

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-1 FEB. 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**  
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)



Impact Factor: 8.67

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Exploring Women's Representation in the 1960s: A Feminist Analysis of 'Mad Men'**

**Rashmi Jacob**

Jaypee Institute of Information Technology.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10795598>

**Article History:** Submitted-03/01/2024, Revised-15/02/2024, Accepted-22/02/2024, Published-29/02/2024.

### **Abstract:**

This research paper scrutinizes the portrayal of women in the 1960s through the lens of the "Mad Men" television series, juxtaposing it with the profound concepts of Sanskrit sutras "Aham Asmi" and "Aham Brahmasmi," which underscore the holistic significance of women. Despite women's pivotal role in creation and life's sustenance, literature and society have often failed to represent them adequately. The paper challenges this trend, delving into gender theories and analyzing characters like Peggy Olsen, Joan Harris, and Betty Draper, particularly focusing on Peggy as a feminist icon. Drawing on feminist literature and media studies, it dissects the objectification of women in "Mad Men" and the societal barriers they encountered, while also acknowledging the limitations of 1960s feminism. By contextualizing these themes against the backdrop of the show's portrayal of advertising executives, the paper acts as a window into the challenges faced by women in the 1960s, shedding light on persisting barriers today. The Sanskrit sutras, originating from ancient wisdom, further accentuate the innate importance of women in the creation and perpetuation of life, resonating with the paper's exploration of gender representation and societal norms.

**Keywords:** Representation of Women, Mad Men TV Series, Performativity Theory, Media Representation, Feminist Literature.

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, women have played pivotal roles in shaping societies, cultures, and families. Their contributions, however, have often been overshadowed or inadequately represented

in various facets of human expression, including literature and societal norms. This paper endeavours to delve into the representation of women within the television series "Mad Men," which unfolds against the backdrop of the early 1960s.

"Mad Men," created by Matthew Weiner, is a series that immerses its viewers in the world of advertising executives working on Madison Avenue during the 1960s. While it portrays a broad spectrum of characters, the focus of this research centres on the predominantly female characters within the series. These women grapple with a society marked by its inherent sexism, a period when the struggle for gender equality was a distant aspiration.

The choice to juxtapose the Sanskrit sutras with the exploration of women's representation in "Mad Men" is not merely coincidental. Instead, it is a deliberate attempt to draw parallels between ancient wisdom and contemporary societal narratives. The sutras emphasize the idea of completeness, hinting at the notion that women, too, are an integral part of the fabric of existence, much like the core of the universe itself.

By examining the characters, storylines, and societal dynamics portrayed in "Mad Men," this paper seeks to shed light on how women were perceived, and treated, and, ultimately, how they navigated the constraints of a patriarchal society. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly disparate subjects aims to provoke critical questions: Why have women, despite their profound roles in the creation of societies and cultures, been marginalized and inadequately represented? Why do women continue to struggle for their place in what is often referred to as a "man's world"?

As the paper embarks on this exploration, we will witness how the characters in "Mad Men," particularly Peggy Olsen, Joan Harris, and Betty Draper, grapple with societal expectations and attempt to construct and affirm their identities within the confines of a society that often seeks to suppress their aspirations. Furthermore, the paper scrutinizes the objectification of women and the constraints placed upon them in the workplace and society.

In essence, this research endeavour not only seeks to dissect the portrayal of women in a television series but also to draw connections between ancient wisdom and contemporary realities. It aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on women's empowerment, societal representation, and the recognition of their indispensable role in shaping the world, both historically and in the present day.

## Methods

In the pursuit of understanding the representation of women in the television series "Mad Men" and its intersection with feminist literature and media studies, this research employs a qualitative analysis as its primary methodological approach. Qualitative analysis is well-suited for examining complex narratives, character development, and the portrayal of gender dynamics within a cultural context.

### 1. Qualitative Analysis of "Mad Men"

- a. Data Collection: The first step of this research method involves watching and systematically reviewing episodes and scenes from the television series "Mad Men." The analysis extends across multiple seasons of the show to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the characters and their development. Detailed notes are taken during this viewing process, focusing on the characters Peggy Olsen, Joan Harris, and Betty Draper.
- b. Character Profiling: Each of the three central female characters, namely Peggy Olsen, Joan Harris, and Betty Draper, is subject to extensive character profiling. This entails noting their personal histories, career trajectories, relationships, and the evolving challenges they encounter throughout the series.
- c. Thematic Analysis: The qualitative analysis extends to identifying and categorizing key themes related to gender representation, workplace dynamics, societal expectations, and the characters' struggles within the context of their time. The themes emerging from the episodes are extracted and documented.

