

Women In TV Serials

by Iqbal Masud



When one writes on TV and films for an "engaged" women's magazine like *Manuslii*, one tries and sets down one's own slanted or unstated preferences and predilections, although it may appear egoistic to do so.

Is there a "man's point of view" and a "woman's point of view" of looking at reality itself or at "reality" reflected in literature, art or the media. I think there is. This is not the place to elaborate this point. To put it simply : I liked *Adharshila*. It was panned in these pages. I liked the first half of *Kaash*. Also panned in these pages.

Having displayed the cloven hoof, I shall get on with the job of setting down a male critic's view of some of the types of women portrayed in our TV serials.

The TV explosion occurred around 1984-85 From the outset the serial makers were trendy. And one of the trends was "women"—their "oppression" and their "liberation." In fact this kind of "feminism" became an industry on TV. Starting with *Hum Log*, it is going on in *Udaan*. It's time some media student monitored the feminist themes on TV and their variations in an academic manner. What follows is an empirical account of the developing 'woman on TV'.

Hum Log begat the rest. It is not necessary to name or identify the women characters. The point is that most middle class or lower middle class women I know (from age 16-18 to the 40s) identified with one or the other of the characters.

The four main Women character "types" were : the

Grandmother, the Mother, the Elder Daughter and Younger Daughter. Grandmother, with her husband, represented the old world virtues. She was a Rock of Certainty in an uncertain age. Uncertainty caught up with Mother. She did not have the confidence to bring her children to heel, nor the resilience to guide them in the turbulence outside the home. She bowed to her husband's complex character. He was a shiftless man who sang Ghalib and frittered away his life. The typing of Mother points to one of the disadvantages of a soap opera. The relationship of Mother to her idiosyncratic husband—a familiar, one in our society—could not be worked up in any meaningful or significant fashion. ,...

Elder Daughter was shown as a weak, ambitious "lost" girl. She goes to Bombay in search of film celebrity and gets involved in a murder.

She is an interesting type. The original aim of *Hum Log* was to encourage family planning by showing the adverse results of large families. Actually, as popular art, *Hum Log* gave expression to deep, usually unexpressed, longings of the lower middle class. Elder Daughter says somewhere : "I wish a money tree grew in our house so that we could take as much as we want." Remember this is being said in an oppressive, low roofed, Janata Colony house. Ashok Kumar says at the end of this episode : "There's nothing wrong with the desire for money but you must work to earn it." A typical male moralistic sentiment.

Elder Daughter is the typical rootless amoral girl of her class

and time. She is trapped in a moralistic, deprived universe with no opportunity either to fulfil her wants or learn to dream other dreams more relevant to her plight.

Compared to all the TV women who came later, *Hum Log*'s Elder Daughter stays in my mind. Her persona approached "reality" despite the awkward acting and the melodrama. Her misery, her suffering arose so inevitably from her surroundings that it made

The younger daughter didn't ring so true despite a, better performance. She was the precursor of all those "rebels" who were to come later in *Shakti*, *Stri*, *Adhikar*. She struck all the right attitudes, mouthed all the fashionable 'platitudes. She was Theory, not Life. And, finally, she surrendered, howsoever reluctantly, to tradition. In fact, the *Hum Log* lot was happiest, most secure, when gathered together to sing *bhajans*.

Buniyad broadly continued the same pattern in depiction of women. No wonder, since the writer was the same. Writer Joshi excelled at depiction of what may be called Arya Samaji women—dignified, educated, propping up tradition, reluctant to break bonds. Both Anita Kunwar and Kiran Juneja glorified this type. It's interesting to see how Joshi caricatured the "modern woman" in the person of Soni Razdan playing the part of Masterji's elder bureaucrat son's wife. He gave the Razdan "type" low origins—which implicitly accounted for her "unIndian" qualities like selfishness and ambition. When Joshi came to 1947 he revelled in explaining the hypocrisy of the younger generation in the person of Neena Gupta.

To sum up, the women of *Hum Log* and *Buniyad* belong to a specific cosmogony. The "good" women are not necessarily obedient reactionaries. They can be lively, bright, romantic, determined, self respecting. But they work within the boundaries of a traditional culture which they sublimate as "virtue." The bad, negative women are rootless, ambitious, violators of the higher values of life.

What these serials ignored is the fact that even accepting the types, there is considerable interflow between them and a considerable modification of their characteristics in life as it is actually lived.

But an objective observer cannot ignore the fact that these types reached into the psyche of a large number of women with a vitality which subsequent, more "radical" women's serials have been unable to match.

Let's take two of the recent women's serials. *Stri* tried to show the way particular women struggle against a male environment. As against *Buniyad* and *Hum Log*, *Stri* takes a "heroic" view of women. A Tamil woman welder struggles and becomes a factory owner. A Bengali girl becomes a photo journalist. And of course there are the inevitable Kiran Bedi and Vijaya Mehta.

And here's where I begin to question the sincerity of some women's serials. I have been a bureaucrat and am now a

professional writer. Are we justified in emphasising the *womaness* of Kiran Bedi and Vijaya Mehta in their respective careers? Is Kiran Bedi a police official or a *woman* police official? I think she is first and last a police official and has to be judged as such. I remember she appeared quite some time ago on the TV breakfast show and was asked about some women who had complained of police harassment. She bluntly replied: "If they complain of police harassment, why do they come to the police?"

Vijaya Mehta is a promising film director, not a *woman* film director. I know her and her work. Out there in the market she struggles for audiences as much as a man. No hurdles have been placed in her path. She has name and influence and—rightly—uses both.

Stri, in making "heroines" of Bedi and Mehta, forgot that there is a question of class as well as gender. Bedi and Mehta started with advantages far greater than those of the Tamil welder and the Bengali, photographer—and their male counterparts. The palm of the series went to Vijaya Mehta—not to the welder.

Adhikar, with the best of intentions, suffers from a similar confusion. Let us take the episode which concerned a Bombay municipal corporation woman clerk. She was given a bad confidential report by her boss because he didn't like her independence. Now I can say as a former head of department that this is a general issue, not a women's issue. Hundreds of government employees are damned by our vicious, practice of personal bias in confidential reports. By making it a women's issue we are weakening a movement for general reform.

On the other hand *Adhikar*'s episode dealing with equal pay for stenographers was excellent because the persons affected are generally women. This episode also showed how a good director—Jahun Barua—can elevate an episode. The TV medium has its own artistic laws—and a good director can elaborate issues more subtly.

This episode also raised another issue which is forgotten when we talk about women on film or TV. This is the link between the woman question and ethnicity. Barua evoked the Goan background of the stenographer which very subtly was shown as accentuating her alienation at the office.

I think this point is important. In the 70s film *Julie* recently telecast on a Sunday evening, the Anglo Indian community was pilloried. Julie comes to her Hindu boyfriend's house, admires the *puja* and tells her friend's father: "In your house, there's always a sweet smell; our house stinks of fish and meat."

This sequence was passed by Doordarshan's censor who had cut out a lot of songs. And there was not a cheep of protest from TV reviewers at the racist sequence.

While looking at images of women on the media—or at any aspect of the women's question—we cannot ignore the class or ethnic aspect on the simplistic ground that "Well, anyway, woman is the most oppressed in every oppressed class."