CHAPTER-II

Media Studies and Audience Research: A Review
Chapter-2
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In this chapter I will discuss the various traditions in media studies with respect to the shift in focus from text to the audience (starting from effect studies to reception analysis). The present study falls into the domain of audience research though I analysed the texts of various soap operas when required. Then I proceed with a discussion on the emergence of feminist media studies and the studies on popular culture for women in general and soap operas in particular. This is followed by the academic debates on soap operas as an independent genre, the works done on the soap opera texts and their assumed audience and then the empirical audience studies done in this area. After discussing the major works done in the western context a similar discussion was carried out in the Indian context. This is where a gap was identified in the present set of research on Indian soap operas and then I explain how this study is positioned to address this gap.

2.1. Tracing the Trajectory of Media and Audience Studies

Studies on media consumption can be broadly divided into two major categories, i.e. message based and audience based. The first category of works in media studies focuses on ‘Textual’ power over the determination of meaning, and the second relies on ‘Ethnographic’ method of cultural investigation where agency of the audience plays a significant role in meaning construction. David Morley (1999 [1980]: 116) summarizes the trajectory of development of media studies in the following words;

The different styles and strategies of research may ...be characterized as a series of oscillation between different, sometimes opposed points in this ‘chain’ of communication and command. On the one hand, message-based studies, which moved from an analysis of content of messages to their
‘effects’ on audience; and, on the other, audience-based studies, which focused on the social characteristics, environment and, subsequently, ‘needs’ which audience derived from, or brought to, the message.

So far the message/effect based studies have been behaviourist in orientation whereas the audience-based studies are structural-functional in their orientation (Morley 1992 [1980]), which is discussed in greater details in the following sections.

Within the mainstream media studies paradigms Jensen and Rosengren (2005 [1990]) outline five main traditions of audience research. They are: the effects research, uses and gratifications research (U&G henceforth), literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception studies.

Trying to be more comprehensive, Abercrombie & Longhurst in their book *Audiences* (1998) categorized the various studies dealing with the interpretation of a text and the audience within their ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ paradigm.

The development of media and audience studies has emphasized on the role of media as a site of struggle between the power of the text vs. the power of audience. Audience studies were engaged in examining the variable interpretations and interpreting the politics of pleasure which began polarising into what Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) call the ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ paradigm, within which either audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in the media activity or they are resistant to that incorporation (1998: 15). This can have two extreme versions: 1. Dominant Text Position, 2. Dominant Audience Position.
For example, the effects research and literary criticism focused on the power of text, uses & gratification research focuses on the power of audience, whereas cultural studies and the newly emerging reception analysis focused on the influence of the text, the audience and the context of consumption in the process of meaning construction.

All these traditions of audience studies have developed on the diverse notions of understanding within them. For example, the effects research has developed from the idea of strong-effect to that of weak effect ‘from short-term, direct and specific effect to long-term, indirect and diffuse effects; from the notion of audience being passive recipients of powerful media messages to active and selective users of media content’ (Jensen and Rosengren 2005 [1990]). This we will discuss in detail as we move ahead in outlining the trajectory of developments in media studies.

2.1.1. The Effects Studies Tradition

Ever since the emergence of culture industries¹, academics have enquired about the effects of their products on the consumers. One of the major theoretical approaches in media studies is the “Mass Society Theory”. According to this theory media acts as the cause as well as the maintainer of the mass society. It emphasizes that the content of media ‘serves the interest of political and economic power holders and assists in the accommodation of dependent public to their fate’ (McQuail 1987: 62).

Marxist perspectives on the media dominated the development of mass media research in communication in the UK and Europe, in contrast to the empirically based

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¹ ‘Culture Industry’ produces mass culture for mass consumption. It is described by the Frankfurt school as an industry imposing the dominant culture on the masses.
tradition (i.e. the Uses & Gratification research) of the United States. The mainstream research in media studies have developed in response to the “pessimistic mass society theses” of Frankfurt School which stressed on ‘the conservative and reconciliatory role of mass culture’ for the audience’ (Morley 1992 [1980]: 45). Frankfurt School’s ‘pessimistic mass society theses’ overemphasized on the direct and unmediated impact of the media on audiences and its role in cementing the link between Fascism and ‘mass society’.

So, the effects studies tradition which was highly influenced by the theoretical position of Marxism, worked with the idea that people’s minds might be manipulated by powerful advertising and propaganda through newspaper and later radio and television.

The Marxist influence in media studies was evident in three different, but inter-related approaches: political economic perspective, critical theory and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. The political-economic approach focused more on the economic aspect than the ideological content of media. It suggested that media creates audience and delivers them to the market (advertisers) and also shapes their behaviour in certain distinctive ways (McQuail 1987: 64-65). The second perspective, i.e. critical theory, took shape in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer (Frankfurt school). According to them, it is the ‘culture industry’ that decides the taste of the consumers and in this whole process it is the ideology\(^2\) of the ruling class, which gets transmitted (Adorno

\(^2\) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coined the term “ideology” in the 1840s to describe the dominant ideas and representation in a given social order. The concept of ideology forces readers to perceive that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social group.
The third approach, i.e. Gramsci’s hegemonic theory of media focused on the forms of expression of dominant Ideology through media content and how it played a major role in shaping the consciousness of the audience.

The above approaches (except the hegemony theory) mobilized a hypodermic model of media influence where the media ‘inject’ its audience with a certain way of thinking and behaviour. It treated audience as passive consumers. This media influence theory worked on a simple stimulus-response or one-step assumption about mass media where individuals receive messages and act on them. For example, Ewen’s (1976) immigrant viewer transformed herself to fit the imaged America of the media image, making herself ‘American’ in accordance with its recipes (cited in Nightingale 1996: 4). As Philo (1993: 255) argues the problem with many traditional attempts at ‘effects’ studies has been that they utilized a crude stimulus/response model and did not analyse either the specific content of the message or how it related to wider systems of values and beliefs. Empirical research in social psychology quickly showed that a direct effect notion of mass communication was misleading.

The effect-studies research over stressed on the power of the text/content, which was then challenged by the Functionalist approach. In contrast to an understanding of the audience as a ‘mass’ that was passively subject to ideological manipulation or moral decay, the American behavioural science placed more emphasis on empirically verifying the media’s influence on individual audience members.

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3 Hegemony theory for Gramsci involves both analysis of current forces of domination and the ways that particular political forces achieved hegemonic authority, and the delineation of counter hegemonic forces, groups, and ideas that could contest and overthrow the existing hegemony (Kellner and Durham 2001: 7).
In this context it was argued that mass media cannot influence its audience until and unless it has some “function” or “use” in the social and psychological context in which they live (Morley 1999: 119). Later, the U&G perspective addressed this issue. The effect research tradition emerged around 1920s in America to which the Uses and Gratification followed after two decades. But, as Stuart Hall points out these ‘effects studies’ confined themselves to immediately observable changes in human behaviour and left the formal structure of media output wholly unauthorized (cited from Moores 1993: 5).

2.1.2. The ‘Uses and Gratification’ Model

The ‘uses and gratification’ model first started in America in the early forties with a mass communication research programme done by Paul Lazarsfeld & Herta Herzog as they attempted to study what gratifications radio listeners derive from daytime serials, quiz shows etc. The model insisted on the audiences as the active users of media messages. The idea of the active audiences was also particularly attractive to symbolic interactionist researchers. The gratifications researchers were concerned with how individuals use media as resources ‘to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals’. In other words it aimed at one question as Halloran puts it, ‘what people do with media rather than what media do to them’ (cited in Morley 1989: 16). It focused on the active engagement of audience with the medium as well as message.

