminds us that classed, gendered or raced subalternity no longer remains subaltern when brought into the hegemonic framework. The Gramscian subaltern is less impervious, as Spivak herself notes and it is in this pervious, Gramscian sense that I address the contradictory position of middle-class Hindu women as both dominant and compliant.

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<sup>53</sup> Interview by Vickey Lalwani posted on [indiantelelevision.com](http://indiantelelevision.com) on May 29, 2003.

Contextually, Hindu middle-class womanhood, although internally heterogeneous, hierarchizes and subordinates Dalit and Muslim women. Textually, idealised middle class Hindu womanhood others and inferiorizes deviant womanhood characterised by an inability to embody ‘matri shakthi’ that derives from being a good mother, a chaste wife and an auspicious married woman. In other words, the serial narrative seeks to homogenise Hindu middle-class womanhood. The failure to embody matri shakthi amounts to a failure as woman. As a signifier of failure, deviant womanhood becomes the textual locus, the narrative source of familial disorder. She becomes the source of familial conflicts – of marital infidelity and illegitimate children. Her oppositional presence helps consolidate the ideal protagonist and her virtues. Her vice, principally ambition<sup>54</sup>, makes the protagonist’s virtue – sacrifices in nurturing the family – legible and meaningful.

### 7.1.2 Constructing the binary plot

In *Kyunki* Mandira who emerged as the protagonist Tulsi’s antagonist (the first of many Tulsi antagonists, Mandira was followed by two other characters, Tanya and Parvati) engages in an extra-marital relationship with Tulsi’s husband Mihir, after she nurses him back to health following an accident in which Mihir loses his memory. Consequently, Mandira not only becomes the source of familial conflict but is later held responsible for the poor upbringing of Mihir’s son Karan. Both these narrative outcomes facilitate the reaffirmation of Tulsi’s role as ideal wife and mother – she not only decides to accept Mihir despite his ‘unintentional’ transgressions but also takes up the task of transforming Karan into the ideal son by adopting him as her own. That viewers approved of and simultaneously found meaningful the portrayal of Tulsi, Mandira and Karan in their roles as ideal mother, antagonist and prodigal son was celebrated in the annual Star Parivaar (Star Family) Awards function where actors playing these roles have been feted in the categories of favourite wife, favourite other woman or co-wife and favourite son respectively.

In *Kahani*, the main protagonist Parvati is portrayed as the ideal sister-in-law and her antagonist Pallavi, who is her brother-in-law’s wife, as a jealous woman who grudges

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<sup>54</sup> Randeep Wadehra. 2006. ‘Revamp the vamp’. The Tribune, Sunday, February 19. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2006/20060219/spectrum/tv.htm>

the position accorded Parvati in the family. Parvati fulfils her responsibilities as mother and wife by taking on herself the task of managing the family, but especially significant is her role as *bhabhi* or sister-in-law. Her role as *bhabhi* and her idealised relationship with her husband's younger brother, however, becomes axiomatic to narrative tension in the story when Pallavi, the latter's wife, suspects the nature of Parvati's relationship with her husband. Pallavi thus becomes the source of familial conflict and is instrumental in disrupting familial order.

Both Tulsi and Parvati struggle to secure familial harmony; while they are portrayed as representing the last bastion of order in the family, they frequently fail in securing familial order and instead themselves become sites of disorder. For instance, both Tulsi and Parvati are at some point in the narrative confined to mental asylums. So while they are keepers of the familial order, they never fully master it. The result - a textual contradiction which, as women informants in Delhi confirmed, opened up a resistive space that made dis-identification with the serial text's dominant representation of middle class Hindu womanhood possible. In order to further explore the non-hierarchic pedagogy of the televisual text contextually I pose the following questions which I try to work through in the next section. How does the order-disorder binary of the serial text generate deep engagement with its narratives? Does pragmatic engagement with the narrative foreclose emotional identification with the characters and situations? If not, then how do these different aspects of narrative engagement sit together?

## 7.2 LEARNING MIDDLE-CLASS WOMANHOOD

Women in families from Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg spoke of serials as a source of *seekh* or learning about the right conduct of family life. Serials were a source of *seekh*, understood as wisdom through informal learning leading to a moral stance. *Seekh* is also crucially knowledge that is circulated; it is both acquired and shared or passed on, like a family heirloom. Komal, a Hindu housewife in her mid-40s belonging to the dominant Rajput community and one my key informants, frequently referred to how serials were a source of knowledge about right conduct in familial relationships. She felt that the sharp antinomies between good woman and bad woman that the serials melodramatised were true to real life. She explained her identification

with ideal womanhood as primarily involving an acknowledgement of the need to learn to perform the roles of mother, wife and future mother-in-law to her sons' wives with perfection.

The ideal womanhood of the serials epitomised an order of being that could ensure peace and stability in the family. The moral ecology of the family served as the operational ground for the enunciation of the ideal-woman-in-progress, as she characterised herself often. Her womanhood is ultimately defined in and through her negotiation of relationships within the family. A key tool in such negotiation is giving – the fulfilment of her subject position comes from giving of herself because it is only by giving that the family, the realm that defines her and is defined by her, can be preserved. Giving is not a familial ethic, it is a broader social ethic.

### **7.2.1 Familial order and the ethic of giving**

As discussed in Chapter 6, middle-class women in Delhi perceive familial order as the most significant and pivotal narrative thread. Various articulated as the need for familial harmony and discipline, the unrelenting pursuit of familial order, however evasive, emerged as the central narrative interest. The serial narrative is seen as a source of learning about maintaining and upholding familial order while rejecting and quelling disorder. The ideal protagonist is seen as a natural repository of order; learning from this natural repository of order would help make familial order the natural state of affairs. However, serials are also perceived to cause familial disorder – especially by encouraging remarriage. In families where the women are economically dependent on their spouse, male members - who by and large do not watch the serials - argue that serials are a cause of familial disorder because they encourage women to reach out for a consumer lifestyle beyond their (husband's/son's) economic means. It did not matter that they did not watch the serials; they experienced its ill-effects first hand and they knew that something meant solely for an audience of women must surely have something that will misguide them. Although women commented on the consumption-oriented lifestyle depicted in the serials they did so to contest it as unrepresentative of their reality, rejecting it wholly or desiring it while recognising its inaccessibility.

Familial order was variously articulated as harmony, togetherness or discipline. The central figure who was instrumental in ensuring familial order was the ideal female

protagonist; Tulsi or Parvati from *Kyunki* or *Kahani* usually became the exemplars. Familial disputes over wealth, marital infidelity, fissures among family members and so on were perceived as instances of familial disorder. The female protagonist, is yet again, seen as axiomatic to the resolution of familial disorder. However in becoming subjects of serial pedagogy, middle class women in Delhi's Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg critically appropriated, evaluated and made pragmatic sense of serial discourses on how women should ideally navigate between their various roles within the family in the larger context of their own everyday lives.

Thus Komal, a housewife and mother of two young men, explained that there would be peace and harmony only if women like her accommodated the young girls who would be married into the family. Although Tulsi of *Kyunki* taught her how to conduct various relationships within the family, Komal was especially aware of the need to "go to great lengths" just as Tulsi had while dealing with her daughters-in-law, in order to lead a harmonious and peaceful family life. Sheila, a middle class office-worker from Sarkar Marg, emphasised the conciliatory tone that Tulsi adopted in her interaction with family members even in highly provocative situations. Lalitha stressed the idea of discipline as a necessary element in keeping the family together - even if it was a small family such as hers, a certain amount of discipline was necessary to keep the family together. Rupa, who lives in Sarkar Marg with her husband and two children, felt that although she was part of a nuclear family, the serial showed her how a large joint family can act as a support system in the upbringing of children and be an emotional cushion in difficult times.

An ethic of giving seemed to underlie the position of women – in Sarkar Marg and Kishan Nagar – on familial order. The togetherness and harmony that women cited as the hallmark of the joint family system portrayed in the serials, was clearly only achieved by the central protagonist 'going to great lengths'. Such self-sacrifice was seen as legitimate and normal, yet a quality that had to be simultaneously further learned and cultivated. This general sentiment is captured well in Komal's words:

"Tulsi was in the middle of criticism from all sides. She was being pulled in different directions. Her husband had gone astray, a son had gone astray; she had to deal with her mother in law's schemes, she had to deal with her husband's infidelity. And go through the process of understanding the son (Karan) he had out of another woman. She adopted Karan as her own son and he also soon began to love her more than he loved his own mother. Karan and Tulsi are outstanding characters. You won't find a son like Karan and a

mother like Tulsi, a daughter-in-law like Tulsi or a sister-in-law like Tulsi. I have a learnt a lot from Tulsi.”

In Komal’s family, giving was cultivated as a familial ethic. Cooking and offering food were among Komal’s main preoccupations. “Giving food is the highest form of charity,” she explained. From impromptu invitations to people to her house for lunch to making Rotis for a sick neighbour, Komal reiterated her view of *anna daan* or giving food many times. She explained that it was not a family’s wealth or status that mattered but its willingness to give, especially *anna* or food. In other words, *anna daan* was not just a familial ethic but a social ethic. Every day, as her husband prepared to leave for work, Komal took out grains and bread for the pigeons so that her husband could feed them on his way to work. Komal explained that she has known her husband to do this ever since they were married. Echoing his wife’s views, Chauhan explained that giving food to animals and human beings were acts of *punya* or merit that would accumulate over many lives.

However, notwithstanding this ethic of familial giving that was apparent across families in Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg, there were dissenting voices too. Lalitha, who had shifted her choice of serials at the time of my last interview with her in favour of romances, while expressing her appreciation of Tulsi’s devotion to the family, emphasised that it was not possible for one individual to lay down so many sacrifices or continue to do so much for the family:

“It is not possible. That someone should sacrifice so much...and for so long...It seems there is no life of one’s own. [It is always about] nurturing the family, nurturing relationships...It is not possible in real life.”

In challenging the realistic nature of the enormous sacrifices laid down by the central protagonist of *Kyunki* Lalitha was also contesting the serial narrative as a source of familial order. In an interesting juxtaposition to Lalitha’s contesting view of serials as a source of familial order, Komal’s husband Chauhan, in an unusually lengthy and forceful intervention during a conversation where his wife Komal was talking about what she had learnt from the serials, argued that serials were in fact causing fissures within families. They were actually a source of familial disorder:

Chauhan: Families are falling apart...all the discord in families in the present time is being caused by the serials. In the families brothers are at war; the women are doing politics in the house. Like my brother's house - when he has to go for duty she [wife] makes him do all the household chores!

Komal: It is true.

Chauhan: He is the servant of the house.

Komal: Yes, she makes him do all the household chores.

Chauhan: So this is happening. When you interview people, most of them are going to be artificial. They won't tell you the truth...90 per cent families are being spoilt because of these serials.

Komal: Girls and boys are falling in love these days.

In this conversation, two sources of fear, anxiety and potential disorder are outlined. Despite not being a regular viewer of the serials, Chauhan fears the potential shifts in the traditional male and female domestic roles that the narratives might be inducing. To him, serials are a source of familial disorder and a reasonable explanation for the duress that the middle-class family is under in globalizing India (Fernandes 2001). Chauhan, an avid political enthusiast, who openly expressed his support for the Congress party on many occasions, uses the word 'politics' to describe the shift in familial relations that serial viewing seems to have introduced, indicating fears about a potential blurring of the patriarchal home-world dichotomy.

This stance is in contrast to his views on the depiction of Hindu festivals such as Karva Chauth in *Kyunki* and other serials (see Section 7.2.3). And for Komal these new anxieties are represented by a greater permissiveness in the relationship between young girls and boys. In a separate conversation, she explained why the families in Kishan Nagar were different – here, she pointed out, the girls and boys never looked each other in the eye. And this was a sign of treating each other with respect. And this respect, she said, was the bedrock of interaction between young people in the neighbourhood.

As she explained this, it was apparent that the relationship of respect that girls and boys in the neighbourhood maintained was also in her view a reflection of how honourable Kishan Nagar was as a neighbourhood. Familiar tropes of woman's honour as familial and national honour came into play. Later that day, Rimi, a young

girl who lived next door to Komal's and whose family had migrated from Ropar, Punjab a few years ago to settle down in Kishan Nagar, brought up the topic again. In the evening as we walked to the tailor's shop nearby, she told me how things were different outside the neighbourhood:

“The world is really cantankerous. When I go out, I dare not even look up and even if somebody passes a comment, I ignore it.”

Her conversations on the serial reflected this concern with the security and safety of a young woman her age. One way or another they converged on the episode in *Kyunki* where Nandini, one of daughters-in-law of the Virani family, is subjected to marital rape.

### **7.2.2 Performing middle-class respectability**

Rimi's concern with the safety of women on the streets of Delhi was discussed by women in various contexts, particularly around episodes of sexual violence that had been a part of the serial narratives. Both young and middle-aged women urged the need for self-discipline on the streets of Delhi in order to avoid sexual molestation. A conversation on the rape of Krishna Tulsi, who was Tulsi's daughter and someone who, according to Komal, had acquired the sterling qualities of her mother Tulsi, seamlessly crossed over into the real world, when Komal reminded me again that I should not have ventured out the previous night to have dinner late in the evening. Seeing me go out into the street the previous night became part of a discussion on why sexual molestation was on the rise on the streets of Delhi. Komal suggested that girls these days dressed in an immodest fashion and invited molestation on themselves. She explained how one should conduct oneself on the streets and how one could be an exception to the rule (of being molested):

“One should always display one's sense of dignity and honour. One should always keep one's head covered with the *pallu*. I always keep my head covered. And I always wear a *Salwar-Kameez*...If I wear a skirt and go out, people are going to stare at me. They will not see that I am a mother, a wife, a sister or a daughter-in-law. They will see me in the wrong way. They will think of me in strange ways. Can't fathom what they might think of me. They

might even molest me. What can I do? Nothing. Because that is how I am dressed.”

She explained that this was the sign of a virtuous woman, unlike the young girls these days who wore jeans and exposed their midriff to men, inevitably inviting male attention and consequent molestation. She warned me against going out in the night alone and invited me to have dinner at her house every single day if I didn't feel like cooking. Komal's observation is not only an attempt to convey her pragmatic approach to the issue of molestation in public; it is also a lament. She openly laments her inability to do anything but recede further into the safety of the *pallu* of her *salwar-kameez* if faced with molestation on the streets. She not only does not envisage her right to be protected from assault in public but considers any such assault as a natural outcome of her manner of dressing.

The need to discipline oneself through the attire one wore was often discussed as part of the costume schemes employed in the serials. On several occasions, Komal wanted me to teach her how to tie a saree – an attire worn by all the female protagonists in both *Kyunki* and *Kahani*. Rimi frequently expressed her desire to wear a saree for the first time on Diwali (the festival of lights) or Karva Chauth, a day of fasting by married women for the longevity and well-being of their husbands. Serial costumes – principally sarees – easily became a part of these conversations on proper attire:

Komal: In the serials they always wear sarees. Bhumi had once worn a jeans and top. Her husband said, ‘Bhumi I don't like this’. Since that day, Bhumi has also been wearing sarees.

Rimi: The attire in Ekta Kapoor's serials are simple. Be it a saree or a salwar. These days, they show sarees on most serials.

Komal: They get a chance to advertise sarees too. Sarees are very popular these days. Tulsi has worn all kinds of sarees – from cotton to kanchipuram. And how has she worn them - in her own style, with the straight *pallu*<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Through the opening scenes of *Kyunki*, the Virani family is introduced as a traditional Gujarati family and here Komal is referring to the Gujarati way of draping a saree, where the decorative length of the saree that usually goes over the shoulder is instead brought to the front.

For women in the lower middle-class families of Kishan Nagar who mostly wore Salwar Kameez, the traditional Punjabi attire, the mediated consumption of and desire for the saree seems to articulate a new middle-class respectability. Although sarees have always been a defining feature of the representation of ideal femininity in Indian cinema, television, through the K-series seems to have mediated it as a defining aspect of the performance of a desirable middle class Hindu womanhood. Thus the saree was often spoken of as the attire of choice to celebrate Karva Chauth or Diwali, which were occasions for highly ritualised performances of Hindu womanhood. It was, most importantly, seen as an aspirational attire. Rimi, who was looking forward to keeping the Karva Chauth fast for the first time, frequently expressed her desire to receive a saree as a gift, so she could wear it while breaking the fast. To Rimi, wearing the saree at Karva Chauth represented a rite of passage to true or idealised womanhood.

The televisual representation of sexual violence through the serial narrative seems to have also become discursive arenas for re-configuring middle-class desire. The marital rape of Nandini in *Kyunki* became the singular narrative thread around which Rimi, on many occasions, weaved her own personal narratives of love, desire and marriage. As Rimi explained why her favourite characters in *Kyunki* are Karan and Ansh, who are a foil to each other - the former being Tulsi's adopted son and the latter her own son - she recalled how Nandini, who is married to Ansh by dint of circumstances rather than love, is raped by him inside their bedroom:

“Nandini's marriage with Ansh takes place by force. She goes back to Karan because Ansh tortures her in the bedroom. If a husband behaves nicely to his wife within the confines of their bedroom, at least talk to her nicely, any woman would feel so happy. When you go out, if a boy talks to you normally, nicely – even if it is your husband - you will feel so nice right? It is the same with Nandini. But Ansh, whenever he enters their room, he tortures her. Sometimes he just pushes his fingers into her face, and threatens to harm her...She thinks how she might be happy spending her entire life with such an arrogant and foolish person. Every girl thinks, if he is so arrogant....We say – when a boy taunts us on the street - We say what an arrogant rascal he is! So she felt that way. I felt that if he had behaved nicely with her in the bedroom then perhaps Nandini would have been his. But he never talks to her nicely. If

a girl....when a girl sometimes goes out....I've heard that girls from affluent families..... There was a girl who used to come to the beauty parlour. She is from a very good family. Her parents had a love marriage and they constantly have fights. She has chosen one boyfriend and left another. If somebody doesn't behave nicely with her, she immediately leaves that person. She might have left two or three people within a year and a half. She says that she is not willing to take nonsense from anyone...she is so battle-hardened, hardened by the conflicts at home...but I say, how will she spend her whole life with a husband?"

