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Negotiation of Cultural Themes in Malayalam Serials: A Study of Kalyani

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Abstract

Culture has a decisive say in people's lives, attitudes, lifestyles and beliefs. The cultural components are transmitted through interactions between individuals. Mass media also play an important role in preserving and passing along cultural characteristics from one generation to the other. The focus of the study was the negotiation of cultural themes in Malayalam television serials, namely Kalyani. Negotiation is a complex cognitive process wherein the audience tends to understand and interpret the meaning of the text based on their frames of reference. The data generated from the sample was analysed to assess the manner of reading of Kalyani text based on the triadic (dominant, negotiated and oppositional) reading of a media text proposed by Stuart Hall. The audience of Kalyani largely made a dominant reading, that is, they subscribed to the intended meaning of the producers in terms of the frames of reference/the central themes of the serial.

Key words

Culture, Negotiation, Dominant Reading

All social units both at the micro and macro levels have a culture. Micro-level relationship develops a culture over a period of time. For example, in friendships, patterns develop based on shared experiences, language codes, behavioural pattern, likes, dislikes, habits and rituals that provide a special character to the relationship. The special dates, songs, persons, events etc. will have unique social and emotional value for the members of the group. These, however, will be irrelevant and meaningless for the members of another distinct group. At the macro-level too, groups develop a culture which differentiates them from others. Over a period of time, the way a particular group at the macro-level goes about socialising and conducting its affairs will eventually become the specific elements of its culture.

For Ruben (2001), the most complex and rich cultures are those that are associated with a society or nation and the term culture is most commonly used to refer to these characteristics including language, language usage, patterns, rituals, customs, norms and so on. A national culture includes elements such as significant historical events and characters, social customs, religious practices, beliefs and value systems, and systems of law.

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All social units, be it a group, organization, political party, society or nation, develop a culture over a period of time. The culture so developed performs certain essential functions. The first is to link individuals to one another, the second is to provide the basis for a common identity and finally to create a context for interaction and negotiation among members. These functions get actualised through inter-personal and inter-community discourses.

Culture and communication are therefore described as the two sides of the same coin. The relationship between them is complex as well as intimate and integral. Cultural components like customs, roles, rules, rituals, laws and other patterns are created and shared through communication. Culture emerges and is transmitted through mass media, it would be impossible to preserve and pass along cultural characteristics from one generation to another or from one place to another. As Ruben (2001) rightly points out, culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication. The reverse is also true; that is, communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture.

Culture is a learned behavior of societies through formal and informal social discourse modes of production of sense, meaning and consciousness. Individuals who are at the centre of dynamic social discourses imbibe culture from a variety of informal and formal channels of interaction. The latter has come to assume great significance with television establishing its presence in the drawing rooms and the bedrooms. Its 24x7 presence has provided a surrogate space for cultural interaction for television audiences everywhere who lap up its varied fare on a regular basis. The soap operas in particular are known to have a great influence on their audiences to the extent of making them develop para-social interactions with the characters (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Nordlund, 1978). Para-social interaction means the seemingly face-to-face interpersonal relationship which can develop between a television viewer and a television performer. Perhaps, that is the reason for their large viewership all across the world (Whetmore and Kielwasser, 1993; Allen, 2004). This is also the case in India (Singhal and Rogers, 1989). The state of Kerala is no exception (Aravindan, 2006). Unlike many other genres of television programmes which have a limited life, soap operas go on and on for years. Over a period of time, soap opera characters, sets, lifestyles, the ups and downs of the stories etc. become a part of an imaginary neighbourhood. That being the case, how do viewers engage with and negotiate soap opera texts? This is the question that the present study tries to investigate.

Negotiation

Communication research in the first half of the 20th century focussed on what media do to its audience, that is, media content can have an immediate and direct effect on thoughts and actions of individuals. Later, attention was shifted to limited effects perspective mass influence on individuals.

Mass communication research further shifted to active audience perspective where the focus was on what people did with media rather than the earlier concept of what media did with people. Thus, a perceptive shift was visible here from source-dominated approach to audience-centred approach. Although the latter approach was round the corner from 1940s, it gained momentum and academic attention in the 1970s and 1980s at the hands of the exponents of cultural media researchers. By this time, the reach and use of television in Europe, the US and other countries expanded exponentially and research concentrated on what the viewers did with television programmes.

As stated earlier, the audience-centric approach was round the corner from 1940s. The uses and gratifications theory (Herzog, 1944; Schramm, 1954; Blumer, 1979) was one of the

early audience-centric approach which conceived that individuals seek certain uses from media and derive satisfactions in terms of the motives and self perceived needs. McQuail (2005) lists some of the major gratifications sought from media such as information and education, guidance and advice, diversion and realization, emotional release, identity formation, security, sexual arousal and filling time.

