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## Reality Shows and Mediated Selves: A Case Study of Midukki

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### **Abstract:**

Visual imagery has immense potential to stimulate the creative and critical thinking of the viewers. With its potential to reach a mass target audience, visual media affects and is affected by the mass society. It is through the images transmitted by television and internet that we reflect upon our own selves and develop a shared experience. Each programme should be considered as a cultural platform which enables or even compels us to reconsider our own sense of identity. The urge is instilled in us to re-define ourselves to attain social validation. The current paper aims to attempt a case study of the reality show Midukki which was aired in the channel Mazhavil Manorama and critically examine the role it has played to redefine femininity for our youth.

### **Keywords: Reality Shows, Midukki, Femininity, Television**

Television channels are marking a revolutionary change in visual productions through Reality Shows. Gone are the good old days of teleserials which centered mostly on the travails of married women within the homes of the in-laws. The viewers were so bored with the usual saas-bahu soaps that there was an inner urge to experience something new. The producers were compelled to create new genres to satisfy the expectations of the viewers. This changing sensibility of the viewers could be rightly exploited through the emergence of the reality shows in almost all channels cutting across the globe. The TRPs of these shows have peaked to such an extent that channels are vying with one another to produce more and more of them with novel ideas.

The Oxford dictionary defines reality shows as “Television programmes in which ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative” (<oxforddictionaries.com>). In these programmes, a selected group of ordinary people are introduced into a highly dramatic or humorous experiential world and their resulting performances as well as emotions are documented for the entertainment of the viewers. These shows provide refreshing alternatives to the daily serials which are bound by limited scripts. They have offered a platform where fiction blends with reality. To be more precise, what keeps the viewers hooked to their seats during the telecast of a reality show is its proximity to the reality of the personal lives of the viewers together with the mixing of a few elements of fantasy to the whole programme. Thus the viewers are familiarised with a kind of mediated reality which eventually helps them in building their own individual fancies.

While the reality shows marketed to the English viewers are mostly focused on the daily activities in the lives of common men which at times even peek into their intimate moments, in India we have more of talent shows and game shows like the *Antakshari* and *Sa Re Ga Ma*. They provide a platform for a select group of people to come together and get a chance to exhibit their talents through a number of competitions. The victories and failures, the exultations and disappointments on screen are transmitted uncensored to the viewers.

To the majority of Indians who still belong to the middle class or even lower rungs of the society, these kinds of shows offered a new lease of life by driving in the possibility of gaining fame and money without much investment. The passion and emotion induced into the episodes added to their popularity. Referring to the programme *Indian Idol*, Sanjiv Sharma, one of its producers succinctly remarks, “The best thing about a reality show is that it is real, it is interactive: the viewers could decide who would be the *Indian Idol*. Reality shows see the dreams of millions of Indians come true. They relate to the characters that appear on the shows, and this makes the shows more meaningful than any tearjerker.” (qtd. Singh 333)

Quite contrary to the daily soaps which have now become redundant with predictable scripts, the reality shows offer immense scope for innovation. Their random scripts and thrill associated with seeing ordinary people or celebrities in real life situations render a different aesthetic experience to the audience. Moreover, with the inclusion of sms votes of the viewers to identify the final winner of the show, the audiences are kept involved in the process till the very end. This space to interact provided to the audience adds to the interest in these shows.

While the media tycoons are enjoying their success through the high ratings of these shows, the latter are also granting golden opportunities to ordinary people to showcase their talents. They are offered a visibility unforeseen in the conventional world. By reaching out to even the remotest corner of the world, these shows try to bring into limelight the most talented. There have been instances from real life where these shows have decided the destiny of the talented as well as the fortunate ones among the select few. We have Shreya Ghosal, Sunidhi Chauhan, Kunal Ganjawala and Debojit as some of the best examples of this phenomenon. The category *Celebrity Reality Shows* has also seen huge viewership in India. The image makeover that happened in the life of the item queen Rakhi Sawant is a best example of what reality shows can mean to celebrities.

From talent shows and game shows, reality TV in India is now flooded with a new category of the genre, “*Makeover Show*”. More than the former types, programmes classified under this title offer immense scope for a re-vision as well as a re-creation of the overall identity of the participants. They have altered the existing mediascape to such an extent that they are now highly instrumental in shaping the identities of the viewers as well, especially when the latter fall within the formative period of their personality.

