

# Kyunki Main Bhi Kabhi Tushi Thi: Opening and Using the Black Box of Primetime Telereality

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The title of this paper is a weak attempt to simulate the extractive interactivity of the new media \_ for Tushi, the reader is welcome, even encouraged, to substitute Priya, Pooja, Kusum, Kumkum or Savy . For the teliterate among us, these names will ring many bells . They are all central characters of primetime serials aired on cable TV over the last five or six years. The black box, in consumer electronics, refers to a particular configuration of entertainment and/or information technology packaged in a single commercially successful product. In what follows, I shall look into the black box of those primetime serials in which live these women whose names form the title of this paper, attempting to understand the interaction between sections of the female audience and such serials as a possible element for the configuration of success that they enjoy. I am arguing that this is possible because of the construction of what I would call telereality. The use and construction of this reality necessarily feeds into and grows out of the ideologies and practices that form everyday life . For the purposes of this paper, the ideology that is loosely referred to is feminism \_ but not only because the audience whose everyday lives are explored in the context of these serials are women. We start with the simplest of assumptions - teleserials are part of women's lives . To quote the woman who has ruled Indian television viewing in the last few years, "Men don't want to develop a long term relationship with any show. For them TV viewing is a sporadic activity."<sup>[2]</sup> Hence the consumption of these narratives cannot be understood without reference to women's views on their uses and women's engagements with them. How is the real understood in the context of the screened and

vice versa ? Can they be and are they separate and separated? These are the questions from which this paper begins.

An eighteen year old woman said about a serial named *Aurat* (Woman):

Seeing the heroine of the serial *Aurat* my self-confidence is strengthened and I feel *samarthyvaan* (empowered). I begin to believe that I am second to none and I am proud to be a girl.

Another serial called *Amaanat* used to be aired on cable TV in the late nineties. The tagline of the serial was "A daughter is also an asset "i.e., *amaanat*. This is no reason to suppose that this serial and several others like it, about which this paper will talk, are signs of the acceptance of feminist ideology into the mainstream of Indian society. At the same time, there is also not enough reason to dismiss this and other similar telenarratives as simply replicating the norms of patriarchal gender organization such that these are even more firmly entrenched in the lives and realities of men and women who inhabit this society, socializing them into roles that will keep this gender ideology operative and flourishing. For the most part, however, feminist media criticism in general has focused on the latter reality - we have found Hindi teleserials guilty of retrograde, reactionary practices and vociferously demanded their consignment to the virtual floors of on-line editing rooms and from thence to the dustbins of history. Unfortunately, they have instead gone from strength to strength, even leading to comments like the one with which I began. I encountered this comment and several like it in the course of doing a survey among six hundred women across a wide age-range, in three languages - English, Hindi and Bangla. The survey was located in one metro and one smaller city, and covered the period between 1998 and 2000<sup>[3]</sup>. Informally structured group discussions along with a questionnaire provided the core data about the response of women to the popular media's representation of issues that directly affected them. As avid watchers of teleserials, readers of women's magazines and women's fiction, as admirers of female media personalities, women were eager to discuss the

new material in the twists and turns that popular media took, introduced into their lives and offered to them as options. So, our conversations around the relationship of the 'popular', the 'feminine' and the 'feminist', occasioned by our discussion of teleserials continue, even after the actual survey has come to an end. These continuing conversations with women about the popular media and its effects upon their daily lives reveal no final or complete truth but a processual understanding . If the first phase of the process was structured, funded, time-bound, with very quantifiable results that I shall elucidate in a minute, the second and third phases that I shall demarcate have pushed me to a complex confusion regarding the wide range of possibilities that seem to characterize the relationship between living ideologies and the popular media. I have increasingly begun to wonder whether it is possible to see a final and grand solution to the problem of reality and its formation, how we construct it and how it constructs us .

Ang and Hermes (1996) point out, that women's choice of particular genres of television and particular communication technologies to 'gossip' and 'chatter' are used as "dynamic process of fixing or flitting together, which is however never total or final"<sup>[4]</sup>. This they label "articulation", a process that is continuous, and, therefore, given the multiplicity of the contexts of articulation, characterized by the "impossibility of fixing ultimate meanings" (*ibid*). As I shall endeavour to show, this notion of articulation is especially productive in understanding how women negotiate their gender roles and practices in the light of the hegemonic gender ideology of patriarchy in a society implicated within the flows of global capital . Even if the precise articulations are related to the local context, this context is itself nested within a climate of change and the demands made by such change upon the ideas and ideals of 'femininity', 'modernity' and 'feminism' Thus, even when I ask an apparently large, all-encompassing question like, is the world constructed by teleserials real or is it make-believe , I am embarking on a search for multiple answers, and attempting to understand them not within the single frame of a grand single theory but as contextualized within

multiple specificities. When I begin a reading of the answers available from a particular cross-section of middle-class women in selected urban centers and in specific languages, I find that all the answers that people involved with these serials give seem to combine the entire gamut of theoretical frames, from the phenomenological to the Cartesian. I shall cite three, just to illustrate this range. One comes from the Ektaa Kapoor, serial-maker we all either love or love to hate for her reintroduction of the hydra-headed Indian joint family into the idiot-box, in all its mundane, reptilian, humane glory.

The serials are a blend of idealism and realism. You have to create situations which are identifiable.....There are two ways to hook women viewers in this country you can make them dream or you can make them identify<sup>[5]</sup>

The next is an experience referred to by Rakshanda Khan who plays the so-called vamp Mallika in *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, the most popular teleserial at the time of writing.

