

WOMEN IN TAMIL TELEVISION SERIALS

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the representation of women in Tamil television serials and the relevance of the portrayal with the reality of the women in our society. Nowadays television daily soaps are in general irrelevant in the messaging and projection of people, groups and individuals. The way women's personality traits, clothing and education are presented are problematic and disrespectful to women who are strong, independent and brave. Women are categorized as ideal women considering some of the aspects such as being a good housewife, taking care of the house and family etc., which limits the capabilities and capacity of women in our country as it stereotypes and creates an unrealistic bubble of an ideal woman.

The research maps out the way women are being represented and finds out the reliability of the beliefs, ideas and thought process of the women shown in the daily soaps/ serials with the women in real life.

INTRODUCTION

Television serials in the early days

Television first came to India in 1959 but the first ever Television serial/ daily soap to be broadcasted was "Hum log" in 1984 which was based on a middle-class family. There were other very popular television serials of that time which includes malgudi days; chronicles the lives of people living in the fictions town of malgudi, Fauji; story of army men and their training, ramayan and Mahabharat etc. At the very beginning of serials taking over the households, had some really interesting, entertaining and different storyline with each and almost every serial. But today with tv serials having it's own niche and particularly targeted audiences, it has become more complacent and monotonous with the same storyline about a so called middle-class family where there are differences in opinions and treatment and even the same pattern in depicting those stories. Now every other household in India has a television, with atleast one person per house watching the TV serials/ daily soaps which runs for years and years with end number of episodes. TV serials are largely popular among the women or to be more precise, the homemakers. Back in those days, when serials just started, it had some really good, senseful and reasonable stories to offer to attract audience and hold their attention as it was a whole new medium and technology for the audiences to discover and for the makers to attract and it did catch the attention of not just some but a really huge chunk of people/ audiences for the regular consumption of the daily episodes of the serials. As soon as serials started to gain attention and the spotlight, it carved out a cluster of people especially women as their target audience. With the huge and loyal audiences, tv serials, rather than contemplating and producing some breakthrough and exciting stories, it

continued to stick to showcasing the same family drama.

1.2 Content and projection

The content or the storyline is quite different from American tv shows in the sense that Indian tv serials shows a lot of things in the name or advantage of having the creative liberty without any limitation because of the solid numbers in the viewership. So, with these advantages in hand, what and how is society and people are being showcased? Looking closely to some of the most successful tv serials (in India) it can be clearly understood what is the general pattern of these serials storyline and projection of characters, especially women. Indian tv serials usually projects family dramas with problems and struggles that the family goes through between each other and showcases women in two different characteristic features, the faithful, innocent and well mannered one and the one who is devious, cunning and plotting against the innocents. Women are playing the major part in the consumption of the Indian tv serials and yet are being portrayed in the most stereotypical and derogatory way ever. Regardless of the setting of a serial such as urban or rural, the projection of women comes down to the same old fashioned, diminishing and disparaging manner. Women, in today's modern time are with big dreams and aspirations in life and living in a progressive society with equality being considered as a right for every woman. Along with the stereotypes in projecting women, there is a pre conceived notion in our society of an ideal woman, taking care of her in-laws, husband and children and the household with little to no opinion and voice for herself which is being presented in the tv serials. Instead of breaking those pre conceived notion of an ideal woman of what she should do and wear and how she should behave, the tv serials are portraying these pre- determined opinions on the characteristics features of women in an extravagant way with all those jewellery and heavy sarees. As Indians we like to call our country 'modern', 'globalised', 'economically viable' and unbiased when it comes to providing and treating equally or atleast in the process of achieving the earlier mentioned factors. And so, how are we presenting our women in tv serials who holds the majority in the population rate of our country according to the Fifth National Family and Health Survey (NFHSA, 2019 and 2021)?