### 2. Drawing from Feminist Literature

To provide a robust analytical framework and theoretical lens for the qualitative analysis, this research draws upon a body of feminist literature. Feminist theories offer valuable perspectives for understanding the representation of women in media, and they inform the interpretation of the characters and themes within "Mad Men."

a. Literature Review: A comprehensive literature review is conducted to identify relevant feminist theories, concepts, and critical perspectives that pertain to women's representation in media. This review informs the research's theoretical framework.

b. Application of Feminist Theory: Feminist theories, such as the representation of women in media, gendered power dynamics, and intersectionality, are applied to the analysis of "Mad Men." These theories assist in deconstructing the characters' experiences and challenges within the series.

### **3. Incorporating Media Studies**

Media studies provide a critical lens through which to examine how women are portrayed in the television series "Mad Men" and the societal impact of these portrayals.

a. Media Analysis: Key concepts and methodologies from media studies are integrated into the analysis. This includes examining how media constructs and disseminates gender norms, stereotypes, and narratives.

b. Historical Context: Media studies also consider the historical context of the series, including the cultural and societal norms of the 1960s, which deeply influence the characters and their actions.

### **4. In-depth examination of Gender Dynamics**

The analysis extends beyond the characters themselves to encompass the broader gender dynamics present in "Mad Men." This includes scrutinizing how the male characters interact with and perceive the female characters, as well as the overall portrayal of gender roles and expectations.

### **5. Interpretation and Synthesis**

Following the qualitative analysis of the series and the integration of feminist literature and media studies, the research engages in interpretation and synthesis. This involves synthesizing the findings, identifying patterns, and drawing conclusions about the representation of women in "Mad Men," as well as the relevance and implications of these portrayals within the broader societal and historical context.

This research employs a multi-faceted approach, blending qualitative analysis of the television series "Mad Men" with insights from feminist literature and media studies. The characters Peggy Olsen, Joan Harris, and Betty Draper serve as focal points for understanding the representation of women, their roles, and the challenges they faced within the specific milieu of the 1960s. Through this methodological framework, the research aims to provide a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics and the portrayal of women within the cultural narrative of "Mad Men."

## **Results**

The analysis of the television series "Mad Men" yields several significant findings that shed light on the representation of women within the context of the early 1960s. These findings encompass the multifaceted portrayal of women in the series, the emergence of Peggy Olsen as a feminist icon, the objectification of women, and the limitations of feminism during this period.

### **1. Representation of Women in "Mad Men"**

The series "Mad Men" serves as a compelling lens through which to explore the lives and experiences of advertising executives in the 1960s. While the show masterfully portrays its characters as multidimensional human beings, it is evident that the female characters, in particular, confront distinctive and challenging circumstances in their pursuit of identity and success. The series adeptly captures the nuances of a society marked by deeply ingrained gender norms and expectations.

These gender norms, prevalent in the 1960s, manifest in various aspects of the characters' lives, influencing their career choices, personal relationships, and self-perceptions. The representation of women in "Mad Men" reflects the complexity of navigating a world where societal roles were rigidly defined along gender lines. It serves as a microcosm of the broader societal dynamics of the era, highlighting the challenges and constraints faced by women in their quest for autonomy and recognition.

### **2. Peggy Olsen: A Feminist Icon**

Among the female characters depicted in "Mad Men," Peggy Olsen emerges as a standout feminist icon. Her character arc is a testament to the changing landscape of women's roles in the

workplace. Peggy's journey, from her initial role as a secretary to her ascent as a copywriter, reflects her unwavering determination to be valued and recognized for her intellect and creativity rather than her appearance.

Peggy Olsen's character subverts traditional gender norms by challenging the expectations placed upon her. She seeks to break free from the confines of her assigned gender role, refusing to be confined to the limited opportunities available to women during that period. Her relentless pursuit of professional success serves as an inspiration and a symbol of progress, both within the context of the series and as a reflection of broader societal changes.

### **3. Objectification of Women**

"Mad Men" also brings to the forefront the pervasive objectification of women during the 1960s. The series emphasizes the preoccupation with women's appearance and sexuality, portraying characters who wield sexual power over men. The women in the series are often depicted as beautifully dressed, meticulously groomed, and skilled in using their physical allure to their advantage.

This portrayal underscores the societal expectations placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles. Success for many female characters in "Mad Men" often hinges on their ability to embody a specific image of femininity, catering to the desires of a desiring male gaze. The series' visual representation reinforces the idea that women's worth is intrinsically tied to their physical attributes and their ability to captivate men.

### **4. The Limitations of 1960s Feminism**

While Peggy Olsen's journey symbolizes progress and resilience, it is essential to recognize the limitations of feminism during the 1960s, a theme explored within "Mad Men." The series portrays a world where the feminist movement had yet to gain significant momentum, and women were still navigating a society deeply entrenched in gender inequality.

The characters in the series, despite their struggles and ambitions, exist within a societal framework that largely restricts the opportunities available to women. The limitations of 1960s feminism are evident in the characters' interactions, choices, and societal norms that persistently

reinforce traditional gender roles. The series underscores that women like Peggy were pioneers in challenging these norms, but widespread feminist cultural shifts had not yet taken root.