On a holiday in Switzerland, she reports having met fans who consoled her for 'losing' the hero Armaan to Jassi, the heroine <sup>[6]</sup>. The third is a comment made by one of the respondents to the survey, who said that she couldn't remember the name of the actress who played Savy in the serial *Hasratein* because she always thought of her as Savy. (Chanda 2002, p. 100 ) The flip side of this is Sudha Chandran, who plays Ramona Sikand in the current serial *Kaahin Kisi Roz*, and insists that she has forgotten her real name and introduces herself as Ramona Sikand.<sup>[7]</sup>

What does this tell us about the real and the telereal ? From the canny comment that Ektaa makes, it is obvious that the popular serial is anchored in reality - from the other two comments, it is clear that the serial characters become our "para-social acquaintances"<sup>[8]</sup>; they are people whom we know, given the fact that we meet them at fixed times for fixed hours day after day, for years together and follow their lives and their realities. In that sense,

their realities become part of ours - our realities are augmented, interrogated, extended, judged and validated by theirs. Serials interface with what we call our real lives in rather complex ways \_ so complex that it is difficult to separate our real acquaintances from the para-social acquaintances whom we meet at fixed times on fixed days and follow with claustrophobic intimacy. To recall John Fiske, though many, many electronic pulses have throbbed into oblivion since he wrote *Television Culture*<sup>[9]</sup>, television fuses popular forces within a realist politque - so realism is a way of making sense of the real rather than the real itself. The classical view of television realism is that it is faithful to sensual reality within a dominant ideology. But the classical view stops here, not making a suggestion that would seem to logically follow from this point, about the possibility of negotiating lived realities in the complex process called 'life'. It does not ask whether sensual reality shown on TV and interpreted in accordance with dominant ideology, becomes in any way a mode of identifying, of coming to terms with the actual experience of living within dominant ideology as the dominated group. In other words, the use of this interpretation of reality remains outside consideration. Do TV serials that portray existing relations within heterosexual patriarchal families, nuclear or extended, become popular only because they reflect and reinforce the real relations within such families? Or do they also serve as occasions to reflect upon the experience of living within such families, using a complex combination of identification as well as distance to understand, and structure responses to this experience? To give this question an identifiable face, I would refer to the episode showing marital rape in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, Ektaa Kapoor's most famous contribution to telereality, and hereinafter referred to as *Kyunki...* which landed Ektaa, the producer, in a legal tangle with the National Women's Commission. I mention this here in passing - in the final stages of this rumination on the uses to which telenarratives are put by their viewers, we shall return to it in order to discern whether our journey through teleserials popular in the last six to seven years puts us in a position to understand the implications of this incident. What caused Ektaa and her

script department to put this episode in ? What does it tell us about the power of telereality over our lives which caused the episode to draw the censure of the state ? What significance does this have for the use of TV by the disempowered who live within a dominant ideology that television has thus far been seen to reinforce and legitimize ?

Telenarratives are amenable to what John Ellis, borrowing a concept from psychoanalysis, calls "working through"<sup>[10]</sup>. Pointing out that television is the premier medium in the age of witness, Ellis defines this phrase as "the processing of material of the witnessed world into more narrativised, explained forms". In psychoanalysis, working through is the process whereby ideas, experiences, thoughts are constantly "worried over", to use Ellis' picturesque term, until exhausted. Looked at in this way, the presence in the viewers' daily lives of issues and ideas through episodes from telenarratives begins to assume the status of a life-activity, an activity that becomes part of one's diurnal universe. Indeed it is not everyday that one can actually meet one's so-called 'real' friends, so the half hours spent with parasocial acquaintances who inhabit the world of the serial fill in as pre-fixed appointments with friends. For women who are housebound, this is a break without its attendant tensions - one of the things that all commentators on soaps have always pointed out is the possibility of following a characteristically episodic storyline with breaks, natural and artificial, the ease with which it is possible to enjoy TV even while doing something else. I would submit that the position of the television set shows the distance traversed by television as a medium over the years. To start with, the set had pride of place in the drawing room, a symbol of our ability to afford it. Gradually with the decrease in prices, the increase in range and the influx of cable networks, TV has taken over the interiors of our houses - its position in the living space now is a subtle indicator of our class position. A particular class that seems to be growing, has moved the set into inner spaces, both literally and metaphorically, and this is reflected in our reception of programmes . One is tempted to carry this further and wonder whether the

number of TV sets in a single family-house is an indication of inter-familial dynamics as well. To quote Ektaa again, "it is only the middle-class that watches TV in this country ....also it is only the middle class that is bound by values" (Kapoor, 2000). If we go with this analysis, the primary viewer of television belongs to some section of the middle-class. Is it possible to argue then that the middle class, because of its numbers and its position at the trafficlines of globalization is television's majority audience ? Could the same be true of the women's movement as well \_ for a successful reorientation of gender roles, for a reorganization of patriarchal family structure that is openly oppressive, should the agenda of the women's movement not attempt to understand the concerns of 'ordinary' middle-class women? And if middle-class women form not only an audience but an engaged, involved, discerning audience for the telenarratives that we, as feminists, have difficulty watching, what lesson are we to learn from this? Is our version of 'reality' manifestly different from that of a large section of women whom we want to address ? Are these women using television material in a way that is more effective than our attempts to reach out to them ? "How relevant is contemporary women's movement to ordinary women and girls ?" Angela Macrobbie asked,<sup>[11]</sup> And went on to point out

....whilst feminism ensures thoughtfulness sensitivity and sisterhood, it cannot bind all women together purely on the basis of gender... and indeed how are we to know that feminism in its present form is in itself a suitable instrument for overcoming all those obstacles which divide women? ('The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk, Text and Action', in Macrobbie, op cit.)

