

# “Being Mary Jane” and the Research about Television Post-Feminism

**Wenrong Wang**

*University of East Anglia, Norwich, NH4 7TJ, England  
wenrongwang1998@163.com*

**Abstract:** *The airing of female-themed TV dramas has generated an enthusiastic response among viewers. One of the reasons is that the emergence of feminism embodied in the subject matter makes the group think about the current situation of women's existence. This article uses Being Mary Jane (2013-2019) as a case study. The post-feminism embodied in the case is analyzed from different perspectives. The case shows that the skills and abilities of professional women to balance work and life are clearly underestimated. In addition, femininity is still being portrayed as the need to maintain a perfect body in order to increase attractiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Post-feminism; Being Mary Jane; Femininity*

## 1. Introduction

Television shows allow consumers to derive different messages on feminism that are portrayed depending on the character associated with the ladies in the film. Aspects of feminism like the desperate career woman feeling the pressure to start a family, mother-daughter feuds, women against each other, postmodernism on domesticity, among others, are common in films. A look at contemporary cinema tries to balance how they portray women, but one transparent aspect is that the successful and beautiful ones work on their bodies, hair, and dressing. On the other extreme, the men in the film express their preferences for a particular type of woman, which puts pressure on young girls to keep up with the hope of upholding the ideal ideologies on femininity. Films are becoming more modernized and attempting to strike a balance between traditional feminine ideas and modern ideologies on gender roles and attitudes towards women. Other factors that emerge in the analysis of TV shows and their impact on femininity is the aspect of racial differences and the directing of different films to attract a variety of audiences. A look at the television series *Being Mary Jane* as a case study reveals the representation of femininity in career, life choices, aspects of happiness, body expectations, and their role in society.

### 1.1 Background

The UN Women Organization<sup>[1]</sup> indicates that research is clear on more than 40% of media highlighting gender stereotypes and only 6% representing well-balanced aspects of masculinity and femininity. One of the leading causes of this challenge is that men hold more senior positions in media across the globe, and they control the perspectives towards women depending on their preferences and goals. An increasing number of television series focus on the harassment or domestic abuse against females and their resilience towards the relationship despite the challenges. Besides, men get the opportunity to glorify women's bodies and paint a picture of what they feel is the ideal shape. This impacts the ideologies on femininity and attractiveness among the viewers.

### 1.2 Series Review

One series that portrays different aspects of feminism and allows the viewers to feel differently about women and their characters is the TV series *Being Mary Jane* (2013-2019, BET). The main character, Mary Jane (played by Gabrielle Union), is a career woman incapable of sustaining a relationship as she tries to be the best news anchor and journalist in the country. At the same time, her desperation for a relationship leads her to be with a married man. Eventually, she gets heartbroken and devastated to the extent of affecting her career. On the other extreme, is her sister-in-law Niecy (played by Raven Goodwin) who does not care about looking after her body or getting a job but keeps getting children even though she is financially incapable of taking care of them. A different main character is Kara (played by Lisa

Vidal), Mary Jane's director. Kara is a working mother with two children and creates the illusion of a balance between her demanding role and taking care of a family. At the same time, Kara also comes off as the idea woman with a good relationship and an understanding spouse, and she is happy throughout the seasons. However, she idealizes aspects of brevity as she goes through a mastectomy in the final series after discovering she has breast cancer, and this is important to the film as it affects the perceptions of women. Besides, Mary Jane also goes through panic as she learns that she is growing old and may not get children at a later age, and this prompts her to handle the issue differently. The in-depth desire to become a mother leads her to freeze her eggs and, later, get them fertilized without a stable father as she desires to settle down and have children, but is frustrated at her lack of marriage proposals from suitable candidates. Mary Jane gets the happy ending as she marries Justin, the man who accepts her for being a strong black woman with a good career, beautiful and brave as well as pregnant from the procedure.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 Domesticated Roles

One of the essential points to note in the discussion is the continued support for women joining the production industry and recreating the narratives by highlighting the attractive female aspects. Perkins and Schreiber <sup>[2]</sup> highlight that there is a significant inclusion of women in film development and the creation of shows, which is a strategy in changing the stereotypical feminist narratives. Past representations focus on women as anti-heroes and foster the descriptions of females being resilient even in abusive and toxic relationships due to uncontrolled male expectations. However, the inclusion of women in the production process is reducing this narrative and creating room for women to emerge as protagonists capable of having it all. For instance, in the *Being Mary Jane*, Kara Lynch, the main character's best friend, emerges as an independent working mother, entirely dedicated to her relationship and children as well as domestic chores at the same time.

