Motherhood in the New Age Hindi Television Soap Opera: Tracking Change and Continuity

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Abstract: Motherhood has been glorified in the Indian popular imagination through mythical and nationalistic associations and has accordingly been invoked in contemporary popular culture, first in cinema and then on television. It forms the central motif in most pre-millennial Hindi mainstream serials of the 80s and 90s and then through the *saas-bahu* soap operas of the new millennium. The cultural continuities of Indian motherhood have spilled over into the new millennium in myriad ways and it remains a significant theme even in contemporary television narratives at the beginning of the third decade. The post global era of the new millennium saw an upsurge in women's aspirations and it is illuminating to see how the soap opera genre has accommodated them in changing times, despite its own limitations as a neo-traditionalist genre. This article contends that although there many continuities in the imaging of the Indian mother, these are marked by contestations and reconfigurations, even though the myth of the devoted "good mother" continues to dominate the cultural landscape.

Keywords: motherhood, Indian television, *saas-bahu* soap opera, women's aspirations, cultural continuities.

Introduction:

Adrienne Rich famously opens her pioneering work on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) with the statement, "All human life on this planet is born of woman". Other than reproduction of the species, caring and nurturing become the associated tasks of motherhood. The responsibility of the child's physical and emotional well-being is assigned to the woman while the man is freed from the necessary associated household activities. While the woman is physiologically equipped to bear children, the deep-rooted biological essentialism of the patriarchal society ensures that a woman's identity is tied up with her being a mother. Motherhood is accorded the highest status for a woman in India. But as Krishnaraj (2010) points out in the eponymous title of her book, motherhood in India is "Glorification without Empowerment" and the woman's sense of the self is subsumed in her identity as mother. Motherhood has been glorified in the Indian popular imagination through mythical and nationalistic associations and has accordingly been invoked on television in the pre-millennial serials of the 80s and 90s and then through the *saas-bahu* soap operas of the new millennium. The cultural continuities of Indian motherhood continue to be a significant theme even in contemporary television narratives at the beginning of the third decade. These continuities though are marked by many contestations and reconfigurations, even though the myth of the devoted "good mother" continues to dominate the cultural landscape.

Literature Review

The soap opera is a formulaic television genre located in the domestic gendered space and is significant for the study of the growth of television cultures. The genre of the soap opera emerged as a major site for the study of women's resistance for second wave feminist theorists. In one of the earliest critical studies on the soap opera, Brunsdon (1996) theorises that the soap opera ideologically occupies the space of the feminist sphere- the realm of the domestic, the personal and the private- and it is here that 'feminine competence' is recognised (p. 386). This analysis recognised the significance of the soap opera in bringing to the fore complexities of the private sphere that had found no space in other genres previously. Their appeal to women is compounded by their stories being told from the women's point of view. These studies and feminist discourses also led to questions being raised about the 'images of women' in popular culture and the role that media played in creating stereotypes as well as the socialising of women into restrictive notions of femininity (Hollows, 2020, p. 21).

The saas-bahu soap opera genre in India which emerged on the Indian television firmament was a unique form, embracing whole-hearted commodification of Indianised femininity. Despite its popularity the *saas-bahu* soap opera is a much maligned genre and it has been panned by many critics, media watchers, intelligentsia and those associated with the 90s television industry for the supposed regressive nature of their content and the complete shift from the purported progressive agenda of the earlier decades, leading to a kind of "undoing of feminism in popular culture" (Fazal, 2009, p. 43). Perhaps this progressive agenda combined with global consumerism carried in themselves the seeds of a backlash through a kind of "new traditionalism" (a term coined by Susan Faludi in the context of American media culture of the 80s and early 90s) which articulates a vision of the home as a woman's sanctuary as opposed to the stress of their working lives and the outside world (Genz & Brabon, 2009, pp.51-52). The first generation soaps of the new millennium in India similarly prioritised the home-maker over the professional woman. To say that it was wholly on account of a backlash would be stretching it too far since there were several other socio-economic, cultural and political factors that were at play in the capitalistic neo-liberal era that the country had entered after a decade of globalisation. The genesis of the new Indian soaps lay in the negotiations with the radical images of women of the 80s and the 90s. At this juncture on Indian television the existing radical role models offered were deeply infracted by class, making them aspirational as well as conflicted. However, it is undeniable that the representations of women during these two decades have explored the many real and imagined possibilities which had opened up on account of the boom in the neo-liberal economy.