More than twenty years on, (the essay was first published in 1982) in the Indian context at least, with the implications of globalization inflecting all our engagements, this remains a pertinent question.

As I have indicated earlier, I see my attempt to understand the reception of telenarratives and explore the uses of this process as stretching into three

phases, as yet incomplete, and given the way in which things are fanning out, perhaps never to be completed. We might consider them in sequence. The first phase covers the time of the actual survey, between 1998 and 2000. The serials most talked about by the respondents at this time all dealt with relationships outside marriage. Two of these *Saans* and *Kora Kagaz*, started during the period of the survey itself, while another, *Hasratein*, had begun earlier and was well-entrenched in viewing schedules. Among the respondents, 132 cited *Saans* as their favourite, 23 cited *Kora Kagaz* and 33 cited *Hasratein*. In each of these, there is a couple and an other, a patriarchal family is the context, and patriarchal gender organization is the 'norm' that is visibly broken. In hindsight, one realizes that in all of these, the 'other', whether visible, as in *Saans* and *Hasratein* or invisible, as in *Kora Kagaz*, is always a woman. Perhaps that throws into relief the area within which these narratives must operate, the distance they can traverse. Having broken the taboo of the male as polygamous being, no questions asked, and actively shown the woman at the receiving end as a human being with agency, there is a limit built into the narrative. In each of these serials, the triad of man-wife-other woman is probed from different angles. At different points of time, each of these characters get centre stage. Neena Gupta, who directed *Saans* and played the role of Priya, the 'wife', emphasized that she was looking at the loneliness in the life of every woman who lived for her husband and children, until they found their own niche and left her alone. Her explanation is

I am showing the reality. So that every woman can solve the problem in her own way. So that she can look after her family and find time for herself, on her own terms.<sup>[12]</sup>

Talking to women who watched these serials one got the sense that they too were looking at the issue from different angles within different situations, "working through" it in all its complexities once the Pandora's box of this 'problem' of fidelity, of morality within heterosexual marriage in patriarchal society, was finally opened. I shall cite just two of the conversations I am

aware of in this context, both about *Saans*. One at which I was present, focused on the 'other woman', Manisha. A twentyfive year old woman in Kolkata felt that too much audience sympathy was being drawn towards the wife - she suggested that someone with power in the serial, someone whom the viewer had positive feelings about, should be shown as sympathetic to Manisha, in order to convey to the audience that she was not the typical vamp in this story, just as Gautam, the man had been earlier shown as a normal, caring husband (Chanda 2002, p 123). Viewers' fora<sup>[13]</sup> in Agra, Ahmedabad, Lucknow and Delhi convinced the director of the serial to change her storyline, when she had at one point decided to show Priya asking for a divorce. Their argument was that a divorce would set Gautam free to do as he liked, it was exactly what he wanted in the circumstances - if Priya played into his hands, would he ever get what he deserved for deserting her? I would like to draw attention to such engagements, formal and informal, which provide occasions for using experience and lived knowledge to inflect telerealities. I would go further and suggest that such engagements characterize telerealities and so, they must be the focus of concern for studies of television, as well as reception of other 'popular' media. Working through this issue as narrativized in the teleserials, women are in a position to see the constructed nature of the 'normal', as well as identify the needs and necessities that impinge upon their efforts to negotiate the 'normal'. This particular case, for instance, may well provide a base for more complex engagement with the issue of sexual morality within patriarchal gender organization in general, and heterosexual marriage in particular. Is it possible, then, to speculate whether the episode of marital rape in a *Kyunki....*, made five years after *Saans* has gone off the air, is a further engagement with nuances of the same issue, brought upon the agenda by the earlier set of serials?

Gautam and Priya lived in a nuclear family, though they were surrounded by relatives from both sides. But Pooja in *Kora Kagaz* married into a joint family, and lived with her in-laws even as her husband lived with the 'other' woman

outside the home. In other words, the context of the `adulterous` relationship shown was different in these two serials. The second phase of my attempt to understand the ways in which women interact with telenarratives took the story into the heart of the sacred cow which can be all things to all Indians - the Indian joint family. For some of us it is the root of all evils, and for some, the best of all possible worlds . Interestingly, it took a slew of serials to show us that the truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between. The committed TV viewers among my readers will know that I refer to a set of serials with names all beginning with the letter K and made by Ektaa Kapoor whom we have met a while ago. These began just as the survey was drawing to a close, and in the early days that it was on air, women felt that at last there were some serials they could watch with the whole family - evidently, the intrigues and the mental violence unleashed by the joint family's internal machinery was considered safe and less likely to cause embarrassment in a family viewing situation compared to the set of serials about adultery that marked the earlier couple of years. I would also like to remind you in passing that this is the same serial in which marital rape was shown, to a chorus of divergent views, on October 12, 2004 - four years after this seemingly innocuous start. But this emphasis on `clean` , `family` entertainment also seemed to reflect the prevalent questions society itself found relevant in the period when the serial was launched. In a way, the change in the polity marked by the coming to power of a number of conservative rightist political formations intersected with India's rendezvous with the globalized market, as well as its slow transformation into an active player in this market itself. As a seventeen year old woman astutely asked, why do multinationals want to Indianize themselves when they also want us to forget our roots and participate in global culture ? I could tie up this with a comment one of the viewers of these serials made . Every woman in the Virani family, she said, seems to have been involved with two of the males in turn \_ and she reeled off a dizzying account of at least three women who had at different times been fiancées and wives of one male, only to switch to another one within the same family. Is this Indian, she questioned, it seems

more like *Dallas*. She was saying this in response to another view that a lot of the women who watched this serial regularly did so because it reflected Indian culture. The most interesting part is that the woman who pointed out that the Virani saga was more *Dallas* than *desi* said clearly that she watched it all the time in order to "see where it was going".

