

## THE CHANGED AND UNCHANGED SITUATIONS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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### ABSTRAK

*Gerakan pembebasan wanita gelombang kedua pada tahun 1960-an telah memberi pengaruh terhadap para aktivis perempuan dalam mengkampanyekan perlawanan terhadap budaya patriarkat hampir di semua bidang. Salah satu area yang diyakini membuat perempuan rentan adalah isu perempuan dalam layar lebar. Artikel ini menganalisis perubahan representasi perempuan dalam layar lebar melalui perbandingan empat film, yaitu *Stepford Wives* (1975), *Orlando* (1992), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), and *Stepford Wives* (2004). Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan metode modern hermeneutics. Dari hasil analisis yang telah dilakukan, film-film ini menunjukkan tiga aspek perubahan pada perempuan, seperti kesetaraan dalam pekerjaan, ekspresi identitas seksual, dan imej 'wanita pendidikan tinggi'. Film-film tersebut juga menunjukkan beberapa aspek yang tidak berubah terkait representasi perempuan, yaitu aspek keibuan, mitos seksualitas, dan posisi perempuan sebagai korban.*

**Kata Kunci:** *feminis, hermeneutics, gender, layar lebar, perempuan*

### ABSTRACT

The second feminist wave in the 1960s has influenced feminists to increase their campaign against patriarchy in almost all areas. One of the areas which has made women very vulnerable is the issue of women in cinema. This article investigates some changes in the representation of women in cinema by comparing four movies: *Stepford Wives* (1975), *Orlando* (1992), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), and *Stepford Wives* (2004). This study was conducted by using modern hermeneutics method. The results indicate that these four films appear to contain three changed aspects regarding women, that is, the equality of work, the expression of sexual identity, and the image of 'higher-education-woman'. The films also show that some aspects in the representation of women, such as the expectation of motherhood, the myth of sexuality, and the position of women as victims, remain unchanged.

**Keywords:** *cinema, feminists, gender, hermeneutics, women*

### INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in cinema has been intensely criticised and discussed by a number of feminists. These feminists focus their criticism on how mainstream cinema

does not represent women's actual experience (sexuality, work, and family), but only presents a stereotype of the social status of women (Humm, 1992:13). This misrepresentation as well as non-representation obviously disadvantages women. This can be shown by sexist movies which depict

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male domination over women and portray an image of women as sexual objects to men. As a result, the films have contributed to spreading and strengthening a sense of patriarchal culture in the spectators' minds. Some contemporary cinema workers have struggled to diminish these criticisms (i.e. gender biased movies) through presenting women's films (films by women and/or for women). However, Marshment argues that although efforts to represent a positive image of women in films are continuing, they do not function easily owing to the unchanging cultural expectations regarding femininity. In other words, there will still be a gender bias in the representation of women in movies (Marshment, 1997:150).

This study aims to reveal the changed and unchanged situations in the representation of women in contemporary cinema. This study was conducted by using modern hermeneutics. This method allowed descriptive analysis and interpretative process including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication as well as prior aspects that affect communication (Asri, 2013:69). Interpretive methods constitute the fundamental procedures of measurement and of the generation of research data relevant to theory. This study examines the issues as they appear in the following movies: *Stepford Wives* (1975), *Orlando* (1992), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), and *Stepford Wives* (2004). The four selected movies can be classified as women's movies. This is because the films have challenged patriarchy by using different topics, such as presenting the equality of women in the work place, offering the rejection of heterosexual concepts, and showing women as educated people. The analysis focused on six aspects, i.e., the equality of work, the expression of sexual identity, the image of 'higher-education-woman', the expectation of motherhood, the myth of sexuality, and the position of women as victims.

The first movie that was examined is the *Stepford Wives* (1975). Based on Ira Levin's novel, the director Bryan Forbes had succeeded in making the story into a watchable movie. The story is about Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross) who moves from New York to Stepford (a New York

suburb) with her husband Walter (Peter Materson) and two young children. When Walter joins the Men's club, he changes his attitude and starts to make all the decisions in his household. Joanna with her friend Bobbie (Paula Prentiss) realises that there is something wrong in Stepford. They try to investigate why women in Stepford display strange behaviour, like robots. Most wives in Stepford do their usual routines of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their homes without any complaint. This film can be categorised as fantasy, thriller and mystery.

