**Negative Gender Stereotypes in the Big Bang Theory Sitcom**

Name

Institution

Class

Tutor

Date

**Negative Gender Stereotypes in the Big Bang Theory Sitcom**

There is much that has been written on the influential role of the media in society. Television and film, in particular, have offered an opportunity for recreation of almost every aspect of society, albeit in a more dramatic way. However, there are still quite a lot of films that offer a reflection of society and perpetuate undesirable stereotypes that tend to undermine certain groups. Women, in particular, have been the biggest victims as some filmmakers insist on representing women in a way that often negatively reiterates gender stereotypes (Alzahrani, 2016). With well over 275 episodes that ran for about twelve years (2007 – 2017), the sitcom Big Bang theory offers an ideal platform to analyze negative gender stereotypes in films. The first series, in particular, where the casts familiarize with the audience, offers a perfect illustration of the gendered nature of films whereby some of the male casts do not hesitate to reveal their bigoted beliefs. Accordingly, a review of The Big Bang Theory reveals that it continuously reinforces negative gender stereotypes by how the actresses are presented and the behavior of the male characters towards their female counterparts. The first paragraph will be a brief synopsis of the sitcom before addressing traditional gender stereotyping in the second paragraph, followed by a discussion on the sexualization of actresses and the arrogance of male characters in the second and third paragraphs before concluding the body with the issue of gender equality.

The Big Bang Theory is arguably one of the most popular science-based sitcoms of the last two decades. With twelve episodes that ran for twelve consecutive years, there is no doubt that the creators enjoyed tremendous support from fans across the globe. The sitcom primarily features a group of highly learned and socially awkward roommates, Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, and their neighbor, Penny, a waitress. Some of the other main characters include Raj Koothrappali and Howard Wolowitz, who are equally physicists and socially awkward and friends to Sheldon and Leonard. The socially awkward group also includes Stuart Bloom, a comic book store owner; Amy Farrah Fowler, a neuroscientist; Leslie Winkle, a physicist and Bernadette Rostenkowski, a microbiologist. The sitcom revolves around the lives of the scientists as they try to balance both their careers and living normal lives like Penny. This attempt to find balance is hilarious and reveals the weaknesses and biases of each character, especially the scientists.

The representation of the female characters perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes. One of the first things that a conscious viewer will first observe is that the sitcom attempts to confine women in stereotypical gender roles. For example, the women in the series are either depicted as motherly, seductive, or overly rational. Penny, for instance, is not allowed to step out of the traditional blonde representation of women that pursue careers like the arts or hospitality. Accordingly, throughout the series, she is regularly ridiculed by her college-educated neighbors, Sheldon and Leonard, and later their friends. The interaction with the boys and even the girls show the viewers that she has nothing else to offer besides her looks. Most of the series shows that the boys are obsessed with her beauty and treat her differently from the other college-educated girls. Further, some of the comments made by the male characters show that they would prefer a patriarchal setup and that women should remain housewives. For instance, Leslie notes that Sheldon once demeaned her and advised that she should return to traditional female roles in the thirteenth episode of the first series:

***Leslie****: Wait, you’re going up against Sheldon Cooper?*

***Howard****: Yes.*

***Leslie****: That arrogant, misogynistic East-Texas doorknob that told me I should abandon my work with high energy particles for laundry and childbearing?*

From the excerpt above, there is no doubt that Sheldon holds traditional beliefs on gender roles and sees high-achieving women like Leslie as a threat. Sheldon’s behavior towards Leslie can best be described by Kimmel (2013, p. 50), where he notes that “if the playing field had now grown more crowded, and the cries for leveling it had grown more insistent, then one strategy was to kick them out.” According to the quote, as the threat of women that were now educated as men grew, the strategy used by the white men was to lock women and other marginalized groups out. Thus, Sheldon seems to hold the same belief. Further, the perception of women does not stop at traditional roles, as seen in the next paragraph.

The sexualization of women in the sitcom is another example of gender stereotyping. Besides each of the women in the film having independent careers, the creators’ attempts to objectify the women cannot be missed sexually. Moreover, the creators also seem to try to make the women feel less female if they do not pursue sexual encounters with men. The most prevalent example in the sitcom is that of Penny, who has is largely commodified. For instance, unlike the female scientist characters, Penny maintains straightened hair and often wears tight or revealing clothes. Also, both the male and female characters do not hesitate to sexualize Penny. For example, in the first episode of the fourth series, Sheldon interjects a conversation between Amy and Penny by suggesting that Penny had slept with over 171 men since she was 15 years:

***Penny****: What? Where did you get 171 men?*

***Sheldon****: Simple extrapolation. In the three years that I’ve know you, you were single for two. During that time, I saw 17 different suitors. If we work backwards, correcting for observation bias and postulate an initial dating age of 15…*

From the excerpt, Sheldon assumes that Penny has slept with almost every man who has been to her house, which makes her a slut. The appearance of Leslie Winkle in the sitcom also proves the gendered nature of the sitcom. Notably, most of the female characters are scientists who place little emphasis on sexual endeavors. However, Leslie is the exact opposite, whereby she is both educated and hypersexual. While she is largely featured in education or scientific setting, she often discusses sex and wittingly uses scientific terms. Thus, the director takes the viewers’ attention from her career to her sexuality. Further, the discussions and behavior of the men reveal the sexualization of women in the sitcom (Larsen, 2020). For example, in the 20th episode of the second series, Howard, Leonard, and Raj go into a bar with the sole intention of getting women, as seen from the following conversation:

***Leonard****: Should we talk to some of those women?*

***Howard****: It’s way too early in the night for that. See, first we let the lawyers and the jocks thin the herd, and then we go after the weak and the old and the lame.*

In that conversation, it is clear that the three men are not looking for meaningful encounters with women besides sexual encounters. Moreover, the men are not even after the high-achieving or successful women they reserve for the “lawyer and jocks.” Filipova (2017, p. 4) describes the depiction of female characters like Leslie and others who pay attention to their appearance as “the stereotype of a seductress.” This stereotype largely portrays women cannot offer much besides sexual intercourse, whereby they also have to present themselves appealingly. Further, this perception leads up to the conversation on the authoritarian character of men in the sitcom.

The arrogance of the male characters towards women in the sitcom cannot be understated. While the socially inept male characters are not the typical representation of masculinity, their sense of entitlement, especially towards the female characters, cannot be missed all through the entire series. Sheldon particularly stands out in the sitcom, whereby he constantly reiterates his academic achievements and alma mater. For instance, in the first episode of the first series, Sheldon makes the following comments on Penny’s education:

***Penny****: Can I ask you a question?*

***Sheldon****: Given your community-college education, I encourage you to ask as many as possible.*

The arrogance then goes further when Penny tries to advise Sheldon on how to manage his date:

***Penny****: Okay. Well, then, there’s a couple of things you should probably know.*

***Sheldon****: I have a master’s degree and two doctorates. The things I should know, I do know.*

***Penny****: My point is, I know more about dating than you, and if you were smart as you think you are, you would listen to me.*

***Sheldon****: If you know so much, how come I have a date tonight and you have nothing better to do than drive me to it?*

Thus, Sheldon suggests that Penny has no authority to enlighten him on dating by having lower academic achievements. This sense of entitlement and arrogance is perhaps best illustrated in the Manufacturing Rage chapter of the Angry White Men book. The book discusses the manifestation of anger among white men as a result of the increased social equality. According to (Kimmel 2013, p. 61), “Angry White Men feel entitled while looking ‘down’ – at the hordes of ‘others’ who are threatening to take what they believe is rightfully theirs.” Notably, Sheldon seems to back his masculinity on his education while downplaying women like Penny to offer any meaningful advice. A similar case is also witnessed among Asian characters in the entertainment industry. As seen from The Problematic Representations of Asian American Gender and Sexuality Reading. According to the text, “some are constructed as having power and dominance, and others are depicted as powerless and submissive, and sometimes subservient” (p. 65). The excerpt perfectly illustrates the sitcom whereby the men are depicted in high regard compared to the women, regardless of their achievements. Consequently, it is also important to look at equality in the sitcom.

The film primarily revolves around the lives of the male characters while having little to show for the female characters besides their interaction with the actors. While there are nearly as many women as men in the sitcom, not much can be said about the female characters. Notably, most female characters have lives beyond their friendship with Sheldon, Leonard, or Howard. For instance, Amy Farrah Fowler has a Ph.D. in neurobiology and even occasionally challenges Sheldon’s wits. However, little can be written about her career, but much can be said about her relationship with Sheldon. The symbolic annihilation theory best illustrates this scenario whereby it describes the inequality in media across differences like socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or race. As seen from Smith et al. (2018, p. 1), “leading ladies rarely drive the action in the film.” For instance, in a study of 34 and 32 films in 2016 and 2015, respectively, only 33 percent gave women the lead or the co-lead. These numbers would not be surprising to most avid viewers, whereby it is common to find even a lead actress role being overshadowed by their male colleagues. Thus, The Big Bang Theory undoubtedly offers a perfect illustration of symbolic annihilation where even the attention does not favor the lead actresses.

There is no doubt that The Big Bang Theory is one of the most popular sitcoms in the last decade. However, a review of the film extensively perpetuates negative gender stereotypes through both subtle and overt strategies such as characterization, diction, attitudes, and even the focus given across the groups. Given its popularity and massive support, it is likely that there will be more of such sitcoms which might either perpetuate the same stereotypes or make improvements.

References

Alzahrani, F. (2016). The portrayal of Women and Gender Roles in Films. *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research*, *7*(4). https://www.ijser.org/researchpaper/The-portrayal-of-Women-and-Gender-Roles-in-Films.pdf

Filipova, P. (2017). *Women (and) scientists: Modern Sexism in The Big Bang Theory*. Oceanide.

Kimmel, M. (2013). *Angry White Men*. Nation Books.

Larsen, M. L. S. (2020). *Geek and nerd masculinity in The Big Bang Theory*. https://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/334563721/Speciale\_\_Marie\_Larsen\_\_\_The\_Big\_Bang\_Theory.pdf

*Problematic Representations of Asian American Gender and Sexuality*. (n.d.).

Smith, S., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Case, A., & Choi, A. (2018). *Inequality in 1,100 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT & Disability from 2007 to 2017*. http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inequality-in-1100-popular-films.pdf