Objectives of the Study

The present study proposes that the role of the mother in the *saas-bahu* soap opera has also contended with the many upheavals that have taken place in the family and society. It provides an overview of the various phases of the soap opera with greater focus on some of the soaps in the last six years. While the soap opera genre on Hindi language television over the last twenty-five years has held on to its essential core of Indian womanhood, it has seen different waves of content and representation in its various phases, interacting with the historical elements in the prevalent socio-cultural discourses of the time. This is also in keeping with the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's view of mass culture as a dynamic entity. Mass culture for Gramsci belongs to the realm of civil sphere where consent and hegemony is organised, and is also the place where counter hegemonies or alternative ideologies are negotiated and reconstituted (Landy, 1986, 50). As Stuart Hall points out, representation is not a "one way transmitter" but it is "dialogic" and is sustained by "the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever…"(Hall et al 1981, p. xxvi).

Methodology of the Study

This study is an outcome of sustained research, viewing of select prime time soap operas and their archives, and note-taking over the years. The period of study covers twenty-five years from 2000-2025 and is historical and panoptical in its approach. It provides phase-wise highlights of the representation of the mother in the soap opera.

The Rise of the *Saas-Bahu* Soap Opera

The soap opera landed with a huge bang on Indian television in the year 2000 with the launch of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thhi (The Mother-in-Law was once a Daughter-in-Law,)*a creation of the production house Balaji Telefilms for the Hindi general entertainment channel (GEC) Star Plus. In fact, this was the first time that the soap opera, in its truest form, had hit the Indian television screen. This genre was a complete departure from the television serials of the 80s and 90s which were designed with narrative closures and were guided by realist aesthetics rather than the intense melodrama and spectacle of the soaps. Later in the same year, Balaji Telefilms and Star Plus once again joined hands to consolidate this genre with the launch of a second soap called *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* (The Common Story of Households). This new genre of prime time soap opera, uniquely Indian, would henceforth be unofficially termed as the *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law) sagas and would also be referred to as K-soaps since their producer Ekta Kapoor had a superstitious belief in the letter 'K'. In what is part of television history, both these soaps ushered in a revolution in the content, the format of story-telling and characterisation. The narratives of such soaps did not necessarily reflect a clash between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law but the melodramatic nature of the conflict in these soaps remained domestic and the women in it primarily housewives.

The success of this genre can be measured in the way it transformed the fortunes of the Indian production house and the transnational television channel and turned their leading stars into household names. Such was the impact of the K-soaps that regional television industries also quickly followed suit and serials in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, etc. began to reflect the new programming. The aggressive Indianisation to appeal to a 'glocal' audience paid rich dividends. It also marked a paradigm shift in terms of content and gender perspective in television programming. The immense success and reception of both these soaps opened the floodgates for this genre and its legacy continues strongly even twenty five years later into the new millennium. Television has been a middle class global consumerist phenomena and the woman of the pre-millennial television serials was mostly located in the urban, middle class milieu where most of its viewers came from. The turn of the century saw an exponential growth in the aspirational Indian middle class which now extended to include even semi-urban small town India. The representation of women in the *saas-bahu* soaps reflects the reality of the shift in viewership and creation of new television cultures.

The Making of the Genre: Gender, Nation and Popular Imagination in India

The soap opera has incontrovertibly been established by feminist critics as a woman's medium which acknowledges women's competencies. According to Geraghty (1991), the feminine genres create a world which allows it readers or audiences to imagine the possibilities of a kind of a "utopia" or an "ideal world in which values traditionally associated with women are given space" and relationships can be organised on women's terms (p. 117). But one must remember that the world of the soap opera is a simulation of the contemporary world and exists only on television. Das (2003) is of the firm opinion that the images one sees on television have nothing to do with life's reality even as fiction. For Baudrillard, the images on television arise out of a life-world of their own and not out of any socially defined community (cited in Das, 2003, p. 148). Yet the images on television potentially engage with the audiences and interact to create new cultures.