The second movie which was analysed is *Orlando* (1993). This is a drama and romance film. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's novel, the director Sally Potter tries to present *Orlando* in cinema. The story begins when Queen Elizabeth I (Quentin Crisp) grants young Orlando (Tilda Swinton) a large estate. She gives him the following advice: '*Do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old*'. After her death, Orlando becomes immortal. As time progresses, he is attracted to Sasha (Charlotte Valendrey), a Russian diplomat's daughter. However, Sasha rejects his love. Orlando then becomes an ambassador in Constantinople. He changes his sex and associates with 18<sup>th</sup> century geniuses after witnessing the death of a man in battle. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, she falls in love with Shelmerdine (Billy Zane), a handsome American. By the turn of the century, she gives birth to a child.

*When Night Is Falling* (1995) is the third movie that was examined. The story is about Camille Baker (Pascale Bussieres), a professor of mythology at a Toronto Protestant College. After 3 years of a relationship with Martin (Henry Czerny), she changes her mind and falls in love with Petra (Rachel Crawford). At the end of the story Camille leaves the college and decides to go with Petra. Patricia Rozema, the director and the writer of this movie, tries to reveal the taboos on women's sexuality and the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The film focuses on the conflicts faced by a religious woman, who is confused when it comes to choosing between her desire and her religious belief.

The last movie that was reviewed is *Stepford Wives* (2004). Like *Stepford Wives* (1975), this film is also based on the novel of Ira Levin. The difference between the two movies is that *Stepford Wives* (2004) belongs to the genre of comedy. Frank Oz, the director, depicts Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman) as a successful manager of a TV network game show. She is fired after being attacked and nearly killed by one of the contestants. She moves from Manhattan to Stepford (Connecticut). She meets a Jewish writer who is recovering from alcoholism, Bobbie Markowitz (Bette Midler). Together with her, Joanna tries to figure out why most of the housewives in Stepford have strange attitudes to becoming perfect wives and doing all domestic works like robots.

## MALE GAZE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The study of the representation of women in movies, and its changes, is important when it comes to knowing to what extent the cinema fights against patriarchy. It is obvious that by the 1970s the embryonic feminist studies area was crystallising among academics and encouraging a much sharper-eyed and theorised attention to women's filmic representations. The study of the representation of women in films cannot be separated from two important aspects, those of spectators and those of spectacles (Modleski, 1988:87).

The domination of psychoanalysis in criticism of women in Hollywood traditional movies appeared when Laura Mulvey published her essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' in 1975. However, after dominating the scene for a long time, pros and cons about her work have appeared (Modleski, 1990:58-59). Mulvey in her essay tries to reveal Hollywood misogyny which has its visual manipulation in the mainstream of narrative cinema (1975: 748). Using Freudian and Lacanian works of psychoanalysis, she argues that traditional Hollywood cinema represents the ideas and values of patriarchy and oppresses women via the male gaze. The Male gaze refers to 'the camera which is usually operated by a man, looking at women as objects; the look of male actors within the film

is structured to make the gaze more powerful; and the gaze of the spectator who is presumed to be male' (Humm, 92:13). Women thus became erotic objects by fetishistic scopophilia and voyeuristic sadism. To destroy the patriarchal ideology in film, she proposes a deconstruction by making it free of sexual objectification in film (Mulvey 1975: 755-757).

Regarding the male gaze, Studlar mentions that the cinema apparatus is not influenced by the male gaze, and has no sexual difference. Due to her concept of the domination of 'mother', spectators are not involved in voyeuristic sadism, but masochism. They go to the theatre to get a promising oral fantasy rooted in their separation from their mother, even the subject (the mother) will suffer as a consequence of caring for her infants. Spectators make a 'contract' to be passive when watching cinema and that this is a submission desire. This means that cinema is not a 'sadistic institution' and that the spectators surrender their control over fantasy and over their gender identity (Studlar, 1992:788-789). However, Studlar cannot explain why the realities show that the representation of women in the cinema is full of gender biases.

