

Arcadia University

The People's Princesses: Feminist Theory and UK Media  
Representations of Lady Diana Spencer and Meghan Markle

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## **I. Defining Feminism**

Feminism is, at its core, a humanitarian movement which strives to achieve social, racial, financial, and political equality for women. Since its inception, it can be broken into four distinct waves. The first wave (which took place from the 1840s until the 1920s) was defined by the push for women's suffrage. The second wave (which took place from the 1960s through the 1980s) revolved around a variety of social, sexual, and reproductive freedoms, with a particular interest in contraceptive and abortion rights. The third wave (which many estimate as beginning in the late 1980s or early 1990s) focused on making feminism more inclusive for women of all races and sexualities, while also adding transgender women to the narrative. The fourth (and current) wave of feminism rose in tandem with the digital and social media age and is centered around body positivity, sex positivity, and exploring how patriarchy is damaging to men as well as women.

Though each of these waves have separate defining characteristics, it is important to note that they are not stepping stones from one another. That is to say that the fourth wave of feminism is no "better" than the third. Rather, the focus of each wave of feminism is to address whatever issues are pressing to women of the time. In many cases, the issues at hand can be related back to former waves, especially as it relates to reproductive and sexual freedoms.

## **II. Liesbet van Zoonen**

Liesbet van Zoonen is a Dutch scholar whose works focus around feminist theory, media theory, cultural studies, and popular culture. Her 1994 text, *Feminist Media Studies*, provides an introduction to feminist theory and how one's idea of gender is shaped by the media products (literature, advertisements, music videos, television programs, films) which they consume. She references Stuart Hall's popular model of encoding and decoding (Hall 1973) and claims that it

“provides a useful framework to review and arrange feminist media theory and research” (van Zoonen 9) before beginning with an overview of three particular branches of feminism; radical, liberal and social.

### **A. Branches of Feminism**

Radical feminism is described by van Zoonen (through citing a portion of *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* by Leslie Steeves titled “Feminist theories and media studies”) as having a keen interest in pornography and the damaging effects that the industry has on men’s perceptions of women:

“Many feminists argue that pornography objectifies women for men’s pleasures, that it contributes to the eroticization of power and violence and hence the construction of forms of masculine sexuality which seek pleasure through power and violence” (van Zoonen 35).

According to van Zoonen, liberal feminism’s primary concerns are stereotypes and gender socialization. Finally, and most importantly as it pertains to van Zoonen’s scholarship, is socialist feminism, which acknowledges that human beings are defined by their gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and nationality (van Zoonen 22).

### **B. Representation of Women in Popular Culture**

Using both popular and cultural studies as a foundation, van Zoonen discusses the fact that women are both underrepresented and misrepresented in the media saying, “The uneasy connection between the pleasures of popular culture and the political aims of feminism is by now more or less a classic issue in feminist media theory” (van Zoonen 7). She notes that, as we all live in a patriarchal society, it comes as no surprise that media production, as is the case with many industries, is primarily controlled by men and suggests that the misrepresentation of

women in media products is due to that fact. In quoting from *Out of Focus: Writings on Women and the Media* by Kath Davies:

“Since those who control the media are almost all (rich) men, there is every incentive for them to present the capitalist, patriarchal scheme of things as the most attractive system available - and to convince the less privileged that the oppression and limitations of their lives are inevitable” (van Zoonen 29).

In this instance, “the less privileged” are women and “the most attractive system” is women being represented as wholly domestic beings that are rarely given their own autonomy in popular media. Other scholars and van Zoonen have pointed out that women are most often portrayed in media products as wives, girlfriends, sisters and daughters, whose role it is to be subservient, dependent sidekicks to their male romantic partners or family members. In citing the inherent want of all feminists for women to be represented realistically in media products, van Zoonen points out that while some women do in fact make livings of being mothers and homemakers, using this cliché stereotype with frequency may reinforce to young girls and women the feeling that they must adhere to this outdated gender role.

### **C. Gender Roles**

Liesbet van Zoonen believes that children and adults alike learn their “appropriate” gender roles from the media products they consume. In proving this point, she cites *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger (which introduces the concept of male gaze) as well as “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” by Laura Mulvey. She concludes that women’s bodies are (generally speaking) something meant to be lusted over while men’s bodies are viewed as a spectacle (van Zoonen 92).