In the postmodern high-tech world in which people are more and more obsessed with the external appearance, the upcoming generation of youngsters crave to be on par with the most popular concepts related to beauty and smartness. It is in this context that these makeover shows, also

referred to as self-improvement shows gain recognition. These shows effectively take advantage of the desire of the viewers to transform themselves.

Makeover reality shows narrate the metamorphosis of an ordinary person (the participant) or one of their belongings (for example their home) in the hands of the programme experts. The transformations presented in these shows can affect all imaginable areas of life....(Olive 189)

These shows emphasise the fact that one has to be reinvented through the effective involvement of experts, so as to attain an empowered status.

Redefining the identity of the participants is of utmost importance in a makeover show. The participants go through a number of sessions which include talent sessions, fashion segment, handicrafts, team assignments etc, giving them the opportunity to reflect upon their own 'deficiencies' together with the chance to correct them along this journey. As the show advances, those who are far behind the maximum point of transformation face elimination. At the very final episode of the show, we usually have a handful of participants who could successfully manage to cover the various sessions. The difference in the way they carry themselves on the platform of grand finale compared to their first appearance, validates the influence of professional trainers to shape the identity of a person.

Identity happens to be a sociological term imbued with multiple levels of interpretation. In very simple words, identity could be considered as the understanding of human beings as to who they are. It is never a stand alone concept but one which is closely associated with a number of other attributes, for instance, nation, race, class, gender, sexual orientation etc. Hence, identity is never a homogenous term but a heterogeneous one in which a person has to define himself with reference to numerous parameters.

Identity should be regarded as a socially and historically mediated construct where our social positioning has a great role to play. Internal as well as external factors come together to shape as well as bring greater understanding of our identity. We develop our sense of self through our interactions within the family, with our peers, with the institutions we are associated with and with different forms of media we familiarise with. The identities we have assimilated in relation to these factors influence our perspectives and our experience of the external world.

Identity is never a neutral term and as life moves on, we are constantly in the process of constructing and redefining our identity. When identity is considered as a social artefact, it implies that it is never static but liable to transformations. According to Foucault, a person's sense of self and identity cannot be claimed to have an inner fixed essence. On the contrary, "the self as being defined by a continuing discourse in a shifting communication of oneself to others" (<changingminds.org>)

Media is one of the most important discursive platforms that influence our daily lives these days. It happens to be one of the most prominent factors which shape our identity. The relevance of media in this regard is increasing these days owing to the profusion of visual images through television and [www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

internet. Television and internet have emerged as the two windows through which we see ourselves in relation to the outer world. Visual media is never a passive space to report reality but an active one to negotiate reality and to shape and even fabricate it to suit the contemporary ideologies.

As we have already seen, identity is a fluid concept and media is a discursive text offering great scope for ideological indoctrinations. Combining these two ideas brings us closer to the main argument of this paper, how media acts as a tool in negotiating a new identity for women. With televisions, laptops and smart phones becoming common gadgets of a majority of households even in a third world country like India, the cultural impact that visual media can create is tremendous. As the visual media venture into new types of programmes to cater to the aesthetic aptitude of the viewers, they invisibly assist in the shaping of social constructions like gender and caste. Through repeated gender performance, the visual media establish the gender codes to be played out by men and women.

With the explosion of reality shows in television channels across the globe, a study based on their influence in the construction of femininity is highly relevant. Within the genre reality shows, the sub-genre makeover shows is of greater significance as such shows in the regional language Malayalam have so far had only women participants. The cues that they give to the younger generation about how to create an aesthetically pleasing femininity founded on consumerism is quite interesting.

The makeover reality shows actually create a democratisation of the visual space for ordinary people. The very definition of 'makeover' implies that participants from ordinary backgrounds fitting into the ratings of the producers are selected after audition. Thus they are gifted with the possibility of endless media visibility. In an indirect way, this could be considered as the opening up of the media as a new form of political enfranchisement. However, it would be too naïve to consider this as an innocent act of empowerment. On the other hand, this 'demotic turn' which grants increased visibility to the ordinary person is replete with a pre-planned ideology. The term 'demotic turn' was coined by Graeme Turner to characterize the increasing production of 'ordinary' celebrities through reality TV (Turner 153). The attempt here is to analyse the gendering process performed by the makeover reality shows through a case study of the show Midukki which was aired in the channel Mazhavil Manorama in 2012-2103.

