

## *Women's Role in the Series Desperate Housewives: A Feminist Perspective*

Cholawat Prawalpatamakul, Khon Kaen University, Thailand  
Suban Keowkanya, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

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### **Abstract**

*Desperate Housewives*, created by Marc Cherry and aired on the ABC channel for eight seasons, is considered a representation of gender, specifically femininity, on the television (Bignell, 2008). Its plot focuses on the lives of four women (Bree Van De Kamp, Lynette Scavo, Gabriel Solis and Susan Delfino) who represent the internal struggles of the average woman, such as disempowerment, restrictions, and the confusing relationships of modern women in society (Coward, 2006; Sayeau, 2006; Morgan, 2007).

With the emergence of the feminist movement, it is skeptical on how the series portray the four female protagonists when viewed through the lens of feminist perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze the women's roles in the series by using feminist theory as a lens. The eighth season of the series was selected since this season is the latest and shows the conclusion of all the characters.

The results of the analysis showed all aspects of women's roles which reflected feminist theory in many ways. The four female protagonists portray the roles of housewife, mother, and daughter. The oppression, the gender performance, the sexual pleasure, the female friendship, and the contradiction are found and presented which can reflect the feminist theory clearly.

Keywords: women, role, feminism, Desperate Housewives

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## Introduction

*Desperate Housewives* was broadcasted on ABC Channel for eight seasons. This series focused on the lives of four housewives - Bree Van De Kamp, Lynette Scavo, Gabrielle Solis, and Susan Delfino. Although the series focused mostly on women, the four female protagonists still had faced disempowerment, restriction in their actions, oppression, and the general difficulties of their roles (Bignell, 2008 & Richardson, 2006). In addition, Coward (2006), Sayeau (2006), Morgan (2007), and Salomaa (2010) claimed that the four housewives in this series represented the internal struggle of housewives. In order to understand these women, gender and feminism were taken into an account.

Gender is the identity that society creates for men and women (Eitzen & Maxine, 2000). People in society have been assumed to be different not only in body, shape, and size, but also personality, intelligence, ability, and all other aspect of human behavior (Schaffer, 1981). Lindsey (1994) claimed that gender comes with expectations from society such as attitudes, behaviors, rights, and responsibilities. With these assumptions, it becomes the condition to create the roles that society gives to people according to their gender, a phenomenon known as 'gender roles' (Zanden, 1996). Men and women have been assigned roles based on their physical and reproductive differences. They unknowingly and uncritically accept the roles and the behaviors in their lives. They use these assumptions to shape their lives and pass it to their children which is called 'gender-role socialization' or the process of learning the gender roles from their parents, school system and peer group (Schaffer, 1981 & Peirce, 1995).

Being daughter, wife, and mother seems to be obvious roles for women in the society (Begum, 1992). Children are raised differently based on their gender. Daughters are expected to become a wife and a mother (Bem, 1976 cited in Schaffer, 1981). Therefore, they are raised in order to confirm and reinforce what their parents expect them to be (Peirce, 1995). Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminize Mystique* (1979), claimed that the ideal housewife is constructed under the belief of patriarchy. The traditional housewife, then, should be in the private sphere or at home doing house chores, taking care of children, preparing meals and waiting for her husband to come home (Friedan, 1979). Another role of women is mother. Being mother is the most important aspect of women's lives (Kirk and Okazawa-Ray, 2003). Friedan (1979) stated that there are two types of mother, the sacrificing one and the silly one. The sacrificing mother will raise her kids with everything they can get and cause her children to be under the power of emotion and dependent on their mother. The silly mother is the one who goes shopping and to the spa to make herself beautiful and spends her time outside the house.