Stuart Hall, one of the prominent figures at the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, contributed greatly to the audience-centric approach popularly known as reception analysis. Hall (1980) argued that researchers should direct their attention to the twin aspects of social and political context in which the content is produced (encoding) and the consumption of the media content (decoding). A key feature of Hall's reception analysis is the manner in which various types of audience make sense of media content. A centrally packaged programme beamed on a television will be understood, interpreted or negotiated by the viewers depending upon several factors. He stated that a programme/text can be read/decoded in three different ways.

1. Dominant/Preferred Reading

All messages/texts will have an intended meaning as perceived by the producer of the text. When a reader's interpretation coincides with that of the producer(s), there takes place a dominant reading.

2. Negotiated Reading

Media messages are also open and they can be interpreted according to context and cultural backgrounds of a viewer. Thus a reader may interpret the meaning of a message differently from what is intended by the producers. This process of understanding or interpreting a message differently from the preferred understanding is referred to as negotiated reading.

3. Oppositional Reading

In some cases, individuals can make interpretations that are in direct opposition to preferred meaning. Thus depending upon a host of experiences and outlook, an individual may resist the intended meanings of the messages altogether and read them differently.

Methodology

The primary focus of the present study being the negotiation of culture in Malayalam television serials, the study design demanded the conduct of a viewership survey to gauge the negotiation of portrayed cultural themes by the audience. Negotiation, as explained earlier, is a complex cognitive process and audiences do not negotiate media content in a uniform manner. Instead, they tend to understand and interpret the meaning of the text based on their frames of reference. The frames of reference are a set of viewpoints or presuppositions through which individuals assimilate the cultural facets of the messages.

Kalyani serial was broadcast on Surya TV from August 16, 2006 to May 30, 2008. It made its debut on the prime time slot of 8.30 pm, Monday to Friday. Later, when its popularity began to wane, it was shifted to 7.00 pm slot on July 9, 2007, then to 6.30 pm on September 3, 2007 and finally the 5.30 pm slot on May 19, 2008. *Kalyani* enjoyed top Television Rating Points (TRP) and was one among the ten top rated serial for a substantial period of its broadcast (Malayala Manorama Weekly 2007-2008).

Kalyani reflects the two faces of Indian women as ingrained in the cultural ethos: (i) housebound and self sacrificing as well as (ii) an individual who has the abilities to fight the odds and excel as entrepreneur. This serial is also a cultural product which presents certain facets of middle class life with focus on marital compatibility, extra martial relations, follies of men in deserting the lower middle class wife to take a wife from the upper-class, determination of the deserted wife to prove that she can be both charming and successful entrepreneur like an upper class woman, and the return of the husband to the first spouse. Thus, *Kalyani* is a story of a middle class family juxtaposed and enmeshed with an upper class family in the context of marital relations wherein the middle class woman's determination to excel is singularly portrayed.

Viewership Survey

In order to gather information on the extent of negotiation, a viewership survey was devised and conducted among the viewers of *Kalyani* while the serial was being aired and at the end of the serial. To collect data while *Kalyani* serial was being aired, the 450 sampled viewers spread across six locations were administered. The post telecast questionnaire was to be administered to 450 sample members from whom mid-telecast data had been collected. But, 70 respondents could not be contacted despite several visits. As a result, these 70 respondents had to be removed from the sample. Thus, the effective study sample got reduced to 380.

Reading of *Kalyani* Text by the Audience

One of the important objectives of the study was to determine the way *Kalyani* serial's text was read/decoded by the audience. The triadic classification by Hall (1980) has been used by several researchers notably among them are Morley (1980), Hobson ((1982), and Mankekar (1991). These and other researchers have investigated and categorized the reading/decoding of televised text based on qualitative analysis. In this effort, the five frames of references which reflected five ideas central to the storyline of *Kalyani* serial were taken to assess the nature of reading *Kalyani* text by audience. The five central ideas/frames of references were:

1. Prior to marriage, individuals must meet their fiancé/fiancée and understand them well.
2. Men who shun their wives for not being fair-skinned would one day realize their folly.
3. Simple and ordinary housewives can transform themselves into attractive and successful entrepreneurs.
4. Parents should not support their sons in establishing and maintaining extra-conjugal relationships.
5. In our society, married women are expected to silently suffer and endure their husbands' extra-conjugal relationships.

A frame of reference is a viewpoint or a set of pre-supposition within which a person's perceptions seem to occur. All incoming messages have a viewpoint which may or may not match the message recipients' pre-suppositions. But, they will bring about one or the other kind of change in the audience's frames of reference. Thus, a frame of reference is a product that reflects (i) the way the recipients read/decode message(s), as also (ii) the effect of such reading on their pre-suppositions, that is, their attitudinal positions.

