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# Deconstructing Female Empowerment in The Devil Wears Prada

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**ABSTRAK:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji dekonstruksi pemberdayaan perempuan pada dua tokoh utama film *The Devil Wears Prada* yaitu Miranda Priestly dan Andrea Sachs. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode analisis wacana kritis dengan menggunakan dekonstruksi sebagai kerangka analisis pada film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Pemeriksaan menyeluruh terhadap film dan skenario dilakukan untuk memilih, mengurutkan, dan mengidentifikasi (mencatat) elemen-elemen dalam film *The Devil Wears Prada*. Dekonstruksi pemberdayaan perempuan dalam karakter Miranda menunjukkan bahwa Miranda bukanlah representasi yang baik dari tujuan pemberdayaan perempuan yang sebenarnya meskipun ia sukses secara materi dan profesional. Di sisi lain, analisis terhadap tindakan Andrea menantang gagasan pemberdayaan perempuan. Sementara Miranda mewakili tujuan pemberdayaan perempuan dalam pengertian yang lebih tradisional, yaitu perempuan yang berhasil mendobrak tempat kerja yang didominasi laki-laki dan mencapai kesuksesan serta pengakuan sebagai pemimpin. penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Andrea telah mendefinisikan ulang gagasan pemberdayaan perempuan dengan menetapkan dirinya sebagai wanita berdaya yang mengambil kendali dan membuat keputusan penting dalam hidupnya.

**Kata Kunci:** Dekonstruksi; Pemberdayaan Perempuan; *The Devil Wears Prada*

**ABSTRACT:** This study aimed to examine the deconstruction of female empowerment on the two main characters of the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, namely Miranda Priestly and Andrea Sachs. It employed a critical discourse analysis method using deconstruction as the analysis framework on the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Thorough examination of the movie and the screenplay was conducted in order to select, sort, and identify (taking notes) elements of the work which contributed to the discussion of deconstructing female empowerment in the characters of Andrea and Miranda, including how they interact with and respond to the challenges they face throughout the movie. Descriptive analysis was then conducted to offer support for the proposed hypothesis of this study, namely that there is a deconstructed idea of female empowerment in the characters of Andrea and Miranda. The deconstruction of female empowerment in Miranda's character shows that Miranda is not a good representation of the true goal of female empowerment despite her material and professional success. On the other hand, the analysis on Andrea's actions challenges the idea of female empowerment. Whereas Miranda represents the goal of female empowerment in a more traditional sense, which is a woman who manages to breakthrough the male-dominated workplace and achieve success and recognition as a leader, this study shows that Andrea has redefined this notion of female empowerment by establishing herself as an empowered woman who takes control and makes important decisions for her life.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Female Empowerment, *The Devil Wears Prada*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction is a philosophical approach or idea that is first proposed by Jacques Derrida. It is founded as a rejection against the structuralist approach which emphasizes on the importance of logic and structure. According to Barker (2004), deconstruction means to break down and to reject in order to seek and present assumptions of a text. Barker (2004) adds that it rejects the idea of “hierarchical binary conceptual oppositions” and exposes the tension between what is meant (to be conveyed) in the text and what can be conveyed by the text. Derrida suggests that meaning does not necessarily reflect one main central point (logocentrism) which serves a single absolute objective truth, and proposes what allows this to happen as the ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Crowley, 1989). Therefore, as meaning is neither inherent nor static, a text or an idea can always be taken from its context, be placed in a new context, hence creating constantly evolving meanings, which Derrida refers to as *différance* (Crowley, 1989).

In literary analysis, deconstruction becomes important as a way to approach various texts by questioning their intended purposes. Various studies focusing on deconstruction of popular literature and films, have been published, including Bowman (2008) who wrote *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, and Dillon (2018) who wrote *Deconstruction, Feminism, Film*.

*The Devil Wears Prada* is a 2006 movie based on a novel with the same name published in 2003 by Lauren Weisberger. It tells the story of the 20-something protagonist Andrea Sachs in pursuing her dream job as a journalist by working as an assistant to an influential boss, Miranda Priestly. Miranda is a demanding boss, and the dynamic between the two characters offers an interesting spectacle about the portrayal of women in the modern workplace. The movie has a slightly different yet significant ending compared to the novel. In the novel, Andrea and Miranda did not reconcile:

*“Emily had been the one who officially fired me. Not that I’d had any lingering doubts as to my employment status after my little foul-mouthed temper tantrum, but I suppose Miranda had been livid enough to drive home one last dig.” (Weisberger, 2003, pp. 341-342)*

Meanwhile, although the movie ends on a similar note with Andrea leaving her job during her assignment in Paris, she did not get into an argument with Miranda and simply left her car and threw her cellphone to a fountain to indicate that she was resigning. Additionally, there is

one important scene in which Miranda gives Andrea her approval and support in a reference letter, as conveyed by the editor of the publication Andrea was applying to:

