I'm a Drama Queen…But I'm the Star you Love to See!

Soap Operas, Melodrama and the Televisual Construction of Female Stardom

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Abstract

The relationship between the silver screen and stardom has been the focus of academic work for several decades. Despite the post-globalization expansion in the Indian mediascape, a rapid increase in the number of television channels, an exponential increase in television programming, and a never-ending production of television stars, small-screen stardom, however, has still not received the same kind of academic attention. With the arrival of Ekta Kapoor's Balaji telefilms in the early 2000s, the soap-opera genre on Indian Television introduced the audiences to melodramatic tales in the form of *saas-bahu* sagas. Kapoor's soaps gave birth to iconic characters like Tulsi, Parvati, Prerna and Jassi whom an average Indian woman adored, identified with and often held on a pedestal higher than that of film stars. Thus, the phenomenon of stardom, once associated with film actors, slowly found its manifestation in television actors.

This paper aims to understand the discourse of the star-text that emerges in relation to the small- screen through the 'leading ladies' of the soap opera genre. The paper will explore

how 'female stardom' is constructed on the small-screen through the melodramatic form and televisual techniques adopted in the soap opera genre. Establishing an association between television melodrama and television stardom, I will analyze how the two complement each other and prioritize the female protagonist through narrative, music, costumes and other televisual techniques, thus conferring to her a 'star-status'. Through a semiotic analysis of a few leading soap operas - *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Bade Achche Lagte Hain*, *Balika Vadhu*, the paper will analyze the associations that the star-text and the melodramatic-text bring together in the soap-opera genre.

Keywords: Indian Television, Stardom, Female, Soap-opera, Melodrama, Small-screen.

Introduction

The year 2014 can be considered a milestone in the journey of Indian television. With 168 million TV households and 149 million cable TV subscribers, it has become the second largest television market in the world after China[1]. This massive expansion of the Indian television industry can be traced back to the post-liberalization era in the early 1990s that introduced Indian audiences to satellite television. From one state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan in the early 90s, Indian audiences now have an offering of 798 national and regional satellite television channels to choose from[2]. With an exposure to foreign programmes like *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Baywatch* in the initial years of liberalization, the entertainment genre wasn't too far behind in producing indigenous content that was served with a flavour of Indian culture and values. The immediate years of post-globalization offered acclaimed soap operas like *Banegi Apni Baat* (1993-97), *Tara* (1993-97), *Hasratein*

(1996-99) and *Saaya* (1998-99) that represented everyday middle-class anxieties related to marriage, relationships, family and career with protagonists who were stuck at the cross-roads of life. But it was with the entry of Ekta Kapoor's Balaji Telefilms that the soap opera format on Indian Television witnessed a rapid transformation. With the broadcast of two of its most successful soap operas *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahanii Ghar Ghar Ki* in the year 2000, Kapoor's new formula of the *saas-bahu* sagas[3](often known as the K-serials) became an instant hit among the audiences and the Hindi entertainment genre conferred a new definition to the soap opera format. Few other television producers followed Kapoor's formula and redefined the soap-opera genre with women-centric narratives that gave birth to iconic fictional characters like Tulsi, Parvati, Jassi and Anandi. A brief overview of the expansion of Balaji telefilms in the early years of the new millennium can be helpful in gauging the reach and popularity of its soaps and their stars. In the early 2000s, Balaji's serials accounted for 85-90 percent of the total advertising revenue for its host channels. The production house increased its programming from 616.5 hours in 1999-2000 to 1584.5 hours in 2001-02, and the company's programming revenues increased from Rs. 48.88 crore (2000-01) to 110.30 crore (2001-02), a 125.63 percent jump within a year[4]. These figures clearly indicate the burgeoning effect that the *saas-bahu* serials had on their audiences and the popularity they provided for their female leads. It is within these co-ordinates that the phenomenon of female stardom on television can be identified and analysed. This is not to say that the female protagonists from the soap operas of the 90s were not popular. Their reach and popularity, however, was only restricted to a relatively smaller audiences until the late 90s as the cable television industry was still in

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[3] The tales of mothers-in-law and daughters-in law are referred to as *saas-bahu* sagas on Indian television.

[4] Data accessed from The Annual Report – Balaji Telefilms 2002, available at http://www.balajitelefilms.com/pdf/annualreports/balajiannualreports/annualreport_2002.pdf

its infancy in India[5]. Female stardom on the small-screen, then, must also be understood within the intersections of technology that allowed the rapid expansion of cable television in Indian households and the economic growth which provided social upward mobility to the audiences so that they could own a television set. This, however, will be an expansive study beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper will explore the construction of the star-text on the small screen through an analysis of the melodramatic form and the televisual techniques adopted in the soap opera genre and will argue that both melodrama and the televisual apparatus centralize the female protagonist and are thus critical in the formation of the small-screen star. The soap-opera or the *telenovela* is a women's fiction form that finds its roots in melodrama. Deriving similarities between soap operas and melodrama, Jane Feuer argues that Peter Brook's conceptualization of melodramatic characteristics like "strong emotionalism, moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of beings, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue..." are in perfect synchronization with the contemporary genre of soap-operas (Feuer, 1984:4). Furthermore, scholars like Lynne Joyrich, Ien Ang and Jeremy Butler have also drawn strong associations between the melodramatic form and the soap opera format, thus, linking the two closely together (Joyrich, 1991-92; Butler, 1986; Ang, 1985). The melodramatic form, therefore, becomes central to the understanding of the soap opera genre. Feuer observes the "excess" that characterizes the melodramatic idiom in the aesthetic as well as the ideological form of soap operas and argues that this "excess" is evident not only in the narrative and *mise-en-scene* but also in "acting, editing, musical underscoring, shot-reverse-shot gazes and the use of zoom lens frequently" (1984: 10). The "star-text" that I propose to extricate in this paper, will also be unraveled through an analysis of this "excess". Through detailed