To answer these criticisms, Bruzzi (1980:233) argues that there are two models that have been used by women film-makers, i.e., 'liberal' and 'sexual'. The 'liberal' model stresses on the political and ideological affinity between women struggling in the present, by using a picture of the past. By contrast, the 'sexual' tries to explore women's experiences in relation to their hidden passions, their sexual frustration, and the process of the denial of their relationship with men.

In relation to women's movies, Martin (1995:4) states that making a woman's movie needs a lot of long and hard work so that the film is not just about housework, such as cooking and dress-making. Some women's films also represent men with feminine qualities. Based on this phenomenon, it seems that some film-makers have been challenged by feminists to make films which contain neutral gender.

## THE CHANGED SITUATION IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

In the *Stepford Wives* (1975), Joanna is represented as an amateur photographer. Even though she is a housewife, she cannot give up her hobby of taking pictures. She always practices this to improve her skills. In one scene, she is offered a chance to become a professional photographer in the city. Although the film does not show whether or not Joanna accepts the offer, at least she has received an acknowledgement from the labour market that she has the skills and capabilities to join the professional work force as a photographer. Her confidence in her ability in this regard can be seen by her words to her husband (Walter), 'When you come back, there will be a woman with my name and my face, she'll cook and clean like crazy, but she won't take pictures and she won't be me! '.

Different from *Stepford Wives* (1975), in *Stepford Wives* (2004), Joanna is represented as a successful television executive. She speaks to audiences and her fans confidently about her job and her TV program which is running successfully. This can be seen by the host who says, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to introduce a legend in our industry. She's the most successful president in the history of our network and for the past five years has kept us at the very top of the ratings'. Even though she is then fired by her company, it is not because she lacks capabilities, rather it is an accident. Nevertheless, this movie has shown that she has always been popular and has reached a managerial level in her career. This movie shows that women have 'graduated' from being only unskilled labour, but that they can now work also as managers with higher wages in equality with men. Women as managers can also be seen in this 2004 movie, when Joanna finds that all the 'zombie women' in Stepford are women who have good positions in their work places.

The other movie, *Orlando*, has the main character changing his sex to become a woman; Orlando has a good job as a patron of poets and geniuses. She works with men in the field of the arts. She has received respect from her colleagues

being recognised as one of the talented poets in England. In this movie, Potter wants to show that a woman is not lower than a man in terms of work equality. Whatever Orlando's sex is, male or female, Orlando can get good jobs such as becoming an ambassador in Constantinople or a poet in her country.

In *When Night Is Falling*, Patricia Rozema has presented Camille as a professor of Mythology in a Christian College. Her status is the same as that of her fiancé Martin who has also been presented as a professor. They can discuss and often argue about their work together from their own perspectives without being disturbed by their sexual difference.

In the film *Orlando*, Orlando is presented as a smart and knowledgeable man and woman. As a woman she is a part of the community of poets and geniuses in England. She is able to fluently discuss things with men. With her knowledge, she criticises the gender bias of her friends' works. She is also able to make her own decisions in relation to her life. This can be seen when she rejects Archduke Harry's love and says, 'Oh! Archduke! That's very kind of you, yes. I cannot accept'. It seems that Potter wants to show the power of women as Shasa rejects Orlando (when a man) and Harry is rejected by Orlando (when a woman).

The representation of women with higher education in the film *When Night Is Falling*, has Camille as a professor who teaches in a Toronto Protestant College. She is depicted as an expert in mythology. With her education, she questions the binary system between heterosexuality and homosexuality. She has the same level of education as Martin does. Rozema seems to want to discover that women like men can gain a higher education.

