

Feminist and Non-Feminist Elements in ‘The Devil Wears Prada’ and Their Reflections in Contemporary Society

Jiaen Li^{1,a,*}

¹*The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100080, China*

a. baxuan@ldy.edu.rs

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Although women are less represented and objectified in the film industry, in recent years, more women entered the film industry and are bringing in narratives from the female perspective. Under this social context, *The Devil Wears Prada*, a film based on the novel of the same name, premiered. This paper analyzes the feminist and non-feminist themes in the film. After analysis of the script, cinematography, and story plot, this research discovers that the film reflects on feminist themes – the fashion industry as a non-patriarchal industry, less gendered use of language, and fashion as empowerment - and efficiently reveals societal expectations of women to maintain a balance between life and career. However, the film also imposes stereotypes and objectification towards women, as demonstrated in the fashion industry’s strict rules for body image and gazes from male characters to Andrea. The issues identified in this film, such as strict body image for women, still exist in contemporary society, and more research can be done to try to address this problem.

Keywords: *The Devil Wears Prada*, feminism, fashion industry, body image

1. Introduction

The film industry in a patriarchal society guarantees a power dynamic where women are displayed on the screen and are objectified by men. Typical Hollywood films are among the best representations of this power relationship as women often wear extensive makeup and clothes that reveal a large amount of skin. For instance, in *Singin’ in the Rain*, a 1952 Hollywood film, the female protagonist dances in a group hired for a film’s premiere afterparty. The dancers, all girls, wearing baby pink suits with V-neck designs and miniskirts that reveal most of their legs, have to do choreographs like bending their waist and squatting, which significantly increases the possibility of exposing their private parts. Women also appear in decorative roles as most films feature male protagonists and women are left with indifferent roles that exist only to appeal to men’s ideal imaginary figure of attractive women and satisfy men’s desires. When comparing the different ways men and women are portrayed in films, women lack complexity in characteristics and personality. Therefore, women lack depth in character as people rather than objects despite the fact that some people would argue women are not less represented in the film industry as there are plenty of women on screen. However, progress has been made as more and more women realize this problem. By writing novels that are later on shot into films or by directing films, narrative from a female, sometimes feminist, perspective is beginning to enter mainstream media. Through these efforts, women are reclaiming their voices and reflecting on their experiences and struggles in a society where their gender is considered

somewhat inferior. Thus, although the film industry is still dominated by men, more and more films are actively fighting back against the male gaze and advocating feminist topics such as claiming women's agency. Under this social context, the film *The Devil Wears Prada* premiered in 2006. David Frankel's film, which starred Meryl Streep as Miranda Priestly and Anne Hathaway as Andrea Sachs, was based on Lauren Weisberger's novel, and received positive reviews. Much past research discusses the film from various perspectives such as language differences, femininity and fashion, and gender discrimination but none talks about implications to contemporary society. This research not only analyzes the film from a feminist perspective but also discusses its reflection on the society around the time when the film was produced and whether gender-related topics depicted in the film are still relevant almost 20 years later. This essay critically analyzes elements that can be considered feminist and other elements that still impose stereotypes on women. It then considers the themes covered in previous sections and evaluates how they can relate to a more modern world. For issues that still exist, this research seeks to provide possible solutions.

2. Analysis

As a commercial film depicting the fashion industry, *The Devil Wears Prada* is filled with vivid portrayals of women with rich and diverse characters. Among them are Andrea, who is ambitious and a workaholic; and Miranda, who is meticulous, authoritative, and manages to succeed in a patriarchal society where a glass ceiling exists for women. Overall, the feminist elements in this film help explore gender roles and women's position in a patriarchal society.

2.1. Elements in this Film that can be Considered Feminist

Set in the fashion world, this film tells the experience of women in the fashion industry, an industry where the staff is mostly women, as it features only a few men working within the industry as designers but many more women in diverse positions. The setting itself is non-patriarchal because women are in dominant positions possessing power and authority, as opposed to a patriarchal environment where men occupy leading positions and leave women with inferior roles. Instead of isolating women, the film demonstrates "narcissistic individualism", where women compete in a certain field for opportunities [1].