1.3 Objective of the research

Representation of women in Indian tv serials itself is a very wide topic, so I will be diving deep into the representation of women and will further analyse it. There are various problematic sequences or scenarios in the way of portraying women in the daily soaps and also the way they are being treated in the serial. With tv being one of the most influential medium and our country becoming modern and progressive, keeping both of these in mind what is being catered to the audiences will what be one of the research questions that needs to be addressed. This research will focus on understanding and analysing the portrayal of women in tv serials and the stereotypical characteristic features attached to it.

The following are my objectives for this research:

1. To understand the representation of women in Indian tv serials by studying or reviewing few of the most popular tv serials.

2. To list out the various most prevalent stereotypes in the daily soaps with respect to the projection of women.
3. To study the relevance of the characters of women represented in the tv serials with the women in today's day and age.

This research's overall objective is to break down the projection of women's characters by closely looking into the behaviour, reaction, treatment and dialogues of them in the serials and the relatability of the same with the real- life women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Characteristics traits of women

According to the study done by Himashree patowari (2014), Women in Indian Tv serials are shown as snobs, braggarts who have no clue about the outside world and doesn't seem to discuss anything at all about the outside world and are only into planning and plotting against the innocents, having pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, always wearing heavy, costly, designer sarees, dresses and golden jewellery, always and forever following every religious beliefs and practices, being part of all the quarrels and arguments in the family and the household, wanting to commit suicide if their love has been rejected, attending big fat parties, living in huge bungalows and houses, living an extravagant lifestyle with cars, costly mobile phones and make-ups.

The vamp of anti-heroine where women portrayed as ultra-modern women while she works as a plunging neckline, bold, shorthair, ruthless and villains (Farheed Ahmad 2014).

In a study conducted by Ishdeep kaur (2018), Entertainment programmes such as daily soaps or TV serials represents women as victims of some misery and pain and as someone who always endures a lot and sacrifices a lot.

Women are being projected just as a wish and craving for the men and objectifying them, leading to the portrayal of women coming across in an underwhelming and disparaging manner. Women are portrayed in the serials as a highly educated, nicely behaved young woman who is independent in all ways but eventually gets married and totally changes from independent to being submissive in the household. There comes a sudden shift in the woman's life as she gets married where her priority changes from career to family and going back to the same old stereotypical way of projecting them as a perfect ideal woman working for her family which they call tradition (Tanmoy Bhaghira).

2.2 Stereotypes attached in portraying women

A study done by Debanjali Roy (2012) concludes that, Despite of the difference in setting i.e., urban and rural in the serial environment, the pattern of representing women remains the same. Women are either victimised, being fragile or a scheming vamp and the cause for all the problems. Categorising women into slots and as someone whose capability has limitations and ends.

In a study by Farheed Ahmad (2014), Most, of the television serials which are shown are fully stereotypical in nature where men go to the office and women are shown as light of approval and disapproved that she stays on home which means that they don't have work at

all.

According to Dr. Deepanjali Mishra of Krit University in her study (2015), states that, taking from Simone de Beauvio's viewpoint of women as the "opposite" or "alternate" to man, sexuality and femininity has always been projected as a clear cut opposing differentiability that portrays the difference between groups of people, contrasting distinctions which are influenced socio-culturally and transferred in manners which would cause one group to overshadow other. This sexuality and femininity of these women has always been shaped as to cater the male-formed stereotypes which would be used as a tool to place them as the "secondary sex".

Almost all serials show a stereotypical image of an ideal womanhood which is, sacrificing and either being all glamorous or loving her husband and children and nothing more than that and that this image portrayal has an impact in shaping their thoughts on those watching the serials, which are mostly the women (Suparna Dhar, 2019).

According to Zushti and Pal (2019) in their research, the makers of the TV serials do try to portray women as strong, empowered and independent beings but eventually comes back to showcasing the same ideal woman concept of a perfect woman who is an amazing housewife. It is crucial and necessary to look into the portrayal of women to bring to the right track of projecting. According to DR. Jayati Kumar (2020), The way women are represented in TV serials is extremely stereotypical, restricted and monotonous with the same old ideas and pre conceived notions. The geographical setting, lifestyle and surrounding are changed in the portrayal but not the concept and idea of an ideal woman. Often women in daily soaps are showcased as a burden or responsibility of the society and as a hindrance.