In the newly-minted *saas-bahu* soap opera on Indian television it was the woman as housewife in her totally Indian avatar now firmly at the centre of these new television narratives, linking all the characters and driving the plot forward. She was ideologically positioned as Hindu and upper class, with all the sartorial and cultural markers such as *sari, bindi, mangalsutra*, etc. The existence of these women characters begins when they are married into the family and then they willingly and lovingly bear the enormous responsibility of being the ideal daughter-in-law, the perfect wife and the perfect mother. They are shown as proactive and committed to the task of preserving family values and honour, even bringing the wayward sheep back to the fold. Their strength and assertiveness is crucial in sustaining the moral order as well as the rituals of the family.

The instant popularity of the *saas-bahu* soaps in India, cutting across genders, can thus be explained in the context of classic patriarchy finding a televisual representation. According to Kandiyoti (1988), under classic patriarchy, "Woman's life cycle in the patriarchal extended family is such that the deprivation and hardships that she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her subservient daughters-in-law" (p. 279). Thus, women themselves help sustain the model since to a certain extent they are able to negotiate autonomy and power within the domain of the household; ranging from the purse-strings to the kitchen, from control over their sons to dominance over their daughters in law.

This new genre of the Indian soap opera became a unique form drawing from the richly diverse Indian culture and story-telling traditions. The two epics, *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are deeply embedded in the Indian cultural landscape with their value systems and they have not just provided narratives but also provide the ideal models for characters, familial bonds and social relations. The patrilocal joint-family settings in which these soaps were typically foregrounded provided the ideal platform for the interplay of family relationships. Shoma Munshi (2010) notes that, "Content borrowed from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and other pan-Indian tales frequently broadens characterization and interpretation of plots in daily prime time soaps. This is in line with the aesthetic theories found in Indian epic narratives". (p.10).This can be seen even in the interpersonal relationships which suggest the Indian epic structure.

Further, the construction of a Hinduised femininity which actively draws from the mythological aspects of Hindu womanhood forms the basis of representation in these K-serials and the other soaps that followed- "the *mata* (mother), the *pativrata* (the chaste woman), the *sumangali* (the auspicious married woman) and *virangana* (the warrior woman)" (Mahadevan, 2010, p. 9). The images of Sati, Sita and Savitri become prototypes for the characterisation of women in these soaps carrying forward the notion of the *Bharatiya Naari* which has been the overarching symbolic cultural construct of ideal Indian womanhood, especially promoted as a currency during the course of the anti-colonial movement in India. To this may also be added the heroic anti-colonial figure of Rani Lakshmi Bai, the widowed queen of Jhansi who stepped out of the palace/home to defend her kingdom and the titular right of her minor son against the predatory colonial power, and who showed exemplary valour in the battlefield before sacrificing her life.

The various nationalist and religious reform movements of the late 19th century primarily succeeded in creating a discursive conflation of gender, religion and nation symbolised through *Bharat Mata,* that is, Mother India, also viewed as a goddess to be worshipped. Bankim Chandra's Bengali novel *Anandmath* (1882)*,* for example, which included his poem *Bande Mataram*, later adopted as the national song of India after Independence, pays obeisance to the nation as mother. In popular Hindi cinema, this trope was immortalised by Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) which collapses all the facets of *strishakti* as *matrishakti* in the title itself. The iconic line, *Mere paas maa hai* (I have my mother), spoken by actor Shashi Kapoor in the Bollywood cult classic *Deewaar* (Yash Chopra, 1975), cements powerfully the status of mother in the Indian popular imagination. The poster of *Mother India* famously depicted the mother carrying a heavy plough on her back, a metaphor for the hardships that she endures for her children, ensuring at the same time that they grow up with the right values. The Indian mother is virtuous, carries on in silence; is resilient and multi-tasking. But she can be fiercely aggressive when it comes to protecting her children and family. The new era soaps, through the reworking of the epic imagination, mythology and popular culture, ensure the continuity of all these images beyond the post-colonial period into the post-global consumerist era of the new millennium.

