

## Representation of Women's Role in Iranian TV Series

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**Abstract:** The concept of representation has a central aspect in media studies. This concept is closely related to the efforts, which are done to draw reality. Considering the importance of women in the family institution in Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the important tasks of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is strengthening the women status and improving the levels of community mental health for women. Three decades after the political revolution of 1978, the figure of the woman remains a pivotal point in the Iranian public discourse.

This article endeavors to unravel the dominant gender ideology of Iranian television by decoding one of its popular T.V series. It argues that this T.V series represents Iranian women as 'otherization' of the Western women. Furthermore, it argues that the hegemonic aspect of this T.V series has been able to win the trust of many Iranian viewers. It is theoretically based on the 'theory of discourse' developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The methodologies which have been applied in this study include textual analysis and in-depth interview. In this article the role of women in the most Iranian popular family series of television (Coma with 84/2 percent of viewers) has been evaluated by using content analysis techniques during the first six months of the year 2007.

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### 1. Introduction

Traditional/modern representation of Iranian women is one the idiosyncrasies of Iranian society: they have been represented as traditionally Islamic women who are also able to meet the modern social demands. This article makes an attempt to unravel these contradictory elements –such as liberty/motherhood, and to reveal their interactions. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, body image is a rich source of social and cultural signification of the meaning of being human, always gendered always contested. In the words of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock one needs to approach the body "as simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact". From this stance, the imposition of compulsory hejab on the body of women speaks volumes to developmental and psychological processes of articulating the contour of the feminine body (Norenee, 1977).

Television is an ideological state apparatus. Its programs are cultural efforts to disseminate a dominant cultural ideology. In this regard, T.V series are efficient tools to 'interpellate' the audiences within a social, political and cultural ideology. Since they deal with social and family relations, they have ample opportunities to address a large audience. The audience does not usually deem these programs as

complete narrations and start to identify with their characters (Pazarzi, &Tsangaris, 2008).

In Iran, T.V series has been a key tool in the representation of the traditional/modern Iranian women's identity; therefore, their decoding (textual analysis) can reveal the dominant representation of Iranian women.

This article pursues two aims: first, to reveal the representation of Iranian women in Iranian popular T.V series; second, to analyse the audiences' interpretations of this representation.

### 2. Methodology

Two methods have been drawn upon in this research: 'textual analyses', and 'encoding/ decoding method. We have used 'textual analyses in order to reveal the representation of Iranian woman in Iranian TV series, and 'encoding/ decoding method' to analyze the audiences' decoding and their reactions to the representation of Iranian woman in Iranian TV series.

Through the use of 'encoding/decoding method' this article makes an attempt to analyze the discourses which have constituted the audiences' decoding of the content of these T.V series. On the other hand, by combining Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Hall's 'encoding and decoding', it endeavors to reveal the constructive discourses of

these T.V series. Accordingly, this article argues that the producers of these T.V series encode messages which are constituted by the discursive practices of the dominant ideology regarding the representation of Iranian women (Pazarzi, & Tsangaris, 2008).

One of the most popular Iranian T.V Series in 2007 was called "Coma". This T.V series has been selected as a representative case study. The focus group whose reactions to this program have been analyzed is a group of Iranian viewers who represent the more educated class of the society.

### 3. Theoretical Bases

According to Laclau and Mouffe all social phenomena are discursive in that every phenomenon will be devoid of meaning unless it is ascribed to a discourse. Accordingly, a discourse is understood as the fixation of meaning within a particular domain. All signs in a discourse are 'moments'. Therefore, a discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points. Both Stuart Hall's theory of representation, based on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory emphasize the prominent role of mass media in the construction of the dominant ideology. Hall (1975, 1980) argues that mass media, especially television, plays a special role in the buttressing of the dominant ideology due to its popular use of language and allegation as being the representative of the majority (Hall, S. 2003).

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2002), T.V Series are a type discourse. They are a total structure; they include entities which have been ascribed with fixed identities and meanings. Through this type of representation they endeavor to express the universality of their meanings. Like discourse, they make an attempt to persuade the audiences to accept a dominant ideology as natural and to provide power with legitimacy. However, the audiences may resist it since they have been surrounded by other discourses as well (Creswell, 2007).

