

## WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*

Putu Gayatri Devi Ganti Karuni Natih<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Padjadjaran

<sup>1</sup>E-mail: putu22001@mail.unpad.ac.id

**ABSTRACT.** Despite significant advancements in opportunities for women, certain expectations still push them to choose either a successful career or a stable personal life, making establishing and maintaining a career challenging. From a gender perspective, this study analyzes how *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) portrays women's struggle while maintaining and setting up their careers. This study examines how women are represented in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), mainly focusing on the portrayal of career-oriented women and the conflicts they face in balancing their professional ambitions and personal relationships. The findings reveal the conflict between career success and personal life portrayed in the movie. Miranda's career goals come at the cost of her personal relationships, while Andy is faced with similar tensions as her career path breaks away from her personal life. Through these characters' portrayal, the study shows the social pressure on women to balance work and personal life by highlighting each character's sacrifices to choose one over the other.

**Keywords:** *Devil Wears Prada*, Career-oriented woman, Gender, Representation

## REPRESENTASI PEREMPUAN DALAM *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*

**ABSTRAK.** Meskipun perempuan telah memiliki kesempatan-kesempatan dalam beberapa bidang, beberapa harapan tertentu masih mendorong mereka untuk memilih antara karier yang sukses atau kehidupan pribadi yang stabil. Dari perspektif gender, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) menggambarkan perjuangan perempuan dalam mempertahankan dan membangun karier mereka. Penelitian ini menjelaskan bagaimana perempuan direpresentasikan dalam *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), dengan fokus utama pada penggambaran karakter-karakter perempuan yang berorientasi karier dan konflik yang mereka hadapi dalam usaha menyeimbangkan ambisi profesional dan hubungan personal mereka. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa terdapat konflik antara kesuksesan karier dan kehidupan pribadi. Melalui penggambaran karakter-karakter ini, penelitian berargumen bahwa terdapat tekanan sosial pada perempuan dalam usaha menyeimbangkan kerja dan kehidupan pribadi.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** *The Devil Wears Prada*, Wanita berorientasi karier, Gender, Representasi

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, women have been fighting for equal opportunities, particularly in education and career advancement. In the contemporary era, women are still being pushed by societal expectations. Women continue to grapple with the dilemma of prioritizing between achieving a successful career and maintaining personal life stability. As Janet Yellen (2020) argues, despite the movement's progress, evidence shows that many women are still unable to achieve their goals because too many women are struggling to combine aspirations for work and family. As the movement has peaked, the representation of women in literary works and films has become more diverse and moved away from traditional stereotypes.

Amidst this development, a movie genre called "chick flicks" emerged. According to Barger (2011: p.337), "chick flicks" are highly commercial films targeting young urban women. Typically

centering on female protagonists and their everyday problems, chick flick movies frequently add a moral component to their theme and plot structure. Kubrak, quoted by Rifqi (2024), argued that film is seen as a vehicle for individual and social change, influencing public perceptions, including attitudes to proposed current social issues. The representation of women in contemporary media is crucial in shaping social expectations and influencing how women perceive themselves and their roles in society.

*The Devil Wears Prada*, one of the most popular chick flicks, serves as an example illustrating the struggle. *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) is a movie adaptation by David Frankel and revolves around two female characters, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) and Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway). This movie follows Andy Sachs, a young journalist who has a job as an editor assistant for a prestigious magazine under the demanding chief editor. Through Miranda and Andy's interactions, the movie

highlights the challenges of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. According to Valby (2006: p.73), *The Devil Wears Prada* portrays “a delightful knowing and sympathetic portrait of a working woman” and explores “the price a wonderful woman has to pay for her success.”

Since its premiere in 2006, *The Devil Wears Prada* has received abundant attention from film critics and researchers. Several studies have already been conducted to understand the characterization of Miranda Priestly and Andrea Sachs (Ye, 2021; Tampubolon et al., 2021), power of impoliteness in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Ratri & Ardi, 2019), fashion as means of empowerment (Köşker, 2023; Jamal, 2023; Febriyanto, 2024) and gender reconstruction by Miranda Priestly (Murtazikoh & Hetami, 2022).