How are we to understand these widely divergent views about the same serial which has itself changed direction a number of times and embraced many nuances of many issues in its amoeba-like progress down the years? Neither of the views cited above is a linear explanation privileging a cause effect chain. The ability to analyze what was going on, and the ability to critique this in terms of 'Indian reality' or 'tradition' is not proportionately related to viewing choices, apparently. So the following speculations are just that - speculations about why/how the black box hit upon by Ektaa Kapoor works.

The K serials were limited in their breadth of focus but the depths to which they plumbed the positions of women within the portals of the joint family provided a kind of answer to this question. National modernity in the time of globalization must necessarily hinge upon what might broadly be called a version of the pre-encounter traditional, whether it is pre-colonial, pre-global, pre-capitalist or medleys of these and more. The modern subject is anxious about an identity because of the security, the fixed form of 'stability' that a palpable identity provides in times of change. In this context, the 'national' is primarily an identity with which to enter the 'global' world. Thus, when speaking about her most famous *bahu* in the mother of all *saas-bahu* serials, Ektaa was careful to emphasize the process by which an identity can be asserted, a personality carved out within the confines of the most traditional of all Indian organizations, the joint family. When the serial first began she described Tulsi, the main character, thus

(Her) place is outside the home. She disturbs the balance of equation in the family the moment she steps in. She has given the people of (her

marital home) enough time to adjust to her. Now you will see how she handles each one<sup>[14]</sup>.

Four years down the line, she is ready to spell out the implications of this statement. Her explanation for the paths that she has made the serial and its protagonist travel reveal a subtle understanding of the roles of women in the Indian joint family, and the various ways in which they can negotiate these roles. She points out

When a man gives his office to his son, it becomes a total hand over. On the other hand, a woman is made to give up her parental home, her domain and later her son to another woman who becomes his wife. She has to sacrifice so much...when a woman comes to her in-laws' place after marriage, it takes time for her to adjust. Conflict is bound to happen at this point. What we have tried to show is the basis of these relations (Kapoor 2003).

It is as if what Probyn<sup>[15]</sup> calls the "primacy of the real" provides situations into which teleserials introduce characters and hence offer extended realities for the viewers. To quote Probyn

... discourse both circulates in the TV programmes and is lodged elsewhere in the primacy of the real. As a level of abstraction, this describes the articulations that are made between TV's representations and those we live \_ self-representations. Thus the primetime discourses of family, of the home or of women are effective precisely because they lodge in the real. They are attached to other ideological frameworks. They draw actual women to conversations about actual women and homes (ibid ).

In the course of these conversations, the *bahu* who began it all, the character Tulsi, became so much a part of real life that she stood for elections and caused a lot of sleepless nights to rulers, self-righteous fundamentalist heroes and aspirants. But that is only tangential to our

concerns. The K serials' content is nothing short of a feminist's nightmare. We can see them clearly for what they seem – patriarchy's return to centre stage, shorn of all subterfuge. After all it is difficult to contend that the joint family is not the epitome of feudal patriarchy. At the time that *Kyunki...* ruled the screen, women's participation in the workforce rose, but so did female ministers' idiosyncrasies about contraception advocacy, dress codes for female media personalities and obscenity. The Durga Vahini has been holding summer camps for women from rural areas to train them in self-defence. The state coordinator of the Vahini in Madhya Pradesh<sup>[16]</sup> said in an interview that these camps were not for convent-educated women but those "who have been taught and told that they are the weaker sex. Our attempt is to strengthen the weaker sex.". What use the "weaker sex" puts this attempt to may be gauged from the response of one of the participants in the camp held in May 2001. Having done a management course, she explained that she was attending the training camp because "if I qualify for a job in Bihar or UP, do you think my parents will let me go? At least now I have an argument" (ibid).

This is all part of the primacy of the real – and women who gorged on the *saas-bahu* serials seemed to know what the norm was demanding of them. Just as the serials celebrated *karva chauth*, the fast kept by the wife for the welfare of the husband, so they trained these wives to hold their own, to scheme, plot, intrigue, love, control make a difference once they were thrust into an alien household among strangers who were supposed to be their nearest and dearest. We might recall the description of the serials as *Dallas* clones in this context. Perhaps the woman who gave this description was acknowledging the seething realities under the façade of duty and tolerance and adjustment that circumscribe women's traditional roles in joint families. *Dallas* is perceived as populated by 'bitches' and 'sex symbols' – a far cry from the images of women in the traditional joint family. Yet, the ability of the latter to manipulate and negotiate the constraints of the very roles that they are supposed to live unquestioningly perhaps likens them to the former. Of course, 'Indianness' demands that the latter are more subtle (and

cleverer ?) in their negotiations, but that does not render them passive, docile or incapable of the cut and thrust of survival maneuvers in a milieu ordered and ordained by patriarchy. The quarrel feminists will have with this analysis hinges exactly on this point - that these women do not upend patriarchy or attempt to dismantle it - they merely - merely? - act to survive and inflect it. Perhaps here again, one can recall the aftermath of the infamous marital rape episode in *Kyunki...* The man is taken to court for his offence , in itself a sensation ; the lawyer is naturally reluctant to describe a `man demanding his conjugal rights' as `rape' but Tulsi, the mother of the accused (another sensation) intervenes : "Just a moment - why can't it be called rape ? When a woman is married, does she become *saamaan* (thing) instead of *insaana* (person) ?" My submission is that this may be shock tactics at its most melodramatic, but it brings real relations and their workings onto the public agenda and creates space for open discussion - no longer are these issues consigned under the carpet of respectable Indian tradition, they are material for family viewing on primetime TV. This was an opportunity, surely - have we , as Indian feminists, used the momentum generated by this episode , seen by many, many more women than we have been able to reach, and made the most of this sensational `exposure'?