To meet the objective of assessing the way in which *Kalyani* text is read by the audience and the effect of serial on audience's attitudinal positions towards the five frames of references/central ideas, the data was collected twice. In both laps of the study, the respondents were presented with five statements. For each of the five statements they could either agree or disagree. Each 'agreement' was given a score of 2 and 'disagreement' a score of 1. Thus, the scores could range from 1-2 for each of the statements with the midpoint being 1.5.

A mean score higher than 1.5 and closer to 2 is indicative of an agreement with the core idea conveyed in the text. A mean score of 1.5, or closer to it, reflects a position of both agreement and disagreement with the portrayed message. Likewise, a mean score of 1, or closer to it, is suggestive of the audience's dissonance with the statement(s). Following this schema of scoring, the mean, standard deviation and standard error of mean were determined for the mid and post telecast periods of the serial based on audience's responses to the five frames of references.

To assess the way in which the audience read/decoded five central ideas, the data pertaining to the post telecast period was most appropriate. Though redundant, it must be pointed out that the way in which the audience read the texts can be best ascertained only when the entire text gets presented to the audience. In the case of tele-serials and soaps, that happens when the serial culminates. Therefore, the choice of post-telecast data to assess the way the audience read/decode five central ideas as reflected in the five frames of reference was appropriate.

Table 1: Frames of Reference: Sample Statistics

Frames of Reference	Telecast Period	Sample Statistics			
		Mean	Freq	Std. Dev.	Std. Error of Mean
1. Prior to marriage, individuals must meet their fiancé/fiancée and understand them well	Mid-telecast	1.8579	380	.3496	1.794E-02
	Post-telecast	1.8421	380	.3651	1.873E-02
2. Men who shun their wives for not being fair-skinned would one day realize their folly	Mid-telecast	1.9474	380	.2236	1.147E-02
	Post-telecast	1.9079	380	.2896	1.485E-02
3. Simple and ordinary housewives can transform themselves into attractive an successful entrepreneurs	Mid-telecast	1.9421	380	.2339	1.200E-02
	Post-telecast	1.9237	380	.2659	1.364E-02
4. Parents should not support their sons in establishing and maintaining extra-conjugal relationships	Mid-telecast	1.9079	380	.2896	1.485E-02
	Post-telecast	1.9632	380	.1886	9.676E-03
5. In our society, married women are expected to silently suffer and endure their husbands' extra-conjugal relationships	Mid-telecast	1.2079	380	.4063	2.084E-02
	Post-telecast	1.9342	380	.2482	1.273E-02

Going by the evaluative schema detailed in the earlier paragraph, one could very easily classify the reading/decoding of each of the five central ideas as reflected in the frames of references into Hall's triadic classification: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading. In the case of all five central ideas of *Kalyani* text, the mean score during the post telecast period ranged from 1.9421 to 1.9632 (see Table 1). These high mean scores which are very closer to 2, the highest score possible, is suggestive of viewers' strong agreement

with the intended meaning of the text which is described by Hall as dominant reading. Had they not agreed, the mean scores would have been lesser hovering around 1.5 or closer to 1. In the event of obtaining such mean score, the inference would have been that the reading of the text by the audience is either negotiated or oppositional. Thus, it could be deduced that the reading of *Kalyani* text is entirely dominant. In other words, *Kalyani* audience's interpretation of the messages appears to coincide almost fully with that of the producers of *Kalyani*.

From the above analysis of the effects of *Kalyani* serial on the five attitudinal ideas posited vis-à-vis the audience's socio-demographic variables, it could be summarized that the serial had not brought about uniform changes in the audience. Of the five attitudinal ideas or frames of reference chosen for investigation, there was no change in only one of the frame of reference. That being 'parents should not support their sons in establishing and maintaining extra-conjugal relationships.' In the remaining four frames of references, however, there were significant changes during the two phases of the study – mid telecast and post telecast periods. And the changes could only be attributed to the portrayal of the messages and their assimilation and negotiation by the audience. The four of the five attitudinal positions that underwent change suggest that television serials like *Kalyani* have the potential to bring about changes in the attitudes of their audience. And, the changes cut across all socio demographic variables in varying ways. In relation to one attitudinal idea, a few variables assumed importance. In respect of the other ideas posited, other socio demographic variables appeared to be critical in bringing about attitudinal changes. Which of these socio demographic variables are more salient than the other is the question that needs to be investigated in future studies. Similarly, another question that needs to be probed is the endurance of changes in the viewers brought about by teleserials like *Kalyani*. Such an investigation would throw ample light in understanding whether the changes resulting out of assimilation and negotiation of culture portrayed in teleserials are ephemeral or long lasting.

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