



Gendered Power in Armenian Soap Operas: Women, Masculinity and Violence

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During the recent years the number of the Armenian soap operas has increased dramatically and despite much criticism, still some 50% of the population continues watching those products. According to communication experts, soap operas reveal openly an anti-social and cynical behavior and their aggressive content has a crucial and dysfunctional impact on the audience. Taking into consideration the fact of popularity of soap operas in Armenia, it becomes obvious that they should have a particular role in forming and constructing gender roles in the Armenian society. The soap operas both reveal and re-shape gender stereotypes. Its images and scenes not only represent social norms but also recreate and popularize them. In the Armenian environment soap operas have become the nation's storyteller since they tell many stories to most of the people most of the time. Soap operas have become distributors of images, characters and also the mainstream of popular culture. In this regard, in Armenia soap-operas have a huge capacity for popularizing certain types of images of masculinity and femininity. However, the feminist analyses of the Armenian media have previously focused mostly on women presentation only. Meanwhile, the dominance of men and representation of masculinity has been ignored in such analyses. Robert Connell states that generally in society of mass communication one of the best ways of understanding which are the characters and images of dominant forms of masculinity is through study of media representations in advertisements, TV shows and popular films. Thus, taking into consideration the facts mentioned above it can be concluded that in the Armenian society one of the best ways to study dominant forms of masculinity is through the analyses of the Armenian soap-operas.

In many societies it has already been established that media influences people's beliefs as well as behaviors and that the violence present in media, normalizes the gendered violence. Researchers in the area believe that the exposure of media violence and aggression contributes to the development of tolerant attitudes, and sometimes even approval, toward violence in actual relationships and everyday life situations. According to Professor Dow, media as a social institution shapes and has the whole potential to re-shape the cognitive structures and paradigms, and this, in turn, serves as a basis for perceiving and evaluating the social reality. In this sense, soap opera,

being part of media, and being circulated over and over nearly every day during the certain periods of time on TV, has the same power and ability to re-construct and re-form the perception of some certain categories revealed in them. Media forms such as, for example, movies, soap operas and advertisements, always influence social norms concerning such categories as gender, since they present some certain paradigms and models of what is feminine and what is masculine, thus automatically presenting ways and means that will make them so.

In the Armenian mass media male's verbal and non-verbal means of violence toward not only each other but also toward women are often considered as part of masculinity. Violent masculinity in our society might be considered a normal and natural rather than an abnormal and unnatural phenomenon. Interestingly, sexuality and love sometimes might also be closely interrelated to violence, even sometimes being necessary part of masculine line. So, masculine standards are often shaped through such categories as brutality, strength, violence, aggression, etc. Even it seems that the standards of the perceived masculinity may be violated if the masculine character gets some other overtones. The presentation of their ugly and violent behavior does not stand for their perception as ugly and violent characters. The protagonist may be violent, hence masculine, sexual and attractive for female figures. And the image of these 'bad boys' seems to be circulated in many soap operas. In this sense there is a danger that soap operas will create a false consciousness, making society members believe that whatever they see it should be within the domain of accepted standards of masculinity.

Women are a subject of many popular ideas, beliefs, and practices. In turn, popular culture 'contributes' to the process of turning biologically sexed beings into symbolically and culturally gendered ones, both male and female, hence, popular culture has the whole potential to create, recreate and reinforce ideas about heterosexual masculinity and sexuality. The category of masculinity and its norm change, and a driving force in that change is media presentation of that category.

Some of the international research results have shown that 95% of abusers are male, whereas 85% of victims are women throughout the world. And it seems very important and urgent

to reduce the violent masculinity from the perspective of women's empowerment. Therefore, within the frames of the current research we tried to find out whether in the Armenian soap-operas violence is regarded as 'pre-supposed' and 'acceptable' part of masculinity and sexuality. Violence is not a natural phenomenon and is not only conditioned by biological factors, as it is sometimes wrongly presented and perceived in society. And since violence is a social construction, and every act of violence has its social context, some sociologists argue that domestic violence is a learned behavior too. And since it is not only through family, school or other social institutions that a social context of learning violence is formed and developed but it is also done via popular culture, therefore, it becomes important to analyze and find out whether violence is perceived and treated as normal and natural part of masculinity and sexuality in our popular culture.

There has been much criticism on soap operas since the latter presents many open scenes full of aggression and violence. Katzman states that soap operas at least suggest, if not dictate, how people should act. They also might legitimize behavior and remove taboos. In other words these mass products do possess the whole potential to construct special gender attitude in society.

One can hardly find a full, complete and detailed research carried out on the issue of masculinity in Armenian soap operas, and the within the frames of the current research we tried to fill that gap and carried out a study on violence as part of masculinity in the framework of men-women relations.

Objectives

Violence may have different forms of manifestation: abuse, sexual harassment and rape, the use of insulting and swearing words, etc. Widely speaking, the concept includes all the genres of both verbal and non-verbal means of aggression and violence. In turn, media violence scenes provide insight into how women and men are gendered. This research aims at finding out how the Armenian soap operas demonstrate violence as part of masculinity. The research also focuses on perception of that masculine violence by women in society, i.e. the attitude toward the phenomenon by the female audience.

One of the objectives of this research is to increase the public awareness, and mainly among women, in public discourse of mis-presentation and 'misreading' of the category of masculinity, since the misrepresentation leads itself an automatic diminutiveness of a female figure in society. And finally, the aim of the project is to encourage the development of critical thinking and consciousness on the issue and to use this critical consciousness, since the latter will serve as a true basis for women empowerment in a practical context.

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives three Armenian soap operas were analyzed – “Shadows from the Past”/ «Անցյալի ստվերներ» (Shant TV), “The Dearest Enemy”/ «Հարազատ թշնամի» (Armenian TV), and “911” (Armenian Public Television). And since in Armenia the number of soap operas is great, only those soap operas which have a relatively higher popularity among the nation have been selected for analysis.

Methodology

The research was a three-step process. First, it examined the images and characters that the society members encounter in the Armenian soap operas, i.e. that was a content analysis of the material. Then, it ascertained what perception those very images and figures had by men and women in society. In order to fulfill this, a survey was carried out among different female and male age groups, among them - university students, workers and housewives. And finally, it aimed to understand the institutional processes that created and introduced those images, characters and scenes. This was done via both in-depth and survey interviews with the screenwriters.

Research Results reveal that:

- in the Armenian soap operas most of the male characters are depicted as aggressive and violent,
- in the Armenian soap operas most of the male characters are endowed with aggressive masculine features,
- in the Armenian soap operas violence toward women is presented as inseparable part of male masculinity, i.e. the borders of gendered violence and masculinity cross,
- in the Armenian soap operas not only antagonists (wicked characters) but also protagonists (main heroes) are inclined to gendered violence (mostly toward female characters),
- in the Armenian soap operas most of the characters reveal tolerance toward gendered violence (mostly toward female characters),
- the audience misinterprets violence patterns,
- the audience reveals tolerance to violence in general, and particularly to domestic violence.

Taking into consideration the research results, the researchers make the following suggestions to those who are responsible for these media products (who also circulate dangerous gender and gendered stereotypes within society), including TV channels, screenwriters, film directors and other individuals and institutions. Thus, they should:

- consider the fact that the family patterns and interpersonal relations that are presented in soap operas will dramatically influence the audience,
- avoid endowing protagonists with gendered violence behavior,
- within the frames of soap operas show criticizing attitude of other characters toward gendered violence,
- within the frames of soap operas emphasize the importance of law and its legislation that will condemn gendered and domestic violence.