Previous studies reveal a gap in understanding the impact of the protagonist's career on their personal life. While previous studies have explored gender performance and character struggle within the film, there remains a distinct absence of analysis specifically examining the impact of a high-powered career influencing the personal lives of female protagonists.

Through this film, this research aims to analyze how women are portrayed in *The Devil Wears Prada*, focusing on Miranda Priestly and Andrea “Andy” Sachs. The study also aims to compare how Miranda and Andy handle the struggle of balancing career and personal life differently.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method to gather non-numerical data, such as observation and movie analysis. The subject of the research is the film *The Devil Wears Prada*. *The Devil Wears Prada* is a 2006 comedy-drama film, a screen adaptation of Lauren Weisberger's 2003 novel of the same name (Yan, 2017). It was produced by Wendy Finerman and directed by David Frankel, one of the most popular chick flicks, grossing over \$326 million worldwide. This research only focused on the two main characters in the movie, Miranda Priestly and Andy Sachs. The researcher watches the film multiple times, noting scenes that highlight how women are portrayed and the struggles of balancing career and personal life. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the film *The Devil Wears Prada*. The study draws upon Judith Butler's gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* theory to provide a theoretical framework for analysis. The researcher also did research for information on the internet to study several articles that might support the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Women's Portrayal in *The Devil Wears Prada*

Even though both Miranda Priestly and Andy Sachs are characterized as ambitious women, they are depicted differently. Andy Sachs, the protagonist, undergoes a significant makeover session as she adapts to her new role at *Runway*, a prestigious fashion magazine. At the beginning of the movie, Andy is seen as an outsider. With little to no knowledge about fashion, Andy struggles to fit in with the industry's high standards and her boss', Miranda Priestly's, demanding expectations. Andy has a physical and professional makeover to achieve respect and confidence, allowing her to deal with the fashion industry. This fashion transformation is significant because it demonstrates Andy's adaptability and willingness to evolve and thus advance her profession.

On the other hand, Miranda is portrayed as a bold and fearless career woman from the beginning. Her commitment to her profession and unapologetic manner strongly characterize her personality. Unlike Andy, who transforms herself to fit in, Miranda derives her confidence and authority not from external validation but from her self-assurance. This distinction between the two characters signifies the different paths women can take to succeed.

### Andrea "Andy" Sachs' Fashion Transformation

*The Devil Wears Prada* opens with a montage sequence showing the protagonist, Andrea "Andy" Sachs, and a series of anonymous young women getting ready for work in the early morning (Hideki, 2013). This montage depicts several nameless young women carefully selecting their outfits, even choosing matching undergarments and applying makeup and accessories. In contrast, Andy simply brushes her teeth, applies chapstick, and carelessly throws on a random piece of clothing from her wardrobe. Although she applies to a prestigious fashion magazine, *Runway*, as a co-assistant, she is less concerned about her fashion. A coworker named Emily looks down on Andy for not having a good sense of fashion. Emily's first impressions of Andy are expressed as, "Great. Human Resources certainly has an odd sense of humor." (Frankel, 2006, 00:03:56). Miranda Priestly does not leave a positive impression on her first encounter with the antagonist. At first, Miranda just scans Andy from her hair to toe and then points out that she has no style or sense of fashion. When Andy is about to introduce her achievements, Miranda only waves her hand and says, "That's all," uninterestedly.

Andy learns the hard way to adapt to a new working environment, especially in a fashion magazine with a fast work pace. Later in the movie, Andy goes through a dramatic transformation at the hands of Nigel, a flamboyant art director at *Runway*. With his expertise in style and a deep understanding of the fashion world, Nigel gives Andy a makeover that would change her life. He transforms Andy from a careless young woman into a stunning, polished fashionista. The makeover is a turning point for Andy, marking the beginning of her journey into the fashion world and her transformation into a confident and stylish individual.

The fashion transformation in *The Devil Wears Prada* functions as a powerful metaphor for personal growth and empowerment. By learning to be more fashionable, Andy can gain the confidence and self-assurance she needs to excel in her job and more respect from her coworkers. Her decision to change her style can be seen as a feminist act of reclaiming agency over her own body and image, as she acknowledges the power dynamics at play in the world of *Runway* (Jamal, 2023).

In *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir provides a theoretical framework to understand the role of fashion in shaping self-esteem and identity. De Beauvoir discusses how women's identities are often constructed in relation to men and societal expectations.