Balnaves et. al. (2009: 68-69) summarize this tradition in following words;

A fundamental assumption of uses and gratifications research is that mass media audiences are not composed of passive individuals... Rather, they exercise freedom in their use of the media... It is assumed we use the media to satisfy specific needs and that we select particular media and particular content to satisfy those needs. These needs are determined by our social
environment, which includes our age, sex, marital status, group affiliations and personality”.

This tradition was criticized for overplaying the ‘audience freedom’ and ignoring issues of ideology completely. It was criticized for over-emphasizing the openness of the content (text) as well as banking more on the individual interpretation of the content. In other words, it ultimately got reduced to individual psychology. It was also criticized as few researchers challenged that ‘reality cannot be grasped and explained through quantitative methods alone’ and to overcome this limitation a qualitative method (which was a move towards the ethnographic method) was proposed (Ang 1996: 486).

Criticizing both the traditions (‘effect studies’ and ‘uses and gratifications’ research) Giltin (1978) says that the audience research when divorced from an understanding of both the politics of mass communication and texts are necessarily ‘administrative’ as they were designed to manage audiences for media industries rather than to explain their developing, changing, dynamic and formative nature, or to explore the quality and meaning of the media experiences encountered by audience (cited in Nightingale 1996: 4).

The lack of interest in the text and cultural criticism among traditional audience researchers (both from the US or Europe) left a gap in the field of audience and media studies. In early 1980s, British cultural studies theorists and researchers started filling up this gap with hermeneutics-based rather than social science research skills. In British cultural studies, the effect debate was marginalised by more textually relevant issues such as the dominant ideology of the text or its ‘cultural meaning’ and by the
search for the locus of textual pleasure (Nightingale 1996:5). We will discuss this in
detail but before that let us discuss the third tradition of media and audience research,
i.e. literary criticism research.

2.1.3. The Literary Criticism Research

Most of the studies in this tradition have focused on the ‘structure’ of the literary
messages, or works where meaning is taken to be immanent in the content structures.
In other words, there was a structuralist reading of the text within this tradition and it
was generally confined to ‘high culture’ products.

Traditionally, a great deal of importance was attached to the ‘exegesis of texts
carrying cognitive and/or aesthetic experience’ but with the development of modern
social order literature has got redefined as ‘a form of communication which addresses
its readers as private individuals in a sphere of leisure’ (Jensen and Rosengren 2005
[1990]: 56). As a result the purpose of literary criticism got redefined and there ‘was
an emphasis on attempts at demonstrating that, and explaining how ‘literature’ as
mastered by specific historical authors, may give rise to aesthetic experiences
supposed to transcend the historical time and place’ (ibid.) which required readers to
be educated in order o respond to the literary traditions.

Within this tradition an alternative ‘critical’ paradigm (which first originated in the
works of Adorno and Horkheimer) in media studies was formed towards the end of
1960s within European social theory. The theorists started drawing on semiotics and
began to talk about the message as a ‘text’, as a complex and structured arrangement
of signs rather than an empty vehicle for the transmission of information or opinion
Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theories claimed to ‘re-view’ Freud through the lens of structural linguistics, and also promised to show how subjectivities were constituted in discourse. It was believed a Lacanian perspective could be used to unpack the process through which spectators were ‘positioned’ as viewing subjects (in films) (Ibid: 11).

Methodologically speaking, this psychoanalytic model mobilized another form of hypodermic theory of media effect (Morley 1989: 19). With the help of content analysis, it deduced audience responses and assumed certain effects on the audience from the structure of the text and in doing so, it neglected the cultural and historical specificities. Lacanian writings and their application to media consumption have proved highly problematic as they led to a form of textual determinism which left no room for negotiation or resistance on the part of the audience as a result of which readers were reduced to a set of textually inscribed ‘subject positions’. Morley argues that psychoanalytic theory proves to be very useful when it leaves the universalistic approach and addresses issues pertaining to particular groups in specific conditions and historical moments (ibid.: 19-22).

Later the interest of culture theorists in television audiences led to include interpretive activities of audience for which social or psychological utility bore little relevance and psychoanalysis was discarded for its clumsiness as an ‘effects’ method. But it re-emerged in cultural studies as a theory of spectatorship (Mulvey 1981), and as a means of demonstrating the ideological nature of film texts as gender and political discourse (Nightingale 1996: 9).

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4 Aspects of Freud’s own writings, such as notes on voyeurism and scopophilia, were taken up in film criticism.
To some extent, Psychoanalysis certainly explains the procedures, by which individuals are constituted as speaking subjects ‘in general’, but it does not attend to the cultural specificity of discourses - nor does it address the relationship of those discourses to wider social structures. Screen theory claimed to have resolved this by bringing together psychoanalysis and historical materialism (Moores 1993: 15).

Contributors to the British journal *Screen* brought together semiotics with Althusserian Marxism and a distinctive brand of French psycho-analytical theory associated with Jacques Lacan (which is called ‘Screen Theory’). They were interested in studying ‘the formal structures of cinematic representation, asking how those representations construct certain ways of looking and knowing spectators’ (Moores 1993: 12).

The screen theory still had the problem of textual determinism as here the subject appeared as always-already successfully interpellated, or positioned, by the text. In this tradition, the reader was treated as a critical analytical construct to be deduced from literary discourses. It was Stuart Hall (1980, 1986) who guided media and audience studies into Cultural Studies tradition by developing the two paradigms in cultural studies.

Unlike this tradition of literary criticism which focused only on high culture, it is within this cultural studies tradition that ‘popular culture’ got revaluated as a worthy discourse for serious research. It differed from the above traditions as it took into

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5 *Screen*: A Film journal which was one of the first ports of call for French poststructuralist theory.
account not just the text and the audience but also the everyday practices as an integrated aspect.

2.1.4. The Cultural Studies Tradition

Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* (1957), Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961); E. P. Thompson’s *Making Of The English Working Class* (1968) constituted the *caesura* out of which ‘Cultural Studies’ emerged. In this context the ‘theory of culture’ got defined as ‘the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life’. These works laid the foundation for the ‘culturalist’ strand (one of the paradigms of the cultural studies tradition) which was then interrupted by the arrival of ‘structuralism’. One major gap between these two strands of cultural studies lay on the ‘conceptual reference to the term ‘ideology’’. Hall in his well known work ‘*Cultural Studies: two paradigms*’ says that,

> It has been remarked that whereas the ‘culturalist’ paradigm can be defined without requiring a conceptual reference to the term ‘ideology’ (the word, of course, does appear: but it is not a key concept), the ‘structuralist’ interventions have been largely articulated around the concept of ‘ideology’: in keeping with it’s more impeccably Marxist lineage, ‘culture’ does not figure so prominently. […] Though neither structuralism not culturalism will do, as self-sufficient paradigms of study, they have a centrality to the field which all the other contenders lack because, between them they address what must be the *core problem* of Cultural Studies. (1986: 40-48)

Thus cultural studies moved ahead of the Marxist lineage and offered another premise to the ‘human science of culture’ by appropriating theories from Levi-Strauss’s structuralism and the linguistic paradigm of Saussure, i.e. Semiotics. The cultural studies tradition proposed to study mass-communication processes as an integrated aspect of other everyday practices. Summarizing this Jensen and Rosengren (2005

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6 *Noun*, a pause near the middle of a line of poetry

7 Two rather different ways of conceptualizing ‘culture’ can be drawn out of the many suggestive formulations in Raymond Williams’s *Long Revolution*. The first relates ‘culture’ to the sum of the
[1990]: 57) say, ‘For cultural studies … the centre of mass-communication research is located outside media, which are embedded, along with audiences, in broad social and cultural practices’.