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[5]   The number of cable households in India rose from 4 million (1992) to 30 million (2001). The number of satellite channels increased from 8 in1992 to 90 in 20001. Increasing buying capacity of the population and fall in price of the TV sets can also be cited as important reasons.

textual analyses of a few popular prime-time Indian TV soaps– *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* (Star Plus, 2000-08), *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*[6] (Sony, 2003-06), *Balika Vadhu* (Colors, 2008- till date) and *Bade Achche Lagte Hain* (Sony, 2011- 14), I will analyze how various televisual techniques foreground the female protagonist in the production of the melodramatic text and how melodrama as a form itself privileges the 'star'. Ellis's argument about the lack of the "photo effect"[7] on television gives me an entry point into understanding the discourse on television stardom through the framework of film stardom. Television, Ellis argues, pretends to 'actuality' and 'immediacy' as opposed to film's presence-absence or the "photo effect". Therefore, TV produces not "stars" but "TV personalities" who "have a fairly constant presence on the medium during the time their TV series is being broadcast" (Ellis 1991:38). Unlike film actors, who metamorphose from one character to the other in every new film, the daily fictional presence of television actors typecasts them in one character. The off-screen circulation of the actor's image is also such that it supports his/her on-screen persona. Working within this framework, my analysis of the 'star-text' that emerges in these soaps will remain confined to the fictional space of the soap operas. With an analysis of the narrative, characterization, music, costumes and make-up and the support of the televisual apparatus, I will attempt to offer an understanding of the star-text that the soap operas produce on the small-screen.

Narrative, Characterization and the Soap Opera Star

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[6] *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* is the Indian adaptation of the Columbian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*. The American television series *Ugly Betty* is also inspired by the same.

[7] The concept of the "photo-effect" is borrowed from Roland Barthes. He talks of the photograph as always already recorded that makes present something that is absent and brings back the absent/past through the illusion of the reality of the image.

From the Ewings in *Dallas* and the Carringtons in *Dyansty*, to the Viranis in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and the Aggarwals in *Kahaanii Ghar Ghar Ki,* they all demonstrate a key characteristic of the melodramatic form: the usage of the family as the locus to dramatize various socio-political issues. The 'nuclear family' of the 1950s American Film Melodrama is, however, replaced by a 'joint family' in the contemporary Indian soap operas. Where, on an ideological level, a joint family as a social institution constructs the idea of a national-self[8], at a narrative level, I observe that it provides the writers with ample opportunities to establish multiple characters, introduce various sub-plots and provide for celebratory occasions like a daughter's marriage, a mother-in-law's funeral, the birth of a new baby and so on. The concept of a joint family is further extended in the Indian soap operas by weaving in the narrative of a family lineage of almost four generations[9]. John Cawelti notes that melodrama is complicated in plot and character, which

> Instead of identifying with a single protagonist through his line of action…typically makes us intersect imaginatively with many lives. Subplots multiply, and the point of view continually shifts in order to involve us in a complex of destinies. Through this complex of characters and plots we see not so much the working of individual fates but the underlying moral process of the world (Cawelti, cited in Modleski, 2008: 267).

As we discuss the contemporary genre of Indian soap operas, I will argue that although melodrama in soap operas still gives emphasis to "the underlying moral process of the world," in terms of the

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[8] Maitrayee Chaudhri discusses the idea of seeing the Indian joint family as the construction of the national-self which "uniquely expresses and represents the valued aspects of Indian culture and tradition" (373). See Chaudhri, M. (2010). "The Family and its Representation: From Indology to Market Research", in *Social Sciences- Communication, Anthropology and Sociology*, Ed. Yogendra Singh. Vol XIV Part 2, 363-390.

[9] *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahut thi, Kasautii Zindagi Kay, Kahani Ghar Ghar ki* and *Pavitra Rishta* are a few shows which had a narrative weaving in four generations in the story. A new generation in a family is often introduced through a generation leap of over several years. This is a narrative technique usually implied when the story with current characters starts getting exhausted.

narrative pattern, the genre has evolved from the shifting point of view of multiple characters to a dominant point of view of the protagonist(s). While the narrative still intersects with multiple lives, the female protagonist, I argue, becomes the fulcrum upon whom the entire plot revolves. The narrative foregrounds the point-of-view of the protagonist(s) and we witness the multiple sub-plots and various characters through her. Within the framework of the family, the protagonist (in most cases a female) becomes the binding factor for the family and the narrative of the soap. In all the soaps that I undertake to study, I observe the presence of a female protagonist as central to the resolution of everyday familial conflicts. The dutiful daughter-in-law Parvati (Sakshi Tanwar) in *Kahanii Ghar Ghar Ki* (hereafter KGGK), the ugly-geeky secretary Jassi (Mona Singh) in *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* (hereafter JJKN), the affectionate mother and wife Priya (Sakshi Tanwar) in *Bade Achche Lagte Hain* (hereafter BALH) and the respectful and enduring Anandi (Avika Gor/Pratyusha Banerjee/Toral Rasputra) in *Balika Vadhu* are all strong idealized female characters who hold the family together and fight against all social odds to maintain the moral rightness of the social world order. The single-protagonist narrative technique in the contemporary Indian soap is what I observe as one of the primary reasons that has led to the emergence of television stardom in India.