Dressing has a twofold significance: it shows the woman's social standing (her standard of living, her wealth, the social class she belongs to), but at the same time, it concretizes feminine narcissism; it is her uniform and her attire; the woman who suffers from not doing anything she thinks is expressing her being through her dress (de Beauvoir, 2012).

Since the beginning, even though Andy is belittled by her boss and coworker, her ambitions never change but increase. The moment she walks into *Runway* with little to no knowledge about fashion, she always carries the same goal: to be a successful journalist. The first time she confronted Miranda, she acknowledged that she did not wear something fancy or matching, but she had a high work ethic and was an intelligent and hard-working employee. Both De Beauvoir's work and the transformation of Andy highlight the importance of fashion in shaping self-esteem, particularly for women.

### **Miranda Priestly as High-powered Career Woman: Challenging gender norms**

In contemporary society, gender norms are usually influenced by societal expectations and cultural norms. These standards control how people see themselves and how others see them. Research conducted by England et al. (2011) examines how female characters, particularly in Disney princess movies, are portrayed in the media, revealing a tendency to conform to stereotypical feminine traits. These traits, including being submissive, emotionally sensitive, and nurturing, are consistently depicted, reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda Priestly offers an interesting case study to examine how a high-powered career woman challenges gender norms in contemporary patriarchal society. As *Runway*'s chief editor, Miranda holds a position that demands respect and fear from those around her. Miranda's outstanding achievement in the top fashion journalism strata shows her exceptional abilities and strength in a male-dominated profession.

Despite being a nurturing mother, Miranda is depicted in her professional field as assertive, direct, and unapologetic in her interactions with coworkers and business rivals. Her commitment to her career and willingness to sacrifice challenge the traditional woman's stereotype of prioritizing family over ambition. Miranda's ambitions know no boundaries. Miranda is also persistent in keeping her career when her position is threatened. She creates a strategy for keeping her position as chief editor in *Runway* magazine even if she needs to throw her loyal coworkers under the bus. This action indicates that Miranda resists the traditional stereotype of women as submissive. Miranda performs her gender to be an independent woman determined to achieve her purposes (Murtazikoh & Hetami, 2022).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not a natural or biological category but a social and cultural construct that is performed and reinforced through various forms of socialization and cultural norms (Butler, 1990). Miranda Priestly's character emphasizes her power, authority, and agency as a career woman who challenges traditional gender norms. Her character contradicts women's stereotype of the weak and submissive female and portrays herself as a powerful and influential woman who can easily navigate the male-dominated industry.

### **How both Career Women face the challenge of balancing their personal life**

The most oblivious postfeminist myth perpetuated in *The Devil Wears Prada* is that women

cannot have it all, which is a misconception that has been widely criticized. This myth suggests that women cannot balance their personal and professional lives and must choose between them. This myth is particularly damaging because it can lead to women feeling guilty or inadequate if they are unable to balance these aspects of their lives or if they prioritize one over the other. *The Devil Wears Prada* reinforces the myth by portraying both female characters, Andy and Miranda, in a situation where they are in a dilemma about whether to sacrifice their personal life or a fashionable career in the fashion industry. There are numerous scenes depicting Andy and Miranda failing to maintain healthy relationships with loved ones and their family (Ruggerio, 2012)

### **Miranda Priestly, The Dragon Lady Career-Obsessed Woman**

Miranda: What did you expect me to do, walk out in the middle of a cover shoot?

Stephen: I rushed out of an investments committee meeting, and I sat there waiting for you for almost an hour.

Miranda: I told you the cell phones didn't work. Nobody can get any signal work.

Stephen: I knew what everyone in that restaurant was thinking—there he is, waiting for her again.

(Frankel, 2006, 00:47:43)

In this scene, Andy accidentally witnesses Miranda arguing with her husband, Stephen, in her house when Andy is about to deliver a mock-up of *Runway* magazine. These arguments highlight the tension between Miranda's career and personal life. During the argument, Stephen expresses frustration over feeling neglected by waiting for her for an hour. Miranda's response reflects the prioritization of her career over her personal life.

