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## UNIT 2 GENDER ON TELEVISION

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Television is often referred to as a ‘woman’s’ medium. This feminisation of the media arises from the programmes aired on television and the manner in which television programmes are consumed. The fact that television, unlike cinema or theatre is watched inside one’s home, allows for an assumption that the principle audience are women; therefore the content or programs such as soap operas and serials are generally made with a female spectatorship in mind. Another important aspect that leads to the female centric nature of television is advertising. Today, upper class women have been considered decision makers and therefore targets of the advertising message, it only follows that the content of the programme must find favour with female viewers. Of course, we have to examine this connection more vigorously and it is important to understand that the notion that television is a woman’s media is at best an assumption, as belonging to all genders obviously television programs are watched by members of households, belonging to all genders.

However, this perception of television perhaps also enables a closer scrutiny of how women are portrayed on television. The representation of women in the mass media has been closely scrutinised by media commentators, critics, academics, researchers and within the women’s movement. In the case of television, with its avowed female spectatorship, the representation of gender becomes a complicated issue.

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## 2.2 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you would be able to:

- Develop a perspective on gender on television;
- Identify some of the key ways in which gender has been looked at on television;
- Critically analyse the representation of gender on Indian television;
- Discuss the history of popularity of television in India; and
- Explain how gender has been represented in various genre such soap operas and serials.

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## 2.3 DEFINITION

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Early studies of gender on television, particularly in the United States and in Britain tended to address two primary concerns, firstly, the manner in which women were stereotyped or misrepresented on television and secondly the study of the television industry and its structures of employment. Based on the general notion that the dominance of men in positions of power resulted in a skewed representation of women, these studies suggested that the presence of male camera operators, directors and producers tended to objectify women's bodies and perpetuated to stereotypes in the representation of women.

These studies found that overwhelmingly television produced stereotypes of women, either encapsulated within the domestic sphere as wives and mothers or outside the domestic sphere as embodiments of the beauty stereotype - young, slim, fair and objects of sexual desire. Contemporary television programs however, both in the west and in India have grown beyond the scope of such studies primarily because several new genres of programmes, such as reality television, game shows, and quiz shows have evolved and earlier genre such as soap operas and serials have mutated in interesting ways. What exactly is mutation here? Did you mean 'evolved'? Whatever you have thought kindly elaborate it.

As far as the pattern of ownership was concerned in the early days of television, there were very few women in positions of power, and the studies suggested that this was reflected in the nature of programs. Today, women do occupy positions of power in the television industry. However, it does not necessarily mean that this has resulted in more 'progressive' representation of women. The representation of gender is a complex phenomenon and perhaps the mere presence of women producers and directors does not change that. And as the various genres continue to evolve therefore the representation of gender sometimes transcends, sometimes reinforces and sometimes creates new stereotypes.

For instance on Indian television, soap operas that generalised as *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) sagas have been very popular; of late reality television programmes such as Bigg Boss have as contestants some popular stars of the soap operas as their ‘real’ selves. They may portray traditional *bahus* and wives on the soap but appear as their modern selves in the reality shows. In programs such as Roadies on MTV and *Khatron ke Khiladi* (in which contestants undergo physically gruelling tasks) on Colours, the notion of that men/boys are physically superior than girls/women is challenged when both male and female participants perform the same physical tasks and are expected to perform with the same efficiency. However the programme also enables the playing out of other stereotypes like ‘girls are more quarrelsome than boys’, girls who are aggressive are ‘forward’ or that boys feel the need to ‘protect’ the female participants and so on.