An Overview of Soap Operas through the Decades

All soap operas are necessarily located in the domestic gendered space, yet they can be distinguished in terms of their thematic content. The first decade of the new millennium witnessed at least two major phases of the soap opera- the earliest phase which commenced with *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* helped in establishing the genre and mostly showcased intergenerational family conflicts within the extended joint-family and the trials and tribulations that they tide over by staying together. The popularity of the first generation K-soaps hinged upon the construction of television families which were shown to be at the crossroads, striving to seek strength in tradition and culture as opposed to the upheavals caused in the post-global era. The mothers of these early soaps were dutifully home-bound and had no aspirations for a career outside the home. On the few occasions when these women stepped out to work, it was generally to intervene in floundering family businesses or to resolve temporary crises as part of the plot. The first phase of Ekta Kapoor soaps with Tulsi Virani of *Kyunki*(2000-2008) and Parvati Om Agarwal of *Kahaani* (2000- 2008)*,* cast in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould, emphatically established the formula which became the guiding template for the others to follow. Even their names Tulsi and Parvati, drawn from Hindu mythology, embody the strong, tradition-loving Hindu character of the concerned family. Apart from the names, the opening visuals and the background devotional songs highlight the "sacralisation" of these two characters (Munshi, 2010, p. 138). These two soaps also established the prototype for the strong and respected mother who could exert the right measure of control over her children and even punish them for their waywardness; following in the footsteps of Lajoji from the iconic 80s television serial *Buniyaad* (1986) rather than the whimpering Bhagwanti of *Hum Log* (Doordarshan, 1984-85).

The second major phase of the soap opera was pro-social in content, moving beyond the status-quo of the domestic sphere of urban households. A pro-social soap opera is defined as one that depicts cognitive, affective and behavioural activities considered socially desirable or preferable by most members of a society. Earlier the sway of the intensely melodramatic *saas-bahu* K-serials and their clones was disrupted with the arrival of *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* (henceforth *JJKN*) on Sony Entertainment Television (September 2003- May 2006) which brought with it a whiff of much-needed fresh air to the Indian television firmament before losing its steam towards the end. The makeover story of the ordinary girl with a heart of gold and with ambitions towards a career rather than marriage brought realism back to the small screen. While Jassi's mother is timid and dominated by her husband, Jassi's grandmother Bebe is her greatest inspiration and support against the conservatism of her father. The enlightened Bebe or grandmother finds reconfiguration in the highly melodramatised matriarchs of the phase two of the *saas-bahu* soaps.

Saat Phere (Sphere Origin, Zee TV, 2005-2009) and *Sapna Babul Ka …Bidaai* (2007-2010) on Star Plus capitalised on the conversation started by *JJKN* around the external looks versus the inner beauty of a woman which eventually led to the thematic trend of incorporating social concerns surrounding women. The launch of the pro-social mega-soap *Balika Vadhu* (Sphere Origins, Colors TV, July 2008 -July 2016) changed the dynamics of the Hindi GECs. The child bride Anandi with her innocence, and the matriarch Dadisa with her sternness and rigidity introduced new categories of women representation to the serial industry which was in turn lapped up by the prime time audiences. Dadisa represents the matriarch who feels constantly challenged by patriarchy and yet is its stoutest defender. In the absence of the male patriarch (who has long been dead), it is she who has assumed power to ensure that the family upholds its ordained traditions. She also performs the role of the antagonist opposed to Anandi's desire for education. Through her persistence in the pursuit of education, Anandi offers resistance, and is eventually able to make Dadisa relent and support her education and ambitions.