2.3 Opinions/perception of the viewers on the representation of women in serials

According to the responses from the interview conducted by Shashi kaul and Shradha Sahnii (2010), The respondents believed that the daily soaps are not showing women rightfully and undervaluing their part in the society while the reality of women in society is the opposite of what is being projected. Also, many of the male respondents have put forth their opinion that media should be representing women in different characters and roles and should showcase the reality rather than just showing them as scheming and controlling.

Dr. Shukla, in a sample study (2015) concluded that, the audiences form their own idea about the way women are represented and clearly convey their ideas. The respondents believe that women are being portrayed as homemakers and are objectified for sexual satisfaction and desires and there are many viewers who watch these serials. So, these problematic depiction of women in the serials could mislead the young minds of India about women and diminishes the image of women in the society and in India as a whole. As the serials are long and drives the audiences to be glued to it, it should be used to project the progressive and more empowering part of women in the country's improvement.

Indira and Marissa (2016), in their study concluded that, the respondents were of the opinion that the women in the daily soaps were shown negatively because these representative characters did not align with their conceived belief of a woman in Indian culture. The respondents were against the unpleasant and unrealistic portrayal of women on screen to show the real women in India, for example, showing women in minimal clothing or presenting show of sexual closeness on TV.

2.4 Rationality behind representing women in serials

A study conducted by Shailaja Bajpai (1997), The makers and producers of the soap operas believe that there is a thought to the way women are presented and that is because television is a fantasy

world and that it aims to provide the audiences with something to hope and long for. As there is majority in the female when it comes to the number of audiences for the TV serials, makers showcase women as brave and powerful beings who wins against it all to get the attention of the viewers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research method

The researcher has used the triangulation method which includes various methods, theories and concepts to determine the answer for the research problem statement and data collection. In this research, the researcher has chosen two different research methods such as qualitative methodology and quantitative methodology. Qualitative methodology involves first hand observations and analysis by the researcher which are not in numerical value. Under qualitative methodology, this research has involved content analysis where the research analyses, understands and interpret the various text, images, visuals and concepts. Content analysis was used to analyse and observe the portrayal of women in a Tamil TV serial called Barathi Kannamma as it is one of the objectives of the research. Further through the observations made by watching and understanding the serial, the quantitative method was used to find out the relevance with the findings made with respect to women portrayal. The quantitative methodology which usually has numerical values and is used to analyse the data it derives, is taken by the researcher to further determine and find out the relevance and relatability of the portrayal of women with the reality. Under this quantitative methodology, survey method was used to collect data regarding the relevance of the women portrayal by using the questionnaire tool for collecting the responses.

3.2 Parameters for content analysis

The different parameters that were studied by the researcher for content analysis were characteristic traits of women, role of costume in portraying the characters, role of education in portrayal and thought process of the women. This was studied purely on the basis of the observations made by the researcher by interpreting the dialogues and portrayal of the characters.

3.3 Sample of the research

The chosen geographical location to conduct the study is Chengalpattu district as it was easy and comfortable for the researcher. The sample size taken for the study is 50. The sampling technique used was non-probability sampling technique where the research would select a number of people from the population which leads to not everyone having a chance of being selected. Under the non probability sampling, purposive sampling technique was used as the research had a purpose

on selecting the participants for the questionnaire. The purposive sampling where the researcher would have a purpose for selecting his/her respondents, was used in this study because the researcher of this study wanted the respondents to be the viewers of the chosen TV serial called Barathi Kannamma.

3.4 Scaling

The questionnaire was prepared to understand the reliability factor of the participants in the survey i.e., questionnaire. The scale that was used for the questionnaire was Likert scale for all the questions as the questions were designed to know the agreeability and reliability of the respondents.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Content Analysis

The researcher has watched the first ten episodes of a Tamil serial called Bharathi kannamma to understand women portrayal and to analyse and list out the various characteristic traits of the women in the serial.