In this personal narrative, Rimi evaluates the choices open to a girl in Nandini's situation. Her acquaintance with the personal story of a girl she met at a beauty parlour who has rejected relationships at the faintest hint of discontent is effectively rejected as a model conducive to maintaining a long-term relationship like marriage. More specifically, this seems to be a choice open to girls from affluent families, suggesting that affluence is empowering in terms of enabling choice, particularly the choice to reject ill-treatment but also restricting because the freedom it enables is seen to threaten marital stability. As Rimi further reflects on the episode, she attempts to come to terms with Nandini's decision to end her relationship with Ansh and choose to spend the rest of her life with Karan. She makes intertextual references to a news story about a girl who had rejected her bridegroom for demanding additional dowry hours before the wedding. To Rimi, the possibility that in such a situation someone else could step in to marry the girl despite her bold decision to call off the first wedding seemed to hint at a world of "men like Karan":

"So Ansh behaves so badly with her. Karan behaves nicely so she goes to him. In London, Ansh rapes her, forces himself on her against her will. She is his wife, but still she was not willing. So he rapes her. That other man Karan was not even her husband; was only her lover. I don't know if there are people like this [Karan] in this world. But there must be some people. This world does not exist just like that. There are bad people and good people... I will also tell you a story – I heard this on the news. There was a girl. She was getting married. If the marriage is today then the bridegroom's party arrives tonight....But at the last minute the bridegroom demanded Rs. 2 Lakhs as dowry and said that that would complete his list of demands. The bride's family felt that if the

bridegroom demanded this much in cash today then tomorrow he might make more demands. The girl said that if they are making such a demand today then tomorrow they will burn me to death. So the girl refused although it might result in a lot of disrepute and dishonour to the family. I agree that *badnami* (dishonour) occurs but that can be just in the mind. So many people get *badnam* but the *badnami* [in this case] was not to the extent that the only recourse left to her was to die. Since the girl said she will not marry, the family said, ‘no, we won’t go ahead with this marriage’ and called up the news media. And then a man came along. He said he ran a restaurant and that he would like to marry her. Do you know how happy I was...I felt, yes there are men like Karan in this world.”

The fear of sexual violence that permeated women’s discursive engagement with the serial narratives moved seamlessly into their conversations about women’s safety on the streets of Delhi. Rimi described the experience of travelling on Delhi’s buses as occasions when young girls got pinched or touched by strange men who as she says might be married with children, likely have a daughter her age at home and yet are “dirty minded”. Her experience of sexual molestation on the streets of Delhi once again moved seamlessly into the televisual experience of Nandini’s rape by Ansh which had in turn made the street a more dangerous space for a girl her age:

“When Ansh raped Nandini I was so affected. I said God! It happened in a serial but I had to go with my aunt to the market to get clothes that day and I couldn’t even do that. You won’t believe I stood in front of *Babaji* [Guru Nanak] and said, Babaji please let someone come and save her. Do you know how he raped her – he raised the volume of the television so her voice isn’t heard outside the room....I couldn’t sleep the whole night.”

As Rimi further explained someone could ask her to give away the Salwar she wore and get another one in its stead, or take away her money or her mobile phone or any other possession – all of these may be replaced. But if someone “does something” to her body, she cannot replace it. Her body is the one thing that she zealously guards. Because as she puts it, “it belongs to the family”. At this point Rimi’s views on sexual discipline were closely tracing those of Komal, who had stressed the need for greater sexual discipline by girls in order to avoid molestation on the street:

“Girls who wear small, dirty dresses with deep cuts....ok, wear them because we live in a free country. Every person has his own wishes about how to live. But you know what - girls are also responsible for this because they wear such seductive attire that the one who sees it simply goes mad.”

Rimi, like Komal, had a set of prescriptions to avoid being molested on the street. In describing her experience of successfully avoiding molestation, Rimi seemed to contradict her earlier first-hand recollection of being molested while travelling on Delhi's buses – an experience she had attributed to the “dirty minds” of a few men. Indeed, admitting that one had been molested reflected not on the virtuosity of the molester but that of the molested. Molestation happened only by invitation; the molested always invites molestation upon herself. In prescribing how not to be molested, Rimi was closely echoing Komal's stance on the issue – suggesting that the onus of avoiding molestation lay with the women themselves:

“I've been here for two years. I've never been molested by anyone when I step out into the street or in the bus. Nobody has offered to befriend me. When I go out, *I don't get commented on* but the girls with me are taunted. My brother tells me, Rimi, if you are good, nobody will tell you anything. If you are wrong, if you are travelling in a bus and you look at someone, keep looking at someone, look here and there, eyes rove everywhere, if someone is in front of us and he is looking at us and we look back that seems wrong. If someone is looking, ignore it (emphasis added).”

Here Rimi prescribes a bodily regime that had to be performed in order to avoid being molested on the street. Molestation, in her account, becomes a public commentary on improper or flawed bodily discipline on the streets. Not being subject to molestation is not only rare as “the girls with” her “are taunted”, but also, as in her case, proof of having achieved normative, even ideal, bodily discipline. Her prescription reflects a street-based gender regime and performance that is reinforced by representations of the violation of the female body in the serials. Nandini's rape results in an evaluation of different styles of masculinity, with the desirable mode of masculinity being assessed as rare – appearing as an exceptional news story - and a concomitant anxiety about the safety of the female body on the streets of Delhi, where “most men were dirty” .

Delhi's street regime became an unexpected subject of digression during a conversation with Lalitha about Tulsi's efforts in *Kyunki* to keep the family together against all odds. Lalitha explained why Tulsi, as a role model, could not be not emulated not only because of the unrealistic moral goals that she had set for herself but because the overall standards of morality had declined so steeply that even if one wanted to emulate it was not possible. According to Lalitha, Tulsi had failed, despite her herculean efforts, to keep peace in the family and to uphold her values. Comparing Tulsi's role in the family to that of a social worker, Lalitha explained:

"Today the situation is such that even if a social worker wants to prevent wrong-doing, it is likely that he might be killed because he does not have power. Even if he has power, he will be killed but there is more protection with power. But without power or protection, your morality and your values are worth nothing. Your principles are worthless. If you are travelling in the bus today and see that two girls are being molested by someone can you stop him? If you stop him, tomorrow acid will be thrown at your face. This is the fear people have. There is no protection anywhere. And because of this, people are losing their values. There is no morality. Everyone wants to save his own skin."

Lalitha's views suggest that her gradual shift away from the K-serial narratives, while contributing to a disidentification with Tulsi both as role model and as exemplar of womanhood defined in and through the family, has not resulted in identification with modes of womanhood that challenge the family-centric ideal of womanhood in the serials. Instead, Tulsi's apparent failure on the domestic front seems to have effected an erosion of belief in the sphere of civic discourse and action.

As both complicit and resistive subjects of serial pedagogy, women in the national capital seemed to be increasingly distancing themselves from civic and activist discourses about women's safety in Delhi's public spaces – sexual harassment is either seen as a result of women's own deviant conduct in public places or as legitimate grievances about which little can be done by other women. A combination of self-discipline and apathy characterises discussions about women's harassment in public spaces, a combination that works along different axes – complicit and resistive - of narrative engagement with the serials, but pointing ultimately towards the erosion of a

culture of civic participation among women encouraged by serials such as *Rajani* and *Udaan* broadcast on Doordarshan in the 1980s.

### 7.2.3 Doing relationships, doing womanhood

“I am eldest member of the Virani family. And carrying such a large family along as one is the highest form of social work. I am always busy.”

- Amba Virani, Opening  
dialogue, Episode 101,  
*Kyunki*

Women in the lower middle class locality of Kishan Nagar readily acknowledged the educative value of the serials, particularly on how to conduct oneself in the multifarious roles of wife, mother, daughter-in-law and so on. The central female protagonists of the serials were adept at navigating between their various roles as mother, wife, daughter-in-law and so on within the family. Chuck Kleinhans (1991) points out that one of the most persistent structures of bourgeois domestic melodrama is the pattern of the woman sacrificing her personal achievements, career, happiness, independence and so on for the well-being of the family. Kleinhans emphasises the pivotal importance of the home-workplace division to the centring of home and the family as the locus of material and emotional consumption and the recasting of women as the primary figure that directs the site of consumption. In fact as explained in Chapter 6, some of the episodes of *Kyunki* illustrate the narrative tension between the serial's ideal of domesticated womanhood and the contemporary reality of educated middle-class women who are part of the urban workforce in ever increasing numbers.

In the lower middle class locality of Kishan Nagar, Komal, a housewife in her early forties, educated up to class 10 lives with her husband, who worked in a restaurant in the city and two sons, the elder working as a receptionist in a city hotel and the younger in high school. Komal would finish all her household chores by 12 noon and as I visited her for our daily session of serial viewing at 3pm, as usual the room would be dark as she had lunch in front of the nearly muted television while her husband

slept in the adjacent room in preparation for his night shift at the restaurant. The television was always muted and the room was always dark but for the television, clearly to ensure her husband was not disturbed ahead of his night shift.

While *Kyunki* was the first serial from the K-serial stable to attain unrivalled popularity, by the time I began fieldwork, the serial seemed to have lost its sheen and many women who had been devoted viewers of the programme were switching to serials with similar plotlines on channels such as Sony or to more ‘romantic’ serials that are part of the second wave of K-series. However, Komal continued to be a devoted viewer of the serial, and one day she reminisced aloud of the time she actually went to catch a glimpse of the actress who played the central protagonist Tulsi, while the latter campaigned for the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in Chandni Chowk, a parliamentary constituency in Old Delhi, during the 2003 national elections. As I heard her husband stir in the adjacent room, she added that she respected Tulsi although she was a BJP sympathiser and her family were devoted to the Congress party.

On many occasions, her husband made it clear to me that he thought the serials were corrupting women, raising their levels of expectation in terms of what they would like their husbands to buy when the men-folk simply could not afford their wives’ new expensive tastes. On one such occasion, Komal asked him pointedly when she had made such a demand and went on to explain that she was a housewife who would finish all her household chores by afternoon and found serials to be a far more productive way of spending time than going to the house next door for a session of gossip. She says, “My husband gets Rs.7,000 as monthly salary. With this money, household expenses, rent and school fees have all to be taken care of. Last week we went to Kalpana saree and saw a Rs.15,000 saree. I just saw it. I didn’t ask for it because I know my husband cannot get it for me”. Similarly she knows she cannot get sarees that are as expensive as the ones women in the serials wore, but she could always get similar-looking ones in the market for less. As she asks “What does one not get in the bazaar (market)?”

Of all the women I spoke to, Komal was the most eloquent about what the serials had to offer beyond providing plausible images of an affluent lifestyle and yet seemed most aware of the fact that she could only aspire to that lifestyle. “I can’t afford to go to clubs or kitty parties or meet clients [sic] in expensive restaurants, but I have been

learning something of value from the serials,” she says. She uses the word “seekh” which is a word that in itself denotes informal learning or wisdom. As someone who had been educated only up to class 10, she warned me at our very first meeting that she wasn’t highly educated but she would tell me all she knew about the serials. She sought to convey her “seekh” from and about the serials on many levels. Consistently, she provided ample evidence of her mastery of the serial narrative over 5 years and characterisations spanning three generations and regularly predicted which way the suspense at the end of one episode might play out in the next. In this she took great pride and was insistent about correcting herself on the rare occasion she got the details wrong.

In the serial, Tulsi, the central female protagonist of *Kyunki* and Komal’s favourite character, not only performed the roles of ideal wife, daughter-in-law, mother and so on through the highly charged tropes of self-sacrifice and patience, but in fighting for her very survival in the family, Tulsi had to prove herself street smart and pragmatic enough to sense the conspiracies and subterfuge that surrounded her in order to keep the family together because her existence, it was apparent, depended on the existence of the family and vice-versa. Through the melodramatic instrument of suspense deployed, among other things, as a narrative aid in the resolution of conspiracies in favour of the central protagonist, pragmatic choices are yoked to performances of ideal womanhood in a dynamic contradiction.

Thus Komal spoke of how the serials portrayed the complexity of a web of relationships that she herself was part of as a wife, daughter-in-law, sister and mother. Tulsi, she explained, had been an ideal (adarsh) wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Tulsi knew how to perform (nibhana) her responsibility as wife, daughter-in-law and mother perfectly. Significantly, Komal used the word ‘nibhana’ quite often in order to explain the ‘seekh’ she got from serials. In Hindi, ‘nibhana’ denotes the practice of embodied performance of a role or a responsibility depending on the context in which it is used. In common parlance, a cinematic or theatrical performance of a character is referred to as “kirdar nibhana” or character performance. As a mother on the look out for a bride for her elder son, Komal often spoke of the ‘seekh’ she got from Tulsi on how to be a good mother-in-law. According to Komal, as a mother, Tulsi is morally instructing the younger generation in the serial, trying to bring her sons who have gone astray back on track, distributing the ‘seekh’ she received from the elderly

matriarch Amba Virani, while trying to deal with the conspiracies around her that are threatening family unity.

“I will try to be a good mother-in-law to the daughters who come into this family just the way Tulsi tries to carry everyone along...she goes to great lengths to treat the daughters-in-law as daughters...to keep the family together....only then can there be peace in the family”.

She frequently pointed out that she could not afford the lifestyle that was portrayed in the serial but she enjoyed watching the lifestyle. As a woman who wasn't adequately educated and who belonged to the middle-class (as she puts it, “Hum to middle mein aa gaye na? [We fall in the middle, don't we?]”), the serials taught her how she might behave and mingle with ‘upper class’ people if the need arose. Mingling with upper class people amounted to knowing how to conduct oneself at a party, knowing English to the extent of having at one's command at least a small lexicon that comprises words expressive of decorum and good manners.

Significantly, in another conversation, her husband disagreed with his wife and suggested that serials were simply exacerbating differences between the rich and the poor, where the latter was being shown their place. It was actually causing fissures within families and propagating a superficial material culture. His experiences at the restaurant, he explained, told him that rich people were all about what wealth can buy, the poor still retained values of respect and love. So what did he think about a ritual such as Karva Chauth<sup>56</sup> being religiously celebrated on *Kyunki*? That was a very positive thing that the serials did, he said, because this is not something man-made, but a custom whose roots hark back to Mother Parvati (Ma Parvati) herself, the divine consort of Lord Shiva, who had observed the primordial fast for the well-being of her husband.

“So just like Mother Parvati kept the fast for Lord Shiva, my wife is observing the fast for me. This is how it should be because it shows the values of the family. We belong to a particular faith (Hindu dharm) and this is something that those belonging to the Hindu faith have been doing for centuries and

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<sup>56</sup> Karva Chauth is a popular North India ritual in which women fast from dawn to dusk for the well-being of their husbands, until they are finally given the first drop of water and the first morsel of food by their husbands upon sighting the moon.

something every Hindu family should continue to do irrespective of class or caste”.

All through, Komal nodded approvingly and commented that her husband had spoken better than her. She further pointed out that it was Viswakarma pooja that day and people offered prayers to tools, mostly made of iron, to mark the day. Therefore she had not only cleaned and tidied the house but also swept the area in front of the flats leading up to the road.

In this exchange between husband and wife, Komal tries to advance domesticated womanhood as an ideal that legitimates her serial viewing in the afternoons. She distances herself from gossip and from high-society culture, choosing instead an activity that has brought her ‘seekh’. Defending herself in response to her husband’s veiled complaints about his wife’s lifestyle aspirations putting him under financial strain, Komal tries to articulate not only how practically grounded she is but also how well she performs both her mundane and ritual duties as a wife. Her husband implicitly encourages the pativrata-sumangali model of womanhood represented in heightened fashion through entire episodes devoted to rituals such as Karva Chauth, explaining it as a timeless practice, unlike the anxiety producing currency of images depicting material affluence. Komal’s articulation of the discourse of ‘seekh’ with her own life narratives reflected a foregrounding of her multiple positioning as a woman acutely conscious of her lower middle class existence and concomitant desire for greater social mobility, inadequate education in relation to the researcher from London, as a housewife whose sole interest besides housework had been watching *Kyunki*, a fact that had suddenly acquired a measure of value as a topic of interest to an educated woman who seemed to potentially be a mediator between their middle-class existence and ‘high society’ and as a mother anticipating the role of a mother-in-law in the near future, her deep engagement with both the affluent lifestyle and the fabric of relationships, particularly the manner in which her favourite character Tulsi performed those relationships, seemed to lie at the heart of her long-standing ties to the serial.

#### **7.2.4. Virangana as ‘New familial Woman’**

K-serials have reinstated the centrality of the extended family to melodramatic narratives on television. In analysing the kinship systems and the nature of the family

in India, Patricia Uberoi (2006) refers to an important dimension to be reckoned with in the study of the family in contemporary India – this doesn't have to do with the family as it is, but as it is imagined to be through the media. Terming this realm of the imagined family as the moral economy of the Indian family, Uberoi suggests that it is not just a fixed set of ideals, but a dialogic system “that is framed in terms of a set of moral dilemmas and contradictions, even as it posits the patrilineal joint family as the ideal, ‘traditional’ and culturally authentic form of Indian family life” (2006:30). As a 2007 study of K-series by the New Delhi based Centre for Advocacy and Research concludes, the serials package and market the family as a ‘dynamic entity’ that allows for continuity and change (Ghadially 2007:183-196).

The women of Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg reaffirmed the ideal of the joint family in terms of contradictory but dynamically articulating discourses. While women in the lower middle class locality of Kishan Nagar reaffirmed the extended family of the serials as a palpable reality, “a living heritage (Jeeti Jaagti Parampara)”, as one woman called it, women in the more upper middle class locality of Sarkar Marg engaged with the serial discourse of the extended family using tropes of saving, discipline, togetherness and right upbringing that are more suggestive of the practical value of having such families at a time when nuclear families are the norm.

