

Women Portrayals in Soaps and Advertisements on Indian Television and the Politics of Representation

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Analysis of representation in television is a key critical approach to understanding of the significance of the medium and the meanings, which it constructs for its audiences. The term representation refers broadly to the depiction of social groups and institutions. It has to do with stereotypes, but it not only about stereotypes. Depiction is not merely about appearance and description but it is about the meanings (or values) behind the appearance. The appearance of representations is a cloak concealing the true form of meanings beneath. Even if they are only electronic constructs, television must be understood as a visual medium that provides us with icons, pictures of people and groups, which at least look like life. It is easy to apply processes of social perception to televisual images. Our perception of others in life is also dominated by an inclination to assign them to categories and to make judgements about those categories. These judgements inform our readings of television representations. There are three experiences through which these judgements may be formed:

The study aims mainly to raise questions with regard to the portrayal of women in Indian soaps, serials and commercials between Hum Log and Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi? Whether major female characters in some chosen television serials and soap operas defy gender stereotyping? Or, do they perpetuate and sustain the status quo of the submissive, secondary and dominated sex within the family and society? Do women characters who defy stereotypes in some way or another throw up positive, progressive and alternative definitions of women? Or do they delineate negative stereotypes by submitting to sponsor or audience demands? The titles of most soaps either consist of adjectives referring to girls and women such as Baa, Bahu Aur Beti, Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Teen Bahuraniyan, Bhabhi or by their proper names that have no surnames such as Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin, Saloni ki Shaadi, Kumkum, Kkusum, Kajol, etc. Why? Why are almost all women in soaps and serials presented and portrayed in exaggerated images of costume and make-up? Do these soaps and serials sustain the status quo of marriage as a monogamous institution? If they do not, how and why do they deviate from the norm? Given the fact that several software producers of television serials today are successful and significant women such as Ekta Kapoor and Smriti Irani, has this helped change the televised image of women for the better, do they sustain the status quo, or, have they worsened the image of women at large on television? In what way are portrayals of women in soaps and serials different from or similar to portrayals of women in television commercials?