This similarity also can be found in both *Stepford Wives* (1975) and *Stepford Wives* (2004). Even though in those films the directors do not explain Joanna Eberhart's level of education, it is clear that she has knowledge, creativity and skills in photography and in management. In those movies, Joanna is depicted as a brave woman who dares to reveal the oddness in Stepford and even to argue with her husband. She, with her friend Bobbie, also

investigates the Men's Club with some risks. At the end of the movies, she alone goes to the Men's Club to save her children. The difference between *Stepford Wives* (1975) and *Stepford Wives* (2004) is that Joanna in *Stepford Wives* (1975) fights alone, while in *Stepford Wives* (2004), Joanna needs to collaborate with Robert (a gay) and Walter (a man).

In *When Night Is Falling*, Patricia Rozema is highly capable in that she challenges the heterosexual mainstream in her film. When Camille meets Petra, she decides to begin a lesbian relationship with her. She dares to leave her beliefs as a Christian and rejects the conservative norms which see lesbianism as a taboo in Canadian society. The director Patricia Rozema also depicts a scene in which Camille has sex with Petra in the middle of the film. In this movie, Camille triumphs in expressing her sexual identity as a lesbian. She wants to be honest and so she cannot lie to herself about her desire and her choice. When discussing with the Board President and Martin she says, 'Well, in hetero - in retrospect, sorry - I've come to think that there's a lot of room for multicentricity in God's creation. God... God cannot be so cruel as to decree that people like... like that can never, ever be contented. I mean, one's devotions are not entirely chosen'. She prefers to leave her job rather than losing her love. At the end of the movie, Rozema plays the 'Hallelujah chorus' and Bob (her dead dog) comes alive and is seen running in the snow, all of which shows her liberty and her happiness as a lesbian. Camille thanks God for being a lesbian because she now understands the uniqueness of His creatures.

The expression of sexual identity is also found in *Orlando*. In this movie the director Sally Potter reveals the issue of transgender. She depicts 'transgender' by using different ways. For example, she has Queen Elizabeth I acted by Quentin Crisp who is a male actor. Transgender can also be seen when Orlando as a man is acted by Tilda Swinton, who is a female actor. When he falls in love with Sasha, he kisses her, but the spectators know that it is basically a woman (Tilda Swinton) kissing Sasha (Charlotte Valendrey). Rozema should also receive credit here when she presents Orlando as changing

his sexuality from a man to a woman, and calmly says, 'Same person. No difference at all... just a different sex'.

Frank Oz in *Stepford Wives* (2004), presents Roger Bannister as a gay who enjoys being involved in the Stepford society. This shows Frank's confidence in promoting the idea that people can accept a gay (Roger) as a human and a member of the Stepford Society. Even though in *Stepford Wives* (1975), transgender and homosexuality are not an issue as in *Stepford Wives* (2004), Bryan Forbes also presents the character Patricia Cornell saying when making love with her husband, 'Oh, Frank you're the best, you're the champ, you're the master...!'. In this context, both *Stepford Wives* (1975) and *Stepford Wives* (2004) do not see sex and sex identity as taboo.

#### **THE UNCHANGED SITUATION IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN**

In *When Night Is Falling*, Camille is portrayed as a victim. This is because she has to leave her job as a consequence of being a lesbian. Her college does not tolerate homosexuality. In this context, Camille has been punished owing to her sexual identity. She is also punished by her fiancé Martin's anger. Martin leaves Camille with her dead dog in her house. This movie also shows how Martin hits Petra's van (her house). In this context, Camille and Petra are the victims due to their choice to become lesbian in which they challenge patriarchal culture and religious belief (which only allows heterosexuality).

Similar to Camille and Patricia, in *Stepford Wives* (1975), Joanna is punished for being a cyborg as she tries to reveal the mystery of 'robotication' of wives in Stepford. The 'robotication' of Joanna Eberhart also can be seen as a consequence of rejecting doing domestic work. She struggles but is defeated by men (patriarchy). In this context, Joanna is a victim of patriarchal culture which has deep roots in Stepford society. This phenomenon has similarity with *Stepford Wives* (2004). Even though Joanna does not become a 'cyborg', she is still punished by the members of the Men's

Association as they stand around Joanna, while Walter is silent.