Familial conflicts constitute the main device for narrative progression and the central female protagonists of both *Kyunki* and *Kahani* are perpetually managing these conflicts. And for the women of Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg this elevated them to a heroic status and made them role models who should be emulated. And yet they could be critiqued for their ideal status, safely ensconced as they are within the narrative of a serial and therefore spared from actually facing domestic situations on a day to day basis for a lifetime. The length of serials, often when the plot is seen as being stretched endlessly, is a source of these critiques of ideal female protagonists whose qualities although at first admired are seen as un-emulatable in the long term. However notwithstanding this critique they continued to acknowledge the manner in which the main female protagonists held together the fabric of the joint family against all odds not only as a skill they could draw upon in their daily lives but also as something heroic. Women spoke of how the protagonists taught them to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers, of the large well of resourcefulness that was required to keep the family together.

Lalitha, who lived with her husband, daughter and mother in Sarkar Marg used to be an ardent fan of *Kyunki* and *Kahani* but of late she confessed she had turned to serials on Sony such as *Saloni Ka Safar* and *Saath Phere*, which had plotlines similar to *Kyunki* but were crisp and not endlessly stretched out. Yet she continues to watch *Kyunki* occasionally to keep up with the narrative. She continued to find relevance in the joint family system portrayed in the serials because she felt it had that element of discipline that ensured that the family spend time together – at dinner, while praying and so on. She says, “Discipline is essential in real life. Even if you live with just four people there should be discipline. Ours is not a joint family, but I would like all of us to at least have dinner together.” She had always idealised Tulsi for her confidence and devotion to family. “Tulsi is willing to do anything for the family...she does not forgive anyone or anything that threatens the family. She is always fighting for truth and she wants to bring the truth (of conspiracies) of every situation (that threatens the family) to the fore,” Lalitha explained.

This heroic quality is reminiscent of the ideal of the Virangana, literally meaning the woman who wields *virya* or heroism. Drawing out several examples from Indian history such as the figure of the Lakshmibai of Jhansi who defied and challenged the rule of the British India company while attempting to reclaim the kingdom of Jhansi, Kathryn Hansen describes the Virangana ideal of womanhood in the following manner: “Between the polarities of self-effacing wife and all-powerful mother lies an overlooked and yet important alternative paradigm of Indian womanhood: the virangana, the woman who manifests the qualities of *virya* or heroism (2000:260). Hansen suggests that the unique feature of the virangana ideal in Indian history is that little or no emphasis is placed on the sexual fidelity of the virangana or her status as wife or widow. Sanjay Srivastava interprets Hansen’s virangana ideal, particularly the lack of emphasis on her sexuality, as representing “the startling conjunction of physical prowess, moral strength and sexual freedom” and therefore a refreshing and competing model of female identity and sexuality (2007:303). However Hansen herself theoretically expands the virangana ideal by pointing to the possibility that it was the embodied ideal of the nation during the Indian nationalist struggle suggesting, I argue, that the Virangana is not about sexual freedom, rather it is an ideal of womanhood defined by an ascetic renunciation of the sensorial for the sake of the heroic objective to be achieved and therefore an ideal that is as sharply marked by desexualisation as it is marked by valour and moral authority. It is this trope of the

Virangana that can be traced in the moral tenacity and traditional authority that the character of Tulsi, the central protagonist of '*Kyunki*', wields.

Lalitha, having shifted her loyalties away from *Kyunki* continues to recall a particular narrative thread in the serial where Tulsi kills her own son for deviant behaviour. Her voice progressively choked with emotion she asks, "I think to myself can I ever be as righteous as Tulsi? If my son turns into a scourge for society will I go to the extent of killing him? I am also a woman of principles...I can also give my children 'seekh'. But can any mother ever go to the extent of killing her own child? Perhaps if I had to kill myself I would have..." Lalitha's attempt to appropriate the virangana ideal into her own life means that she participates in the expansion of the dialogic realm of sacrifice that the melodramatic narrative invokes. Further, Lalitha's engagement with the serial was largely using the trope of "discipline", an English word she used in all our conversations about the serial. Sacrifice and discipline were tropes that created narrative engagement through a process of dynamic contradiction. The ideal of the mother and the virangana too exists in dynamic contradiction making the character of Tulsi a source of both performance and pedagogy.

### **7.3 EMBODYING DISORDER AND ORDER: KITTY PARTIES AND KARVA CHAUTHS**

In the two Delhi neighbourhoods of Sarkar Marg and Kishan Nagar, Karva Chauth was a highly anticipated festive occasion. As I mentioned my trip to Sarkar Marg later that day to see the preparations for Karva Chauth, women in Kishan Nagar expressed their curiosity in relation to the scale and extend of the celebrations in the upper middle class area. Komal wanted me to tell her everything about the preparations that might be ongoing at Sarkar Marg in the run-up to the sighting of the moon that evening. At Sarkar Marg itself, most women were not at home that day – they were at the salon for a session of henna design on their hands or at the tailor's getting their blouses for the beautiful sarees that they were wearing that evening.

#### **7.3.1 Desire as entropy**

In Kishan Nagar, Rimi had decided to keep the *vrat* or fast that is central to Karva Chauth for the first time with a view to finding a suitable husband in the near future.

She was turning 27 soon and that was considered too late for girls in the neighbourhood. After knocking at her door for a few minutes as she wanted me to accompany her to a salon nearby which offered Henna service, just as I was about to leave hearing no response, her mother opened the door and I saw Rimi lie on the bed in the living room. Her mother explained that the fasting since dawn had tired her out and she seemed to also develop a fever. I went and sat next to her on the bed and seeing me she slowly began to sit up. Her mother made both of us tea and while sipping at it she slowly began to talk. She looked unusually sick and pale and I asked her if the fasting had been too harsh on her. She whispered to me that although she was tired because she had had only a cup of tea at 5 a.m. that day, the real story behind her exhaustion was something else. Rimi said she would tell me the story as soon as her mother had stepped out to go to the market to get vegetables.

As her mother left for the market, Rimi began by saying that what she was about to narrate was unknown to everyone, even her close neighbour and dear friend Komal aunty. Lowering her voice further, she said she has been sick many times in her life, once even to the point of death, not because of any inherent, diagnosable, physical ailment but because she was possessed and haunted. She was haunted, she said, by the spirit of a young man who wouldn't part with her body. The young man, she said, or rather his spirit considered her his wife and would therefore part with her only if she herself died. Her body, she said, belonged to him. She has been suffering from bouts of illness of an unknown nature for many years now and the doctors had given up or rather her family had given up on doctors and as a last refuge they had sought the counsel of a spiritual advisor, a *tantric*. The *tantric*, Rimi continued, told them that the real cause of her illness was due to the fact that the spirit of a dead young man was accompanying her like a shadow. The *tantric* offered her a protective amulet which would give some relief from the haunting. Ever since the protective amulet came to be on her body she had felt better and her parents had brighter hopes of finding her a suitable groom. But today, however, being the day of Karva Chauth, and her first fast that held the promise of a good husband in the near future, the shadows of the haunting had intensified, as if to assert its right over her body.

As I later recalled the episode, it was clear that Rimi's description conveyed a sense of visceral pain and entrapment. I recalled how she always expressed a sense of containment – in her frequent requests to me to take her to the movies or just for

shopping, her heightened sense of order and decorum and her vigorous self-patrolling and regimentation of ‘disorderly’ bodily gestures, in public, particularly wandering gaze in public spaces or a focussed gaze at other men on the street, her admiration for a friend who seemed to have countless boyfriends while she herself remained a mere listener of such romantic exploits and bold explorations of desire – all seemed to cave in on her own body, creating an internal disorder, an entropy. In the end, she had simply been dispossessed of her own body, her own desire. She had become the object of desire and occupation by a phantom. Rimi’s anxiety about the nature of men, the possibility of sexual violence in relationships, the lack of freedom to explore relationships with young men and the inability of her family to fulfil her desire for coupling even in the socially respectable form of marriage seemed to materialize into a slow deterioration of her physical body. In the theatre of order that Karva Chauth is, Rimi’s desire created a performative space of physical entropy and dissipation, of disorder.

While Rimi receded into the shadows of her first Karva Chauth, preparations were on in full swing across Kishan Nagar. By early evening, Komal and four other women had gathered at one of the flats in the building, where the *diyas* (lamps), the *thalis* (trays) and the *Karvas* (small earthen pots) for the *puja* (offering) had been prepared. While the women awaited the start of the group puja, they began discussing how they have been fasting year after year for their husbands and what they received each year in gift for keeping the fast. They spoke of the nature of the gifts that their husbands were fond of giving – usually either clothes or jewellery and sometimes both. As the hour of the puja drew near, the women broke up and sat on the floor with their offerings. A young girl started reading out stories from mythology eulogising the practice of Karva Chauth and the women repeated the lines after her. Having been given my own copy of the story book, I had to read out the Hindi language verses too as my turn came. I read out the story of Savitri, that mythological phenomenon embodying the ideal of chastity and perseverance in the face of even death. Later as the women prayed to the setting sun, I along with other unmarried ‘girls’ were asked to shower our blessings on the married women as they touched our feet. By dusk the women were up on the terrace of the building to spot the moon and receive their first bite of food for the day from their husbands.

### 7.3.2 Embodying Disorder as Order

In Sarkar Marg, while women performed all these rites associated with Karva Chauth and other festivals such as Diwali once a year, more integral to their lives were the monthly kitty party celebrations that are held by rotation in different homes in the neighbourhood. As Lalitha from Sarkar Marg pointed out, the manner in which Karva Chauth is depicted in the serials is far from how it is actually done in the average household. Yet, it has influenced the younger generation, she says. So, for example, during Diwali, the traditionally used clay lamps are now available in fancy metal too and the lighting and decorations have become more important features of the celebration, particularly among the younger generation, she said.

Lalitha's neighbour Rupa expressed similar sentiments when she said that on television things are exaggerated and that the traditional celebration of festivals were no different in the wake of their appropriation in serials. In other words, these women were clearly aware of a consumerist fetish associated with the contemporary celebration of Hindu festivals. Notwithstanding these views which pointed to their disjuncture with the serial narratives, their involvement with the Kitty parties revealed other ways in which women in Sarkar Marg drew on serial discourses.

According to Kajri Jain, Kitty parties in the South Asian context, specifically in the context of Ludhiana, an upcoming industrial town in Punjab, are a "common aspect of social life across the class spectrum" and a local form of "financial credit and consumption" (2003:10). Analysing notions of locality generated through and left inarticulate by the televisual field, Jain argues that kitty parties are among aspects of local life that are both picked up by nationally or globally oriented producers (as in the successful Zee Tv soap *Kitty Party*), and simultaneously thriving in other locally specific forms. In an explanatory foot note she writes:

"The kitty party serves as an informal credit institution, where a group of women each contribute to a common pool or 'kitty' and then draw lots to decide the order in which they get to take it home. In Ludhiana the kitty party has taken on a highly elaborated form: catering or dining out is essential to most middle-class kitty parties, though they might also be based on other activities or themes, such as the *bhajan* kitty (where a singer is invited to perform religious hymns) or the couple kitty (where couples go away for

weekend parties, replete with DJ). While most kitties are of the order of thousands of rupees (a few hundred US\$), they can go up as high as Rs 10 lakhs or 1million (approx US\$20, 000)” (2003:10).

Despite Jain’s marking of kitty parties as primarily an instrument of credit and as an instance of a thriving of local socialities as much as it is an appropriation of locality by corporate media, in the light of my observations in Delhi, I argue that kitty parties can be more about an embodied and performative localisation of televisual images. In other words, a local mode of sociality, kitty parties can also be a space for re-embodiment and re-localising the national televisual field and grounding it in inter-subjective, familial spaces. The kitty parties in Sarkar Marg were elaborately planned and kitty party themes were chosen in advance. Each Kitty party would invoke a theme, most of which centered around soap opera characters, and executing each theme would involve the emulation of a star or character type. The theme itself is chosen by lot from a few suggestions made by group members. I was informed of and allowed to access the very last kitty party held in Sarkar Marg before I would leave Delhi. By being admitted into the kitty party setting, I soon realized, I was at the receiving end of a significant act of inclusion and implicit trust, as the parties are not open to any of the male members or children and/or young girls or boys in the family. It is a meeting space solely for the women in the neighbourhood. That my presence at the Kitty party was not without its anxieties for the women would be revealed in the course of my presence at the party. I had already been informed that the theme of the month was “serial vamps”. And Komolika, antagonist to Parvati, the repository of ideal womanhood in *Kasauti Zindagi Kay* (Vissitudes of Life), was the principal character on whom women had modelled themselves. In *Kasauti* the nature of Komolika’s dark character was clearly highlighted not only through the narrative but also in terms of the character’s outfit, make up and overall persona. This is true of the other prominent antagonists across the different serials – in a manner reminiscent of the religious melodramas *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, where ‘evil’ mythological characters like the scheming Shakuni were presented in black attire, the leading antagonists dress in black sarees and wear dark make up, with an elaborate black bindi as the focal point of the face.

At the kitty party, each woman was dressed in black and had done their own variations of Komolika’s televisual presence. Lalitha wore a black saree but it was not

accompanied by elaborate make up of the kind characteristic of Komolika. Rupa, who was Lalitha's neighbour was also present at the Kitty party. Everyone praised her saree and commented that it looked exactly like the kind worn by Komolika. Rupa was wearing a black saree with red designs on it, the blouse for which, she said she had just picked up from the tailor's that morning. In the course of eating and drinking and playing cards, the group began to talk about each other's attire and began judging how well each had managed to emulate the character. They complimented each other on how black suits them or how closely they had managed to emulate the looks of the vamp.

As they began judging each other on how authentically vampish each of them looked, the discussion turned to how their appearances were tied to their life and their real selves. Damini, a housewife, who was complimented by everyone on emulating Komolika's appearance more effectively than anyone else in the group responded with laughter; she replied in a tone that was more sarcastic than serious, that she could never be as terrible a character as Komolika. "I am not as bad as her," she said, at which everyone laughed.

The thread was picked up by Lalitha who said, in a more serious vein, that she agreed that Komolika was evil beyond her comprehension. At this point I ventured to ask why was it that they had chosen Komolika or negative female characters as their kitty theme. To this Lalitha replied that this was just one of many themes that they had "done" and that in future it could include the characters of Tulsi and Parvati too. At this point another member said that Komolika does stand out as a character because of the extremities she represents. While Tulsi, Parvati and other leading female characters were easy to identify with, it was a challenge to relate to Komolika. And yet, Komolika was fun to emulate given her scheming character and over-the-top accessorizing. According to Damini, Komolika performed her role well and was popular because of the shock-value that characterises her performances. Everything she does and says is shocking to women; she is bold in a way Tulsi is not, Damini pointed out. She lives for herself, she added. As the session of games continued and snacks went around, lunch was served. As I proceeded to help with the serving of the lunch, Damini came up to me and asked, "Will you write about us as flimsy women who waste their time gossiping and playing cards at Kitty parties? We do this because

we have spare time and it is a good way to meet up and socialize,” she emphasised. I reassured her and said I would make sure I added her views into my analysis.

The kitty party setting, as was clear from women’s free and open conversations, its themed performative focus and more crucially the manner in which it was kept free of interference from other family members, including children and young girls, is a privatized domestic-social space whose ambiguous positioning within the family, yet outside it, makes it a theatre for both complicit and subversive appropriations of televisual representations. Yet ultimately as a site grounded in familial orderliness, it appropriates televisual representations of disorder as fantastical caricatures to be performed and embodied within privatized domestic spaces. Not as subversive intimations that can be deployed within the civic arena.

### **Conclusion**

Middle-class women’s appropriation of televisual narratives on the discursive and performative levels points to their active participation in invisible pedagogies of order and disorder. While the category of order is epitomised in the family and the person of the ideal woman, disorder is epitomised in challenges to the family and is manifested in the impermeability of the civic arena. In the interplay of and intersections between the patriarchal category of order and the subaltern category of ‘womanly disorder’, familial order, portrayed as in need of constant reclamation through the efforts of the good mother, the wife or the daughter, is set up in opposition to the disorder of the civic space. In fact, for women like Komal and Rimi, their neighbourhood was safe and honourable while the world outside, the streets and civic arena outside the perimeters of the neighbourhood were cantankerous and disorderly spaces, posing all manner of risks for women. Such disorderly spaces required performances of womanhood that invokes familial order; it called for the initiation of certain disciplinary rituals grounded in a woman’s body and in her desire.

## Chapter 8

### IMAGINED DAUGHTERS OF KERALA

#### Introduction

On rare occasions during my visits to families in Thoppilbhagam, the working class settlement that lay half an hour's bus journey away from the Kollam city centre, I could see women from neighbouring families gathered outside their houses – overlooking the open *muttam*, the private ground where children played hop-scotch, they sat talking to each other or reading popular women's magazines such as the *Manorama* or *Mangalam* on the raised threshold. On one such occasion, Vanaja, a girl in her late teens who identified Sophie, the central protagonist of *Manasaputri* as a role model, joined in on a conversation I was having with Nanimani, a young wife whose husband worked as a guard in the Railways, on why she liked the serial.

“Vanaja: A story told with great finesse from the start and that's not changed. That's why we still love watching it.

Nanimani: I have the same opinion.

Nanimani's mother-in-law: There's not a single flaw really in the narrative.

Nanimani: A serial that can be watched with mother and father [family].

Nanimani's daughter: Father is not here now. If father is here he will not allow the serial to be watched [everyone laughs]....He likes to watch movies.

Nanimani: And news...

Nanimani: I like Sophia. And then Glory. Her [Glory's] acting skills are good although her character is not.

Vanaja: Glory's is a bad character but she is acting out her character well.”

