



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITIES AND THE PARADOX OF SUBVERSION IN
"RICK AND MORTY"

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of sitcoms and television series arises the question of how gender and its attributes are represented in the contemporary world. It is impossible to step out of the narrative of gender, which implies that either gender roles and stereotypes can be conformed to, or not conformed to. The show has been mostly located within the post-modern culture as it is self-reflexive by nature, it includes elements of Baudrillard's Simulacre, it inculcates within itself Marxist and nihilistic ideas mostly shown through its anti-capitalist nature and Morty's take on life. "Raising Gazorpazorp" and "Big Trouble in Little Sanchez", "Lawnmower's Dog" and "Rickchurian Date" are some of the episodes that address the discourse of gender and its representation. This paper attempts to do a feminist criticism of the text, by looking at specific episodes (mentioned above) and using specific theories of the discourse of feminist theory namely ideas of Kate Miller, Judy Butler, and Angela McRobbie. It points out instances in the text where gender roles are being abided by, and where they are being broken. Gender and Sexuality is a theme subtly present throughout the narrative: it has been done primarily through the cynical character of Rick and the complex relationship shared by Jerry and Beth and how gender functions in today's world. In "Rick and Morty", the creators of the show Harmon and Roiland, in attempt to address gender stereotypes, and the problems of rigid gender roles, create further stereotypes and paradoxically subvert them in the process.

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INTRODUCTION

Rick and Morty is a television series whose central characters Morty and his grandfather Rick go on inter-galactic adventures. The series originated from an animated short parody film of *Back to the Future*, *The Real Animated Adventures of Doc and Mharti*, created by Roiland for Channel 101, a short film festival co-founded by Harmon (Evans, *WubbaLubba Dub Dub!-the pursuit of happiness in Rick and Morty;*" Rick and Morty are opposites: Rick is the most advanced scientist existing on the planet, whereas, Morty is shown to be dumb, sensitive and emotional. The series also compromises of the family life of the Smiths: Jerry Smith is married to Beth who is Rick's daughter. They have two children, both of them not very smart and popular. Jerry and Beth have a failing marriage: their regular conflicts seep into the behaviour of both Morty and Summer, his sister. Jerry and Rick do not get along very well in the entire series: Jerry is sensitive and whiny.

He wants the good of the family and even tries to guide his children but throughout the show as we see it he is shut down by either Beth or Rick. Morty's closeness to Rick makes Jerry insecure about both his relationship with his son as well as Morty's future. Hence, in the narrative, we mostly have two parallelly running narrative: the family life of the Smith family and the adventures of Rick and Morty. Interestingly, the show exhibits the endless possibilities of the universe by bringing aliens and humans from other dimensions into life, presence of an infinite number of timelines with each character having a different life in each timeline. It brings the impossible into the reality of the earth. The show addresses many contemporary shows in their episodes: two episodes have been dedicated to the problematics of gender. This paper attempts to locate problems of gender that is addressed in the narrative.

Review of Literature: The purpose of this literature review is to look at already existing ideas and ideologies in the academic society on gender and its construction in popular television series such as *Rick and Morty*. Gender stereotypes in sitcoms have been extensively studied and problematised with, and it has been established that gender stereotypes are reinforced on society in a circular motion through television.

Summary

Rick Sanchez comes back to his daughter after twenty years of abandoning her. He develops the garage of the Smith family as his laboratory where he would conduct all sorts of scientific experiments. He has a spaceship and a portal gun with the help of which he and his grandson Morty go on endless number of space adventures. Together, they come across different types of creatures in inter-galactic adventures. Morty spends most of his time with Rick on these adventures because of which he misses most of his hours at school. Initially Jerry objects to this and says that Rick is being a bad influence to Morty. However, Rick carefully manipulates the situation and Morty is never forbidden from going on adventures with Rick. Due to the presence of infinite timelines, there are infinite Ricks and Mortys. Rick gets into conflict with the inter-galactic government federation because he refuses to co-operate and live their kind of life. In the ending of the second season we see that Rick hands himself over to the inter-galactic police when he overhears Jerry telling his wife how Rick has been a menace in their lives and has never cared about anyone else apart from himself.