In *Orlando*, the end of film has Orlando losing all the property as she is pronounced 'dead' (because she is now 400 years old), but the main reason is because she is a woman. Orlando becomes a victim of England's inheritance policy. The sexist policy can be seen from what the officer says to Orlando when the executor takes her house, 'One, you are legally dead and therefore cannot hold any property whatsoever. Two, you are now a female. Which amounts to much the same thing'.

In *Stepford Wives* (1975), Joanna Eberhart has to cook and prepare food for her husband, children, and her husband's friends. Then, she has to accompany her children catching the bus. As a mother Joanna is expected to be perfect and this expectation causes her to give priority to domestic activities in her house. She can only take her pictures when all her duties as a mother are completed. In the film Walter seems to not care about his children, while Joanna with her sense of motherhood tries to find her children into the Men's Club. This means that Joanna cares about her children in her role as mother, while her husband in his role does not. The similarity also can be found in *Stepford Wives* (2004). The expectations of society for women to perform their roles as mothers and as domesticated women can be seen in the movie when Bobby says to Joanna, 'That's right! That's what's important, my new cookbook. And my husband, and my family, and making a perfect home. It's a lesson every girl needs to learn, especially you'.

Even though the role of mother is mostly unseen in *When Night Is Falling*, it seems that the film implicitly shows how Camille as a woman prepares her role in the future as a mother who has to wash clothes, when she meets Petra in a Laundromat. It foretells her transformation into the mother of the future when she will be doing washing. Motherhood expectation can also be seen in *Orlando*. As a woman, Orlando has to fulfil her roles, such as pregnancy, giving birth and caring for her child. She has to do all these roles also as a

mother, and this becomes particularly difficult when she becomes a single parent and has to do it alone.

In *Stepford Wives* (1975), Joanna Eberhart wears a dress without using a bra, but a man (Dale Coba) watches her when she prepares food in the kitchen. In *Stepford Wives* (2004), Walter wants his wife to wear a beautiful and becoming dress and to look very feminine, when he says, 'You heard me. Only high-powered, neurotic, castrating, Manhattan career bitches wear black. Is that what you want to be?'. In this context her husband wants Joanna to wear her dress in conformity with his expectations (a man's perspective). So she then wears a dress the same as the other Stepford wives and is then seen cooking in the kitchen after having argued with her husband.

In *Orlando*, Potter wishes to criticise Victorian dress in England. She presents Orlando wearing an exaggerated hooped skirt as a symbol of Victorian femininity. As a result, Orlando looks glorious and this is counter-productive considering Potter's intention. The movie spectator may feel well that women wearing Victorian dress were look lovely even if the dress is awkward to wear. The high expectation of femininity connected to wearing dresses is also found in the film *When Night Is Falling*. Cammille Baker wears Petra's sexy dress, but Martin sees it as breaking the norms. When they have a discussion with the board president, Martin forces Camille to cover her open shirt with her coat. By this evidence the feminine expectations which force women to dress according to social norms (i.e. patriarchal culture) seems still prevalent in the movies.

Based on the results of the analysis of the four movies, it is clear that the first aspect that has changed in the representation of women in these four movies is the equality between men and women in obtaining jobs. From the evidence, it appears that the equality of work between men and women has changed quite a lot, compared with other movies such as *Notorious* (1946) in which a woman is much subordinated to a man. There the woman is like a doll who has to follow a man's instructions when she is working, but a

woman does need 'other activities' which would fulfil her desires to work outside house (Williams, 1990:151). The second aspect that has changed in the representation of women in movies involves women as educated women. This shows that there is a change in strategy in campaigning for the rights of women. In enrolling extra help, Joanna in 2004 is more educated and smarter than Joanna in 1975 (Calhoun, 2004:55). The third aspect that has changed greatly in the presentation of women in the four movies is that women can express and choose their sexual identity. Regarding this, Hollinger (1998:10) and Halberstam (1992:41) believe that homophobic lesbian images are used most frequently to validate the superiority and desirability of heterosexuality. Butler terms the 'performativity' of gender; the body is not a passive receptor of social norms but a signifying, performing system of meanings. Part of the zone of the social, for example, heterosexuality simultaneously abjects homosexuality while identifying with that disavowal (Butler, 1990: 337). Regarding this, Haraway argues that 'bodies are maps of power and identity'. Therefore, it is important to avoid unitary identity (Haraway, 1990:222). This means that there is no difference between men and women in this world (Stoney, 1994:36).