How are women's responses to serials like *Kyunki...* related to this concern? If we agree that Indianness itself is no longer established fact, but under articulation in the context of global modernity, then the K serials seem to show a particular class of `Indian' society in myriad hues, not all positive . They indicate that women who have to live within societies in flux need certain survival skills to maintain especially that which is necessary in a global world \_ their identity. But this does not mean that this formula for telenarratives has finally reached a nirvana of continued popularity - the falling TRP ratings of the K serials towards the first quarter of 2003 led to a frantic exploration of options. Once established large-screen stars tried to draw the sedentary home crowd and failed - it seemed as if those who were blown up in size could not justifiably be para-social, they were too large to fit

into the primacy of the real. Television's rules of success were clearly different from those of the big screen. This frantic search for a nouvelle frisson after the K serials were dwindling in viewership led to some soul-searching amongst the viewers as well as among the makers of these serials. One forty-plus schoolteacher in Kolkata told me that she had stopped watching the K serials once they became full of contrived twists and turns, once the characters seemed to have been established and had nothing new to offer. "They are just carrying on for sympathy value," she said.

Who watches them anymore ?"

My mother, my mother-in-law - all the old people. They watch and they cry".

What do you watch?

"*Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*".

And so begins the third, and current phase.

I cannot talk at length about the Jassi phenomenon -- my only focus here is to report what some women who watch this serial feel is its speciality. I do this as preliminary to an attempt at understanding some of the answers with a view to exploring the relation between the 'reality' of their lives and the 'reality' of the telenarrative.

It seems that at different times, different aspects of gender roles and their operation within a hegemonic gender discourse become the material for telenarratives to "worry over" in all its aspects. At the point that Jassi became popular, many of the conversations I had centered around another serial, aired right after Jassi, called *Yeh Meri Life Hai*. . Both these serials basically deal with ordinariness, a certain kind of marginalization that is overcome in a successful bid for high achievement. Jassi is nothing if not ordinary in looks \_ she wears glasses, braces on her teeth and has a voice huskier than Rekha's. The protagonist in *Yeh Meri Life Hai* is a girl from the suburbs with downmarket attitudes and English, who comes to the city to

study. It is interesting to note that Ektaa's *Kkusum* also tells a similar story about an ordinary girl who makes it big. Both these serials have spent some time in the process of exploring these women's hidden capacities, moving away from the outer to the inner possibilities which are not always visible, and not directly connected to outward appearances, either. And were the seventeen year old women sending a message about visible beauty to the mainstream when they pointed out that for them, Jassi's appeal lay in the discrepancy between reality and appearance - she may look 'conservative', to quote one of them, but she has all the capabilities that are not normally associated with her looks. That seems an indictment of the beauty aspirants, but it is also a reminder of the vast numbers of ordinary girls whose ability to shine is now finding acknowledgment in the most public of fora.

In the current context, where women are ubiquitous in a number of professions, the reason for their presence is an issue that must concern feminists. In the first instance, there was a natural reaction against the 'beauty' factor - looks could get women anywhere, the unstated corollary being that a woman could use her physical attributes for advancement. While some of us had grave reservations about this view of women's achievements, some also felt that a woman looks good because *she* wants to, takes care of her body because it makes *her* feel better. It is something that she does for herself rather than to conform to the gaze of the viewer. But the serials that I am now discussing seem to have bypassed that issue completely - rather, in making the ordinariness of the heroines a virtue and a point of identification, they seem to be drawing attention towards women's ability rather than women's looks. The possibility of ordinary women getting a job and then performing well in it is no longer a matter of exceptional capability, given the fact that we are, in the global market, the repository of a large English speaking labour pool, mostly unskilled but for the language ability. Outsourcing has ensured jobs with eccentric demands but very respectable pay packets, and vast quantities of Jassis can now be accommodated,

because they need to be heard and not seen. The cultivation of abilities with less visual appeal seems thus to have become financially desirable.

But of course visual appeal is not a hindrance. If the viewers are to be believed, many of them are watching and waiting for Jassi, the ugly duckling, to turn into a swan. The success of the ugly duckling, apparently, as well as her physical transformation, seem equally important for the viewers. We might quarrel with the second part of this desire, and endorse the first, but that makes little difference to the Jassi fans. Valerie Walkerdine<sup>[17]</sup> points out that texts of what we have thus far called romance “do not simply bias or distort a reality that exists outside the pages of a book, rather practices within the text itself have a relational effect that define who and where we are.” Jassi is now in the process of a makeover, with reputed brands falling over each other to turn the ugly duckling into a swan<sup>[18]</sup>. The real world seems to depend on the virtual to bolster up its own transactions, not to mention profits. Whether this was part of the storyline initially conceived is not clear, but from the channel to the sponsors, Jassi’s makeover is slated to benefit everyone. Sony has just finished a high TRP rating show, Indian Idol - now before the viewer switches to another channel for fresh excitement, Jassi’s alteration will grab attention. In fact Sony has made a considerable hooah about this alteration, with regular news items about who will be Jassi’s fairy godmother - Kolkata is specially singled out for this media blitz because the search has ended with Vandana Luthra, Kolkata’s own beauty expert, who has already shot an episode where she meets Jassi in Hong Kong and ostensibly, explains that now that she is the CEO of a company, it’s time she discarded her braces and glasses and began to look like Page 3 people ought to look. The beauty issue, thus, will come full circle, echoing an argument I have made elsewhere (Chanda 2002 p. 38 - 39 ) - that beauty, in the vocabulary of modernity, is not what you are born with but something you can achieve, thus making it a more democratic category, an aspirational threshold . Strategies for achieving these thresholds are offered by women’s magazines. All this fits into the larger rubric of understanding modernity as

an ability to control what was hitherto thought of as ordained by fate, thereby making a self and/or an identity visibly amenable to construction and structuring to suit one's needs.

