

Challenging Stereotype in Marriage and Societal System from a Film Analysis of Anatomy of a Fall

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Abstract: The essay explores how to deconstruct gender stereotypes by looking at gender representations in marriage and the juridical system through a film analysis of *Anatomy of a Fall*. The film won the Palme d'Or award at the 76th Cannes Film Festival in 2023; it narrates the female protagonist Sandra's denial of the accusation of murdering her husband and the reclamation of her subjectivity in the trial. The aim of the article is to expose the film's subversive representation of gender roles as intertwined with Sandra breaking the traditional binary gender stereotypes prescribed by patriarchal society. The essay uses a contextual analysis approach, by analyzing the films' cinematic elements, such as narrative structure, cinematography, and editing. Besides, the essay also draws theoretical insight from Laura Mulvey and Beauvoir. The first finding of the essay is that the representation of the juridical system symbolizes the societal power system, which reinforces the stereotypes towards women; the second finding is that Sandra shows women's the refusal of male gaze and gender performativity. This essay elucidates how *Anatomy of a Fall* effectively subverts gender stereotypes, contributing to a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and gender roles in western society. Furthermore, its significance underscores the film's approach to challenge the entrenched societal norms and promote feminist ideals.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, subjectivity, feminism, gender performativity, gender role

1. Introduction

Anatomy of a Fall (2023) is a French drama film directed by Justine Triet that won the Palme d'Or award at the 76th Cannes Film Festival in 2023. The movie is about the trial of the female protagonist, Sandra, a woman accused of murdering her husband. The trails revolves around the trial which cast doubt on whether Samuel's death was the result of a suicide or a murder by pulling various evidence. The couple's tumultuous marriage is examined in court, exposing intense emotional conflicts. The paper is going to explore how gender representations in this film can potentially challenge gender stereotypes in marriage and the societal system.

This paper draws theories from Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler criticism of the reduction and segmentation of women's role in patriarchal society. To specify key terminologies, the male gaze is the act of depicting women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective, placing them as objects of male pleasure and desire. Women's representation becomes a medium for viewers' idealized

patriarchal delight and produces the visual pleasure of narrative cinema through objectification of female bodies [1]. However, this film is opposed to traditional Hollywood cinema that focuses on male characters or vilifies ambitious female characters. The director challenges the notion that looking is a source of erotic enjoyment for the male viewer, reinforcing the dynamic of patriarchal power and control. *Anatomy of a Fall* offers a nuanced perspective of the women under the marriage system, balancing between women's liberation and family and social responsibility. As a successful novelist, Sandra challenges the objectification of women [2] in marriage and the juridical system.

Another key term of this paper is gender. Gender, according to Butler, is a sequence of socially constructed and repeated behaviors and performances[3]. This concept implies that gender identity is fluid and subject to change in response to society's standards and individual expressions, rather than being a stable or set quality. According to certain research, the representation of traditional gender performativities still exists in Hollywood movies [4]. Luckily, films like *Anatomy of a Fall* successfully try to reverse the status of female and male characters. Traditional gender performatives are therefore deconstructed, we are able to see qualities like wisdom, rational, decisive and so on, which opens up more possibilities for female characters in movies through the setting of specific scenes and stories. Audiences gradually learn about the power of female characters and their original abhor on female characters dismiss. In this film, many scenes are shown to audiences in the cinema. In a critical scene, Sandra's husband accuses her of neglecting home responsibilities, highlighting the double standards in expectations for men and women. This inversion exposes the often underappreciated emotional labor that women perform, as well as the animosity that can occur when these roles are challenged [5]. However, Sandra clearly tells her husband that the all the failure he experienced are all caused by himself, 'This your own trap.', like Sandra says. She has the liberty to fight for herself.

This essay elucidates how the movie effectively subverts gender stereotypes, which means the generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics ascribed to women or men in order to maintain power relations. The film contributes to a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and its application of multiple languages, innovative documentary-style cinematic techniques, and storytelling contribute to its cultural and political significance. Furthermore, the film challenges entrenched societal norms and promotes feminist ideals within the multi-cultural socio-political landscape [6].