Hebdige’s analysis of ‘reception aesthetics’ where attempt was made ‘to account for the variable significance of objects and images as they are circulated in different consumer markets’ contributed immensely to the ‘cultural’ audience research (Hebdige 1979 cited in Nightingale 1996: 14-5). Similar to ‘uses and gratifications’ account, Hebdige claimed that media audiences adopt those objects and images which offer a coherent account of their lived experiences, are culturally significant to themselves and promote a sense of community or solidarity with significant groups within it. However, ‘unlike ‘uses and gratifications’ accounts, Hebdige demonstrates that the symbolic value of the objects and commodity forms selected by the subculture are accessible through semiotics analysis’ (ibid.).

By late 1970s and early 1980s small groups of media researchers throughout the world began to experiment with interpretive and qualitative methods of audience research based on cognitive psychology and symbolic interactionist theories.

**2.1.4.1. CCCS and the Encoding/Decoding Model**

Within the Cultural studies tradition a more appropriate model of texts and readers was developed by members of the Media Group at Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS henceforth) which was partly a critique of ‘screen theory’. The group strongly contested Screen’s model of text-audience available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences… the second… emphasizes that aspect of ‘culture’ which refers o social practices… ‘culture is a whole way of life’… (Hall 1986: 35)
relations by ‘putting an emphasis on reader as active producers of meaning and on media consumption as a site of potentially differential interpretations’ and ‘pointed to readers as the possessors of cultural knowledges and competences that have been acquired in previous social experiences and which are drawn on in the act of interpretation – the ‘repertoire of discourses’ at the disposal of different audiences’ (Moores 1993: 16). Their studies concentrated far more on TV representations and their reception than on film spectatorship. It’s encoding/decoding theory ‘opened up a gap between readings inscribed in the text and the actual social subjects who interact with it and this “dialogic” encounter between the two finally determines meaning’ (Ibid. 6).

The ‘encoding/decoding’ model developed by Stuart Hall in CCCS was a serious attempt to establish an appropriate linkage between the text with the social context in which it operates. To some extent it synthesized the ideas given by both effect-studies (role of media in setting agendas) and uses and gratification (ability of active audience to make meaning from the text). Hall in his work ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1973) divided the audience into three categories on the basis of the procedure of decoding of a cultural text: (i) an acceptance of the preferred reading where the viewer decodes the message according to the reference code, ‘operating inside the dominant code’, (ii) negotiation with it, which ‘contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements’, (iii) flat opposition to it, where the audiences ‘decode the message in a globally contrary way’ (Hall 1993).

Hall was criticized because of the ambiguity of the concept of ‘preferred reading’, where the doubt was whether the text carries it within or it has to be derived through
some method. In other words, one possibility in determining the exact status of ‘preferred reading’ was to assume it as a property of the text (something contained in the text) and accessible to researcher who conducts a close inspection using the correct method of semiotics or it could be reading that most members of the audience will produce (Moores 1993: 28).

Morley defended this model’s usefulness and used it in his study ‘The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding’ (1980) (the first Ethnographic study on television audience). This qualitative audience research was initially set out to explore the encounter between the text and the audience and sketch a provisional map of different ‘interpretive communities’. In this study he was concerned with the ‘determination of meaning produced by the effectivity of the traditional sociological/structural variables — age, sex, race and class — in terms of the way a person’s position in these structures may be seen to determine that person’s access to various discourses in play in the social formation’ (Morley 1992 [1981]: 119). He argued that in the interaction between text and subject, ‘other discourses are always in play besides those of the particular text in focus — discourses …brought into play through “the subject’s” placing in other practices — cultural, educational, intuitional (Morley 1992 [1980]: 57). But, later on he argued that ‘there is no a priori reason to stop at age, sex, race and class- that there is an infinite range of factors (from religion to geography to biology) which could be taken into account as determinations on decoding practices’ (ibid: 125). He also argued that determination of the relation between social position and discursive formation ‘is not to be conceived as a closed and final process’ as ‘audiences are determined economically, politically and ideologically’ (Morley 1992 [1980]: 57).
Some of the important shortcomings of Morley’s study has been its failure to deal with the social setting in which consumption normally takes place – the immediate physical and interpersonal contexts of daily media reception (i.e. the domestic context of viewing which he addressed in his later works starting with *Family Television*) and its failure to address the contradictory nature of decoding by the same person for different programmes (Morley 1992 [1988]: 133, Moores 1993: 7).

Morley, Hall and others at the CCCS were working towards a sociologically grounded semiotics of the text-reader dialogue. Later critics of the encoding/decoding model Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott (1987) argued that there is no ‘text itself available for inspection outside of the ‘reading formations’ in which meaning is activated (Moores 1993: 28). It was also acknowledged that the preferred reading model was better suited for news and current affairs programmes than popular fictional dramas like soap operas. This acknowledgement of *genre variation* led Morley to plan for reformulated reception ethnography (ibid.). In this context Morley says that by translating our concerns from the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory, we may be able to develop a model of text-audience relations which is more flexible and of wider application (1992: 127).

### 2.1.5. Reception Studies Tradition

Alasuutari (1999) divides audience studies into three ‘generations’, where the first generation refers to birth of reception studies, dated from the momentous development of Hall’s communication model; the second generation of studies refers to the range of empirical reception studies that developed from Hall’s model, which shifted the focus to actual audiences, leading to the rise of audience ethnography
approach (which now forms a major part of the media response studies and includes works of Morley, Ang, Mankekar); and the third generation of reception studies (which is still emerging), seems to endorse an approach that seeks to study media and audience relationship within an integrative framework of discourses through which media and audiences are formed.

Thus the reception studies tradition developed on the combined premise of cultural studies and U&G traditions. On the one hand, it employs the method of ‘interpretative content analysis’ which is done by reader-response theories within cultural studies traditions and then compares it with the empirical data about the audience which is done through in-depth interviewing and participant observation.

The reception studies tradition developed on a variety of other theoretical frameworks like symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis. Within reception studies it is assumed that cultural practices as well as individual acts of interpretations are relatively independent of the various structures of the overall society, like the political and economic structures. In other words, reception analysis intends to study how specific audiences differ in the social production of meaning.

To sum this up I quote Jensen and Rosengren;

Like cultural studies, reception analysis speaks of media messages as culturally and generically coded discourses, while defining audiences as agents of meaning production. Like U&G research, reception analysis conceives of recipients as active individuals who can do a variety of things with media in terms of consumption, decoding and social uses. What characterizes reception analysis is, above all, an insistence that studies include a comparative empirical analysis of media discourses with audience discourses- content structures with the structure of audience response regarding content. (2005 [1990]: 60, italics mine)
It is within the cultural studies tradition that the media and audience studies has largely developed in the last few decades. But in this tradition most of the work (except few like that of Radway (1984), Morley (1980), Ang (1985)) did not examine the audience empirically. In fact, they were deduced as analytical constructs from the media discourse. The studies that fall under this tradition were extensively referring to the social and historical contexts within which the social system of diverse practices (like sub-cultures based on gender, class and ethnicity) took shape and helped in the formation of the “interpretive communities”. Hall recognized that media “language” is not a strait forward “tool” for transmitting ideas, or a transparent “window” on the social world and audience members bring their interpretative frameworks to bear on the message and ‘the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical’ (Hall 1973: 92-93).

