

BREAKING GENDER STEREOTYPES: WOMEN AND WORK IN THE FILM *THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show that women are physically capable of performing (and free to perform) any task or work and pursue any career path in life. Guided by Amazon Feminist film theory, the article rejects the notion that work should be gendered. The argument made here is that if women are to be truly liberated, they must be at the centre of their own emancipation. They should be able to decide and pursue their dreams or career paths in life, without fear, without allowing men to decide for them what work they ought to do. In respect of world views, male frames usually exploit women by assigning subordinate roles or jobs to them. Furthermore, they discriminate against women based on the assumption or stereotype that they are passive, weak and physically helpless. To demonstrate the role films play in liberating or providing alternative images of women, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (2008), directed by Anthony Minghella, is used as an example.

Keywords: film; gender; representation; stereotypes; work

INTRODUCTION: THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN THE MINDS OF MEN

Femininity, according to Friedan (1963), is reflected in a set of traits and behaviours that girls and women are expected to possess. It is, in a certain sense, the ideal

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behaviour that girls and women are expected to display – mostly by men in patriarchal societies. When girls and women deviate from these set traits or behaviours they are sometimes admonished, scolded or labelled immoral, or are even derided as whores in extreme cases. An assertive or self-confident and opinionated girl may be told that her behaviour is unacceptable, and she may be disciplined for behaving outside the norm. In such a situation, her actions will be measured against the ideals of feminine behavior, as determined by society in general and man in particular. In other words, girls and women who are considered ‘normal’ in these societies are those who do not deviate from specific set traits and behaviours. Moreover, in patriarchal societies there are certain expectations of what a person must or should do with his or her life as far as their career goes, and it is strongly based on gender stereotypes. Thus, the nature of the work to be done will determine whether the person who must do it, is male or female.

Chodorow (1978) states that feminine ideals are associated with certain roles – those of wife and mother. The assumption is that all women will be or become wives and mothers. Likewise, certain jobs are seen as ‘good’ for women, as they leave women with enough time to devote to their household chores. Teaching and nursing are good examples of the kind of jobs which men expect women to take up or aspire to. Nursing, for example, which is seen as an extension of the caring, nurturing role of women, can be extended from the home and into the workplace. In short, those female characteristics which are associated with being a wife and mother often determine which career options are deemed suitable for women. Thorne (1993) adds that certain careers are gendered: nursing, for example, is a profession that has more female than male practitioners and is not deemed appropriate for men. This emanates from the stereotype that women are warm, loving and caring. Accordingly, women’s employment outside the home may be concentrated within certain professions and specific types of work, and they may thus be less likely to own and/or control economic resources and assets. In most patriarchal societies, a young person may be advised on which subjects to take in school/college, depending on their gender. Hence, if education is gendered, so is the job market – certain opportunities are considered appropriate only for girls, and others for boys.

It is through socialisation processes in societies that girls and boys, women and men are ‘taught’ about the kind of jobs, occupations or careers they should aspire to. Jobs are modelled along the stereotypes assigned to each sex. According to Bernard (1974), a stereotype is an oversimplified, clichéd image which has been repeated so many times that it seems to have established a pattern. It is a highly judgemental type of representation. In other words, stereotypes are an extreme form of representation, constructed through a process of selection where certain aspects are focused on and then exaggerated. At the same time an evaluation is made, society is invited to make a judgement which is often based on prejudice. The repetition of this process serves to establish stereotypes and, over time, allows them to appear ‘natural’. Many

groups in society have stereotypes associated with them, but these are mainly based on limited and distorted views. Frequently, stereotyping is evident where there is a power imbalance between members of society. Skewed relations between men and women can encourage the development of stereotypes on both sides. Put differently, stereotyping is an ordering process which serves to order people's reality within an easy-to-understand format, and is an essential part of making sense of the world. The fact that stereotypes offer an incomplete view of the world does not necessarily make them false, but they do reflect a particular set of ideological values. In fact, there is no such thing as a complete view of the world. All of us use stereotypes as short-cuts to meaning and a way of referring to the world. As such they are social constructs which offer a type of re-presentation which naturalises power relations in society. Stereotypes have a hegemonic function, therefore the fact that women are often subservient to men legitimises their inferior position. Consequently, what stereotypes represent are not beliefs based on reality, but ideas which reflect the distribution of power in society. Stereotypes are therefore not an expression of value, but of ideology. Ideology, according to Dyer (1993), refers to sets of ideas that give a (partial or selective) account of the social world, the relationship between these ideas/values and the way power is distributed socially, and how such values tend to be presented as 'natural' and 'obvious' rather than socially aligned.

