

Patriarchy in Disguise: The Portrayal of Liberated Woman in Selected Hollywood Films of 2015

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Introduction

In 1985, Alison Bechdel introduced a test inspired by Virginia Woolf's *"A Room of One's Own"* called 'The Bechdel Test' which was used in feminist film criticism. This test was used in 2010 to show that films today were not women friendly. In order for a film to pass this test, it should fulfil three requirements; it should have more than two women characters with names, they should talk to each other, they should talk about something other than a man. Although it seems a simple enough test, more than half of the Hollywood movies fail to pass the test even though they have powerful female leads because only 30 percent of the female characters actually have a speaking role (Setoodeh, 2015). Strength or self-assertion of the female character in most of these movies are eventually granted by men. Simone De Beauvoir once said, "(h) umanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (2011, pp 5). Today, the film industry claims that they have changed their ways; today the idea of a "liberated woman" is promoted by filmmakers as 'The Ideal', a woman should aspire to be.

The 'Liberated Woman' can be described as an autonomous being who strives for equality between the sexes, someone who does not accept the double standards of the society. According to Jane Gallop, she is the "figure of resistance to the double standard", she is the formation of an 'intersection' between the 'sexual revolution and women's liberation. The liberated woman refused the sexual double standard: she had the same relation to sex as men did; she was, like men, sexually free" (2015, pp 92). Liberation in simple terms mean freedom but, Gallop's definition of a liberated woman is only limited to one being sexually free. The paper is constructed on the notion that, a liberated woman is a woman who is changed radically from the subdued, innocent, vulnerable woman of the past.

The films which call themselves Feminist Films or promote themselves to be films that portray the modern liberated woman should try to counter the patriarchal assumptions of what a woman ought to be. The paper shows how on the surface they may seem radical and appear to talk back to the ideological assumptions of the patriarchy, which demands the woman's conformity to the domestic sphere. However, it is proved that the depictions in relation to the selected films which are promoted as 'feminist films' either because they promote a Feminist ideology or because they have a strong modern female lead do not fit the feminist films criteria.

In 2015, The Guardian published an article titled '2015 will be 'year of women' at the movies' saying that because of the demand for films with female leads increased the amount of sales at the box office, the directors and story writers are aiming to produce more films with female leads in Hollywood.

According to Rosalind Coward, all representations of woman cannot be taken wholeheartedly as an innocent activity; for Coward, it is a 'political activity'. To a reader (or an audience) it may seem to champion the use of radical ideologies heralding a move away from the patriarchal norms but according to Coward it may only be giving a "surface commitment" to Feminism (1980, pp 55). For one to decipher whether a movie or a novel allows the commitment to feminism, one should see "what representations of sexuality, of maleness and femaleness they achieve their version of reality" (1980, pp 55). 'Hollywood Movies' is a worldwide phenomenon, it is not only watched by Americans but watched by millions of people around the world. The use of female leads with characteristics of an autonomous, liberated woman provides a space for the modern films to challenge the assumptions of the patriarchy as well as the assumptions of the earlier mainstream films which were more catered towards a male audience.

Laura Mulvey, in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses the function of a woman in films, she analyses that it is usually as the 'signifier of the male other'. She says that a woman has been displayed in films at two levels; "as erotic object for the characters within the story, and as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (2015, pp 804-805). Mulvey observes that Hollywood thrives on feeding the scopophilia (to derive pleasure by looking at things) of the audience and the characters of the film.

Methodology

The films chosen for this paper are chosen due to the immense popularity they received in media as 'Films to look forward to in 2015' or as 'feminist films'. They are also chosen because they reached a wider audience (as evidenced by their box office figures). Films which are part of an ongoing series or stories which are about the past are not chosen for this research since they cannot be used as standalone films or as a portrayal of the modern woman. Thus the films *Jurassic World*, *Spy*, *Hot Pursuit*, *Trainwreck*, *The Intern* and *Ricki and the Flash* were mainly analysed for this paper.

The theoretical framework of the study is informed by Feminist theory, mainly by Simone de Beauvoir's '*The Second Sex*', Germaine Greer's '*The Whole Woman*' and '*The Female Eunuch*' and Laura Mulvey's '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*'.

This study aims to show how the departure from earlier portrayal of women is only a surface commitment to market the films and entice the audience to watch the films.