### **III. Alison Harvey**

Alison Harvey is a contemporary feminist media studies scholar who presently lives and works as a professor in the United Kingdom. Her 2019 text, *Feminist Media Studies*, compliments the former work of Liesbet van Zoonen in the field of feminist theory. In this text, however, Harvey attempts to make feminist theory more accessible and explicitly adopts an intersectional approach to the discipline, meaning that she frequently addresses the roles of gender, sexuality, race, class, and more from a feminist lens. In the introduction, she introduces the idea of white feminism, which is the act of treating the experiences, struggles, and desires of white women as if they were universal. Though she herself is a white woman, she widely acknowledges the many facets and forms of privilege in her text.

#### **Intersectionality**

When overviewing the importance of intersectionality as it relates to modern feminist media studies, Harvey offers 10 important topics to consider:

##### **A. Race**

In previously noting that the experiences of white women are often deemed to be the universal experiences of women, Harvey points out that though women on the whole are not given enough proper or accurate representation in the media, white women are given more visibility than women of color are (Harvey 20).

##### **B. Class**

Here, Harvey introduces the concept of consumer feminism and how it ties into the development of feminist media studies. She notes that women who are born with significant economic reserves have access to better education, healthcare services, and are thus more likely to have the time and resources to progress themselves personally and professionally. She also

identifies that women who are from or of lesser economic reserves are often subjected to intense media scrutiny. As they cannot afford to buy into consumer feminism, they are, at times, excluded from even the most intersectional of feminist narratives. (Harvey 21).

### **C. Language**

Harvey brings to light the fact that many academic works stemming from feminist media theorists exclusively reference texts from other Western thinkers. She notes that this, in part, due to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, which is the intense "othering" of persons from non-Western cultures as being unintelligent and savage for their differing views and daily practices. (Harvey 21).

### **D. Sexuality**

Using 'Sex in Public' a section of the 1998 text *Critical Inquiry* by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, Harvey defines heteronormativity as, 'the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent - that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged' (Harvey 21). While she notes that representation of LGBTQ+ persons is on the rise in popular culture media (television, advertisement, film) there is still a great deal of subtle and outright discrimination against members of the community. She specifically mentions the erasure of bisexual individuals as "disingenuous, greedy, or indecisive." In her intersectional approach to feminist media studies, Harvey stresses the importance of including members of the LGBTQ+ community in the narrative. (Harvey 22).

### **E. Age**

Harvey highlights the fact that ageism, discrimination based on one's age, is a large component of women's representation in media products. She argues that, in the eyes of the

media, there is too heavy a focus on young femininity and that women decrease in value as they age. (Harvey 22).

#### **F. Migration and Citizenship Status**

Harvey believes that women who have to immigrate or become refugees due to a variety of conflicts are not given the opportunity to be represented in a substantial manner by the media. (Harvey 22).

#### **G. Gender Identity**

Persons who are cisgender, whose sex at birth aligns with their sense of identity, have the innate privilege of being validated in their gender identity. Harvey points out here that gender-queer, non-binary, and transgender persons face unrelenting discrimination and harassment in the eyes of the public and, in some cases, at the hands of their own friends and family members. These persons continue to be marginalized in the mainstream, despite concerted efforts by some in the field. (Harvey 22).

#### **H. Disability**

As far as physical accessibility is concerned, disabled persons are often at a disadvantage. Whether it be a physical or mental ailment, Harvey notes that “people with disabilities are largely represented in the media as victims, objects of pity, and as lacking or damaged” (Harvey 23). As it relates to women with mental disabilities, their experiences are invalidated by news media and popular culture through being written off or portrayed as crazy or otherwise unhinged. (Harvey 23).

#### **I. Religion**

Representations of religion in the media, particularly portrayals of Muslim women, are discriminatory. This ties back in to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and “othering”, but is

also influenced by Islamophobia, the prejudice against any persons who practice Islam. It comes as no surprise that Christianity, a religion heavily practiced in Western society, has been and is currently the most heavily represented religion in popular media products. Though, with that said, it's important to note that Christian values and practices (particularly those of the Catholic faith) oppress women in their teachings in part by citing that Eve, the first known woman in their eyes, committed the original sin. (Harvey 23).

### **J. Body Shape and Size**

Similarly to ageism, women who are not thin and fit are not given equal representation in media products. Though body positivity is coming more into the light as part of the fourth wave of feminism, fatphobia is still clearly present. Something else that Harvey notes is the concept of thinness as being directly related to the perception of someone's inherent beauty and value whereas fatness is ridiculed and automatically associated with unattractiveness and poor health practices. Though the latter is untrue, it is the notion of many sexist and fatphobic commentary (Harvey 24).

