

Tele-fiction invents the “wronged” woman

Urban middle-class women viewers in South Delhi and Noida recently got together to discuss the spate of new serials which focus on the ‘wronged’ woman. The debate centred on the treatment in serials like ‘Kora Kagaz, Saaya, Janan, Naya Zamana’ and ‘Henna’.

Portraying the wronged woman is a challenge. To explore the suffering and humiliation and low self-esteem of one betrayed within the home and by society is not easy. It seems teleserials are unable to reflect the real struggles women today are facing.

A majority of the viewers objected to the fact that serials tended to reinforce traditional values and stereotypes of the long-suffering, patient woman. In ‘Henna’ both the wife and the other woman allow themselves to be exploited although they are educated and relatively independent. Some of the questions this brought up are – is it essential to have the social protection of the husband? Must wives live on the hope that things will work out in the end and the estranged husband will return?

Not all is bad though with the treatment. The four women in Janam are shown to be self-reliant. In Kora Kagaz the bride’s story is narrated in flashback so that viewers know she has refused to accept her husband. This raised further questions: Is her refusal a solution or a rebellion? The presence of supportive parents, friends particularly women, in-laws, in Rahein, Janam, and Kora Kagaz, provide a realistic environment and this was much appreciated.

Naya Zamana was hotly debated for its portrayal of the modern woman as aggressive and demanding. The paradigm of this ‘new woman’ is effectively contextualised through the presentation of an advertising campaign by a woman accounts executive. Her middle-aged husband’s reaction is shown to contrast sharply with that of a young male member in the audience. Consumerism requires and helps create a generation that is not ashamed of its desires and the drive to satisfy them. This cuts across gender and class as the rich college student’s attitudes are also those of the young maid servant’s daughter.

The discussion wound up by noting that although most serials still focussed on stereotypical representation of women, at least there was an element of questioning. Why should the woman alone be bound within the family? Shouldn’t the man be accountable in some way? And while the wronged woman hasn’t put her home and the family behind her, she has begun to ask, even demand, that her rights be recognised and respected.

Viewers who watch tele-fiction regularly and took part in group discussions over the last one-and-a-half years identified some key issues in serials like content, portrayal and viewership by the family.

- trivialisation of women, their problems and relationships, as in sit-coms like Tu Tu Main Main

- the way the family is depicted, particularly the relationship of men/boys and women within the family can function as a social sounding board for individual viewers when handled sensitively like in Saans and Hasratein
- serials display a ‘copy-cat’ tendency. A number of them today deal with extra-marital relationships. Besides being repetitive, they show exaggerated representations
- women feel responsible for their children’s viewing and are worried about the impact of violence on children
- increase in detective serials which target women for violence is cause for alarm
- serials like Tere Mere Sapne capture the tensions of a society in transition. While there was some nostalgia for the past, viewers preferred the portrayal of women as independent and mature. Many women felt that serials should not reinforce the idea that marriage was the ultimate goal for women and perfect adjustment their sole achievement.

Viewers’ Voices-2

Over the past few months the Basti Manch had several meetings at Gautampuri. All of them are women, most are in the age group of 15-35. All of them are avid television viewers (six-eight hours a day) as they do not go out to work and housework keeps them largely indoors. Some of the girls are literate.

Viewership is limited DD Metro and the National channel. Apart from soaps like Aparajita, Waqt ki Raftar, Itihaas and Ardhagini, they also watch thrillers. Religious serials are very popular. With the exception of one viewer who said it was expensive to get a cable connection, the others said they did not have one as it would affect children’s studies.

Pushpa shared that she liked serials in which women fight for their rights although she knows in real life it is not that easy. “Often, it brings more aggressive reactions from husbands and other men in the family,” she says. Many pointed out that though young, unmarried girls are shown to be strong and rebellious, they are invariably depicted as passive and traditional once they are married. No personal growth is shown thereafter and they are always dependent on their husbands. Urmila felt that in Ardhagini the theme song functioned as a mere slogan because neither in the serial nor in real life can one see equality between men and women. Wives and daughters share the economic burden but this does not mean equal status.

Some of the other points that emerged were that portrayals of single women are few and far between. At any rate, this status is never by choice. If a woman is shown to be ‘modern’, this is invariably interpreted as going astray. All the viewers were dismayed by the tendency to depreciate women through frivolous representations and by displaying them as scantily-clad objects.