Television in Kerala, as is palpable in this conversation, has become a source of gendered entertainment, not only in terms of the content but in terms of the viewing context. While news and reality shows occupy a neutral ground in the context of gendered viewing, serial viewing constitutes not only a fiercely private and personal

form of entertainment for women but also one that is often fought for and sometimes negotiated. Further into the conversation above, when it became clear that Nanimani's husband preferred to watch movies, it merely reflected the fact that in Kerala, movie-going has been a gendered, even classed, event. For the Malayalee male, both young and old, male movie stars become "dense points of transfer of desire, belief, self-affirmation or transformation" and movie-going tends to be seen as familial entertainment among the labouring class, while it is considered an undesirable form of outdoor entertainment among 'respectable' middle-class families who would rather rent videos for home viewing (Osella & Osella 2004:1). Television serials have inaugurated a new familial and therefore respectable space for women to entertain themselves. Yet watching a serial entails a personal investment of time and emotion, often at the risk of alienating the dominant male figure in the family who prefers the news, news based programmes or indeed movies.

It is within this frame invoking Kerala's gendered media practices that this chapter continues to examine women's engagement with the serial narratives, but specifically focussing on the evaluative strategies employed in consuming the figures of the protagonist and antagonist. In order to illuminate the ways in which the order-disorder binary that these polarised figures represent is re-configured in women's evaluation of the televisual performances, I draw on Paul Ricoeur's (1975) hermeneutical categories of belonging-to and distantiation. Women's evaluation of performers and performances in the two urban locations in Kerala reveals a pattern of identification with the characters that involves the separation of women's engagement with the protagonist and antagonist to two different levels of experience. While such a pattern of ordering serial womanhood – through the separation of the viewing experience, particularly the engagement with the protagonist and antagonist, into different levels of appreciation and meaningfulness – was occasionally traceable in women's narratives in Delhi, it was expressed more frequently and explicitly by both middle-class and working class women in Kerala. Drawing on debates about Kerala's gender paradox – widely seen as reflected in the concurrent prevalence of high levels of education and healthcare for women alongside domestic violence and dowry deaths – especially epitomised in the construction of a dominant form of womanhood that was "wholly agreeable to interventions of the State in the name of social welfare and general good, while being mostly inimical to any radical politicisation", I examine the

ways in which women-centric narratives on television may be reinforcing this apparent paradox (Devika 2002:27).

In doing so, I also attempt to further critically interrogate Kerala's gender paradox, suggesting that it is not only a discursive reflection of the manner in which gendering of Kerala's civil and political societies have worked to limit women's access to full-fledged citizenship, mediated as it is by "a domestic-oriented Womanliness" (Devika 2005:6) but, in the context of the Indian State's rising stakes in a neo-liberal economic agenda, mirrored partly, in the explosive growth of television since the 1990s, it is also a reflection of women's dynamically contradictory discourses located within the space of the familial that seek to find meaning in, identify with and crucially lay claim to an ideal and 'appropriate' representation of Malayali womanhood. This appropriate form of Malayali womanhood is seen to be narrativised through the most popular form of the televisual text – the serial.

In other words, television serials seem to be re-centring the family as a discursive site for the shaping of an idealised Malayali 'familial' womanhood that further contributes to a deepening of the gendered schisms between the sphere of the familial and the civil society while simultaneously appearing to complicate the divide, thereby re-configuring the terms of gendered citizenship itself. In most instances, the televisual serial narrative appropriates and reworks popular serialised fiction from women's magazines – a form traditionally popular as a sentimental (and therefore) women's genre – providing for itself not only a captive audience of magazine readers eager to witness the televisual transformation of their favourite stories but also making these narratives available to women audiences unfamiliar with the stories, thus cutting across differences of class, education and age.

In this chapter, I argue that television's centring of this women-oriented genre or the feminisation of television in Kerala reinforces, from within the domestic space, an ideal of Malayali womanhood that re-inserts the 'familial woman' or "domestic-oriented Womanliness" as the bedrock of women's participation in a gendered form of citizenship. Drawing on the work of Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), I suggest that citizenship may be variously constructed depending on the relative importance of three differentiated spheres – the State, Civil society and the domain of family and kinship – at any specific conjunctural moment.

To this end, I first discuss how gender has been articulated in Kerala from within the twin projects of ‘modernity’ and ‘democracy’ and how television might be complicating the discourse of ‘modern gender’, and thereby also the terms of its insertion into civil society. I then examine ways in which the discourse of modern gender works through the narrative of *Manasaputri*<sup>57</sup> or *Daughter of the Imagination*, which has been among the most popular Malayalam serials to be telecast on a private cable networks in recent times. Finally, I explore the ways in which women engage with *Manasaputri*, particularly the polarised female subject positions enunciated by the leading characters.

I have chosen *Manasaputri*, directed by Baiju Devaraj and telecast on Asianet, in order to explore viewer engagement with the serial text in Kerala not only because *Manasaputri* textually activates an order-disorder binary outlined in the case of the K-serials but because the serial narrative itself rests on the moral juxtaposition and polarity of its principal female protagonists - unlike the K-serials with its principal narrative objective being the reclamation of the Hindu joint family – cited as the principle reason for its immense popularity among the Kerala audience. Unlike the K-serials that already posit an ideal Hindu joint family, *Manasaputri* engages in positing the ideal conditions (the ideal daughter) that may help constitute an ideal (Hindu middle-class) ‘Malayali’ family. Crucially, class differences seem to converge in and work alongside women’s appreciation of the dominant female subject positions offered by *Manasaputri*.

## 8.1 TELEVISION AND THE IDEOLOGY OF ‘MODERN GENDER’

In discussing the ideology of modern gender in contemporary Kerala, I take up as a starting point, critiques of Kerala as a State of paradoxes, manifested, particularly, in a ‘gender paradox’. As a society whose model of development has been for long

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<sup>57</sup> *Manasaputri* is a term coined by conjoining two words – *manas* (mind) and *putri* (daughter). Therefore it may be literally translated as ‘Daughter of the mind’. However, given that the story rests on the construction of an idea of the ideal daughter, the word mind does not entirely capture the element of idealism inherent in the use of this term as the title of this serial. I therefore prefer the translation ‘Daughter of the Imagination’, a term that captures not just the ideal construct of daughterhood that is central to the serial narrative but also one that accounts for the process of negotiating and reimagining this ideal by its audience. *Manasaputri* connotes a daughter who belongs to everyone and yet to none as she is a creation of the mind.

touted to have produced social and development outcomes on a par with the most advanced societies of the West without following a concomitant trajectory of industrial modernization, Kerala's 'state of paradox' has been increasingly leveraged in debates that seek to critically interrogate the 'Kerala Model of development' – characterised by high social development indices despite low economic growth. The State's gender paradox is seen to be reflected in the simultaneous presence of conventional indicators of high social development such as 'total' female literacy, health and falling fertility rates amidst gender-based violence, dowry-related crimes and the high incidence of suicides among women. Despite high human development indices, including weaker taboos on women's employment and rapid acceptance of smaller families, these have not brought greater mobility to women or expanded their life choices (Erwer 2003). As Usha VT, in an analysis of television fiction in Kerala writes, "Going for a cinema to a theatre calls for prior planning and preparation especially... if the cinema goer happens to be a woman. Perhaps she will have to take permission from the head of the household and get a willing and agreeable company of friends too" (2004:9). She further writes that as a form of entertainment, television is particularly suitable for women as it brings self-reliance, giving her an independent means of entertainment where she doesn't have to seek a male escort, incur expenditure on tickets or transport and secure social sanction in any way (Usha 2004:9).

Indeed, the fact that going to the cinema in Kerala continues to be marked as a distinctly, even normatively, male-oriented form of entertainment, works, alongside general restrictions on women's mobility, as a form of containment of women's social freedom and consequently a visible facet of Kerala's gender paradox. As the Osellas write in their analysis of Malayali men's movie-going, there is a "relative absence of women from cinematic arenas" in Kerala:

"...Malayali cinema - unlike Hindi counterparts - does not have female stars...girls and women participate less strongly in cinema-going and *fillum* culture; and...females are entirely absent from fan clubs and fan activities. More than a mere absence of women, the community of males appears to be reproduced and defined here in a belligerent opposition to women, as young men aggressively embody and mimetically perform hyper-masculinity in the

space they take as their own and make uncomfortable for young women - the street” (Osella & Osella 2004: 26).

Analyses of Kerala’s gender paradox have included a mapping of the discursive conditions that led to the formation of modern gender identities in Kerala (Devika 2002); their insertion into and articulation with the civil and political societies in the context of specific development initiatives by the State and the consequent transformation of these spheres as both gendered and gendering (Devika 2005) and critical evaluation of the changing familial structure and family micro-politics as crucial instruments of mediation that can reveal the continuities in this apparent paradox (Eapen and Kodoth 2002). At the heart of these arguments that seek to analyse the gender paradox is an acknowledgement that a blurring has taken place between the public and the domestic with the rapid spread of disciplinary institutions since the 1930s; however there is no explicit consensus on the contingent nature of that permeable relationship. These arguments do not address the possibility that the blurring of the domestic-public divide in Kerala that came about as part of the State’s project of fashioning modern governable subjects is, in an era of accelerated neo-liberal economic reform and the rapid withdrawal of the State, one that is subject to reconfiguration from within the terms of the domestic and the familial. In the post-liberalisation period, television in Kerala, I argue, is central to a re-inscription of the familial onto the modern gender regime, thereby shifting the terms of the permeability between the public and the domestic. Television serials in Kerala mark the domestic sphere or the family as the domain of a certain kind of Womanliness, which enables the protagonists a public-ness - by which I mean both access to and conduct in the public domain – that is defined in and through familial goals and needs; meanwhile the outside, the street, the public domain which is also the arena of movie-going, continues to be normatively marked as male – and only conditionally available to women. Familial womanhood rearticulates the terms of the permeability between the domestic and the public, investing the domain of the domestic with a new gendered resonance.

### **8.1.1 Re-defining the paradox**

Through much of the late twentieth century, conventional gender development measures seemed to merely formalise what had become legendary - women in Kerala

enjoy a more egalitarian system of gender development, with some outstanding gains to show in the sphere of health and education on a par with the State's male population. As Kerala topped other Indian States in measures such as the Gender Development Index released by the United Nations Development Programme, it was attributed to the traditionally 'high status' enjoyed by women in the State and their role, historically, in social development (Jeffrey 1992). The State's long tradition of a matrilineal system, social reforms and literacy and high educational levels for women were perceived to be decisive in the achievement of this gender parity (Rajan and Sreerupa 2007). However, non-conventional indicators of gender development – that measures women's relative power and autonomy - revealed that in terms of household decision-making and mobility, Kerala women lagged behind their counterparts in less literate states such as Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. Further evidence of gender disparity trickled in as the decade of the 90's progressed – there were rising incidence of gender-based violence, especially sexual crimes, suicides among women and an increase in dowry-related crimes. Together, these growing gender disparities came to be described as Kerala's 'gender paradox'. Of these non-conventional indicators, I have chosen to focus particularly on women's low social mobility as it constitutes one of the most visible measures of women's social freedom.

In popular media discourse the 'gender paradox' has found expression in various ways - through investigative reports, first-hand accounts of sexual harassment, the extended reportage of sex scandals, particularly high profile incidents of women's sexual harassment and so on. The case of Nalini Netto, a high-ranking civil servant within the Ministry of Transport who was officially punished (transferred) for lodging a complaint of sexual harassment against the then Transport Minister Neelalohithadasan Nadar and that of P.E. Usha, a Kerala University non-teaching staff member who had to face a long-drawn-out vilification campaign launched against her at the Calicut University after she filed a sexual harassment case are, in recent memory, two such incidents widely covered by the media. Typically, in both these cases, the media has narrativised the manner in which the women who raised their voices against sexual harassment were in turn hounded, penalised and silenced by the very system that they hoped would provide them relief and succour. The message was loud and clear: anyone who dares to complain will not only have to fight

a protracted battle for justice but also risk being simply reduced to a spectacle at the end of it all.

From January 30 to February 3, 2004, the *Malayala Manorama* newspaper ran a series of articles which were the result of an investigative journey by six of its women journalists who were attempting to answer what seems like a most unlikely question in God's own enlightened State – How safe are women in Kerala? The narrative of their journeys turned out to be chilling accounts of a State that seemed pathologically prone to harassing women in public spaces. In a State that prides itself on its outstanding record in education and health for its women, all the journalists recounted stories of humiliation, fear and pain in exercising what seems the most basic right of every citizen – the right to free movement. One article recalled a reporter's experience in the following manner:

“On January 14, as soon as she boarded the general compartment of the Chennai mail at 3.30 pm from Kollam (about 70 km from the state capital Thiruvananthapuram), the reporter became the centre of attention. She was the only woman in the compartment and hands began reaching out to her from all directions. While she held on to a seat to balance herself, the passenger seated there decided to push himself back and rest his head on her hands. Those passing by made it a point to finger her, en route. Sensing danger, hurriedly she moved towards the door. But the ordeal was not over. A man was sitting near the door, extending his legs casually across it, in such a manner that she had to cross over them to reach the door. On her request, he moved one leg and as soon as she moved forward, he kept the other leg intact, restraining her between his legs. The reporter requested several times and tried to push the leg with her bag, but bore no result. She was almost in tears when she could finally move out.”<sup>58</sup>

The article sparked off an unprecedented response from the public, with the newspaper's letters page flooded with responses from people attesting, with their own experience, to the veracity of the articles and many leading women in the public eye

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<sup>58</sup> Sreedevi Jacob. 'Malayala Manorama exposes Kerala's men', February 15, 2004. <http://www.thehoot.org/web/home/searchdetail.php?sid=1044&bg=1>. Accessed April 22, 2009.

recounting their own tales of harassment<sup>59</sup>. The political response from the upper echelons of the State machinery was unprecedented too, if predictable. As Sreedevi Jacob writes in ‘The Hoot’, “on February 9 (the reports ended on February 3), the Chief Minister flagged off a special motor cycle squad called Kerala Rangers to nab eve-teasers. Each of the 75 bikes in the squad will have a wireless, first aid, siren, mike and weapons to tackle the criminal. State Minister for Industries PK Kunhalikkutty<sup>60</sup> announced that the social welfare department was ready to lead actions for the safety of women.”

Five years later, on March 9, 2009, *The Hindu* in an article titled ‘Breaking the stigma with elan’ quoted a small group of women activists leading a march on International Women’s Day to re-claim the Thekkinkad Maidan (grounds), considered a ‘male-bastion’ after dusk: “Outings after dark are now the prerogative of men. Most places are unsafe for women after sunset. Women face unwelcome glances and even advances if they venture out after dark.” The fear that pervades women’s lives in Kerala is naturalised to such an extent that the lack of safety at night, essentially a fundamental curtailment of their right to free movement and social freedom, is re-articulated in popular discourse as stigma, a fact that this newspaper report reflects. And the anti-eve-teasing squads seem nowhere in the picture.

Even as the media underlines the so-called paradox, Kerala’s neat gender statistics continues to unravel – even the high sex-ratios prevalent in the State that were on a par with gender-sensitive societies in the West are showing signs of abating, with sex-selective abortions of the female foetus rising at an alarming rate, particularly among

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<sup>59</sup> In an interesting juxtaposition to the public response in this instance, there is the hitherto undocumented case of the film ‘Ente Sooryaputrikku’ (For my Sooryaputri) which haunted popular imagination in the late 1980s, when the film’s theme – a young woman who, unloved and abandoned by her mother, a highly respected professional classical singer, sets out on a mission to re-claim her right to be recognised as daughter - provoked a public outcry. The outcry was not against the theme per se but the portrayal of the young protagonist as an ‘angry young woman’ who rebels against her abandonment and ‘orphan’ status by roaming the streets freely at night with her girl friends. The film is ultimately about the domestication (and traditionalisation) of this angry young woman by her mother, who now realises that she had done a grave wrong in placing her career above her primary duty as mother, a role she performs only secretly and inadequately as her daughter was born out of wedlock. In the wake of the release of the movie, news stories began to appear about young girls eloping from hostels or breaking disciplinary codes inspired by the example of Sooryaputri, followed by calls to reinforce stricter discipline in girl’s hostels.

<sup>60</sup> Kunhalikkutty, who is one of the leading figures of the Kerala Muslim League, was among the first accused in a sex scandal involving a minor girl.

affluent families. All of this raises the question – how have these discontinuities in the status of women in Kerala ossified into a paradox? What does paradox or even disparity in the Kerala context really suggest? Does it suggest a state of stable contradiction, an equilibrium, a bind? Is this a dynamic or a static equilibrium? What are the discursive conditions that have produced, and hold, this gender equilibrium in place? The next section attempts to trace the discursive constitution of Kerala's gender equilibrium. Drawing on J. Devika's historical account of Kerala's modernity (2002;2005;2007), it suggests that overwhelmingly, gender relations in Kerala evolved within the project of democracy, particularly the shaping of governable subjects. However, I argue that a historical inquiry into Kerala's gender paradox needs to account for both the historical changes in Kerala's family structure which has had both direct and mediatory influences on gender relations in Kerala (Eapen and Kodoth 2002), but also how the (middle-class) family has been a crucial site of discursive mediation, acting as a node of articulation between gendered 'Individuals' and civil society and consequently a crucial determinant of both the nature and extend of the former's insertion into and articulation with the latter. I prefer to describe the so-called gender paradox as an equilibrium as it makes visible the contradiction in the condition of women as part of the system of gender relations in Kerala and not just as a condition internal to a category called women. It further captures the condition as both specific to, and reinforced by, particular conjunctural moments, as the next section argues.