But to return to Jassi and the stir her transformation seems to be causing in the `real' world, perhaps this is interactivity in a very complex but real sense. While virtual reality, by technical definition, is a fabricated visual field, telereality, like the virtual, is also met within the material contexts of the institutions and places of the `real'- it is not a parallel universe. But virtual reality through what the jargon calls a technical management of the senses, dislocates the body from itself and dissociates some of its parts from the whole, since it uses only a subset of the senses. This cannot be the case with the telereality that operates in the consumption of primetime narratives that we have been discussing - in fact if we do continue to use the technicalspeak of new media to understand serials and their reception, we would have to term telereality `immersive' - those who watch the serials and engage in conversation about them think of them as part of their experienced world. Perhaps these experiences are not direct but vicarious ; but that does not seem to take away from their impact, their ability to engage attention, thought, conversation, just as so-called direct experiences may do.

It is this that leads to the final question that I would like the data to pose. I contend that telereality is a potent tool that we, as feminists, might think in terms of exploring. Are all women who watch even those teleserials that seem to be constant reinforcement of patriarchal gender ideology in its most blatantly undisguised form, victims of false consciousness or are some of them using these realities to engage with their own immediate experiences ? I have been attempting to ask them exactly this question. And in an unstructured and episodic way this exercise has revealed several points for media theorists, activists and viewers to "worry over". First, the nature of modernity, as figured in the modern Indian woman by the Indian media, is Janus faced. The ever-present reality of the family, extended or nuclear, influences all attempts by the popular media to figure a woman who is

independent in that she questions social practices and norms, leading to issues that have immense potential for serial themes. The obvious tussle seems to be between independence and family – the Indian teleserial’s most visible characteristic is to keep both sides of this equation in constant tension, figuring a reality that few of us can dispute. Women understand this dilemma, and contrary to these being dubbed ‘women’s’ issues relegated to ‘women’s’ pages or slots, these issues are now on primetime. This also indicates the emphasis on women as consumers of such narratives, and the willingness of serial makers to cater to them. Does that mean women now have power? I would like to introduce here Beck’s (1992) idea of the “risk modernity”<sup>[19]</sup>, which he proposes as an alternative to post-modernity. Beck describes the global society as characterized by an “incalculability” between prediction and action, the risks being visible (like the ones consequent upon socio-economic variabilities) or invisible (like environmental risks that are irreversible). Everyday life, Beck argues is full of familiar dangers and “drenched with experience”. The victims of risk themselves become “small private alternative experts in the risks of modernization” (ibid p. 61), for no grand scientific theory will exactly fit the particular context of the risk that they face. It is in such a situation that the media is crucial as an aid to these local risk managers even though the media itself is not averse to profiting from the risk. In that sense, the risk management industry, along with the media, will “continue to control a media-dependant manipulable public” (Beck 1997)<sup>[20]</sup>. But, as Beck points out, this leads to the breaking of grand narrative ‘expertise’ and disperses knowledge in the hands of multiple users who are able to contextualize it for actual use. Thus the incidence of local expertise also creates a democratization of criticism, and here the role of the media becomes crucial. To quote Beck,

the democratization of criticism... implies that the necessary attentiveness and clarity of criticism in the interplay of government and opposition will falter if at the same time criticism, even radical criticism,

does not prove its principles and expand its footing in the public mass media (ibid.)

Through its possibilities for imagistic condensing and concretizing, the media may well become "the cultural eyes through which the blind citizens can perhaps win back the autonomy of their own judgement" (Beck 1992, p. 20). We do not question the status of feminism as both radical ideology and practice - is it too much to expect that we might be able to utilise the popular media to offer this ideology to those who can use it ?

Let us return to the marital rape episode in *Kyunki*...While not suggesting for a moment that Poornima Advani, chairperson of the National Commission for Women, is a representative of the Indian women's movement, I wonder how we should make sense of her summons to Ektaa to appear before the Commission on charges of obscenity centred around the marital rape episode. Does not marital rape occur in real life ? The episode showed this act for fifteen minutes, argue the anti-Ektaa lobby. Would it have been less objectionable if it was over in five ? Is there a time limit to decide obscenity ? Or are we arguing that there should be a difference between the reality on our screens and the reality of our lives ? In fact haven't we earlier castigated serial makers precisely because there was such a difference ? Ektaa has also been accused of "sexing up" her serial with the rape episode to stave off falling TRP ratings and meet the challenge from Jassi. But in the process, she has also forced a grey area onto mainstream TV. Fifteen minutes was all it took to highlight violence against women, a very gruesome, palpable reality. Now the ball, it appears to me, lies not in Ektaa Kapoor's court - it lies in ours.