Sarita Kumari found Bachcho ki Adalat to be a good programme because it showed that brothers and sisters should share housework. “There should not be too much burden on

only one section of the family,” she says. Lalitha liked programmes which promoted patriotism. “I even like Captain House although he is not a living person because he helps people in need, specially women and girls. He fights the policemen,” she says.

Shaktimaan was seen as unrealistic and dangerous as children tend to imitate stunts. Everyone responded positively to the fact that court action against the producer had borne fruit. Now the caption informing viewers that Shaktimaan is an ordinary man and the powers he is shown to have are only fictional appears at the beginning and end of the programme. Pushpa admitted that “now that his powers have all gone, the attraction of the serial has diminished.”

Box Item:

Aaj Tak and Ankhon Dekhi are some of the popular news-based programmes with Basti Manch viewers. Many of them felt marginalised as these programmes never focus on their living conditions and problems. When they do, it is in situations like the onion or mustard oil crisis. Only events get focussed and official bungling and apathy is receded into the background. Little effort is made to get the opinion of people, although official explanations are always given.

Many of the women felt that news stories showing violence against women is often covered in a sensational and provocative manner. There is little attempt to provide legal and administrative information that could help viewers.

Viewers’ Voices-3

The Disability Group hosted a meet at the Max Mueller Bhawan on July 31, 1999. Disability Commissioner Mr B.L.Sharma was the chief guest. Televised vignettes about disabled achievers were shown to the participants. Directed by Ananya Banerji and produced entirely by DD technical staff this was a DD presentation as part of a human rights campaign. Viewing was followed by a discussion focussed on these ‘spots’ and on the role of governmental policy concerning the rights of the disabled and availability of support services.

Everyone was inspired by the extremely sensitive presentation. The special abilities, skills and achievements of persons who refused to be cowed down by even the most daunting physical and mental disabilities were depicted extremely powerfully. The visuals were remarkable as they showed the acquired abilities in a manner that did not focus ‘oddity’ e.g. the camera angles and the pace of the footage showing an engineer using his toes on a keyboard focussed on his agility and made it appear very natural and competent.

The five minute spots had to be seen as an unbroken series although they have been planned as spots slotted between programmes and have been viewed by television audiences all over the country. Our viewing did have the result of

making the focus on achievement appear a little one-sided and some participants in the discussion expressed reservations of this score.

As someone pointed out, 'Do we only need to highlight our achievements? We also need to highlight our problems. A friend of mine has been writing in *The Pioneer* about the problems he faces living in this city with a physical disability for the last two years. The response he is getting from other disabled persons is tremendous.'

Ananya clarified that her target audience was the average T.V. viewer, and not only the disabled. She had to draw and hold their attention and a completely exhaustive treatment within five minutes was neither possible nor desirable. At the same time since her concern was human rights she chose to emphasise that each individual was unique.

Col. Marwah joined the discussion here with the observation that while the portrayal of achievements was well done, the issue of rights needed to address the role of law, governmental policy, and social attitudes for the approximately nine crore disabled persons in the country.

Sudhir Tandon, Incharge of Special Programme Unit, Doordarshan, pointed out that although DD and its production teams are devoted to socially relevant themes, they too have severe limitations. Prime time is invariably cornered by the so-called 'mainstream' interest programming. Also, the number of actual programmes dealing with special groups were far fewer than one would ideally like to have. One programme cannot take all issues into consideration and so a choice has to be made. Inevitably, many aspects of these complex problems are sidelined. However, we should try to evaluate what has been portrayed for its sensitivity and technical competence and not merely list areas that have been left relatively unexplored.

But for Dr. Anita Ghai, Reader, Psychology in Jesus and Mary College, the complaint ran deeper. 'We don't want to fall into the trap of achievement. Must we always be achieving? Always having to prove ourselves? Please let us be normal – we achieve but we also fail.' Anita Pal, an architect by profession, went even further. 'Do focus on achievements, but aren't our emotional lives a part of these achievements? Why are these issues never discussed? Social stigmas and attitudes have not changed – we are not supposed to have any sexual or emotional responses and involvements. Because I am disabled, men who are intellectually and professionally my equals don't come near me. If at all a disabled person is considered as a matrimonial prospect, it is because there is some monetary or social advantage being held out to persons willing to take them on.'

