



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY ROLES IN MOTHER-IN-LAW TV DRAMA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND LITERATURE REVIEW

***Doreen Akech Orawo**

P. O. Box 6767, Eldoret – 30100, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses masculinity and femininity manifestations in television drama series based on a proposed study in Eldoret municipality, a cosmopolitan area with different groups of residents with different social and economic backgrounds. It examines *Mother-in-Law* TV drama programme which provides a complexity of extended family life. The mother-in-law tries to dominate the entire family in shaping the distinct roles of male and female in the society at the same time contradicts the same roles by dominating the husband. The study explores the main social themes communicated in the drama series; the stereotype communications in the roles played by different actors; the critical perceptions of masculinity and femininity in the programme, and lessons of complexity of extended family life provided. The study uses qualitative research design and employs research paradigm of constructivism. The target population comprises housing units as provided by the National Census data. The study also uses multi-stage sampling technique and interview schedule to select respondents and to collect data respectively. Its findings are useful to a wide spectrum of stakeholders such as the social workers, the family members, scholars, media houses and the ministries of information and communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Theories on the Medium of Television

Television as a medium is complex. As one of the main methods by which we receive information, news and entertainment, it is deeply embedded into our society. This relationship makes a study of television and its content multidimensional (Milkie, 2002). To understand the use of representations on television, the co-dependent relationship between medium, culture and society has to be analyzed. The theoretical model that institutes a multidimensional approach suited for this type of study is Regis Debray’s mediology. “One is acting as mediologist each time one brings to light correlations unifying a symbolic corpus (a religion, a doctrine, an artistic genre, a discipline), a form of collective organization (a church, a party, a school, an academy) and a technical system of communication (recording, storage, and trace circulation)” (Debray, 1996). Mediology focuses on the mediation of the information and how it represents and transmits culture, which is the core objective of imagery in television. Television context is mediation in its absolute form. The television industry creates context through its governing standards and the cultural and societal standards impart upon them. In Debra’s model, each of these three institutions is considered an environment through which information is transferred. These environments are known as media sphere or middle ground. “This milieu, structured by its

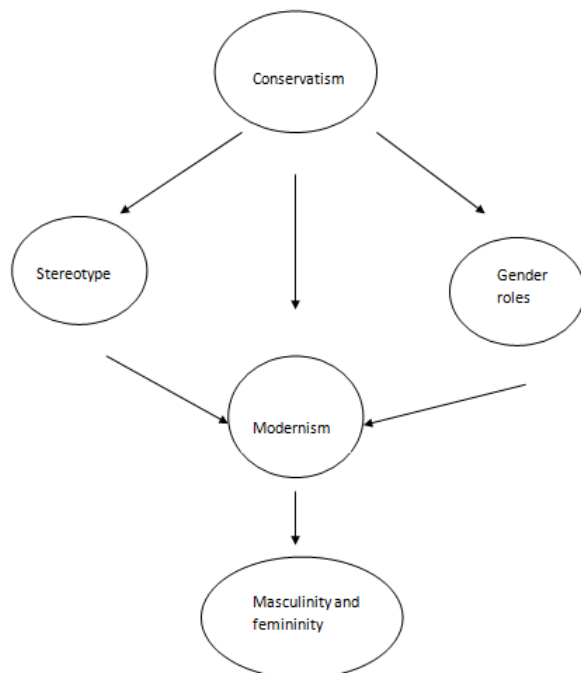
foremost technique and practice of memory-formatting, structures in its turn a type of accrediting of the discourse in currency, a dominant temporality, and a mode of grouping together that are the three faces of a trihedral forming (what one could sum up as) the collective personality or psychological profile proper to a mediological period (Debray, 1996). This ideology personifies how television creates mediated images. In addition, it also represents how the culture and society shape the content. The creation of mediated images is produced through the interaction of the culture, society, and television industry media spheres. These media spheres interact with one another on a constant basis and evolve and recreate themselves as external elements transform them. The relationship between the media spheres shapes the content of television. The cultural, social, and television environment are all their own media spheres with their own governing standards, rules, decision makers, motives, etc. Television content is created through the interaction of all three media spheres. Analyzing how and why television content appears in a certain manner can be quite difficult. To understand why a presentation appears in the manner it does, all three media spheres have to be examined for their contribution to the portrayal. Because of this nature the evolution or change of media spheres is inevitable (Whannel, 2002). Within media spheres change occurs slowly and adapts itself around the culture as it happens. The components of one version of the media sphere are never recreated. New elements of hegemony are hybrids of past ones but each component in the media sphere is indefinitely altered

