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## Reading Women, Watching Women: An Analysis of Female Reader/Audience in the Time of the Rise of the English Novel and Indian Daily Soaps

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### **Abstract:**

Rise of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England and the arrival of the cable television network in India though were the two different phenomena happening at the two different places and time, yet they have a common thread connecting them. With the growth of the novel and also the daily soaps on the television grew the number of women reading/watching them, and thus came the time when both the novels and the tele-serials started catering themselves to this exclusive target reader/audience. This paper explores the scenario in which both these genres grew and also traces the commonality which was the cause of their rise though happening at the gap of the centuries. It also attempts to explain the factors that lead to their immense popularity and hence providing an alternate space for the assertion of their otherwise redundant identities.

**Keywords:** English novel, Indian television, Reader/Audience, Alternate space.

Women have always been at the centre stage of the Indian television industry, be it the earlier days of the soaps like *Rajni*, *Shanti Swabhimani*, *Kitty party* or the later years of *Kora Kagaz*, *Saans* etc. Coming down from the 90s to the times we are living in now, Indian television industry has morphed itself around a certain set of audience. This paper focuses on this exclusive targeting of the Indian television industry where daily soaps became a cult in India and this scenario seems to be an offshoot of a similar phenomenon of the emergence of the novel as a genre identified with women in England. It will also discuss the social context in which novel came to be called a bourgeois form and the context of today's society which even after the leap of so many centuries has not transformed much when it comes to the conventions which these daily soaps target (at least in India).

Initially the age of Jane Austen and the writers before her saw the humiliation of the women when it came to their writings. Their works were not considered as the works of true literary merit. Petticoat author, She-Author, and what not she had been tagged then. The novels concerning courtship, marriages, families, balls, dinners, and other nuances of domestic life lacking the discussion or setting of any political subject were considered inferior. But this very domesticity in the novels written by women was later on to define the characteristic of the whole genre. Fredric Rowton in his preface to his anthology of women's poetry writes:

Woman's qualities may be less conspicuous, but they are quite as influential. Man has to bear outward, tangible rule; and his faculties are necessarily of an authoritative, evident, external, commanding order. Woman has to bear the invisible sway over the hidden mechanism of the heart; and her endowments are of a meek, persuasive, quiet and subjective kind. Man rules the mind of the world; woman its heart" (qtd. in Armstrong "The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel", pp.130)

It was this heart- literature only which carried itself throughout the large section of female readers of the time so much so that the genre itself came to be recognized with women (be it the readers or the author). The economic rise of the bourgeoisie in the time enabled them to afford books and thus they became the major consumers of novels. Moreover a new status symbol for them was having a redundant wife at home. As Jane Spencer writes:

During the eighteenth century as trade expanded and commercial production gradually took over spinning, weaving, brewing, baking, soap and candle-making and bleaching, her (woman's) importance diminished. This was the effect felt in the prosperous middle and lower middle trading classes, where the idle wife as Defoe remarks show, was becoming a man's status symbol...In eighteenth century, by contrast, women were highly valued but also confined to a special feminine sphere, as guardians of home and of moral and emotional values. (12-13)

So the women were left with ample of time for recreation and leisure in which they occupied themselves with reading novels. Ian Watt writes-

Women of the upper and middle classes could partake in the few of the activities of their men folk, whether of business or pleasure. It was not usual of them to engage in politics, business or the administration of their estates, while the main masculine leisure pursuits such as hunting and drinking was also barred. Such women therefore had a great deal of leisure, and this leisure was often occupied by the omnivorous reading." (45)

This was the reason for the emergence of 'domestic novels' as a new pass time and also for the boom in the female readership of the novel. As Nancy Armstrong also points out, "At some point during the eighteenth century, the cultural climate in the England was right for the novel to begin its rise to a prominent position in the hierarchy of genres. The same conditions also made it possible for women's lore, taste, judgment, feeling and words to become for the first time in history, the fit matter for literature" (127)

Quite similar to the phenomenon of emergence of the novel in England was the advent of the cable television in India. With it the whole entertainment industry was revitalized and flooded in the daily soaps. Like so many other products that find their consumers in an exclusive (read elite) section of the society, cable television too became the part of the bourgeois wish list. Soon, because of its wide-spreading web its expenses came down and it came to the every middle class house. To follow what is on air requires

a person with plenty of time to spare it on the television set. Who else but our mothers and aunts and grandmas would have come to rescue? This was the fact which the new production houses cashed on and targeted the same audience with what concerned them most – family drama. Since then these family dramas have clutched the pulse of the women viewership and as the official website of a production house claims that it “has single-handedly changed the way the nation spends its evenings”. The nation meant here is essentially women viewers who further expanded the viewership of these soaps by imposing their family members with their choice and thus leaving no option but to watch what was being watched on a single available television set in the house. Ms Ekta Kapoor, of Balaji Telefilms, says, “Soaps will always have a h-u-g-e audience in India; they will never become a has-been. Soaps are like ‘dal chawal’, the rest of the genres form the tidbits on your plate. Face it. Indian television mainly caters to women. The television is on when the man leaves in the morning for his office, and often, remains so even after he is snoring in the night!” (May 2003)

