FEMINISM VALUES IN SHONDA RHIMES GREY’S ANATOMY SEEN FROM ITS PLOT AND CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

*Grey’s Anatomy* is an American medical drama television series that is created by Shonda Rhimes, an African American single mother. Shonda Rhimes, the creator, had successfully invented a new perspective about women working in a very professionally skilled job field, in this case being surgeons. *Grey’s Anatomy* was a tool used by the creator to speak her mind and to demonstrate her own way of feminism movement. Using feminism theory, the elements of the shows – the plot and characters – were analyzed and broken down in detail. The personal life of the creator was also analyzed. Those analyses eventually verified that *Grey’s Anatomy* was not only a television drama but also a political movement that was designed by the creator herself to have an impact in the real world.

*Keywords: feminism, Grey’s Anatomy, television series*

ABSTRAK

*Grey’s Anatomy adalah drama televisi Amerika yang dibuat oleh Shonda Rhimes, seorang wanita keturunan Afrika Amerika yang menjadi seorang orang tua tunggal. Shonda Rhimes sudah sukses menciptakan daya pandang baru bagi wanita yang bekerja secara profesional, di bidang pekerjaan yang membutuhkan kepintaran dan keahlian tertentu, khusunya wanita yang bekerja sebagai seorang ahli bedah. Grey’s Anatomy digunakan oleh Shonda sebagai alat atau media untuk menyuarakan isi pikirannya. Ia menggunakan Grey’s Anatomy untuk menjalankan pergerakan feminisme dengan caranya sendiri. Dengan menggunakan teori feminisme, elemen-elemen fiksi dari serial televisi ini dianalisa sedemikian rupa, tidak lupa juga dengan kehidupan pribadi Shonda. Hasil analisa membuktikan bahwa Grey’s Anatomy bukan hanya sebuah serial*
drama televisi, melainkan sebuah pergerakan feminisme yang digunakan oleh pembuat cerita untuk menciptakan perubahan di dunia.

Kata kunci: feminisme, Grey's Anatomy, serial televisi

INTRODUCTION

Grey’s Anatomy is an American television series created by Shonda Rhimes that has drama as its genre. Just like the title, this show is a story related to human anatomy, hence medicine, hence hospital. Nobody – the author, producer, production house, actors – expected this show to be a big hit as it is today because it was only a replacement in mid-television-season on ABC on March 2005. However, to everyone’s surprise, Grey’s Anatomy has attracted about eighteen millions of viewers in The United States of America alone and earned Golden Globe Award for Best Television Series – Drama the very next year. Now, there are already eight season finales and the ninth is currently airing.

In real world, Gray’s Anatomy is a book written by an English anatomist, Henry Gray, in 1855. He wrote this book to help medical students all around the world, especially surgeons, to have an inexpensive and accessible anatomy textbook to learn. Though originally the book was called Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical, it was then worldly known as ‘Gray’s Anatomy’. It is still in print today and perhaps is the best known medical books of all. It is one of the great reference works of all time, used by physicians, students, artists, and anyone interested in human anatomy.

In the television series Grey’s Anatomy however, the Grey, the hero in medical world is Ellis Grey, Meredith Grey’s (Meredith Grey is the protagonist) mother. Ellis is an on-top-of-her-game surgeon who has won two Harper Avery Awards – the most sought after award among physicians.

What makes Grey’s Anatomy special and worth analyzing is the uniqueness of the setting, plot, and characters. The show has successfully changed the image of doctors, medicine, and most importantly hospitals in the eyes of the audience. Revitalized are the image of science world about being boring, doctors about being old and stiff, and also hospital about being a place of horror. It may be a fact that being in a hospital is everyone’s last thing in mind; but this show has really changed that. In the show, the hospital is not only giving people medication, but also life lessons, motivations, and ironically fun.

I choose to analyze a movie, to be specific a television series because studying a movie has no limitation like studying other printed literature, such as poem, novel, even drama. In a movie or film, there are so many elements that can be sensed by audience such as its action, characters, and setting. These elements cannot be sensed if readers simply read the text of the play.