*Corresponding author: doreen.orawo@yahoo.com

by the change. As the controlling powers of the media sphere hybridize so does the mediation that it creates.

Critical issues on gender and media communication through TV drama

The Kenyan local industry is developing very fast. Since drama series are developed with passive entertainment as the main goal, the TV drama series produced in Kenya and aired on TV stations across East African Countries have no much difference. The complexity between the mother-in-law (Charity) and her daughter-in-law (Alison) clearly portrays the volatile and unbearable relationship between the in-laws. The drama series draws attention to the aspirations and the roles of mother-in-law in shaping the extended family life, assuming the dominant character and at the same time insisting on submissiveness of the daughters-in-law to their husbands. Although the *Mother-in-Law* has been carefully administered and it is informative to the development of society, the programme contains, by necessity and assumption, measurable internally varied relationships between socially mediated communication about extended family life and gender roles. It is not clear therefore the extent to which the *Mother in-Law* TV drama communicates the clashing roles of the male and female gender in an extended African family life. The ideal African society role of an African mother may be perceived differently by different viewers depending on the background characteristics, such as the culture of the society, the economic status, experience and education. The problem which provokes the mind of the researcher is why the mother-in-law should expect subordination of daughters-in-law to her sons while she dominates the husband. It is because of these clashing roles of masculinity and femininity in extended family life, in the light of conservatives and modernists characters, that this study was proposed.



The purpose of the study is to investigate the complexity of masculinity and femininity in extended family life while factoring in the contributions of television drama series in using the social norms to instil an ideal behaviour of members

of the extended family. The proposed study will use a model of interrelationship between the extended family life and gender and stereo-type roles in the society; in the society we have the conservatists who are normally affected by their gender and the culture which shapes their masculinity and femininity. Conservatists give rights to stereotypes and gender issues which in turn shape the masculinity and femininity of the members of the extended family. TV drama series therefore is influenced by the stereotype roles played by members of the society, as is illustrated by Fig 1. The television drama series programmes have concentrated on interpersonal relationships in extended family life. They provide the narrative dynamic and emotional interest. The actors in the programmes normally take the roles of the mothers-in-law, the fathers-in-law, the sons and the sisters in the extended family. The main character shapes the outcome of the roles of each member within the extended family. The *Mother-in-Law* programme has coined the inter-relationship within the extended family into realism of what happens in the African society setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study sets out to explore Masculinity and Femininity manifestations in extended African family life. Field survey will be conducted from in the estates within Eldoret Municipality of Uasin Gishu County of the Republic of Kenya. The location is described by the 2009 National population census as a cosmopolitan urban centre with a population of ... people (Kenya Bureau of Statistics, 2009). The study will target households that have TV sets from the population of households in 17 major estates found in Eldoret municipality. These estates include Huruma, Mwanzo, Kamukunji, Kipkaren, West Indies, Kidiwa, Kapsuswa, Langas, Elgon view, Kapsoya, Munyaka, Action, Hawaii, Railways, Maili Nne, Kimumu and Pioneer. The number of households in each of the named estates will be enumerated from the 2009 National population census counts of all housing units in Eldoret municipality. Samples of the housing units will be selected from the sample clusters chosen on the basis of estates in Eldoret Municipality. To sample members of the cast, simple random sampling will be used. Each member of the cast will be given a number. Random numbers will then be computer generated and used to select the required sample of the cast. Data analysis will be done with the help of SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys. With this approach, the data analysis will take the five main steps as suggested by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). The five steps are familiarization, identification of a thematic framework, indexing, charting/mapping, and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Culture and Television