During the days when Rick is gone we see that an unemployed Jerry gets a job in the intergalactic federation. Beth, who was a horse surgeon, loses her job because advanced medical technologies prevent horses from falling sick. Morty goes back to being a lonely below average kid and he calls Rick selfish for abandoning them. Summer wants to save her grandfather and help him escape from prison partly because she cares about him and partly because she wants to save earth from alien domination. Together, they go on a mission to find out that this was Rick's plan to collapse the intergalactic government. He comes back to the family and Jerry blames him for losing his job. Beth and Jerry have a fight because Jerry does not want Rick to live with them. He asks Beth to choose between the two of them. In the end, the couple decide that they want a divorce. In most of the third season, we see that the Smith family life lies in ruptures. The divorce of their parents affects both of their children, especially Summer. Jerry blames Rick for their divorce and tries to kill him in one of the episodes but fails to do so. He apologises to Rick later but their relationship continues to remain sore. Rick and Morty continue to travel to other universes. After a few more episodes, Beth realises that her happiness lies in the family living in a united manner after which Jerry comes back into the lives of Morty, Summer and Beth. The end of season four definitely hints at the fact that there are many more seasons to come.

Themes relevant to the analysis

Complexities in modern relationships: The Smith family is not a very happy one. Jerry and Beth get married because Beth gets pregnant with Summer at seventeen. They do not make an ideal couple and are constantly fighting. Summer's character is shown to be a conventional teenager who is always engrossed in her phone.

Role of technology in our lives: Rick is an advanced scientist who deconstructs human emotions into mere chemical functioning of the brain. In one of the episodes Rick claims that love is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed and instead tells Morty to focus on science. On the flu season dance Morty tells Rick to give him a portion that would lead to Jessica (the girl he was attracted to) falling in love with

him. Rick develops a portion that initially works because Jessica does fall in love with him. However, due to the mixing of the portion with the flu it becomes contagious and all the kids in school fall in love with Morty. Later on, in that episode when Rick tries to fix the situation, it gets worse. The same is the nature of human relationship with technology. Technological advancements, while being beneficial, have done more harm than good to human kind.

Sitcoms: A Sitcom is mostly a show whose episodes are mostly timed between twenty to twenty-five minutes: they try to redefine American life and they achieve that by mostly putting in themes concerning the contemporary world. The conversations and incidents are written in such a way so that they appear realistic and the audience can relate to it. In most sitcoms, gender is represented in particular ways, most of the times the construction of gender is orthodox and stereotypical and the characters only exhibit characteristics expected of their gender.

Men in sitcoms: Men in sitcoms are mostly represented in four ways: the dominant and superior who has a high paying job is very successful, the arrogant man who is big headed and full of pride, is shown to be having affairs with a lot of women, the man who never grows up : he is represented as an overgrown child who constantly needs attention and does not have the ability to fulfil anything on his own. The last representation is similar to the latter, the male is represented as immature and irresponsible and he is known as the "henpecked" husband because of the constant inferiority he feels of his wife. (Miller)

Female in Sitcoms: According to Castro in *Visual Prostitution of Women in Sitcoms of the Philippines: A Political Economic Analysis* females are always portrayed as the other of the males, their character supports the male character in the sitcom. In terms of characteristics of they are portrayed as "pretty", either remaining domestic spaces or very successful in their careers: mostly the characters lack a balance. Stanford in *TV Sitcoms and Gender* claims that women are characterised in these archetypes: the perfect wife, the "sex-bomb" assistant, the CEO woman, the struggling woman in a Man's World, Woman in Authority, Women who engage in conflicts with other women, women who are concerned about her age and 'biological clock'. He says that it was difficult to classify men into such archetypes, however he attempts to do so, and comes up with the following archetypes: 'little man against the system' "self-important man" "the would-be lothario" "the man who won't grow up", and "the man who is afraid of women". (Sandford 12).

Scott in *The Roles of Women in Television Situation Comedies: A Pilot Study* emphasises on the fact that despite all the social changes women that have happened in the society, television still tries to contribute to traditional existing gender roles and this is portrayed mostly through the spaces of work and home. Television plays a very important role in influencing male-female relationships in contemporary society. He says it is important to regulate the cultural trends television series manifests as it is important to see what kind of culture the audience is consuming. Lauzen in *Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television* articulates that "female characters were more probable to be seen intermingling with others in matrimonial and romantic roles. In dissimilarity, male characters were more likely to

occupy work roles unveiling more agentic goals including ambition and the desire for success.” (Lauzen 101)