In addition to the setting, the script of this film is innovative as Nigel, a man, says mostly feminine words such as "darling" and "sweetheart". When given two sentences, one beginning with "oh dear" and the other with "shit", Lakoff says "it is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as a part of 'women's language', the second as 'men's language'" [2]. In other words, Nigel is speaking in a way that is more common among women than men [2]. Findings from Juwita et al.'s research indicates not every linguistic characteristic identified by Coates and Lakoff is present in men's and women's scripts and those characteristics are sometimes used reversely by the other gender [3]. From Lakoff's pioneering work to Juwita et al.'s study [1,3], there is a transformation of men not using women's language to men using it. Thus, the border between men's and women's language has become obscured. This reduces people's perception that a gender only speaks its corresponding language and, therefore, helps promote gender equality. Therefore, the film's script is trying to take a more feminist approach and include less stereotypical use of language.

Moreover, the film reveals society's exaggerated gender discriminative reactions to women and its traditional view that women should maintain a work-life balance. Despite differences in character and class, Andrea and Miranda both face an imbalance between their career and family due to social expectations for women that displaces women in unequal social relationships [4]. Miranda is criticized by public journals for not taking up the responsibility as a virtuous and supporting wife and instead being a workaholic while neglecting her husband - which ultimately leads to their divorce. In

one scene, she breaks down and complains to Andrea about what articles the press will publish criticizing her: "The Dragon Lady", "Career-Obsessed", "Snow Queen Drives Away Another Mr. Priestly". Andrea, having strong empathy with Miranda, awakens as a woman and criticizes patriarchy's impact on successful women by stating "ok, she's tough, but if Miranda were a man, no one would notice anything about her except how great she is at her job". Miranda's divorce signifies her failure to maintain a balance between career and family, an expectation of women from the entire society. When women fail to perform traditional roles, they face isolation [5]. The public attributes Miranda's divorce to her personality, which is authoritative and demanding, but it fails to acknowledge that it is because of Miranda's personality that *Runway* can continue to be one of the most prestigious fashion magazines. Other women, seeing the public's critique and the consequence of having personalities similar to Miranda's, will very likely be discouraged from following her path and may choose to return to a more traditional feminine role, which isolates Miranda from society. Miranda's story is a reflection of how competent women in the real world receive criticism for not fulfilling unrealistic expectations and how men do not get criticized for the same problem.

Likewise, Andrea experiences an imbalance in her life and career as well. As she begins to succeed in her job, she constantly receives criticism from her friends expressing that she is no longer the old Andrea making fun of girls in fashion magazines. They are disappointed in Andrea because she chooses to conform to fashion standards. Her friends snatch her phone, give her harsh attitudes, and continuously express their disappointments. Nate, Andrea's boyfriend, even breaks up with her. People around Andrea are forcing her to choose between her career and their relationships. However, they neglect the fact that Andrea's conformity helps improve her performance at work, which helps her to pursue her dream as a journalist because someone who manages to stay at *Runway* for a year is valued by companies in the field of journalism as well. Andrea finally complies with their expectations and reconciles with Nate. Unconsciously, Andrea chooses her career but finally gives up returning to a more traditional path of rediscovering love and initial dreams due to rigorous societal demands that cause mental and life pressures on women [6]. Andrea's story in this film reminds feminists that societal expectations, especially when manifested in people having intimate relationships with a woman, obstruct personal improvement.

Another feminist theme in this film is fashion as a source of empowerment. Looking from a broad perspective, "[the] fashion industry represented women as powerful with the ability to buy anything they want" [7]. When Andrea first goes to work at *Runway*, she receives negative feedback from her colleagues as they implicitly or explicitly express their disappointment in her fashion choice – "you have no style or sense of fashion" from Miranda and "[she's wearing] her grandmother's skirt" from Emily, and an implicit "your clothes are hideous" remark from Nigel. After Miranda criticizes Andrea for not booking a flight for her on a stormy night, Andrea decides to have a complete makeover and starts wearing stylish clothes from world-famous brands like Chanel. She changes her conception of fashion and her attitude toward work as we see her impress Miranda and outcompete Emily for the opportunity to go to Paris. As Andrea's friend Doug explains: Fashion is not about utility. An accessory is merely a piece of iconography used to express individual identity. Andrea's fashion choice expresses competence at work and her identity as someone in the fashion industry. Women use fashion as a means to build their identity [8]. Miranda's clothes best exemplify her character as a harsh woman with power and a helpless mother who fears failing her children. Her simple and dignified clothes with eye-catching earrings, glasses, and rings reflect her powerful aura. In contrast, after Miranda's divorce, she looks pale in a solid gray robe with no accessories except her wedding ring. The difference in Miranda's clothing choice on different occasions expresses her different identities.