The movies which were analysed during this research can be considered as films which will pass the mandatory Bechdel Test with flying colours. However, this does not mean that these films can be considered as "Feminist Films". The feminist commitment promised at the inception fail to stay constant throughout the rest of the movie. The portrayal of the liberated woman is truly a patriarchy in disguise, even though they seem to reject the double standards of the society on the surface, they themselves help create

new double standards and stereotypes and re-establish the old ones through the characters within the films.

The Portrayal of the Liberated Career Woman

As a career woman, the characters do not promote the ideals of an independent woman. Instead, they go onto show how unfitting and abnormal they, as liberated women are in the society. They are portrayed as mechanical or the abnormal; unable to fit into the real world. Her success and intelligence is undermined by her lack of finesse in dealing with difficult situations and her inability to make viable decisions on her own. The portrayal implied that a career woman in a top administrative position will stand to lose her humanity and humanness. The movies rather than questioning the said patriarchal stereotype, helps in re-establishing it by showing the consequences of the deviancy of a woman having a successful career. They also show the career women as dependent on men showing that women are not as capable as men in their career. A woman in a top position is portrayed to showcase an ornamental purpose to a company, she is hired as a decoration, not to do anything important around the office.

The films also show how a successful career woman is a product of male knowledge and that the career women can only find success when they dress in a way that accentuates their femininity.

According to Judith Butler, sex is biological and gender is a social construct (1990, pp 6). However, these representations try to show that gender, which controls our actions and behaviour is innate and that there is no distinction between sex and gender. The inability of the characters to succeed in their professions is shown as a result of some of the characters not possessing male traits. However, it should also be taken into account that even if they do possess male traits it is shown as something which goes against her innate femininity.

The Portrayal of the Sex and the Sexuality of the Liberated Woman

The liberated woman's body, sex life and sexuality has also been portrayed contrary to the ideals of Feminism. The films emphasize the norm about gender appropriate clothes; clothes which project femininity and sex appeal are more welcome than practicality and comfort with regard to women's clothes. Police clothes which are connected stereotypically with male professions are deemed to be inappropriate for female body. It also displays how femininity is used by women for their advantage and how being hyper feminine can help you succeed. A liberated woman who accepts herself is also shown as accepting of any mode of sexual harassment well since it is shown as a romantic compliment rather than abuse. The films show how a woman is to be passive and submissive in her sex life, providing a cautionary tale to the society of the consequences of those who do not adhere to the norm. The sexuality of the liberated woman is heterosexual; she can only love a man, if she does love a woman, she does it for the pleasure of the man. The body, sex life and sexuality of the liberated woman in movies are shown to be there only to fulfil three requirements; one, to show the accepted norm, two, show the consequences of not fitting into the norm and three, to feed the scopophilia of the audience.

The Portrayal of the Liberated Woman in a Familial Setting

Liberated woman in a familial setting is someone who will not be accepted as a powerful and strong head of the household but as a caring, nurturing mother who has a secondary position to the father. It shows how single women who are independent and strong are just waiting to meet the right man in order to embrace their feminine side consisting of the idea of marriage and motherhood. Women, who follow their dreams are shown to be doing so by sacrificing the happiness of her children and herself. Rejecting her biological position as a mother and not participating in the act of 'mothering' makes her a failure as a woman. Liberated women are shown to emasculate men through striving for equality which can result in dire circumstances at the end of the day. The liberated woman in a familial setting is portrayed in two ways; one, the unmarried liberated woman who requires a strong man to help her get in touch with her feminine, womanly side and two, as a woman who needs a husband and children at the end of the day to fill the void in her life.

Conclusion

In concluding it can be said that the films analysed do not have full-fledged commitment to feminism as the films promised in their promotions but only a surface commitment. These films also showcase that even the position of the so called liberated women can only be obtained by a white female since no portrayals of black or other minority representations have been made in the films, not even as "an afterthought" (Gaines, 1986, p. 65). The lack or non-existent of portrayal of the liberated woman of colour (even as a promoter of patriarchal ideals) can have dire consequences in the society as it might lead to women of other ethnicities who watch these films to equate power with skin colour and strive to obtain the skin colour which they think is powerful.

Thus, it could be said that the films analysed only have a surface commitment to feminism and that feminism has been used as tool by the promoters to promote the film to a wider audience. However, these portrayals create new double standards and stereotypes in the audiences around the world. The films analysed for this paper are truly patriarchy in disguise only aiming to feed the scopophilia of the audience and nothing more.

Keywords: Feminist Films; Liberated Woman; Patriarchy; Scopophilia

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