Television writer and academic, Vijay Ranganath observes that with the rise of the satellite television channel, Star Plus, in the 1990s[10], a different narrative strategy was being carved out in the daily soaps. "What Star did was to connect the audiences to one face rather than multiple characters. All shows started showcasing one woman on a big hoarding. One face, one woman would invite the

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[10] In 1991, under the Congress government led by Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the Indian economy discarded the socialist policies and went through a process of liberalization. The new neo-liberal policies opened doors for international trade and investment, deregulation, privatization and tax reforms. As a result, the Indian broadcasting industry also witnessed an explosion of Cable Television with the entry of many foreign players who set up new satellite channels, for example Rupert Murdoch's Star TV Network.

audiences to watch the show.[11]" Marking the difference between earlier soaps and now, Ranganath observes, "*Pehle ek mudda hota tha aur uspe kahani banti thi, ab ek ladki hoti hai aur uski kahani hoti hai.*" (Earlier the story would be about an issue, now the story is about a girl). Taking the example of a famous soap of the early 1990s - *Swabhimaan*, he notes that it was a story about "*jaayaz and najaayaz*" (legitimate and illegitimate) whereas now, we have stories about a child-bride Anandi in *Balika Vadhu* or a middle-aged newly-wed Priya in BALH. Unlike the earlier soaps (*Buniyad* and *Humlog*), which had several storylines and multiple protagonists, today's soaps run on a single protagonist and one major storyline that is narrated through the point-of-view of the protagonist. Therefore, the screenplay and the script of the soaps over-emphasize the role and function of the protagonist. This results in portraying the other actors as merely subsidiary, and the protagonist as the 'face' of the soap and often also of the broadcasting channel. Talking about *Balika Vadhu,* writer Gajra Kottary discusses that the initial few episodes set up the narrative and "that is the reason we emphasize on the protagonist. Once the protagonist is liked by the audiences, we move on to other sub-plots." She further adds that, "telling a story from the point-of-view of the protagonist is simpler and the audiences have a direct connect with one character that they look up to and therefore other people's stories are also told through the point-of-view of the protagonist."

A quick reading of the synopsis of the soap JJKN on its host channel's website[12] will support the point I make and illustrate how the story of the soap is essentially the story of its female protagonist Jassi. It illustrates how the story of the soap opera unfolds as Jassi traverses her journey through various phases of life.

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[11] All interviews (except the ones for which links have been shared or sources mentioned) are taken as a part of my field work for my MPhil dissertation during July-Aug 2013.

[12] The synopsis of the soap *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* was accessed from www.setindia.com on November 10, 2013.

Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin is a story of the loveable ugly duckling Jassi's journey to becoming a beautiful swan and finding her prince charming. It is the story of Jasmeet Walia – Jassi – who is an unattractive, bespectacled girl with braces and an odd style of dressing. She is naive but intelligent. Jassi faces a lot of criticism from prettier colleagues – both men and women. The show chronicles her at her workplace where she wins the hearts of her colleagues and her boss due to her warm nature…

Furthermore, I observe that the soap operas not only privilege the female protagonist in the narrative by giving her maximum screen-time and considering her point-of-view as primary, but they also project her as 'an ordinary woman with an extraordinary persona'. Shoma Munshi, in her study of Indian Prime Time soaps notes that "lead actresses in soaps – whether positive or negative – are always strong women. Heroines of soap operas in India are also almost always an embodiment of *Shakti* (power)*"* (2010:188). Richard Dyer, in his seminal work *Stars* (1979), observes the phenomenon of stardom as an amalgamation of the "spectacular with the everyday and the special with the ordinary" and the stars as "ordinary yet extraordinary modern individuals" (35). For me, it is this incorporation of the 'ordinary with the extraordinary' that puts the soap opera heroines in the category of stars where they are 'identifiable' and 'aspirational' simultaneously. Rajan Shahi, the producer of successful shows like *Bidaaii* and *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, in an interview points out that the prime factor in casting a female lead in a soap opera is the 'relatability' factor. "There has to be a *kachchapan* (rawness) that the audiences relate to. I like to cast innocent and vulnerable faces so that people think that this is my sister or my daughter or my wife's story. She can't be picture-perfect. Else she would be in films."

Jassi, a less-than-ordinary looking office secretary who gets nervous at the very sight of her boss; Priya in BALH, a 33 year old unmarried working woman who doesn't succumb to societal pressures of getting married at the right age, the child-bride Anandi in Balika Vadhu who continues with her

education even after marriage and KGGK'S Parvati, the eldest daughter-in-law of the Aggarwal family who transforms from a domesticated housewife to a modern and confident entrepreneur to win back the lost family fortune– are all reincarnations of a middle-class Indian woman. They are all characters who embody in themselves melodramatic characteristics that build not just the narrative of the show but also their own star-images. But while they represent the ordinary woman, they have an extraordinary persona with which they solve every day familial conflicts and disseminate messages of women's emancipation. Shailja Kejriwal, an ex-Creative Director at Star Plus, mentions, "women-wives, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law – find their strength and their heroes in Tulsi and Parvati, just as they found their heroes in Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man persona…Tulsi and Parvati are the Amitabh Bachchans of the small screen" (Kejriwal, cited in Munshi, 2010:191). Thus, it is evident that the ordinary looking house-wives- Anandi and Parvati- are not just fictional characters we see every day, but personalities that embody "ethical forces"[13] and emanate such characteristics that put them in the category of stars.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* bring to us symbols of Indian womanhood through the figures of Sita[14] and Draupadi[15] respectively. In her study of the K Soaps, Munshi observes a direct relation between Indian soaps and epics in terms of the narrative patterns both follow. She notes that Ekta Kapoor's inspiration for KGGK comes from the religious Hindu epic *Ramayana* and therefore, KGGK for her is the modern day *Ramayana*. The narrative unfolds the story of the Aggarwal family,

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[13] Term borrowed from Gledhill, Christine. "Signs of Melodrama" In *Stardom: Industry Of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, Pg. 213, 210-211, London: Routledge, 1991. For Gledhill, the moral/ethical forces entailed in the melodramatic good vs. evil dichotomy are externalized in a character's physical being, personality, gestures, dress, voice and above all actions.

