

# Women in films: not truly lifted off their traditional stereotypes essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Films may encapsulate many messages and beliefs and are an effective mode of relaying messages to its audience. Over the years, films are known to carry messages on gender stereotypes as the traits the characters in the films embody serve as a signal for audiences to follow.

Traditionally, males are regarded as 'real men' when they accomplish jobs which males customarily ought to do (Rajan, 2006). Rajan (2006) elucidates that these include having a stable job, fulfilling family and social obligations, playing sports and being heterosexual and that masculinity is attained by the amount of recognition received for their actions. Additionally, males are also required to possess masculine, patriarchal characteristics or qualities such as undoubted power, physical strength, social authority, competitiveness, tendency to isolate oneself and not easily sharing one's emotions (Attwood, 1995; Gillam and Wooden, 2008).

#### A breakthrough for males

However, various studies suggest that males can breakthrough their traditional stereotypes and promote a new model of masculinity (Gillam and Wooden, 2008; Rajan, 2006). Firstly, males can adopt masculinity that females increasingly demand and desire of males, which includes exercising power by intelligence and competitiveness, being thoughtful to women's concerns and being in concord with present-day feminist approaches towards marriage and sex (Rajan, 2006). Alternatively, males can also acquire feminine qualities by developing a soft side to them, where they can be more expressive of their feelings, recognize their need for communal

support and show sympathy rather than violence (Gillam and Wooden, 2008).

These findings propose an idea where the portrayal of one gender is largely dependent on the other (Attwood, 1995; Gillam and Wooden, 2008; Taylor and Setters, 2011). Instead of expressing masculinity or femininity as fixed definitions, we should focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct their lives in order to appropriately qualify what each gender should be (Gillam and Wooden, 2008; Rajan, 2006).

A breakthrough for women?

While in regards to the male aspects, it seems possible that films are increasingly able to bring about a positive breakthrough of men's stereotypical portrayal and venture out of its traditional representations. However, have films been able to achieve this breakthrough for females? Is the portrayal of women in Western films really moving beyond traditional gender norms, or simply re-articulating and re-presenting stereotypical traits in a new guise?

Despite the evolution and progress of film production, women's seemingly non-traditional representations in Western films generally bring limited success in lifting women off their traditional stereotypes. This is because non-traditional representations of women are not independent of traditional stereotypes, as such portrayals ultimately still stem from stereotypical traits of women.

### Role as a maternal individual

Over the years, there are increasing depictions of women adopting masculinity. Particularly in action films, these female characters engage in activities highly correlated to traditional masculinity, such as physical violence, fighting or even taking up arms (Attwood, 1995). Hence these tough protagonists are seen to deviate from the traditional notions of femininity. However, such characters' violence behaviors are only made necessary due to their role as a mother. Owing to her maternal instincts, the female action character would risk all, which includes abandoning her femininity to be violent or even to the extent of being ruthless in the process of it, if it could save her children and loved ones (Gilpatric, 2010).

Women seek to dominate and secure authority, which goes against the traditional stereotypes of how female are deemed to obey and behave according to. However, albeit how powerful and domineering a woman can be, as seen from the character of Miranda in the film 'The Devil Wears Prada', she is still shown to be just as vulnerable to the love as any other less powerful woman (Spiker, 2012). As for Miranda, she exudes absolute power in her career and in the fashion world, yet in her personal life even though she does not simply show others her concealed self, two scenes divulge this vulnerability. One of which she places her husband in the position of power and the other she shows her devotion to her children, hence still being a slave to her familial ties and relationships (Spiker, 2012).

### Role as a submissive partner in a relationship

Female characters have not been truly lifted out of their traditional stereotypes. In films, many women are being pictured to take up masculine traits. However, a majority of female protagonist is shown to retain gender stereotypes with respect to feminine traits of compliance, as they are depicted to be in a romantic relationship with the male characters (Gilpatric, 2010).