*"I called over there for a reference, left word with some snooty girl, next thing you know I got a fax from Miranda Priestly herself saying that of all the assistants she had, you were by far her biggest disappointment. And that if I don't hire you, I'm an idiot."*

The ending of the story is a crucial element to the idea of female empowerment and both characters' journeys. On the other hand, the visual media also has the opportunity to reach a wider audience as it is more accessible in popular culture (Heffernan, 2016). For this reason, many studies have been drawn to examine the novel from various perspectives, from feminism (Putri, 2020), gender performance (Murtazikoh & Hetami, 2022), post-feminism (Ilief-Martinescu, 2015), fashion discourse (Adam, 2016), to socio-economy (Mandal's, 2020), as well as the movie (Oktapiani, Natsir, and Setyowati, 2017; Liu (2017); Ratri & Ardi, 2019). Putri (2020) discusses the novel by deconstructing the idea of "girl power" in the novel and finds to the conclusion that "Miranda's dependence on others shifts her powerful status to a powerless person" (p. 51). Whereas Putri (2020) focuses on who has the "power" in the dynamic between the two characters, this study addresses and questions how the idea of female empowerment may shift. The discussion will provide extensive descriptions on how female empowerment is portrayed and redefined in each character and how important it is to challenge and question what it means to be an empowered woman.

## B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs the critical discourse analysis method using deconstruction as the analysis framework on the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). The method implies that a body of work can be examined based on how it is related to the social context, in this case female empowerment (Janks, 1997). The source of data was the screenplay of the movie by Aline Brosh McKenna based on the novel by Lauren Weisberger, including the narration of the events and gestures, as well as dialogues between the characters. Thorough examination of the movie and the screenplay was conducted in order to select, sort, and identify (taking notes) elements of the work which contributed to the discussion of deconstructing female empowerment in the characters of Andrea and Miranda, including how they interact with and respond to the challenges they face throughout the movie. Descriptive analysis was then conducted to offer

support for the proposed hypothesis of this study, namely that there is a deconstructed idea of female empowerment in the characters of Andrea and Miranda.

## C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Female Empowerment and Patriarchal Values in the Workplace

The European Institute for Gender Equality defines female empowerment as “process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices.” In addition, Chen & Tanaka (2014) describes female empowerment as “the process of increasing women’s access to control over the strategic life choices that affect them and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their capacities.” Walby (1990) describes female empowerment “gradual emancipation of women from the patriarchal mindset, belief system, and behaviour.” The foundation of female empowerment is feminism, which essentially demands the equality for women to have the same opportunities and power as men (Elshtain, 1975). It is rooted in the fact that across the world and in many cultures, patriarchal values are the norm. According to Walby (1990), patriarchy refers to a social system which favors men as the primary authority figure over women as women are often seen as the weaker sex, whereas men are typically recognized as physically and mentally stronger, and therefore deserve to be leaders. In the modern age, women empowerment movements have afforded women basic opportunities such as education and strategic positions in the workplace or in the government. However, the stereotypes surrounding women in the workplace are unfortunately still common, such as women being too emotional and only care about superficial things. At the same time, the patriarchal society demands that women care about their appearances and determine their values based on how they look. These patriarchal values become the main reason that even today, many higher positions in the workplace remain male-dominated despite a great number of highly qualified, highly educated, and highly competent women (Warner & Corley, 2017). Therefore, female empowerment in the workplace aims to overthrow the patriarchal values that hinder women from advancing in their professional pursuits.

This study refers to Spreitzer’s idea of empowerment, which assumes that empowerment is formed by environment, continuously changing, and specific to a certain context (1995). This implies that empowerment is not only about a success of an individual in overcoming challenges, but also how their actions impact the community (Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000).

## 2. Deconstructing Miranda's Empowerment

Miranda Priestly is the editor-in-chief for Runaway, a highly reputable fashion magazine. She is portrayed as stern, demanding, and has little patience or compassion for her staff, often pushing them to do what she asks to the point that it creates anxiety in the workplace. The title of the movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, is a reference to Miranda and how she makes her staff, especially the protagonist Andrea, feel stressed in completing tasks for her.

INT. RUNWAY - BULLPEN -- DAY

ASSISTANTS frantically push clothing rails out of the way. EDITORS race into their office.

ANDY peers in. One of the EDITORS changes from kitten heels to sky-high stilettos...

...another pulls on a body shaper under her dress...

...another hurriedly dumps the remains of her breakfast -- some cubes of cantaloupe -- into the trash...

INT. ELIAS-CLARKE LOBBY -- DAY

We watch MIRANDA walking through the lobby. We see PEOPLE react to her--GUARDS, ASSISTANTS and SECRETARIES cower, DISTINGUISHED EXECUTIVES bow their heads in respectful greeting.