[14] Sita is a Hindu Goddess, an avatar of Lakshmi and the wife of Hindu Deity Lord Rama in the epic *Ramayana*.

[15] Draupadi is described as one of the 'Panch Kanya' (Five Virgins) in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. She is said to have been an extraordinarily beautiful woman who was married to the five brothers known as the Pandavas.

an affluent joint family consisting of four brothers (like the four brothers in the *Ramayana*[16]) and their everyday familial conflicts. Parvati[17] as the eldest *bahu* (daughter-in-law) of the family is the one who shoulders the responsibility of keeping the family united in tough times. The first episode of KGGK, while introducing us to the main protagonist Parvati, parallels her role to that of Sita. The episode opens with Parvati, clad in a red *saree*, ornamented with gold jewelry, sitting on the floor and making a *rangoli*, almost reincarnating the figure of Sita. The house is decorated with lights and *diyas* (lamps) which gives the audiences an idea that the festive occasion for which Parvati prepares is *Diwali*[18]. In a long shot, the camera pans slowly and establishes a temple in the background while Parvati makes a *rangoli* in the foreground. Next, we are introduced to Parvati through a series of close-up shots as she is engrossed in making the *rangoli* with the background score playing *"mangal bhavan amangal hari"*[19]. Then, we see Parvati moving around the house as she puts *diyas* in the house and through her, we are introduced to other members of the family. In the first fifteen minutes of the episode, the audiences are made to believe that Parvati is not only a dutiful and responsible daughter-in-law, but also a loving wife and a concerned sister-in-law. The episode ends with Parvati protecting the *diya* flame with her hands to prevent it from going off while her husband, Om joins her (this frame also becomes the logo of the show) saying *"tumhare hote iss ghar mein andhera kabhi nahi ho sakta…main jaanta hoon tum duniya ka har dukh seh logi par iss ghar ki sukh shanti par kabhi aanch nahi aane dogi"* (This house will never be dark in your presence...I know that you will sacrifice everything

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[16]   *Ramayana* is a Hindu epic that narrates the story of good vs evil through four brothers Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan.

[17]   The character name Parvati is also derived from Hindu mythology where Parvati is a dedicated wife to Lord Shiva.

[18]   The festival of Diwali is celebrated amongst the Hindus as celebration of the homecoming of Lord Rama after a fourteen years exile in the forest. This story is mentioned in *Ramayana*.

[19]   These verses are taken from *Ramcharitmanas* – a religious book that has compilations of stories from the life of Lord Rama.

for the peace and happiness of this house). Just like Sita sacrificed all the palatial comforts for the well-being and reputation of her husband and family, Parvati is also equated to her and expected to do the same.

While Munshi refers to KGGK as a modern day *Ramayana* and parallels the character of Parvati to *Sita*, writer Kottary in her interview with me mentioned that although there are no direct parallels between soap heroines and the image of *Sita*, "but a good woman is always *Sita*. We as social human beings have set images that come from scriptures." Therefore, in all the other soaps that I study, I do not find any direct relation to the mythical characters but all the protagonists to some extent inherently bear the characteristics of *Sita*. In fact, what I observe in the modern Indian woman that the soaps depict, is an embodiment of the characteristics of *Sita* with a balance of rationality, a profusion of modernity with traditions. Therefore, while a woman is dutiful, virtuous, self-sacrificing, an ideal daughter, wife and mother; she is also educated, independent, rational, ambitious and progressive. When Anandi in *Balika Vadhu*sees that her husband has fallen in love with another woman and in spite of all her efforts doesn't want to return, she, too, finds her life-partner in another man, Shiv. This modern day Sita in the form of Anandi does not live in exile after her husband abandons her for another woman; instead, she finds a safe haven elsewhere[20]. Although her in-laws object to her receiving education post-marriage, she fights for her rights and goes to school and returns as the village *sarpanch*. Although she is cultured and respects her elders, she is not easily suppressed by her in-laws; instead, she stands up for her rights. It is also interesting to note that a soap which was labeled as "regressive" by audiences and critics stands out as very "progressive" when Anandi's *Dadisa* (grandmother-in-law) herself allows Anandi to get married to Shiv and start a

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[20]According to the *Ramayana*, Sita was abandoned by her husband Ram once she returned from Lanka where she was abducted by Ravana. Questioning the morality of Sita, Ram abandoned her and sent her for a lifetime exile in the forests.

new life. Moving away from the general constructs of patriarchy, the leading ladies of the soap operas are what Munshi calls the "*televisual viranganas*" (televisual women warriors) who are "virtuous and strong, powerful and prudent…and (move) beyond the roles for women prescribed by patriarchal society" (2010:193). While on the one hand, the narrative supports melodramatic excess through "chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute-rescues and revelations, *deux ex-machina* ending" (Neale 1986:6), the characters themselves exteriorize melodramatic attributes through extreme facial gestures, heavy costumes, excessive jewelry and garish makeup. The next section of the paper will discuss how elements other than the narrative aid the melodramatic form and the star-image in a soap-opera.