#### Iranian T.V Series Analyses

Iranian T.V series called "Coma" was broadcasted in 28 episodes in 2007. The story of this T.V series is based on dissemination of gender ideology with a series of binary opposition. As follows; four cinematic moments have been selected to further illustrate the concepts represented in "Coma" T.V series:

#### The reduction of the body to the facial

One of the most noticeable physical features of people in "Coma" was their face. For women in Islamic Republic, the details of their facial anatomy and design have become a public obsession. Tehran,

the mega-capital city of the country is reportedly the number one urban space in global statistics of cosmetic Rhinoplasty. Once prohibited by cultural norms – or today's young people in Tehran openly speak about their own cosmetic facial surgeries and proudly name their city as the number one capital of nose job. In T.V, finding an "un-adulterated" face, as it is often referred to by the filmmaker, is an increasingly difficult task. Only in recent decade, the independent filmmakers with considerable social and intellectual clout such as Beyzai, Kiarostami, Panahi, and Hatami-Kia have made a concerted effort to casting the "natural" face. The usual explanation given by the directors for their selectiveness is to overcome the futility of cosmetic trends in their pursuit for an authentic representation of life in Iran. Bahram Beyzai, an outspoken pro-feminist filmmaker of close to forty years, whose theatrical professional repertoire is no less impressive than his extensive cinematic productions, often uses his real life wife, Mojdeh Shamsai to play the prime role (Barker, 2003).

Caught between two extreme models of beauty, the Iranian woman perceives her body to be first reduced to the shape and proportions of her face, and second is taught to choose either a Western ideal of beauty that deems her own facial characteristics as less than desirable, or to react by adopting a moralistic rhetoric to justify her non-participation in the trend. As such, she ceases to be impartial or confident about her body.

#### Frail grannies, fragile finches

In a societal setting that is obsessed with the feminine body, either in its governmental systematic effort to cover and control the female body, or the reactive indulgence in cosmetic alterations to the body by women (young and mature) the vast majority of women become invisible. What remains visible is an oppositional set of profiles built on the idea of the woman as an embodiment of the heterosexual man's desire. In simpler words, women are either sexually available thus desirable by men (the girlfriend, the wife) or they remain outside the realm of sexuality (the familiar and the familial such as the mother, the sister, and the grandma). In the past decade or so, a popular slang term about the body of the desired woman has emerged in Iran's oral culture, which is popular among men and women alike. Named after a very small-bodied bird that resembles a less mature embodiment yet with better singing qualities and in a more colorful version of the otherwise common sparrow, *The Finch* became the term to identify feminine beauty. The ideal girlfriend is a Finch whose beauty rests in her petite (read fragile) body and colorful entertaining behavior (Derrida, 1979).

### The profiling of the female voice

Another subtle extension of the body image in “Coma” T.V series comes through the profiling of the female voice. The State Television and Radio programs have severely caricatured the voice of the woman into a handful of stereotypical categories. The women on these programs are profiled both in their physical appearances (their body shapes, size, clothes and make up) as well as their aural representations. The vocal expression of the woman on the radio where the voice matters most- is primarily limited to one of the two profiles: that of a depleted pious auditory of a saintly grandmother or else the forcefully paced and overly enunciated voice of a religious poetess (Dines & Humez, 1994).

On television and popular cinema, however, the possibilities for the woman’s voice expands to include even more exaggerated forms ranging from, faux infantile speech often with a fake lisp and high pitched tones, to the shrill and angry piercings of a nagging wife. These extreme models of feminine vocal articulations are frequently adopted by young women and are greatly accepted and strongly popular in Iran. Most notably is the popularization of these oral castings through cartoon characters that reach a considerable span of popularity on television before they are adopted into a full feature film. As a result, one will hear millions of young adults (boys and girls, although by far more females are expected to play this game) imitating the voice over for puppet characters such as the infamous Kolah Ghermezi, when relating to friends and or lovers.

While the practice of trend-seeking and oral and bodily imitation is neither unique nor new to Iranian women (e.g. Japanese hyper model of femininity, or the Hannah Montana effect in the USA) it does, however, set the foundation for heterosexual and overly exaggerated femininity that re-emphasizes misogynistic view of women (Gledhill, 1988).