It was with the reader-oriented approach to audience response that the emphasis shifted from meanings in the text to the process of reading a text with an understanding that the relationship between text and audiences is dialectical. But, defining the ‘interpretive community’ as a sub-culture based on factors like gender, class and ethnicity within a broader social system made a generalization which got contested within the feminist media studies. Works by Ang and Hermes (1996) and Zoonen (1994) pointed out how studies within this tradition treat women as a unified category without actually problematising the category of ‘women’ itself and how gender was assumed to precede cultural preference and behaviour. As a result, Zoonen argued how instead of treating these identities (gender) as something given or fixed, one should look at them as an ongoing process by which subjects are formed.

8 Same social system helps to generate interpretive strategies supposedly shared by individuals belonging to specific audience groups or publics which are referred to as interpretive communities.
constituted often in paradoixical ways. This limitation within the cultural studies could be addressed by adopting reception studies tradition. For example, ‘theory of intersectionality’ addresses the limitation of the feminist studies.

The theory of intersectionality gained its popularity within the feminist studies in the 1980s (though it originated in the 1960s and 70s in a movement led by women of colour), as category of ‘woman’ was in the process of deconstruction. Intersectionality can be defined as a theory to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine. It was claimed that gender, class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality may enhance the complexity of intersectionality (Davis 2008). Hence theory of intersectionality studies the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations. Similarly the present study attempts to deconstruct the category of audience by addressing the complexity within the group and focuses on the relationship between the various sub-categories of audience based on their social and cultural variation.

In Morley’s work on *Family Television* one could find the gender dimension getting prioritized and isolated from factors like class and age. This ultimately reduced the strength of the arguments related to women as a heterogeneous social category (and not merely a biological category) based on age, caste, class, education, income, region and religion (Morley 1992). Similarly, researchers like Hobson (1981), Radway (1984) Ang (1985) started their work with ‘a pre-existent’ interpretive community of women. To them, the commonality of women’s experiences of opposition in capitalist society provided an unifying sense of ‘community’ around which the attachment to mass-produced media commodities could be explained.
Seiter et. al.’s project on soap opera viewers explains how women can not be treated as a homogeneous category. Their findings suggest how women belonging to different class (working/ non working) differ a lot in the meaning making process of soap opera narratives (Seiter et. al. 1996). But, this classification between working and non-working women is criticized by Ang and Hermes (1991). In their opinion ‘rather than treating class position as an isolated ‘independent variable’ predetermining cultural responses, it could … be seen as a factor … whose impact as a structuring principle for experience can only be conceptualized within the concrete historical context in which it is articulated (Ang and Hermes 1991: 314). Going deeper into the debate they argue that, ‘the theoretical question that should guide our research practice is how gender along with other major social axes such as class and ethnicity is articulated in the concrete practices of media consumption (ibid: 315). While examining of the politics of EastEnders in his work Public Secrets: ‘Eastenders’ and its audience, Buckingham collapsed together concepts of discourse, ideology and commonsense knowledge. He stressed on active audience and the importance of interpretative activity. He advocated mapping its diversity across gender, age, race, and other major socio-cultural distinctions (cited in Nightingale 1996: 89).

Thus not only gender and class but historical context and ethnicity are also major dimensions which need to be examined along with gender to understand the practice of media consumption. This study takes into account how gender along with age, class, caste, religion and regional background influence the consumption of the media texts.
2.1.5.1. The Ethnographic Audience Studies

The quantitative survey techniques (used in the Uses and gratification research) failed to answer subjective questions related to media-audience studies, thus qualitative method and to be more specific the ethnographic perspective (which is also known as ‘reception analysis’) have been used by scholars like Silverstone, Ang, Seiter, David Morley many others.

According to Christine Geraghty (1998: 142), ‘the use of the term “ethnography” is itself polemical’. In her essay “Audiences and ‘Ethnography’: Questions of Practice”, she analysed various ways in which it has been defined and used by scholars like Gillespie, Fiske, Ang, Gray, Morley and Seiter (Ibid: 142). For example, according to Gillespie (1995) ethnography is the empirical description and analysis of cultures based on intensive and extensive fieldwork in a selected local setting. For Fiske ‘the object of ethnographic study is the way people live their culture … trace differences among viewers, modes of viewing, and the meanings and pleasures produced’ (Fiske quoted in Geraghty 1998: 142). Whereas according to Seiter, ‘doing ethnographic audience research necessitates making contact with informants repeatedly, for as much time as possible, and under as many different circumstances as possible’ (Seiter 1999: 05). There are many studies in the audience research tradition where the scholars claim them to be ethnographic studies but still that has remained a contested domain.

Morley’s pioneering work *Nationwide Audiences* (1999 [1980]) was the first ethnographic work in audience studies, since then it has been widely used. But, it was been criticized by scholars as ethnographic methods used in television/media studies
do not satisfy to the requirements of ethnography completely. ‘It has been argued that a proper ethnographic study in audience ethnography entails at least several months’ stay in field’ (Alasuutari 1999, cited in Bird 2003: 6). But so far the ‘television audience studies have not satisfied the requirements of ethnography proper… while ethnographies are based on long-term and in-depth field work, most television audience studies have involved only brief periods of contact, in some cases less than one hour, with the informants’ (Seiter et. al. 1996: 141).

These limitations have not reduced the competence and use of ethnographic model and one still finds it being used by scholars in the field of television studies. In the Indian context, scholars like Anjali Monteiro\(^9\) (1998), Purnima Mankekar\(^10\) (1999) and Juluri\(^11\) (2003a) have done some important ethnographic studies in the specific localities of Goa, Delhi and Hyderabad respectively. The present study also depends on ethnographic methods for fulfilling its objectives.

The soap operas which are screened during the prime-time target family as a whole, though women still form the target audience category. Family viewing is much talked about by both the producers of the content of the soap operas as well as the policy makers. When one talks about family then home becomes the obvious set of viewing. This is the reason why I preferred to locate my fieldwork in the context of home

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\(^9\) Monteiro for her work ‘Official Television and unofficial fabrications of the self’, which was an analysis of several genres on Doordarshan, did participant observation and in-depth interviews with 88 respondents, in a heterogeneous, working-class, shanty town in Goa.

\(^10\) Mankekar in her work ‘Watching culture viewing politics’ analyzed the texts of popular serials on Doordarshan and further enriched her arguments with responses of the viewers, who were women belonging to lower-middle class in the Vikas Nagar locality of Delhi.

\(^11\) Vamsi Juluri (2003) did a study on MTV viewers in Hyderabad. He carried out group interviews for which he selected four viewing segments and the participants had to answer open-ended questions after watching those segments. His respondents cut across gender and class.
viewing instead of work-place (though one of my respondents reported doing so, occasionally)\textsuperscript{12}.

\textbf{2.1.5.2 The Multiple Interpretive Communities}

As discussed earlier, Abercrombie & Longhurst emphasized on the role of media as a site of struggle between power of the text and power of audience, which can have two extreme versions: 1. Dominant Text Position, 2. Dominant Audience Position.