Costumes, Make-Up and the Make-Over

Tracing links between melodrama and stardom, Gledhill finds similarity between the two as both use the mode of "exteriorization" of emotions and gestures:

> Melodramatic characterization is performed through a process of personification whereby actors—and fictional characters conceived as actors in their diegetic world—*embody* ethical forces...Here moral forces are expressions of personality, externalised in a character's physical being, in gesture, dress and above all in action…Star personae are constructed in very similar ways. Stars reach their audiences primarily through their bodies (Gledhill, 1991: 214).

Focusing on the 'excess' that is created through the appearance of the characters, I will discuss how the process of "exteriorization" fosters the melodramatic attributes of the protagonist and also helps in the creation of the "star-image" within the fictional space.

Melodrama, Gledhill argues, works on "visual rather than verbal effects" and star personae too offer pictorial pleasure "with appropriate settings, dress and accoutrements" (1991:214). Indian soap operas invest an exorbitant amount of money and time into glamorizing the characters through dress and make-up. Indian soaps have earned immense criticism for they enforce their women to wear heavy *sarees*, jewelry and make-up even when their women go to bed. The soap actresses defy the logic of age as they never have to worry about wrinkled skin or grey hair. One can observe that the "excess" that melodrama creates as a form, is prevalent in the soaps not only in the narrative, music, dialogues but also in the make-up, costumes and sets. Mitu Kumar, the Creative Director of KGGK informs me in an interview that, "heavy sarees, jewelry and make-up makes the female characters look larger than life and adds an aspirational quality to them. That is why the audiences want to look like them or dress up like them." Yvonne Tasker argues that "the star functions as commodity, as signifying system, as fetish object and, to some extent, as the space of a narcissistic identification on the part of the audiences" (1998:180). Therefore, at one level where the fetishized female body of the protagonist adds to the spectacle of the mise-en-scene, at another level the fictionalized feminine subject becomes "the object of identification rather than eroticism" for the female spectators (Stacey, 1994:129).

Where on the one hand the narrative in the soaps has references to *Sita*, the same is exteriorized through costumes and make-up as well. While the soap opera heroines bear modern ideologies and drive major decisions in the family, they are always represented as the ideal, self-sacrificing and *pativrata* wives (all the attributes that we also associate with Sita). Be it the more traditional house-wives like Parvati and Anandi or the modern Priya, they all wear *sindoor* and *mangalsutra* as the potent signifiers of a married Hindu womanhood. These symbols, however, are not seen by these women as symbols of oppression but that of "romance, lyricism, beauty, enchantment and fulfillment" (Singh, 2007:36). In all the soaps that I studied, I observed a married woman (protagonist) *always*

wears the signifiers of married Hindu womanhood. It is only after the death of Om that *Parvati* in KGGK is shown removing her *mangalsutra* and wiping off her *sindoor* and *bindi* in deep remorse. Therefore, the use of *bindi*, *mangalsutra* and *saree* is not just an accessory to enhance the protagonist's beauty but also an essential part of the identity of a married Hindu woman.

Munshi points out that Balaji Telefilms spends a minimum of Rs.15,000 on a *saree* and has its own cupboards filled with *sarees* which are rarely repeated. She adds, "Balaji actors and actresses are dressed and made up like film stars in an expensive Bollywood production" (2010:93). Ritu Deora, a leading costumes designer, mentions in an interview[21] that in the early 1990s Television had no concept of costume designing, and fashion came from films. "However, now TV producers have realized that the personality of a show depends much on the look of the characters." She further adds that costume designing for TV is much more challenging than films as "films can do with very plain costumes, because in most cases they are juxtaposed against scenic backdrops for effect. On the other hand, a TV serial relies only on frontal views in most cases. So whatever gloss or effect we want to create has to be on the front."

Another theme that I want to focus on is that of the image make-over. I will analyze the make-over in the soap operas within the framework of Gledhill's observation that "The star vehicle frequently places its star in a role which initially withholds the full persona" (1991:215). My observation of the two makeovers that I analyze also supports the fact that the star-persona of the characters that I read is 'maximized' over a period of time as the narrative is taken forward. Since the soap-operas run for several years and the actors are supposed to maintain a specific look that their character requires, it often becomes monotonous for both the audiences and the actors. Therefore, a change in the

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[21]   Interview published on the site : http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k3/actor/ritu.htm

narrative or a generation leap often helps the producers to experiment with the look of the actors. Sakshi Tanwar's makeover from Parvati to Janki Devi is a case in point. After a six-year telecast, the soap took a generation leap of 18 years in November 2006. Parvati, after spending several years in prison, on charges of murdering her husband Om and nephew Krishna and then spending a few more years in Benaras, returns to Mumbai and plans to seek revenge "against her own to win back her own" (Apno ke liye, apno ke khilaf). The metamorphoses of the *gharelu* (domesticated) and timid Sita-like *bahu* Parvati to a modern, confident and glamorous Janki Devi was a much-awaited one for everyone. Balaji roped in the makeover king of Bollywood Manish Malhotra to execute the same. With designer *sarees*, strappy blouses, pearl and diamond jewelry, shoulder length highlighted hair and modish make-up, Parvati transformed into Janki Devi. However, a change in the look did not result in a change in the personality of Parvati. Malhotra in an interview mentions, "Her personality is not going to change, I will make her look elegant, not sexy. She will continue to be the inspiration for millions of *bahus*"[22]. Although there is a complete alteration in the physical appearance of Parvati, she still remains the ideal *bahu* who dons a new avatar only to bring back balance in the family. The audience identification still lies with her personality (of Parvati) while her looks only confer visual pleasure to them.