Mr. Sharma said marriage schemes, along with other facilitating projects for the disabled, were being worked out and some had already been implemented. Even though he did not really address the issue Anita had raised, his approach was very

positive. He recognised that advocacy was one of the major areas to be taken up if one wanted any substantial change in the lives of the disabled as an important segment of the community. Part of his agenda was to use film and CD-Rom for the purpose. His office has asked all DD Kendras to allot time for programmes for the disabled with the suggestion that assistance of local groups of the disabled be sought in the production of the programmes.

The session ended on a confident note as Neelam stood up to thank Doordarshan for the role one of their programmes has played in her life. She said, "Fifteen years ago I saw a serial which portrayed a disabled girl's struggle to overcome her disability and that programme gave me hope and inspired me to study. Today I am leading an active professional life. And you will be glad to learn that I also got married a few months ago."

Viewers' forum - 4

"Advertising has a necessary function as a marketing tool. It informs consumers about products and enlarges the scope of the consumers' right to choose, but how does one address the question of advertisements that go beyond 'the bounds of decency' as companies and advertising agencies compete with each other to grab viewer attention. Is censorship a viable alternative? A seminar between industry, policy makers and social activists was conceived as a significant first step towards initiating a debate with wider social implications." – **Manju Bharat Ram**, Member CII SDCA Council and Chairperson, The Shriram School

"Projection of women in advertisements is predominantly passive, mechanised, and utilised only as an instrument to market goods. Liberalisation appears to have reinforced stereotypes as it foregrounds people as consumers. There is need for a debate aimed at reducing the propagation of demeaning stereotypes in media and for redefining the role of media in this area." -- **Chandani Joshi**, Regional Programme Advisor Unifem.

"Responding to the power of advertising, legislation was enacted in 1986 to protect women from derogatory projections in the media, but the problem is one of enforcement of laws. Actually changing attitudes is the most important step and it must begin with the media itself. There are only 12 to 15 % women in Doordarshan and All India Radio. The privately owned media would vary only marginally. Stopping gender stereotyping within the media means a higher representation of women in decision-making positions in the media. Self-regulation is the best means of discipline as it is the result and a cause of social sensitisation." -**Kiran Aggarwal**, Secy. Dept of Women and Child Development.

"Common human sensitivity must temper freedom of expression. Men and women have to sit together to discuss issues relating to their partnership in society. The question of projection of women in advertising is an important area in this discussion. Advertisements have a dominant role to play in competitive consumerism but the credibility of an image or a slogan has much to do with the sensitivity of its portrayal. Product producers and the creators of advertisements, a number of whom are women,

should understand that it makes good business sense to recognise this' -Chief Guest **Najma Heptullah**, Dy Speaker Rajya Sabha

Viewers Forum and CFAR participated in the CII and Unifem Seminar on the Projection of Women in Advertising held at the India Habitat Centre on Aug 25, 1999. Their presentations introduced the refreshing presence of advocacy and social activism into the seminar. It received a good response from advertisers and policy makers.

Several presentations were made by representatives of advertising agencies. Most of them felt that they really did not play a determining role. 'We are the 15 per cent guys' said **Shivjeet Kullar**, national creative director, Joint Communication. **Sushil Pandit**, vice-president (media), Contract Advertising, felt their 'responsibility did not go beyond selling a brand and a message. We use strong stimuli – the hot buttons of fantasies, fears, preferences, humour – to get a response.' Questioning if codes or bans could be effective, he answered 'I think not – they don't seem to work.'

Only one or two advertisers justified the use of sexist images and copy. 'If that's what consumers, including women respond to, why shouldn't we use them?' asked **V. Krishnamurthy**, brand manager, Hindustan Sanitaryware and Industries Ltd. However, most of the advertisers tried to strike a balance between the obviously more permissive norms of contemporary metropolitan lifestyles and the fact that gender sensitivity is 'politically correct' in today's environs.

Shunu Sen, CEO, Quadra Advisory, and a celebrated 'guru' of Indian advertising, recalled Ogilvy's warning: 'the consumer is not a moron, she's your wife'. He emphasised that you could hardly sell a product successfully if you 'trivialised' women and by implication men as well. Successful brands support good advertising, he claimed, so it was sound business sense to be sensitive to the diverse images and needs of women who are the most important segment of consumers in the market.