Midukki was a reality show which was subtly suggesting to the female audience how they can be a 'midukki' (a term used in Malayalam to compliment girls when they excel in any field). After referring to a few episodes of the programme, I have identified the following aspects of it through which the producers were trying to draw the boundaries of a 'midukki' for the new generation youngsters.

First and foremost, the category of women by itself who could participate in the audition reflects the social class which the programme was trying to attract attention to and also the impact it intended to create. The participants were unmarried girls from the age group 18-25 who mostly came from middle class background. Whenever the performance of a participant is being evaluated, the camera also takes us to the group of spectators where her parents are anxiously listening to the rating of the

judges. The most conspicuous difference between these two sections (girls and their parents) is in the aspects of dressing and style of speaking. Girls located in ordinary middle class background are made aware of the opportunities waiting for them in the outer world in the form of the so called experts to groom them and re-define their socio-cultural identity.

The producers have established their concept of the appearance of a midukki right from the title song of the programme. Together with the anchor, we have a set of participants dressed up in western outfit dancing to the title song. The way they walk is very much close to that of models on the ramp. The viewers are exposed to the perfect body image which is the thin ideal. Most of the eating disorders among women are linked to their dissatisfaction with the body and internalization of this thin ideal. Moreover, the impact of this image is stronger among young adults and adolescents. This can eventually result in long-term health issues and even a sever lack of confidence when one doesn't fit into that ideal image.

The western outfit and the distorted accent in which the participants as well as the anchor herself articulate the language have a combined effect. Dress and language are two prominent markers of social identity. It is very rarely that we see the participants dressing up in churidhar or saree which are the usual choices of middle class girls these days. "Doing dress not only presents a visual symbolic image of the self, but the central object from this occupation, clothes, provides a pathway for communicating an image of ourselves to others in the social, cultural world" (Goodman, Knotts and Jackson 101)

Language is a social practice and the way we speak inevitably classifies us under specific heads. Language learners are constantly in the process of renegotiating their identity. What the language of the girls on stage tells is that when they aspire to be in the so-called elite section of society even when they are economically and socially from moderate backgrounds, 'englishing' Malayalam is an easy way to gain recognition. This linguistic trend that is quite evident among youngsters these days is reemphasised through the programme.

The choice of the judges accentuates the significance attached to external appearance to remould oneself into a midukki. Among the four judges, we have a fashion designer, Shalini James and a hair stylist, Ambika Pillai. There is even a grooming session by the hair stylist where the girls put it in very clear terms that they are totally alien to this stylised world. And as the session winds up, they seem to be bowled over by their image makeover. Again, among the different rounds, we see more number of ones focused on fashion and jewellery.

The concept 'ordinari-ization' used by Lisa Taylor (Taylor 479) to refer to British Gardening Lifestyle Television is quite helpful in grasping the role of the judges. People from ordinary background who lack competence in certain aspects of life are chosen. The 'lack' in them validates the timely intervention of the experts whose advices facilitate self-improvement which happens to be the chief concern of the show. When the professional knowledge of the experts is conveyed to the participants who are supposed to make necessary changes to their overall personality accordingly, the same is also indirectly extended to the viewing population as a whole.

What we realise from our close observation of this reality show is that the media is effectively redrawing the map of femininity to suit the aesthetic sensibility of the globalised, regional youth. The attempt is to build a hybrid personality, a merging of select attributes from the west together with that of the regional. In this personality development, the body of the woman and how she adorns herself is of utmost importance. The focus on dancing which actually indicates the flexibility of the body and also ensures that the person never turns overweight again draws attention to the body. With the inclusion of one of the participants who has a darker complexion and reaches up to the finale, the programme has written a new code of appearance. It doesn't matter even if you are dark, but there can be no compromise on the size of the body. And nowhere in the programme do we have a session which analyses the real intellectual calibre of the participants. So, to conclude, when we liberally allow our youngsters to uncritically view such reality shows, what message are these programmes trying to convey?

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