A different perspective in the postmodern television series reflects women as career-minded and capable of being the best without allowing personal issues to dictate their growth limits. Arthurs <sup>[3]</sup> indicates that there is an enhanced focus on female characteristics that display brevity on the career paths women take up different roles as compared to domesticated positions insinuated in traditional television series. For instance, *Being Mary Jane* shows the main character as the head journalist not clouded by her feelings and professionalism in her work. Besides, the same series highlights the director as a woman capable of juggling marriage, a director's position, and managing her toddler's schedules. The perspective is growing more common in modern films and erasing the stereotype that females cannot take up top positions and manage their expected family roles.

The options provided in the films affect the thoughts on feminism as women are provided with limited options on how they should behave by either coming off as very domesticated or ill-misbehaved. Carroll <sup>[4]</sup> indicates that a closer look at most films reveals women as either mother with domesticated roles and struggling to manage their careers or whores with questionable behavior. The kind of reflection gives the impression that a woman unwilling to experience motherhood or participate in domestic roles is unworthy of marriage and should be wild and unsettled. Similarly, TV shows airing during prime-time hours tend to display more positive parts and attitudes towards women by making them appear as the victors and portraying them as reliable and career minded-persons. Previously, male-dominated shows filled the screens throughout the day, but the increasing demand for more balanced depictions has given rise to prime time TV shows documenting positive female aspects <sup>[5]</sup>. The extreme feministic elements are disappearing where women are either frustrated homemakers or wild city girls frequenting the club. There is an increasing balance in the depiction of women as the victors, similar to the men.

### 2.2 Women as supporting characters

One of the arguments that support this phenomenon is the consistent representation of femininity as a supporting role as opposed to the leading position in many television series, mainly in traditional cinema. Lee <sup>[6]</sup> highlights that despite the progress in gender equality in film making, there is a significant representation of women as the support actors by making them wives or girlfriends to the main characters. The description suggests that femininity is about support and not taking the lead on issues, which creates a negative impression of women's capabilities. The representation does not appear in the selected series, *Mary Jane*, as the women get the leading roles and emerge as the key decision-makers both in the workplace as well as in their social setting. While Mary Jane becomes a girlfriend and eventually a wife,

she does not play the role of supporting the husband or fiancé; similarly, the support series *Modern family* (2009-2020, ABC) reflects a balance between genders. Each actor is the main character, and there is a fair representation of males and women as the key players and decision-makers. None of the actors comes off as a support for the other among the leading families represented.

In the selected case study, Mary Jane, the main character, emerges as the protagonist as she gets to choose whom to marry as two men propose to her despite being pregnant through an artificial process. The series portrays her as the victor and gives her the option of being a different woman as opposed to either taking the traditional role of either being a perfect wife and mother or the misbehaving lady oblivious of respect for relationships. Taking up an in-between part shows her human nature as she struggles to decide what kind of woman she is and becomes over time- she sleeps with a married man, but later calls it off out of guilt. Besides, she is also comfortable sleeping with someone she is not in a relationship with and masturbating. Eventually, she amends her ways to be the ideal wife and homemaker by balancing her roles.

### **2.3 Female Careers and Happiness**

A different television series that supports the increasing portrayal of balance is *Modern Family*, which is a contemporary representation of women managing careers and families with ease. Coffin <sup>[7]</sup> reflects on the modernity in the film by suggesting that the families represent a balanced approach to taking care of children, including providing and doing basic chores like cooking and packing lunches. Similarly, the selected television series, *Being Mary Jane* highlights on Kara as a career woman able to enjoy her life in the studio and engage with friends through the help of her supportive husband. The balance of roles creates a different feel on the domesticated femininity and creates an intense understanding of how balance is beneficial in keeping couples together. Reese <sup>[8]</sup> adds that the gender roles portrayed about women during holiday seasons are some of the reasons that viewers go into marriages expecting females to be domesticated and balance with careers during other times. In this case, it is explicit that the continued depiction of females as modern, balanced, or traditional and tame shapes viewers' perspectives unconsciously as one would expect some level of understanding after watching *Modern Family* and *Being Mary Jane*.

