

Gender Stereotypes in Turkish Soap Operas

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the effect of soap operas on the construction and continuation of gender stereotypical images of woman. To this aim, a general framework of gender stereotypes and their relation with mass media is drawn and in the following part, two famous series on Turkish TV channels is analyzed in terms of gender stereotypical roles of the female characters in these series.*

Key words – Gender; Gender Stereotypes; Media; Turkish Soap Operas; Gender Stereotypes in Soap Operas

I. Introduction

Gender and the practises that are driven by gender have been an area of debate for long. The core issue of these debates is the socially stereotyped differences between men and women. The term gender refers to the socially constructed identities of men and women rather than the biological ones and gender studies concentrate on the discriminative attitudes towards women that are arising from these stereotypical understandings of the female.

Dating back to the Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" [1], feminist writers have been working hard to combat with the challenges of the discriminative practises against woman. Not only these writers, but also policy makers, NGOs, several institutions and individuals have also concentrated on figuring out the ways of eliminating these negative practises in societies worldwide. Despite the rapidly changing world, the concepts of gender stereotypes secure their place in everyday lives of the individuals through several different ways. One of the most influential of them is mass media which has a generally accepted effect on not only individuals' but also societies' perceptions and practices of life.

This study investigates the impact of media on the construction and continuance of gender biased identities of women in the society. With this idea in mind, two different soap operas of Turkish TV channels are analyzed in terms of gender stereotypes.

II. Gender and Gender Stereotypes

Gender is basically the term used for the social aspect of being a man or a woman. That is to say, sex refers to the biological differences between males and females whereas gender refers to the social ones. These differences are outcomes of the centuries long traditions one of which is the patriarchal characteristics of most societies. Patriarchy shapes the society in such a way that there exists firmly clinged beliefs of the appropriate attitudes, places, careers etc. for men and women. All of these in total are known as the gender stereotypes which are the other term for the generally accepted notions of males and females. Stereotypes are described "as a

particular subset of social reality beliefs: they are understandings about particular social groups that we have learned from our social world." [5] They "are not simply labels, but are assumptions about traits and behaviors that people in the labeled categories are thought to possess." [3] As a kind of stereotype, gender stereotypes are labeling men and women in certain ways that rely on the traditional beliefs.

"Commonsense beliefs about men and women are not arbitrary." [2] Cultural norms are hidden in the very essence of these gender stereotypical point of views not only in Turkey but also worldwide. Wollstonecraft claims that "the laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex" [1, p. 8] However, in societal realm, gender goes beyond characteristics in so many ways. This result from the commonbeliefs of gender among people.

Beliefs resulting from the masculine hierarchy is felt deeply in so many social institutions ranging from politics to family. "They are the consequences of patriarchal values being learned by each succeeding generation as a result of men being in positions of power and influence in all human societies." [2] Women have always been restricted in climbing the ladder of masculine hierarchy. As a result, men have been the leading figures in most decision making points which in turn paves the way into a male hegemony in social, political and economic life. The dominance of men is a vital point in the firming of gender biased understandings of the individuals in a society. These notions penetrates into the everyday lives of human beings via several ways including the TV screens. From now on, the study will delve into the gendered depictions of woman in mass media; especially in soap operas.

III. Media's Role in Constructing Gender Stereotypes

Media's role in narrating daily life alternatives is an undeniably important one. Media is guiding the lives and ideas of most people. Common beliefs relating to gender is one forerunning point in this long list. As it was noted earlier, "one common theme that can be found in traditional commonsense beliefs about the nature of women's and men's characteristics is that they stem from the societal roles the two sexes occupy." [2] If society is the biological mother of these beliefs, then media can be named as the caring mother of them since media perpetuates the gender stereotypes with all its energy in an analogy with a mother's breeding her child to help his/her grow up.