Radio, television, film and other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless...media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and its deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil (Kellner, 2004). As a culture icon, the television drama series and its representations express the dynamics of power in society. Changes in the portrayal of minority groups, and the era of political

correctness have shaped the way cultural institutions, like the sitcom, can represent them. At its best, political correctness may be understood as the effort to respect each politically constructed identity, culture and lifestyle on its own terms; by protecting constructed identities, society limits what elements may be used for ridicule and satire (Weitz, 2003).

The content of the television drama series has always pushed the limits of what is culturally acceptable and what is not. Though the genre is still commercially driven, the sitcom has done much to challenge and dissolve old boundaries by laughing at their existence; the power of the heterosexual male in society has remained unchanged for decades, as has the portrayal of such characters as buffoons and boors (Robinson, 2000). Is the lead heterosexual male character in the sitcom a manifestation of what the society desires and diffusion of some of social unrest or are they so established in the hierarchy of social power that ridicule of any kind will not hinder their existence? Exposing the use of heterosexual male characters in popular sitcoms will display what position this cultural institution fulfils in society (Perry, 2001). By comparing their portrayal to the other characters in the show, an established methodology for the use of these character types will be demonstrated. If this comparison reveals little to no change from the historical portrayal of the group, it can be concluded that the powers of political correctness do not alter the relationship of the straight male in society. The face of television has been revolutionized by changes in society; the absence of change in any area denotes the existence of established social and cultural institutions.

Masculinity and femininity in sports

In a study to address male and female responses to televised football, results demonstrated how some women respond to stereotypical, subservient roles, as manifest in media content geared to male audiences. Importantly, female participants in the study sought to empower themselves through the sports text, using irony and sarcasm and displaying limited interest in the game to refute dominant (patriarchal) readings of the text (Young, 2002). Extending that collective response to an informal group situation, one can imagine a social setting in which sarcastic remarks about the players, teams and so forth, might detract from enjoyment, as the remarks, depending on their content, stand to be a source of social discomfort and a distraction from the game itself. Sarcasm, after all, can be quite hostile, and although certain remarks might be a source of empowerment, they surely are not to be confused with enjoyment; for here, they illustrate different readings of the sports text, and how such differences might impact a given milieu (Messner, 2003).

In sport, broadcasters have tended to describe African American athletes as naturally gifted and blessed with quickness and agility, while portraying White athletes as intelligent team players whose extraordinary work ethic and leadership skills have allowed them to overcome the odds and reach the elite ranks. Such constructions work against African American athletes by trivializing the considerable amount of practice they, like everyone else, had to complete to even approach the elite ranks. Moreover, such constructions characterize African American athletes as dependent on physical skills to offset the purported intelligence and poise of

White athletes. Related to the stereotype about intelligence explained, is the notion that African Americans do not make good team leaders, coaches or administrators because they lack requisite knowledge possessed by European-Americans (Giles, 2003). These media constructions inform the present thesis in several ways. In a homogenous social group consisting of, say, five White males, enjoyment of a televised football contest, per se, will stem largely from what happens on the field, especially on what happens to the team the audience members favour. When the team is successful (media content), the audience members share common ideals and experiences (hegemonic masculinity), and are in a setting where they can express their views without reservation (homogenous social group); enjoyment will likely reach its highest point. In a homogenous social group consisting of five African American males, enjoyment may stem not only from what happens on the field, but from what happens in terms of how African American athletes are portrayed as African Americans and whether these portrayals do justice to the success these athletes have earned, not happened upon. For instance, how the media often accommodates likeable African American athletes, such as Jordan, and in so doing, construct African American athletes as somewhat childlike, calling them by their first names and diminishing their status as adults competing in professional sports. Clearly, such constructions stand to be interpreted in different ways by different audience members in diverse situations; while White sports audiences may be oblivious to such constructions, Black audience members might find them condescending and offensive (Trujillo, 2001).