First, it sounds like a line a wife would say to her husband, illustrating that Miranda's work ethic and dedication to the job are too much like a man's and that she is subsequently not satisfying her husband. Secondly, Stephen appears embarrassed that others see him as "waiting for her" because men do not traditionally enact this behavior in a heterosexual relationship (Ruggerio, 2012).

Miranda's response to Stephen's frustration, "What did you expect me to do? Walk out in the middle of a cover shoot?" reflects her work ethic and dedication to her job. This response also highlighted the social expectations placed on women in the workplace, where they are often expected to be more flexible and accommodating than men.

The conversation reflects traditional gender roles and expectations within relationships.

Miranda's dedication to her career aligns with the stereotype of a career-driven woman. On the other hand, her husband's frustration and feeling of being overlooked likely came from the traditional expectations placed on men as the heads of households. It also highlights the social perceptions and judgments faced by both Miranda and her husband. The husband faced societal pressures on men to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, including being supportive of their partner's career at the expense of their own needs or desires.

During the Paris trip, Andy witnessed a rare and vulnerable side of Miranda Priestly, the seemingly heartless and strict chief editor of *Runway* magazine. For the first time, Andy saw Miranda's bare face, without her usual makeup, her face streaked with tears. Miranda then reveals that her husband will not join the next day's agenda and will divorce her by saying, "Well, if you speak to him and he decides to rethink the divorce, then yes, fetch away."

"Another divorce splashed across page six. I can just imagine what they're gonna write about me. 'The Dragon Lady' 'Career-obsessed' 'Snow Queen drives away another Mr. Priestly.'" (Frankel, 2006, 1:22:00).

This line indicates that this is not her first time getting a divorce because she prioritizes her career. It illustrates the punishment for career women, which is loss. Her choice to maintain a successful job and high position within her career came at the expense of her own family. She is characterized as a woman who has sacrificed everything for power and has had a tough life moving up in the fashion world (Güzel Köşker, 2023). Even though the moment she says that her relationship is on the verge of being over, she still thinks about how this divorce news will affect her career reputation. Despite her relationship being on the verge of being over, Miranda's primary concern remains her professional reputation and how the press will laminate her divorce news in the magazine. The scene demonstrates the high stakes women in powerful positions face in maintaining their public image.

Miranda's career-driven nature is juxtaposed with her maternal vulnerability as she struggles with the impact of her divorce on her twin daughters. Her statement, "It's just so unfair to the girls, and it's just another disappointment. Another let down. another

father figure gone," reveals her deep concern for her children's emotional well-being because their father figure will be taken away by the 'Snow Queen'. The divorce affects not only her professional reputation but also the emotional strength of her twin daughters, who are already vulnerable due to the consequences of their parents' failed relationship.

In her paper, Wood (2013) believes that media portrayals of career women often depicted them as effortlessly balancing their professional and maternal responsibilities without any conflict. However, the character of Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* broke the unrealistic expectations of the "superwoman" who excels at everything without any signs of stress or imperfections. Miranda's portrayal of the difficulties of juggling a demanding career and a healthy relationship with her family highlights the representation of career women in media who defy traditional norms.

### Andrea "Andy" Sachs' Dilemma

As Andy Sachs's career gradually reaches its highest point, she faces the same challenge as Miranda. She is forced to confront the sacrifices she must make to succeed in her career and the impact this has on her personal relationships. Andy chooses a different path from Miranda's. Despite her dilemma, Andy decided to prioritize her relationship over her career.

Initially, Andy feels overwhelmed by the never-ending workload and struggles to keep up with Miranda's pace. The first personal life disturbance that happens to Andy is shown in the scene where she is supposed to spend her weekend night with her father. Instead, Miranda assigns her to call all the airlines to get a ticket home despite the thunderstorms. She fails to get a jet so Miranda can come home, so she misses her children's recital. Miranda was disappointed and expressed her disappointment by saying,

"So you, with that impressive resume and the big speech about your so-called work ethic, I thought you would be different. I said to myself take a chance, hire the smart, fat girl. I had hope. My god, I live on it. Anyway, you ended up disappointing me more than any of the other silly girls." (Frankel, 2006, 00:31:33).