Dominant Text Position treats audience as passive, the prisoner of the text, and therefore to be very heavily influenced by the preferred meaning (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 18). Studies by Glasgow Media Group, for example Greg Philo (1999) believes that audiences are heavily influenced by the ideology and the meaning that the text carries. In practice his method revealed the ‘preferred’ meanings of the news though the study has illustrated some of the processes by which messages were negotiated or rejected. But, at the same time Philo (1999: 268-9) says, ‘we must not forget the social context within which these messages are constructed and their relation to competing political views… media accounts may influence how we understand the relationships which constitute our world- what is seen as legitimate, necessary or possible’. Thus, he concludes that media is ‘a crucial site of struggle for such contested meanings and for the attempt to gain legitimacy and to win the consent of the various groups and classes which make up our society’ (Philo 1999: 269-70).

Dominant Audience Position tends to see the text not as monolithic with a strong preferred meaning, but rather as polysemic, containing a number of possible meanings

\textsuperscript{12} One of my male respondents said that he watches his soaps in the office itself in case he gets late there. He tells his boss that it is time for his soaps and he does not care about the criticism from his colleagues and friends regarding his addiction to the soaps.
and therefore allowing a range of audience interpretations (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 18). Most of the interpretive theorists locate themselves within the ‘resistance’ group but the range of interpretation among them varies.

The ‘interpretive theory’ in media and audience studies is based on two major assumptions:

(a) The open and polysemic nature of the media content

(b) The active audiences.

It emerged as an offshoot of reader-response criticism in the works of a prominent and respected literary theorist Stanley E. Fish. Fish’s work in this field (especially his argument in ‘Interpreting the *Variorum*’ (1976)) examines how the interpretation of a text is dependent upon each reader’s own subjective experience in one or more communities. In other words, people read a text in different ways because they belong to different interpretive communities. For him, different critical models of a text are equally valid because critics disagree as they read differently. He argues that meanings are constructed in the process of reading and emerge from the reader’s expectations, judgements, projections, assumptions and conclusions.

This paradigm attributes power to audiences in conceptualizing the media audience relationship as Fish ends up with a kind of idealism in which the text disappears, leaving only readers to “constitute” texts (Rendall 1982). The most persistent objections made against this paradigm is that if texts do not exist as independent objects constraining our ways of reading them, then they would seem to be no constrain at all on interpretation which can lead towards an interpretative anarchy. Defending his idea Fish points out that there are always constrains on interpretation as
the members of an interpretive community share the same set of norms and assumptions (cited in Rendall 1982: 51). Again if the writer and the reader of the texts belong to the same community then the interpretive principle in force will be the same. It is in this context Fish argues that ‘there are stable formal patterns inherent in the text which compels us to assign it to one genre rather than another and put invariable limits in the way in which it can be read’ (ibid.: 52). But at the same time the interpretive strategies of the author and his/her period may be regarded as determining the way in which a text should be read which can further curtail the power of the reader.

This kind of a debate between Fish and his critics leaves the door open for a balanced research where neither the author/text nor the audience are all powerful. As I have already mentioned if the interpretive strategies of the author coincide with that of the members of interpretive community then the interpretation of the text will be constrained because the interpretive principles in force will be same. So, even though audiences go for different kind of readings of a text, she/he can not think beyond the prescribed set of norms and assumptions of the community. As a result of which there can be multiple interpretive communities within a community of the audience where no scope is left for an interpretive anarchy.

John Fiske (1987) is one of its leading proponents within reception studies. He insists that in the context of text-audience engagement, ‘pleasure for the subordinate is produced by the assertion of one’s social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negotiation with, the structure of domination’ (1987: 19). He argued that the text is polysemic and the audience is diverse. Fiske takes an extreme view to the point
when he declares ‘There is no Text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing’ (Fiske 1996). This is why Fiske’s view is closer to the Dominant Audience Position than any other theorist (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 22-23).

Hobson in her research, Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera (1982) claimed that ‘to try to say what Crossroads means to its audience is impossible for there is no single Crossroads, there are as many Crossroads as there are viewers’ (Cited from Nightingale 1996: 72). According to her, ‘Different people watch television programmes for different reasons, and make different ‘readings’ of those programmes, and much of what they say is determined by preconceived ideas and opinions which they bring to a programme. The message is not solely in the ‘text’ but can be changed or ‘worked on’ by the audience as they make their own interpretation of the programme’ (Hobson 1996: 603). She could not avoid her own estimation of what the programme meant, and explained that pleasure is experienced because the programme reflects the life experiences in which the viewers are engaged, as a result of which she contradicted her own statement. Thus one can conclude that there is no interpretive anarchy as it is guided by the interpretive principles.

Janice Radway’s (1984) ethnographic study on women’s reading of popular romance novels claims that reading romance novels provides women readers with an ‘escape’ from their mundane domestic roles which suggests that these women use reading as a ‘resistant’ practice. Similarly, Mary Ellen Brown (1990a) through her ethnographic investigation into the conversational networks of soap viewers argued that women viewers engage in ‘resistive pleasures’ through such talk. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (2006) though their study of the popular American soap Dallas, examined
cultural variations in the readings of viewers watching this soap in Israel, Japan and the US. Unlike other studies, this study did not focus on ‘resistance’ but seeks to study variable interpretations.

Livingstone (1990: 23) in a study of television soap opera viewers sees the creation of meaning through the interaction of texts and readers as a struggle, ‘a site of negotiation between two semi-powerful sources’ (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 21). Her argument shows the complexity of text-audience relationship. Not only there exists a diversity of response to the text, but most likely explanation of the difficulty of assigning dominant and oppositional labels to the responses. She thinks that the text is fragmented and contains more than one preferred reading, or, infact contains a preferred reading which is contradictory (ibid: 22).

Willis (1990) goes further towards the extreme Dominant Audience end of the spectrum. His starting point is in “readers” not “texts” and in the need to explore symbolic creativity in everyday life (cited in Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 24). Still so far no theorist of the audience has completely endorsed either the Dominant Text or the Dominant Audience model (ibid: 29).

Hall says ‘Polysemy’ must not… be confused with pluralism… this question of the ‘structure of dominance’ in a culture is an absolutely crucial point… there exists a pattern of ‘preferred readings’ (Hall 1993(1973): 13). Thus audience research should attempt locating ‘significant clusters’ of meaning and join these clusters with the social and discursive positioning of readers to outline boundaries of various interpretative communities.
Morley suggested that, ‘what is needed is the development of a “cultural map” of the audience so that we can begin to see which classes, sections of classes and subgroups share which cultural codes and meaning system… so that we can then see how these codes determine the decoding of the messages of the media [and] what degree of distance different sections of the audience have from the dominant meanings encoded in the message’ (Cited in Moores 1993: 18).

Attempts to theoretically reconcile the dichotomy of ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ can be found in Anthony Giddens (1984) theory of structuration, which extends the classical debate between structure and agency. Giddens argues that social actions are shaped by social structures, which in turn are reproduced or transformed by human agency. Hence structure and agency are mutually interdependent in the constitution of society, and should be treated as dualisms rather than dichotomies. Similarly Hall (2005 [1981]: 65-66) insists that study of popular culture does not need to subscribe either to the incorporation or resistance paradigms, rather popular culture constitutes itself as a ground on which cultural transformations are worked, with the double movement of containment (or incorporation) and resistance.