Any discussion of gender on television also necessitates a discussion of genre and spectatorship. In the simplest sense genre refers to how television programs are classified and organised. A primary classification of television programmes is fiction and non-fiction. Soap operas, Serials, and situational comedies or sit-coms would be some examples of fictional programs while news programs, talk shows, quiz and games shows, contests, and recently reality television are examples of non-fiction genres. Apart from this narrow division of genre, time slots i.e. the hour in which a program is aired can also alter the content of the program. For instance primetime soaps (usually between six or seven in the evening to about ten in the night) would differ vastly from day time soaps. In the United States, fictional programs like day time soap operas are usually based on the saga of family turmoil such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, usually catering to a more female viewership, while evening soaps or serials such as *ER*, *House M.D*, *CSI*, *24*, *Friends*, and *How I met your Mother*, are examples of medical dramas, crime or detective shows, and situational comedies (respectively), which cater to both the male and female adult viewers. Genres are also culturally informed, for instance soap operas in India are vastly different in content from say the American soaps, and enjoy prime time slots in India.

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## 2.4 INDIAN TELEVISION AND GENDER

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Before we proceed to examine gender on Indian television, let us take a brief look at the history of television in India. As compared to other media like print, radio and film, television has a very short history of a little over 50 years. Television was introduced in 1956 with a small grant of 20,000 US dollars from UNESCO, to set up a pilot project that would study the use of television as a medium of education in India. In 1959, with an additional aid from the US government in the form of equipment and the sale of transmitters at a subsidised price from Philips, a weekly half hour service

was beamed from Delhi to a radius of about 40- Kms. This small experimental beginning did not galvanize very quickly into the nation-wide phenomenon that Television was to become. Until 1965, this was India's only experiment with television, when a daily service from Delhi was introduced.

Seven years later, 'Kendras' or stations were set up in Bombay and subsequently in Srinagar, Calcutta and Madras with emphasis on education and development. However, in 1982, there was a shift in the agendas for television in India and it changed from education and development in rural India to commercial and entertainment oriented programs in urban India by introducing a national channel called Doordarshan. The introduction of 'entertainment' along with 'instructional' programming significantly altered the nature of television programming.

In the absence of local entertainment genre Doordarshan programmes drew from myriad sources as diverse as Hindi cinema, American soap operas and Mexican Telenovellas. A hybridised genre needed to be created that would address two needs, firstly the project of 'development' and 'literacy' through television and secondly the more commercial/capital project of making content interesting enough to engage and tutor viewers in the practice of watching and understanding (elucidate a bit more about this) television. The 'developmental soap opera' was born of this union. Among the several social concerns that Doordarshan highlighted, the emancipation (did you mean empowerment) of women and national integration or the fostering of a nationalistic spirit among the viewing public were the primary objectives.

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## 2.5 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The first soap opera or serial as Doordarshan defined them was *Humlog*, sponsored by Nestle and Colgate and produced by a private company. The popularity of this soap has been variously documented and perhaps justifiably seen as prototype of how Doordarshan and subsequently private channels defined the genre of soap operas and serials.

'*Humlog*' was the story of a large lower middle class family that perhaps lived in Delhi. The serial led the viewer through the trials and tribulations of this family which was weighed down with problems that had to be read as pan-Indian social problems; the family dealt with issues like the father's drinking problems, their difficulties in raising daughters in a male-dominated society, and monetary issues that this large family grappled with in every episode. The series also made their struggle heroic, thus endearing them to the audience. Veteran film actor Ashok Kumar summed up each episode and hinted that most of this family's problems were because of their large number and hence the need for 'family planning'.

*Humlog* was followed by a large number of serials on social themes. In addition to the socio-cultural themes, the Doordarshan serials also explored patriotic, mythological, and historical issues, such as *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* and *Rajani* that were inevitably based on the day-to-day lives of middle class families.