## **IV. Judith Butler**

### **A. Gender as Performance**

In her 1990 critically-acclaimed text, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler theorizes that people display gender as a type of performance saying in part, "...gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 34).

In this, Butler is saying that one's identity is constructed through a series of acts and so-called "expressions" that people perform. These acts can range from the way someone dresses and speaks to how one carries themselves physically. While Butler acknowledges that there are biological differences dictated by sex, she distinguishes that gender is something different which is defined by these aforementioned acts and the media products a person consumes. She also notes that gender performativity is not a single act, but a repetition and a ritual which is reinforced by dominant patriarchal ideologies. Butler also believes that, in most scenarios, women live up to gender roles more often than men do.

## **V. Conclusion**

The feminist and gender related frameworks and theories of Liesbet van Zoonen, Alison Harvey, and Judith Butler can be used to evaluate two of the most famous women in the world; Lady Diana Spencer and Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex. Though their lives followed different paths, both of their treatments in UK news and tabloid outlets were and are unjust in their nature.

### **A. Lady Diana Spencer**

#### **I. Diana's Life**

Diana Frances Spencer was born on July 1, 1961 at Park House, Sandringham, Norfolk to parents John Spencer, Viscount Althorp and Frances Spencer, Viscountess Althorp. The family were considered to be British nobility, as they had had close relations with the British Royal Family for many decades. According to Andrew Morton, journalist and author of *Diana: Her True Story - In Her Own Words*, "though her childhood was privileged it was also unhappy," (Morton 19) as her parents divorced when she was only 7-years-old.

Prior to her marriage, Diana, just age 19, was working at a local kindergarten center as a teacher's aide. Just prior to and following her and Prince Charles' engagement announcement on February 24, 1981, Diana began being followed and photographed by members of the British tabloid press. In describing these initial encounters, Diana said, "Then it all started to build up, sort of like the press were being unbearable following my every move. I understood they had a job, but people did not understand that they had binoculars on me the whole time" (Morton 54).

Diana wed Charles, Prince of Wales on July 29, 1981 at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, thereby making her Princess of Wales. Seeing as though tensions were high throughout the country at the time, the British people were overcome with excitement by this union. Less than one year later, the pair welcomed their first son, William, Duke of Cambridge on June 21, 1982 at St. Mary's Hospital in London. On September 15, 1984, they announced the birth of Harry, Duke of Sussex, who was also born at St. Mary's Hospital in London. Though by all accounts both Charles and Diana enjoyed being parents to William and Harry, many sources say that their marriage was doomed from the beginning.

Not only did the pair have an age difference of 13 years, (Charles being the senior) they both were unfaithful to one another throughout the course of their marriage. The most prominent of these affairs was Charles' with Camilla Parker-Bowles, a woman to whom he is now married. Furthermore, Diana struggled with the intense pressures of being a member of the Royal Family, which manifested in a variety of mental health issues.

Even prior to her wedding to Charles, she suffered from severe bulimia, an eating disorder characterized in her case by binge-eating and subsequent self-purging via vomiting. In describing her eating disorder, Diana confessed the following for Andrew Morton's book:

“I remember the first time I made myself sick. I was so thrilled because I thought this was the release of tension. The first time I was measured for my wedding dress I was 29 inches around the waist. The day I got married I was 23 ½ inches. I had shrunk into nothing from February to July. I had shrunk to nothing” (Morton 93).

Morton’s text also outlines several attempts that Diana made on her life, including throwing herself down a flight of stairs while pregnant with William and conducting various acts of self-harm:

“I was running around with a lemon knife, one with the serrated edges. I was just so desperate. I knew what was wrong with me but nobody else around me understood me. I needed rest and to be looked after inside my house and for people to understand the torment and anguish going on in my head. It was a desperate cry for help. I’m not spoiled- I just needed to be allowed to adapt to my new position” (Morton 91).

Though her marriage was crumbling and her mental health was unstable, Diana’s media coverage at the time was overwhelmingly positive. Diana was loved by most of the British public and was referred to as the people’s princess for her individuality, empathy, and fashion sense. Though she was receiving so-called “good press” Diana did not enjoy this attention:

“The public side was very different from the private side. The public side, they wanted a fairy princess to come and touch them and everything will turn into gold and all their worries would be forgotten. Little did they realize that the individual was crucifying herself inside, because she didn’t think she was good enough” (Morton 95).

