

To what extent do social and cultural differences explain the function of character in the first episode of *The Book Group*?

The styles of British sitcom have changed over the years, but they tend to be based on a group of contrasting characters brought together in each episode. The situation comedy has a storyline; actually it is a drama where each character goes through comedic sequences. Characters are unable to communicate and they have relationship and family problems. Classic British sitcoms 'deal with groups who the audience is intended to find funny because of their inability to understand one another.' (Mills, 2005:41). *The Book Group* (2002) is a comedy drama written and directed by the American-born Glasgow resident Annie Griffin. It was aired on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2003. It is a critically acclaimed series with excellent camera style and film shooting, which does not have a laughter track. This sitcom ran for two series. The first episode of season one is "On The Road" and it consists of many key characteristics of postmodernism. Certain features of postmodernism are pastiche of many genres and styles; boundaries between high and pop culture are blurred which 'have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture' (Andreas Huyssen cited in Storey, 2009, p. 184).

Even as most of the people nowadays characters in *The Book Group* are all affected by globalization. They are individuals from different classes. Janice, Dirka (from Sweden) and Fist (from Holland) are Dutch footballer's wives, Rab is an unemployed football fan, Barney is an angloist postgraduate student and Kenny is a wheelchair bound leisure centre employee. Claire is the host in this episode and she is a sexually distressed teacher character from America. They all come from different cultures – many of them affected by diaspora – but both the audience and other characters become confused when Fist starts a phone conversation in Dutch in the middle of the book group.

They want to meet other people and they speak a common language, but the use of language characterizes their differences. These cultural differences make boundaries among them and make them unable to communicate and this is the source of the humour. Claire is constantly criticising Rab's accent and she looks down on him. Still, maybe because of their inner needs for social life and for ambitions to better their lives, they are able to talk about some things in certain level. Rab is a football fan and he is capable of talking to footballer's wives. The footballer's wives like Barney in the beginning, but later their attention focus on Kenny because he is kind and emotional. Barney is able to talk about the book, but others are not interested in his speech. In this first episode Claire is obsessed with Barney, because Barney is able to express his opinion about the book according her expectations and she hopes that she can start relationship with him.

Claire is frustrated because most of them do not want to read and explain the book in her way. They interpret the book in their way in reference to their life experiences and their education— this can be linked to the interpretation of text by Roland Barthes' (1967) essay *The Death of the Author*. Claire is trying to persuade others how to think about the book. It is ironic that she is trying to orchestrate the discussion about the book, but at the end, she reveals, that she is sexually frustrated person (superiority) – association to the post feminism. She seems educated, independent and in some way self-confident, but she is not aware of her own condition. She is unhappy and alone person bounded by her expectation, but she pretends to be a stable and socialised character. The irony of her double coded behaviour is an example of incongruity.

They all see each other through lenses of their own personality. There is a constant tension between the group members and they are unable to meet others expectation because they are all different. Dirka wants to be a television presenter, her behaviour is strongly affected by

the media – characteristic of postmodernism – but because she feels she is unable to speak about the book she is very distressed. She is trying to release her tension by doing ‘social rituals’ like offering and making tea. However this behaviour is for Claire very strange.

They try to joke to release strained relations, but they are not always able to do so. In the scene where Dirka asks ‘do you mind if I smoke?’ Claire answers with a face expression of disgust ‘yeah’. Then Fist wanted to make a joke, that Dirka is not smoking and this is her first time ever to try smoking, but only footballer's wives laughed. The rest of the group remained cold and restrained. Later there is a *mise-en-scene* where Barney ironically suggested discussing their sexual preferences. Kenny takes it serious and he starts talking about his sexual life (which does not exist), then Barney exposes, that he was being ironic and that for him is awful listening people’s sexuality. This situation is comic, but also dramatic.

Social and cultural differences of characters and the inability of communication in in the first episode of *The Book Group* may cause tension in the audience. Probably the notion of the writer is to leave us in a mixed feeling which is made by the conflict of humour and tension. Not surprisingly Gareth McLean’s opinion about *The Book Group* is that ‘its emphasis on character and its excruciating moments of social awkwardness’ make this sitcom a comedy of embarrassment (2003).

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