The message which is therefore inferred is that jobs or occupations for each sex are also stereotyped, and the stereotypes men hold about women do not communicate accurate information. These stereotypes are meant to make women subordinate. For instance, girls are stereotyped as being more sensitive and emotional – more likely to get upset or scared, more likely to cry. They are also stereotyped as being sensitive in another sense of the term – that is, they are more aware of other people's feelings and more caring towards others. In view of the above stereotypes, women are therefore encouraged to enter the teaching and nursing professions. Girls and women are also expected to be more concerned about their physical appearance – clothes, make-up and hair – and spend time making themselves look beautiful. It is also assumed that girls will grow up to marry and have children, that they will at some stage of their lives become wives and mothers. In this respect, domestic work is therefore seen as something towards which women are naturally inclined.

In many cultures domestic work is not recognised as work but as women's duty. Housework (cooking, washing, rearing children and so on) is often unpaid work and hence it has led to women's work being deemed invisible. Men's work, which is usually done outside the home, is treated as visible work. Hence, men have become the bread-winners and women who do household work are treated as dependents. Work thus ultimately became gendered within and outside the home. If women were to search for employment they would take up work as domestics in private homes, washing clothes and utensils and cleaning the house (Dyer 1993). Men believe that women are used to doing domestic work in their own homes, and generally consider

it below their dignity to do such jobs. Thus, cleaning and cooking jobs are considered appropriate for women, whereas men are mostly employed to work in offices or supervise women.

Women are preferred in jobs which have secondary status, pay low wages and in which males are disinterested. This clearly indicates the kind of prejudices that work against women. Men are preferred in jobs which require automation and a certain level of skill. Whenever a new technology is introduced, it is usually the males who are encouraged to go for training and upgrade their skills, while women are not usually encouraged to do so. This kind of gender discrimination makes it difficult for women to remain in employment in the organised sector where skills are deemed important (Tasker 1998). This gendered understanding of work is also observed in the agricultural sector, in which women are removed from activities when modern technology enters the picture. To conclude, gender plays a very important role in determining the type of work that is handed over to males and females respectively. Women's employment in the farming sector is usually referred to as 'off-season unemployment', yet many of them remain unemployed during peak season. Again, in this sector men and women do not have equal or similar roles.

The ways in which women are represented in patriarchal societies affect the nature of the jobs they end up doing. Of all the stereotypical roles assigned to women that of the homemaker is the most prevalent. It is imperative for a woman to put her family's welfare before her own; she is loving, compassionate, caring, nurturing, emotional and sympathetic. The male's role, on the other hand, is to be the provider; he is expected to be assertive, competitive, independent, aggressive, courageous, rational, career-oriented and pragmatic. These stereotypes are quite damaging and can hinder an individual's personal and professional growth as well as their expression and creativity. In a nutshell, gender stereotypes maintain the status quo in terms of women's and men's roles. Furthermore, they are one of the most persistent causes of inequality between the genders in all spheres and at all stages of life, influencing people's choices in terms of education, as well as their professional and private lives.

To combat the gender discrimination or inequality which obtains in most patriarchal societies, several feminist have approaches emerged. These theories have one goal in mind, which is to see women liberated. One such theory is ecofeminism, which rests on the basic principle that patriarchal philosophies are harmful to women, children and other living things. Eco feminists feel that patriarchal philosophy emphasizes the need to dominate and control unruly females. Furthermore, other approaches (such as radical feminism) question why women must adopt certain roles based on their physiology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on their gender. Radical feminism attempts to draw lines between biologically and culturally determined behavior, in order to free both men and women as much as possible from existing narrowly defined gender roles. Amazon feminism, which focuses on physical equality, is opposed to gender stereotyping and discrimination

against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. Amazon feminism furthermore rejects the idea that certain characteristics or interests are inherently masculine (or feminine), and upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood, in addition to viewing all women as just as physically capable as men.

DECOLONISING THE MIND: WOMEN AND OCCUPATION IN THE FILM *THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY*

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency (2008) seeks to provide alternative images of women and the work they can do or the professions they can enter. The film, which employs the tenets of Amazon feminist theory, attempts to decolonise and restore human values to women. Decolonisation is seen as a process of learning to unlearn patriarchal ideologies and relearning matriarchal ideologies. In this article, matriarchal ideologies are regarded as focusing on or putting female frames at the centre of our world view. As a consequence, the pictures and words, images and symbols that filmmakers use should aid in fixing women's memories and shaping or creating 'new' realities, since the ways in which film represents people have impact on identities. Representations of characters invite audiences to understand them and agree with them in certain preferred ways.

In most patriarchal societies the girl child is not prioritised in as far as education is concerned. Families often choose to invest in boys as the future earners and caretakers of the family, which enables boys to grow up with higher status in the household than girls, and better income-generating opportunities. While status generally increases with age for both men and women, it increases disproportionately for men. On the other hand, the status of girls is not measured in terms of education, but in terms of marriage. A married girl is valued more highly than one who is unmarried. In *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, an alternative image of women is provided. The father of Precious, who is the protagonist in the film, is seen moving around in the village with his daughter, teaching her so many things. This is underscored by Precious when she says: 'I learnt a lot of things from my father ... [I learnt] to use my eyes, to use my ears, to use my memory, [and also] to be patient' What is implied in the film through the above excerpt is that girls and women have the right to both formal and informal education that parents should not educate only boys, and that education should not be gendered.