People who are not familiar with the world of literature and literary criticism, may simply view Grey’s Anatomy as another television show displaying some ordinary stories about biology and doctors. This is why I step up to reveal the unimaginable elements of this popular television show to the world; that there are hidden messages in the show that the creator, Shonda Rhimes wants to send to the world.

The main characters on this show, who are all surgeons, meet different patients everyday, who can give them lessons explicitly or implicitly; and vice versa. That’s how the ingenuity of the creator is manifested in the blend of the message of the whole story of the show and the message of each episode. Every episode of the show concentrates on different aspects of human lives, for instance hope, family, true love, trust, passion,
even revenge; but somehow at the same time the personal issue of the main characters are still highlighted. In other words, there are two dramas going on in the show: the major one is the drama of the doctors, and the minor one is the drama of the patients. In the world of literature, that means there are plot and subplot.

The creator uses the show as a metaphor: the interns are children, the attendings and residents are parents, and the patients are challenges in our lives. The attendings and residents are hard on the interns because they are just like parents teaching their children lessons. They are being mean for a reason that is to prepare the children to face their lives later on when parents can no longer be on their sides. As for the patients being challenges, when the doctors could save the patient, they pass the challenge or when they could not save the patient, they fail the challenge. No doctors can save all the patients because just like in real life, nobody lives without mistakes and downfall at all.

In this thesis, the plot of the show is the main concern. I will also discuss about the characters that can contribute in proving the feminism values. What has happened and what is yet going to happen are all controlled by the creator’s main principle, that is feminism value, which will be explained and expanded thoroughly.

Beside using feminism theory, I will use a theory of understanding literature and film to support the analysis. These theories will work together and support each other in finalizing the analysis of this thesis.

Feminist criticism did not become familiar until the 1960s. Some recognized feminist criticism as something academic as a theoretical movement, but most viewed feminist criticism as being a political movement that has consequences to the real world. Provided this information, I became more convinced to write a thesis about feminist criticism in Grey’s Anatomy. Most of us have heard that everything is all about politics; there is no such thing as a coincidence; America is the number one country in the whole planet. So I am going to unveil the concealed motivation behind the making of this very popular American television series.

It cannot be denied that however smart the society are – that they are very aware that television drama is only a fiction – what the societies see in television still has impacts on their way of thinking, reaction and belief. Tracing back to literature is the illustration of human beings and their lives, when people watch a movie, they cannot enjoy it only with their imaginations but they admit it or not, reflect and sympathize the movie with their own lives. Many researchers have shown that people’s way of thinking and belief towards medicine are mostly extracted from the media, especially television. For example, Harter and Japp (2001) on their article ‘Technology as the Representative Anecdote in Popular Discourses of Health and Medicine’ say that people do go to doctors or other scientific practitioners of medicine to consult but they already have in mind some information whether facts or myths they had previously gained from media such as news, books, films, and TV.

Seeing how this phenomenon evolves in human lives, I once again emphasize that the creator, an African American single mother, Shonda Rhimes creates Grey’s Anatomy with a certain motivation in mind that she wants this movie to benefit her; how she gains recognition as being a woman, an African American living in the United States of America, and as a writer, uses the feminist criticism as a political movement.

It is necessary to first examine the research that has been conducted on such similar topics – about feminist criticism, and about Grey’s Anatomy itself. I have found that a number of research have been done using feminist literary theory, but there are only a few research have been done on Grey’s Anatomy, but as far as the research is done, none has been performed on feminist criticism in Grey’s Anatomy. Barnet (2007), for example made her senior honors thesis: ‘Dissecting the medical drama: A Generic Analysis of Grey’s
Anatomy and House, M.D.’ Her thesis discusses the differences between Grey’s Anatomy and House, M.D. and the impact of those medical dramas have on the audience on medicine. Kahlenberg (1995) wrote a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication, ‘Character Portrayals on Prime-time Television: A Content Analysis’. Her thesis is analyzing the production of prime-time television shows, the people behind the scenes like the directors, producers, and writers. In the thesis, she proved her assumption that there were stereotypic images of men and women in those prime-time television shows.