The results of the analysis reveal the multifaceted representation of women in "Mad Men," reflecting the complexities of gender dynamics, the emergence of feminist ideals through characters like Peggy Olsen, the objectification of women, and the enduring limitations of 1960s feminism. These findings provide valuable insights into the portrayal of women in media and offer a poignant commentary on the societal norms and challenges faced by women during this transformative period in history.

## Discussion

The television series "Mad Men" serves as a compelling window into the challenges faced by women in the 1960s, reflecting the societal norms and gender dynamics prevalent during that era. This discussion aims to explore the show's significance as a historical narrative, focusing on the evolution of women's roles represented through characters like Peggy Olsen, and the continuous struggle for achieving gender equality.

As a historical narrative, "Mad Men" aligns with the feminist theory of historical consciousness, offering a platform to reflect upon past social ideologies and women's endeavours (Baker, 2000). The series acts as a cultural artefact, vividly depicting the patriarchal norms and entrenched gender roles characterizing 1960s society, providing a contextual backdrop for understanding women's roles within that framework (Lerner, 1986).

Peggy Olsen's character epitomizes a feminist ideal by challenging established gender norms and conformities, aligning with the concept of "doing gender" as outlined by West and Zimmerman (1987). Her character arc also embodies intersectionality, where her experiences as a woman intersect with her socioeconomic background, showcasing the multifaceted nature of her journey (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

Furthermore, "Mad Men" highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality, emphasizing its resonance with feminist theories such as those by Hooks (2000). It echoes Judith Butler's theory of "performativity," showcasing the fluid and performative nature of gender roles and the need for societal evolution (Butler, 1990). Peggy Olsen's character actively challenges these performative



aspects, advocating for societal change and redefining the conventional female roles within the workplace.

In conclusion, the nuanced portrayal of women in "Mad Men," contextualized through the lens of feminist theories, offers profound insights into the gender dynamics of the 1960s. The series not only serves as a historical depiction but also contributes to ongoing dialogues about gender roles, empowerment, and the persistent struggle for achieving gender equality in society. Through its characters and narratives, "Mad Men" becomes a powerful vehicle for understanding the historical context of women's experiences and the evolving nature of gender norms.

## **Conclusion**

The television series "Mad Men" presents a compelling and multi-layered portrayal of women's experiences in the 1960s, offering a window into the intricate and challenging roles they navigated within a society entrenched in traditional gender norms. The character of Peggy Olsen emerges as a beacon of progress within the series, showcasing a resilient and determined woman breaking barriers and challenging the established gender expectations of the time. However, the series also adeptly highlights the limitations and constraints imposed by societal norms, underscoring the struggles women faced to assert their identities and pursue their aspirations against the backdrop of a patriarchal society.

An essential aspect of understanding women's roles in "Mad Men" lies in exploring the influence of linguistic concepts on societal expectations. The show vividly illustrates how language and discourse played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of gender roles during the 1960s (Lakoff, 1973). The linguistic analysis reveals how societal expectations, embedded in language, dictated women's roles and choices, providing a deeper understanding of the intricacies surrounding gendered language during that era.

Peggy Olsen's character embodies core feminist theories of agency and resistance (Scott, 1986), epitomizing women as active agents challenging prevailing gender norms. Her journey from a secretary to a copywriter signifies a seismic shift in the landscape of women in the workplace, echoing the broader social changes beginning to unfold during the second-wave feminist movement. Peggy's story is a testament to the evolving perceptions of women's

capabilities and contributions, exemplifying the progress made and the potential for transformative change.

However, "Mad Men" also sheds light on the limitations of 1960s feminism, portraying a time when feminist ideals were nascent and had yet to gain widespread traction (Friedan, 1963). The series captures the zeitgeist of the era, where women were beginning to challenge societal norms, but institutional barriers and societal expectations still constrained their emancipation fully.

Applying theoretical constructs like performativity (Butler, 1990) to the series reveals how gender roles were not intrinsic but rather performed, emphasizing the societal construction of gender identities. Furthermore, "Mad Men" serves as a historical and linguistic artefact, offering insights into feminist linguistics and illustrating how language and discourse were pivotal in shaping women's roles during that era (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

In conclusion, "Mad Men" provides a complex tapestry of women's experiences interwoven with linguistic and feminist perspectives. It illuminates the complexities of women's roles, the evolving nature of societal expectations, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. This research enriches the broader dialogue on women's empowerment and underscores their pivotal role in shaping societal narratives, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

### Works Cited:

Baker, Paul. "Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis." *A Companion to Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 139-160.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1990, pp. 519-531.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139-167.

Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. *Language and Gender*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton, 1963.

Lakoff, Robin. "Language and Woman's Place." *Language in Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, pp. 45-80.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

Scott, Joan W. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5, 1986, pp. 1053-1075.