With fixed roles and assumptions for people in society, questions appear, like who gets what, when, and how are the way in which they usually answered to benefit men. According to the belief that men create these stereotypes and beliefs in the patriarchy, they use their power to put their will on women (Beauvoir, Parshlet, and Crosland, 2000). The belief of patriarchy is the system that is controlled and dominated by men in the society (Johnson, 2004). Men employ their power to categorize women they deem inferior to them. The belief of patriarchy is usually seen in the family unit (Wood, 2004). Rich (1986 cited in Kirk and Okasawa-Ray, 2003) also asserted that

the family is the site of inequality, where women are oppressed according to their positions as wives and mothers. Moreover, the gender-role socialization in the family exercises the patriarchal idea and perpetuates the inferiority of women. Preventing women from accessing privilege, prestige and power under the patriarchy has been a common phenomenon in many parts of the world (Bryjak & Soroka, 2001), until the feminist movement occurred in the nineteenth century.

There are three important movements that call for the equality of women in society. The first wave of the feminist movement requested legal rights such as suffrage and property rights. The second wave fought for the equality of affirmative action, pay equity, charges against rape and domestic violence, the denunciation of pornography and sexism in media and so on. The third wave of the feminist movement, which is considered as the most diverse and individual feminist wave arose in 1990s. This wave focused on the individual identities, the abolishing gender role expectation, defending sex works, and sex-positivity (Fisher, 2001; Sanders, 2001; Thornham, 2001; and Rampton, 2005).

These day, women have more freedom. Yet, the belief of patriarchy hides itself in various forms in the society such as movies, television shows, books, magazines, advertisements and the internet. In the article by Coward (2009), she claimed that the primetime soap operas focusing on male domination get attention among woman viewers by showing that the power of men can be challenged. More than 30 years that the feminist critics critiques the gender representation. However, the television drama still focuses on many of these feminist representations, as we can see from the series *Desperate Housewives*.

Although feminist movements occurred for women to be equal to men, it is skeptical whether the four female protagonists who portrayed the traditional housewife struggled to make their choices or not, and how the society reacted to their choices. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze four female protagonists using feminist theory as a theoretical framework to look past the smiling faces of these women with two research questions – what are the roles of four female protagonists and what we can understand of their roles based on feminist theory?

I critically and thoroughly watched the eighth season of *Desperate Housewives*. While I was watching the twenty-four episodes, I noted the events and roles of the four main female protagonists are noted. I then grouped the events and roles a theme. Then, I read all my notes, selected the scenes that represented the theme explicitly to analyze through the feminist lens. The scenes were analyzed by searching for women's roles and the events that occurred surrounding the four female protagonists. Moreover, the society, environments, and backgrounds around these characters were analyzed to find the reasons and the causes of their actions and the reaction of the society towards those actions.

After watching the series and analyzing it, I can answer my first research question on identifying the roles of women exhibited by the main characters. The four female protagonists portray all aspects of women's roles, including wives, mothers and daughter.

Bree is the Stepford housewife who always attempts to make everything in her family perfect. She had a relationship with Chuck Vance, a detective, until she broke up with him because she was not ready to marry. Danielle and Andrew come back to visit their mother, Bree again after a long time. Danielle has just divorced her husband, so she takes her son to stay with her mom for a while, whereas Andrew, Bree's gay son, comes to visit Bree and introduces her to his new 'girlfriend' whom he wants to marry because of her money. Bree comes to manage this relationship after finally being able to accept her gay son. She comes to understand that it is what they are born to be. Moreover, the series also presents Bree's role as a daughter. When she has to face a powerful man, she thinks back to what her mother taught her about how to wear 'a mask', a facial expression in which we can hide our real feelings. At the end of season, Bree gets married to Trip, her lawyer, who comes to help her be clearing of the accusation that she is the criminal of the Alejandro case. She moves from the lane and attends the conservative women's club. With her husband's support, she is selected to the Kentucky state legislature. Hence, Bree Van De Kamp portrays all the women's roles in this season.

Lynette Scavo is a fulltime mother with five children, Preston, Porter, Parker, Penny, and Paige. In this season, she has a problem with her husband, Tom, so they decide to separate for a while. Tom is the first one to move on and begins having a relationship with a woman named Jane. So, Lynette has to find the way to bring her husband back. At the end, they understand each other and move out of the lane to New York. Lynette enjoys her moment of being a CEO of the export company. Thus, Lynette depicts the roles of mother and wife.