### The “real” beauty: weaving through theory and the concrete

In his re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan distinguishes between the “imaginary order” and the “symbolic”, so that the imaginary is chaotic and disorderly while the symbolic representation illustrates thought and careful organizational techniques at work (1968). Lacan offers this distinction in order to locate the way we experience reality. His conclusion is that “the real” sits somewhere in between the symbolic order (i.e. society) and the imaginary representation of it. Much of the International success of the Iranian new-wave cinema in the past decade, I believe, is due to achieving an alternative order of reality about life in

Iran that oscillates between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real representation of life. As such, this movement back and forth between poles of exaggerated imageries and contested sensibilities has revolutionized cinematic productions in Iran. More relevant to the scope of this paper, however, it has expanded the range of possibilities for human existence, especially with respect to the woman’s body in a politically heightened time. (Laclau & Moufee, 1985).

The body of the woman in “Coma” T.V series, on the one hand, is at the foreground of domestic gender moralities, and on the other hand, it provokes fierce International politics that projects Iran as the least rational and most violent tyrannical “other” to the whole of the Western civilization (e.g. American democracy, women’s liberation, social justice, etc.).

Body tattoos, un-supervised extreme diet regimes, cosmetic surgeries, mass consumptions of un-regulated diet pills and thinning creams, are among a few widely available and dangerously popular practices that women subject themselves to in order to obtain the perfect body. The normative conception of beauty is far from being heterogeneous or at least free of overtly “racialized” imagining. However, as the idealized image of the body and hetero-sexually normative figure of a beautiful woman stretches beyond geo-political and socio-economical boundaries, the role of visual production in its casting of female models and roles becomes more potent- symbolically and politically. In this light, the evolving cinematic body of work that has dominated the independent production in Iran and about Iran plays an important role in challenging hegemonic super-imposed standards of femininity and beauty (Van Dijk, 1993).

### 4. Conclusion and Discussions

According to the ideological function of mass-media, what which is of great concern for the encoders of T.V series are positive and negative roles of women. The features of women with positive roles are: covered, academically educated and satisfied with the role of being a mother and housewife. They are working women with religious and traditional inclination, and have a great respect for their husbands and are dependent on them. On the contrary, women with negative roles have the following features: first, they are alienated in that they are not able to make a good relation with people around them (who have been trapped in the contradiction between modern and traditional); second, they are against the traditional roles of women in Iranian society: they are against patriarchy and as a result are rejected by society and family. The polarization made in this T.V series serves the dominant discourse of ‘*otherization*’.

The context has two poles: a positive pole (women in traditional role) that represents us and a negative pole (intellectual woman) representing them or 'others'.

This T.V series implicitly wants to separate the education and employment from modern women's specifications and to articulate them as discursive practices that constitute traditional- religious women's identity. Thus legitimate women are educated, religious, employed, obedient, moral, and pliant to their roles as mothers. The dominant discourse of this series creates a nodal point around which signs such as veil, values, tradition, loyalty, motherhood, education and economic independence (which is borrowed from a Western discourse) are fastened to each other to create a dominant representation which strike cords with the majority of audiences.

Results of in-depth interviews show that seven viewers out of seventeen have decoded this series under the influence of the dominant ideology. These viewers had great religious tendencies with a fairly low level intellectuality. They confirmed the series' figurative space as an ideal one and the women in it as perfect women.

Confirming the cultural/social messages of the series including loyalty to the family institution, motherhood, deeming the representation of contemporary women and men in Iran as natural is the feature of this group of viewers.

Adjusted and operated (compromised) decoding belongs to second group of the viewers that have a medium level of intellectuality and religious tendencies. Although this group including four viewers accepted the gender roles constituted in the series as natural, they argued that the motherhood should be the main role of women; however, they believed that this role was not at loggerheads with the economic independence and employment of women. Moreover, they criticized the producers of this series for their lack of technical mastery.

The third group included six viewers who decoded the series oppositely. The level of their religious tendencies was low, but their level of intellectuality was medium and high. They were aware of the ideas which had been promulgated by the series and argued that these kinds of series were watched by a special group of Iranian society who are generally benefiting from them. They opposed the religious and traditional bigotry and reacted negatively to the dominant moral advice of it. They criticized its producers for their efforts to introduce and represent Iranian women as adhering to patriarchal view points. Therefore, they translated the

important contextual elements so oppositely that they deconstructed the dominant ideology hidden inside it.

The results of in-depth interviews revealed that among the important variables including social /cultural base and religious beliefs which formed the audiences' interpretations, the former one was the most effective variable. Although entering university can be an opportunity for viewers to be exposed to a vast area of information and other discursive practices which can result in fundamental changes in their behaviors and viewpoints, religion still has the main role in the constitution of their mentalities.

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