Whereas in KGGK, the make-over is peripheral to the narrative, in JJKN the make-over becomes central to the narrative of the show. When a less-than-ordinary looking *Jassi* with thick glasses, a shabby wig, braced teeth and full-sleeved *shalwar-kurta* is all set for a makeover, the audiences are in for a jaw-dropping moment. Abhijit Roy contextualizes Jassi's makeover with the phenomenon of the makeover as a wider category in global consumerist culture:

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[22]   Interview published on The Hindu on November 17, 2006 http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/behind-the-beauties/article3231384.ece

It was indeed interesting to note how the serial triggered a context of reception in which the central thematic of the bodily makeover resonated with a broader thematic of societal and representational changes (2011:19).

Roy notes that the makeover of Jassi brought along with it the makeover of the post-globalized Indian society and also of the changing television programming. Discussing the politics of makeover, Roy argues that although there is a change in the image "but never a paradigmatic shift in ideology… sustenance of a certain order of 'tradition' appears to be a key condition in discourses of makeover" (21). While there is a dimension of change in the made-over-body, there is a dimension of a non-change in tradition.

Therefore, the bodily makeover helps the character to shed her existing image which has been appreciated by the audiences and instead acquire a new image in order to do what her character is otherwise not meant to do (seek revenge). Also, the make-over is almost always from a timid, traditional woman to a confident and glamorous one (and not in the reverse order). Therefore, the once identifiable character of Parvati or Jassi, later acquires an aspirational value for the audiences. If Parvati would have been the glamorous Janki Devi from the first episode, the relatability with her would have been much less. Once Parvati acquires a "star-image" through KGGK, her transformation to a glamorous Janki Devi becomes acceptable to audiences because although her physical being has changed, she still remains Parvati Bhabhi for them. While the exteriorization of the mise-en-scene comes through appropriately with the costumes and make-up of the characters, the exteriorization of emotions is often conferred via dialogues and music in melodrama. "Sound", Thomas Elseasser says, "whether musical or verbal, acts first of all to give the illusion of depth to the moving image and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the mise-en-scene" (1991:75). With an

emphasis on music, I will now explore how the 'melos' in melodrama caters to the aural pleasures of the spectators and acts as a critical third dimension in building the 'star image'.

Melos, Melodrama and the Star Image

Both stardom and melodrama, Christine Gledhill argues, give "centrality to the systems of the 'person'" (1991: 211). This emphasis on the personality is further enhanced through the usage of music and particularly the title track of the soaps. But before I link the usage of music in soap operas to stardom I want to briefly explain how music enhances the emotional effect that melodrama aspires for. In terms of film melodrama, Ira Bhaskar identifies the use of music and songs as a unique characteristic of Indian melodrama, which serves not only as a vehicle for emotional amplification, but is also "the language of the ineffable" (2012:163). In the context of television melodrama, music not only expresses the 'ineffable', but also due to its 'hyperbolic' nature, works towards producing an 'underlining' or over-emphasizing effect. The emotional and mental turmoil of the characters, which cannot be expressed through the dialogues, is fore-grounded for the audiences through the use of music. In an interview with television writer Ved Raj, I was told that since the narratives of soap-operas run at a snail's pace, the music makes the audiences believe that "a lot is happening" although there isn't much that has happened in taking the story forward. The music in television, therefore, also works as a tool to 'delay' the narrative. Since the daily soaps are shot and edited at crunching deadlines, music helps in elongating the programming time for the soaps thereby keeping a slow narrative pace.

This observation becomes significant with reference to the soap opera genre where in, functioning within the melodramatic mode, the "melos" most often becomes more important than the "drama".

The heavy and continuous background score in almost all the soap-operas under discussion is a witness to the fact that music becomes as important as the narrative in the soaps.

Dorothy Hobson observes the primary function of a title track in a soap opera as that of a "siren call to view" for the audiences (Hobson cited in Munshi, 2010:97). Most of the title tracks that I undertake to study are sung by a female artist. The lyrics of the track weave into the main plot and introduce us to the protagonist of the soap. Furthermore, the feminine voice in the track, engages the viewer directly with the protagonist of the show. This further supports what I have argued earlier - that the female protagonist's point-of-view remains central to the narrative. *Balika Vadhu's* title track for instance summarizes the agony of the child bride, Anandi, who is married at a tender age of eight years. The female voice in the track represents Anandi's voice who complains to her father for marrying her off at a young age. To give the soap a more authentic appeal, the title track uses Rajasthani dialect instead of Hindi.

Chhoti si umar parnai re babosa,	Father, you got me married at such a young age
kiyo tharo kai main kasoor	What wrong had I done to you?
Itra dina toh mahane laad lagaya,	You have loved me for so many years
ab kyun karo mahane hivde se dur	Now, why are you sending me away from you ?

Unlike *Balika Vadhu*, which has a first person account in the track, KGGK is a third person account that describes how an ideal family lives, but the female voice re-enforces the idea that the song is being sung by Parvati. This is also supported by the visual where the video starts with a close up of Parvati and then we are introduced to different family members through her gaze. The point-of-view of the camera becomes the point-of-view of Parvati.