METHODOLOGY

One aspect of the sitcom is the gender politics it addresses. There are many instances in the text where stereotypical gender roles are addressed and countered, one of the primary instances being Jerry and Beth’s marriage. Rick’s questionable sexuality, his relationship with both men and women, molestation and rape, prejudices against women are some of the issues prevalent in the text. The paper I would attempt to write would look at the issues Rick and Morty series addresses with a feminist approach. I would look at specific episodes, pointing out particular incidents that address issues of gender, explain the issues addressed or the subversion of prejudices. I would look at the gender stereotypes these incidents are throwing light and look for commentary the creators try to give on these instances. I would look at study done on existing gender stereotypes by critics such as Millet (*Sexual Politics*), McRobbie (*The Aftermath of Feminism*) and Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*) and attempt to apply existing theories to these instances. I would also be looking at the subversion of gender stereotypes: the text becomes a play of stereotypes of gender and the paradoxes leading to a no- conclusion situation. This paper attempts to look at gender stereotypes, how unconsciously notions of gender are being created and subverted at the same time.

Analysis: In most representations of the “female” in sitcoms, it is palpable that there is a huge difference between how she is portrayed to be and what she actually is or wants to be. In the 1950s, women in sitcoms were categorised as the timid housewife, or the sacrificing character who would compromise on her contentment for the male in her life. The 19th century imagined the woman only in association with ideas of domesticity, family and her home. The shift started gradually in the 1970s, when women were shown to be in active in work spaces as well as domestic spaces. In the 1990s, a new archetype of the female was formed: she was single, independent, beautiful and individualistic. Zuberman and Dubowitz point out how the how there was a shift from one female ideal to another as “it moved from one narrow and unrealistic to another (the beautiful, smart and athletic private detective)” (Routman 5).

However, males are also portrayed according to their gender attributes: they are generally the bread earners of the family, the rational and the head of the family. They exhibit characteristics of aggression and dominance in most sitcoms and popular television series. Men are represented mostly in three ways: the dominant patriarch who is intelligent and has a high paying job, the boastful man who is arrogant and thinks very highly of himself, the man who never grows up: his behaviour is like that of an arrogant child. His behaviour is often depicted to be immature and irresponsible. The final representation, which is very similar to the latter, is that of the “hen-pecked” husband who is fearfully respectful of his wife. (as qtd. in Reed 5). Claire Fallon in her article, “*Women in Sitcoms are getting a lot more three dimensional. And that’s a good thing.*” articulates that apart from simply being categorised into four categories: positively masculine, negatively masculine, positively feminine and negatively feminine, women and men now are being defined by a more diverse set of personality traits.

In the present era of sitcoms, characters are not just “caricatures of their gender” but also more individualistic (Fallon 1). Representing gender in *Rick and Morty* has been done primarily through two aspects: the intergalactic adventures Rick and Morty go on and the complex relationship shared by Beth and Jerry. On Rick and Morty’s adventures, females have been characterized in many ways, sometimes as loving, sometimes as evil, sometimes as Monstrous, sometimes as matriarchal and sometimes a concoction of all these characteristics. On the other hand, Beth and Jerry make a couple that is constantly fighting and are not together by fortunate fate. At the age of 17 Beth got pregnant with Jerry’s baby, after which the two of them decide to get married. None of them could accomplish their dreams. Beth wanted to be a surgeon but the pregnancy came in the way. Jerry’s ambitions have not been spoken about but in one episode it is discovered through the use of inter-galactic goggles that he would have been a director and actor if he wouldn’t have gotten Beth pregnant. Beth blames him for not being able to achieve her dreams and the viewers can see that over a period of time she grows really disconcerted with Jerry. Jerry on the other hand is a sensitive character, who loves Beth, yet blames Rick for whatever goes wrong in their marriage.

Mutually Beth and Jerry, Morty’s parents do not fit into prejudiced characteristics of male and female characters. The creators of the show comply to Judith Butler’s notions of “gender as a performance” and not a biological phenomenon (Butler 24). While television is a platform to reinforce social norms, help our understanding of how we are expected to behave, and how we should perceive one another in terms of gender, “it is not a machine for reproducing dominant ideology”; Most narratives in popular culture are “charged with paradoxes within itself”, involves complications and seems to be an ongoing process of negotiation and deliberation (Martinez -Shepherd 3). In *Rick and Morty*, the creators of the show Harmon and Roeland, in attempt to address gender stereotypes, and the problems of rigid gender roles, create further stereotypes and paradoxically subvert them in the process.