A look at different television series like *Modern Family*, *Gossip girls* (2007-2012, The CW), and the selected case study *Being Mary Jane* also displays the traditional depictions of feminism as love-obsessed and gossiping creatures. Horbury <sup>[9]</sup> echoes that most filmmakers are concerned about 'feminist' aspects such as romance, love, and the need for ladies to come together for gossip, and this is a growing trend among the viewers. However, there is an increase in females' capabilities as they get more sophisticated roles as contributors to essential conversations and use their position to influence others. For instance, Mary Jane highlights on her challenges towards motherhood and the journey women have to endure freezing their reproduction organs to preserve their femininity. In this scenario, highlighting the issues of women changes the conversation from female aspects such as gossip to using positions of influence in creating awareness and rallying support for women. The television series may choose to highlight women as feeble and weak, unable to bear children at a certain age, with other females bashing Mary Jane for putting her career first before children. However, the narrative changes to women emerging as mentors and conversation starters brave enough to use their challenges as a platform for encouraging others.

A different ideology propagated by this series on feminism is that career success and happiness are mutually exclusive; successful women are given other life challenges to show they cannot have it all. Various television series display the problems among women in being happy and, at the same time, having a fulfilling and successful career away from the traditional ones like cooking and sewing <sup>[10]</sup>. The *Being Mary Jane*'s begins by fuelling this narrative when the main character emerges as a beautiful, smart, and successful journalist, but with a poor relationship and lonely. Her sister-in-law affirms this narrative by making it clear that children make her happy, and she cannot balance that with a good career like that of Mary Jane, who does not have a family. The feud between Mary Jane and her sister-in-law, who keeps on reminding her that she has money but very bitter in life for the lack of a family or relationships, is an evident propagation of this narrative.

However, there is a change in the representation of women as the television series gives a happy ending for both Mary Jane and the sister-in-law, who decides to change her life and pursue a career as well as being happily married. Mary Jane is a clear illustration of this situation where marriage and children come exclusively at the cost of her career, but, in the long-run, she manages to get it all. Apart from a blossoming job, Mary Jane manages to get pregnant amidst all her challenges, deal with the anger

issues towards her family, and get a chance to hold a dream wedding with a man she loves. The happy ending gives the illusion that feminism does not have to choose between career and marriage but finding the right balance to know when one needs more attention than the other.

*Modern family* represents Gloria (played by Sofia Vergara) as a happily married woman open to becoming a housewife in most of the seasons in the series, which is comfortable for her and the family. She does not feel the pressure to pursue a career until it seems vital to her; she also selects something that fuels her passion despite the doubts others have in managing the situation. Kuperberg and Stone<sup>[11]</sup> indicate that modern films represent women who opt out of careers or marriage intentionally as strong, brave, and knowledgeable, which is a new reflection of feminism. Female aspects such as decision-making and women trusting their instincts to pursue their ideologies of marriages and opt-out of a career or relationship if it is not their ideal definition of happiness. Mary Jane is desperate for a relationship and is unwilling to compromise on having one at the expense of the other. Still, at some point, she realizes there is nothing wrong with having and raising a child by herself. The brevity in deciding to have a child without a father in pursuit of happiness is a display of strong feminist characteristics that one can choose to be happy without a man.

TV films and series are designed for various demographics and tend to elicit different reactions from the target groups by reinforcing stereotypes or breaking down the ideologies in society. Mayne<sup>[12]</sup> indicates that films highlighting women's issues of femininity are designed for a specific audience, and this affects the impacts the notions held by women towards themselves and other females. For instance, the series *Being Mary Jane* highlights how black women are concerned about getting children and families feel the pressure to conform even when the time is not right. The series reaffirms the stereotype that black women in their thirties are desperate to settle and create families, and its target audience is career women trying to balance life. Inspiration from the main character can influence other black career women to take desperate measures to start a family because of the pressure that women are incomplete without families. However, the narrative changes at the end and highlights Mary Jane's impatience as she finds two men willing to settle down after getting pregnant through the artificial fertilization procedures. Such a narrative reinforces the stereotypes that black career women are desperate and ready to do whatever it takes to have a family, which comes off as a symbol of happiness.