This made way for other matriarch figures, the most popular amongst them being Ammaji of *Na Aana Iss Des Lado* (Colors TV, 2009-2012) which tackles the issue of female infanticide. The matriarch figure thus also questions blind orthodoxy and becomes the leading agent of social change, notwithstanding the mixed messaging on emancipation of women in these soaps. Production houses and channels were quick to follow the pro-social trend triggered by *Balika Vadhu*, realising its marketing potential. Serials showcasing a complete spectrum of social ills were aired through the narrative of the suffering woman at the centre of these soaps: of discrimination against girls, the lower caste girl, Dalit girl, fat girl, short girl, girl with disability, the sexually harassed girl, and so on.

The search for fresher and newer narratives had continued on the Hindi soap opera after *Balika Vadhu*, accommodating roles which could at least reflect the rising aspirations of the Indian women, alongside the deeply entrenched *saas-bahu* model, or even within its overarching shadow. The third phase of the soap opera in the new decade of the new millennium threw up a new crop of determined women characters, and was more about the *betis* and *behnas* (Bajpai, 2012, para 4) with career ambitions. Romantic narratives too found centre-stage, involving protagonists both young and old. Marriage, of course, continues to be the dominant discourse, but lead protagonists on the verge of marrying persons of their choice becomes common; married women are shown to have a *mayka* or parental home and not just a *sasural* (marital home). The trend now was to incorporate the career ambitions of the woman within the narrative in which they are mostly encouraged by their mothers or mothers-in-law. However, despite being professionals and holding positions of responsibility at their places of work, these women characters are never able to emerge out of their family roles. A reworking of 'new traditionalism' is evidenced through these characters. As such, the formula of kitchen politics has remained a consistent presence. Regressive tropes have continued to raise their head despite some refreshing portrayals. The lead protagonist in *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein* (Balaji Telefilms, Star Plus 2013-2019) is a dentist, yet is referred to as *baanjh* (an infertile woman) on account of her inability to have her own child. In her desire for motherhood she has married a divorcee so as to be the mother to his daughter. Motherhood thus, is depicted as the natural urge of the woman.

It is also imperative to acknowledge that this decade saw a number of soaps other than typical *saas-bahu* sagas which made their interventions with progressive portrayals of women and mothers. The finite serial *Tamanna* (Star Plus, February–June 2016) showcased disruptive content with the progressive story of a young woman, Dharaa who aims to become a cricketer but is married off early and also becomes a mother. The central question that is posed here is if there necessarily has to be an "expiry date" to a woman's dreams and if a woman should abandon her dreams once she gets married and has children. Dharaa eventually divorces her abusive husband, embraces single motherhood and also pursues her career as a cricket coach. Although the story of *Tamanna* incorporates all the elements of the soap opera with melodrama inside and outside the domestic sphere,

it is laudable for staying on course with the protagonist's ambition of making a career in sport even after her marriage. The decision to walk out of her marriage normalises divorce as a possibility for the Indian wife, who for once refuses to stoically suffer in silence in her virtuosity. It also removes the stigma around single motherhood.

Contestations over Motherhood in the New Age Soaps

Feasey (2013) contends that "good" motherhood is a romanticised myth that most women struggle to emulate and are burdened with guilt if they are unable to meet these expectations (p. 25). This echoes the contentions of "new momism" as suggested by Douglas & Michaels (2004) where they see it as a set of ideals, norms and practices that sets standards of success that are impossible to meet (pp. 1-28). This, according to Douglas & Michaels is a shift promulgated by media images which marks a post-feminist regression toward intensive mothering. While the devotion of the Indian mother to her children remains incontrovertible in the new era, media images by implication raise further expectations. Even the evil woman of the soap opera is depicted as a good mother to her children. The contemporary world of advertisements now portrays the post-feminist mother not just as someone cooking Maggi, but also as someone running a race with the son to train him, with a drink of Complan waiting at home at the end of it; or making wise investments through LIC (Life Insurance Corporation of India) to secure the future of her daughter. The issue for the Indian mother generally is not whether she is a bad mother, but whether she can be an empowered woman even as she cares for her children. The reluctance of young Indian women to marry early and have children soon thereafter reflects their fears surrounding their careers and loss of freedom. The current images of the Indian mother especially on reality television seek to present her more as a mother seeking empowerment rather than a bad one. At the same time she is burdened with the stress of finding the right balance between motherhood and career.