In a bombshell interview for BBC program, *Panorama*, which was broadcast in November 1995, after the separation between Diana and Charles was publicly announced, Diana was candid with journalist Martin Bashir about her experiences as Princess of Wales:

“The most daunting aspect was the media attention, because my husband and I, we were told when we got engaged that the media would go quietly, and it didn’t; and then when we were married they said it would go quietly and it didn’t; and then it started to focus very much on me, and I seemed to be on the front of a newspaper every single day, which is an isolating experience, and the higher the media put you, place you, is the bigger the drop.”

As she was a charismatic person, Diana quickly became one of the most, if not the most photographed women in the world. According to her, this began taking a toll on her husband and their relationship:

“On the outside, people were saying I gave my husband a hard time, that I was acting like a spoiled child, but I knew I just needed rest and patience and time to adapt to all the roles that were required of me overnight. By then there was immense jealousy because every single day I was on the front of the newspapers” (Morton 94).

After her official divorce from Charles in 1996, Diana remained devoted to her two sons and various philanthropic efforts, including work with The National AIDS Trust of England and Centrepoin, a charity that helps homeless youth avoid life on the streets. In discussing her future plans during interviews for Andrew Morton’s book, Diana said: “I think I’m going to cut a very different path from everyone else. I’m going to break away from this set-up and help the man on the street” (Morton 116).

She died following a car accident in Paris, France on August 31, 1997, after being followed by cars of paparazzi personnel. After hearing this devastating news while in South Africa, Diana’s brother, Earl Spencer blamed the press for her death saying,

“I always believed the press would kill her in the end. But not even I could imagine that they would take such a direct hand in her death so as seems to be the case. It would appear that

every proprietor and editor of every publication that has paid for intrusive and exploitative photographs of her, encouraging greedy and ruthless individuals to risk everything in pursuit of Diana's image, has blood on their hands today."

Prior to her highly televised funeral service, Queen Elizabeth II gave an address to the nation on September 5 to honor the passing of her former daughter-in-law. She said, in part: "She was an exceptional and gifted human being. In good times and bad, she never lost her capacity to smile and laugh, nor to inspire others with her warmth and kindness."

## **II. Analysis**

Using the ideas of Judith Butler, one can argue that Lady Diana struggled mentally in part because she was stripped of her autonomy when she married Prince Charles. She was forced to conform to gender roles and the expectations of The Royal Family, a stoic group of persons who by nature stifle many of their own emotions. She was, in a sense, misrepresented by the media, even in her "good press." The British public saw Diana not as a human woman with human struggles but as an ethereal being whose role it was to be a perfectly poised porcelain doll. The continuous, intense pressure to keep up her public persona had to have had detrimental effects to a woman who could not even receive help from the people who were closest to her.

In looking at the life of Lady Diana through the lens of Liesbet van Zoonen's works and her thoughts on gender roles, Diana's struggles with bulimia may have been exacerbated by how frequently Diana and her body were photographed by the paparazzi. This overexposure would have led Diana to see images of herself whenever she had the opportunity to read a magazine, watch television, or scan through a newspaper. Bulimia often lives in tandem with body dysmorphia, a mental disorder in which one in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance. People with this condition tend to avoid social

situations when possible, something which Diana did not have the option to do, even after her divorce from Charles. If Diana was constantly performing body checks and ensuring that she were, by her standards, still desirable, her anxiety could have only worsened after seeing images of herself, leading to the continuation of her bulimia.

## **B. Meghan Markle**

### **I. Meghan's Life**

Rachel Meghan Markle was born on August 4, 1981 in Los Angeles, California to parents Doria Ragland and Thomas Markle Sr. In their book, *Finding Freedom: Harry and Meghan and The Making of a Modern Royal Family*, journalists Carolyn Durand and Omid Scobie detail the harsh, racially-charged attacks from the British press that Meghan faced at the beginning of her relationship with Harry: "No matter how Meghan conducted herself online, there was never any justification for the racism that didn't take long to appear in stories about her" (Durand, Scobie 86). A headline in the *Daily Mail* in the first week of November (2016) referred to Meghan's upbringing as "Straight Outta Compton," going so far as to call her mother's neighborhood "gang-scarred."

Harry and Meghan allegedly met on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend of theirs in 2016. The relationship quickly developed and before long a proposal was on the table. The engagement of Meghan to Harry was officially announced by Clarence House, the home of Harry's father, Prince Charles on November 27, 2017:

"His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales is delighted to announce the engagement of Prince Harry to Ms. Meghan Markle. The wedding will take place in Spring 2018. Further details about the wedding day will be announced in due course. His Royal Highness and Ms. Markle became engaged in London earlier this month. Prince Harry has informed Her Majesty The

Queen and other close members of his family. Prince Harry has also sought and received the blessing of Ms. Markle's parents."