It is important to throw some light on the title track of BALH at this juncture. The track is originally drawn from the famous Bollywood song *Bade Achche Lagte Hain* (Balika Vadhu, 1976). With minor variations in the lyrics, the song is played in the background in almost all the episodes. Playback

singer, Shreya Ghoshal lends her melodious voice to the protagonist Priya (Sakshi Tanwar) through the title track at various instances. Ghoshal's voice which is widely used in Hindi film songs for almost all the famous Bollywood actresses gains an aural quality specific to the small-screen. Her filmic 'aural stardom'[23] is conferred on to Priya's small-screen stardom in a way that puts Priya at the same pedestal as a film actress whose 'invisible voice' Ghoshal becomes on the silver-screen. Also noteworthy is the fact that there is a male version of the song sung by Trijay Dey but it is Shreya/Sakshi's version that is used more frequently in the soap.

The usage of films songs in television soaps has also seen a rapid increase in the last decade. TV soaps often borrow their titles form old Bollywood songs since they have a better recall value. At a time when soaps come out of an assembly line system, the soap titles need to be catchy to grab the viewers' attention. Titles like *Bade Achche Lagte Hain*, *Sasural Genda Phool*, *Kya Hua Tera Vaada* and *Na Bole Tum na Maine Kuch Kaha* are often more appealing than titles like *Parichay, Saans* or *Sanskar*. The usage of film songs, however, finds a more important function in the diegesis of the TV soap where at critical climactic moments the film song not only 'underlines' the already depicted emotions but also 'delays' the plot. An additional function that I observe of the film song in the soap opera narrative is that of the manifestation of film stardom in television actors. With reference to Hindi film songs, Neepa Majumdar considers songs to be an important vehicle of star construction since "they epitomize the most spectacular aspects of star performance" (2009:175). Although there is an endless list of film songs that feature in almost all daily soaps, I will explore the very controversial consummation scene of Ram and Priya in BALH which I observe as a replication of the consummation scene between Jodha and Akbar in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodhaa Akbar*. The song *"In Lamhon ke Daaman mein"* plays in the background while Ram confesses his love to Priya, similar

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[23] Neepa Majumdar (2009) uses the term "aural stardom" in *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only* to discuss the popularity and fame of one of the leading Indian female playback singers of Bollywood Lata Mangeshkar.

to Akbar expressing his love to Jodhaa. Ram and Priya's bedroom is the site of the performance and objects like mirror and candles become important elements in the mise-en-scene in both the sequences. While the camera in *Jodhaa Akbar* keeps itself at a distance and attempts to capture the palatial grandeur along with the characters' performance, the camera in BALH tightly frames the characters with slow pans between the bodily movements of Ram and Priya within the backdrop of the bedroom. The close-ups thus become vital not only in setting forth the emotion but also in the identification of the characters with the audiences. Although the act of consummation is performed almost similarly in both the sequences, the well-choreographed movements in *Jodhaa Akbar* are replaced by candid gestures between Ram and Priya in BALH. The title track "Bade Achche" is interspersed twice in-between "In Lamhon ke Daman mein" to emphasize on the fact that though it is a televisual manifestation of *Jodhaa-Akbar,* the characters here are not Jodhaa and Akbar but Ram and Priya. Ram and Priya at any point do not remind us of Hrithik Roshan or Aishwarya Rai but of the characters they played in *Jodhaa Akbar.* It is Rai's manifestation of Jodhaa that Sakshi Tanwar borrows from in playing the role of Priya, thus imbibing in her performance, the skills displayed by Rai on celluloid. While the "melos" in melodrama allows for emotional heightening through the usage of songs, the televisual apparatus further supports this heightening through the use of various camera and editing techniques. The final section of the paper will explore the role of the camera and the editing pattern in making meaning of the televisual text.

The Televisual Apparatus and the Small-Screen Star

Peter Brooks considers melodrama as a rhetorical mode that is based not only "on verbal signs that provide a full enunciation of how and what one is, there is also a realm of physical signs that make one legible to others" (1976:44). These physical signs are depicted not only through the *mise-en-scene*

but also through the actor's facial expressions and body language. Jane Feuer argues that the "excess" that melodrama creates as a form is often most prominently visible in the actor's acting style in the soap-opera format which is far more "excessive in comparison to the more naturalistic mode currently employed in other forms of television and in cinema" (Feuer, 1984:10). While melodrama allows for hyperbolic and exaggerated acting for emotional heightening, the television apparatus further supports this heightening of emotions through the use of close-ups, fast zooms, swish-pan shots, tableau construction and fast paced shot-reverse-shot editing pattern. "The small television screen records perfectly even the most minutely nuanced gestures" (Thorburn 1976:598). Therefore, it is in the light of the televisual apparatus that I will analyze the actor's role in the creation of melodrama and furthermore his/her own 'star image' in the soap opera format.

Talking about television melodrama, David Thorburn notes that "far more decisively than a movie actor, a television actor creates and controls the meaning of what we see on screen" as television's "reduced visual scale grants him a primacy unavailable in the theatres or in the movies, where amplitude of things or spaces offers competition for the eyes' attention" (1976:598). Contrary to this, television producer and writer Zama Habib observes that in the contemporary context, the actor's role is undermined with the emergence of latest technologies used in the televisual apparatus. Discussing the technological and industrial changes that took place with the coming of daily soap operas in the late 1990s, Habib mentions:

> All good writers, directors, actors left because they knew that they will not be able to churn out episodes every day. So then, the mediocre lot took over. Actors were non-actors who were taken for face-value. So, to prop them up the directors had to play with the camera, editing and background score. Since the actor doesn't act, it is the camera that has to act…a good actor underlines things with silence and pauses…an

average actor cannot do that…so to underline, you put music, twist the camera and use the bang sound effect on dialogues.