Precious' father also taught her to be just and to exercise justice. As such, she is portrayed in the film as having a sense of justice (which she inherited from her father) and taking pleasure in solving mysteries. What is more, her father gave her his vehicle as well as 130 cows. What can be deduced from the above tangible and intangible gifts, is that Precious is indeed 'precious' to him. The message signified

by the name of the protagonist is that girls, just like boys, should be treasured and that, consequently, parents should make an effort to invest in them.

In addition to the above, the film also attempts to correct the 'male-centric' world view which denigrates women by placing them at the margins or periphery of the 'men's world' (where men are central and dictate everything that happens or should happen). In similar vein, the film attempts to liberate women by displacing patriarchal ways of thinking and replacing them with ways of thinking and acting that are based on women's cultural experiences. Girls are usually taught to be concerned with their looks and snaring a man. The reason behind these teachings is that women should strive to get married and become wives and mothers. However, in this film, the patriarchal image of an 'ideal' girl or woman is repudiated and an alternative image is provided. Women are taught to pursue their dreams prior to getting married. Women are also taught to explore alternative careers. They are shown that getting married is not an end in itself, but that they should aspire to do greater things in life. In the film, the teachings that Precious received from her father later helped her to become a detective. She managed to establish her own company in an urban area by breaking into so-called 'men's spaces'. In Africa, villages and rural areas are usually considered ideal places for women, while cities are deemed better suited to men. Precious works as a detective, a profession which her community considered as being the purview of men.

When Precious' father was about to breathe his last breath, he said: 'I bless you my son.' Larson (2001) states that everything depicted in a film text is not there by accident but by design, hence the inclusion of the word 'son' to denote the girl-child Precious is meant to convey the message that society in general and women in particular should not see girls as passive, weak and physically helpless, but as capable as men. This is evident in the film when Precious manages to resolve a squabble which arises between two members of her community regarding a cow and its real owner. Elderly men had failed to resolve the dispute, but Precious manages to solve the puzzle.

Women in patriarchal societies are taught to be dependent on men and so they are encouraged to get married and wait for their husband to take care of them. What is more, women are also stereotyped as typical blondes – people who have the looks but not the brains, and who need men if they are to survive in the social world. In patriarchal societies, men are regarded as rational and tactful human beings with the ability to decide what is best for women. When Precious' father passed on, his lawyer approached her and told her that her ex-husband intended to remarry her, after having mistreated her in the first place. What was being suggested or communicated to viewers is that women cannot survive at all without men that they need men to take care of them. The lawyer – misguided by these patriarchal philosophies – believes that since women need men to look after them and since her father has passed on, it

is prudent for Precious to remarry her ex-husband. However, the film denounces this negative stereotype when Precious refuses to accept the proposition.

The lawyer furthermore suggests that Precious either consider investing all her wealth and staying at home while ‘eating’ the interest accrued, or open a bottle store in the city that he (lawyer) will manage on her behalf while she stays in the village. The stereotype that he is perpetuating is that women do not have the insight or mental acuity that men do, and that men understand the value of money (more so than women) and so are capable of deciding what is good for women. Thus, the preferred reading is that women are not capable of making sound business decisions, while men are. Women are deemed to lack entrepreneurial skills and as such cannot make independent decisions or run businesses on their own. The film provides a counter-stereotype in that Precious is presented as an entrepreneur who manages to set up her own detective agency. She furthermore works as a detective – an occupation or profession considered better suited to men. In other words, Precious refuses all the business proposals which the lawyer puts forth and decides to pursue her own dreams. All his proposals would have reinforced the stereotype that a woman’s place is in the kitchen. This is reinforced by a man who helps to tow her car when it overheats en route to the city. The man asks Precious what she wants to do in the city, and she tells him she wants to open a detective agency. ‘Why does a fine woman like you want to be a detective?’ he asks. The preferred reading is that women should not look for work outside the village setting or venture into so-called male professions. Instead, women should focus on getting married and being dependent on men. Men are therefore regarded as providers or bread-winners and women as housewives.

However, in the film *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* women are encouraged to pursue their dreams, to get an education and take up so-called men’s jobs. In the film, Precious, through her detective agency, manages to solve all the cases that are brought to her by clients. The film is therefore significant in that it deals with the issue of gender and work, and shows society that women can do whatever men do. It manages to decolonise the minds of people in general and women in particular, by depicting how, despite all the impediments that women may face in their respective communities, they should always dream big and dare to venture into new territories considered the domain of men.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to show the role which the film *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* plays in decolonising the minds of men and women in society. The film shows that women are not passive, weak and physically helpless when compared to men. As such, the article recommends that women should be treasured and that parents should invest in their girl children. Furthermore, the argument made here, is that work should not be gendered. Women are capable of performing jobs

or entering professions that most patriarchal societies regard as the domain of men. This is depicted through the character of the independent Precious, who works as a detective and successfully solves all the cases that are brought to her detective agency.

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