Media Representation Of Women And Society

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The term Media is the plural of 'medium' and refers to the channels of communication which are used to disseminate knowledge, information, education or entertainment. When this is done on a large scale reaching out to a very large number of people, it is called mass Media. It can be broadly divided into two main categories: broadcast and print. Though print media is the older and traditional one, it is the broadcast media which is ruling the roost in the modern world with internet and Over the Top (OTT) platforms emerging as the newest component. The mass media, by its very definition, reaches out to a very large population. Consequently, it has a huge impact on the public opinion and social norms. This is testified by the prominent place given to a TV set in most houses rural as well as urban. People are watching TV throughout the day and are consuming whatever the channels dish out and this content especially the teleserials have become an important part of their lives. They don't want to miss any episode and the channels air repeat telecasts to feed this hunger. Therefore, these serials and their characters have been incorporated in the fabric of the lives of the audience who start treating them like real human beings.

However, these serials are not just providing entertainment but are influencing the societal perceptions and expectations in a very subtle manner. This has been proven by psychological studies like social cognitive theory which postulates that most human behavior is learned through observation, imitation and modeling. In simple terms, it means that human behavior is influenced by observing the role models available to them. In old times, these models were provided by mythological and historical characters available in the cultural heritage of the society and though people were familiar with these, yet these role models were too far removed from reality. Thus, women would know the fables of Sita or Savitri but will not look forward to an Agnipariksha or Yamaraj because these women were always put on the high pedestal and meant to be worshipped rather than be emulated.

But the basic problem in the role models presented by the media is that they are as close to reality as possible confusing the audience with a slice of the life. Media is meant

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to be a mirror to the society showing its failings and alerting against the pitfalls as a potent agent of positive social change. But the educative role has been forgotten and the strong women characters like the once famous Rajni and Kalyani of the Doordarshan era are missing who inspired viewers positively. Such characters have been replaced by flimsy ones and most serials project women in stereotypical roles which are limited in every possible dimension. A very important part of the phenomenal growth of channels has been the unprecedented focus on women as the target audience. Interestingly, the protagonists of most serials are women but they are trapped in mundane situations without any aspiration beyond the four walls of domesticity. Women are portrayed in a clichéd manner living a very shallow life concerned only with their household duties. The ideal woman is shown as a self-effacing one who is willing to forgo all her desires for her family. She is a person without any personal or professional ambition. If at all a working woman is the protagonist, she will still be prioritizing her household chores and leave her job at the drop of a hat. Further, the career woman is usually presented as a lonely one who has lost the bigger happiness of family time for professional success and therefore shown as a cunning one living on the fringes of the happy families. The women who have central roles are mostly engrossed in petty household politics and their ambitions do not go beyond this arena where she is fighting a battle with other women to win the symbolic keys to her happiness.

The society which is fed on the daily dose of these *devis* expects the same in real life. We have often seen people aping a particular dress or hairstyle of some popular TV personality. The same impulse to copy their lives raises expectations as to the model behavior of a woman. It is not only the society and family which has these high expectations. At times, women themselves set themselves these difficult targets because they have internalized these concepts. This situation becomes tricky for working women as they are trying hard to precariously balance the two worlds perfectly but are themselves the biggest losers. No wonder, Indian women are the most stressed lot in the world as per surveys conducted by international agencies. Chetan Bhagat addressed this problem when he wrote an article in Times of India drawing attention to the alarming statistics that shows 87% of Indian women are stressed as per a survey conducted by Nielsen (which covered 6500 women from 21 developed and developing countries). The reason behind this stress is not only societal demands but also the high bars set by women themselves who are suffering due to these unrealistic targets.