The analytical and gender sensitive construction of the very successful NIIT Ltd. ad campaigns, and its informed presentation by **Sanjeev Kataria**, vice-president (corp. communications), more than proved the point made by Sen. An ad stating that self-confidence was not the most expensive but certainly the most precious gift a mother could give her daughter, showed how advertising did not only sell a product but also promoted the values appropriate to it.

Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, CFAR, made a strong plea for a 'cross-sectional dialogue' in her keynote address so that industry and activists 'don't sit across an uncrossable gulf – you with your business interests and me with my loony social ideas.' Assuring that there was no intolerance on our part, no attempt to silence the freedom of expression either of the advertising industry or of the wide spectrum of consumers, Akhila highlighted the fact that she was not promoting out-dated, narrow values but was on the contrary making a strong plea for letting contemporary values of plurality, equality, and support to marginalised groups, come into their own. Appreciating the role of the Advertising Standard Council of India (ASCI), an intra-industry disciplining body

using ethical criteria, Akhila pointed out its limitations for its decisions were outside the public gaze. Also, rival business interests could exert undue pressure.

The Viewers' Forum perspective was presented by **Madhu Prasad** and supported with an intervention by **Mridula Murgai**. Madhu opened with the claim that it was the creator of the advertisement who also created the activist – the offensive ad made one sit up and think 'what should I do about this ad?' Where the advertisement only did its 'job', viewer attention shifted to the product. The need and space for a dialogue between the agency and the activist opened up here. Discussing the action taken by the Forum against the Kwality-Wall's ice-cream campaign, 'The Big F', the petition sent to ASCI as well as the recourse to the print media were raised. The latter led to suo motto notice being taken by the court and an inquiry under section 292 of the IPC which punishes depiction of obscenity in any medium. Madhu and Mridula suggested that public interest 'spots' on T.V. would make ASCI known to viewers as a body they could appeal to. Enlarging ASCI's code would increase areas in which viewers could intervene.

Sam Balsara, Managing Director, Madison Advertising, and chairman ASCI, argued that advertising has brought an unprecedented focus on women, a factor which should not be overlooked in responding to derogatory representations. The existence of a self-regulatory council also showed the maturity of advertising and allied services. At present 254 agencies and companies are members of ASCI. Its 16-member board also includes members of the media. ASCI's code is regularly revised and upgraded if required and a careful factual investigation is undertaken before any evaluation of complaints is made. Within the industry, ASCI decisions are respected. In 80 per cent cases the company itself withdraws the offending advertisement. In 20 per cent cases an appeal is made to the media not to accept the ad for publication. 'ASCI issues a list of offending ads and believe me, nobody wants to be on that list,' he said.

Responding to Viewers' Forum suggestions, Sam Balsara stated that ASCI charged no complaint fee to encourage public intervention and every complaint was looked into. Although they do place public notices in the print media, ASCI was restrained here by the policy of not accepting any donations, even for ads, from industries precisely because it did not want to compromise its impartiality.

Ramesh Narayan, vice-president, Advertising Agencies Association of India, applauded the role of ASCI. He pointed out that as in all spheres of life, here too, it required two hands to clap. If advertising is changing, we must recognise that audiences are changing too. Dialogue, and not censorship, is therefore the best solution both for the industry and the consumers.

The chief guest for the closing session, **Vibha Parthasarthy**, chairperson, National Commission of Women, talked in detail of her experience of the way in which children, a crucial segment exposed to the influence of advertisements, decode messages and derive meaning from visual images and copy. Her account of a workshop with schoolchildren brought the seminar to a close with a healthy emphasis on the need for greater and freer

discussion with precisely those sections that we feel are most vulnerable to the impact of advertising.

Viewers Voice-5

Viewers' Forum conducted its first 4-day Training Workshop for Media Educators and Advocates on August 14 -18, 1999 with technical input from Centre For Advocacy and Research. Held at India International Centre Annexe, the workshop generated great enthusiasm among participants thanks to the well-researched and absorbing presentations made by resource persons from the media, law, advertising, management and technology. Intended to train a 'core' advocacy group, the workshop also functioned as a testing ground for the training material package and methodology.