Different readings of the text often become apparent in heterogeneous audiences, especially when a conflict arises. As an example, with race considered the central axis of social relations and drawing on social identity theory, if an African American athlete and a White athlete are involved in a shoving incident and the African American athlete is ejected from the contest, African American viewers might take issue with the fact that the White athlete was allowed to continue playing, while White viewers may conclude that the African American athlete was simply causing trouble and acted out based on a (stereotypical) proclivity for deviance (Spry, 2001). In a heterogeneous viewing milieu, after all of this has played out on a large-screen television, no one in the room may speak a word about it, but a certain tension may enter and remain there. Subsequent laughter becomes nervous laughter, and enjoyment becomes feigned enjoyment, all based on different readings of the text.

Culture and TV drama series

Historically, images of predominately marginalized ethnic, social and racial groups have been ridiculed, mocked and berated for the benefit of comedy. Every thinkable minority was the object of middle-class White ridicule at some point in history. Asians were ridiculed for their slanted eyes. Jewish people were seen as miserly with large noses. Women characters were depicted as non-intellectual airheads and the Irish as drunk and clumsy (Thomas, 2008). These representations, although demeaning to the group they symbolized, were traded as comical commodities for centuries. Admittedly, the representations of yesteryear are quite appalling to the current society, but those representations

were a product of the beliefs, comprehension and power structure(s) within society at that time. As the social infrastructure has changed, so too have the elements of comedy. Change in the social power structure has ushered in an era of strict political correctness (Rubin, 2002).

***Mother-in-Law* and TV Drama Issues in Kenya**

Masculinity and femininity are the social dimensions which shape the roles played by women and men in the society (Raney and Bryant, 2002). While feminist thinking permits cultural studies, not all forms of feminism are to be thought of as cultural values. In general, feminism asserts that sex is fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization which, to date, has subordinated women to men. Thus, feminism is centrally concerned with sex, an organizing principle of social life and one that is thoroughly circulated with power relations. Feminists have argued that the subordination of women occurs across the whole range of social institutions and practices, that is, subjection of women is understood to be a structural condition (Raney and Bryant, 2002). Television drama series have a long running series which have potentially unlimited time period to tell their stories and have no sense of closure to be found in the feature film. Most of the Television drama series establish a sense of geographical space that the audience can identify with and to which the characters return again and again. Television drama series utilizes the conventions of both realism and melodrama. Indeed, they can be differentiated from each other in terms of the balance they strike between these conventions (Burton, 2000). Realism refers to a set of conventions by which drama appears to be a representation of the real world with motivates characters' recognizable locations and believable social problems. In contrast, the melodrama is constituted through a heightened sense of the dramatic with a focus on emotions and life's torments. Here, the characters have insufficient motivation from realist point of view (Rubin, 2002). Reinforced by the same elevated acting style, dramatic music and lingering close-up shots, the story line contains a variety of twists and tones that stretch the credibility of realist narrative.

In studying media enjoyment and communication in television drama series, scholars have assumed a measurable, internally valid relationship between programme content and viewer response (Freadman, 2001). The television drama series which concentrate with the themes of interpersonal relationships, such as marriages, divorces, break-ups, new alliances, arguments, acts of revenge and acts of caring lie at the core of the TV programmes. They provide the narrative dynamic and emotional interest. Given the stress in television drama series on the personal sphere, it is understandable that the family forms the mythic centre of the television drama series. The imaginary ideal of the family is constantly shattered by the arguments, affairs, type of food cooked and the mode of dress of the actors in the *Mother-in-Law* programme. The features named above are the makers of the *Mother-in-Law* programme. The TV programmes in Kenya have undergone tremendous improvement in the last few years as a result of competition of the media houses. The most common programmes include *Makutano Junction*, *Mother-in-Law*, *Tahidi High*, *Vitimbi*, *Inspecta Mwala*, *Vioja Mahakami*, *Beba Beba* and *Waridi*. *Makutano Junction* is a TV drama series which documents life in a typical Kenyan sub-urban