Beth’s character and her relationship with Jerry: Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* says that in the 1900s the average age of marriage was dropping and the birth-rate was increasing. However, there was an ongoing tendency in the discontent of women. “American culture insisted that women could find happiness in marriage and being a housewife, however the image they wanted to draw of the women was not parallel to how women in America felt or were”. Friedan exclaims, “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’” (qtd. In Leah, Smith, *A Feminine Mystique Summary*). Beth’s character completely complies to Friedan: her relationship with her family is more of obligation than affection. As Rick points out again and again, Beth and Jerry have a weakening marriage. Apart from Jerry’s insecurities that trigger her impatience, Beth seems to have married Jerry only she got pregnant. She also does not play a very great role as a mother or a wife due to reasons stated above. Beth is not a very sensitive character, she is outspoken, sarcastic and hateful. In one instance in the narrative when Jerry goes to her and asks her if she still loves him, she replies with a lot of boredom in her tone that loving Jerry is tedious for her and she asks him to leave her alone:

"Jerry: Beth, do you still love me?"

Beth: *sighs* Want kinda question is that?

Jerry: The "yes" or "no" kind. *weak laugh of obviousness*

Beth: Jerry, do you want homeless people to have homes?

Jerry: Yess.

Beth: Are you gonna build them?

Jerry: No

Beth: Then what good was the "yes"?

Jerry: (walks to Beth at the computer) (confused) Wait, iii... is loving me the house or the homeless people?

Beth: (Turns around to Jerry) (Irritated) Loving you is work, Jerry, hard work, like building a homeless shelter. Nobody wants to say "no" to doing it, but some people put the work in. So what do ya say? Do you see me working here? Does this conversation seem tedious to me?

Jerry: Sort of.

Beth: But I obviously sort of love you, don't I? *alert on Beth's phone* So stop asking and maybe I'll love you more." (as qtd. in *Rickpotion*, Wikia)

Unlike how a woman is considered naturally to be a mother, Beth does not do very well in motherhood: when Summer asks Beth if she is beautiful, Beth very rudely tells her to not disturb her with questions of puberty, when Morty is in a lot of pain because an evil worm had entered and the only cure is to show love to him, Beth initially tries to comfort her son by telling him affectionate words but soon makes a joke out of it, which increases Morty's pain. She also hits Summer with a bottle of wine in her eye when she was drunk, and when an alien asks her to choose between Summer and Morty, she blurts out Summer's name and it shows her carelessness as a mother.

Gender as a performance: Construction of gender: Similarly, Wollenscraft, author of *Vindication of Rights of Women* one of the early feminists saw gender as more of a social character than biological: social norms, values, laws, and cultural practices are demanding, imposing and recommending particular forms of behaviour from women:

Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper; outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (Wollenscraft, 150). Ideas of femininity such as the desire of jewellery, or the desire to be protected, or the desire to be beautiful are imbibed into their psyches at a very young age. To woman therefore notions of femininity seem natural than social. (Nayar 120). Beth's character truly represents how gender is social: Beth since childhood has been brought up by a psychopathic father who was mostly bothered about himself. It is not exactly revealed to the viewers what happened to the marriage of Rick Sanchez and Beth Sanchez, but in the episode "*Rickpotion*" Beth exclaims that her father was a selfish man who left her mother. It has also been said repeatedly in the show that Rick had left Beth and her family for twenty years. All of these incidents certainly had a powerful effect on her: as Rick says Beth was a psychopathic kid because she would always be asking her father to invent her absurd objects, some of them are a magic knife, an unbreakable baseball bat, a whip that forces people to like her

and fake fingerprints. Her marriage does not seem to make her happy as she feels hollow due to her inability to fulfil her wish of becoming a cardiac surgeon. Her behaviour towards her children is more dutiful than affectionate; she tries to be happy in her present situation but is unable to.

Construction of the "male" as a gender

As quoted before Jerry represents the fourth representation of masculinity: he is the "hen-pecked" husband who is intimidated by his wife. (as qtd. in Reed 5) Jerry is always depicted as not so "masculine": he is constantly called a loser in the show because of his inferiority to Beth and his unemployment. He tries to gain superiority by mocking Beth by saying she is just a "horse surgeon". He is bullied by Rick all the time and constantly called unintelligent. We see a complete reversal of gender as Jerry does not have any agency of his own. He is weak and instead of protecting Beth, Beth protects him all the time. He is emotional, and affectionate towards his wife and kids but he always fails in his attempts to establish himself as the patriarch of the family. However, there are instances in the text where Jerry attempts to protect his wife: in the episode *Rickpotion*, when Rick accidentally converted all the people on the universe into Cronenbergs, a weird type of species, Jerry protects her. In '*Whirly Dirty Conspiracy*' he tries to kill Rick because he thinks he is responsible for their divorce. Margaret Fuller, was a radical thinker who questioned the categories of gender: she claimed that there cannot be a completely "masculine" male, just as there is no "feminine" female. (Nayar 150) Jerry, Beth's husband is always portrayed as not so "masculine": he is constantly called a loser in the show because of his inferiority to Beth and his unemployment. He tries to gain superiority by mocking Beth by saying she is just a "horse surgeon". But at the same time as pointed out he does sometimes portray extreme masculine traits such as aggression and possessiveness.

