

**Screening culture, viewing politics: an ethnography of television, womanhood and nation in postcolonial India**

Purnima Manekar; Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1999, £13.50 (Pbk), £40.00 (Hbk), ISBN: 0-8223-2390-7

In this clearly written and always engaging ethnographic study of women and television in contemporary India, Purnima Manekar makes an important contribution to the growing body of postcolonial feminist scholarship that reveals the crucial ways in which both representations of women and women's activities are bound up in processes of constituting national, ethnic and other community identities. For feminist thinkers seeking to work with models of women's identity that take as their starting point the simultaneity and intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and community, Manekar's grounded and specifically located study provides numerous productive insights.

Manekar began her research in Delhi in 1990, in the context of heated protests against the Indian government's Mandal Commission Bill, which aimed to set quotas for the so-called 'backward castes' in both education and civil service employment, and of a brutal wave of Hindu right-wing violence against Muslim communities and holy sites. In both cases, notions of womanhood, community, belonging nation and culture emerged as inter-linked sites of violent contestation, and in both, women and representations of women were foregrounded (3–4). Manekar keeps this broader social and political context in focus as she looks at both the production and reception of representations of women in the programming of Doordarshan, the state-run television network. She thus takes the time (and over 400 pages) to work simultaneously at three levels: to 'read' the representational codes and discursive systems at work in a variety of Doordarshan narratives; to explore the relationship between these discursive productions and the narratives that viewers weave of their own lives (8); and to track the articulation of both cultural production and reception with the broader structure of power and inequality (21).

Four key discursive clusters emerge from this analysis: family, community, violence, and the transnational connections through which these themes, as well as notions of the local and the national, 'tradition' and 'modernity' are being reconfigured (39). A recurrent theme across these discursive clusters is the problematic way in which women are simultaneously foregrounded as key players in producing and sustaining national, class, caste and religious identities, and constrained by the gendered hierarchies embedded in prevailing

definitions of those identities. Mankekar argues that, from its earliest productions of television serials, Doordarshan promoted the configuration of its national audience as a 'viewing family'. In both the serials and the closely coordinated advertising campaigns that accompanied them, 'the family' became a prism through which themes such as national integration, development and modernity, middle-class aspiration and consumerism are elaborated. Within this, the positioning of women is key, not least as consumers, who, through their choices, are being called upon to hold together tradition and modernity and to consolidate the family's class status and aspirations through its acquisition of consumer goods. Similarly, Doordarshan's 'women-oriented' serials stress the centrality of family to discourses of Indian culture and nationhood (105). The 'New Indian Woman' at the heart of these discourses is both accommodated and subsumed within master narratives of family and nation: she participates in the nation's march to modernity and at same time, preserves all that is unique and authentic about 'Indian culture' (137). Women's agency is at once enabled and domesticated by these narratives of nation and family. Nationalism creates the horizon for women as it constitutes them as citizen-subjects, leaving little room for radical critiques of women's position within the family and nation, and importantly, also foreclosing discussion of inequalities among women along axes of religious identity, caste or class (153–154).

This theme is continued in the excellent chapter 'Television Tales, National Narratives and a Woman's Rage' (versions of which have already been anthologized) which focuses on one episode of the serialization of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, known as 'Draupadi's disrobing'. In Mankekar's reading of this telling of the tale, Draupadi, a woman caught in the conflict between the men of two warring families, is pressed into service as an emblem of the Nation, her ill-treatment a symbol of social decay. Draupadi's rage at her betrayal reflects the power of Woman, but this remains constrained within the interests of preserving the integrity of the family, and the unity of the nation (235). Here again, the representation of woman becomes a site for inquiry into tradition and nationhood, rather than the structural conditions that make women vulnerable (252). Nevertheless, Mankekar also identifies the ways in which some of her women viewers disrupt the producer's preferred reading, by relating Draupadi's situation to their own fears and worries about their personal vulnerability in a patriarchal society. Indeed throughout the book, Mankekar is careful to present her research subjects as complex agents, who may be constrained by their positioning along multiple axes of power, but who are, nevertheless, actively interpreting, and at times contesting, these popular cultural narratives, whose meanings are never fully stable.

*Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* also addresses the crucial issue of the role of Woman as symbol, and of the complicity of some women, in communal conflict. In her textual analyses of both the television version of the *Ramayan*, and of the

Hindi serial *Tamas*, which depicts the communal violence at the time of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, Mankekar tracks the ways in which questions of gender and sexuality are made central to constructions of right-wing Hindu communal identities, and to their othering of non-Hindu communities. The sometimes very different ways in which Hindu and non-Hindu women viewers engaged with these narratives provide an opportunity for Mankekar to address the problematic question of 'ordinary people's' (including ordinary women's) investment in communal violence. In particular, she suggests that the silence with which her Hindu viewers reacted to the scenes of partition violence in *Tamas* reflects a dangerous kind of collective forgetting of the potentially violent exclusions at the heart of some versions of community identity, from which women are not immune. On this as on many other issues, *Screening Culture* is a text that respects the complexity of both its ethnographic subjects and the theoretical issues raised by its subject matter. It is a welcome contribution to our understanding of women's positioning in postcolonial India, and to feminist thinking on women's identity more generally.

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