These attributes indeed make her the perfect villain in the novel. However, in the perspective of female empowerment, it is undeniable that Miranda's current state as a successful and respected woman in a male-dominated field has made her a highly empowered woman in the traditional sense. This means that she, more than her female peers, has overcome obstacles that initially prevent women to climb the corporate ladder and become so successful that she has an established reputation in her field.

Miranda works in the both the fashion industry and media and publication which, despite being marketed to women, remain significantly dominated by male leaders according to a report by Forbes magazine in 2002.<sup>1</sup> In the movie, her significance is portrayed in how even designers seek her approval. Although the movie does not mention an extensive background on how she gets to her position, it speaks to Miranda's accomplishment that she manages to break through the glass ceilings and gain such

influence. However, this study attempts to challenge the notion that Miranda is the ultimate goal of female empowerment. First, empowerment implies that it is an action done for the benefit of the community (Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000). In Miranda's case, it can be argued that she does not necessarily uplift her female peers in the workplace, and instead suppresses and undermines them and on a daily basis. Although she is aware that Andrea is an accomplished person, she gives Andrea mundane, unsubstantial, and unprofessional tasks, and even to take care of her personal errands and her children's school assignment.

In a patriarchal system, women's opinions are rarely considered despite their competence or qualification. Miranda seems to take into account the male workers' opinions, such as Nigel instead of other female workers.

The goal of female empowerment is more to uplift women than destroying the patriarchy. However, it is unimaginable to reach such a goal without destroying what got women oppressed in the first place. According to Rawat (2014), female empowerment is equivalent to "overcoming the belief and practice of patriarchy" (p.44). Therefore, Miranda is not the best model for female empowerment because whether she realizes it or not, she promotes patriarchal values in the workplace, such as emphasis on the way women dress and asserting dominance through demanding tasks and lack of empathy towards her subordinates. The lack of "emotion" and the orientation towards the outcomes more than the process while disregarding personal boundaries have long been assumed as the more commonly acceptable approach which represent male-led workplace. Women are often underestimated and put down in the professional setting for being "emotional" (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 1969). It can be argued that Miranda managed to break through the glass ceiling because she conforms to these patriarchal values. While this is one way to succeed in a men's world, it only creates the illusion of empowerment because she continues to contribute to the system that does not favor women, and only does so when it is convenient to them or when women play by their rules. Female empowerment is not about succeeding despite being a woman, but about paving ways for women as a whole. Although Miranda has set the path for women to be "trusted" with such power in the workplace, she also sends the message that women have to adjust themselves to the men's rules to succeed. Although there is no mention on how she gets to her position of power, her later actions indicate that she knows how to be manipulative and step on others to secure her position.

On the other hand, the narrative attempts to show Miranda's vulnerability in her personal life. A patriarchal system views a woman's value in relation to the domestic life. This means that a successful woman is one that can maintain her household and duties as a wife and mother. Miranda adheres to this value because she is ashamed of the failure in her romantic relationship and wants to hide it from the public from the fear of being seen as a "failure".

MIRANDA

*When we get back to New York, we'll need to think of a way to keep it out  
of the press.*

ANDY

*Of course.*

MIRANDA

*Another divorce in the papers... and we all know what they'll say about me -  
- Dragon Lady, career-obsessed, drove away another "Mr. Priestly".*

MIRANDA

*I don't care what anyone says about me, of course. But it's so unfair to the girls... another disappointment,  
another stepfather, gone...*

If an empowered woman is a woman who is control of her life, it can be argued that Miranda perhaps is not fully empowered because while she is in complete control of her career, she struggles to maintain her personal life. Yet, this begs a further question: Does a woman need to "have it all" to be fully empowered? Miranda is not an excellent representation of female empowerment not because she cannot "have it all", but because she fails to support other women in the process of establishing herself as a leader.

#### *Deconstructing Andrea's Empowerment*

Andrea Sachs is the protagonist of the movie. She is portrayed as smart, loyal, determined, and compassionate. Her accomplishment is reflected from her college experience.

*"I was Editor in Chief of the Daily Northwestern. I won a national competition for college  
journalists."*

Andrea's father reaffirms Andrea's accomplishment when he questions her motive for working for Miranda.

*"I'm just trying to understand why someone who was accepted to Stanford Law turns that down to be a journalist and now you're not even doing that--"*

From the beginning of the novel, we can see that Andrea is an empowered young woman who has the determination to take actions to reach her dream, which leads her to gaining a job at a high-end publishing company in the hope of gaining experience and network to be a journalist.

*"I just have to stick it out for one year. Then I can do what I came to New York to do. I can't let Miranda get to me. I won't."*

This is clearly a smart and strategic move based on an informed decision-making process.

