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MOTHER OF ALL RELATIONS: (From left) The mothers-in-law of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Star Plus), *Kutumb* (Sony) and *Aan* (Zee)



# WITCHES IN DIAMANTE

They may seem modern, sensitive and caring. But beneath the trendy superscript is the jaded stereotype.

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

INDIAN TV FINALLY FOUND ITS first lady. As saas-bahu soaps multiplied in number on Indian channels, it was the mom-in-law who blitzed the competition and walked away with the title of TV's woman of the year. And most viewers liked what they saw. Gone was the Lalita Pawar sneer and the Sashikala poison, here was a woman who gave the impression of being sensitive, nurturing, brave, bright, even reasonable. A matriarch who had the trendiest colours in her wardrobe and on her lips. Though she wore her mangalsutra and sindoor like medals the evil glint of cliché was missing. Even the venom-laced jibes spoking the happiness of the bahus were not coming. Cliches seemed to somersault out of control as daughters-in-law were shown to be patterning themselves after her.

TRPS rose maddeningly, creating a profusion of family soaps. *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* became Star Plus' flagship serial in 2001, leaving behind even the Amitabh Bachchan anchored *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* quickly filled the number two slot and there came a slew of more. Besides *Kahin Kissi Roz*, *Kasauti Zindagi Kay*, *Kundali* and *Shagun* on Star, there are

*Aan*, *Koi Apna Sa* (both on Zee), *Heena* and *Kutumb* (both Sony) among at least 12 such family soaps on various channels now. All of them have an overdose of the Karva Chauth culture with the maaji-in-law firmly writing the family book. With a smile on her lips and a tear in the eye, Savita Virani (played by 38-year-old Aparna Mehta) actually caused a mild stir as she showed willingness to get her tragically widowed young daughter-in-law Tulsii remarried in *Kyunki*. Also, when Sudha Chandran playing the ultra-glamorous mom-in-law in *Kahin Kissi Roz*, hugged her daughter-in-law and promised to help her take revenge against her own son, Indian audiences sat back and revelled in this much-desired change of script.

But as each of these stories progressed, the stereotype returned. Shockingly at first and boringly as the episodes go past by in each of these soaps, viewers are discovering that the new mother-in-law is just a repackaged version of the old model. Someone who is only superficially

modern. Leave out her fashionable Swarovski on crepe and brown matte lipstick and the TV mother-in-law isn't one bit radical. Unlike real women who have nerve and verve, the reel mother-in-law is still in a prototype time warp—a clone moulded out of the old patriarchal groove of thought and behaviour.

"Real women, unlike the ones on TV have forward mobility," says Delhi-based cultural analyst Sudheesh Pachauri. "In the soaps, the camera doesn't move out of the house. It is confined within the four walls, symbolising the status of the woman." A homebound woman who clings unyieldingly to her sons for emotional sustenance, TV's mothers-in-law indulge in hierarchy-oriented political wars, sobbing and lobbying to remain the pivot of domestic power equations. Instead of intelligently evaluating sons and husbands, these women tread the judgmental land of black and white. Sons are either a *kalank* (blot) on the family *izzat* (respect) or an *adarsh beta* (ideal son). No grey areas, thank you.

Unlike real moms, TV mothers-in-law cling to their sons, lobbying and sobbing to remain the pivot of domestic power equations.

Even the actors who portray the old witches in new robes agree that there is a reality jam. "What I believe and what I portray as Savita Virani in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* are two different things," confesses Mehta who plays a vindictive mother-in-law in the serial. In reality, Mehta lives in a nuclear family, usually dons jeans and tees instead of saris and doesn't agree with the way Savita Virani often desists from respecting the individuality of others.

The NSD-trained Uttara Baokar, who played a manipulative mother-in-law Shobha Verma in the just-concluded serial *Kora Kaagaz*, had loads of questions about Verma's character when she started shooting for the serial. She quizzed the writer, the director and herself about the depth of realism in the character. While emoting, Baokar says she made a deliberate effort to establish the reasons behind Verma's viciousness. "Shobha Verma turned out to be believable because she didn't hate for the sake of hatred but because she wanted the happiness of her family," she says. "That is true of mothers in real life too, isn't it?"

Says psychologist Madhumati Singh: "In reality, urban upper middle-class mothers-in-law are an amalgamation of the traditional and the modern. They are professionally ori-

ented, health-conscious, socio-politically aware, possessive about their personal space and sensitive to that of others." Social scientist Deepti Priya Mehrotra finds this TV image of the middle-aged woman shedding copious tears to prevent nuclearisation of the family far from the real. "In the urban educated society, there are many interesting women who are grappling with numerous changes. Even middle-aged women choose new relationships, including sexual ones," she says.

Ironically, even the mothers-in-law who watch these serials and boost their TRPs find it difficult to identify with the TV shrews. Like Delhi-based Shashi Gupta, 54, who says her change from the *ghunghat* to western twin-sets, has been slow but steady. "I am beginning to get over my possessiveness about my son," she says. Gupta, who belongs to a traditional family, doesn't feel guilty about not fasting on Karva Chauth, something that is fervently observed in her family. Sween Singh, 61, an export buying agent based in Delhi, elegant in her zigzag pochampalli sari, too professes the advantages of nuclear families and of personal and familial flexibility. Singh says unlike the TV moms-in-laws, she neither clings to her sons for emotional security nor did she

dissuade them from marrying for love.

So if the TV mom-in-law is neither real nor radical how do you explain the high TRPs? Do people really love watching what they don't want to be? It is after all the regressive behaviour of these moms on TV that is creating a success formula for producers. Anjali Monteiro, professor and head of the media and communications unit at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, points out that expecting unadulterated presentation of reality on soaps is a tall order. "Comparing media representations to reality is tricky as realities are subjective and complex," she says. "Soaps are not about reflecting reality, but about what Len Ang, noted Australia-based culture and media scholar and author of *Watching Dallas*, calls the 'melodramatic imagination'—they provide a space for viewers to occupy imaginary subject positions, which would not be possible for them to occupy in their everyday lives." Or, as Pachauri explains, "The producers are making an event out of the everyday happenings in a Hindu joint parivar, cashing in on the saleable aspects of the cultural surplus it supplies."

Successful soaps like *Dallas*, *Bold and Beautiful* and *Hum Log* hyped the impossible and dramatised human frailties while sticking to the age-old formulas of love, power and betrayal. For an Indian tele-scriptwriter, there can't be a better symbol of familial manipulation than the mother-in-law. Only, these days she comes on TV glittering with diamante.

—with Natasha Israni