As for representation of gender; with women's empowerment as a primary concern, Doordarshan serials showed women as 'progressive' or modern figures. Sitcoms like *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, a comedy that revolved around the daily lives of a young couple, the wife was shown to be a working woman and both the husband and the wife seem to share domestic responsibilities. An early series *Rajani* narrated the story of a young housewife who fights corruption in institutions of the state, like the municipality that affects the functioning of the domestic sphere. *Trishna*, based on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* adapted to the Indian context, explored similar conflicts between gender and class, and just as the novel did, questioned the role of women in society. *Tamas* set around the partition of India, sensitively portrayed the violence and the position of women in the midst of such political turmoil. Serials such as *Nupur* - about a young classical dancer, who sets about honing her craft against all odds, or *Udaan* the story of a police officer who fights to perform her duty challenging a patriarchal society, endeavoured to represent women as brave and intelligent people, willing to fight to fulfil their dreams.

However, while an attempt was made to break through stereotypes and present more 'modern' or more positive and empowered representation of Indian women, the patriarchal attitudes of the State were still apparent. This could be traced for example in public service messages/ advertisements shown on television media; for instance, the advertisement on birth control that largely placed the primary onus of family planning on women rather than on men.

While reading gender, one must realise that it is a complicated exercise and the depiction of gender cannot be classified in simple terms as 'positive' or 'negative' nor 'progressive' or 'regressive', as there could be more shades to it.

#### Check Your Progress

- 1) How did Doordarshan Kendras emerge?
- 2) Name at least two serials of Doordarshan that were very popular. What, according to you, are the reasons for the popularity?

## 2.6 THE NEWSREADERS OF INDIAN TELEVISION

The presentation of news has become quite popular and Doordarshan had framed a different kind of ambience for a news reader. If you still come across DD News channel or the news section of your local Doordarshan, you will notice, the way the presentation is taking place. You may note that depiction of gender is very patriarchal and bureaucratic, especially with Doordarshan. Female news readers are always shown in Indian traditional sarees and male presenters are always in western formals. With the emergence of different cable television, which you will study in detail in the next section, the news presentation saw some changes. Like Star News, Zee News, or NDTV 24x7, for instance did not present their news readers in this pattern as Doordarshan. Rather, female newsreaders were often shown in western formals and other Indian ethnic garments. The colours of clothes previously very subdued, also changed to include brighter hues.

When it comes to the number of newsreaders, these appear to be an equal distribution of male and female newsreaders. Today we have news anchors, commentators, and reporters. However, the gender equality is not reflected in different kinds of news, for instance, sports news is dominated by male reporters. Similarly, in news anchoring there is a dominance of males, especially in Prime Time news. Most of the channels have male news anchors, or news readers, very few have female newsreaders. But gradually the scenario is changing.

## 2.7 CABLE TELEVISION AND GENDER: SOAP OPERAS

Until the early 90's Doordarshan was the only television channel up and they enjoyed monopoly in television media. The first whiff of competition to Doordarshan's monopoly came in the early 90's. Cable television, although present, by some accounts since the early 80's, became popular in India in the mid 90's. Individual cable operators, who began by showing movies, soon began to beam news video magazines. The 'live' cable cast of the Gulf war on CNN sealed the popularity of cable television. By the mid-90's satellite broadcast via cable had Indian cities weaned away from Doordarshan. The Star Network owned by the Hutchinson Whampoa Group used the satellite ASIASAT 1 to broadcast three international channels-MTV, Prime Sports and BBC. In 1992, Subhash Chandra bought slots from the HW Group to broadcast ZEE TV, India first private Hindi language channel.

With the advent of the private channels, there was a change in the content of entertainment programmes. Uma Chakravarti suggests that while the national network telecast serials that had regional and local stories, like *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* set in Kashmir, or *Dil Dariya* set in Punjab, or *Malgudi Days* set in Karnataka, the private channels seem to erase the local for an

ambiguous, 'urban' Indian milieu. And unlike Doordarshan serials that inevitably narrativized rural India and the urban poor; these serials were inhabited by the upwardly mobile and the affluent characters who displayed all the trappings of a global, cosmopolitan lifestyle while still being steeped in tradition, where the honour of the family was of primal significance.