#### **2.4 Strained Mother-Daughter Relationships**

One contemporary representation of feminism is oppressive mothers and strained relationships with the children, causing them to act out or misbehave in one way or another depending on the situation. TV series and films represent real aspects of mothers, but there is a growing trend that highlights the cultural issues of motherhood as domineering and oppressive towards the children<sup>[13]</sup>. The strained relationships between women and their daughters are founded on the need for the mothers to be the ultimate decision-makers in an attempt to protect their children from the problems in society. Feminism is represented by strength, but at the same time, oppression from mothers who do not comprehend the challenges facing the youth from a different generation. Mary Jane and her mother have a strained relationship, which affects their conversations and spending time together; she learns that the mother had cheated on the father earlier in life. The strained relationship is continually emerging in several films as the daughters struggle to earn their mother's approval while seeking personal freedom.

The strained mother-daughter relationships also impact the observers' feelings of sympathy by making the mother a victim of circumstances and the father, the abusers, and the villains for acting coldly towards their wives. Astrom<sup>[14]</sup> indicates that modern TV series are attempting to change the narrative by creating positive relationships between fathers and daughters while highlighting the strained interactions between girls and their mothers. For instance, Mary Jane's mother is kicked out by her father after discovering he cheated on her, making her a brave woman for standing up for herself. However, the narrative changes when the film suggests that she also cheated in her past, and this makes Mary Jane very bitter about her mother. Although both parents have made the same mistake in marriage, the woman is punished more as she emerges as the home-maker who should not mess up or deceive the husband and children relying on her.

#### **2.5 Objectification of women**

A different representation common in the television series is the objectification of women's bodies as females try to prove there are worthy enough of love and a relationship, while the men can make decisions that suit them. For one, Mary Jane attracts men that want to use her while they move on to other

relationships because she is attractive and 'hot,' but she is judged for wanting to have a casual relationship. Muhammad<sup>[15]</sup> highlights how the series is big on reflecting on the objectification of women as Mary Jane discusses the issue on her show over and over to create awareness. The objectification creates a stereotype that women can be used and discarded as the men please and later on be branded as whores for sleeping with several males, while the men get a different treatment. The reflection of such aspects of femininity in the film impacts women by letting them understand that they can endure the objectification process, which is part of social norms. However, *Being Mary Jane* condemns the behavior and teaches women to stand up for themselves by pursuing the love they desire without feeling guilty for sleeping with several men or not getting it right the first time.

Media smarts<sup>[16]</sup> highlight that woman, especially from the white community, consume ideologies on femininity that push them to be thin despite being strong and victors in different conquests. According to the excerpt on femininity and TV portrayals, women are forced to consume media that highlights their looks despite getting other characteristics like superheroes, who ought to be tough and more masculine. The obsession with making women look 'hot' according to the pressure placed by TV films leads to the series and movies showing women that for one to look good, they should be thin and have a figure as defined by community standards. Looking at superhero characters like Gamora, She-Hulk, and wonder woman, it is clear that there is a rising trend in women's ability to maintain skinny and curvy figures for them to be attractive and accomplished. Mary Jane emphasizes the need to work out and maintain a slim figure even though the sister-in-law is not comfortable losing weight, which creates pressure on women to pursue critical approaches to keep up with the trend. Females who consume a lot of TV material may fall into the trap of thinking that being attractive involves having a slim figure and showing it off despite having a preference for muscular forms.

Physical aspects are highlighted as part of the main elements representing femininity among women, and the different films set expectations on how women should look- their figure, hair, and facial features. There is a consistent notion of the feminine body as represented by the different television series and films that women should look in a specific way and dress in expensive fitting clothes to look attractive<sup>[17]</sup>. The series portrays femininity as a curvy figure where the woman has a small belly and bigger hips and buttocks and dressing in fitting clothes that emphasize these features. Mary Jane is a beautiful lady with long flowy hair and the 'appropriate' shape as described by the society and filmmakers, wearing dresses and outfits that show the figure. Mary Jane is obsessed about her body to the extent of shaming her sister-in-law who is obese and not concerned with taking care of her weight, she sets a standard of what females should look like. In the same case, other films like *Modern family* reflect the same aspects as Gloria does everything possible to keep in shape, same as Haley, who gets twins but is stressed about losing her shape.

Some television series represent femininity differently for white women as compared to other racial communities, which creates a difference between the perceptions of the females on the ideologies they should uphold, and those that do not apply to their demographic. For instance, Wood<sup>[18]</sup> stresses that films and series express white women as thin, stylish, successful, and centered on finding a man that will marry them or propose most romantically and a beautiful diamond ring. Such representations may differ with what films portray about females from other communities who are comfortable with settling for a relationship whether there is a ring or not. Post-modernist reflections are trying to merge the differences by putting mixed-race actors in the films to represent as many races as possible and give the women similar characteristics on marriage and life. *Being Mary Jane* has African-American actors mainly, and this creates expectations of how the women from this community should behave and the things that should matter to them.