The role of a house wife within the sphere of their domestic life (talking particularly in Indian context) is still the same as it was in the nineteenth century England as the guardians of home and of moral and emotional values. And as the general opinion goes, apart from the trivial(?) domestic activities and nurturing kids, they apparently have nothing to do. The difference does exist in the scenario when one considers the idle-wife-being-a-status-symbol criteria of the Victorian life. Today the working woman has become a status symbol for a man, and those who are not working outside their homes are those who have chosen to or those who have inadequate qualifications to work or those who have been chained by the conservative families of their in-laws. Moreover, what was the whole women population in England, now it has been divided into working (minority) and non-working women (majority) if we consider the Indian scenario today. That being the case of course when one does not care to be technically right by saying paid work and non-paid work by women. Purvita Chatterjee in an article, published in *The Business Line*, refers to the study of SNAP (Study of Nation's Attitudes and Psychographics) which says:

“Only one in ten married women work full-time in India. The study also outlines as to why the creators of today's hit serials continue to ignore this ten percent of working women and continue to reinforce the values and beliefs of the homebound majority...These are women who feel restricted by society and seek refuge within the family, providing ample fodder for the heroine to be the ‘family harmony manager’, says the study about the typical non-working married woman. The study further suggests that “unless this 10 per cent of working women become significantly large, no scriptwriter or TV channel dare change the script of the ideal woman being a heroine who can ensure the harmony of her family”.

This lot of supposedly idle woman became the chief consumer of the daily soaps quite similar to that of the rising female readership of the novels in 18<sup>th</sup> century England that the paper has been discussing.

But one cannot thoroughly do away with the fact that the novels and so the daily soaps in this paper's context were merely a domestic product to be devoured by women.

What novels and daily soaps have done is to provide them with alternative spaces for discourse in their living rooms, kitchens and neighborhoods. Nancy Armstrong in her article argues this very concept of domestic novels and supports the view that women by writing novels on the limited family life, manners and etiquettes were not circumscribing the subjects of the novel but through it they were indirectly participating in the political, economic and social debate from where they stood. She writes, "Domestic fiction...provided a way of talking about conflict and contradictions within the socio-economic sphere while remaining remote from that world." (133) She substantiates point view by stating that "stories that revolve around courtship and marriage offered a way of indulging in fantasies of political power with a kind of impunity, so long as they were played out within a domestic frame of reference, and so long as the traditional relationship between husband and wife was ultimately affirmed. (133). Behind the portrayal of the family dramas, ball dances and courtship laid the ulterior motive to expose the underbelly of the hypocritical society (Jane Austen's novels in particular). Richard Handler and Daniel A. Segal in their essay "The Social Construction of rank in Jane Austen" argue that Austen far exceeds the reputation of the miniaturist who captures foibles and manners of the rural bourgeois, they find in Austen rather a critical illumination of the principles that organizes macro-sociological hierarchies of class and inter-personal hierarchies of sex". (692) Similarly the soap operas despite of attracting much criticism have never been out of the discussion forum in media or in the daily lives of their women consumers. These soaps offered and allowed the house-wives to be opinionated and hold on to their views and perspectives. The same woman who was silent at her home was talking and talking vociferously within the medium of the daily soaps. As there was a relative democratization of the space of discourse through printing press in the era of novels, television set too democratized this space and provided a little room of their own to these women in the name of the daily soaps. They had their own set of moralities and values which they were watching exhibited on television; they were relating themselves with the characters; they found an area where women like them were not neglected in the threshold but were speaking out their mind. They gained a new identity through these TV serials. The central women characters in the soap operas that always had an upper-hand in their household, family and relations, became the new glamorous face of the Indian house wives. Women viewers came to realize the importance and power they possessed being at home inside the shell of their family. These were the women who were not working (again in general terms, though ideally it should be called as unpaid work by women) and they had to face this fact squarely that brought in the realization of the reality that in a middle class household working woman is considered to be an asset and so has importance in the family as well. In contrast to this the educated working women do not seem to find any kind respite in these soaps, be it the entertainment or even occupying the spaces of discourse as mentioned earlier. A *Times of India's* report "Women in Kerala are no mere TV Addicts" corroborates this. Kerala being the state achieving highest literacy rate in India will obviously have a comparatively refined understanding that does not allow them to become the happy audience to the cliché ridden soap operas. As the report says:

"In Kerala over 50% of women look at the box as a major source of news and current affairs. A survey conducted by the Media Monitoring Cell of the Kerala

Women's Commission, which mainly focused on rural areas, revealed that nearly 54% of women covered by the exercise regularly followed news on television, which helped them to form their opinion on public issues.”

The pervasiveness and popularity of the daily soaps has changed the way women, who were considered not-so-important part of the ‘earning’ society, look at their selves.

What the novel was to the eighteenth century England, daily soaps are and have been to Indian television industry and to society in general. The English novels came to the scene and soon gained recognition with its female readers as they could find the story of the characters and their surroundings much akin to their own lives. Same was/is the case of the Indian daily soaps which though were largely women-based from their initial days and gradually came to be defined and related to women alone. The common reason, that can be understood in the light of this analysis, for the upheaval of both the media was the targeted audience or the exclusive consumer-ship. The English novels reflected the codes of conduct and social behavior of bourgeois, same did the daily soaps. However, it was not merely the reflection but the medium of television had the capacity to redefine the scenario and identities, as it held a different persuasive charm of the visual screen. This is not presuming Indian women television watchers as gullible lot that can be lured away daily soaps. In fact this is crediting them for choosing a medium assertively from ‘where they stand’ and explore this medium to create a space of their own which further can lead to the growth and rise of the genre, the way English novels did.

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