The workshop was aimed at encouraging better viewer intervention in the creation and dissemination of media products. Since both the media and the consumer have a stake in quality productions, opening up avenues for negotiation would be more practical than letting oppositions build up to head-on conflicts. Trained media 'advocates' would be better equipped to develop analytical abilities among general viewers rather than have them merely accepting information conveyed through the electronic media. The impact of this process would be significant in our contemporary pluralistic civil society.

Welcoming participants, Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, CFAR said: 'How we respond as viewers is central. Only if we are sensitised, informed and critical can we constitute an intelligent public opinion and be in a significant position to shape government policy with regard to the quality of electronic media on the one hand, and help to create self-regulatory and viewer remedial codes, on the other.'

Anuradha Mukherjee, Programme officer, CFAR followed with an exercise which made clear the parameters for evaluation of tele-fiction by directing attention to the handling of the subject.

Media Critic Sudhesh Pachauri traced the development of television in India from the introduction of the Satellite Information Technology Experiment (SITE) in 1959 to the advent of colour television for the Asian Games in 1982. In 1985 with the televised version of the Ramayana the first and most popular religious serial brought the medium into the lives of millions across the country. It showed the impact of the medium as the serial regulated social life by its broadcast time. It also brought with it the first push towards linking consumerism with TV. Sponsored advertisements between scenes of a single episode were introduced with this serial.

In 1988 the installation of low horizontal transmitters extended the reach of DD to 70% of the population making it the most powerful medium of communication in the hands of the government. Private channels, Zee followed by Star, came in 1990-91. Television software changed from being largely government commissioned or relayed to being dominantly sponsored by the corporate sector. The packaging and presentation quickly made the former appear shabby and visually dull. The nineties have shown the new

corporate culture which has acquired social prominence to be emulated in television software as well. This reflects the absolute dominance of sponsors and it has become very difficult for small producers now to survive on the small screen.

Finally Pachauri addressed the so-called 'western' vs 'bharatiya' culture divide that is encountered in all debates about the images and content of television programming. He pointed out that the 'standardisation' of cultural images is a response to the globalised system of production controlled by multinational corporations. The creation of an 'international consumer' with a standardised identity, identical needs, choices and gratifications, is the ultimate target of the transnational corporate world.

A fall-out of this has been the visual and content-based *intimacy* of television images, with the images and responses becoming increasingly individualised. People 'anywhere' should be able to respond. In the process, wider socio-cultural specificities are no longer as significant as they were earlier. Participants noted that viewing too had become individuated now bringing radical changes in viewer responses. Watching television with the community or extended family generated quite different reactions. This change was reflected even in the location of the television – from the community centre to the individual home, and in middle-class families, from the living room into the bedroom.

Shailaja Bajpai, Media Critic and Columnist with the Indian Express presented a lively session on television news with a viewing of DD news bulletins from 1984 and DD and Star News from 1998. Much to the surprise of many participants DD was found to have greater variety and a better sense of priority in choice and presentation of news items. Star was a clear winner on presentation and packaging, including the persona of its presenters, although Star too depended on administrative or governmental sources for information. DD was seen as more 'transparent' in its attempt to convey an already formed, usually official, message to viewers. Star News appeared to be more aggressively polarising, its presentation reflective of the fact that it had to fight for space in the creation of public opinion. While many participants felt this gave Star News more credibility, others felt that this made its impact 'opaque' so that viewers became more gullible in their response. Everyone felt the absence of even a single genuinely 'alternative' news programme to the so-called 'mainstream' official and privately owned channel programmes.

The session on advertising, its goals, volume, techniques, and images, was presented by Aditi Chatterjee, a business journalist. She drew attention to the difference between advertisements on DD and the private channels in terms of both products and advertising styles. This was indicative of the mass audience, both rural and urban, of the former which contrasted with the sectional markets that private channel audiences usually represent. However, youth across all sections have begun to emulate and aspire to the elite lifestyles which they are exposed to on the electronic media. Advertisers can exert considerable influence over the representations and the content of programmes particularly when they sponsor programmes or have brand rights over them.

Udita Das, consumer research specialist with Mode stressed that corporates take consumer response very seriously. However, the aim of their research is only to promote consumption of a product and hence 'their world-view is very limited'. Every brand is identified with an 'image', the purpose of which is to narrow down the consumer's options to a range within which the brand to be promoted appears upfront.