Private channels, like Star Plus, Zee TV, Sony and much later Colours also positioned soap operas as against serials as the preferred genre. *Tara*, *Banegi apni baat* and *Campus* were some of the early soap operas but marked a historical shift in the nature of entertainment on television. Balaji Telefilms, owned by the mother-daughter duo of Shobha and Ekta Kapoor, produced the most famous soap opera for Star Plus was *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. Henceforth, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* set the trend for other to follow.

Shoma Munshi, in her book *Prime Time Soaps Operas on Indian Television* (2010), suggests that the popularity of soaps can be attributed to various carefully crafted production techniques, plush sets, and story lines that seem to resemble Bollywood movies. The protagonists of the soaps became decidedly female and drawing heavily from the Ramayana and the Mahabharat and gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon, heroines embodied the virtue of Sita, Parvati, and Laxmi. The undivided Hindu family became the focus of the soaps and virtuous and brave heroines of these soaps always did the right thing, but never overstepped the boundaries of traditions and morality. In *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, Tulsi, a middle class girl, marries into the rich Virani family and often made difficult and brave choices that united the family and kept them 'true' to their traditions. The series ran for eight years and covered about 70 years in the life of Tulsi. Tulsi in the latter part of the series turns a blind eye to her husband's mistress, while continuing to perform her duties as a wife.

*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* was a trendsetter, and soaps that followed had similar plots. Clearly defining a new modernity for the Indian woman-global, cosmopolitan but still intensely traditional and an embodiment of Indian values and morals.

In the last few years, soap opera themes have undergone a shift; while the soaps in the early part of the decade had moved away from the social reform themes popular in the Doordarshan era, current soaps have revived the genre by addressing social concerns centred on women's empowerment. *Balika Vadu* on Colours set out to address child marriage, and *Na Aana is Desh Mere Laado (Laado)* on the same channel, female infanticide. However, given the nature of the narrative of soap operas, after the initial few years the series end up meandering towards the largely established genre of family dramas and soap heroines continue to embody the virtuous femininity that has become the staple for Indian television.

Interestingly, alongside the creation of the stereotype of the virtuous heroine, soaps have also created the 'vamp' or the 'negative' character. The negative characters represent the antithesis to the heroine and also in many ways the freedom to transcend traditions. Many of the early 'vamps' were shown to be working women, unapologetic of their ambitions and desires. For instance, Payal of *Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, or Pallavi of *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*. The newer soaps, however, have characters like, Ammaji and Kalyani Devi from *Laado* and *Balika Vadu* respectively representing a deeply patriarchal and feudal order.

Soap operas are ever changing and a fluid genre. They have been a site for reading representation of gender, stereotype and many ways as small capsules of contemporary life. It may well be fair to suggest that they are conceived for a female spectatorship, however to perceive them as either as the site for positive representations of gender or deride them as regressive would be a limited perspective.

An interesting exercise would be to read gender in those programs that are not avowedly for a female spectatorship such as reality television or talk shows. How is gender represented here? Shows like *Swayamwar* on NDTV Imagine does not allow for an easy reading. In the first season of *Swayamwar*, a controversial female starlet, considered to be a media hyped, interviewed potential grooms, put them to various tasks in order to win her hand and in the end got engaged to the proverbial last man standing. The protagonist, in the process of the series, was adopted into this larger TV family where actors played traditional roles of brothers and friends ubiquitous in the great Indian marriage. Despite the commercial trappings, the series could be seen to affirm the notion of choice, and also the absolute power of television that can transform a rather risqué personality and project her as the ideal bride, and a potential wife and *bahu*, an interesting example again of the fluid nature of the interplay of gender on television. The same show in the subsequent season, starred showed another controversial protagonist, this time a male, going a step actually telecast the wedding of the winner. If the first season affirmed a woman's right to choose the second season had a bevy of beautiful young women willing to supplicate themselves in order to marry male protagonist on air.

