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Literary Criticism (I)
January 15, 2010

Desperate Feminism: the *Écriture Féminine* in Disguise

Perhaps it is extremely unusual to have someone who already committed suicide narrate a story for the audience, but many of the viewers are nonetheless fascinated with the episodes of “Desperate Housewives.” Marc Cherry’s *Desperate Housewives* is an American television series, launched in October 3, 2004, which mainly features the lives of four women as well as their neighbors who reside in the suburbs of America named Wisteria Lane. Its story line follows what happens to the four main characters: Gabrielle Solis, Susan Mayer, Lynette Scavo and Bree Van de Kamp, seen through the eyes of their beloved but deceased neighbor, Mary Alice Young, whose suicide brings about a heavy mystery to her friends. Obviously, the drama is presented from women’s perspective, though a closer look into the roles of these housewives reveals a seemingly pro-feminist but actually male dominant point of view.

The four characters all have their own distinguishing personalities and attitudes; yet one thing that they share in common is that their more active roles, compared to the male ones, are well manifested in the drama by their stronger desires, their behaviors observed, and of course by the narration of the omniscient Mary. Gaby (Gabrielle) used to be a famous model and gets married with a rich businessman, Carlos. Susan is an illustrator, who gets divorced with her husband, and now she lives with her lovely daughter. Bree is a typical housewife, whose husband works as a dentist, and their children study in a private school. As for Lynette, she is an outstanding woman in her career, but gives in to be a full-time mother for her family. The themes of this drama revolves around love, hatred, sadness, and happiness in these four brave women’s lives, all told from women’s stance, which in part

corresponds to Hélène Cixous' "écriture féminine."

Hélène Cixous first used the term "écriture féminine" in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), in which she asserted, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." *Ecriture féminine* doesn't just literally mean "women's writing." Sometimes, it can be widely applied to male writers' production (one of the leading examples being James Joyce's "The Dubliners") and it can even be portrayed by any kind of form, referring to women's uprising self-awareness.

In *Desperate Housewives*, the four women often appear glamorous in their outlook and confident, superior in their mode of talk. If we read between the lines, however, we can discover some "implicatures" suggesting that they still live under the control of the prevalent male domination. Take one of Gaby's lines in season one for example: "You're a woman. Manipulate him. That's what we do!" Gabrielle is always chic in her outfit, seductive, and sometimes mysterious, living a life of luxury and manipulation. Furthermore, she knows how to tame men. Apparently, she is just like a modern woman. Gaby seems uninterested in her husband and finds satisfaction with her seventeen-year-old gardener. It may conclude that she overcomes the patriarchic society, but in fact, it is still a typical myth about feminism for she succumbs to men's impression.

The idea of "male gaze" was first put forth by Laura Mulvey, and it means that men do the looking and women are to be looked at. Also, women are always represented as passive objects of affection. In the drama, the "male gaze" is usually centered on Gabrielle, as she is seen as the sexiest character among others. She is always dressed in tight fitting clothes and high heels so as to stimulate men's sexual arousal. She takes full advantage of her good looks and her irresistible body in order to seduce the guys with whom she wants to have sex. A crucial point here is that we

may infer that her subjectivity and identity are based on being “looked” at and suited by men or by being sexually satisfied with men, for all she endeavors to do to make her good-looking is driven by “male gaze.” As a result of this, she still cannot escape from the social “norm,” namely the male dominant ideology.

Another stereotype imposed on women is well exemplified in the role of Bree Van de Kamp, who, unlike Gabrielle, serves as a typical housewife that always takes good care of the family and the household chores. The audience might predict that Bree’s family must be perfectly normal and happy. Nevertheless, her marriage is on the edge of a divorce, because her husband cannot bear that everything is perfectly done with her wife’s hands, and he can’t even understand why Bree’s hair is always immaculate and appears neat and tidy all the time! In one episode, she makes a concession and dresses like an alluring prostitute to seduce her husband. Although Bree does assume the active role to rescue her marriage and seem to be capable of manipulating her husband, she unconsciously gives way to her husband’s view point. That is, again, a possible misrepresentation of feminist role which some people may interpret as women’s emerging self-awareness.

The sexist ideologies embedded in *Desperate Housewives* conjure up visions of women represented as homemakers. As mentioned above, Bree’s appearance reflects upon female objectification, implying to the audience that if women do not make their hair look good they will not be the “perfect housewife.” The same idea of perfect housewife is also prevalent in Nicole Kidman’s “*The Stepford Wives*”(2004).

What *Desperate Housewives* shows to the audience, as a consequence, is an incarnation of the male dominant society, though camouflaged by means of *écriture féminine*. The struggles of these housewives probably manifest what is going on in our real society, but their self-consciousness and rebellious attitudes mark a rather inspiring milestone in women’s lives. They are values of great importance for today

because there are still objectification and even marginalization for female. However, we cannot always be convinced of women's own voice and ignore the nature of the ambivalent and contradictory feminism, which can yet be subcategorized into different types. That is because the four women in discussion are nonetheless not aware that they are still subject to the phallogocentrism. However controversial and debatable the story plot may seem, the fact that this television drama has already provoked different versions of interpretation reveals that not only are these housewives desperate to achieve what they desire, but the idea of feminism should also be desperately treated with justice.

References

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