2. Methodology

Aiming to present better the process of how stereotypes are deconstructed in this film, several methodologies are utilized in this paper. First, academic articles and books related to theories including gender stereotypes, gender performativity, film theories, and so on are consulted to set the basis for the analysis in the paper, which also improves the technicality of this paper. Second, relevant data is applied to reveal specific trends or changes in this paper. Third, some film scenes of *Anatomy of a Fall* are selected to be shown so that the discussion and hypothesis in this paper possess concrete instances to advocate them.

3. The deconstruction of gender performativity

It is claimed that gender is performative, it is through engaging in those behaviors that one constitutes oneself and therefore becomes intelligible as a woman. [7]. So the representation of gender performativity in real life is mainly judged on the behaviors of different gender identities. Based on this, we, the audience, can observe the activities of the male and female characters in the scenes. Thus, we can conclude that the status of different gender identities varies and that the views of females and males in the film are demonstrated through shots of characters.

Under the influence of gender performativity, people have formed stereotypes of each gender. Therefore, gender bias can be discovered in movies. According to one research, two certain types of gender bias are found. The first one has to do with gender distributions over the years. Researchers have compared the ratio of male and female distribution over the years based on the presence of the participants and the number of dialogues they have had. The finding is that during 2000-2004, only 15.1% of characters were females however, during 2015-2019, this percentage increased to 43.9%. It is observed that with the evolution of time, gender distribution is getting more or less balanced. Secondly, the emotions of both genders are analyzed as well. The analysis showed that male and female characters exhibit emotions like anger, aggressiveness, despair, envy, outrage, and love very differently. Male characters have higher values for emotions like anger and aggressiveness [8].

On the other hand, female characters have higher values for emotions such as joy. These results are in line with the gender stereotypes in our society. Women are perceived to be more loving and caring, whereas men are supposed to be more aggressive and powerful [4].

Since the phenomenon of gender bias still exists, spaces are provided for us to discuss gender performativity. In the following passage, how *Anatomy of a Fall* deconstructs gender performativity will be discussed through the present of specific shots and the analysis of the techniques that are employed in this movie.

In traditional Hollywood movies, the major difference between the tropes of male and female characters is that the paths of female characters are dominated by tropes that describe romance and family, whereas, for male characters, the most common tropes include friendship, family, romance, career, and crime/violence. The most significant trope for female characters is described by the path 'female character-love-fall'. For male characters, the most considerable trope is defined by the path 'male character-old-friend' [9]. Society seems to give male characters a greater responsibility to achieve in their lives while female characters are described as emotional and are hesitant to life [10]. Luckily, as time passes, female characters' behaviors, such as marrying, gradually decrease in movies. In other words, *Anatomy of a Fall* exactly fits the trend. The following contents will focus on the scene of the quarrel between Sandra and Samuel at their home.

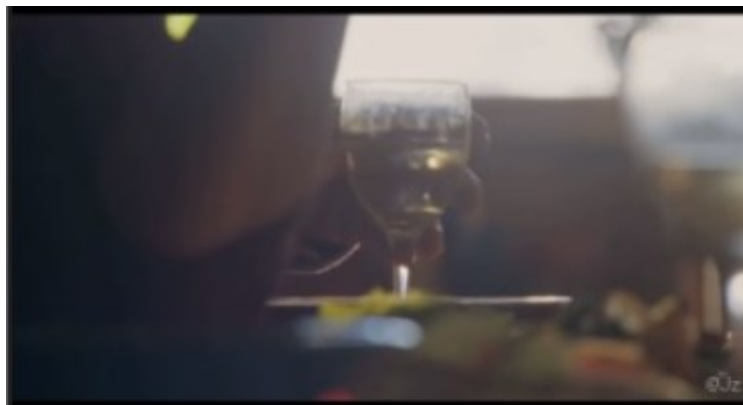


Figure 1: Close-up shot of Sandra pouring the wine

Close-up is used in Figure 1. to focus on the wine glass. Traditionally, the representation of wine in Hollywood movies is for the male due to the intensity of alcohol. The action of holding the wine glass can be understood as the control of power and rights. Back in this scene, Sandra holds the wine glass, as we can see in Figure 1., which corresponds to the condition that Sandra succeeds in both her career and in her family. Sandra wants to relax in the intense quarrel with his husband. However, it's just a phenomenon. In the quarrel, Sandra demonstrates that Daniel got blind because Samuel was putting too much effort into his work so he forgot to pick his son up. In fact, it has been claimed that the women chairs were better able to describe the effects of their identities on their leadership, and

they were more reflexive about the benefits and challenges they perceived were caused by their identities [11]. As a rebel to the traditional gender performativity, the inversion of the identities of male and female is a key element since Sandra, as a female character, got success in her own field rather a male character holds all the power. This can be regarded as the key reason why gender performativity is broken and deconstructed in the film.