### **8.1.2 'Modern gender', community reform and the shaping of governable subjects**

The period of inquiry into the emergence of a modern gender ideology in Kerala or the 'en-gendering of Individuals' (Devika 2007), relates to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries - periods of heightened social and community reform in Kerala and concomitant efforts to shape 'gendered', governable subjects. This period of reformism can largely be seen as comprised of responses to attempts at the colonial modernization of Malayalee society, which roughly began with British rule in Malabar<sup>61</sup> in the 1790s. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the arrival of missionaries from England

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<sup>61</sup> The several chiefdoms that existed prior to the arrival of the British were reduced, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, to three major political units – the District of Malabar of British India in the north, the small

and other parts of Europe to ‘civilize’ natives; missionary agency advanced new ideas of culture, justice, morality and economy and led to a critical rethinking and appraisal of the local society, its hierarchies, power structures, sexual mores and so on. Alongside emerging debates about the need to modernize the caste groupings or *jatis*<sup>62</sup>, which were the primary groups accessed by the State for the purposes of governance and which also constituted fundamental modes of organising society, missionary education created the need for members of communities to simultaneously act as citizens. Thus the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the first glimmer of a nascent public sphere, which, with the rapid expansion of modern education by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had transformed into a public sphere where ‘public interest’ emerged as a dominant concern and issues came to be debated within its terms (Devika 2007:6).

In this nascent public sphere, challenge was mounted against the old order undergirded by the *Jati* system in terms of an image of society where gender difference was seen to be a superior form of ordering society rather than a system that privileged status by birth or inheritance, in other words, the *Jati* system. Thus there was tremendous pressure put on the State by community movements to modernise familial and inheritance practices, particularly ‘anomalies’ such as matrilineal practices and to conform to standards that were ‘civilised’, ‘natural’ and truly ‘Indian’ (Devika 2007:5). This did not mean jettisoning the *jati* system; far from it, this involved facilitating its entrenchment as a modern form, articulated within the terms of ‘public interest’. And within this nascent public sphere, ideas of modern domesticity and conjugal life were increasingly circulated and debates about women’s ‘natural’ space became a prominent feature of discussions about ‘public interest’ within the framework of community reforms.

The expansion of literacy and the reading public meant that women entered the realm of modern education and professions such as teaching and nursing by the 1920s. And yet the emergence of women’s magazines since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the mushrooming of *Stree Samajams* or Women’s Associations seemed to place women in special slots indicating that the public sphere was already a gendered and gendering space. In other words, the early twentieth century public sphere in Kerala promoted a

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state of Kochi in the central region and the state of Tiruvitamkoor or Travancore in the south - that were united to form the State of Kerala after Independence in 1947.

<sup>62</sup> Internally heterogeneous, hierarchical and tightly bounded caste groups that were hierarchically linked with other *Jatis* with little or no mobility between them.

discourse of the modern Individual as “already-gendered”, possessing inherent and natural gendered capacities. Women’s magazines thus addressed a population that was assumed to have certain natural ‘capacities’ that were ‘womanly’ but which were nevertheless to be nurtured and developed. “Women’s Magazines defined for women a domain projected as direly in need of capacities that were specifically ‘Womanly’—the domain of modern domesticity” (Devika 2002:8).

Thus in the public sphere of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, women figured mostly in debates centred on the modern domestic domain. However, by the 1930s the rapid spread of disciplinary institutions such as schools and hospitals resulted in a distinct blurring of the public-domestic divide. Womanhood began to be increasingly associated with a form of ‘Womanly’ power or ‘gentle power’ rather than a specific domain (Devika 2007).

Simultaneously, however, an ‘order of gender’ that emphasised sexual complementarity held sway through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the 1950s, its effects were paradoxical in that it was used to both argue for and against women’s entry into popular politics. So while it was argued that women’s capacities were best suited to the domestic domain, it was also, as in the case of the ‘liberation struggle’ against Kerala’s first Communist Ministry in 1959, argued that women could participate in such popular political movements as they were ‘guardians of the home’ and ‘keepers of the social conscience’ (Devika 2002:16). As Devika points out, in arguing for a space for women in the public domain, the movement was significant, but the space granted was not that of popular politics but an apolitical space of ‘social work’<sup>63</sup> (2002:37).

However, this dominant order of gender that stressed sexual difference and complementarity with respect to the domestic-public domains coexisted with a new discourse of ‘Womanly power’ that made possible the expansion of women’s social spaces without compromising their ‘inherent womanliness’. In representations of this alternative gender regime, a key role was assigned to women’s ‘inborn capacities’ that

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<sup>63</sup> Editorial, ‘Streekalude Samoothyadutyam’ (The Social Role of Women), *Nazrani Deepika*, September 20, August 2, 1959.

give rise to her ‘natural authority’ within the household where she wields sentimental power.

As far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the public domain itself was being recast – it became “a reticulation of different institutions that shaped their subjects through non-coercive power, the power of words and emotion” (Devika 2002: 16). Beginning with the re-conceptualisation of the State as a benevolent and protective parent figure in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the institutional advocacy of the powers of compassion, persuasion, caring and giving had become hallmarks of the modern school, hospitals and even the community reform movements by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was precisely these qualities that were attributed to women in debates around gender at the time although this did not immediately result in the opening up of these spaces to women. But by the 1930s women’s ‘natural capacities’ were being articulated as reasons for their entry into modern institutions; thus this new form of gentle ‘Womanly’ power began to displace the discourse of the domains. In other words, women’s presence in the public domain has been extendable to any institution as long as it was perceived to require the deployment of gentle power.

This association of womanhood with a form of power rather than a domain meant that the man-woman relationship too was reinscribed as not just a complementary one but also a competitive one. Devika argues that this signalled the early appearances of a dichotomy that “continues to endure, shaping countless narratives that populate everyday reading, seeing and hearing in contemporary Keralam — television, cinema, serial novels in ‘popular’ magazines etc” (2002:22). In aligning (normative) womanhood with gentle power, the woman who failed to display these qualities and was seen to be “acquisitive, aggressive or competitive stood clearly condemned as one who disrespected Womanliness” (Devika 2002:22).

Thus from being a risqué subject of domains deemed outside women’s purview, entering which meant losing any sex-specific considerations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to being a risqué subject of a form of gentle power, the perceived jettisoning of which at any point will result in her forfeiting her claims as Woman, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, womanhood in Kerala remains incarcerated in discourses that while metamorphosing to seemingly yield more social spaces to women, continues to trap them in a regime of highly individualizing disciplining. As Devika writes:

“Then, the moment a woman became a subject of the modern literary institution, she must lose any special considerations entailed by her sex ; now, the moment she renounces altruism she loses her special claims as Woman. Indeed, such a woman must stay outside society itself” (2002: 23).

The onus of proving her normative womanhood now lay on each woman. Even the leftist cultural challenge of the 1940s and 1950s failed to make any dent on this new womanhood, leading instead to an ultimate sidelining of gender issues in favour of issues of class.

The re-inscription of this highly individualising form of womanhood was integral to both community reformisms and interventions by the State in the form of social welfare. As Devika explains, this “individualising power acquires increasing acceptance through the figure of Woman, who is projected as the agent of a form of power that does not seem to be power at all” (2002:27). And more importantly, this new womanhood was not always an inclusive category. In fact its highly individualizing discipline created types of work that were deemed un-Womanly, an example being the production and sale of liquor, a domain perceived as unambiguously ‘not-Womanly’. Professions such as singing and dancing had to undergo a process of ‘sanitisation’ before becoming acceptable.

In effect, the history of gendering promoted by civil and political societies in 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala reveals an enduring proclivity towards disqualifying women as full citizens or limiting them to a citizenship mediated by a domestic-oriented Womanliness (Devika 2005). By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, women’s issues began to be articulated as part of ‘democracy’ particularly in the People’s Planning Campaign (PPC), with its stated ambition of mainstreaming gender justice and integrating it with local development initiatives. This was a move contiguous with late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century initiatives to uplift women as part of community reform movements in that yet again women’s freedom was sought to be posed and resolved entirely within the terms of a ‘collective welfare’ underpinned by the public-private dichotomy informed by sexual complementarity (Devika 2005:7).

While on the surface, the community reform movements promoted reforms to familial and conjugal arrangements in an effort to ‘modernize’ them, in reality reformisms worked to assign women a supervisory role within the family, treating female

education as an instrument that could produce efficient homemakers and attractive wives rather than as a tool to expand women's autonomy or freedom. In this scheme, female agency was effectively tied to the domestic realm and any measure of freedom in terms of education was always promoted as part of a discourse of 'social need'. As Devika writes, "the 'woman question' was resolved not in favour of women's autonomy and equal participation in community life and citizenship" or what she terms the framework of 'modernity', but in terms of 'social need', which later became an important element of democratizing initiatives such as the PPC (2005:11).

In fact, even as early as the 1930s women active in the Freedom Movement themselves considered the demand for full civic freedoms for women as too narrow a goal when compared to the larger goal of general emancipation. Thus even as the goal of obtaining full civic rights for women as equal citizens was being edged out of their arena of concern by community and class movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women civil social associations such as *Streetsamajams* jettisoned all intentions of articulating women's interest as equal citizens and aligned their objectives closely with that of the modern family and women's roles as mothers, wives and homemakers.

Women's magazines, which enjoyed a powerful revival in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century did little to articulate women's interests in terms of citizenship, working instead as formidable instruments that promoted a flattening of the ideology of modern gender as natural and unassailable, while simultaneously unwittingly exposing its faultlines. By the 1990s the unprecedented expansion of mass media renewed and gave currency to 'women's perspective' although this rarely amounted to a critique of patriarchal structures with the only exception being the Malayalam literary field, which has seen an ongoing critique of the effects of patriarchy since the 1950s against tremendous odds (Devika 2005, Arunima 2003).

In the public sphere this was reflected in an acknowledgement of the ethical correctness of the feminist position on issues such as sexual harassment, dowry and domestic violence but was not accompanied by any corresponding consensus in positions on the issue. This was in contrast to the consensual support that women's associational activities received when they suggested overt links to familial well-being and domestic upward mobility; in other words when women's civic

mobilisations did not involve any questioning of familial power structures and did not seek for women the status of full-fledged citizens (Devika 2005).

In a reflection of these entrenched tendencies, the PPC, while attempting to include women as participants, drew on their participation by principally locating them as agents of change within families and therefore within civil and political society. The PPC or democratic decentralization in Kerala and indeed the Kerala Model itself eventually evoked a sense of well-being that was constructed through the conjunction of a particular kind of politics with a particular kind of female subjectivity; ‘politics’ in this instance has denied women parity of participation in public life (Devika 2005:30-31).

### **8.1.3 Television and the ideal of Malayali womanhood**

In the 1990s, the expansion of the media and the insertion of Kerala into a globalized economy of consumption normalised the hegemony of images of domestic-oriented womanhood through an accelerated circulation of such images while simultaneously exposing its deepening internal faultlines. These deepening fault lines reflect the presence of the young westernized female as a key figure in the articulation of global capital with specific sites of consumer agency (Lukose 2005). The growth of the beauty and fashion industry has been a key component of the insertion of gender into the geography of globalized consumerism. Analysing a ‘Miss Kerala’ pageant staged in the State capital Thiruvananthapuram in the 1990s, Lukose observes that the performance of Malayalee femininity demanded by the beauty contest invokes post-colonial discourses of binarism between tradition and modernity operationalized through a specific bodily habitus of young middle class women in these globally-inflected spaces of consumption (2005). “The content [of the contest] required a performance of the “traditional” comportment and habitus in a public space which collided with other (“modern”) bodily demeanours — walking as in a fashion show, but somehow doing so while wearing a *pawada*” (Lukose 2005:930). Ultimately, the pageant, a globally-inflected space of consumption, was attempting to construct a hegemonic Malayali femininity, unambiguously marked as ‘traditional’, middle class and upper caste. The modern, young Malayali woman exposed to new geographies of consumption and interested in fashion shows and beauty pageants must learn to navigate these new spaces of consumption through a gendered performance that speaks to the hegemony of a ‘modest’ and ‘respectable’ Malayali femininity.

In Kerala, television has been an important site for the melodramatisation of these fissures and contradictions and for the enunciation of an ideal and normative Malayali womanhood. The rapid growth and expansion of television in Malayalam since media liberalisation in the early 1990s, has been characterised by the rising currency of women-oriented narratives and their dominance over other programme formats for over a decade now. The success of reality shows has somewhat over shadowed the popularity of these narratives but television continues to be a citadel of women-oriented narratives. As the Director of Amrita Television Sudhakar Jayaram commented in a 2006 interview, “Malayalam television is ruled by the female audience”<sup>64</sup>. Making its debut in 2005, in a television market of which nearly 70 per cent was dominated by Asianet and Surya channels, Amrita Television spends between Rs.65,000 and Rs.200,000 on any one episode of its bouquet of serials, according to Jayaram. Asianet, which has emerged as one of the largest media outfits in the South Indian television market, thanks to tie ups with transnational players such as Star tv, has televised some of the highest grossing serials. As the first privately owned Malayalam channel, Asianet popularised women-oriented narratives through *Stree* or ‘Woman’, the first ‘mega-serial’ to be telecast in Malayalam.

Telecast five days a week, the success of *Stree* surpassed that of all other serialised fiction on Malayalam television, running into nearly 400 episodes by the time the curtains fell in June 2000. *Stree* captured the imagination of middle class women in Kerala in a manner that even popular magazine fiction could not. It narrated the story of Indu, a young woman who marries for love in a violation of social and familial norms. Educated, intelligent, beautiful and modest, Indu soon wins over the members of her husband’s family through her polite and self-effacing ways. Devoted to her husband beyond all else, Indu is however prematurely separated from her husband when he is implicated in the murder of Vijayan who attempts to violate Indu. Pregnant with their child at the time of their separation, Indu raises their child on her own deriving comfort and solace in her upbringing, remaining devoted to her jailed husband through it all. When faced with unwelcome advances from other men, Indu’s calm and accomodative demeanour would transform into that of a courageous and firm woman, well-prepared to defend her honour and chastity in the midst of grave

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<sup>64</sup> Interview by Bijoy AK posted on [http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k6/executive/sudhakar\\_jayaram.htm](http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k6/executive/sudhakar_jayaram.htm), August 21, 2006.

provocation. In this way years roll by until circumstances conspire to bring Indu and Hari together once again. However, instead of a happy reunion, Indu has to come to terms now with the shocking discovery that Hari had, under the influence of his family, remarried after being persuaded of the futility of waiting for Indu. Instead of being angry or disillusioned by the turn of events and despite having waited for this moment of reunion for years with an ascetic tenacity, Indu is now prepared to relinquish her legal and conjugal rights in order to avoid upsetting her husband's new life. Her devotion to her husband and her love for him is such that she does not want to be a burden on him and is willing to even give away her child who had also been her only source of companionship and happiness all these years in order that her husband can lead a full life. Indu's story was such a huge success among its largely female audience that Vinaya Prasad, the actress who played the part, became an icon and symbol of ideal Malayali womanhood; Indu and Hari became synonymous with the ideal couple. And *Stree* broke all records for Asianet in terms of viewership and revenue from advertising, earning the channel more than Rs 5 lakh (\$10,000) a day, until it was taken off air in June 2000<sup>65</sup>.

"Hers was the serial that changed the semantics of television serials....she was the original *sthree* [woman] on Malayalam television. Scores of women suffered with her, cried with her and laughed with her." This extract, from a report published in *The Hindu* on November 18, 2005, marked the return of Indu's story as a sequel 5 years after it was taken off air. Earlier, in 2003, Yantra Media, the producers of *Sthree* had launched a new serial casting all the women protagonists of *Sthree*, in a bold, new light. This came in the wake of the failure of a sequel to *Sthree* – *Sthree II* - that began on Asianet after *Sthree I* went off air in 2000. *Sthree III* or *Sthree Janmam (Born as a Woman)*, as it was called, told the story of three young professional women and their struggles on both the professional and personal fronts. Vinaya Prasad, who played the docile Indu in *Sthree I* was recast as a truth-seeking, risk-taking and outspoken journalist. However, *Sthree III* was unsuccessful and was pulled off air not long after.

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<sup>65</sup> In *The Hindu* dated June 15, 2000, this is reported as follows: "Asianet says it had jacked up the advertisement rates from the initial Rs 8,000 to Rs 12,000 for 10 seconds. Advertisements have been filling up at least seven minutes of each 30-minute episode. And according to the quoted rates, the channel has been earning more than Rs 5 lakh a day and Rs 1 crore a month (other sources report, however, that the revenue has been much higher)".

The fourth version of *Sthree* which began telecasting in 2005 told the story of a middle-aged Indu and Hari and their family life, particularly how Indu has to struggle to protect her family from her nemesis Gladys, a young woman, westernized in her attire and deportment, who cons Indu's son into believing she loves him and marries him in order to gain entry into the family to seek revenge for the death of her father, believed to have been caused by Hari. In surveying the *Sthree* series telecast on Asianet, it becomes evident that the producers have tried to recreate the success of the first instalment of the soap opera without success. In fact, the failure of more 'progressive' avatars of Indu, the female protagonist who achieved cult status as the ideal Malayali woman following her debut in *Sthree I*, makes it tempting to describe Kerala's television audience as regressive. As Shyam Sunder, the Director of the production company Yantra Media pointed out in an interview to [Indiantelevision.com](http://Indiantelevision.com) in 2004, experimentation with bolder roles for women as in *Sthree Janmam*, indeed any drastic variation from the formulaic plot such as a male-centric plot in the serial *Snehanjali*, have failed to capture the audience's imagination and met with failure.

Despite a flurry of media articles on the *Sthree* phenomenon that had gripped the state in the early first half of this decade, there are few answers as to why women prefer a docile, self-sacrificing Indu to a bold and outspoken Indu who demands what is rightfully hers. As the *Sthree* series continued to be reinvented without success, the producers seemed to finally settle on a plot that brought back Indu as her docile, unassertive, struggling self with one important difference. In a reflection of the K-serial plots, Indu had to now deal, not with fate or villainy personified as men, but with a female antagonist. This new good woman versus bad woman formula, however, did not find its biggest success story in *Sthree IV* but in another serial on Asianet called *Manasaputri (Daughter of the Imagination)*.