Aarathi Pai, Advocate in Delhi High Court talked about laws that impact media to make viewers aware of how these can be used to increase their intervention and influence what we see, read and listen to. Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression but clause 2 of the same article provides for what are termed 'reasonable restrictions'. Laws are formulated within the space created under these identifiable heads through constant interpretation and reformulation in legal hearings and court judgements. Social reactions and mobilisation of public opinion on what constitutes 'reasonable' restrictions or whose freedom of expression is being threatened are a significant input in the legal process and a major determinant of the judgements that are arrived at.

Joydeep Gupta, a journalist working with Cable Wave introduced participants to the technological advances that are rapidly changing the communications and information industry. Better and more efficient technologies are daily increasing the range of viewer choices, which cannot any longer be restricted to government monopoly over entertainment and information. However the fact that the technology and the software are coming under the control of transnational media conglomerates puts a big question mark against placing one's faith in technologies alone – where does this private monopolistic control leave the viewer? Do viewers in fact exercise control or are their choices being determined by corporate interests?

Clearly the importance of media advocacy aimed at empowering viewers and in particular at increasing criticality and articulation among women viewers is urgently required. Mobilising informed viewer opinion and activism is the only way to enlarge the area of viewer choice.

PARAMETERS FOR WATCHING TV FICTION

A serial/soap can be judged by breaking it down into following categories:

- STORY
- STYLE
- CHARACTERS
- DIALOGUE
- SETTING
- RELATIONSHIPS
- PACE

In any kind of fiction the **STORY** is the fulcrum. It is hard to keep a good story down. It is even harder to find a good storyteller. But when the two things come together, you have a satisfactory combination.

If a story is well told, it makes a world of difference to the viewer. The ability to tell a tale well is called **STYLE**, and each director searches for his or her own distinctive style to stamp upon the story. If you like a director's style, it is quite likely that you will like the serial/soap.

Once the bare bones of the story are in place, the **CHARACTERS** come in to fill up the spaces. If you find an affinity with the characters, once you begin to be interested in their life, you will return to the fresh weekly episodes to find out what happens next. That is the hallmark of a successful serial, sitcom, soap, that it pulls you towards it: if you return eagerly, willingly, then you know the serial is important to you.

The way the characters interact, the way they speak to each other, the words they use, are all intrinsic part of the serial's appeal. If you have an urban, ultra-modern girl like, say Kamiya in 'Saaya', and if she speaks in a way which does not suit her personality, you will have problems accepting her character. If the characters are the bricks of the edifice, the **DIALOGUE** is the cement: it joins the characters to each other, and the viewers to the characters.

The **SETTING** is not only the sets, which the characters inhabit, it is the clothes they wear, the colours they use, the accessories they sport. To take the example of 'Saaya's Kamiya further, we know that she lives in a large, expensive apartment which is filled with gadgets and objet d'art; we also know that she prefers skin-tight mini-skirts, or tees which show off her slim midriff; we also know that she tints her hair burgundy. Her friend Sudha, who is supposed to be the contrast, wears salwar-kameez which cover from head to toe; she speaks in a low tone, never raises her voice, is the picture of demure femininity: these are the settings which we know the characters by, and if they are out of their natural settings, we can sense their unease at being out of place.

This aspect of the serial is connected to the **RELATIONSHIPS** the characters share. They flow from the way the events flow: one of the thumb rules in a long-drawn soap is that the relationships are never static, they keep changing as the story twists and turns. As a buffer to these tenuous relationships, there are always some, albeit fewer, which remain pretty steadfast, as they give the soap some mooring. You ask yourself: do you like the way these relationships are progressing, or are they too contrived?

Everything we have mentioned till now is connected to that most vital thing: **PACE**. Sometimes, even if everything else is in its place, but if the soap is paced wrong, you tend to go off it. You are likely to get irritated by things which are flying too fast, or events which crawl at a snail's pace, and it is much more likely to be the latter. If a director has a sure touch and keep things moving, he will find his viewers moving, he will find his viewers move along with him. If he slows down too much, he is likely to be left behind.

And finally, there is the **LIKEABILITY** factor. There are times when you are impressed with much of what the serial displays but there is that little something that puts you off – it could be a character, a swing in the story, a line of dialogue. If the likeability factor is high, the serial is likely to be popular among several diverse sections of the audience.