To move beyond the ‘Interpretive Paradigm’ as well as the ‘incorporation/resistance paradigm’, the focus has now shifted to the relationship of media and everyday life. Such studies are based on the argument that media use is inherently embedded in the everyday lives of people and therefore cannot be studied as an isolated object. Instead they insist that media must be seen as a process through which everyday lives are constituted (Raghavan 2008: 21). It is particularly this research approach and practice of focusing on the ‘embeddedness of media and audiences in culture’ that Alasuutari
places into the ‘third generation’ of studies (ibid.). Hence, it becomes important to have an understanding of the role of media in everyday life and politics that takes place within the domestic consumption of television.

2.1.5.3. Media in Everyday life and the Domestic Consumption

Charlotte Brunsdon (1981) explained that ‘the relation of the audience to text will not be determined solely by that text, but also by positionalities in relation to a whole range of other discourses… elaborated elsewhere, already in circulation and brought to the (text) by the viewer’ (cited in Moores 1993: 16). Hence, in exploring practices of media reception, attention needs to be paid to the environmental conditions in which meaning and pleasure are constructed. Similarly, to understand the lived experiences of media consumers, one has to see things ‘from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences’ and then it has to engage with the situational contexts in which the media are used and interpreted (Moores 1993: 32).

The pioneering studies that focused on the context of consumption are – James Lull’s (1982) research in the USA on the ‘social uses’ of TV in family life; of Hermann Bausinger and his colleagues from the institute for Empirical Cultural Studies (Germany); and in Britain, Dorothy Hobson’s investigation on how young mothers at home relate to media output and Morley’s *Family Television* (1986). All these studies share Radway’s concern with interpreting embedded acts of consumption or in other words, ‘the politics of the living room’.

The idea of the active media consumers was attractive to symbolic interactionist researchers, who championed the idea of activity, either because it allowed them to
talk about the rule-following activities of audiences (Lull 1990), familial and personal performances (following Goffman), or in general to focus on the ways families integrated mass media like television into their everyday activities (Lindlof & Meyer 1987 cited in Nightingale 1996: 8). Communication and information technologies have a functional significance, as they provide, actively, interactively or passively, links between individual members of the households, with the world beyond, in complex and often contradictory ways (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 15). ‘Empirical research has demonstrated that one factor which influences the way families process television is the nature of interpersonal communication which takes place at home’ (Lull 2006: 237). As Silverstone & Hirsch (1992: 27) have summarized ‘Families and households work with these technologies as much as they work with every other aspect of their daily lives, with greater or lesser degrees of success, control, competence and composure, depending on the resources they have to sustain their own moral economy’. Similarly talking in the context of television consumption Ang says, ‘the continuing dialectic between the technologized strategies of the industry and the fleeting and dispersed tactics by which consumers … transform these offerings into ‘opportunities’ of their own – making ‘watching television’, embedded… in the context of everyday life, not only into a multiple heterogeneous cultural practice, but also, more fundamentally, into a mobile, indefinite and ultimately ambiguous one, which is beyond prediction and measurement’ (1992: 142).

Though the consumption of the media in the context of everyday life is too complicated to capture still there are studies on the consumption of television at home which try to explain their interaction. For instance, James Lull’s edited book The Family and Television in World Cultures (1988) addresses issues composing the
complicated notion of “family television viewing,” in which researchers from six countries (i.e. Great Britain, Venezuela, Germany, India, America, and China) have produced reports. ‘The chapters emphasize the qualitative character of the relationship- how television influences the family and how families interpret and use television within their particular cultural contexts’ (Lull 1988: 10).

Ultimately what emerges from the growing body of literature in this area is a report of conflict in the sitting room, with disputes over what, how and when to watch. My study also highlights at this politics of the living room.

After discussing all the major traditions in the media and audience studies I now arrive at the theoretical framework where my study can be placed within the reception studies tradition. Through my fieldwork I have attempted to look at how soap operas represent women, men and the power relationships within family. Again I analysed various institutions of Indian society like marriage, family and religion (which is content structure) as they are portrayed in the soap opera texts and compared them with the reaction of audience towards these kinds of representation. The discussion that follows discusses how audiences which are situated within similar political and economic structures vary in their interpretation of these content structures of the media texts. This conforms to the basic question ‘how specific audiences differ in the social production of meaning’, on which reception analysis moves ahead and builds on other traditions like cultural studies and U&G.

Within the three generations of audience studies as discussed by Alasuutari (1999) I can say that my study fits into the still emerging third generation reception studies. An
attempt was made to study the customary audience of soap operas, their understanding of the texts of soaps that they watch regularly and construction of meaning through the interaction between text, audience and the context of consumption. It treats individual audience as a unit of consumption. It focuses on the way each audience constructs meaning out of various institutional aspects (like joint family, marriage, divorce, remarriage) and issues (construction of gender identity and representation of religious and regional issues) in the soap opera text, within the context of her/his family and everyday life. It shows how the context in which the audience is positioned overlaps with the text the soap opera in the entire meaning construction process.

After placing the present study within the third generation reception studies, now we are going to have a glance at the development of media and audience studies within the feminist scholarship, with special focus on the feminine genre called soap opera.

2.2. Feminist Media Studies

The works by critical media theorists within the various schools of thought (like the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies, French structuralism and poststructuralism) shed some focus on how gender, race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of social life are socially constructed in media representations (Kellner 2005). While discussing about women and culture industry, Mattelart (1986: 63) questioned the way in which cultural industries approach the remodelling of feminine roles and values and how women were straightaway singled out, from a commercial point of view, to become the favourite target of mass-media messages, an essential factor in the organization of their programmes. So far feminine genres like soap operas were ridiculed by
commentators belonging to the dominant social strata. Readers’ enjoyment and competences were accorded greater or lesser “worth” as a result hierarchy of programme preferences were generally skewed in favour of the dominant social group. There was a shift in the media and cultural studies during 1980s as “the popular” was increasingly taken more seriously.

The feminist media movement opposed media representation of women and criticized them to be sexist and inadequate. They were calling for more positive representation of women and the participation of more women in the culture industry. So, most of the interesting qualitative studies on the theme of genre and taste were carried out by feminist cultural critics who attempted to rescue the denigrated media forms meant for feminine audience or the ‘women’s genres’ such as soap opera and romantic fiction.

In this initial phase the feminist critics adopted textual analysis and literary criticism as their preferred methods as they were mostly addressing media texts carrying cognitive and/or aesthetic experience. This mostly happened in the domain of popular texts or narratives like the women’ magazines, romance novel and soap operas which ordinary women had access to and enjoyed in their everyday life. For example, Angela McRobbie (1983), in her work on female youth subculture, analyses the ideological aspect of teenage girls’ magazine ‘Jackie’. She views the ‘function of the magazine as being to ‘position’ girls for their later roles as wives and mothers, by means of ideology of teenage or adolescent femininity it cultivates’ (McRobbie: 1983). She was concerned that children were learning the idea that women should be dependent and have limited choices about their lives. On the other hand, Tania Modleski (1988) feels the popular culture consumed by women is considered to be
gendered because many critics persist in equating femininity, consumption and reading on the one hand, and masculinity, production and writing, on the other. For Modleski, gender is central to the understanding of popular culture because of the fear expressed by high culture critics about the role of mass culture in making its audience passive and vulnerable, and prone to consumerism, which is equally a fear about the audience becoming feminine. But, she argues further that mass produced fantasies for women such as Harlequin Romances, Gothic Novels and Soap Operas deal with the very real problems and tensions that exists in women’s lives. Though she feels that the modern feminists cannot be satisfied with the ways in which tensions and problems are resolved in these narratives, still she declares ‘it is time to begin a feminist reading of women’s lives’ (cited in Storey 1993: 126).