Before discussing *Manasaputri*, a brief analysis of the most successful version of *Sthree* will be useful in tracing out the Hindu, upper caste ideal of Malayali womanhood that it seeks to make normative. By the late 1990s, the popularity of K-serials on Star Plus had inaugurated a successful trend of women-centric narratives that placed ideal(ised) couples at the heart of the narrative – Tulsi and Mihir of *Kyunki* and Om and Parvati of *Kahani* are two examples.

Indu and Hari had become household names and were emblematic of the ideal couple whose union the audience deeply desired. Indu's separation from Hari is like that of Sita and Ram - incidental and unfortunate and the result of villainy by an outside agent Ravana/Vijayan. Like Sita and Ram, Indu and Hari reunite only to be separated again. Like Ram who placed duty to his kingdom above his wife, Hari is, against his better judgement, influenced by his family into a second marriage. Like Sita, who brings up her twin sons in exile handing them over to their father at the appropriate time so that the Kingdom is not without an heir, Indu is prepared to give away her daughter so that Hari and his new family can flourish. In giving away her own child and relinquishing all claims as wife and mother, she attains a living martyrdom, invoking the legend of Sita who wills the earth, her mother, to devour her so she can return to the womb from whence she came.

Indu's limitless sacrifice, obedience and devotion to her husband when juxtaposed with her firm courage (only) in the face of unwelcome sexual advances invokes an ideology of 'gentle power' and serves to construct an idealised womanhood that is the repository of altruistic 'womanly' qualities. Indu's only show of courage was in self-defence. As Devika writes, the 'womanly' woman – working within and alongside institutions that uphold the law – was seen to be far more obedient to modern law than men (2002). And for this very reason, it was only natural that as the *Sthree* venture progressed with at least four sequels, Indu's character was no longer confined to the domestic space.

In its third version, Indu was transformed from a demure housewife into an outspoken journalist, upholding the rule of law alongside two other protagonists, a police officer and a doctor. Yet, while in the professional domain she is a paragon of bold and independent decision-making, when it comes to crucial moments in her personal life she is compelled to rely on the emotional support and decisions offered by male members. As Usha explains in her study, Indu's decisions in a professional capacity are often sympathetic to women in helpless situations but she never displays independence or smartness in her personal life, particularly in the presence of male authority - a surrogate father or husband (2004:15). "The initial show of confidence and assertion quickly gives way to a version of the *Stree* of the earlier serial [*Sthree* I]. The tale of sacrifice and suffering takes over" (Usha 2004:15). This version of *Sthree* underlined the impossibility of autonomy for women in both the private and

public domains and the need for a choice to be made and a balance to be struck – between authority in the familial domain through ‘gentle power’ and authority in the public domain. Usha observes that television surveys at the time pointed to a sharp decline in viewer interest in this bolder version of *Sthree* and soon after it was pulled off air.

In the fourth and last offering of *Sthree*, telecast in 2005, the familial once again becomes the centrepiece of the narrative. Indu and Hari are now middle-aged couples trying to manage their large family. The familial becomes a domain where the ‘womanly’ woman – Indu – is sharply highlighted through juxtaposition with the ‘unwomanly’ woman – “the woman who failed to display altruistic qualities and seemed acquisitive, aggressive or competitive stood clearly condemned, as one who disrespected Womanliness” (2002:22). Usha describes this ‘unwomanly’ Woman as rebellious, independent in thought and reckless in deed, dressed in tomboyish clothes and ruthless in demeanour (2004:15). “She gets punished for her unseemly behaviour, gets betrayed by her men (husband, father or son) for whom she had shed her modesty. But she regrets her unseemly behaviour towards the end of the story, turning over a new leaf or making amends for her misdeeds” (Usha 2004:15). This good woman versus bad woman formula has since become the staple of Malayalam serials. As K Pradeep reports in *The Hindu* dated November 18, 2005, “*Sthree* was a trailblazer. It triggered off a ‘soap culture’ in Malayalam television. ...*Sthree* forced the film folk to hit the panic button, with associations going to the extent of taking a hard stand against film stars acting in soaps.” The formula, which had already become a central narrative feature of the K-serials, however, found unprecedented success in Malayalam only with *Manasaputri*, whose protagonist and antagonist, were for the first time rivalling for popularity.

## 8.2 MANASAPUTRI: IMAGINED DAUGHTERS OF KERALA

The manner in which the serial *Sthree* has been reinvented and received by its audience following the success of its first avatar highlights the way in which discourses about Malayali womanhood produced within the space of the familial in the context of serial viewing, strongly realigns the discourse of ‘gentle’ womanly power – which had facilitated the blurring of the domains to help expand women’s spaces in civil and political society in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala – once again with the

familial. The discourse of a certain ‘Womanly’ power is once again brought to articulate with the sphere of the domestic. More importantly, this gentle womanly power is brought into alignment with the familial through the figure of the antagonist or the vamp or the ‘unwomanly’ woman whose actions, usually inimical to the interests of the family, serve as a catalyst that activates this gentle womanly power with which the protagonist then attempts to salvage the familial realm. As Usha observes in her study, such a juxtapositioning of female protagonists was not the hallmark of serials telecast initially on private satellite channels such as Asianet: “...Camaraderie among women is highlighted regardless of class or caste. Hostility as is often shown among men is not depicted in the case of women” (2004:16). At the time, this was a major difference that serials in Malayalam seemed to have in relation to the K-serials which with its Manichean formula held the Hindi-speaking audience in thrall.

However, in *Manasaputri* this Manichean formula has achieved such success that both the protagonist Sophie and her nemesis Glory are equal contenders for popularity among the serial’s audience who are largely women. While Sophie through her self-sacrifice, devotion, unspoken love and gentle persuasion – all in the service of her family – is perceived to be real and yet ideal, a “dense point of transfer” of desirable qualities that epitomize ideal Malayali womanhood, Glory is seen to represent all that is unwomanly and hence un-Malayali and through her ruthless ambition and manipulation comes to represent the source of familial disharmony and destruction. The sections that follow outline the plot of this highly popular serial, the notions of ideal and deviant womanhood that it offers and the ways in which its audience negotiates with its construct of ideal Malayali womanhood. As the narrative has progressed, the central protagonist Sophie has had to transform herself from a home-bound persona who serves the other family members into someone that can negotiate financially with men in the big bad world of business. I argue that although in this way the narrative proposes an expansion in women’s access to the public domain, given the rising visibility of women in the national work force especially in new spheres of activity that are entrepreneurial in nature, it articulates the need for such expansion in wholly familial terms. In this way, it explores the plausibility of expansion in women’s access to the public sphere not only through the invocation of a ‘gentle power’ through its ideal Malayali protagonist Sophie but by aligning this

gentle power with objectives that are in the final instance intended to secure familial well-being rather than expanding women's choices or freedoms. Indeed, women's access to these new spheres of activity becomes necessary for the well-being of the family; it becomes necessary for the ideal domesticated Malayali woman to suitably transform her gentle, sentimental powers in order to ethically engage with these new spheres of activity. Normative Malayali womanhood is in effect brought to ineluctably align with the domestic domain.

### **8.2.1 *Manasaputri*: The story of the ideal daughter**

*Manasaputri* is the story of Sophie and Glory, two girls who grow up in an orphanage as inseparable friends until Glory discovers that Sophie's future could change for the better, and realises that in the process, she could be left behind. Glory finds that Sophie has, in her possession, documents that could prove that she is actually the daughter of a wealthy industrialist and only heir to his large estate. Glory decides to appropriate the documents and claim that she was in fact the long-lost daughter of Devan, the entrepreneur and Sandhya, a women's rights activist. Born out of wedlock, Sophie was left by her mother Sandhya in an orphanage after she was separated from Devan, who later married Yamuna. Having appropriated the crucial documents, *Manasaputri* narrates the story of Glory's entry into the Devan-Yamuna family. Her sights firmly set on inheriting and taking over the company and estate under Devan's ownership, the narrative plots her ruthless machinations to achieve her objectives at all cost. With her tremendous business acumen and ruthless ambition, Glory uses every means at her disposal – people and resources – to realise her goals. Upon realising the subterfuge, Sophie finds out her mother Sandhya's identity and address and requests her to take her in as a domestic help. Thus in her own house, Sophie leads the life of a domestic help. She cooks and cleans for her mother who, unaware that she was being served by her own daughter, is shown to treat her quite harshly at times.

Yet Sophie's love, devotion and mentality of service wins her an admirer and lover in Prakash and as Glory's friend, a doting motherly figure in Yamuna and an equally loving father figure in Devan. However, the happiness does not last as Glory senses a threat in Sophie's increasing acceptance within the family and her elevation to something more than a friend and a domestic help. Glory embarks on ruining the little

happiness Sophie had managed to find by just being near her mother. She manoeuvres Sandhya into mistreating and humiliating Sophie. Through all this Sophie is tenacious, speaking little in her own defence or revealing her true identity as Sandhya's real daughter. However this silent suffering comes at a great cost as Glory in one victory after another manages to turn everyone against her, even managing to force Prakash to get married to her rather than Sophie by threatening to get rid of Sophie if he did not yield. However, Sandhya who in the meantime discovers that Sophie was in fact her own daughter, begins to keenly observe Glory's actions and the motives that might lie behind them. But her fear of losing Sophie to Devan prevents her from revealing her daughter's identity.

As Sophie continues to lead the life of a domestic help at her mother's, gradually discovering that Sandhya had also come to realise her true identity as her daughter, Glory ruthlessly pursues her plans to take over the Devan estate. Her plans are upset, for a time, when her true parents, an impoverished, working class couple, arrive to claim her as their daughter. Despite all this, in cohorts with gangster Tobias, who is also an employee at 'Devan Associates', Glory finally succeeds in taking over the company, forcing Devan and Yamuna out of their own house. Realising Glory's true identity and history of subterfuge, Devan and Yamuna embrace Sophie who they now know to be their real daughter, moving with her into a humbler setting. At this juncture, the narrative shifts dramatically as the manipulative tactics used by Glory forces Sophia to reevaluate her quiet, unobtrusive and passive stance towards events that have been destroying her loved ones. She decides on a firmer, more decisive and competitive but ethical path towards reclaiming her father's legacy which Glory had appropriated through fraud. Even while silently enduring her disinheritance and orphanhood by deceit and forfeiting her parents and her lover, Sophie is not inspired to take up a more vocal, decisive role in her own defence. Sophie's new avatar is not inspired by the need to defend herself or reclaim what is rightfully hers but only to fight on behalf of her father, a defeated man robbed of his dignity, wealth and even mental equilibrium. Her war on Glory is unambiguously being waged to restore her father's business empire and with it his former glory. Sophie has a voice and an active presence in the public domain solely because her father has lost his, thanks to an aggressive, ambitious and ruthless former daughter in the person of Glory. Sophie is

able to and decides to access a new domain of activity only at a time when her father is no longer able to do so.

As the story stood at the time of writing, Sophie was hunting for resources to start a new business. Her new active stance is not supported by her mother Sandhya who despite being a women's rights activist feels that Sophie is unnecessarily putting herself at risk. However, with the moral and emotional support of her father and step mother and in a sharp foil to Glory's style of conducting business, Sophie adopts an ethical stance in her quest for success in the domain of business. Like Glory who had the perfect accomplice in the cantankerous Tobias, Sophie too, has a male partner and help in this new enterprise – the upright and fearless Adarsh, who is the husband of Deepa, Prakash's estranged younger sister. Fighting for her father Devan with the help of Adarsh, the path ahead for Sophie will be determined by a single overarching objective – the restoration of her family's former glory.

### **8.2.2 Sophie, the Malayali daughter**

To women who love the serial, Sophie is the *manasaputri*, the daughter who belongs to everyone, the girl who is loved and empathised with, and the girl who is idealised and idolised. As the lyrics of a jingle promoting the serial proclaims she is the daughter of the soil. Her appeal cuts across differences of class and age, as working class and middle-class women rallied in her support as though she represented their ethos more distinctly.

As Ponnamma, a woman employed in coir-spinning work in the predominantly working class community of Thoppilbhagam explained, one aspect of the narrative that had left an indelible emotional impression on her was Sophie's frugal life even in her own house: "Sophie lives like us, does all the domestic chores, unlike glory who doesn't do any household work and is a spendthrift. I don't agree with that. We work hard to live...not to spend aimlessly". Here Ponnamma does not perceive Sophie's frugal domestic life as opposed to Glory's opulent and very outgoing lifestyle as a gendered representation of ideal womanhood versus deviant womanhood, but appropriates it as one that pits a working class ethic of hard work and frugal living against an upper class life of excess and waste. And although she admits that these are

performances that are the result of the concrete allocation of roles where Glory is “performing what is given to her”, she seemed to be pre-occupied with Glory’s rejection of her working class, ‘real’ mother:

“Glory is doing it [the role] well...she is now denying that Ammini is her mother. She says Ammini can’t be the one who gave birth to her; her mother can only be someone better. In yesterday’s episode Glory says that if Ammini is truly her mother then there is no point in even living...I want to see what happens; when will Glory be thrown out and Sophie get her rightful place”.

Ponnamma’s investment in the narrative was repeatedly expressed in her desire not only to see Sophie get her rightful place as daughter of Devan and Yamuna and as heir to their estate but to see, in addition, a melodramatic justice done. She explains that her primary interest in the story is to see “what will happen to Sophie, who she will prefer to be with. And there is a desire to see Glory go with her poor parents”.

Ponnamma and her husband manage a group of women workers from the local community who engage in coir-spinning at their house. They are among a privileged group of people in the area who own a television set. Often, people come to her house to watch tv. She often watches tv with a large group of people – family and neighbours - who squeeze themselves into her small living room and on the verandah of her house. This usually includes her husband, her two sons in their early 20s, one or two women in the neighbourhood who do not have access to a tv, another man, a coir worker, living next door, and the women who work for her. It was nothing unusual then that in her conversations about watching television, she spoke in the third person plural ‘We’ rather than ‘I’, invoking a sense not just of her views but of the local community itself. She recalls an incident in the story that has really stayed with her and other women she has spoken to: “When Sophie becomes the victim of lies and is put in jail - all that felt so painful for us. Having lived such a hard life we want her to get a good life”.

Sophie’s appeal is especially strong among young girls in Thoppilbhagam, who associate her with ideal Malayaliness, particularly because her character speaks to a Malayali womanhood that has not already been achieved but as one they should grow into. Yet, in their expression of admiration for Sophie and the Malayali womanhood-

in-the-making that she represents, there is some implicit critique of her inability to exercise an independent voice in moments that threaten her dignity, self-respect and future. While the idealism of Sophie is appropriated as real by young women, their implicit critique, however, is relatively weakened as it is attributed to the fact that it is a part that has been given to 'Sophie' that she is playing well. As Vanaja, a young woman in her late teens, who discontinued her studies after class 10 and was now mulling the possibilities before her, felt that Sophie was the most moving and likeable character in the serial but expressed her bafflement at Sophie's passive stance at crucial moments in her life as an almost unreasonable reason for liking her because it represented her skill at performance:

"Sophie...is playing the character given to her very well. Even when her real parents are standing right in front of her, she is not claiming them as her parents. Even when she is being cheated and abused by glory in front of her parents she is not openly saying that she is the one. It makes us sad. She does not express anything openly, keeping it all to herself and coping with it all. Yet she maintains silence and suffers silently....because she is doing it for her father. Because Glory and Tobias will not allow her claim easily. So that's probably why she is keeping it all to herself".

Expressing at first her dis-identification with the 'ideal' protagonist and her simultaneous and ironic support for the character, Vanaja finally attributes Sophie's stance to a prudent agency on her part – the result of a recognition that a more vocal and active stance might be unsuccessful in the situation that obtained at the time. But despite pitting realism against performance and suggesting that but within the realms of a performance it would have been impossible to not claim one's (her) real parents as one's own or tolerate manipulation and abuse when it can be exposed, Vanaja idealises Sophie and judges herself in relation to that ideal:

"When I see the serial I think if I have done anything wrong in life, I wish I were a daughter like Sophie to my parents - I think that quite often. If I could become a daughter like Sophie, had her qualities - I do think that way".

While the narrative has shifted and Sophie is no longer her earlier tolerant self, it is her role as an ideal daughter that continues to determine her choices. Her new-found outspokenness and courage, which though found wanting in her earlier had still

elevated her in the estimation of her audience as an ideal girl, continues to consolidate her as the representative of a womanliness that can enter the public domain and new spheres of activity in that domain conventionally considered male bastions if it is in the service of the father and the family. And the identification that young women in Thoppilbhagam feel in relation to Sophie is so powerful that where she is seen to stumble or fall short of expectation, it was often voiced as a failure that let them down too or a hurt that pained them too. As Vanaja describes two separate incidents in the narrative,

“...Sometimes you think in this situation I would have done this, so why isn’t she doing the same. I do think that way. Like when Glory gets Sophie to massage her legs in front of her own mother, you wonder why she isn’t reacting. She is dancing to her tune and we wonder why she is doing this.”

“When Sophie disappeared on fine morning. She was taken from the house by someone. That was very hurtful. Only two days later we came to know that it was Tobias [who did it]. It was an unforgettable incident.”

Sophie has captured the imagination of older women, particularly mothers, who can see her as representing a universal daughterhood, an orphan who could be anyone’s daughter. Such are her qualities that she endears herself to everyone in the narrative; there are only two kinds of parental figures in the narrative - those who either readily sees her as a daughter and those eventually embrace her as their daughter. As Veettamma from Thoppilbhagam described her affection for Sophie:

“She is from the orphanage. She hasn’t seen her mother and has suffered because of that. Then even when she understands who her mother is she is not able to claim her as her mother.”