This is also evident in the film 'The Devil Wears Prada', where Andrea wants success and works towards her goal of power and recognition but she is unable to garner support from her family and boyfriend (Spiker, 2012). By the end of the film, Andrea realizes that her family and partner are of utmost importance to her as compared to the rising influence she gains in her career. She eventually chooses to leave the fashion industry and pursues a stable job at a traditional newspaper as a journalist (Spiker, 2012). After all the pursuits of authority, the woman returns to the route of being a conventional traditional female, forsaking her dreams of climbing up the corporate ladder (Spiker, 2012).

In both films 'The Assassin' and 'I'll Do It Myself', both female protagonists Ol'ga and Nadia are depicted to acquire a considerable genre of masculinity such as taking up of weapons and arms to carry out their revenge plans (Attwood, 1995). However, as for Nadia, the reason behind her violence was to avenge for her dead husband who was killed by a criminal gang. It is apparent that if not for so, Nadia would not have engaged in such violence. Whereas for Ol'ga, she fell in love with her one-time abuser, Andrei, in the midst of her revenge plot. Eventually when Andrei was stabbed to death, the

film ends with Ol'ga ending her own life (Attwood, 1995). Hence, both characters ultimately disseminate a common message, that any effort on the part of women to challenge male supremacy is destined to fail.

In addition, women in action films engage in masculine types of violence. Some female protagonists join the military, which tend to be based on models of masculinity and not commonly related with the female gender (Furia and Bielby, 2009). However it is suggested in some films, female enlistees remain feminine due to their "willingness, even eagerness, to break military guidelines on social behavior, especially in their interactions with men" (Furia and Bielby, 2009, p. 218). Films also highlight that women have an innate inclination towards romance, marriage and maternity, which demonstrate that females ultimately revert to their traditional femininity (Furia and Bielby, 2009). A notion is unwarily promoted, such that women despite being high achievers in the military prospects, their ultimate place is still deemed to be returning to their traditional positions of being in a dedicated relationship with a man and fulfilling their roles as a dutiful wife and mother (Furia and Bielby, 2009).

#### Physical attractiveness

Some researchers have categorized aggressive female protagonists as counter-stereotypical (Greenwood, 2007 as cited in Taylor and Setters, 2011). However, from Taylor and Setters' study (2011), it is shown that watching a female protagonist behave aggressively triggers gender expectations for women, but only when the protagonist is stereotypically

physically attractive. Such attribute is considered as an indicator of appropriateness for the use of violence (Taylor and Setters, 2011).

Memorable scenes in a military film ' Keep Your Powder Dry' include one in which while the women exhibit mechanical expertise, the male base commander comments " they're such pretty girls, too!" (Furia and Bielby, 2009, p. 218). This shows that it is difficult to look at women's competence without looking at their physical appearance, and a woman possessing masculine traits alone is less likely to impress others unless she is pretty too. To reinforce this, a large percentage of representations of these women in films are found to meet conventional beauty standards (Furia and Bielby, 2009). Therefore, due to the physical appearance of female protagonists in films, traditional female gender stereotypes are still being reinforced.

Likewise, the female leads in films are often costumed in full make up, well-groomed hair and feminine attire (Furia and Bielby, 2009). Despite being in the military, the feminine sides of female characters in military films are displayed through such physical features and feminine characteristics in their interactions with others, such as being ' catty with other women... and flirtatious with men' (Furia and Bielby, 2009, p. 219). Thus, this illustrates that these female characters still encompass traditional feminine traits and the stereotypes have not been lifted off from them.