Andy, feeling unappreciated and upset by Miranda's comments, has breakdowns and turns to Nigel, the flamboyant art director in the *Runway* magazine, for motivation. Nigel's response is crucial to Andy's confidence. His sharp and sarcastic words urge her to 'wake up' and pull herself together. It might seem

harsh at first glance, but it serves as a wake-up call for Andy to get back on track and start working harder. Andy realizes that she has the power to take control of her career and not let the opinions of others determine her path. From then on, she tries to get her pace faster than Miranda and dresses up fashionably to gain respect from others.

As Andy's career progresses, she becomes increasingly focused on her work and spends less and less time with her friends and boyfriend, Nate. Her life is now full of *Runway*, and she is constantly under pressure to meet Miranda's expectations. This attitude shows the first time Andy hangs out with her friends after work, and Andy's phone rings with a call from Miranda. Nate and Andy's friends play catch with Andy's phone and do not let her answer the phone, which makes Andy lose her temper and say that her friends are jerks. This scene highlights the tension between Andy's personal life and career and her pressure to prioritize her job over her friendships. With each success at work, Andy grows more detached from her friends and Nate (Ruggerio, 2012).

Another scene, for example, is when Lily, Andy's best friend, accuses her of having an affair with Christian Thompson, a magazine journalist. Lily expresses her confusion about Andy's transformation: "For the last 16 years, I've known everything about that Andy. But this person? This 'glamazon' who skulks around in corners with some random hot guys? I don't get her." This statement highlights Andy's personality shift as a result of her career, and it also implies that Andy's rare interactions with her best friends have led to their growing suspicion towards her.

The key moment where Andy prioritizes her work over her relationship occurs during her breakup with Nate. Nate is frustrated because Andy has become the *Runway* girl he used to mock. He is not upset because Andy missed his birthday. Rather, he is disappointed by her lack of integrity. In the middle of their argument, Miranda calls, and Andy is tempted to answer. Nate just shrugged and said, "You know, in case you are wondering, the person whose calls you always take, that's the relationship you're in. I hope you two are very happy together." This scene is significant because it shows that Andy has already made her career her prominent priority, even when her relationship is on the brink of collapse. Then, Andy took her job to go to Paris as a good idea to take her break time with Nate.

During the Paris trip, Andy came to realize how horrible Miranda is. Miranda betrayed many of her loyal coworkers. For example, Nigel, who had been promised a promotion that Miranda failed to

give, prioritized her position as the chief of Runway instead. This realization hit Andy that she did not want to take the same path as Miranda by saying, "But what if this isn't what I want? I mean, what if I don't wanna live the way you live?" Andy then walks away from Miranda and throws her phone into the pond. The implication is she does not want to make the same "mistakes" as Miranda (Ruggerio, 2012).

After Andy resigns from Runway, she meets Nate in a restaurant. During this scene, Andy apologizes to Nate by saying, "I wanted to say that you were right about everything that I turned my back on my friends and my family and everything I believed in and—and for what?" This statement suggests that Andy recognizes that her career ambitions pushed her away from her loved ones.

As the main character, Andy Sachs faces the same challenge as Miranda in deciding between a fashionable career or a stable personal life. In the middle of the movie, her relationship with her boyfriend is on the verge of breaking up, not only with her boyfriend but also with her friends. It indicates that women prioritizing their work must pay for their unstable personal lives. In the end, Andy realizes that she does not want to have the same fate as Miranda, so she resigns from Runway and tries to build her relationship with her boyfriend again.

## CONCLUSION

Through analyzing the portrayal of women in *The Devil Wears Prada*, mainly focusing on Miranda Priestly and Andy Sachs, this study reveals that the film portrays women in such a complex way, and the film also shows the social pressure for career women to balance their career ambitions and personal life commitments. Andy Sachs undergoes a transformative journey from disregarding fashion to embracing it, symbolizing her personal growth to be a more confident and successful woman. On the other hand, Miranda Priestly, as a high-powered career woman, challenges gender norms. Her strategic thinking skills and refusal to conform to submissive stereotypes showcase gender performativity. The film debunks the myth of career women having it all as both characters struggle to balance their relationships with their careers and navigate it differently, each prioritizing their goals and desires. Miranda sacrificed her marriage several times for her career. Andy initially sacrifices relationships for professional success. However, witnessing Miranda's betrayal made Andy realize she wants to choose a different path and prioritize her personal life over her career.

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