Beyond this portrayal of female and male protagonists in television soap shows, the neo-liberal era saw some changes in their projections. Women became more bold and ready to take up the psychological patriarchal inhibitions through serials like *Afsar Bitiya* on Zee TV. The serial though set up in a traditional small town of Darbhanga, where the main protagonist, Krishna, successfully acquires the post of Block Development Officer. Or *Hitler Didi* on Zee TV, where the protagonist, Indira, is shown as never stepping back and creating a phobia in her locale about herself, she shows that woman should never be taken for granted as a docile and meek character.

Soap shows changed thematically as well. On the one hand we saw comedy serials like *F.I.R* in Sab TV, as Inspector Chandramukhi Chautala has been shown as a typical Harayanvi girl, posted in the police station, Iman Chowki. Her behavioural pattern, her attitudes, her robust nature, and her accent of using the language in the local fervour, brings out the depiction of a different kind of woman. On the other hand, we have *Kuch Toh Log Kehenge* on Sony Entertainment, where extra-marital affairs have been dealt with such finesse that the need for love, care and affection at a later stage of life becomes such a pivotal emotion to survive and struggle through everyday life. Serials like *Na Bole Tum Na Maine Kuch Kaha* on Colors, where Megha, a dutiful daughter-in-law falls in love with Mohan, the next-door selcentred bachelor.

There are innumerable serials and soap shows which has marvellous themes regarding neo-liberal society or so-called today's modern life, where gender could be easily traced down to. But amidst all these, *Maryada...Lekin Kab Tak* on Star Plus crossed the borders of heteronormativity. It is the first serial in the Indian television industry where homosexual love between two men has been portrayed. The main characters, Gaurav and Karan, have been shown in love despite Gaurav being married. Although the serial began on a different tone, the angle of gay love has been depicted with authenticity.

The attempt here is not criticise the representation of gender on television for an inaccurate portrayal of women and men and the performance of gender roles. It would be unfair to put the onus of exemplary representation of gender on television producers and suggest that by transcending stereotypes, television can perform an agential role in equalizing gender relationships in society. The notions of femininity and masculinity are far more complex and several representations of gender exist side by side in society and find expressions on television.

**Activity:**

*Which is your favourite serial? Jot down the reasons for liking it amongst all the serials you watch.*

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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Television represents this complex set of cultural mores; it plays on familiarity and elements of surprise to keep the viewer engaged. The representation of gender should be analysed within the same axis; ratings, trends, and genre specific demands allows for less exacting and more temporal and multifaceted representation of gender. The viewers should not be seen as victims of televisual narratives, as they negotiate, accept and reject the stereotypes presented on television.

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## 2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Watch two soaps on different television channels. Analyse the representation of the protagonist in both the soaps. Compare and contrast their projections.
- 2) Critically analyse the representation of women participants in two reality shows of your choice.
- 3) Watch two or three news telecasts on any television channel of your choice. Identify the women news makers and their projections.

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## 2.10 GLOSSARY

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- Bigg Boss** : Bigg Boss on the channel Colours where contestants spend several days locked in a house and performing everyday tasks and playing games demanded of them by an unseen voice called the Bigg Boss.
- Roadies** : Roadies a contest show where contestants ride on motorbikes across certain sections of the country and sometimes abroad, getting eliminated on the basis of performance in various tasks.
- Soap Operas** : Soap operas are non-fictional programmes, where the narratives are never resolved, and keep the audience engaged in several different plots lines and characters.
- Serials** : Serials are non-fictional programmes that differ from soap operas, in the manner in which there is a closure of the narrative at the end of each episode.
- Sitcoms** : Sitcoms or situational comedies are usually shorter in duration than soaps or serials and are inevitably shot in studios. The narrative is often resolved at the end of each episode.
- Telnovellas** : Mexican soap operas often called Telnovellas combine the soap opera genre with a social message or moral.

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