### Persistent sexualizing

Even with the increase of female characters adopting more masculine behaviors and traits, they remain sexualized in films. The portrayal of women

is persistently related to a certain degree of sexuality (Furia and Bielby, 2009; Spiker, 2012; Taylor and Setters, 2011). One example would be from the film 'The Devil Wears Prada', where in times Andrea's boyfriend gets angry with her, she is forgiven as she plays the role of the sexual object. In some scenes of the film, Andrea is also dressed in sexy designer outfits and even once aiding to end a quarrel between she and her boyfriend when Andrea opens her blouse and reveals a sexy bustier (Spiker, 2012). This shows that females are rendered as symbols of visual pleasure for a "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975 as cited in Gilpatric, 2010).

Furthermore, as claimed by Manning (2005), female leads in military films face constrained career options, a glass ceiling to the top career positions, and undermining sexual harassment (as cited in Furia and Bielby, 2009). The military often endorses the exaggeration of men's masculinity, which effectively subjugates women's potential in male-dominated organizations (Lockett, 1989 as cited in Furia and Bielby, 2009).

### Alternative Viewpoint

Many may argue that some female characters are still portrayed to be deviating away from traditional stereotypes, as well as being popular (Spiker, 2012; Furia and Bielby, 2009). As for Andrea and Miranda in 'The Devil Wears Prada', both are shown to be presented as winners and fruitful in their chosen paths (Spiker, 2012). Additionally, some female leads in military films demonstrate knowledge on par with their male counterparts, mastering masculine roles and accomplishing tasks traditionally conceived as only



males could achieve, while at the same time maintaining their traditional femininity through appearance and engagement in roles such as wife, lover or mother (Furia and Bielby, 2009; Taylor and Setters, 2011). In the eyes of the audiences of the films, these tough female protagonists represent the successful image of females breaking away from women's traditional portrayal and also being empowered in the process of it.

However, these female characters are usually the few exceptions rather than the norm. It is also likely that such portrayals of successful women possessing the balance of achievement in both traditionally feminine and masculine aspects come with a hidden agenda, such that it could be due in part to the 'government's encouragement of women to enter the public sphere to support the war effort without fear of social sanctions' (Furia and Bielby, 2009, p. 218).

Besides, there are hidden trade-offs for these non-traditional female protagonists. For example, it is implied from these films that love and friendship relationships suffer as women succeed professionally (Spiker, 2012; Furia and Bielby, 2009). It is also highly debatable that despite being successful and popular characters, one may not be rendered as a role model for the female audiences to mimic, hence ultimately not successfully in inspiring women to break away from traditional stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Although these representations of female protagonists being successful yet possessing non-traditional qualities may not suffice in lifting women off their

traditional stereotypes, they may be possible for Western films to be successfully able to do so in time to come. This can be achieved if these portrayals women are truly made without references to the obstinate traditional gender stereotypes.

#### References:

1. Attwood, L. (1995). Men, machine guns, and the mafia: Post-soviet cinema as a discourse on gender. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18(5-6), 513-521. doi: 10. 1016/0277-5395(95)00082-8
2. Gillam, K. and Wooden, S. R. (Spring 2008). Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar. *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 36(1), 2-8.
3. Rajan, G. (2006). Constructing-Contesting Masculinities: Trends in South Asian Cinema. *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture & Society*, 31(4), 1099-1124.
4. Taylor, L., & Setters, T. (2011). Watching Aggressive, Attractive, Female Protagonists Shapes Gender Roles for Women Among Male and Female Undergraduate Viewers. *Sex Roles*, 65(1/2), 35-46. doi: 10. 1007/s11199-011-9960-1
5. Gilpatric, K. (2010). Violent Female Action Characters in Contemporary American Cinema. *Sex Roles*, 62(11/12), 734-746. doi: 10. 1007/s11199-010-9757-7
6. Spiker, J. A. (2012). Gender and Power in the Devil Wears Prada. *International Journal Of Business, Humanities & Technology*, 2(3), 16-26.
7. Furia, S. R., & Bielby, D. D. (2009). Bombshells on Film: Women, Military Films, and Hegemonic Gender Ideologies. *Popular Communication*, 7(4), 208-224. doi: 10. 1080/15405700903046369