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EXPLORATION OF THE VILIFIED CAREER WOMAN IN FILM TEXTS

SNEHA DAYANAND¹, Dr. PRAKRUTHI H.N²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar; ²Research Supervisor
Jain (deemed-to-be) University



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Abstract

The narratives of Hollywood films have illustrated certain hetero-normative stereotypes, fashioning a 'generic' female character that has continued to be portrayed in the same manner through the decades. Simply put, women continue to be under-represented on screen as they are often identified as the inferior of the two sexes. The matter of under representation of women in Hollywood Cinema has been acknowledged as a problem, but there is hardly any progress due to the fact the Cinema is an industry dominated by men. When it comes to Cinema and the portrayal of females in the fictional work space, the characters are either in insignificant jobs, or they tend to give up their interests and their careers for their families. Women in real life are similarly encouraged to identify with female figures on screen who are powerless or victimized, or only associated with active male heroes. They are portrayed as being incapable of balancing their social and personal life. Any character who rejects this status quo is immediately portrayed as a villain. In this paper, the different facets of the working-woman archetype are explored through the film texts, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-20).

Keywords: Gender Stereotyping in Cinema, Working Woman Trope, Workaholic, Gender Subversion, Gender Bias

Narratives of Hollywood films have illustrated certain heteronormative stereotypes and expectations, fashioning a 'generic' female character who has continued to be portrayed on screen through the decades without many improvements. Simply put, women continue to be underrepresented on screen as they are often identified as the inferior of the two sexes. Although the matter of under representation of women in Hollywood Cinema has been addressed as a

problem, there is hardly any progress due to the industry continuing to be dominated by men.

Dr. Martha Lauzen, the executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, at San Diego State University examines the portrayal of female characters in 100, highest-grossing domestic, live-action and animated films of 2013. She finds that women comprised less than a third of speaking parts, and are only 15% of the protagonists. In spite of the high success rate in

female-led films in recent years, female characters are two times more likely than males, to be identified only by a *life-related* role rather than a *work-related* role. She also states in her study that women tend to be consistently younger than their male characters. This brings to light the lack of females portrayed as formal leaders.

Women's cinematic narratives are dependent on other characters in the film text, they are shown as being overly-emotional, and are almost always confined to low-status jobs when compared to enterprising and ambitious male characters. Therefore, gender development in real life, becomes a fundamental issue because some of the most important aspects of people's lives, such as the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves, the socio structural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing. The narratives in commercial films promote heteronormativity by showing the female characters centered in themes of self-sacrifice trying to fulfill their maternal roles, or trying to be worthy of the men in their lives. Almost always, female characters on screen give up their interests and their careers, and women in real life are similarly encouraged to identify with the female figures on screen who are powerless or victimized, or only associated with active male heroes. They are portrayed as being incapable of balancing their social and personal life.

Work life balance is essentially the balance between an individual's personal life and professional life. A healthy work-life balance has a great significance for working women especially in the current context wherein, they are confronted by several challenges in their domestic and professional lives. The demands of the work environment have exerted immense pressure on women as they need to cope with two full time jobs – one at the office and the other in their homes. Women often end up bringing their work home, in order to stay in the good books of their supervisors. While women are expected to be understanding and compromising towards their husbands who are highly competitive and work orientated, working women themselves are never given any lenience or shown

understanding if they are career driven. They are first and foremost expected to focus on their family, and then everything else. Hence the term 'Career Woman' itself has a negative connotation to it. It seems to describe a woman who has put aside her family to fulfill her professional aspirations. On the other hand, 'Career Man' is something unheard of, because men are 'expected' to be masculine, career driven and the breadwinners of the family, which in itself is toxic.

This paper in an exploration of the different representations of the working-woman archetype in Cinema and Television series. Through previous research findings, it has come to light that, working women do experience difficulty when it comes to balancing work and family life. This is due to enormous work pressure, barely any time for self-care and the pressure to fulfill others' expectations of them as women. But this shouldn't be held against them. Majority of the companies expect their employees to put in longer hours, which ends up with the job spilling over into their personal time. The consequence of which results in stress and anxiety, conflicts at home, and early job burnout. Women often end up feeling bitter and resentful due to lack of support from their spouse, and how unfairly the society looks at her own aspirations.