Two soaps launched in 2020 with motherhood as the central trope prove the contrast in treatment and representation that exists side by side in the realm of contemporary soap opera. *India Waali Maa* (The Indian Mother, Sony TV, August 2020- Feb 2021) reaffirms the notion of conventional femininity as the exemplar of motherhood. The soap was launched at a particularly poignant time in the nation's political, social and cultural consciousness, with the word 'nationalism' commanding fervour and passion. With the story revolving around the mother-son relationship, the most powerful 'Indian' sentiments get yoked together in the title itself. The mother is named Kaushalya, echoing the mother of Ram from the epic *Ramayana*. However, her grown-up son Rohan is no Ram. Kaushalya's efforts and sacrifices are directed towards bringing the wayward son home only to suffer rejection and humiliation from her son. Yet she persists, reiterating the belief that a woman's strength lies in her persistence and her primary duty is towards her children. It seems that the figure of the mother on Indian television never evolved in the two decades of the new millennium. The idealised and conservative images of the selfless "good mother" conforming to the ideology of "intensive mothering" (Feasey, 2013, p. 27) still retain their footing in the soap opera landscape. This "good mother" takes complete responsibility of her child and in this case, continues to do so even when he is an adult. The narrative of the soap also reaffirms the conventional 'Indian' values of the mother which are pitted against the morals of the Westernised young couple who are in a live-in relationship. Kaushalya thus embodies the conventional ideal of Indian motherhood.

A completely radical premise of both pregnancy and motherhood in contemporary times can be seen in *Story Nine Months Ki* (The Story of Nine Months; Sony TV, November 2020- April 2021) where the leading lady Alia is presented as a highly educated, modern and independent woman about the world, running her own company. Her choice of attire is shirt and trousers, establishing her corporate credentials in the contemporary world. She is married to a man who is envious of her accomplishments and suffers from an inferiority complex. She eventually divorces him since he has been cheating on her; he even disparages her for being so aggressively devoted to her career that she is lacking in feminine qualities required to become a mother. Alia then plans to become a single mother through an IVF procedure. As someone who knows her mind, she even embarks on a hunt for the perfect sperm donor. Medical advancements in conception procedures coupled with the woman's autonomy raise interesting debates here with regard to paternity and patrilineage. Alia's representation as a modern, financially independent woman places her outside the orbit of male dependency. In a subversion of patriarchy and biological essentialism, the worth of the man is reduced to being just a sperm donor. His identity becomes insignificant and in this case he remains unknown as well to Alia for a long period of time. Though Sarangdhar, the sperm donor who also happens to be her employee gets to know of the situation, he cannot declare or claim his paternity. As such, the father has no agency or right over his child.

In her background story, Alia's mother had walked out on her husband and daughter since as a wife she was constrained from pursuing her own ambition for a career as a painter. In what may be considered an aberration in the imaging of the Indian mother in the soap opera, she chose fulfilment through her career over her family. The conflict between a career and motherhood is one of the top two narrative devices in western soap operas (Modleski, 1982, p. 31) yet has never realistically been addressed in the Hindi soap opera. Alia bears the scar of her abandonment and has never forgiven her mother. Her desire for motherhood is predicated by the desire to be the nurturing "good mother" that her own mother was not. In a particularly poignant scene, she accidentally meets her mother who tries to explain her circumstances but ironically is rejected by Alia, despite all her feminist posturing. The early part of the series raises complex debates regarding individuality and dilemmas of motherhood for the modern woman. It also calls for an examination of the choices and the price that women have paid over the last two to three generations with regard to their stepping out of their traditional roles. But all this takes place before the narrative shifts gears to centralise the love angle between Alia and Sarangdhar and the possibility of their marriage pre-empting Alia bringing up her child as a single mother without the knowledge of the paternity.

