Television and gender ideology training in Iran: a case-study of a popular T.V drama in Iran

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Abstract

This article endeavours to unravel the dominant gender ideology of Iranian television by decoding one of its popular T.V dramas. It argues that this T.V drama represents Iranian women as ‘otherization’ of the Western women. Furthermore, it argues that the hegemonic aspect of this T.V drama has been able to win the trust of many Iranian university students. 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. Our focus group is fifteen Iranian students of the University of Guilan.

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1. Introduction

There have been many discussions regarding the social status of Iranian women in recent decades. On one hand, there has been an increase of female educational achievement at all levels, especially higher education; on the other hand, post-revolutionary educational policy has been characterized by gender role attitudes (Mehran, 2003).

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.

Television is an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1973). Its programs are cultural efforts to disseminate a dominant cultural ideology. In this regard, T.V dramas 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 (Fiske, 1994). The audience do not usually deem these programs as complete narrations and start to identify with their characters. In Iran, T.V drama 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.

Critical discourse analysis of Iranian television programs and their role in the dissemination of the dominant socio-political and cultural ideology does not have a long history in Iran. Researches done by Payandeh (2005), Rezaie (2008), Mohammadi (2008) and Ravardrad, Montazerghaem and Sarkarati (2008) are a good example. Following this research, this article pursues two aims: first, to reveal the representation of Iranian women in Iranian popular T.V dramas; second, to analyse the audiences’ interpretations of this representation.

2. The Research Theoretical Approach

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 (Gramsci, 1971), 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.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2002), T.V Dramas 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 endeavour 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.

Stuart Hall (1980) proposes three types of reaction to the discourse of television; they include:

1. **Dominant – hegemonic decoding**: it means the audience decode what exactly program-makers (encoders) have intended.
2. **Adjusted and operated (compromised) decoding**: In this type of decoding, although the audience decode what encoders have intended, they will adjust or operate the codes to some extent.
3. **Oppositional decoding**: In this type, the audience understand the implicit and explicit aspects of the dominant discourse in media; however, they decode the message oppositely and break the integrity of the message (codes) and re-integrate them in their alternative discourse (Storey, 1993, chapter 2).

3. Methodology

Two methods have been drawn upon in this research: ‘textual analysis’ (Hall, 1975), and ‘encoding/decoding method’ (Hall, 1980). We have used ‘textual analyses in order to reveal the representation of Iranian woman in Iranian TV dramas, and ‘encoding/decoding method’ to analyse the audiences’ decoding and their reactions to the representation of Iranian woman in Iranian TV dramas.

Through the use of ‘encoding/decoding method’ this article makes an attempt to analyse the discourses which have constituted the audiences’ decoding of the content of these T.V dramas. On the other hand, by combining Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and Hall’s ‘encoding and decoding’, it endeavour to reveal the constructive discourses of these T.V dramas. Accordingly, this article argues that the producers of these T.V dramas encode messages which are constituted by the discursive practices of the dominant ideology regarding the representation of Iranian women.

One of the most popular Iranian T.V Dramas in 2008 was called “Marge Tadrij-i-e-Yek Roya” (The Gradual Demise of a Dream). This T.V drama has been selected as a representative case study. The focus group whose reactions to this program have been analysed are a group of seventeen Iranian students at the University of Guilan – they represent the more educated class of the society.
4. Discussion and Conclusion

Iranian T.V drama called "Marg Tadriji Yek Roya"[The Gradual Demise of a Dream] was broadcast in 28 episodes in 2008. The story of this T.V drama is based on dissemination of gender ideology with a series of binary opposition including goodness/evil, good/bad nature and especially the opposition of modern/traditional woman, religious/moral, irreligious/immoral woman.

According to the ideological function of mass-media, what which is of great concern for the encoders of this T.V drama is 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 drama serves the dominant discourse of ‘otherization’ (Soltani, 2005, p.240). 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 drama 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 drama 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 students out of seventeen have decoded this drama under the influence of the dominant ideology. These students had great religious tendencies with a fairly low level intellectuality. They confirmed the drama’s figurative space as an ideal one and the women in it as perfect women. Confirming the cultural/social messages of the drama 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 students.

Adjusted and operated (compromised) decoding belongs to second group of the students that have a medium level of intellectuality and religious tendencies. Although this group including four students accepted the gender roles constituted in the drama 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 drama for their lack of technical mastery.

The third group included six students who decoded the drama 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 drama and argued that these kinds of dramas 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 students to be exposed to a vast area of information and other discursive practices which can result in fundamental changes in their behaviours and viewpoints, religion still has the main role in the constitution of their mentalities.

References


**Appendix**

The drama of *Marg Tadriji Yek Roya* [Gradual death of a dream] in 28 episodes broadcasted in the year 1387. A brief description of that drama is as follows: ‘Maral’, the author of a novel by the name of *Gity*, encounters problem in publishing her book. Her novel is published by a publisher, Hamed Yazdanpanah, after great endeavours. After this acquaintance Hamed demands Maral to marry him and Maral accepts. Maral’s sister ,Sanaz, who wants an open- mindedness beyond the traditional life of Iranian women, divorces from her husband to compensate the loss and pain of divorce, Sanaz takes refuge to her friends, Helen, and Pary and her sister. After Maral’s marriage, Sanaz who thinks is alone, tries to convince her that Hamed is a fanatic and traditional man who will obstacle her progress. Meanwhile Maral is invited to London by one of her family friends, Dariush Ariyan, in order to take part in a session to give a speech about her book. Hamed is informed by his friends that it is a political and one-sided society and begins to object with her journey. On the other hand Sanaz and her friends want Maral to live Hamed. Finally Maral separates from Hamed after giving birth to her daughter, Hasty. Hamed's family who are educated, religious, and love the family try to prevent from their separation. Sanaz and Maral who want to arrive to London as soon as possible, go to Turkey to go to London by their brother's friend, Torkan Demir. They give all of their money to him so that Aras, an Iranian young man who is in human trafficking business, prepares fake passports for them, but Torkan Demir escapes after receiving money, and Sanaz dies in an effort to retrieve the money in an accident. Maral who thinks the key to resolving her problem is in the hands of her brother, contacts him, but she finds out that Mehrdad has been a worker in a restaurant in the Sweden for many years and is accused of theft. Hamed who is in the pursuit of Maral and Hasty is informed that the ship Maral and Hasty wants to get on never reaches to any destination and after catching the passengers' money will leave them in the middle of sea. Hamd goes to the port to save them but the ship has just gone. Hamed goes to the ship and saves Maral and Hasty. Maral is hospitalized because she has forgotten everything due to a blow to her head. After her release from hospital, Hamed who still loves her, demands her to marry him again, Maral accepts and returns to Tehran along with Hamed and Hasty.