If we consider career-oriented men, they are no doubt equally stressed at work, but the difference is that men are still not expected by the society to contribute their time or energy towards domestic chores and child care. These gendered roles are reinforced time and again by the visual media, and if there are characters who exercise agency on screen and try to carve out a niche for themselves in the professional world, they are vilified and held up as a symbol of warning for other women; because these women represent what the patriarchal society refuses to accept- a financially independent, free thinking woman, who doesn't find bliss *solely* in her domestic role as a wife and mother.

As a consumer of visual media, one needs to realise and question the lack of diverse representation of women in movies. Jessica Chastain, actress and jury member at the Cannes Film Festival 2017, expressed her concern that even

female storytellers are continuing to put forth content that represents women as shallow and superficial beings, who have no intellectual identity of their own, and whose sole purpose as characters is to aid the development of the male protagonist. This is apparent in commercial films and television shows of all languages.

One of the noted cinematic personas of mid-twentieth century was the 'independent woman', who was on the threshold of empowerment. Second-wave feminism influenced Cinema, and the on-screen working woman was *less likely* to succumb to social expectations with regards to romance, and was quite aware of her status within the male-dominated society. In the following decades, the feminine heroine was overshadowed by the butch, gun-wielding woman. She was given all masculine traits, just to show her empowerment. Instead of depicting women as either completely feminine or masculine, diverse profiles of these characters need to be portrayed, while trying not to diminish their capabilities, just to adhere to their gender specific roles.

"My mother told me to be a lady. And for her, that meant be your own person, be independent,"

(Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *RBG 2018*)

The sitcoms and movies of the late 20th century revolved around men and women in their workspace. Their general attitude towards work was of begrudging acceptance. They did not find work enjoyable, but rather tedious and boring. The best examples of this can be seen on the Television shows *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. After this came the portrayal of the Capitalist work culture. This modern on-screen culture showed the employers expecting their workforce to spend as much time as possible at the office. Instead of offering higher salaries for working over-time, the companies offered small perks. This is a factual representation of many real-life incidents. According to Glassdoor's Employment Confidence Survey, conducted in the year 2015 nearly 60% of the employees reported that benefits and perks are a major factor in considering whether to accept a job offer. Nearly 80% of the employees preferred additional benefits over a pay raise.

This phenomenon is portrayed in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*. Emily Charleton, the workaholic secretary to a tyrannical boss Miranda Priestly, finds joy in the small perks she gets at work, like designer clothes and travel opportunities. In spite of Miranda being emotionally abusive, and having questionable work ethics, Emily worships her. To the viewers, nothing else about her job seems remotely gratifying. She is so stressed and miserable that she goes to the extent of brainwashing herself into believing that she loves her job. Both of these women find this "all work and no play" lifestyle to be immensely glamorous.

"A million girls would kill for this job"

(Emily Charleton, *The Devil Wears Prada* 2006)

The question now is, whether it is possible in this day and age to survive the rat race of work-life with a sense-of-self intact? In order to understand this, one needs to look into the history of women in the workforce. The Second World War was when women actively took up men's jobs back home, while the men were in combat. But after their return, women refused to go back to their domestic duties as they enjoyed their new "working-woman" status and obstinately continued to strive outside in order to contribute to their family's standard of living. Despite their efforts both at home and at work, their income continued to be embarrassingly lower than that of their male colleagues. Due to this double standard, women have had to work twice as hard as their male counterparts, just to be taken seriously by their superiors.

In films and television shows, some traits of the employed women are seen as a beacon of hope, while others are just plain misogynistic portrayals. These women are broadly categorised into three prominent types of the 'Working-Woman trope'.

The first are movies with the 'Newling Working-Woman'. These movies revolve around a young woman who has just joined the male dominated workforce, and merely holding on to her job is a victory. Most female viewers can associate themselves with this working woman, whose arc begins at the nascent stage of her career. This character tries to show that a working woman is an

empowered woman. The examples for this trope are Peggy Olsen from *Mad Men*, Abby from *The Ugly Truth*, and Lady Edith from *Downton Abbey* etc. All are beginning from the bottom up, with the viewers rooting for their success.