Where do these high expectations come from: the inevitable answer is directly or indirectly to be found in the representation of women in media which projects perfection;

super women who are good looking, physically fit and strong, educated, working but taking care of their families, ever smiling and empathetic to children as well as elderly of the household in the traditional role of care giver. In one advertisement of a popular ready mix, a woman is asking every member of the family what they would like to have for breakfast and happily noting their varied choices. When she comes to the kitchen she is shown with multiple pair of arms each preparing individual dishes with the help of the ready mixes. This reminds of the "Astha bhuja" incarnation of the goddess who carries different symbolic things in her hands. This kind of representation raises expectations and puts unnecessary pressure on women to be as good as the one shown in the advertisements. Chetan Bhagat, in his above mentioned article, exhorts the women, "It is okay if you don't do four dishes for lunch, one can fill their stomach with one".

Another area where the media raises unrealistic expectations is to do with physical appearance. The screen is flooded with fair, good looking and slim women and ordinary looking are conspicuous by their absence. In fact, an attractive personality seems to be an essential qualification for personal and professional success according to the myriad advertisements selling fairness and other beauty products. In a popular serial, the titular character Jassi is a hardworking and sincere person, a good worker with a golden heart but this plain Jane has to go through a makeover before being respected for her professional worth. More importantly, she is rewarded with the love of her boss, whom she loves all along, only when her looks conforms to the accepted norms of feminine beauty. Thus, a story which begins with the promise of celebrating the inner worth of a plain girl is circumvented to endorse the shallow and superficial standards of physical beauty. This kind of validation of physical attributes motivates women to seek similar solution to the problems in their lives. Many women go on crash diets and exercise routines they cannot cope with. Further, they forget one very important fact that for the media personalities, their physical appearance is their qualification and degrees which gets them their livelihood. Influenced by these screen idols, women try to ape them, torturing themselves to achieve impossible targets and develop a negative body image pushing them into depression. It is not uncommon to see women becoming anorexic and prone to various physical as well as psychological diseases. The root cause of these and many other problems can be traced back to the TV set in our homes which is bombarding these attractive, desirable and affable images of women making one forget that these are fictitious characters designed in a certain way.

The audience needs to be alert to this fact while consuming this continuous supply of entertainment. In the modern world, people have lost connection with the real

world living confined in their personal space in the company of various devices. The pandemic situation has aggravated this already present phenomenon of alienation. Hence, it is not surprising to observe people look up to the reel characters for company. These days the clarion call of beauty is not just limited to such fictional storylines. The screen idols are motivating women to become desirable not only through the medium of serials and advertisements but also through their own personalities. All the celebrities are active on various social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. to increase their popularity. The overdose of social media has made them household names who are sharing their beauty regimen, diet plans, workout videos etc. The flood of social media and the PR machinery of channels and artists have enabled the audiences to connect with their screen idols. This results in dissolving the almost invisible wall which separates real from reel and people fall in this trap all the more.

Thus, it can be seen that women are the worst affected section of society because of this invasion of media in day to day life. Therefore, some corrective measures need to be taken. The content of popular entertainment needs to be revamped and it is heartening that the OTT platforms are experimenting with new themes projecting independent and thinking women rather than the typical Saas-Bahu sagas. We have to remember that women are the bulk of the audience of the teleserials and they can boycott and dislike any regressive representation forcing the media moghuls to rethink their narratives. This is happening as the audience is ditching the TV channels airing repetitive content in favor of newer platforms presenting more realistic and relatable stories addressing even complex subjects considered taboo a few years ago. Media is a mirror which is meant to reflect the positive progress of the society rather than dwelling upon the beaten track. However, the most important change makers have to be women themselves, who should decide not to be pressurized by any undue demands of this monstrous media. They should not let anything dictate their choices of dress, decorum or the direction of their lives. They should not endorse the role models which reduce their identities and make them showpieces. Women are the significant half of the country's population and there is no dearth of achievers in the fields of politics, arts, sports, literature, education and all walks of life including the media which is indeed a very potent agent of social transformation. The need of the hour is to use this medium to project positive images and the audience should also choose wisely the role models so that everyone can contribute to the society in a meaningful manner without compromising on one's personal dignity.

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