Figure 2: Trisection composition of Samuel fighting with Sandra

In addition, the effect of trisection composition in this film is supposed to be considered. In a trisection composition in film scenes, the whole screen is equally divided into three parts perpendicularly or horizontally. While this technique gives us visual comfort and balances our experiences when watching movies, it shows the position of the character in the film simultaneously. To be more specific, take Figure 2. as an instance. Samuel's face occupies about 1/3 of the screen on the right, a relatively small proportion. Through the division, the status of Samuel is reflected to be fragile. His facial expression reflects his mental activities and although he wants to gain inspiration through the quarrel, he recognizes that he fails to take most responsibility. Sandra says, 'I don't see a writer who doesn't write just because he has a son and has groceries to buy.' 'This is your own trap.' He wants to blame that Sandra has an affair and her sex is not pure. But Sandra opposes the idea that these are all tricks without approval, because it's Samuel's own fault, for example he keeps on writing that Daniel experienced a car crash due to this and he becomes disabled. Sandra's reason and wisdom again cause the fact that male characters seem to be weaker in a family while female characters become leaders.



Figure 3: The mid-shot of Sandra wearing a jacket that seems to fit a male and sitting on a chair



Figure 4: The close-up shot of Sandra's alternative "male-like" behaviors

In Figure 3. , Sandra wears a jacket that seems to fit a male and sits on a chair when arguing with Samuel. Then she gets up and grabs a cigarette and smokes in Figure 4. These can be seen as alternative "male-like" behaviors despite the example that Figure 1. has been discussed. Sandra completely sits in the seat that is originally for males according to traditional gender performativity, since male characters are always described to be decision-making. In this fragment of quarrel, Samuel only stays in the kitchen and fights back and is deconstructed by Sandra, because all he wants to complain on Sandra is of no avail and Sandra fights back and she transparently that it's Samuel himself doesn't have the ability to make a living.

In sum, many features as mentioned in the previous contexts illustrate that the inversion and deconstruction of traditional gender performativity exist in *Anatomy of a Fall*. It's a revolutionary development because the power and infinite possibilities for females are regarded as an essential theme that occurs in the film which enlightens the minds of audiences. From the techniques the film uses in shot, to the power we see on female characters, audiences can learn that everyone could achieve something, no matter which gender they're belong to, which develops their ideas on the diversification and the limit to judge others by traditional gender performativity.

4. The presenting of social stereotype in legal system

The experience of a verbal confrontation, face to face in the kitchen, in front of the camera, training with a lawyer, in the courthouse is one of the main motifs of the film's plot, with the trial sequence being the most important of all these instances which depict gender stereotypes through cinematographic language while also deconstructing them. It is widely acknowledged that modern society remains patriarchal, and the court is a microcosm of society. So the law not only is a mirror that reflects societal norms but also upholds social order, often wielded as a tool by men [12]. Since ancient Greece established its court system, men have utilized the law to exert unseen power [13], as Laura Mulvey notes: "Power was backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman. True perversion was barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness - the man was on the right side of the law, and the woman on the wrong." [14]. This has perpetuated women's subordinate position until last century's first wave of feminism. However, in Hollywood-led films and within the film industry at large, it remains challenging to evade male gaze in symbolic camera language; this encompasses not only objectification and sexualization of women through cinematography but also implicit oppression and aggression when capturing female subjects. Similarly, in *Anatomy of a Fall*, the director skillfully uses cinematography to showcase Sandra (the female protagonist) experiencing bias and pressure in the courtroom for deviating from gender stereotypes.

Moreover, the aerial view of the courtroom holds profound significance. The architectural style of the courtroom closely resembles that of ancient Greek theaters. Here, the Greek theater not only helps explain the ideology of society, including possible implicit legal misogyny but also achieves the deconstruction of stereotypes through some Greek-style tragedies.