The second type is the 'Successful Working-Woman'. The first variation of this character type is the successful woman on the threshold of a promotion in her career, who is urged by her kith and kin, to step back from her profession, in order to make space for her love interest. The second variation is that she is the woman for whom priority of finding herself a life partner trumps everything else. Hers is the familiar face in romantic comedies, and teenage dramas. The examples of this character type are Margaret Tate in *The Proposal*, Rachel in *Friends*, and Regina in *Under the Piano*.

The third type is the 'Working Woman as a Cautionary tale'. This subversive woman is the one who has exercised her agency, and held down her job successfully. She is either working hard to shatter the glass ceiling and move up the office hierarchy, or she is a high functioning, power driven woman, whose strength and charisma lies in her ability to succeed in her field of work. Her ambition is shown in a negative light as though her commitment to work is unsuitable for her sex. This variant of the working woman trope was created in rebellion against the self-sacrificing 'Successful Woman'. She is comparable to the absentee workaholic father that all viewers are familiar with. This trope started to become popular in the late 20th century. The workaholic woman's status is what many people dream to achieve, and an equal number of people criticise. The main quality that drives this character is her financial independence. She does not have to worry about finding a man for economic support. Many of the women on-screen and in real life are successful in their careers because they are absolutely dedicated to their work. They are not always waiting by the door, with a hot meal ready for their husband, because they themselves are busy at work. The society does not approve of such a woman, and will end up pushing her into the third category and portray her as someone that a working woman should prevent herself from becoming.

The universal onscreen representation of a workaholic woman is someone for whom her work-life trumps her personal life. This was seen as a norm for men, but in the case of a woman her ambition is almost indecent which creates tensions at home, as she struggles to maintain a balance between her family and work. While she is able to succeed professionally, she fails miserably in her personal relationships. The 8-hour work day that the labour unions have strived for, does not apply to these women. Best examples of this trope are Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Annalise Keating from *How to Get Away with Murder*, Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*.

In order to better understand the previously stated gender subversions by the career driven women, the characters of Miranda Priestly from the movie *The Devil wears Prada* and Annalise Keating from the television series *How to Get Away with Murder* will be scrutinised.

Miranda Priestly played by Meryl Streep, is the Editor in Chief of a reputed fashion magazine called *Runway*, and Annalise played by Viola Davis is a Lawyer and Professor at a Law College. Both of these characters are the textbook examples of workaholics. Not only do they spend all of their waking hours at the office, they expect their employees to show the same kind of dedication as well. These are the women who, in order to prove themselves better than everyone, put their careers ahead of their personal life and are the embodiment of the toxic and destructive result of capitalism. These film texts portray that working oneself to the bone has become the new standard. The characters encapsulate the society's notion of constantly being busy and over stretching oneself, as a virtue. Nothing seems to stop these women from advancing in their career- whether it is physical injury, mental stress or even death threats.

Due to the fact that they are career driven, both Miranda and Annalise are demonised for it. Even though these characters are given a great deal of prominence on screen, the society still continues to consider their narrative as a cautionary tale, and refuses to reward their success. Many women, who are doing well at work, continue to feel apologetic

for their success. Their spouse, in this case the husband, makes minimum to no contribution to help them succeed. Aliya Hamid Rao, in her article published in *The Atlantic* says, "Women's success in the workplace is penalised at home. The dual role that they want to play, and are expected to play gets harder and harder, until their life falls apart." Miranda and Annalise's fervour towards their work is borderline religious. Their devotion towards their careers is seen as their life's purpose. A lot of workaholics like them seek comfort in their jobs in order to fill some sort of void in their life. Their social circle primarily comprises their colleagues and clients. But being cut off from their kith and kin increases their feeling of isolation, and they push themselves further into their work. This is apparent in the narrative of both Annalise and Miranda.