"Stereotypes contain an evaluation that justifies social differences." [4] They act as the convincing point for the audience in deciding what is right or wrong for an "ideal" man and woman. With all its products media stands as a vital power in conveying the images of these figures. As a communication strategy, media chooses to affect the society via the traditionally accepted roles of the two sexes. That's to say, gender-oriented conceptions of the society is reflected in mass media and in turn, the life styles in media are reflected in individuals' daily lives. One of the most recurrent example of this fact is the

repetitive depiction of women as housewives or as fulfilling domestic duties dominates mass media, the reason behind which is that “women are seen as more caring and nurturant because they are the ones who bear and suckle infants.” [2] In contrast with this, men’s role is seen as protectors and providers for wives and children since they are not the ones who give birth to children. [2]

Mass media has a long list of vehicles. TV is the one that targets the largest audience and the easiest for people to reach. Thus, TVs are so influential on shaping individuals’ ideas on many issues including gender stereotypes. TV channels promote the traditional stereotypes of males and females via several of its elements one of which is soap opera. The point of departure of this study is to investigate the gendered depictions of women on TV soap operas in the example of Turkish ones since how Turkish femininity and masculinity is understood is clear in soap operas.

IV. Gender Stereotypes in Turkish Soap Operas

“Gender-stereotypic beliefs serve both descriptive and prescriptive functions: they inform us about what women and men are *like* and also lay ground rules for how men and women *should be*.” [3] As it is noted above, gender based depictions of men and women in soap operas is at the core of this study. The way these ideals are portrayed in two soap operas which are the productions of 2016 and are still on TV will be discussed throughout this part of the paper. The analysis of these two media products seeks to determine the marks of women’s gender biased roles in soap operas.

The soap operas chosen are “Eşkiya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz”(The Brigand Don’t Rule the World) and “Hayat Şarkısı”(The Song of Life). Before delving deep into the gendered depictions of the female characters of these series, it should be useful to summarize them briefly. For the sake of practicality, “The Brigand Don’t Rule the World” is referred as S1 and “The Song of Life” is referred as S2 in the following part of the paper.

Scenarios of both soap operas are revolving around a large family that have strong bonds among its members. S1 is a story of brigand who is father of two, wife of a passionate woman, son of an authoritarian mother and lover of young, beautiful architect. His name is Hızır Çakırbeyli. His wife’s name is Meryem and his lover’s name is Nazlı. He has a harsh working life in the middle of mafia connections and at the same time he has been the leader of his large family since his father’s death who was a strong figure, too. Besides work life, his private life shifts into a turmoil too since he learns that his lover Nazlı is expecting a baby and the other members of his family hears of this truth one by one. He wants this baby but at the same time he wants to continue his marriage with Meryem. Moreover, all members of his family is of one mind with him except Meryem and his children.

S2 is again a story of a large family of a rich man with his two sons, two daughter-in-laws, his wife and his illegitimate daughter from his ex-lover. His name is Mehmet Cevher and he is a famous merchant leading a

luxurious life in a huge house with his all family members. The scenario has several sub-subjects related to characteristics and background the figures. However, this study focuses on the gender portrayals of the main female characters of the soap opera who are listed as Mehmet Cevher’s wife Süheyla, his daughter-in- laws Zeynep and Hülya. Zeynep is his elder son, Hüseyin’s wife and Hülya is his younger son, Kerim’s wife. Both Kerim and Hüseyin gets married with the girl of their father’s choice. Hüseyin has a daughter from Zeynep but he doesn’t love his wife; he falls in love with another woman. Kerim also doesn’t want to accept Hülya as his wife but he falls in love with her in time. Kerim and Hülya adopts Mehmet as their son who is Kerim’s son from his former relationship with a girl called Filiz.

As it was noted earlier, these soap operas are full of intrinsic events of each of the characters but this paper aims to put the gender stereotypical depictions of the main female characters in both productions.

Meryem of S1 is depicted as a very feminine figure with her neat dresses, hair and make up. However, with the jackets that she always has on her shoulders, the image implying that she is at the same time bearing masculine traits is given to the audience. She is a loyal wife to her husband and an obedient daughter-in-law to her husband’s family. She is an affectionate and caring mother at the same time. She is in love with her husband, too. Her life comes upside down the time she learns about her husband’s relationship with another woman, Nazlı. Moreover, she was shocked with the news that Nazlı is pregnant. She tries hard to challenge with this woman and her husband to put an end to this relationship and prevent the birth of the baby but she couldn’t be successful.