Although there are some changes in the representation of women in the four movies, the analysis has also shown that there are still unchanged aspects. The first aspect that is unchanged is that the movies continue to depict women as victims. Clover (1992:43) said that sex difference contributes to victimisation women in cinema. Regarding this, Jones first argues on the assumption that woman is *lacked a phallus* and the second, because a woman has broken the norms of society. The assumption that a 'woman has a lack' led to a sexist ideology which marginalised a woman by systematic oppression in the society (Jones, 1981:361). The second unchanged aspect in the four movies that has been examined, is regarding the expectations of motherhood. This shows how motherhood expectations marginalise the characters into domestic areas. In relation to this, Kaplan said that the patriarchal culture

had made limitations for women and stereotypes them as good or bad mothers (Kaplan, 1990:128). The third aspect which is unchanged in the representation of women in these movies is about dress as a reflection of femininity. Simone de Beauvoir (1972:77-78) who said that sexuality is plays a significant role in human life. Men who describe themselves as 'the-self' and women as 'others' feel threatened by women and the way for those men to feel secure is by oppressing women. They do this by creating symbol and myth so that women become subordinate and institutionalised and see this as a destiny to which they are born. According to Linda LeMoncheck (1985) women today live in man's world in which women are systematically sexualised by men in a way that dehumanises women. She believes that women are dehumanised in the domestic sphere, the economic and the political spheres and are taught to believe that men are always right and best. Joseph Bristow (1997:1) defines sexuality as 'a term that points to both internal and external phenomena to both the realm of the psyche and the material world'.

Regarding the body image aspect, Butler (1993:3) argues that perceptions of a woman's body are created, constructed and imposed through cultural norms. A woman has little choice relating to her body because the cultural norm governs her and her body. Butler mentions that this process is introduced and repeated until women accept and never question it. Butler also said that hegemonic culture can be shown by binary structures which appear in the language and are accepted universally (Butler, 1990:9). Another feminist, Naomi Wolf (1990:58) provokes the situation by saying that patriarchal culture introduced the concept that 'men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at'. To explain this situation, probably it should look at what Mary Wollstonecraft said about woman as mother. She argues that men always insult women with their rules and domestication. As a mother, a woman should exhibit obedience and softness of temper. This attitude has been implanted since their infancy (1974:23). Thus, Wollstonecraft believes that to escape from subordination and to get freedom, women should get a proper education

and be freed from economic dependence by working, so that they then can get their rights (1974: 25). The myth about woman basically was promulgated by men who thought that the best way to control woman is to construct myths about her. Myths are meant to explain the unexplainable, to simplify the complex, to rationalise the irrational (Tong, 1994:205).

## CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that there have been some changes in the representation of women in cinema. However, by using modern hermeneutic method, it has been identified that there are some aspects also in which things remains the same. Those elements which have changed are the equality between men and women in getting jobs, in education, and the fact that women can express and choose their sexual identity. Unfortunately, even though women can enter the public sphere by gaining good jobs outside the home, patriarchal culture still needs them to do domestic work in their roles of wife and mother. In this context women have to work twice, inside and outside the home. In addition, in films, women have been presented as having higher education, as being clever, sceptical, and brave heroines in fact, but they are still forced to wear a 'beautiful dress' in accordance with expectations of their femininity. Lastly, women have also been represented as having free choice about their sexual identity, capable of becoming homosexual or heterosexual. Yet at the same time the society punishes them for being deviant if they do choose homosexuality. In conclusion, the representation of women in the cinema seems to have changed in certain respects; however, basically, it remains the same.

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