Both Beth and Jerry represent mixed features of masculinity and femininity: Jerry is not respected by his family because his personality traits are not masculine enough. Jerry always needs Beth's advice in making decisions. When Jerry was hospitalised in an alien hospital because he consumed poisonous ice cream, the doctors of the hospital wanted to remove his penis and surgically replace it for the brain of their well-known leader. In this episode it was also mentioned that his penis was "small" enough for it be the perfect size of the brain of their leader. The mention of the size of his penis definitely points out the fact that the narrative questions Jerry's masculinity. Apart from that, an entire episode has been dedicated to Jerry's love for the movie Titanic. Beth and Jerry, on a weekend, go to a Titanic themed Cruise. Beth is not interested at all and she chooses to remain in her hotel room and drink wine. She pairs Jerry up with Rose, a woman who later attempts to rape Jerry. Jerry is later on saved by Beth. We here again see a reversal of action as instead of the man coming to rescue the woman in distress, the woman saves the man in distress. In the episode "*Raising Gazorpazorp*" we see that Beth comes around as the stricter unemotional parent, whereas on the other hand Jerry is the sensitive and loving parent. Fuller questioned the categories of gender: she claimed that there cannot be a completely "masculine" male, just as there is no "feminine" female (as qtd. in Nayar). "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another.

Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman...Nature provides exceptions to every rule." (Fuller 160). The characters of Beth and Jerry are clear evidences to the relevance of Margaret Fuller's ideas as particularly Beth is not a "feminine" female and Jerry is not a "masculine" male: they have mixed gender attributes. Segregation of the female from the representation of the female in literatures through the character of Beth Kate Millet talks about the representation of the sexual act in male authored literatures and the role the woman plays in it. She gives us examples of texts by D H Lawrence: "the woman seems to be in a state of awe when she comes across the male phallus and she worships it as if the phallus has a god-like superiority in sexual engagement" (Millet 230). She submits to him as a result, the act of sex itself becomes an act of engagement for the man's pleasure. Paradoxically, unlike how representations of females are, when Beth gets to know that Jerry planned to donate his penis and replace it with an alternative initially she is shocked but later on soon she supports Jerry's decision. Her reaction to the situation clearly indicates that she is not awed or intimidated by the male phallus and she does not care if an alternative device is replaced with her husband's phallus.

The show very intentionally creates Beth and Jerry as characters that do not really abide by gender norms. However, it is possible that their marriage fails because of nor Beth nor Jerry are confined to their gender roles. Does that suggest that in every relationship a man has certain roles and a woman has certain roles and if the two of them do not abide by these rules the relationship is not possible to work out?

The Female In A Masculine Dream: In the episode "*The Lawnmower's Dog*" Rick creates a device with the help of which he can enter the dreams of Mr Goldenfold, Morty's math teacher and alter the dream in such a way so that Goldenfold agrees to give Morty an A in his math homework. When they enter his dream, they are on a plane, Mrs Pancakes, a woman character of a television who is also the woman Goldenfold is crushing on is the airhostess. Goldenfold is shown to be flirting with her and the next moment he takes her on her lap and starts rocking her. Mrs. Pancakes is shown to be enjoying hat. When they get into more trouble they incept Mrs. Pancake's dream. Mr Golden fold's version of Mrs. Pancakes dream is that of a sex dungeon. Everyone is in an attempt to gain sexual pleasure (Figure 1). Mrs. Pancakes is in a devilish black outfit where she is hitting a man who seems like a slave to him. Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* talks about the literary representation of women by male authors. She says that the sexual revolution meant liberation of the female sexuality. However, many male authors found this situation to give rise to two possibilities: grant women autonomy and independence which they hate or feared, or they could use this opportunity to manipulate women to create a new order of dominance and subordination (Millet 226). In Goldenfold's dream, Mrs. Pancakes is this hour glass figure shaped woman who consents to sitting on his lap without raising any further questions. Also, in Mrs Pancakes dream, we see the appearance of a semi-clad Summer attempting to seduce her brother and her grandfather. Summer in the dream, does not know she has familial ties with them, however Rick comments that, "Looks like Goldenfold has some predilections so shameful he buries them in the dreams of the people in his dreams, including a pervy attraction to your underage sister." (*The Lawnmower's Dog*, *Wikia*).