Can we, as feminists, look at these innumerable black boxes of the popular to see what their inner configurations are and attempt to discern whether they can be of any use to us - whether we can configure our agenda within these boxes, or construct others which will reach women whom we have not been able to reach so far ? This may be written off as fantasy, but I would

like to remind the reader of Walkerdine's view of fantasy that I have quoted above - fantasy is not totally demarcated from the reality outside the text. If we think of feminism as only radical transformative politics, it may be very difficult to move into the realm of media advocacy. But what if we start from the other end and attempt to use what we have always bemoaned - the astonishing power of the media itself? The very enthusiasm, the need that women who participated in the conversations that form this paper had for talking about themselves extrapolated from the telereality, their deftness in connecting their own lives with the lives of the protagonists, in positive and negative ways, all indicate that if nothing else, telereality can be an effective conversation starter. Let us, for a moment, return to *Saans*. In the discussions on how the serial should end, I wanted to suggest that a fitting end to the serials on adultery might be a meeting of the two women as women, not as wife and other, wherein the man is seen not as a prize to be fought over but a human being just like the two women, all of them put into a particular situation because of certain gender norms, dependent on certain gender organizational practices. Analysing the different kinds of realism in media narratives, Barker <sup>[21]</sup> would classify *Saans* as emotional realism based on the mimetic. To move it from this realm to the realm of naturalism or literal realism marked by plausibility of action and linear causation within a particular social context requires a shift of what is technically known as the "regime of signification" - the range of possibility within which meaningful actions can occur in a particular society, to put it simply. The women with whom I was talking about this serial when I suggested this ending did not feel that the regime of signification inhabited by them, and by extension, the women in the serial, allowed for such a meeting between the wife and the other woman, forever designated by patriarchy as rivals and enemies for the possession of the same prize - the man/husband/lover. But does the all-pervasive nature of material reality prevent us from looking for ways of changing this regime of signification? To quote Barker, "resistance to the ideological work of TV depends on the range of discursive resources and cultural competence available to us from outside and beyond TV itself."

(ibid). The discursive resources offered by feminist ideology, I have argued, can enter the realm of possible alternatives through television itself. Taking advantage of the contextualization of telereality and real reality, is it possible to rethink the black box of feminist ideology such that more women can participate in the process of change?

"To build a black box, whether it is a theory or a machine", says Cockburn, "it is necessary to enrol others so that they believe it, take it up, spread it"<sup>[22]</sup>. Can the women's movement think of constructing such a black box? It would entail what Ang (1996) describes as a comprehension of the self by the comprehension of the other. Based on this, she proposes that feminist researchers begin to take "non-feminist" women's emotions, especially with regard to romance "seriously"<sup>[23]</sup>. As if in response to the question raised by MacRobbie, that I evoked in the early stages of these ruminations, Ang goes on to suggest

What should change as a result of such an ...encounter - and to my mind it is this process-oriented, fundamentally dialogic and dialectical character of knowledge acquisition that marks the distinctive critical edge..... is not only `their' (the non-feminists') understanding of what `we' as self-proclaimed feminists are struggling for, but, more importantly, the sense of identity that is constructed by feminism itself (ibid).

That perhaps is what media research can offer feminism as ideology and practice. It only remains for us to open the black box and use it.

## **References**

1. This can be translated as "Because I too was once Tulsi". For the unaddicted, Tulsi is the daughter-in-law (*bahu*) in the serial *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, or "Since Mother-in-law was also once a Daughter-in-law", the first of the "saas-bahu" serials that seem to be a genre in themselves in Indian television.

[2.](#) Ektaa Kapoor quoted in *Graphiti*, Sept. 14, 2003, p.10. Further references to this interview are cited in the text as Kapoor 2003.

[3.](#) The details of the survey and analysis can be found in Ipshita Chanda 2002 *Packaging Freedom Feminism and Popular Culture*, Stree, Kolkata . Further references to this work are cited in the text as Chanda 2002.

[4.](#) Ien Ang and J. Hermes "Gender and/in Media Consumption in Ang, *Living Room Wars : Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, Routledge, London.

[5.](#) Ektaa Kapoor quoted in *HT Sunday Magazine* November 19, 2000. Further references to this interview are cited in the text as Kapoor 2000.

[6.](#) Rakshanda Khan quoted in Namrata Joshi 'The 29 Inch Stars', *Outlook*, Nov. 8, 2004, p 86.

[7.](#) Sudha Chandran quoted by Namrata Joshi, 'The 29-Inch Stars' in *Outlook* Nov. 15, 2004, p 86.

[8.](#) David Morley and Kevin Robins 1995, *Spaces of Identity, Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*, Routledge, London.

[9.](#) John Fiske 1987, *Television Culture*, Methuen, London.

[10.](#) John Ellis, 2000, *Seeing Things, Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B.Tauris, London.

[11.](#) Angela McRobbie 2000, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Macmillan Hampshire & London.

[12.](#) Neena Gupta quoted in *Sananda*, January 15, 1999, p. 46.

[13.](#) Reports on this attempt were published in *Sananda*, January 15, 1999, p. 46.

[14.](#) Quoted in 'Face of the Week: Production Line', *The Telegraph*, Saturday, November 4, 2000, p.4.

[15.](#) Elspeth Probyn 1998, 'New Traditionalism and Post Feminism TV Does the Home, *Screen* 31 : 147-59.

[16.](#) Reported in *The Telegraph*, May 24, 2001, p. 5.

[17.](#) Valerie Walkerdine 1984, 'Some Day My Prince Will Come', in *Youth Culture*, eds. A. McRobbie and M. Nava, Macmillan, London.

[18.](#) See, for instance, 'The Joust Begins to Jazz up Jassi' , *The Telegraph*, Sunday, March 13, 2005, written by Chandrima Bhattacharya, and published on the front page, no less.