RESEARCH METHOD

I used qualitative method because the study of this thesis was exploratory, meaning that not much had been written about. In qualitative method, the research was rather deep than broad. Creswell (1994) had said about qualitative method in his book ‘Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches’, the literature or theory used in this thesis has three functions. First is to frame the problem of the study of this thesis, which is found in chapter one. The second use of the theory is to base the whole content of chapter two. The last function, which is the third, is to analyze the literary art by comparing and contrasting the literary art to the theory.

Before determining the literature used in this thesis, I had watched Grey’s Anatomy even before I had in mind the idea of writing a thesis. After contemplating of what was open to be researched about Grey’s Anatomy, I could finally confidently decide a study of feminism in Grey’s Anatomy. The use of literature in chapter one of this thesis was then fulfilled.

I studied about the theory through books, journals, and websites. After understanding feminism theory, I wrote the chapter two by summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting. Beside feminism, I also put several other theories that will be useful in finalizing this thesis, such as biography of Shonda Rhimes, literature, film, and television, plot, and character.

The final step was comparing and contrasting the literature to the literary art. I spent the most time doing chapter three when writing this thesis. I had also asked a trusted party, who had watched Grey’s Anatomy to review and criticize this thesis, more importantly the analysis chapter. The party gave a good comment that this thesis was coherent.

By conducting this structured method of research, I believe that the analysis of this literary art is fairly deep. Creswell (1994) had said that when the analysis is deep and focused, it can be said that one good research by qualitative method is accomplished.

DISCUSSION

CONCLUSION

Feminism movement, as opposed to popular belief, is not always an attack by the females to be number one, smacking down the power of males. The sole purpose of feminism movement is to bring about gender equity
the only main difference between male and female is biological. Women, as human beings primarily, want
to be recognized and simply to just exist. Having that principle in mind, I discovered that Shonda Rhimes, the
author or the creator used Grey’s Anatomy to bring about gender equity. Being the ‘god’ in this production,
meaning she created this show however she wanted it to be, Shonda created the story and the characters to
voice her hopes and dreams she had writing this show. I saw Grey’s Anatomy and Shonda Rhimes in parallel
lines that the show and the creator supporting each other making it clearer that it was all by design.

Just seen from its title, Grey’s Anatomy is clearly taking women’s side because the name ‘Grey’ here is a
female surgeon’s name – Ellis Grey. In our real world, however, Gray’s Anatomy is a medical textbook about
human anatomy written by a man called Henry Gray. The opening clip of the show also has a great
recognition of women’s world as it is displaying a pair of red high heels and an eyelash curler whereas there
were no men’s shoes or men’s razor. From the plot or the storyline, the creator more often put the fate of
women’s character as better than men’s character. On top of that, Shonda likes to make the female character
the ‘hero’ in this show.

Shonda, an African American single mother living in Hollywood, the biggest film production in the whole
world, used her connection and wit to secretly produced a ‘feminist’ television show in hoping it would help
her sculpt the image of women, and also an African American in the world’s eyes. Seeing how she put female
characters’ fate in the show and the power of lead female characters in the show automatically explained what
a feminist she is. In the last sub-section in Chapter 3, I have put several facts about Rhimes’s personal lives,
hers opinion of the world, and her quotes that confirm her true identity as a feminist – being a woman as a
writer type of feminist.

Though some people think that movies are just movies, entertainment industries are in fact one of the most
influential industries there are. It is not being smart to just buy whatever we are selling and trust whatever we
are told without filtering and processing those information. Whether we are sitting on the director’s chair
pointing our fingers to direct actors or we are sitting on the sofa watching movies, being critical is crucial.
When providing information, make sure our message is sent, just like Shonda has changed America’s view of
medicine. When exposed with information, it is wiser not to judge or believe right away, rather, take a step
back to see the bigger picture.

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