Radical feminism asserts that ‘since mass media are in the hands of male owners and producers, they will operate to the benefit of patriarchal society… the power of media to affect men’s behaviour towards women and women’s perception of themselves is beyond discussion’ (Strinati 1995: 201). Unlike radical and liberal feminism, socialist feminism does not focus exclusively on gender to account for women’s position, but attempts to incorporate an analysis of class and economic condition of women as well. All ‘the three categories of feminism, i.e. liberal, radical and socialist, end up in forming a single theory in which ‘mass media simply act as a conveyor belt for patriarchal ideology, and the female audience becomes merely a mass of passive consumers imbued with false consciousness’ (ibid.). Being a liberal feminist herself, Zoonen says ‘liberal feminism sees legislation and increased equality of opportunity as ways of undermining the ‘unrealistic’ portrayal of women in popular culture’ (ibid: 192). But, the feminist critics’ understanding of feminine or femininity and their idea
of oppressive representation of women did not get along with the ordinary women’s understanding.

To address this gap between the feminist critics and the ordinary women, work in the area of popular culture was taken up by various feminist scholars like Hobson (1980), Brunsdon (1981 [1996]), Radway (1984), Allen (1985), Ang (1985). For example, Radway’s book *Reading the Romance* is ‘less an account of the way romances as texts were interpreted than of the way romance reading as a form of behaviour operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects – women who saw themselves first as wives and mothers’ (1984: 7). Similarly Hobson (unlike Morley who treated audiences as members of sub-groupings defined principally by class position in his *Nationwide* audience study) stressed on the gender-specific meanings of the media in household contexts. In particular she cleared the pathway for investigations of gender and genre- for future writing on feminine reading pleasures. She says ‘radio and television… are never mentioned as spare time… activities but are located by the women as integral parts of their day’ (1980: 105 cited in Moores 1993: 36). Similarly Ang also said ‘the pleasure of *Dallas*… is not a compensation for the presumed drabness of daily life nor a flight from it, but a dimension of it’ (Ang 1985: 45).

As evident above, both within the broader framework of media studies and the feminist media studies in particular there was a growing inclination to understand the lived experiences of media consumers, especially women. In the following sections we will revisit the feminist media studies while discussing the interpretation of soap opera texts, their audience, and the interaction between them.
2.2.1. Studies on Soap Opera and its Audience

The hierarchy of programme preferences is generally skewed in favour of the dominant social group. Readers’ enjoyment and competences are accorded greater or lesser ‘worth’ in what Bourdieu (1984) calls the ‘cultural economy’. Hence as one might expect, feminine genres like soap operas are ridiculed by commentators belonging to the dominant social strata.

Because of its popularity as a feminine genre, soap opera remained out of the critical masculine gaze which turns it into a much devalued genre. It is seen to be structured to meet the demands of its female, home-based viewers. As the tasks of women staying at home are very repetitive, interruptive and never completed, so the narrative of soap opera lacks a proper end. Soap operas provide a contrast to masculine action-oriented programmes where the story ends when the tension is resolved. Soap operas consist of an ‘endless middle’. They never offer a clear and singular solution to the personal as well as moral problems of characters. So, the stories remain unfinished and full of potential for further development and transformation.

The first ethnographic study on the genre of soap opera in Britain was by Hobson titled: *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* (1982). In this study she attempted to investigate the ‘production of popular television programmes and the understanding or appeal of those programmes for their audience’ (cited in Nightingale 1996: 69). She describes her interviewees (the women who viewed and discussed the programme with her) as active and involved viewers who combined information from their own life experiences and knowledge of both the genre and the programme to interpret and evaluate the stories and characters in *Crossroads*. But her major focus was not on the
power struggle between the text and the audience but between the producers and the audience and over production decision-making. Here the lack of interest in ideology and/or discourse in Hobson’s work draws attention to the difficulty experienced as academics by women researchers who worked at the CCCS in the mid 1970s to early 1980s as it is situated at the beginning of the separation of feminist theory from the dominant masculinist traditions (ibid: 74).

As the genre of soap opera ‘textually implies a feminine viewer’ (Brunsdon 1981: 37), an obvious political critique of these continuous serials is the allegation that its pleasures help bolster patriarchal relations of power by confirming that a woman’s place is in the world of family life, romance and interpersonal intrigue (Moores 1993:40). They often explore these programmes with ambivalence, at once challenging their romantic glorification of women’s isolation at home, but also embracing soaps for their strong female characters and other narrative conventions that may think of speaking to female concerns and pleasures in ways classical novels and films do not (Brunsdon et al. 1997: 5). Much of the research in this area has been produced by feminist scholars and can be seen as part of wider commitment within feminist research to re-evaluation of popular forms aimed at and enjoyed by women. It is this political commitment, which is a hallmark of feminist work on soap opera; and it also focuses on the relationship of the popular text to its audience and the question of where, in this relationship, lies the power to determine meaning (Marris & Thornham 1996: 571).

For example, Tania Modleski, in her work, ‘The Search for Tomorrow in Today’s Soap Operas’ (1979) , focuses on the gendered address of soap opera and analyzes
soap opera’s structural features in relation both to psychoanalytically informed theories of female subjectivity and to the rhythms of women’s work at home. She feels as if the feminine powerlessness is reinforced at different levels in soaps. She insists that in their address to women’s desires and ‘collective fantasies’, soap operas not only allay ‘real anxieties’, and satisfy ‘real needs’ but at the same time they also distort them. She argues that feminists must find new and more empowering ways of meeting utopian needs and desires, which should be more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones expressed through mass cultural forms like soap opera13, or else, the search for tomorrow threatens to go on, endlessly (Modleski 1996: 46-7).

But quite contrary to this Terry Lovell’s (1981) challenging thesis claimed that soaps can actually subvert the values of a male-dominated society… departing from the simplistic assessment of soap opera as the opium of masses of women, she tries to show how there are potentially oppositional elements in this sort of TV entertainment (Moores 1993: 40). She insists that ‘because popular culture does not belong to… feminism and revolution, it is not captured for reaction, patriarchy and domination either… it is situated ambivalently and in contradictory ways, in relation to both’ (cited in Moores 1993: 40- 41). Brunsdon’s essay did not go as far as Lovell’s in claiming that the continuous serial can be ‘progressive’, but she nevertheless sought to foreground the skilled nature of viewers’ decodings and the discriminating character of their tastes (Ibid: 41). Rather she tries to suggest that “the skills and discourses mobilized by despised popularity have partly been overlooked because of their legitimation as feminine” (Brunsdon 1996: 601).

13 Radway (1984) also argues in a similar fashion while discussing about the romance novels. She feels that feminists should behave like the moral guardians of ordinary women when it comes to the consumption of popular culture like romance novels, because the pleasure derived from them by the readers release the tension, which if channelized properly can add significantly to the feminist movements.
Hobson (1982) in her ethnographic study found that the viewers who spoke to her were either apologetic or defensive about watching the programme because of the low status or value that their pleasures has in the wider ‘cultural economy’. At the same time she grounded her discussion of Crossroads, to justify the production of the programme as praiseworthy cultural work on the basis of the pleasure it gave its viewers and the creativity ‘against the odds’ of its production teams.