Bharathi Kannamma

4.1.1 Storyline of the serial

The basic storyline revolves around a woman i.e., the main lead of the serial who has lost her mother at a very young age and is living with her father, step mother and step sister. Since childhood the female protagonist has always been subjected to discrimination from her step mother and sister for her dark skin tone and for being ugly while on the contrary her step sister is the all white, beautiful and popular girl. Amidst all the ill treatment and discrimination from her step mother and sister she finds her solace with her father.

4.1.2 Characteristic traits

Bakyalakshmi

Bakyalakshmi, A second wife to his husband is insecure about the love and affection for his first wife that continues to exist deep down in his heart. She constantly ridicules him and his first wife for giving birth to an undesirable and ugly child. She has this cunning and cruel personality trait in her which comes off blatantly with her behaviour and dialogues, each time she is on screen. She is the most dominating person in the family, suppressing everyone and always picking on the innocent step daughter for anything and everything that goes wrong. She is inclined towards materialistic things and an extravagant lifestyle and prioritizes outer beauty and colour of a person the most.

Anjali

Anjali (Bakyalakshmi's daughter) is the most beautiful, eye catching, popular and self-indulged/ obsessed girl. She is a selfish and devious person who can go to any extent to put down and mock her step sister. She is proud of her fair skin tone and beauty and considers darker skin tone disgusting and unpleasant. She, like her mother always tries to demean her step sister by plotting against her at every other opportunity. She has complete hatred and

bitterness for her step sister for her dark skin tone and looks.

Kannamma

Kannamma (Bakyalakshmi's step daughter) is an innocent, fragile and caring person and the epitome of patience with utmost respect and affection for each everyone regardless how she is being treated. She smiles over pain and misery and endures all the struggles and mistreatment comes her way from her step mother and sister with a big fat smile. Her thought process never

comes even near to taking revenge to those who mock her, shame her but always to supporting, helping and caring for them at every aspect. She is a kind and pure hearted girl with traditional and family values running in her blood with following practises and being the "homely and typical Indian ideal woman". Even though she is sweet, innocent and fragile, she has a brave, strong and thoughtful side to her. She takes a stand for herself when being questioned about her values but remains silent when ridiculed for her appearance.

Soundariya

She is the mother of the lead male actor. She is a strong, dominating woman with determination. She is the owner of a very successful cosmetics brand and is extremely rich but ungrateful and pride about her money, power and success. She believes beauty and money are the only and most important thing in one's life. Nothing attracts her as much as a white beautiful woman as she looks for a bride for her son.

4.1.3 Role of costume in portraying the characters

The costume plays a major role in indicating or projecting the characters in a certain way. In this serial, the step daughter, Kannamma is shown as a cultured girl with family values ingrained in her. So, the costumes used to represent the traditional, ideal woman were chudidaars and sarees with a lot of jewellery and a bindi on the centre of her forehead to convey the concept of ideal woman.

On the other hand, her step sister, Anjali was represented with western clothes such as frocks, jean etc., to showcase her as modern and uncultured woman. Even both the character's hair was done in a contrasting way, the ideal woman had her hair tied up in a plait all the time whereas Anjali had her hair open to give off the idea of modern and not having traditional values as in many households in Tamil Nadu, girls keeping their hair open is considered inappropriate.

Bakyalakshmi always is wearing heavy designer saree even at home with some jewellery all the time. Also, she is wearing heavy make almost all the time. Soundariya in the same way wears grand and designer sarees with heavy jewellery and make up all the time irrespective of the occasion, situation and location.

4.1.4 Role of education in portrayal

With utmost honesty one can say that there is a humongous growth of female workforce in every other sector possible, from entertainment industry to the armed force, women are everywhere. But there was little to no importance given to the lead female actress in the serial. Kannamma was shown as an intelligent and smart kid in the beginning by winning several prizes and medals but as the serial progressed the intelligence of the woman was left out somewhere in a dungeon to rot as she was more into taking care of the family and doing

household chores as she grew up. The smart and intelligent kid which had the potential to have a decent career was made to take turn by the makers to support and care for her family to be the ideal woman. On the flip side where Anjali was shown as a woman with dreams of becoming miss universe in the future was forced to believe that the limelight, height and success might ruin her personality and personal life for which she should get married to complete her life and to have a safe and secure life.