Gabrielle Solis is an ex-model. She is married to Carlos and has two daughters with him. In this season, her stepfather, Alejandro comes back to threaten her again and Carlos comes to rescue her and accidentally kills him. The three female protagonists help in covering up this crime, which is the main plot in the season 8. Carlos feels a lot of tension and becomes an alcoholic. Gabrielle then has to manage everything for Carlos and makes him to go to rehab. She goes to find a job and becomes a personal shopping assistant to help cover house expenses after Carlos quits his job to become a counselor. At the end, she starts a shopping website and has her own TV show. Therefore, Gabrielle represents the roles of wife, mother, and daughter.

The last person is Susan Meyer, who is children's cartoonist. She has one daughter with her ex-husband named Julie. She gets married to Mike Delfino. They do not have any problems in their relationship. One day, Julie comes back home after moving away to pursue her doctoral degree with news that she is pregnant. Susan is so happy and wants to keep the baby but Julie decides to give the baby to another family because she is not ready. Mike has a problem with a loan shark and is shot and killed in one morning. Susan becomes a single mother and decides to move out of the lane to stay with Julie and help take care of her baby. So, Susan shows the roles of mother and wife.

To answer the second research question, using the lens of feminist perspective to analyze the season eight of *Desperate Housewives*, I found that the series does reflect the feminist theory. I grouped the feminist reflections into five themes, which are the women's oppression, the gender performance, the sexual pleasure, the female friendship, and the contradiction.

The first theme is the women's oppression. The women's oppression is the consequence of the patriarchal belief that men are superior to women. In regard to the superior status of men, women are oppressed by men's expression of power through sexual behavior (Wood, 2004). The series presents the oppression in many aspects, such as oppression through violence. For example, Gabrielle presents the role of stepdaughter who has a problem with her stepfather, Alejandro. *'Those short skirts you wore, those halter tops. You were a little slut.'* (Season 7 Episode 23 at 36.50), Alejandro judges Gabrielle by her appearance. Beauvoir et al. (2000) claimed that to be a woman is a social construction. It is through other expectations and assumptions from men, the 'male gaze' that a woman becomes feminine. This statement reflects the scene of Gabrielle who is judged based on her appearance by Alejandro. Alejandro assumes from his point of view and his belief under the patriarchy that Gabrielle who likes to dress sexily is a slut. Beauvoir et al. (2000) also claimed that the purpose of women is for fulfilling men's need and as such are treated as inferior. Alejandro treats Gabrielle as the fulfillment of his sexual desire. *'I remember those nights in your room, baby'* (Season 7 Episode 23 at 36.50), he said. This is in line with the statement of Jackson and Scott (1996) that men's desire is uncontrollable and women are the ones who satisfy it. It is the patriarchy that defines women as property controlled by men (Bryjak & Soroka, 2001). Alejandro objectifies Gabrielle for satisfying his sexual desire. I would like to emphasize again that these oppressions come from patriarchal belief that define women to be inferior.

The second theme is the gender performance. Gender performance in this study is described by the way people in society act according to their roles in order to benefit themselves. According to Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990), gender is flexible. They consider gender roles as a form of performance. In other words, it is like the actor, man or woman, acts his or her suitable and appropriate role in society. The performance of gender role is displayed through the example of Lynette Scavo. After the issues in their marriage, Lynette and Tom decided to live separately for a while. However, she does not want to hurt their children's feelings. Thus, Tom has to wake up, come to the kitchen and sit at the table every morning to show the kids that there is nothing happening between their mother and father by making breakfast for their kids, drinking coffee and reading the news. This actions and behaviors can mirror Goffman (1959) and Butler's (1990) statements about gender performance. Tom and Lynette are acting the role of father and mother in front of their kids, or the audience.