The scenario is acted in such a way that the audience are guided to feel pity for not Meryem but Nazlı, the lover since Meryem can sometimes be harsh againsts her in order to free her husband from Nazlı’s influence. However, Nazlı is depicted as an innocent young girl who unfortunately falls in love with a married man. These two women are depicted as having only two points in common; their love for Hızır and their motherly instincts.

The gendered portrayal of these two women are very live at several points such as having so strong feelings towards the well being of their children that they go through fire and water for their child/children. Another gender stereotype that is dominant in this soap opera is clear at the expectations of Hızır’s family of Meryem. They expect her to manage with the experience of betrayal and to continue her marriage with her husband as if nothing abnormal have happened. They try to suppress her rather than Hızır in order to push her to go on living with them as their daughter-in-law and Hızır’s wife. Moreover, the family members meet with Nazlı and they continue their relationship with her before and after the birth of the baby. Interestingly enough, things could be reverse in such a traditional society as Turkey if this affair were Meryem’s not Hızır’s since woman are expected to be loyal and true to their husbands all through their lives. If they have a fault in this, they have to face so many

difficulties not only with their families but also with the people of their social life.

In addition to these, there exists a point that contradicts with gender discourses on the pressure on women about being slim, neat and beautiful at all times in order to prevent their husband's leaving them. In this case, Meryem is a beautiful, always neat and slim woman. However, her husband still cheats her with another woman and he is eager to continue his relationship with both of the two women.

Süheyla of S2 is portrayed as an affectionate mother and loyal wife all through the soap opera. Her life revolves around her family and her only aim is to make them happy and keep them together forever. However, one day she suddenly faces the reality that her husband has a daughter with his ex-mistress. After a short phase of shock and a period of quarrels with her husband, she decides to come around to this situation and accepts the daughter of her husband, Bade to live with them at the same house. From that time on, she behaves Bade as if she was her own daughter. Bade's mother doesn't want to take care of her and leaves her to live with her new family then. Süheyla's husband, Mehmet tries to normalize this situation and make family go on living all together as in they did in the past. Neither Süheyla's sons, nor Süheyla herself dare divorce but they all agree on the continuance of the family despite the betrayal.

One more female figure, Zeynep, the wife of Hüseyin, their elder son is also cheated by her husband which is an issue that is known by all the family members. They don't have the perfect kind of relationship neither there is a big love between them but they have a daughter and they go on as a married couple but one day Hüseyin meets another woman and their marriage changes from that time on. Not only Zeynep but also the other members of the family know about this affair but the result doesn't change for Zeynep; just like her mother-in-law she is supported not to leave her husband and wait for his getting tired of this affair. Similar to Meryem and Nazlı's case, Zeynep is portrayed as the harsh and problematic one in this relationship whereas Hüseyin's mistress is depicted as very submissive and innocent. She is to be pitied since she could do nothing but fell in love with a married man who is a father at the same time.

Conclusion

The starting point of this study is searching for the impact of gendered images in media products especially in soap operas in Turkey. The soap operas analyzed revealed that in both of them women are expected to obey the patriarchal authority and to fight against any kind of threat to their family including betrayal even if the betrayals' result in their husband's having a baby with another woman. Moreover, they are to balance this struggle for their family in such a way that they shouldn't seem very harsh in the eyes of others.

One more gender stereotypical image of women is their role in the continuance of a family especially for the sake of their children. In both cases, the people surrounding them push them to forgive their husbands and not to think about divorce.

Additionally, in both examples the mother figures are so affectionate towards not only their own children but also the child of their husband with another woman. Even in such extreme cases, motherhood goes beyond other feelings.

Lastly, the conclusions of this story demonstrate that the gender stereotypical depictions of women are recurrent in these two soap operas. Gender intertwined with daily life issues is embedded into the scenarios of these two works which is a proof of the continuance of traditionally accused roles of women in Turkish society. In the light of this paper, further research on soap operas and their impacts on the conveying of gender stereotypical understandings of men and women may be conducted in the future.

References

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