Macaria, in the *Heracleidae* states that "For a woman, silence and self-control are best." [15] In ancient Greece, women did not have the permission to perform on stage, and the plays were mostly performed by men. Women were seen as the "other," and the female characters' personas were often one-dimensional. The chorus, as an essential component of Greek drama, often symbolizes the entire society. They carry the societal norms and values, voicing the beliefs and perspectives upheld by the entire society [16]. In the courtroom, the function of the spectators is extremely similar to that of the chorus, and their actions represent the entire society's scrutiny and criticism of Sandra. They help to construct and present social stereotypes towards females. What's more, Greek mythology, as the blueprint for ancient Greek dramas, also contributed to perpetuating certain stereotypes about women. In Greek mythology, women's roles are often steeped in negative connotations. A striking example of this misogynistic portrayal is found in the character of Pandora, who first appears in Hesiod's *The Theogony* [17]. Hesiod describes her as the origin of female suffering, stating, "For from her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth." [17] but there was an exceptional character archetype: the female warrior.

"Prompted by their mythological sources, the Greek playwrights visualized certain females participating in male behavior. Strong aristocratic women, moved by despair, frustration, anger, and fear, transcend the stereotypical limitations, sometimes usurping a traditional male role completely. They try with various degrees of success to perform like tough-willed, practical, persistent, logical human beings, although other characters - both male and female - consider their actions to be not only violent but also scandalous, immoral, antisocial, and unnatural." [13].

This alternative portrayal in ancient Greek drama challenges traditional gender norms, showcasing women who defy expectations and exhibit qualities typically associated with masculinity. These women displace femininity with masculine strengths, disproving the assumption that such qualities are exclusively male prerogatives.

By drawing inspiration from these narratives, Sandra's character in the courtroom setting can be seen as a contemporary reflection of these strong, assertive women from ancient Greek tragedies. Like them, Sandra challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations within a male-dominated legal environment by using a switch in language (from French to English) to regain her own power under this patriarchal system.

According to the conventions of classic Hollywood, which began to take shape in the 1920s and reached their zenith in the 1940s, the film industry is "a monolithic system based on large capital investment." Cinematic depictions of sexual difference are encoded by all-pervasive patriarchal ideology. The narrative film makes use of psychological frameworks that are socially conditioned to value masculinity in order to further objectify women, which entails disregarding her personality and minimizing her physical qualities. This is frequently done to reinforce the story's masculine characters or to meet the narrative's emotional or visual needs [14].

In particular, the "male gaze" serves as a medium for viewers' idealized patriarchal delight and produces the visual pleasure of narrative cinema. Grounded by Freudian's theory of scopophilia, mainstream cinema positions audiences to engage in an active way of looking and transforms others into objects of pleasure. Furthermore, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." [16]. The woman is the object of the look. In conventional narrative film, the female protagonist receives the look and holds it, but does not give or direct the narrative. While the woman on screen is viewed by spectators of the film as an object of desire and objectified by the leading male

character. However, this movie showcases the denial of the male gaze. Sandra's portrayal stays away from sexualization and neediness for compassion and companionship, which portray women as objects of desire.



Figure 5: Zooming in shot of Sandra preparing for the trial

Prior to the trial scene, the interior scene is pivotal as it demonstrates Sandra overcoming her vulnerability and linguistic barrier to gain control of the trial. Sandra sits in front of the camera and speaks of how her relationship with Samuel changed after their son Daniel suffered a visual impairment. The scene started with J-cut editing, showing audio from the next scene before the visual cut occurs. This editing technique immediately foreshadowed the pressure Sandra was going to confront. Sandra's voice built up a temporal relationship of Sandra witnessing people simulating her husband's fall and she preparing for the trial. The setting of the room is very narrow, and the backdrop is messy and filled with mislaid books. The disoriented spatial environment is associated with Sandra's disjointed description of her relationship with Samuel. This scene shows Sandra's tough situation about speaking of the complex relationship using French, which is not her native language. The scene started with a mid-shot of Sandra being videotaped by her attorney, then gradually zoomed in on the close-up shot of Sandra's face and captured her emotion. Then, by cutting to the extreme close-up of Sandra's facial expression, the composition of her facial expression occupies all positions on the screen; the director concentrates the tension, revealing her inner conflict. While the director exposes Sandra's initial vulnerability to revelation, it also opens another interpretation for readers: that she is detached from her husband's worse mental condition and her son's hearing impairment. She does so just to gain trust for her own purpose.