It is with this premise that I argue that the contribution of the televisual apparatus cannot be undermined in making meaning of the televisual text, and the actor's role in the soap opera genre. The actor's role is further enhanced by various camera and editing techniques that I will discuss to bring home the point that the apparatus plays a crucial role in making meaning in melodrama and also building the 'star text'.

The televisual apparatus, in the soap-opera format privileges the star in various ways. The first episode of JJKN is an interesting case in point to discuss the same. The first shot of the episode begins with the point-of-view shot of a girl who enters Gulmohar Fashion House for an interview. The hand-held camera takes the audiences inside the office building leading to the reception, the elevator, various office cabins and finally to an interview room. Supporting the visuals is the audio of a girl who is asking people directions to the interview room. Shocked reactions of the employees looking towards the camera work as a build-up for the revelation that the audiences are just going to witness. When finally the name Jasmeet Walia is called out, the shot cuts into a fast zoom-in of Jassi followed by a close-up shot of her face. Therefore, the camera acts as the point-of-view of Jassi initially, and while she is introduced to the interview board of Gulmohar, she is simultaneously also introduced to the audiences. The camera's prioritization of Jassi's point-of-view over that of other characters, especially that of Pari Kapadia, her archrival on the show (who is also introduced to the audience through Jassi's point of view) foregrounds the primacy of Jassi's point-of-view which will drive the narrative forward. Earlier, in the paper, I have also illustrated how in the title track of KGGK the camera prioritizes Parvati and acts as her point-of-view.

The close-up shot is the dominantly used shot in the medium of television and more so in the soap-opera format as it provides a "window to the soul" of the characters. The close-up shot has the

"effect of bringing the viewer closer and closer to the hidden emotional secrets" of the characters (Hayward 1997:156). With a dual function, "both to emphasize details and to exclude surrounding actions", the close-up trains the spectator "in being sensitive to the unspoken feelings of the characters" (Butler 2009:183; Modleski 2008:92). Romance, pathos, anger, revenge and regret are all emotions projected by the actors that find further intensification through the use of the close-up. Anandi's love-confession to her new found love Shiv, Priya's consummation with her husband Ram, and Jassi's make-over from Jasmeet Walia to Jessica are all important sequences that use the close-up and at times even extreme close-ups to bring across the emotion of the characters to the audiences. The soap-opera episodes are filled with close-up shots of various characters but "especially the protagonist" (Munshi 2010:118). In an analysis of KGGK and Kyunki.., Munshi observes that "the end of each day's episode, nine times out of ten, also freezes the picture directly on the faces of Parvati and Tulsi" (Munshi 2010:12). In relation to the close-up, Christine Gledhill notes that "stars reach their audiences primarily through their bodies" (1991:214). Where on the one hand the close-up shot functions as a lucrative tool for emotional heightening in the soap operas, it also "offers audiences a gaze at the bodies of stars closer and more sustained than the majority of real-life encounters" (Gledhill, 1991:214).

The swish-pan, swish-zoom and tableau shots are some frequently used techniques that occur at critical points in the narrative of the Indian soap operas. Whereas a swish pan refers to an extremely fast pan movement of the camera from one side to the other and vice-versa, a swish zoom is an extreme zoom in and zoom out movement, both resulting in producing blurring effects. Both swish pans and swish zooms are often accompanied by a heavy soundtrack and colored filters that enhance the emotional and visual appeal of the narrative. The dynamic camera movement of the swish-pan or the swish-zoom, the use of heightened music and often green, red or yellow colour-filtered visuals make the star's body look like an audio-visual spectacle. However, creative director

Mitu Kumar says that although earlier Balaji shows used these techniques more frequently, "the loudness has toned down to a great extent in the contemporary soaps". Whereas a swish pan functions to accelerate action and emotional reaction, a tableau shot freezes the action to hold onto a particular emotion. "It gives the spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs" (Brooks, 1976:62). The tableau construction in the soap operas also works at a similar level as it freezes the frame and most of the times transforms coloured visuals into black-and-white with a bang sound. In terms of the star figure, it enhances the function of the close-up shot by providing a closer and more continuous look at the star's body.

Jennifer Hayward observes the paradoxical nature of televisual technique, where on one level it creates intimacy with the characters as "the camera literally pulls us into each scene, positions us at eye level with the actors", while on another level, it maintains distance between the viewer and the text with the shot-reverse-shot editing pattern that "leaves a large gap of absent space in which we as viewers are positioned" (Hayward, 1997:157,158). Similarly, stardom as an institution also thrives on contradictions. While star appeal depends on connection and identification, it also relies on distance and mystery. "The star must maintain a distance or absence in order to achieve mystique, but also must be perceived as omnipresent, on-the-scene, in the moment" (Mizejewski 2001:166). Thus, the intimacy/distance dialectic that the televisual apparatus operates with unknowingly generates the star-text while catering to the melodramatic form of the soap opera.

While the televisual text foregrounds the 'leading ladies' of the small-screen through various aesthetic and technical procedures, one cannot undermine various other factors that constitute the formation of a small-screen star. My endeavour in this paper has been to map the construction of small-screen stardom in the fictional terrain of the soap opera homes. Television stardom, however, is a multi-layered phenomenon that cannot be understood solely within the limits of fictional spaces. The expansion of Cable TV, the decreasing costs of television sets and the increasing income

capacity of its buyers, the corporatized structures of television channels that build these star-images and an ever expanding culture of media convergence can be considered as nodal connections that lead to unraveling the star-text and further problematizing the phenomenon of small-screen stardom. However, this is material for a different study. Meanwhile, I hope that this paper has demonstrated how the melodramatic mode is deeply imbricated in the televisual construction of small screen stardom.

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