Sophie’s voicelessness becomes a reasonable feature of her origin and her journey to surpass that origin, a journey that women viewers of the serial find meaningful. But her desire to find her parents and the unending trials and tribulations she faces in achieving that ever-receding objective also transforms her into an unreal ideal. As Veettamma explained, “nobody will suffer like her. But the reason she does it is [...] But no girl will suffer like her. All the cruelty that Glory does to her, no one will tolerate that.” But Veettamma and other women in Thoppilbhagam identified with Sophie’s experiences in terms of their class positioning. As Veettamma explained:

“What I remember most is Sophie’s pain when Sandhya behaves cruelly towards her. That remains in my mind. Before she finds out Sophie is her daughter, her behaviour towards Sophie is like her behaviour towards a servant. All those instances – beating her, humiliating her in front of Glory....”

As Ponnamma too had explained earlier, what they really want to see is whether Sophie will get the wealth, her parents and the good life and whether justice will be done and Glory will go with her poor parents.

In the more upper middle class neighbourhood of Jawahar Nagar, Sophie’s appeal did not seem to relate in any way to her lack of wealth or the life of servitude that it entailed. Here, Sophie’s appeal lay in her struggles for acceptance as a daughter. This was best reflected in Kunjamma’s descriptions of her engagement with the narrative. Kunjamma had been a resident of Jawahar Nagar for over a decade, living with her husband, a Gulf-returnee, and two children – a boy and a girl. Although she lived with her husband, theirs had been an estranged relationship for years and can only be described as transactional, at best. Kunjamma felt that her husband had not accepted her children as his own and continued to save his affections for his son from a previous marriage. According to her the interest from his savings did not contribute in any substantial way to the children’s upbringing or education. She, as a housewife, was forced to resort to lending money on interest or selling vegetables from her home garden to meet those expenses. Her struggle, hardwork and thrift paid off in the end. While her son was able to migrate to the gulf and find a job there, her daughter was recently able to secure a place in a pharmacy college in the United Kingdom.

Although Kunjamma’s marital experience and her life story is by all means an unusual one in a conservative neighbourhood, her engagement with the narrative of *Manasaputri* was not unusual. Descriptions of her engagement with, and interest in, the serial and particularly Sophie made it clear that she brought her personal narrative continuously into play in her negotiation with the serial narrative.

“You learn about the lives of so many other women...if I miss it I really feel low...It tells you about the struggles that women go through. You feel sad when you see all that, when I think of Sophie I feel very sad. Without seeing her mother she suffers so much. Her mother recognises her and she recognises

her mother. Now she has to find her father. She will find him but her father has to recognise her.”

Her description of Sophie’s appeal as a daughter and her interest in the lives and struggles of the women in the serial traces, in many ways, her personal journey. The struggles that the women go through struck a chord and mirrored her own life experience. The deprivation of parental affection in the case of Sophie, particularly her reflection – “she will find him but her father has to recognise her” – closely echoed her sentiments about her daughter being deprived of fatherly recognition and affection. And further, like Sophie who was subject to harsh treatment from her own mother when she still hadn’t recognised that Sophie was her daughter, Kunjamma felt that her own daughter who unlike her husband understood her mother well could have been given more affection while she was still at home with her. Watching *Manasaputri* meant seeing her own daughter in Sophia. And when I pointedly ask her if that was the case this is how she responded:

“[Laughs]. Yes. When she is here with me she is always annoyed with me, hurt or angry with me. Now when she is away I feel I shouldn’t have said all the things I told her. I feel terrible [starts crying].

[Recovers.] She is always sad that her father doesn’t care about me. She says she doesn’t even like coming back to this house because ‘he doesn’t treat you well’. She phones me and says *Amma* [mother] you should take your medicine, eat well, take care of yourself. In those moments I think I should have never scolded her. Haven’t said anything wrong, after all I am her mother. But she doesn’t like to be scolded. ...She is ambitious. She wants to prove herself to her father. He is always saying the children are useless, good for nothing, always discouraging them...when I see the way other children get their father’s love it distresses me. My children have not had that blessing”.

It was such a narrative of struggle - struggle above all for love and acceptance - that principally drew Kunjamma to the narrative of *Manasaputri*. Watching the serials, her own struggles in life no longer seemed to be isolated experiences. Women, in general, seemed to live a life of struggle even if it was in relation to experiences within the family. Comparing her life to the serial she said: “My life is even more debased

(*nikrushtam*), even more challenging than the serial...But I do think of my daughter when I see Sophie.”

However, the character in *Manasaputri* she most identified with was Yamuna, Sophie’s step-mother. Yamuna and Sophie are seen to be women of a kind – accommodative and composed, nurturing and sentimental and devoted to authority figures such as father or husband at all costs. Most married women found Yamuna to be representative of an ideal wife and indeed she was their favourite character too. When asked why they preferred her over the other characters, the spontaneous responses from women were all strikingly identical – they loved her for being large hearted enough to accept as her daughter a girl born of her husband by another woman. Here are some of the responses:

“[I like her] because despite knowing that her husband has a daughter by another woman, she accepts that daughter as her own.” – Nanimani

“I like Sona Nair (Sandhya) but I really like Been Antony (Yamuna). She is a nice lady, very affectionate to the daughter. I like Yamuna because she is so devoted to her husband, loves him, is honest with him, sincere...looks after his affairs and loves his daughter just as her own although she is not her child.” – Kunjamma

“Yamuna is also good. She and Sandhya get along well so we like that too.”<sup>66</sup>  
- Ponnamma

Yamuna, like Sophie, does not respond in self-defence even when humiliation is heaped on her by her own husband or Glory. As in the case of Sophie, women like Nanimani, Ponnamma and Kunjamma find her passive, taciturn agency meaningful and defensible. Kunjamma explains Yamuna’s silence on one particular issue - the real identity of Devan’s daughter:

“She knows what her husband will go through when he hears of the truth. She doesn’t have the strength to see that. So she prefers him to hear it elsewhere; even if she says something he won’t believe because Glory is not her daughter. He [Devan] will think she is making up her faults”.

In this way, Yamuna’s unwillingness to speak up is seen as a consequence of the specific conditions obtaining in the family at the time. Thus her taciturnity becomes a

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<sup>66</sup> Here Ponnamma is referring not just to Yamuna’s acceptance of a child born out of wedlock and from another woman but also to her accommodative stance towards Sandhya, who is her husband Devan’s former lover and mother of his child Sophie.

quality and the oppression and humiliation that Yamuna has to take on herself as a result is erased as a temporary unreasonableness or rudeness on the part of the husband. As Ponnamma explained Devan's actions in the previous day's episode:

“Yes yesterday he slapped her [Yamuna]. He dragged her from Sandhya madam's house saying she should never go there again. Neither is he giving her a chance to prove her honesty. Even when the vigilance people catch the money Glory hides in the pooja room and the suspicion falls on Yamuna, Devan doesn't believe that Glory is the one who actually did it”.

Or as Nanimani explained, “I don't like it [Yamuna's silence in the face of humiliation] but... (laughs) she is patient. Remember, Sandhya Menon tells her, ‘Be patient, or you'll lose your daughter - Glory might kill her’. And perhaps it is that fear that is the reason why she is tolerant of everything”. Women understood and explained Yamuna's passive stance along the same lines – that her silence was a deliberate choice borne out of a recognition that her outspokenness might be detrimental to the happiness of her family.

In many ways Yamuna is projected as a more ideal mother and wife that ordinary women can easily identify with in comparison to Sandhya, the women's rights activist whose incipient mistake – bearing a child out of wedlock – and her subsequent quest for independence without concern for her child was responsible for Sophie's orphanhood and suffering.

Even while knowing that her husband had a child by another woman, Yamuna is willing to accept that girl as her own daughter. It is this tolerant, accommodative and loving womanhood that Yamuna exemplifies that will help right the mistakes committed by mavericks like Sandhya. Indeed, the narrative often throws up the question – are such mavericks any use to society? Sandhya seems to have struck out on her own, and gained a respectable public profile.

But in times of need – especially when her daughter is in danger - she is portrayed as incapable or unwilling to use the power that comes with that profile, merely threatening to use them to little avail. When in what is the only instance of an assertion of authority on a personal and professional level Sandhya attempts to shield Yamuna from Devan's increasing tyranny after he disbelieves his wife's account of Glory's subterfuge, it results in an unprecedented estrangement between the couple.

Both her past, as Devan's lover, and her present, as a single working woman and mother of his child comes to haunt and disrupt a family.

### 8.2.3 Glory and Sandhya as 'other' women

Glory is the anti-thesis of Sophie. While the latter tries to create and sustain her own and other's families Glory destroys families and familial relationships in order to achieve her objectives. Indeed, her objectives are achieved only through a destruction of families and familial ties. While Sophie's actions become possible and meaningful only if it is in the service of the family, Glory's actions are seen to be both consistent with the character and meaningful to the audience only when it is self-serving and naturally, destructive of the family. Wherever she sets her foot, havoc ensues. As Ponnamma described Glory's destructive powers: "Yamuna and Devan have no peace in their life. No *Swasthatha*. Glory is the one responsible. Even Prakash's household has no peace". However, Glory is appropriated in subtly different ways by women in the working class community of Thoppilbhagam and the more upper middle class neighbourhood of Jawahar Nagar. Sandhya, while being appreciated for her performance, is like Glory, seen as a factor not entirely desirable in the constitution of the happy family comprising Devan, Yamuna and Sophie. Glory and Sandhya are thus the 'other' women, women who cannot in any way be a part of the ideal middle class Malayali family. More importantly, in different ways, class differences converge in condemning Glory as an affront to all Malayali women.

In Thoppilbhagam, Glory is perceived as a spoilt representative of the elite, whose destiny rightly belongs with the working class as her real parents are working class people and because her wasteful and profligate approach make her worthy only of that more difficult existence. As Ponnamma said, what she really desires to see is when Glory might be thrown out and "Sophie will get her rightful place". Sophie is seen as a true representative of the working class, whose destiny rightly belongs with the elite class because her character even in the midst of a life of struggle and hardship make her worthy of that sort of elevation. As Ponnamma explained why Glory deserved to get a working class life and Sophie a better one,

"Because she (Glory) loves money. Sophie is living such a difficult life. Its Sophie's begging bowl that Glory has snatched from her. Glory has snatched

Sophie's life. So Glory should go with her (poor) parents. And Sophie should be with Devan and Yamuna....Glory wants to live at the cost of others lives. So she should go with her (poor) parents".

In Thoppilbhagam Glory is, alongside a destructive presence, a ruiner of family peace and happiness, a representative of elite profligacy and corruption, especially its disastrous effects on familial harmony and happiness when it is exemplified in a woman. Vanaja explained this as follows:

"Wealth is the main issue there. Prakash, Deepa and family lead a good life but it is with Glory's entry that that home was destroyed. So wealth is the problem there. It was a happy family that lived in harmony but Glory destroyed it".

Glory's independent foray into the world of business in order to achieve her partisan objectives is ultimately destructive of families. Indeed, she ruthlessly uses family relationships to achieve her goals. Vanaja's assesses Glory's ruthlessness:

"She is doing the character given to her very well. But it is not possible to imbibe or accept that character. Because when a woman fights against another woman it is like a challenge to all of us; cheats her for the sake of money and does a whole host of other cruelties that a woman should never do to another woman. So that character is simply not acceptable."

In contrast, when Sophie finally decides to also test out entrepreneurial waters, she does so in order to save her family from ruin. Her foray into the world of business, clearly dominated by men, is motivated solely by the need to protect and salvage her family from ruin. At every stage, her decisions have the welfare of her family and those dear to her at its heart. Indeed, she would have never decided to get into business but for the need to save her family from ruin at the hands of Glory. The class-based negotiation of *Manasaputri* is reflected in a reading of the narrative in other terms too. The central choice in the narrative was seen to be between money and relationships. Or, as Vanaja termed it, between wealth and love:

"In the serials the struggle is all about wealth...Then there is a lot of value given to love in serials. And, wealth. The father and mother love their

daughter for the sake of love but the daughter loves for the sake of money. She is even prepared to kill the father. So the serials give value to loving relationships”.

The character Glory, however, is liked for being a good performer. Women spoke of how well the actress playing Glory performed, but equally spoke of how she was an unpalatable character. She was seen as an embarrassment to women as a whole, the anti-thesis of all that was Malayali, which was indeed in some ways, a reflection of the fact that the actress herself was a non-Malayali. As Kunjamma observed, “She used to anchor on Kiran tv at 1 in the noon - she can barely speak Malayalam. Now I don’t see her anymore, maybe because she is in *Manasaputri*. Should see the dresses she wears, you feel ashamed. But everyone likes her - she acts very well”.

This appreciation for Glory as purely stemming from her performance was in stark contrast with the kind of appreciation expressed for Sophie, who was simply admired for being Sophie and therefore being real. Glory was seen as a good performer but Sophie was seen as a good daughter. Both among the upper middle class women of Jawahar Nagar and the working class women of Thoppilbhagam, Sophie represented ideal Malayali femininity, a rallying focus that articulated with and through their differential class positioning to reaffirm a familial womanhood/daughterhood. She was never seen as Sophie, the actress and Sophie, the daughter – the two were inseparable, unlike the reception of the character Glory. ‘Womanly’ agency is reaffirmed as desirable when it operates for and with the family. That womanliness is also seen as the marker of Malayaliness. The protagonists become real and desirable in direct proportion to the perceived strength of their Malayaliness. As Vanaja explained this in relation to *Manasaputri*:

“Glory doesn’t have even a bit [of Malayaliness] (laughs). She is an affront to all girls. Her very arrival on screen provokes shame in us. Then Yamuna has Malayaliness. Sandhya has Malayaliness. We can be proud of these three [Sophie, Yamuna and Sandhya]. They have done it well – in their talk, looks, smile, in everything, they reflect femininity. They have done it well. Women can be proud of the way they have done these characters”.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of the discursive levels that operate in Kerala women's engagement with the Malayalam serial *Manasaputri* I have tried to trace the manner in which the ideology of 'modern gender' operates in Kerala through the televisual field. Television serials like *Manasaputri* have revived polarised notions of womanhood, and work to insert women into the public domain in familial terms. The familialisation of normative womanhood, which forms the discursive centrepiece of women's engagement with the televisual narratives, cutting across class differences, reinforces the familial nature of women's access to civic spaces and the gendered nature of women's citizenship. In a socio-economic context where women are normatively part of the workforce, women's access to new spheres of activity such as entrepreneurship becomes necessary for securing the well-being of the family. Ultimately, the terms of permeability between the family and civil society are re-deployed in a manner that re-centres the family as the central feature of women's participation in civic spaces. A family oriented womanliness comes to mediate ideal Malayali womanhood and circumscribing within its terms women's full-fledged access to citizenship.

## Chapter 9

### CONCLUSION

#### SERIAL-VIEWING AND THE CONSTITUTION OF FAMILIAL CITIZENS

“The subaltern, says Gramsci, is those who do not achieve the State”. – Gayathri Spivak, W E B Du Bois Lecture Series, November 17, 2009<sup>67</sup>.

The feminisation of television in India, since the early 1990s, has catapulted the image of the familial woman to the epicentre of a contemporary repertoire of gendered representations, drawing in a wide range of media platforms including the internet as its vehicle. The Indian ‘middle-class’ has constituted the principal audience of this complex and regionally discrete process of feminization, directing and constituting its course and its current. The deeply gendered and gendering effects of the televisual representation of women as familial facilitates the legitimization of familial womanhood as a normative ideal across familial and civil society domains. The centralisation of the family and the televisual hegemony of familial womanhood mediate middle-class women’s civic participation by closing off both discursive and performative access to alternative and resistive spaces of civic engagement and citizenship. As (gendered) citizenship entails being (legal) and becoming citizens (Lister 1997), like gender performativities (Butler 1990), being and becoming a citizen involves iterative performances of citizenship in material-semiotic practices (Braidotti 2003, Elovaara and Mortberg 2007). Women in Delhi and Kerala discursively and performatively affirm and appropriate familial womanhood as a normative performance of gender across familial and civic spaces, facilitating their insertion into civil society spaces and institutions as ‘familial citizens’.

“Every citizen with a sense of human dignity”, Gramsci writes, is aware of “the right to protect at all costs his freedom to live, to choose his own way of life, to select the activities he wants to pursue, and... the right to prohibit curious outsiders from poking their noses into his private life” (Buttigieg 1995:9). And yet, Gramsci reminds us, dominance is propagated through the creation and dissemination of a “*forma mentis*”

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<sup>67</sup> See <http://dubois-online.org/video/gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-w-e-b-du-bois-lecture-series-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-0>

or commonsense which is embodied in the State and appears as order or more precisely as order that appears as orderliness itself (Buttigieg 1995:12-13). Thus Gramsci argues, groups that are out of power are persuaded by the prevailing *forma mentis* to pursue their goals in a manner that does not threaten the basic order or orderliness. In a prophetic assertion of the malaise underlying the current financial turmoil dogging the United States Buttigieg writes that in the U.S. context this common sense involves:

“...the notion that the social order can be perfected through ‘fair and open’ competition...It...makes the revolutionary idea of eliminating competitiveness (i.e., greed) as the primary motivating force in society seem unreasonable, unrealistic, or even dangerous” (Buttigieg 1995:13).

Civil society in such a context represents a terrain to be occupied, assumed and appropriated in a pedagogic project of transforming ‘common sense’, an effect of the prevailing *forma mentis*, into revolutionary ‘good sense’ ” (Wilderson 2003). A successful counter-hegemony would involve the expansion of civil society to the extent that it ultimately displaces the State.

The deeply gendered and domestic nature of civil society participation that middle-class women in urban India perform and articulate at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century fails to expand their presence and visibility in civil society arenas. They occupy civil spaces under the condition of familiarity, retreating from potentially subversive civil spaces and refraining from challenging threats to their own security. The orderliness of domesticity they consent to represent through their engagement with televisual texts disallows them from performatively and discursively participating in disorderly civic spaces. Although feminists have persistently repudiated the liberal conception of universal citizenship as really a gendered form of citizenship that utilizes gendered hierarchies while purporting to be universal, this stream of work has also argued for valuing women’s caring, emotional work at home as a performance of citizenship responsibility and one that should carry social rights (Lister 2003). While motherhood has ineluctably been co-opted into the nationalist project by ruling elites in the colonial and post-colonial period, with the collapsing of categories of gender and nation becoming commonsense discourse, women’s domesticity has not been tied to

the notion of citizenship, even as the concept continues to wear the patina of universality.