### 3. Conclusion

There are various representations of women that affect the viewer's perceptions towards the females and influence behaviors among the target groups on how they should act to achieve feminism. Traditional series support the domestication of women, limiting their career choices to simple roles and giving them supporting characters in the various cinemas, denying them the opportunity to be decision-makers. However, modern series are attempting to balance the constructs on femininity by allowing women to be behind the production to portray real-life aspects and expected behavior among empowered females. There is a distinct downplaying of women's skills and ability to balance work and life as career women are reflected as unhappy and desperate for marriage. However, the case study shows that females can balance work, children and marriage and endure challenges such as disease to emerge as the villains. The film also depicts the need for females to identify the pressure to conform and be patient with relationships;

besides, modern series show that women have the option to opt-out of a career or marriage. There is a high level of objectification of women in the series and the pressure for females to be thin and curvy in meeting the standards that men are set as 'attractive.' Mary Jane changes fuels the narrative while her sister-in-law Niccy is portrayed as a happy woman despite not having the perfect career or the anticipated body figure.

## References

- [1] UN Women. (2020). *In Focus: Women and the Media*. UN Women | *The Beijing Platform for Action Turns 20*. Available at: <https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/in-focus/media>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [2] Perkins, C., & Schreiber, M. (2019). *Independent women: from film to television*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(7), 919-927. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1667059>
- [3] Arthurs, J. (2003). *Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 3(1), 83-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077032000080149>
- [4] Carroll, N. (2012). *The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm*. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48(4), 349. <https://doi.org/10.2307/431572>
- [5] Martinez-Sheperd, I. (2006). *Portrayals of women in prime time reality TV programs*. *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*, 1396.
- [6] Lee, B. (2018). *How Media Portrayal Affects Women, And What Geena Davis Is Doing About It*. *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2018/03/13/how-media-portrayal-affects-women-and-what-geena-davis-is-doing-about-it/#1b0372922962>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [7] Coffin, S. (2013). *How Modern Family and Parenthood Represent Equal Parenting: A Feminist Discourse*. *All Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects*, 122.
- [8] Reese, H. (2019). *The Gendering of Holiday Labor* | *JSTOR Daily*. *JSTOR Daily*. Available at: <https://daily.jstor.org/the-gendering-of-holiday-labor/>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [9] Horbury, A. (2014). *Post-feminist impasses in popular heroine television*. *Continuum*, 28(2), 213-225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.888043>
- [10] Moseley, R., & Read, J. (2002). "Having it Ally ": *Popular Television (Post-)Feminism*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2(2), 231-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770220150881>
- [11] Kuperberg, A., & Stone, P. (2008). *The Media Depiction of Women Who Opt Out*. *Gender and Society*, 22(4), 497-517. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27821665>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [12] Mayne, J. (2003). *The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism*. *New German Critique*, (23), 27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487935>
- [13] Davidson, R. (2011). *Subversive Voices in Contemporary Motherhood: The Rhetoric of Resistance in Independent Film Narratives*. Indiana University.
- [14] Åström, B. (2015). *The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: Single Father and the death of the mother*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(4), 593-607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.994100>
- [15] Muhammad, L. (2017). 'Being Mary Jane': MJ Goes Into 'Crisis Mode,' While Her Mom Drops a Bombshell. *Entertainment Tonight*. Available at: <https://www.etonline.com/being-mary-jane-mj-goes-crisis-mode-while-her-mom-drops-bombshell-86321>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [16] Media Smarts. (2020). *Media Portrayals of Girls and Women - Introduction*. *MediaSmarts*. Available at: <https://mediasmarts.ca/gender-representation/women-and-girls/media-portrayals-girls-and-women-introduction>. (Accessed: May 17, 2020)
- [17] Sarkar, S. (2014). *Media and women image: A Feminist discourse*. *Journal of Media And Communication Studies*, 6(3), 48-58. <https://doi.org/10.5897/jmcs2014.0384>
- [18] Wood, J. (2000). *Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender*. *From Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* by Julie, Wadsworth Publishing. Chapter 9.