In any way, As the director says, "Audiences identify with her because she's not perfect, but she's real. She's not a heroine; she is not a perfect victim, but as a spectator, I find perfect victims and angelic women boring to watch on screen." Unlike the traditional Hollywood cinema that portrayed women as quiet, virginal beings who were in need of protection or were "femme fatale" archetypes who were manipulative but ended with tragic punishment [8]. *Anatomy of a Fall* refuses to use the male character's heroic masculine to counteract the negative female's image. Instead, it portrays women as capable of saving themselves and reclaiming their subjectivity in the world constructed by the patriarchy.

In another scene, where the camera introduces Daniel's head as a shadow in the foreground, it strategically directs visual attention to Sandra, who stands at the golden ratio point, creating an atmosphere of being squeezed and surrounded. Sandra's positioning appears very cramped, and in fact, we are positioned above Daniel's head, looking through his eyes to gaze at his mother. Daniel, her son, appears at the trial as the representation of their family and the symbol of their couple's demise. This visual technique not only emphasizes Sandra's central role but also symbolizes the gaze from a family perspective through her son, Daniel. By challenging traditional notions of a mother's role (as she did not take the responsibility to take care of her son as a mother should), she becomes a villain, a guilty woman who breaks her family and needs to be judged. As the camera zooms in, framing Sandra within this encircling presence, the audience is immersed in her emotional turmoil and the weight of societal expectations for a woman bearing down on her.



Figure 6: The wide shot of prosecutor questioning Sandra's testimony

The use of the golden ratio also contributes to the construction of stereotypes on women in the whole society as we can see in Figure 6. . In this scene, the prosecutor is questioning Sandra's testimony, continuously attempting to incriminate her from various angles, whether by attacking her sexual orientation, her career achievements, or her perceived lack of responsibilities at home. Meanwhile, the spectators seated behind him all have their gaze fixed towards Sandra, who is off-camera. This concentrated scrutiny unmistakably reflects the biases and stereotypes towards women in society. This manner of scrutiny not only exposes gender discrimination but also emphasizes society's inherent biases towards women in different spheres and the stereotypical perceptions of female roles.

Additionally, the fisheye lens technique employed in the subsequent scene where Sandra undergoes scrutiny in court plays a crucial role in symbolizing her entrapment within societal norms and expectations as a woman. Positioned centrally but with her back to the camera, Sandra is visually encircled by the judge's bench, reinforcing the imagery of confinement and judgment. This portrayal not only highlights the power dynamics within the courtroom—a microcosm of the broader societal power system—but also emphasizes Sandra as emblematic of the stereotypical impressions imposed upon her as a female within the confines of societal structures.



Figure 7: Low-angle shot of Sandra recounting her husband's psychological struggles

In this scene, Sandra was forced to recount in French about her husband's psychological struggles during the court proceedings, with her young son seated in the witness stand. This situation left her conflicted and embarrassed, reluctant to expose her son to the complexities of their marital issues. During Sandra's monologue, the film employed a low-angle shot as we can see in Figure 7. to highlight the oppression she faced as a woman within the courtroom setting. Additionally, the cinematographic choice of framing Sandra against a backdrop that resembled a church wall further

deepened the narrative. This setting, combined with the low-angle shot, conveyed a sense of a saintly figure being judged or sacrificed, which added to the portrayal of her vulnerability and the weight of societal expectations bearing down upon her.

Immediately after that, the film employs a mockumentary shooting style to prompt a discussion on the authenticity of the proceedings, particularly challenging the reality and representation within this context. As Sandra attempts to elucidate why her husband avoided discussing his suicidal thoughts with her, she halts mid-sentence, expressing a perceived inadequacy in French and requesting a switch to English. The camera swiftly pans, shifting focus from Sandra to the psychologist, then tilts upward towards the translator, capturing a brief smile shared between them.

“Language is viewed as having no power of its own and yet can produce influence and control by revealing the power behind the speaker. Language also reflects the collective/historical power of the language community that uses it.” [18]. This rapid sequence of camera movements and changes in focus not only highlights the hidden power in the language system but also raises questions about the genuine nature of the trial section. By drawing on theories from the mockumentary genre, this filming technique sparks a deeper examination of the authenticity of the depicted events, enriching the analysis of power dynamics, gender stereotypes, and societal norms within the film. Sandra, as a writer, is well aware of the power of her language (English), and she has skillfully used this to achieve her own reversal in the trial environment.