4.1.5 Thought process of the women

The step mother Bakyalakshmi's ultimate desire and belief was all about money, materialistic possession and external beauty. These similar beliefs were shared by a woman named Soundariya in the serial who had a dialogue, "Gunam mukkiyam illa azhagu dhaa mukkiyam" which translates to "personality doesn't matter, beauty does". The borderline thought process of the woman in the serial was of the outward appearance which should be fair and beautiful and with money and fame.

The step sister Anjali had the same ideas and beliefs but had one thing which was uncommon considering others, her dream. She was a girl with dreams to become miss India and miss universe. But she was not shown as determined to achieve her dreams and was easily influenceable.

Kannamma believes that anything and everything can be achieved with a happy smiling face, love and patience. She thinks the pain and trouble that is being caused by her step mother and sister is worth tolerating as in the future they will understand her love and affection for them and will accept her as their own. She is of the opinion that a girl should not be consuming alcohol, wearing short/revealing dresses and being close to men.

4.1.6 Portrayal of the woman characters

The serial started off by trying to convey a positive message on the skin tone of women, but it went far away from the core messaging and took a completely new turn. In the beginning the makers were trying to convey that having a dark skin colour is totally fine but as the serial progressed, the messaging was changed to, having black skin colour is a disadvantage or unpleasant but one should focus more on having a good, kind personality. Here the idea of black as undesirable, itself is a very problematic statement to make as having any skin tone shouldn't dictate the beauty of a person. Both fair and dark complexion people should be treated and made to feel as the same.

Another main messaging was that of an ideal woman who wears kurtis and chudi, does household chores and follows religious practices and beliefs. Woman contradicting to these ideal woman behaviours are considered uncultured and are believed to be wrong and negative. Wearing short and revealing clothes are called out as an unacceptable and unpleasant behaviour. Along with this, drinking and partying was also ridiculed if done by a woman.

The positive message that the serial imparted was that of having a kind and pure heart with caring and helping nature. Enduring everything on a positive note and standing up for ourselves when needed. It passed on the idea that the world is cruel out there and so the women have to be strong enough to live through it or fight when the circumstance asks for and also shouldn't lose their innocence in the process.

Findings and conclusion

Through the content analysis of a serial called Barathi Kannama, women representation was analysed by the researcher as submissive, patient, even when people mock and criticise, innocent, follows religious practices, easily influenced and seeks beauty, money over personality. In addition to that, women wearing short dresses or revealing clothes were portrayed as inappropriate, uncultured and unpleasant.

Survey, in accordance to the findings of the women portrayal through content analysis was conducted and found that majority of the respondents did not relate the ideas, beliefs and behaviours of the women characters in the serial. They do not believe that women in today's day and age are being submissive to anyone but are strong and stand up for themselves. The majority respondents also believe that women's choice of clothing is her right and choice and has nothing to do with her personality or character. In the serial women were shown as having desires about only money and beauty and does not give importance to values and personality, whereas this does not at all feel relevant to the audience. People believe that, women in this era of globalisation and development are more than just being a housewife, doing household chores, taking care of the family but are actually highly educated, employed, independent, value personality over materialistic possessions and beauty. Putting women in slots as to define them as either an ideal perfect woman or as unideal and imperfect woman is not at all appreciated by the people.

Hence, the way women are being projected in the Tamil TV serial is problematic, unpleasant, irrelevant and disrespectful to the women in reality who are breaking grounds and are growing exceptionally in each and every field possible. Television serials should enhance their content and the representation of woman to leave a long-lasting impact on the young minds and also should bring in some thought-provoking projection of women for the good to instil a more open-minded perspective and approach towards women who are still in the 21st century struggling and fighting with gender stereotypes and discrimination.

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