community. The subject of love, relationships and conflict within the family and the society is the main stuff of the show, as well as intrigues that make fascinating television drama series. Events of everyday life are told in entertaining ways using artful storytelling, suspense and video images that resonate with the common life and living. In this programme, there are two women who gossip at the market place, those who work hard in their small businesses so as to fend off their family, there are adulterous ones who wreck havoc in families and the cunning who always want their way.

Vitimbi programme is one of the oldest fun clubs across the country. The main characters are Mama Kayai and Mzee Ojwang, who have really had the most amazing of the runs. Their show literally mothered the new shows on TV and testaments. *Inspecta Mwala*, a Citizen TV programme, is a household name in Kenya. It features *Inspecta Mwala* in a most comical account at Corner Mbaya police station. The vertically challenged Mwala has the task of uncovering the motives of thieves and his most unusual lieutenants. *Vioja Mahakani* on the other hand has undeniably the funniest stuff. This is one of the franchise series that KBC Channel One delivers. It is a comedy about different cases tried in court rooms where the proceedings go awry. The *Mother-in-Law* programme is one of those shows that are watched by close to five million people in East Africa. It provides a good insight into the complexity of an extended African family life where the mother-in-law still feels that the sons are young kids to be taken care of, even though they are married. She wants them to take the same type of food they were taking, the daughters-in-law to dress decently and assume the roles of "African" women. She also wants the same lifestyle extended to the grand children. She does not want the daughters-in-law to domineer her sons, although she dominates her husband. The daughter-in-law and wife to the first son, Alison, is the role model of a patient and diplomatic one. Her husband Jack is a successful and ambitious businessman. He has one weakness though; he listens to her mother's advice although he does not always act as per her requirements. On the other hand, the other son Charles is a drunkard and an under-achiever. He is the proverbial black sheep of the family. The sisters Anglier and Tina are examples of feminine perception, a sight for sore eyes.

Contribution of TV drama series on culture and society

Both the cultural and social media sphere exists within one another. For example in this study the cultural context is the United States and the social media sphere is today's current standards (Sabo, 2000). The cultural and social media spheres are co-dependent upon one another. Changes in either the society or the culture cause change in the other. The infrastructure for both media spheres is based on power. When power shifts from one organization to another, standards are adjusted. Such power shifts are manifested in occurrences like the civil right movements, the feminist movement, social unrest, etc. Power shifts cause a revision in the social status of any one group and thus change what is both culturally and socially acceptable (Berg, 2001). The cultural and social media spheres have an enormous impact on television content. By nature the television industry uses canned representations of social groups in its content (Milkie, 2002). These representations are highly recognized commodities in both the

genre and society. All representations, whether they are an advertisement, television program, or movie, coexist with one another and within a society. For example, if you were to see an image of a 'dumb blonde', that image exist in a society where it is understood, accepted, and coupled with other similar images, thus making it believable. The representation of individual groups and classes changes when the society changes. When societal status increases, the types of representations depicted by the media of certain ethnic, religious, gender, and sexuality groups also changes. Media outlets put the American psyche on display (Griffiths, 2003).

WAY FORWARD

The proposed study will help the stakeholders of both print and electronic media to produce programmes which will shape the society in different ways. The programme producers of local TV programmes will use the findings of the study to produce TV programmes which incorporate the social dimensions of the extended family and other social activities to enhance co-existence of the members of the society. The information from the study is also expected to help the ministry of information and communication technology to provide guidelines governing media houses and programme producers on the specific social themes which should be captured in all programmes to enhance maintenance and development of social welfare vis-a-vis economic development of the society. It also seeks to generate knowledge base for scholars to develop programmes which will enable the society to appreciate its culture and embrace the positive cultural values through watching the TV programmes in an environment which produces value to the whole society.

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