The character Annalise, in *How to Get Away with Murder* is a very sought-after, successful lawyer and a Law College Professor. She does not forgive any sort of incompetence from her students and employees. In her character introduction, the audience becomes instantly aware that she is an incredibly clever, strictly business, no nonsense kind of a Professor. She expects her students to think out of the box, and research beyond their ability. Annalise offers one single student a coveted position in her firm, they only have to meet her incredibly high standards to fill this position. In spite of her inflexible work schedule, and a demanding and unforgiving attitude, many students are devoted to her and follow her words like Holy Scripture. In order to give her a maternal quality, her character arc deals with a miscarriage. Instead of communicating through this difficult time, her husband, a psychology professor, has an affair with his female student and ends up impregnating her. Annalise finds an escape in her work which takes a toll on her marriage. She is not vilified more for her questionable work ethics, but rather for turning her back on her husband and completely involving herself in her work.

The character Miranda from *The Devil Wears Prada* is absolutely devoted to her job as the Editor in Chief of an esteemed fashion magazine. In her character introduction, we see a relaxed office environment

turn chaotic, while trying to organise themselves to her standard. This shows how tight a ship she runs. She is ruthless in her criticism, and unforgiving of people's mistakes. She accepts nothing but utmost dedication and excellence from her employees, and expects them to go above and beyond to contribute to the magazine. Her influence over the fashion industry is so great that top designers take suggestions from her before they work on their collections. Her obsession with meticulousness and attention to detail makes her a villainous character in the movie. Her second marriage is on the rocks due to her work hours and she is heavily criticised by both the media and the public, for the failure of her first marriage. Miranda, due to her fierce and uncompromising attitude towards everyone around her, is often referred to as the "Ice Queen" and "The Dragon Lady" by the media.

The character of a female employee in the movie defends Miranda's actions saying, no one would bat an eyelid if she was a man, and everyone would only praise her for how good she was at her job. In a scene, during the middle of the Paris Fashion Week, Miranda receives divorce papers from her resentful husband; she is devastated more about how the proceedings will affect her daughters, than her own life. This is the only moment of weakness, where the viewers see her let her guard down. Yet, she snaps out of it, and dives right back into her work. She understands how the world works, and doesn't give any man or woman a chance to take advantage of her momentary weakness.

In both Annalise and Miranda's lives, the news media has a big role to play. They push the patriarchal agenda by vilifying the women for not fitting into the role of the self-sacrificing domestic woman and for putting their careers ahead of their marriage. The discomfort of the society is apparent when confronted by financially successful women, who are not dependent on their spouse for financial support. Both Miranda and Annalise symbolise the evil of being an ambitious career woman.

Miranda and Annalise, have earned their superiority, and their need for perfection has allowed them to attain the coveted status. Instead of focusing solely on their shortcomings, the

excellence they bring to their work needs to be appreciated. These powerful women's mere presence calls for everyone's attention in the room. Neither of them needs to raise their voice to have themselves heard. The immense power that both Meryl Streep and Viola Davis channel into their roles, takes the characters to another level.

This research paper aims to confront the patriarchal views of dominant film cultures by calling to attention the pre-existing gender bias in cinematic texts with reference to the working woman. As Oscar Wilde said, "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life." Even though film texts reflect society, they have the power to change society itself. Cinema acts as a great tool to create awareness about the existing social issues. For example, one can create awareness of real-life situations through the portrayal of the unconscious bias against women in the workplace. Because, very few women are cast in leadership positions like law enforcement agencies, as medical school deans, and corporate executive officers- just like in real life. Certain unspoken policies can be brought up which penalize women who are in their child-rearing years, bringing up issues of sexual harassment which tend to go under the radar, due to the fear of retaliation and stigmatisation. All this can be tackled through an open dialogue about all the socio-cultural, political and economic issues that women face on a daily basis.

Even if these biases are not explicitly put across, cinemas have the power to act as a tool of subliminal conditioning that takes place by seeing women playing subsidiary roles on screen, which in turn is instrumental in reinforcing the pre-existing gender roles. To reiterate, film texts have a tremendous impact on the mindset of the society and can play an incredible role in influencing people to either embrace or abandon gender stereotypes.

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