In the journey of achieving her dream, she is exposed by the successful woman figure (Miranda) and sees how she manages her day-to-day operation. Miranda taught her that she needs to adjust herself and adapt quickly to fit in in a demanding workplace condition. Because of this, although she is terrified of Miranda, just as many of Miranda's subordinates, Andrea has a great respect for her.

ANDY

*...I've never seen anyone as dedicated as Miranda.*

...

*Okay, so she's tough, but if Miranda were a man, no one would notice anything but how great she is at her job.*

Whereas others might thrive on seeing Miranda fails due to her poor treatment of others, Andrea feels sympathy for Miranda's problems, and even defends and warns her of an upcoming issue.

ANDY

*Miranda, wait. I have to talk to you. You can fire me if you want to after that, but... (gathers all her nerve) Irv is going to make Jacqueline Follet editor-in-chief of Runway. Christian Thompson told me, he's going to work for her. Irv's going to tell you today. I thought if I told you now, you could fix it.*

Andrea also shows her compassion by not fighting back or resenting Emily for her cold treatment and dismissive attitude. She truly felt uncomfortable when Miranda chose her to go to Paris instead of Emily and when she resigned, she gave Emily the fashionable clothes she was given as a form of compassion and loyalty to Emily.



Therefore, Andrea has demonstrated the true representation of women supporting women in realizing female empowerment as she has no resentment or contempt against those who underestimate her or treat her poorly, and instead consistently shows genuine support and great care for the well-being of her female colleagues. This attribute also depicts the contrast between her and Miranda, who only views her peers depending on their “use” for her.

In the end, Miranda has certainly made Andrea realize that Miranda’s idea of success is not something that Andrea prefers. The story ends with Andrea making a deliberate decision to resign from her job precisely at the same time as Miranda “accepts” her and sees her as qualified.

MIRANDA

*I must say, I was impressed with you, how intently you tried to warn me. I never thought I would say this, Andrea, but I see some of myself in you. Your dedication, your focus.*

At the same time, Andrea has inadvertently achieved her initial goal of impressing Miranda and get credibility from her experience as her assistant, although she resigns from her job. Without understanding her background, Andrea’s decision to resign from her high-end job can be easily mistaken as the opposite goal of female empowerment, as it means that she no longer has paid employment to support her independence. Nevertheless, it is exactly her experience and her success as Miranda’s trusted assistant that lead to her decision to resign. She refuses to be “successful” if it means giving up her integrity and making work her sole priority in life no matter the consequences for other people in her life.

ANDY

*But what if it’s not what I want? I mean, what if I don’t want to live the way you do?*

MIRANDA

*Don’t be silly, Andrea. This is what everyone wants. Everyone wants to be us.*

She decides that she does not want to become Miranda, and instead chooses to pave her own way to success. She begins again from the bottom, ready to work hard and sacrifice to achieve her goal, and hence becomes an empowered woman. In addition, the movie then implies that although Miranda no longer has any contact with Andrea, she shows her

respect towards Andrea's decision through the reference letter she sent to Andrea's prospective employer. As Emily tells the new assistant, "*You have some very large shoes to fill.*"

This leads the audience to believe that Andrea has made a good decision, as even those who underestimated her in the first place show her approval and support. This study argues that this is the ultimate form of Andrea's empowerment journey as the decision she makes for her life goal is one that does not require the assistance of others. This makes her fully independent, and therefore empowered. Moreover, as the goal of empowerment is to uplift the community, she sets an example for her peers that there are other ways, and perhaps more meaningful ways, to be successful.

#### D. CONCLUSION

The deconstruction of female empowerment in Miranda's character shows that Miranda is not a good representation of the true goal of female empowerment despite her material and professional success. The discussion shows that Miranda's actions in the workplace have repeatedly echoed patriarchal values which put down women whether consciously or subconsciously. Miranda shows that women must accept and adhere to patriarchal values to achieve success.

On the other hand, the analysis on Andrea's actions challenges the idea of female empowerment. Whereas Miranda represents the goal of female empowerment in a more traditional sense, which is a woman who manages to breakthrough the male-dominated workplace and achieve success and recognition as a leader, this study shows that Andrea has redefined this notion of female empowerment by establishing herself as an empowered woman who takes control and makes important decisions for her life. It takes courage to be empowered and Andrea shows this attribute by refusing to take part in the manipulative workplace values after witnessing what Miranda has done to ensure her career security. This shows that she is empowered to maintain her identity and integrity in her pursuit of success. Moreover, Andrea also uplifts women as a whole with her compassion towards other women, not showing contempt to those giving her a hard time, which in the end results in how the supporting characters such as Emily and Miranda show their approval and respect to Andrea's decision at the end of the story.

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