[19.](#) Ulrich Beck 1992, *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London.

[20.](#) Ulrich Beck, 1997, *The Reinvention of Politics : Rethinking Modernity in the New Global Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

[21.](#) Chris Barker 1998, *Global Television An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 29-30.

[22.](#) Cockburn, Cynthia 1993, 'Feminism/Constructivism in Technology Studies: Notes on Genealogy and Recent Developments', paper to workshop on 'European Theoretical Perspectives on New Technology: Feminism Constructivism and Utility', Brunel University, September, 1993.

[23.](#) Ien Ang, 1996, *The Living Room wars : Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, Routledge, London.

## **Postscript**

As I was preparing this essay for the press, Jassi or Mona Singh as she is known in 'real' life, gave an extended interview to *etc.*, the Friday showbiz supplement of *The Telegraph* (March 25, 2005 'Telly Go! Round', p 6). The interview, taken by Lata Sinha, highlighted the 'makeover' referred to above, and asked a searching question "So is this radical shift in the soap's attitude to physical beauty?" Mona's reply is worth quoting in full:

No. We never meant to say that physical beauty wasn't important. One has to have respect for oneself. And looking presentable is part of that. But it isn't as if Jassi is going to be one of those glamorous unattainable chicks. Then she'll end up like the characters Mallika and Pari on the show (ibid).

Those who have followed my argument thus far will agree that this single quote merits at least another essay. In the present one, however, I can only raise three interlinked issues , and leave the rest for the future.

First, as I have pointed out above, this project of searching for interfaces between the viewer and television, reality and telereality, is even in its 'written' form far from 'finished' , the conclusions far from 'final', given the constant negotiations that telereality makes with reality of viewers' lives and vice versa. I can only partially place the Jassi phenomenon in the context of the 'makeover' and its politics, without referring back to the viewers and listen to what they say about Jassi's perception of her personality change. For the present, I have only Jassi's words to fall back upon, and from these words arises the second point that I wish to make. For her, the makeover is necessary because "my character had more or less overdosed on self-annihilation and needed to feel whole and healed. That's why the rejuvenating trip to Mauritius with Neena Gupta. That's why the new look" (ibid). Note that the person chosen to play the role of fairy godmother in Jassi's shift in direction, from 'inner' to 'outer' beauty, or perhaps to 'completeness', is Neena Gupta. Neena, it will be remembered, was once author of the 'radical shift' in tele-representations of sexual morality within patriarchal marriage. Here she is used as the authority-figure for not only legitimizing the lure of good looks, but also sanitizing the doubts of viewers and characters regarding the selling out to physical glamour. Neena's authority, ironically, derives from her many strong-woman roles, and not a little from the *Saans* episode itself. While this seems to imply a continuity between past telerealities and present ones, a path that we have no place to follow within the rubric of the current essay, it also opens up the question of ideology and age. Elsewhere (Chanda 2002, p. 170 -1, p 188 ) I have referred to the changed context of women's struggles, and consequently their changed focus, leading to an uneasy relationship between older women's ideology of feminism, and younger women, who have eschewed the label itself, because either they had a set view of feminists as bra-burners or man-haters, that led them to describing themselves as humanists, or because the 'rights' that the women's movement had battled for had become so much part of society that they no longer bore perceptible imprints of the history of struggle which later generations could identify and credit the former generation for. While the second reason opens up the pressing issue of histories of social change wrought by women's struggles and ways in which they may or may not remain residual in popular memory , the first is directly related to representation and hence the media. The question that arises here has been the thrust of my

engagement with the popular media all along , namely, did the hate-hate relationship between the media and women's movement lead to such a violent misrepresentation of feminists and feminism(s)? If so, is it not high time that this relationship is reviewed and negotiated, in the strategic interests of feminisms, since the media seems to have already begun a process of review, albeit in its own interests ? To reinvoké Beck, the media profits from risk management strategy - what prevents radical criticism like feminism itself, to engage with the risks directly as well? From this arises the third and final point. The specific characteristics of the Jassi makeover, its politics and ideology are easy to criticize . We can see this as a capitulation to the dominant ethos of glamour and beauty, making women amenable to the much discussed male gaze. But note two things that Jassi lets slip. First, that she is not going to be 'unattainable' like the typical glamour girls in the serial. Two, she needs to feel whole and healed, and the way there is through outer beauty. Classical feminism (and alas, there is such a thing in folk memory, at least) would seize upon both these impulses as domesticated versions of patriarchal control of the woman's interpellation of self-as-woman. Rightly so. Except that as a radical (and note how the word is such easy currency in the popular media, too) ideology of transformation, can feminism afford to be classical? Even as strategy, can it afford to let slip the chance of investigating the ways in which 'classical' ideology comes to lodge in the interstices of lived practice, each shaping and being shaped by the other?

Rooting the notion of fantasy in lived practice, Ang (1996) suggests:

The pleasure of fantasy lies in its offering the subject an opportunity to take up positions which she could not assume in real life; through fantasy she can move beyond the structural constraints of everyday life and explore more desirable situations, identities, lives.

Jassi's transformation may be out of a fairy tale \_ or it may prove an exemplar of what women's magazines keep assuring their readers can happen if women work hard. We can only come to some sort of understanding of the effect of this 'make over' when we put it within the context of demands made upon women by contemporary modernity and ideologies of gender , and the solutions offered by various agencies to meet these demands. Only within this many-layered 'lifelike' context can a television serial's reception be understood. As I had promised at the outset, this engagement of telereality and 'real' reality, if the two can be at all separated, is not end-stopped. Watch this space.