Additionally, the 'gender-role socialization' (Schaffer, 1981 & Peirce, 1995), or the process of passing down the belief of roles from their parents to their kids, also has been found in the character of Bree when she is interrogated by the police. She thinks back to the time when she is in the kitchen with her mother and is taught how to put on 'a mask', a facial expression that hides our real feelings. She learns how to be a woman from her mother, eliciting the famous statement of Beauvoir that *'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'*. To be a woman is not formed based on her biology, but it is society that constructs a woman and labels her with the word 'feminine' which comes with the responsibilities of the private sphere – do house works cook meals, and prepare everything to be a perfect housewife.

Sexual pleasure is also presented in this series. Sexuality is one of the most complex and debatable issues in the feminist thought since there are two sides of feminist

thought, supporting and opposing. In the past, women were taught to believe that sexual acts are disgusting (Rubin, 2007). There are two sides of sexuality, a bad side and a good side. For the good aspect, the series emphasizes that sexuality today is normal and I have found it in the conversation of the women and the scene of Gabrielle from Season 8 Episode 2. When Gabrielle has a problem with her sex life, she asks her friend for advice Women can obtain pleasure from sexual behavior as long as it is done in the marriage. For the bad side, it is presented through Bree Van De Kamp. Bree, who loses connection with friends, becomes a promiscuous woman. She enjoys her sexual pleasure from a one-night-stand relationship. Moreover, having sexual activities with married men is against the sex valued system cited in Rubin (2007). As a result, Bree is stigmatized by the society and called 'a town whore'. It is interesting that the married man in this situation do not receive blame from society even though it takes two to tango.

The female friendship is one of the most important parts of female life because as Sy (2008) claimed, female friendship helps women to face the consequences of patriarchy. The friendship also supports, comforts, and heals each other. A friend is the one who comes when you have some problems as it is shown through Susan Delfino. In Season 8 Episode 17, her husband is shot by a loan shark. Susan feels much grief after losing her husband, but there are friends who are there to comfort and help her to pass this sorrow and do their best to help her.

The last theme is the contradiction. The contradiction in this research means the one who portrays the traditional gender role with the thought of feminism. The four female protagonists depict the traditional feminine gender identities which are mother, wife, and daughter. However, the series represents these women as having the feminist thought already in them. On the surface, these women are not feminists. They don't argue with their husband about women's rights. Even though they are smart. They are strategic. They seem to conform to paternalistic values. Yet, they strategically do certain thing to get what they want without making their husband upset. In other words, they do not necessarily show that men and women are enemies, like many feminists are accused of.

## **Conclusion**

The four female protagonists of *Desperate Housewives* were analyzed through a feminist lens to understand the depiction of issues women face today. The result shows that this series displays women's roles among the four female protagonists in all aspects. Feminist theory mirrors this series in many ways such as the women's oppression, the gender performance, the sexual pleasure, the female friendship, and the contradiction. The women in this series display traditional roles and follow the norm of how to be a woman, by being beautiful and sexy. These women are smart, intelligent. They are fighters. They don't give up and ready to fight the issues in their lives. They have demonstrated their agency in the way that they do not allow themselves to drift in the mainstream patriarchal society. Instead, they seem to be aware of their power and are capable of exercising their lives without being totally under the patriarchal society. *Desperate Housewives*, for me, is not exactly desperate.

When I have collected and analyzed this series, I found a lot of points that still need to be analyzed. For example, one interesting character that needs to be analyzed is Renee

Perry, an old high school of Lynette Scavo. As a divorced woman who carries feminist thought with her, she depicts the modern woman. Since the scope of my study was to study only the four female protagonists, I would like to suggest an analysis of the character of Renee. Moreover, the series also presents homosexuality such as the couple of Lee and Bob who comes to the lane in Season 4 and Andrew who is the gay son of Bree Van De Kamp. I think it would be interesting to analyze these characters since homosexuality today is a growing school of thought. An analysis of these characters would reveal aspects of gay life and how society reacts to this kind of issue. For the linguistic field, the language of women in this series is one of the many interesting things about it. The women's language in this series is full of sarcastic and pragmatic remarks. It would be exciting to analyze the language they use since it can be interpreted in many ways.

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**Contact email:** cholawatprawal@gmail.com