Figure 1. Mrs Pancakes in Goldenfold's Dream version¹

Goldenfold's ideal version of Summer is a 16-year-old seductress (Figure 1) who does not mind seducing boys or old men or having sexual engagements with more than one person². Millet argues that male critics tried to construct the female in their narratives as sexual and submissive beings that admire and fear the phallus. (Millet 210) A woman's role in sexual interaction is aimed at the pleasure of the man. Man constructs her, and she behaves in exactly the same way. In this case, both Summer and Mrs. Pancakes exhibit sexual behaviour of consent and submission exactly the way Goldenfold wants. Mrs. Pancake's dream of the sex dungeon represents male's fear of women's sexuality. As Friedan talks about the fear men have of autonomous sexual beings, Mrs Pancake's dreams have been shown in extremity. Her whipping the old vision represents man's idea of the freed sexual woman as intimidating and dangerous, and the need for this sexuality to be curbed. Also, since Mr Goldenfold's dream version of Mrs Pancake's dream version does not have Mr Goldenfold in it, it also portrays man's fear of not being needed by the woman for her pleasure, which in turn makes her a monstrous sexual being.

Simultaneously, we see Jerry's attempts to civilise his dog. He manages to force Rick to create a headgear for his dog Snuffles so that Snuffles becomes a more "intelligent dog". The headgear however converts the dog to almost robot like where the dog does whatever he is told, for instance, being a foot stool for Summer. This event in the narrative can also be seen as Jerry's attempt to become the patriarch of the family. He seems very happy with what he has achieved. Beth, however, is not very happy with the situation and very sarcastically tells Jerry, "This should play us just fine." (*The Lawnmower's Dog*, *Wikia*). Both Simone De Beauvoir and Wollenscraft noted the socialisation process of the sub-ordination of women. (as qtd. in Nayar). According to her, the woman has been socialised and trained to believe that there are certain attributes that truly make her feminine. (as qtd. in Nayar) The headgear symbolises the ideologies co-operated into the female by patriarchy through social construction. Beth's disapproval of Jerry indicates that she does not agree to the sub-ordination: she believes the dog should be allowed to behave like what fits him naturally. Beth also chooses to not wear the symbolical headgear i.e to not be driven by Jerry's desires and stick to her own independence: there are instances of Beth's resistance to

¹ Taken from *Lawnmowers Dog*. Source information mentioned in Work Cited page.

² Picture taken from *Lawnmowers Dog*. Source information mentioned in Works Cited Page.

Jerry's wishes in the text. For example, when Jerry asks Beth to choose between Rick and he himself, Beth plans to divorce him. Beth also does not agree to the Jerry's ideal parenting, and she chooses to maintain her agency throughout the series.

The Female Monster: In the beginning of the episode, "Big Trouble in Little Sanchez" the viewers see a quarrel happening between Beth and Jerry. Jerry screams at Beth saying, "Am I a victim, Beth, or am I married to a mean, unfair monster that always hurts me?" (as qtd. in *Big Trouble in Little Sanchez*, Wikia). Gilber and Guber in their essay, "Mad Woman in the Attic" argue that the woman is characterised either as a monster or an angel. She is an angel if she is sweet, submissive, domestic, and agrees to be sexually dominated. The other alternative a woman has apart from becoming an "angel" is to be the "mad woman in the attic" (Guber and Gilbert 10-12): Trapped within a male-dominated society, they struggled with an internal rage against their confinement and with a complexity of anxieties they inherited as a result of their confinement. They dealt with these tensions by creating a metaphor; they created their own double, a "madwoman in the attic." (Guber and Gilbert 13-16). Rick suggests Beth and Jerry to go to a couple therapist off planet to talk about the issues they are facing with their marriage. When they go to this planet, the therapy centre has a device that scans brain waves to create representations of people. When Jerry is asked to put on the device on his head, a monstrous image of Beth comes on the screen. This representation of Beth represents how women are viewed as monsters if they do not please their husbands.