The seamless integration of visual narrative and thematic exploration invites viewers to reflect on the manifestation and impact of power dynamics and gender bias in courtroom narratives, ultimately prompting a critical examination of the complexities of gender stereotypes and power structures within the legal system, as viewers represent the entire society.

5. Pervasive misogyny in the society

Traditionally, mockumentaries have been used by filmmakers to parody, critique, and generally make light of a variety of themes [19]. By constructing a fictional work that presented in a mockumentary style, the film critiques the artificiality of social stereotype. By utilizing the techniques such as Kulevshov editing, full-frame composition, and POV shot, the film displays the caricature of social media’s normalization of misogynistic narratives and the male gaze. Besides, it also emphasizes on Sandra’s transformation under societal stereotypes.



Figure 8: Kulevshov effect of Sandra watching TV

In the scene before Sandra’s final trial, Kulevshov editing technique shows social media’s normalization of misogynistic narratives, which lead to the societal stereotype of women. The shot started with a wide shot of Sandra sitting in front of the TV. Then the shot followed her eyesight and cut to the hosts, making an unreasonable interpretation about Sandra’s case. Then, the shot cut back to the mid-shot of Sandra turning off the TV. The Kulevshov editing juxtaposes the sequential shots of Sandra’s reaction to the TV show; the director addressed society’s alienation of women. The dialogue “even the doubts around his death, the way he died, Voyter’s murky personality, the amoral, deceptive traits” implies the media accused Sandra of killing her husband and making women a public scandal without any physical evidence. Instead of being objective and only disclosing the truth, the

scene shows society's inclination toward blaming women without any physical evidence. Other media less media types such as online hate, violence, and misinformation frequently target women in politics, portraying them as foolish, unreliable, and unduly sexual through fabricated narratives and photos [16]. Contributing to the oversimplified and generalized beliefs of women.



Figure 9: Full-frame composition of male journalists presenting women reporter's image



Figure 10: Low-angle shot of the women reporter

Furthermore, the film also visualizes the male gaze by displaying the power dynamic within social media. By using full-frame composition, the frame is dense, with male journalists centered around the female reporter, creating a chaotic sense. Without any negative space in the frame, the male journalists are behind the camera, while the image of the female reporter is being displayed in front of the camera. Men are depicted as active, and women are subordinate. In addition, by directly addressing the prop of the camera, the film subverts the notion that the interview should directly reflect reality. It makes social satire and informs the audience that the trial and legal system are all being constructed by all-pervasive patriarchal ideologies which objectify female.



Figure 11: Subjective camera point of view shot of Sandra hiding behind her attorney



Figure 12: Subjective camera point of view shot of Sandra acquitting herself and regaining control

The documentary style is also being used to show the transformation of Sandra acquitting herself and regaining control. The film uses the first-person point of view of the camera. By aligning the audience's perspective with the camera, the shot offers them the subjective experience of looking directly into Sandra's life and also examining her guilt. The audiences are again spectators of Sandra's trial. Also, by using a low-angle shot and zooming in on her facial expression, The judgmental tone of showing her close-up exposes her intimacy in front of the camera. Women's images are being displayed on the screen again. The scene after the final trial also uses the subjective camera to capture Sandra in front of the camera. Whereas, this time Sandra is in front of Swann. The blocking position of Sandra in the front addresses her reclamation of subjectivity.

6. Conclusion

This paper, starting from the theoretical perspectives of gender performativity and gender stereotypes and combining film studies, conducts a thorough analysis of the movie *Anatomy of a Fall*. Firstly, the paper delves into a pivotal argument scene, dissecting the portrayal of marital relationships and family dynamics in the film, thus illustrating how the movie challenges gender stereotypes at the familial level. Subsequently, by examining the courtroom scenes in the film, it explores how the movie presents and deconstructs stereotypes within the legal system. Finally, the paper analyzes how the film portrays societal misogyny through media representation.

Gender and performativity are major issues in the movie, especially as they relate to how others view the female lead. Her identity is examined via the prism of cultural norms on acceptable behavior for women, particularly in the context of marriage and motherhood, in addition to the available facts. The impact of deconstructing gender stereotype was not fully examined in our research. Further studies should concentrate on the question of whether Sandra has fully deconstructed the stereotype presented in the family and social justice system, and whether or not her behavior was completely successful in reversing gender roles.

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