On the contrary, many of the respondents in Ang’s (1985) ethnographic study (in Holland on the American soap Dallas) said that they found the programme to be realistic, and indicated that their enjoyment was derived in large measure from the serial’s relevance to everyday experience. Though there were some who structured within the mass culture discourse and took up an oppositional decoding position. She attempted to take up Hall’s formulation of audience as ‘already structured in discourse’ and did so in relation to a position about mass culture, which she contrasted with another discursive position, that is populism. Ang followed this populist course charted for feminist audience research by Hobson and focused on women’s textual pleasures. The most important shift in Ang’s research was from the focus on the ‘meaning’ of the programme as a popular culture to a focus on the ‘pleasures’ experienced in viewing the programme – particularly feminine pleasure (Nightingale 1996: 77). She concludes by saying that ‘…where cultural consumption is concerned, no fixed standard exists for gauging the ‘progressiveness’ of a fantasy. The personal may be political, but the personal and political do not always go hand in hand’ (Ang 1985: 136). This means pleasure may not always have an ideological function. Hence, the pleasure that the viewer of Dallas gained by supporting or criticizing the text, can be kept separated from cultural politics. Nightingale (1996:
82) claimed that the object of feminine pleasure in popular culture (e.g. in Ang’s work) valorises patriarchy by perpetuating subjugation of women. She summarizes Ang’s work in the following words:

An unresolved tension between discourse and individual (emotional) consciousness created an ambiguity in the Dallas project. Where pleasure is personal, discourse is social. Ang’s emphasis on pleasure displaced the analysis from the social to the personal, from what is publicly displayed (the text) to what is privately experienced (pleasure). She then read back from accounts of the pleasure experienced by her respondents to reconstitute the text as a system of pleasure only, and on the way undercut the point of discourse analysis.

The present study largely focuses on the power struggle between the text and the audience. Instead of claiming the soap operas either progressive or regressive the study explores the varying nature of decoding of the text by the viewers. It attempts to strike a balance between pleasure and politics, personal and the social by taking into account the text as a discourse and the text as it is experienced by the audience.

Here we discussed various traditions and models of audience research within feminist media studies and their usage in the studies of soap operas in a western context. Drawing on these studies I highlighted the scope of the present study to re-evaluate the genre of soap operas in a different context and intended to fill some of gaps in the already existing studies. As mentioned above the present study is carried out in a very different context than those that were discussed earlier. So, now we are going to move on to have an account of similar studies on soap operas in the Indian context.

**2.2.2 The study of Soap Operas in India**

In India, it was the state owned television (Doordarshan) which first attracted the attention of scholars. The works done during this period can be divided into two
categories: (1) textual or content analysis of a particular genre or programme, (2) textual analysis enriched with audience responses which are mostly done thorough ethnographic method. Works done by Jyoti Punwani (1998), Anand Mitra (1993), Prabha Krishnan (1990), Krishnan and Dighe (1997), Arvind Rajagopal (1997) fall into the various traditions in media studies (starting from effect studies to cultural studies) as they have critically analyzed the text of different serials on Doordarshan to reveal the Hindu-Hindi ideology embedded within them, and to address the gendered representation of women in the popular serials. Later on works done by Mankekar (1999) and Monteiro (1998) looked into the way women were shown in the television serials on Doordarshan and enriched their textual analysis of the media texts with empirical audience research.

Mankekar (1999), in her study, showed how age old issues of women’s oppression/exploitation were re-enacted and an ideal womanhood was constructed through serials like Ramayan, Mahabharat, Udaan and Tamas on Doordarshan. Throughout her study, she attempts to acknowledge the significance of mass media in identity formation and the construction of national and gendered subjects, through a dialogical interaction between texts and audience (Mankekar 1999: 2002).

On the other hand Monteiro (1998) explains how women derive pleasure from watching television and the way television provides a space for women, to escape from the claustrophobic domestic space. Through her study (which she carried out among the working-class community, in Kamgar Nagar, Goa), she tried to explain how viewers, situated in networks of power within family and neighbourhood, make sense of television.
In her study Mankekar (2002: 299) highlights that ‘meaning is unstable and is frequently contested by viewers, historical subjects, living in particular discursive formations, rather than positioned by any single text’, whereas Monteiro (1998: 167) says that ‘the strategies of viewers range from resistance to negotiated acceptance to complete incorporation of subject positions offered by televisual discourse’. But both these studies address the Indian television in the pre-liberalization era.

After liberalization the focus of serious academic discussion turned back to the ‘effect studies’ tradition where there was this whole debate about how the media texts in the post-liberalization era can threaten the socio-cultural scenario of the country with the weapon of westernization. For example, in the edited volume TV Without Borders: Asia Speaks Out, by Anura Goonasekera & Paul S. N. Lee (1998) from Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore, various scholars attempted to understand and analyze the entry of private channels into the Indian subcontinent; their content and presentation; their impact on the culture and values of Indian audiences. These studies concluded that the new programmes had the potential to enrich the knowledge of their audience and the audiences claimed to be well aware of harmful effects of foreign programmes.

Talking specifically about the study of soap operas on Indian television, one can say that initially there was a whole lot of confusion regarding the definition of this genre (just like the US and Europe debate) and often serialized programs like sitcoms, and mythological serials like Ramayan and Mahabharat were also labelled as soap operas. But soap operas as defined by the US scholars came into existence in the 90s. Initially they were imported from the western countries but later the Indian production houses
started producing them with a touch of Indianness in them. The ‘Balaji Telefilms’ became the centre of discussion because the popular and long running soaps like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (**KSBKBT** henceforth) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (**KGGK** henceforth). Now we have many such industries producing soap operas for domestic consumption. A recent study by Shoma Munshi (2010) takes a closer look at these production houses (Balaji Telefilms, Sphere Origin and Director’s Kut). She looked at the text of the soap operas and the popular characters (especially women like Tulsi, Parvati, Saloni, Ragini) in them and argued how these empowered characters depicted in soaps can empower the audience as well.

Priya Raghban (2008) who studied the popularity of Tulsi (in **KSBKBT**) looks at it from point of view of the empirical audiences. According to her,

> [T]he thesis defines its approach as a study of the discourses that frame viewers’ relationship to *Kyunki*. It argues that study of the reception of a particular text requires a reflexive approach, in linking the interpretations viewers make to the text and the larger discursive framework, which I explore in terms of family ethos (2008: 40).

So building on these set of works and arguing quite similar to Raghvan, my study explores the relationship between the audience and the popular soap opera texts and makes an attempt to understand the ‘interpretive community’ as a much more complex category than what it was understood to be. The work shows how the structural factors as well as the lived experiences of particular individuals play an important role in the construction of meaning especially in changing societies as

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14 Balaji Telefilms, incorporated in 1994, is a television content provider. Mr. Jeetendra, Mrs. Shobha Kapoor and Ms. Ekta Kapoor promoted the company with the object of making television software including serials and other entertainment content. It remained No.1 for four uninterrupted years (2001-2004). Starting off in 1995 with a serial *Maano Ya Naa Maano* on Zee TV, Balaji Telefilms has become one of the few producers of quality television serials and soaps, in Hindi and some South Indian languages.
tensions and contradiction which are always a part of the overall social structure and get aggravated in the fast changing societies.

In the next chapter we are going look at the history of television in India and its emergence as a major source of entertainment over the years. Here we will focus on the portrayal of women in the popular serials and soap operas in the past few decades.