That the theme of motherhood would never be out of fashion was proved by the launch of yet another soap, *Janani* (Mother) in March 2021 as a flagship family drama series on a new television channel called Ishara TV. It was presented as the journey of a single mother who travels from being a dependent wife to an independent and successful woman, setting a progressive example for its contemporary viewers. The image of the mother who has the ability to bring up her children without the support of a husband finds another reconfiguration in this drama. It also points to the changing schematic of the family where the figure of the father is replaced by the mother.

While the generic definition of a "mother" is that of someone with gestational capabilities, in another definition the term 'mother' refers to a person who engages in the act of mothering, that is, caring for and nurturing. An interesting shift in roles may be seen in the soap *Mere Dad Ki Dulhan* (A Bride for My Father, Sony TV, November 2019 - November 2020) where the widowed single father brings up his daughter who is now an adult. He is represented as having adapted himself to the role of the mother and the caretaker of the house, besides managing his own travel agency, multi-tasking in a way most real life working women and mothers do. He is shown running his kitchen and making pickles in his spare time with natural ease, proving the point that normative gender roles are a social construct.

If there has been a reconfiguration in the role of the mother, re-workings and evolution can be seen even in the contemporary representations of the mother-in-law of the *saas-bahu* soap opera. In a generational arc of twenty years, the original *bahus* and TV stars of the K-serials are now seen as the new age mothers-in-law. As mothers-in-law they are no longer the orthodox and traditionally bound rigid women of the first decade but educated and progressive and supportive of the ambition of their daughters-in-law, reflecting the changes that have taken place in the real world. As actress Deepshikha Nagpal who plays the role of an educated and progressive *saas* in a contemporary soap puts it,

As society evolves TV shows have to portray the evolution of characters too. Be it big cities or small towns, the mother-in-law is no longer dedicating her life to just the son and *bahu*, she is a modern working woman who believes in empowering the *bahu* too. (qtd. in Trivedi, 2021, p.1).

Behind this progressive thought process is the desire of the middle class to consistently upgrade the quality of life. The mother-in-law takes on the responsibility of looking after the children if the daughter-in-law is away at work. It is also indicative of the reworking of the joint-family structure in urban India which now has fewer members but still remains relevant. Economic compulsions in urban areas drive the preference for a joint family setting rather than staying nuclear. As recent studies indicate, the traditional structure and roles of members within the joint family system have changed as it is no longer the children who live with their parents but vice versa, where the parents come to stay as 'guests' and not as 'heads' of joint family. Thus the urban family now is defined more as a democratic collective rather than an autocratic set-up under a male head. Individual freedom and independence for all the members within the family, regardless of gender, is guaranteed with economic limitations and emotional needs binding them.

Conclusion

Despite the exponential rise of the digital OTT platforms, the *saas-bahu* soap opera continues to hold strong on GECs. Amongst the very popular ones on air currently, *Anupamaa,* which premiered on Star Plus in July 2020, is still running with new episodes every week, and is also being streamed on Jio-Hotstar. In fact, the OTT platforms have collaborated with GECs to provide space to the television soaps for digital streaming. Even the older popular soap operas have found a new lease of life on these platforms.

In his provocative book on popular culture, *Everything Bad is Good for You;* Steven Johnson (2005) opines that soap opera elements invite us to read the sub-text of television, thereby heightening our narrative intelligence. Similarly, referring to the soap operas on Indian television, Ghosh (2018) suggests that "pop culture is a layered signifier" and that it is difficult "to box this idiot". Its popularity lies in the world of make-believe that it creates in which viewers at times can find reflections of their own reality or can mull over the changing social realities. Through the wide ranging roles now seen for women as mothers, an imaginative terrain is consistently being created over which their aspirations are negotiated and generational conflicts are raised. The textual shifts in the narratives of the soaps also signify a shift in images. This is clearly visible in the steadily evolving differences in representations between the first and the second decade of the millennium. The imaging is defined by both transgression and conformity and therein is the continued appeal of the *saas-bahu* soap opera for its viewers.

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