Soap operas in India could very well serve as a text book case of recovering women's spaces, and serve as (Western) feminist ammunition against the liberal conceptualisation of citizenship and as material for an expanded notion of politics given that it seems to value and accord a central place to women's domestic responsibilities. They even seem to hint at organic links between ideal motherhood and civic duty and provoke subversive mimicry and embodiment of the vamp, albeit within the confines of the domestic, feminized space of kitty parties. And yet, this thesis argues, in the absence of a depiction of corresponding social rights and the negation of gender performativities that are not family centric, contemporary women-oriented serials work to accentuate the gendered nature of women's participation in the public arena by closing off spaces for oppositional discourses, and subversive performances, of citizenship. For the urban middle-class woman, serials are both entertaining and pedagogic, providing pointers for specific gendered negotiations of familial and non-familial spaces; the civic domain and citizenship itself are hostile, disorderly, un-familial arenas whose norms and practices are best left unchallenged. Visibility and mobility in such arenas are in fact legitimately secured only through the normative invisibility of familial womanhood. The subversive embodiment of the vamp in domestic, kitty party gatherings, co-opts women's oppositional stance to the normative womanliness offered by television and does not translate into protest or challenge to oppressive street regimes and consequently into civic action. In fact, the centralisation of the familial narrative and women's crucial role in maintaining familial harmony and unity has helped generate a discourse of order versus disorder among women, where they suggest an equivalence among familial womanhood, the middle-class family and order and between the non-familial woman, the street (as the arena of mobilization and protest), and disorder. The family thus symbolises order and is set up in opposition to the street, an arena of potential civic activism and disorder; the familial woman is thus naturally in opposition to the non-familial, activist, woman.

The televisual opposition that is created between family and civic arenas helps co-opt ephemeral, domestically contained, subversive embodiments of womanhood while

pre-empting the extension of women's oppositional and subversive embodiments to spaces of civic activism. The feminisation of television mediates middle-class women's insertion into civil society by offering familial womanhood as normative to their gendered performance of citizenship, stymieing full-fledged access to and the possibilities of exploring non-familial, disorderly and disruptive performances of citizenship.

Middle-class women's discourse on the meaningfulness of family and the limitations and possibilities of their embodied performances of familial womanhood through local, domestically contained modes of sociality directs attention to the need to evaluate the role of a powerful mediating institution such as television that positions women as citizens whose civic agency is directed towards coping, conforming and complying rather than challenging, contesting and disrupting. Television's valorization of familial womanhood, I conclude, has worked to facilitate its deployment as a domesticated performance of gendered citizenship, emptying out both real and potential imagined spaces of resistive citizenship that can challenge oppressive gender dynamics and expand women's participation in civic spaces. In this concluding chapter I attempt to summarily collate the various dimensions of middle-class women's retreat from arenas of civic action and activism.

### **Re-imagining the family**

As a representational concept, the family on Indian television has been transformed since the 1980s through to the present era of media liberalisation - from being aligned to the development objectives of the state it has apparently become a televisual subject for its own sake. The family seems to have been unhinged from State-oriented projects and transformed into a reflexive space that faithfully reflects the internal struggles and schisms that mark the middle class family in contemporary India. Yet, this realism that seems to characterise the televisual representation of the family since media liberalisation in the early 1990s draws on the melodramatic form that gained currency with the broadcast of religious melodramas *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* in the late 1980s and in fact depicts the dominant realism of patriarchal familial structures which contest and converge with the daily realities of middle-class women's lives. The familial narrative in contemporary serials places women at the heart of a project to build and replenish the ideal middle class family. It encourages women to perceive the family as simultaneously a locus of struggle and an (orderly) ideal to be achieved.

In this way contemporary serials set up a discursive limit of orderliness within the narrative that offers familial womanhood as natural and commonsense both within the family and outside it, on the street, the locus of disorder and lawlessness.

Women in Delhi and Kerala identify the familial narrative as central to their interest in serials; their chief interest in the familial plot was following narrative threads on how the central protagonist held the family together against all manner of odds, posed principally by the 'vamp'. However, women also displayed ambiguity and contradiction in their narrative engagement with the ideal protagonist, refusing to position themselves as fully complicit or resistive in relation to these subject positions offered by the melodramatic narrative. In this way although they unambiguously accept women's central role in holding the family together, they evinced their interest in alternative modes of womanhood that did not portray women as sacrificing everything for the sake of the family or as utterly dependent on the family. However, despite their ambiguous and contradictory relationship with the melodramatic plot, the family, they agreed was their central concern in both the reel and real world and women's efforts to keep that family together, their chief narrative interest.

Women across lower middle class and upper middle-class neighbourhoods in Delhi identified the familial women portrayed in the serials as both real and ideal. They found the sharp melodramatic polarities of good and evil in the serials plausible and meaningful, in different ways. In Kishan Nagar and Sarkar Marg women performed ideal familial womanhood through the ritual spaces of Karva Chauth, drawing inspiration from the televisual portrayal of this gendered festive occasion. Women aspired to the appearance of the serial stars, attired in rich, luxurious sarees, on the occasion of Karva Chauth and the elaborate manner in which they celebrated it; many of them admitted that the celebration of Karva Chauth had become more elaborate and expensive of late. They interpreted festivals such as Karva Chauth as occasions that help bring the married couple and their extended family together and heal differences and fissures within. Festivals like Karva Chauth, that reinforce the traditional roles of the wife and the husband, were also coming-of-age rituals for younger women who sought to join in the fasting and praying rituals of married women in order to 'get a good husband' and a happy marriage in the future. Ultimately the celebration of Karva Chauth and other festivals such as Diwali helped

reinforce familial orderliness by bringing heterosexual couples and the extended family closer.

In the upper middle class neighbourhood of Sarkar Marg, the monthly held kitty parties became familial spaces for performing oppositional and resistive modes of womanhood. The figure of the vamp was appropriated in distinct ways by the kitty party group, articulating it as, possibly, more heroic and real than the ideal role essayed by the protagonist. Yet, ultimately, unlike ideal womanhood seen as an appropriate performance both within the family and the public arena of the street, the articulation of the vamp remained confined within the resistive female space of the kitty party. In other words, the commonsense of ideal womanliness represented in the serials, seemed legitimate and useful to women across the domestic-public divide notwithstanding their awareness of and desire for other ways of being a woman. Ultimately, the serial's assertion of the centrality of the family and the commonsense realities of their own day-to-day existence made it impossible for women to escape the scene of the family, the performance of gender appropriate to it and most crucially prevented them from discursively reimagining the family and their structural location within and without it. Their ambiguity regarding the role of the ideal protagonist and their embodied, performative and self-mocking critiques of orderliness through the mimicry of the vamp were ultimately circumscribed within their domestic setting, for their normative access and mobility on the street required the performance of orderliness or orderly womanliness. The family, as the site of order, both real and aspired, made it legitimate for women to mimic, satirise and simultaneously celebrate the vamp within the domestic social space of the kitty party. The space of the kitty party allowed them to embody the vamp – donning black *sarees* and black *bindis*, the women discussed how closely they resembled the televisual portrayal of the vamp and how closely they could identify with the vamp – in what Michael Herzfeld calls a 'fellowship of the flawed' (2009:134). And yet this subversive embodiment and 'surreptitious solidarity' had to be left behind in the domestic, feminized space of the kitty party.

### **Familializing civil society: Respectable middle-class women become familial citizens**

Although by the late nineteenth century the 'contractual' family became the normative model for much social theorizing in the West, feminist political scientists

like Carol Pateman highlight the contradictions and antagonisms in the dialectic between the family and civil society resulting from an early reluctance on the part of classical theorists to define family as associational, rather than organic, in nature. As mentioned earlier, Pateman argues that treating the family as the ‘foundation’ of social life and as the point of procreative origin of society and locating it as a corollary to Nature, has debilitating consequences for women’s emergence as full-fledged citizens and their participation in civil society (1994:114). By association with the ‘natural’ family, women are “seen as guardians of order and morality as well as inherently subversive” (Pateman 1994:114). In the Indian context, a “modern liberal democracy” has, far from creating a contractual family, been realized in a state that mostly refrains from defining the family as anything other than natural in its law and policy formulation. The developmental state in India has had to reach out to the vast masses of its population, rather than to its small, elite community of ‘citizens’, in order to fulfil its welfare role, channelling democratic mobilization into the realm of a separate political society, which becomes the intermediary realm between the State and its population while civil society becomes the site of interaction between the state and its ‘citizens’ (Chatterjee 2001).

However, as civil society institutions such as the media continue to mediate between the family and civil-political society, the continued stagnation in women’s participation in electoral politics (at under 15 per cent in the People’s House or Lok Sabha over half a century in the absence of affirmative action) and their selective familial engagement with civil society accentuates the role of the ‘natural’ family in shaping the nature of women’s citizenship. Consequently, maintaining conceptual distinction between civil society and family while recognising the permeability and interdependence of the two realms highlights the engendering of state and civil society through their interaction with the familial, particularly in relation to the constitution of women as citizens. Crucially, it has helped highlight how the preponderance of the familial through mediating instruments like television can ossify prevailing gender hegemonies across both family and civil society.

In the serials, marked as upper-caste and Hindu, the familial woman nurtures relationships and fosters harmony within the family and is thus responsible for both the material and psychic well-being of the family. Such onerous responsibility does the figure of the familial woman in contemporary serials embody that women in Delhi

expressed their desire for alternative modes of womanhood, particularly through their enthusiasm for a new crop of ‘romantic narratives’ where romance leading to marriage is the chief narrative concern, apparently freeing women from the task of ensuring familial solidarity. Notwithstanding its supercilious novelty, the family continues to be a central narrative concern in these new ‘romantic’ narratives too. Crucial to the representation of the family in contemporary serials, is its disassociation from older state-led projects such as development, family planning or civic duty, tropes that characterised the depiction of the national family on the State-owned broadcaster Doordarshan. This erstwhile representation of the family depicted a form of womanhood ineluctably tied to these definitive ‘progressive’ and modernizing projects of the State. At the pinnacle of such depiction of womanhood are characters such as Rajani, the citizenly woman, who leads the daily battle against corruption and red tape and assumes civic duties relinquished by people in her neighbourhood and local community.

Contemporary serials, in centralising the (upper caste, Hindu) family and placing women solely within the domestic terrain, valorise familial womanhood as ideal both within the domestic setting and the realm of civil society. Thus fulfilling familial responsibilities, the narratives suggest, is equivalent to or superior to any other form of engagement with civil society. As ‘Ba’, one of the most loved and long-standing characters in the serial *Kyunki* says, “carrying a large family along as one is the highest form of social work”. While it could be argued that K-serials accord value to the so-called private, domestic realm by centralising women’s familial roles and by highlighting women’s contribution to civil society processes by making visible the emotional and physical work they undertake within families in order to nurture future (male) citizens, in that very representational act, it simultaneously makes invisible, even inferiorizes, women’s own engagement with civil and political society institutions by demonizing female characters who actively seek a public profile, because they inevitably do so at the expense of the traditional family. In other words in investing the family and women’s role within it with unprecedented significance, contemporary serials inevitably set up the family in opposition to the realm of and practices of civil and political societies in India.

In Delhi, women described the struggle of the familial woman in the serials as a reflection of the powerlessness they faced in the public realm, the streets, where

sexual molestation was best avoided than challenged. They described a renunciation of their role as citizens who challenge harassment and molestation on the street as far more preferable to an assertion of their basic civic and human rights to free movement and personal safety. Just as the protagonist in the serials often failed in their long-drawn-out attempts to hold the large joint family together, women in Delhi felt they were powerless to challenge the street regime. Thus Lalitha spoke of how she would be powerless to stop someone who molested a girl her daughter's age in one of Delhi's crowded buses. She feared she might be targeted for doing that in the future; someone might throw acid at her face and burn her for trying to be proactive in public. And Rimi spoke of how the rape of one of the characters in *Kyunki* shook her so much she was afraid to go out into the street for a few days and could only pray at a *Gurudwara* in the neighbourhood pleading for the victim to be somehow helped.

Women in the Delhi neighbourhoods saw their safe access to public spaces as possible only through an extension of and explicit display of their domestic persona as mothers, wives or daughters. Thus Komal spoke of how it would be legitimate if someone verbally or physically abused her for wearing in public clothes inappropriate for her age, for they would not be able to see that she was a mother, a wife or a sister; she would simply be a woman who had relinquished her middle-class respectability by sartorially disassociating herself from all that was familial and was therefore liable to be teased. Even when she walked the streets of Delhi, Rimi described how she sought to circumscribe her body so it does not become the object of desire and subsequent harassment.

The good-bad dichotomies of the melodrama played into these anxieties about the public space too when for example, Rimi differentiates her experience in Delhi's public spaces from that of her friends as one that is essentially determined by character. If one is good and avoids looking around too much then one will not be taunted or harassed; if one is looking for trouble with roving eyes that glance back at men in crowded buses then one is actively inviting trouble. According to Rimi it was a mark of her good character and deportment in public that she had never been taunted or harassed like her friends had been. As Komal, representing an older generation than Rimi explained, if she wears a skirt on the streets of Delhi, nobody will see that she is a mother, a wife or a sister; she will be molested. And that is why in the serials, women wear only *sarees*. In Delhi's lower middle-class setting, the

familial woman was viewed as not only the normative but also the ideal mode of being in public.

According to Gramsci, the analysis of civil society and hegemony are corollary, for civil society is the site of hegemony, the site of struggle for dominance and leadership over the state (Buttigieg 1995:26). By expanding the commonsense of familial womanhood on to the terrain of civil society and citizenship, contemporary serials have hegemonized the familial woman as a legitimate discursive and performative gendered mechanism for mediating middle-class women's movement between the public and the private, between the family and civil society. In other words, the hegemony of familial womanhood across civic and familial spaces makes the familial woman the preferred gendered subject of the state; and middle class respectability becomes a key normative discourse deployed in the process of familializing civic spaces. Thus despite critical awareness among urban women of the commonsense of familial womanhood and their concomitant desire for alternative modes of womanly agency, there is a penury of political imagination, of alternative visions of being a good woman, among women viewers of the serials, drowned as it is in a deluge of familial, middle class, commonsense. Further, in familializing women's visibility in civil society arenas, the process of its de-politicization through its distinction from democratic political society and the erosion of its mediatory role as the site of 'expressed politics' is accelerated. In such a context the inclusive move to increase women's representation in the state and national levels through affirmative action acquires greater urgency.

### **Where class doesn't matter: Becoming the ideal Malayalee daughter**

In the course of this research, I have encountered and depicted a middle-class that is fractious and splintered in its discursive positioning as middle-class, with the lower middle-class often asserting its "middle"-classness and the upper middle-class reminding me of its 'working' classness. And yet despite this stratified positioning, the figure of the familial woman emerged as a discursive site for what might be termed as a commonsense of womanliness. The familial woman, at once normative and ideal, is seen as a way of being and becoming by middle-class women in urban India. The familial narrative remains at the heart of their engagement with television serials and the role of the familial woman the central narrative interest. A familial

agency mediates women's relationship with the space, institutions and ethos of civil society.

In Kerala, where the serials depicted familial womanhood as a project constantly in the making rather than as one already achieved, women identified the familial woman as best positioned to mediate women's movement between the domestic and the public. Thus the ideal daughter was someone always in the making and whose public presence and persona was to be determined by familial exigencies rather than individual gain. And it was this domestic-oriented agency that in turn made her an ideal Malayalee girl. Thus Kunjamma, the middle-class mother from Jawahar Nagar, saw her young daughter's departure from home and separation from her in order to pursue higher studies abroad as a pride-filled response to her father's discouraging attitude towards her rather than as an avenue to expand her horizons as a young woman. It was an opportunity to prove herself to her father and obtain his acknowledgement and recognition just as Sophie, the ideal Malayalee daughter of *Manasaputri*, was now seeking her father's recognition and love through her forays into entrepreneurship.

Although women clearly articulated their awareness of the extreme levels of devotion and sacrifice the protagonists subjected themselves to in the service of the family, asserting even of how it was an impossible scenario in their own lives, their critical awareness is circumscribed by their emotional investment in the legitimacy of familial womanhood. Further, although the class positioning of the protagonists is highlighted through separate narrative threads and sub-plots, it serves to highlight familial womanhood as the ideal choice.

Unlike Hindi language K-serials which has the upper middle-class as its sole narrative focus, class difference is deployed as a central element of the plot in Malayalam serials, but only to be co-opted into the figure of the ideal woman, who serves as a site of class equilibrium, a site where class differences peter out and become invisible. Ultimately serials like *Manasaputri* and *Parijatham* help viewers map unproblematically categories of class and regional identity, which serve as significant symbolic sites in Malayali political culture, onto the ideal of familial womanhood, helping it become both universal and specific. Thus the ideal daughter or 'Manasaputri', a daughter who ultimately belongs in an upper-middle class Hindu

family, becomes a universal figure, easily perceived as part of every Malayalee family.

In this apparent universalization of familial womanhood, the familialization of gender and its mediation of the interaction between the domestic space of the family and the public space of civil society, there is a debilitating domestication of civil society arenas into sites that fail to make way for “invented spaces of resistance”, of dissent and of adversarial citizenship. It further implies that middle-class women who constitute the enthusiastic audience of contemporary television fiction might progressively slip away from grassroots oppositional practices which help invent new spaces of citizenship and accelerate the move towards a more substantive practice of citizenship, helping strengthen civil society institutions and serving to achieve women’s right to full-fledged citizenship.

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