Since Beth does not conform to what Jerry wants her to become, in his head she is a monster. The monster tells Beth how Jerry considers her much smarter than she actually is which makes the monster undefeatable. The monster is the metaphor for Jerry's fear of Beth's agency. His lack of control over his wife makes him feel insecure and weak, which the viewers can see in Beth's representation of Jerry: Beth's perception of Jerry is that of a wriggling worm which is weak and scared (see Figure 2).³



Figure 2. Summer as represented in Goldenfold's dream

While the representation of Beth fits into the idea of a monster, the representation of Jerry fits into what society would call the effeminate man. However, in the end of the episode, the viewers see that the only way they escape the planet alive is by changing by changing the perceptions of each other:

³Picture taken from "It Takes A Certain Type of Person To Appreciate The Cynicism of Rick and Morty: Season 1- 2 Review. Figure 4 and Figure 5 taken from Big trouble in little Sanchez Wikia. Source information mentioned in the works cited page

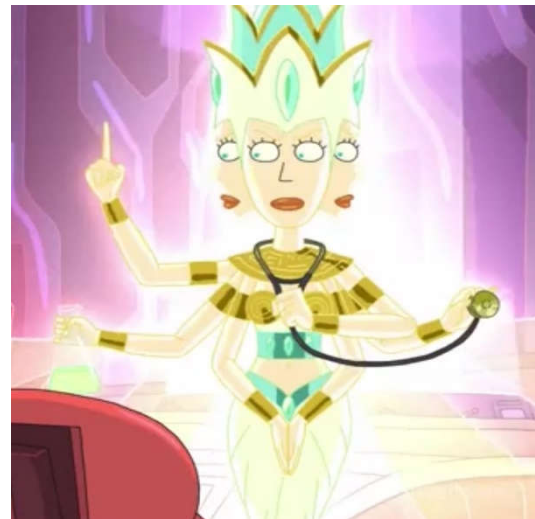


Figure 3, 4 5. Representation of Female as the monster and Jerry as the worm-like weak creature, later representations of Beth as a goddess and Jerry as muscular figure

Jerry's representation in the mind of Beth is changed to a muscular figure (Figure 5), and Beth's representation in the mind of Jerry does not change to an angel, but a powerful goddess (Figure 6). After these representations have evolved from what they were before, peace is restored. The creators of the show here emphasize on how gender roles are constructed in the minds of humans: they essentially do not have to be existing in reality. There is a clear line of difference between what is real and what we imagine to be real.

The Modern Independent Woman: There are two parallel plots working in the narrative-one back at planet earth and one in the newly discovered planet Gazopazorp.

On the alien planet we see that a complete binary has been established between the males and the females. Gender identities are very stringent: the males are shown to be very aggressive, destructive, and sexually abusive towards any female from any planet. On the other hand, the females are shown to be sensitive beings who love to talk, consider fashion and dress up as priorities. They have a world of their own where no males are allowed to enter and all the females despise men. When they see Summer, they think she is the ruler of the planet Earth simply because they believe her top is really fashionable. Every woman addresses the other with the sentence "I am here if you need to talk" which gives rise to another stereotype about how women love talking. Most of their world is full of malls and stores of cuddling, shoes and chocolate. In every few seconds there are announcements of where there are hidden spiders and other insects which gives rise to another stereotype that women are scared of insects. When the ruler of the female Gazorpian world gets to know that Rick is her grandfather they are taken for trial at their judiciary where another amusing incident is witnessed by the audience where a woman is being sentenced to "silent treatment" on grounds of her bad haircut. The women produce sex dolls that can reproduce with the Gazorpian males. This idea serves as an allegory: women apart from being objects of sex and lust are rational thinking beings. In every public announcement we see that it is being mentioned, "We are not telling you what to do, we are just letting you know how we feel." This refers to the idea that women are always told what to do, how to sit, how to stand, what to do, what not to do. Now that they have separated themselves from the patriarch, they are free to do whatever they feel like. Thus, the male or the phallic symbol is being antagonised and it is being shown that they are happy on their own without males.⁴ Paradoxically, despite all the prejudices that one associates with the woman that is being shown in the episode, in the end Rick and Summer are condemned to death because Summer is associated with the "phallus": Rick, despite being a male is unable to do anything; Summer on the other hand, manages to save both their lives by convincing the female Gazorpian that gender politics on the planet earth is not based on segregation and problems of gender are dealt with in a different manner.