The pair wed on May 19, 2018 at St. George's Chapel on the grounds of Windsor Castle. Just under a year later, Meghan became a mother on May 6, 2019 when she gave birth to a son, Archie, at Portland Hospital in London. Though these should have been exciting times for the pair, they were riddled with media scrutiny and invasions of Meghan's privacy. In October 2019, the couple announced a lawsuit against *The Mail on Sunday*, an outlet which published a private letter that Meghan sent to her father, Thomas Markle in February 2019. The claim states that the outlet misused private information and infringed the copyright and breach of the United Kingdom's Data Protection Act of 2018.

Though Meghan's estrangements from her father and half-siblings had been a topic of media gossip prior to this incident, this very obviously hit a nerve with the couple, who were tired of this treatment. In a statement released soon after announcing the lawsuit, Harry, Duke of Sussex said, in part:

"There is a human cost to this relentless propaganda, specifically when it is knowingly false and malicious, and though we have continued to put on a brave face – as so many of you can relate to – I cannot begin to describe how painful it has been."

In a January 8, 2020 announcement on the @sussexroyal Instagram page, the couple announced the following: "After many months of reflection and internal discussions, we have chosen to make a transition this year in starting to carve out a progressive new role within this institution. We intend to step back as 'senior' members of the Royal Family and work to become financially independent, while continuing to fully support Her Majesty The Queen..." This was followed by harsh criticism in *Daily Mail* headlines, "It's a masterclass in wanting to have your

cake and eat it’: Furious Buckingham Palace aides turn on Prince Harry and Meghan Markle after they stun the Queen by ‘pressing the nuclear button’ and quitting the Royal Family” as well as the following notice from Buckingham Palace: “Discussions with The Duke and Duchess of Sussex are at an early stage. We understand their desire to take a different approach, but these are complicated issues that will take time to work through.”

Some speculate that the couple did not inform any of their family members of their plans to relocate to Canada and the United States. Though, after years of media scrutiny, it should not have come as a huge surprise. The renunciation was dubbed first by *The Sun* as “Megxit,” which heavily implies that Meghan pushed or forced her husband to leave his country and The Royal Family. In reality, Harry also felt deep-seeded frustration. To again reference his public statement in October 2019, after the filing of the *Mail on Sunday* lawsuit, Harry said: “My deepest fear is history repeating itself. I’ve seen what happens when someone I love is commoditized to the point that they are no longer treated or seen as a real person. I lost my mother and now I watch my wife falling victim to the same powerful forces.”

This was of course a way to reference the way Harry’s mother, Diana, was followed and harassed by the paparazzi during her short life. The pair now lives in the United States in Southern California, where they plan to live and raise Archie full-time.

## **II. Analysis**

Meghan Markle’s life and her treatment by the British media can be analyzed through the works of Alison Harvey and Judith Butler. To begin with, Meghan has received less positive media coverage than her sister-in-law, Kate, Duchess of Cambridge. This is due to the fact that Kate is a white woman and Meghan is biracial. Harvey points out that though women on the

whole are not given enough proper or accurate representation in the media, white women are given more visibility than women of color are.

In addition to the fact that Meghan is a woman of color, she was also married prior to the start of her relationship with Prince Harry, making her a prime target for sexist and unjust media coverage in the United Kingdom. The family Meghan remarried into is notorious for being unkind to divorcées and their partners. In 1936, Edward VIII, the uncle of Queen Elizabeth II, abdicated the throne in order to wed Wallis Simpson, an American divorcée. Because his family forbade him from marrying her, he was forced to leave his position of power. Though not as outrightly criticized due to the passage of time, Meghan is seen by the press as unpure because she was previously married. As Kate has not been married to anyone other than William, she is hailed as being “better” than Meghan.

The third so-called strike against Meghan is that she was not born and raised in the United Kingdom. As an outsider marrying into one of the most prestigious families in the world, it is not a surprise that she’s been criticized so heavily and so often, whereas Kate was born in England as her husband was. I heavily suspect that Meghan will soon be subjected to ageism at the hands of the press. Although she is not yet 40 and is only slightly older than Kate, women decrease in value in the eyes of the media as they age.

Meghan is constantly blamed in British tabloids for persuading her husband to relocate in January 2020. Even if she did take charge in the couple’s exit from The Royal Family, she had every right to do so after the intense media harassment she has become victim to. This taking of charge is defined by Judith Butler as a traditional masculine role, which is considered abnormal in the eyes of the patriarchal society and the media industry that is primarily run by men.

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