2.2. Depiction of Stereotypical Themes in this Film

Despite the progressive expressions of gender issues, this film also incorporates scenes that strengthen gendered stereotypes.

The film demonstrates the strict rules for women's body image. Nigel reveals the sizes of women's clothes are becoming smaller and smaller as "two became the new four and zero became the new two" [9]. To still fit into stylish clothes, women need to lose weight. Thus, beauty is defined by how thin a woman is and if she is thin enough to wear fashionable clothes. However, being slim may cause harm to women's bodies as they may not have enough energy to support themselves, or because they are intentionally eating much less to reduce their body weight, which may cause them to have low blood sugar and suddenly faint. Therefore, the change in sizes reflects strict requirements on women's body weight and body image that may harm their health.

As the film shifts perspective from Andrea to Nate and Christian Thompson, a well-known journalist, Andrea no longer possesses agency and is displayed in front of men's gaze. When Thompson and Nate look at Andrea, there is more than simply affection. The ways they look at Andrea also include a desire for her body, which not only threatens Andrea's identity as an independent woman with control of her life but also sexualizes and objectifies her to satisfy men's desires. When Andrea tells Nate she decides to quit her job but changes her mind, Nate is disappointed and speaks with a voice of sarcasm, hinting to Andrea that he is upset. Instead of logically convincing her boyfriend, Andrea chooses to escape the problem in their relationship and uses her body to seduce Nate, a more direct and convenient way to cool his tempers. By doing this, Andrea voluntarily gives Nate a chance to gaze at her and deprive her of agency.

Overall, the film reflects on feminist themes – the fashion industry as a non-patriarchal industry, less gendered use of language, and fashion as empowerment - and efficiently reveals societal expectations on women to maintain a balance between life and career. However, the film also imposes stereotypes and objectification towards women, as demonstrated in the fashion industry's strict rules for body image and gazes from male characters to Andrea.

3. Reflection and Suggestion

3.1. Reflection

This paper examines David Frankel's film *The Devil Wears Prada* from a feminist viewpoint and discusses feminist elements as well as themes that strengthen stereotypes. The film's setting, use of language, reflection on women's position, and the idea that fashion is empowerment, all contribute to bringing gender issues into the spotlight and either convey a feminist meaning or call attention to problems that still require a feminist solution. However, non-feminist elements that reinforce women's inferior position still exist in the film, such as slim body images and the male gaze. The issue of body image pointed out as early as 2006 in the film, still exists in contemporary society. A recent study discovered that women's increased dissatisfaction with their bodies is in correlation with browsing fashion websites and other social networking sites [10]. Perceptions of being thin as being beautiful adapt another way to disturb women in the age of the Internet. Slim body standards present in the 2006 film are still present in contemporary society on online social sites, which negatively affects women's opinions toward their body images.

3.2. Suggestion

To improve women's perception of their body images, several solutions can be considered. If one is exposed to social media and experiences anxiety because they think they are not thin enough, one can either choose to decrease exposure – a method that seeks to solve the problem by cutting down the

opportunity to have contact with the source of anxiety - or change one's mindset – a less quick and more difficult method that still maintains entertainment (the source of anxiety as well). Alternatively, one can choose to watch contents that boost self-confidence. a study conducted by Yager et al. showcases the positive impacts Embrace, a documentary film, has on women: women who have seen the film experience more appreciation towards their bodies, less self-objectification and body shame [11]. The aforementioned solutions do not guarantee a better perception of body image. Future research can study elements and factors that are positively correlated to reducing anxiety or negatively correlated to developing anxiety, or methods that can effectively reduce body image concerns to help solve the issue that is still present almost 20 years after the film premiered.

4. Conclusion

Analyzing the film's setting, script, and other elements from a feminist perspective, this research has several key findings: the setting of the film is a non-patriarchal one, diminishing the glass ceiling for women; the film blurs the border between men's and women's use of language; the film reveals social expectations for women of their work-life balance and the consequences of failing to maintain this balance. Despite feminist themes, non-feminist elements also exist in the film, in particular, the strict beauty standard and the male gaze. This research concludes that strict beauty standards still exist in contemporary society, almost 20 years after the film was first shown on screen. After arguing that strict beauty standards nowadays cause anxiety for women regarding their body image, this research provides possible solutions to help solve this problem. However, without conducting actual surveys or experiments on participants, the solutions are merely theories that may not effectively help reduce anxiety. Therefore, researchers in the future can attempt to find the most effective method to solve the issue.

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