Longings of the modern woman: Beth's decision to go back to Jerry: Angela McRobie in her essay, *The Aftermath of Feminism* talks about the idea of post-feminist. Post-feminist is not anti-feminist in the sense that it wants to counter revolt the achievements made by feminists but it necessarily focuses on the idea that time has not come yet for feminism as a movement to halt. In the present era, the words "empowerment" and "choice" are often attributed to women in media and other popular culture spaces, but she raises the question of whether it can be counted as some sort of alternative to feminism. She calls it a propaganda used by the state in proper to prevent feminism from deepening its roots in the lives of males and females. She gives us contemporary examples such as pole dancing being promoted as a form of empowerment, and the over-sexualised images of the female bodies in the porn industry. She also gives us examples from popular culture, such as Bridget Jones diary, make over reality television and *Sex and the City*. (McRobbie 14). She considers media as a source of reinforcing gender roles: in the episode we see an epitome of the gender roles, the society of women

seem to existing happily without the company of men, and there are no references to feminism. In fact, the episode can be seen as mocking feminists due to contempt shown by the female Gazorpian for the male Gazorpian. The woman is shown to be doing exactly what the female has been theorised as by patriarchy: she is sensitive, she likes chocolates and shoes, she loves candy, she does not like insects, bodily functions like passing gas or burping is not performed by her, and she loves to talk. However, these stereotypes attributed to the modern woman. Even if popular culture portrays the idea that women are given equal opportunities as men and they do not need feminism, the continuation of such stereotypes speaks for itself: feminism is needed as long as stereotypes about both female and males exist. Also, the females in the Gazorpian planet do not have any sexual pleasure, the maximum of physical touch they are shown to desire is "cuddling". McRobbie focuses on this idea in this essay: even though the sexual liberation as a movement had taken place, it was only in terms of having the ability to sexualise or objectify one's own body. Women had the freedom to expose their breasts, female clothing companies would try to sell their products using taglines such as "juicy" or "porn queen", she can exhibit her sexual freedom by taking pole dancing classes or doing lap dances. The freedom to sexual objectification is seen as equal to the act of sexual engagement itself, and this has been possible because of acceptance of such ideas on the part of the female. (McRobbie 23). McRobbie gives us the example of Bridget Jones. (as qtd in *Times Higher Education*) She is happy to own the sexual freedom that she owns. She reads postmodern theory and has a job of her own. However, she does not get the feeling of fulfilment because of the lack of romance or the perfect husband in her life. We see a similar situation with Beth: she is an ambitious woman and the bread earner of the family. She does not have complete job satisfaction because she always wanted to become a cardiac surgeon but due to an unwanted pregnancy she ends up becoming a horse surgeon. In the beginning of Season 3, when Jerry asks Beth to choose between him and her father, Beth chooses to get a separation. However, after a divorce, she becomes very emotionally vulnerable and confused. Despite her freedom from Jerry, she feels lonely and unsatisfied and, in the end, it drives her to get back with Jerry again. According to the ideas McRobbie incorporates in her essay, such a portrayal of lives of women is problematic; the woman might be employed or live her life according to her own wish, but she does not feel complete if not loved by a man. Her feeling of satisfaction is dependent on her male lover, and again not on herself.

Conclusion

Rick and Morty as a popular cartoon series has attempted to problematise many burning social issues of the contemporary world and the fact that it dedicates more than one episode to the politics of gender, it is evident that, as McRobbie emphasized on in her paper, we still need feminism. While Beth and Jerry are not "flat" gender characters, but more individualistic, the creators of the show unconsciously demonstrate the problems of such subversion: Beth and Jerry have a divorce at the beginning of season 3; they only get back together when Beth chooses to not leave her family when Rick offers to replace her original self with a clone so that she can go live her life free from her family. She goes back to Jerry and decides to not get separated, fulfilling her gender role as a wife who loves her husband and mother who cares for her

⁴ Part of my own notes on a close reading of the episode Raising Gazorpazorp. Source information mentioned in Works Cited Page.

children. The representation of "females" in Rick and Morty: Mrs. Pancakes, the female Gazorpians and a monster of Beth throw light on the problems with the representation of the "modern woman": she is either homely, loving and submissive or completely independent of the male, and extravagantly successful in her career. Gender stereotypes have just shifted from certain attributes to another: they have not disappeared. The creators of the show definitely hint at the same problem throughout the series, as they leave issues they address related to gender partially answered.

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