

Mona Lisa's Smile: A Cinematic Reflection on Female Awakening and Social Constraints in 1950s America

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Abstract. This essay explores the ideological and institutional oppression of women in 1950s America by viewing the film, *Mona Lisa's Smile*. Through the use of the educational, cultural and socioeconomic institutions displayed within the film, this study explores how women characters were subjected to the oppressive practices of patriarchal oppression through institutions and how these women characters were able to attain self-emancipation. This study can be posed with the following three questions: (1) In what ways did America's institutional structures during the 1950s play a role in gender oppression? (2) In what ways did Katherine's pedagogical style help the female characters develop consciousness? (3) What are the limitations of personal idealism in the presence of deeply entrenched patriarchy? Through the combination of textual analysis and feminist theory, this research concluded that although systemic oppression limited women's autonomy, education and critical consciousness were the forces for resistance, perhaps individualism was not enough to dismantle rooted patriarchal institutions. This current research adds to the literature of gender studies through the exploration of historical factors that play a role in gender-based domination and the potential for education to be a catalyst for social change.

Keywords: Gender oppression, Feminist theory, Institutionalized education, Self-awakening, *Mona Lisa's Smile*.

1. Introduction

The 1950s were a period of postwar conservatism in the US, with stringent reinforcement of conventional women's roles. Women were pedestalized as "happy housewives," and educational and economic institutions functioned to thwart their aspirations [1,2]. The film *Mona Lisa's Smile* (2003), set against the backdrop of prestigious Wellesley College, dramatically captures this conflict in the struggles of Katherine Watson, an art history instructor who encourages her students to challenge social expectations. This article explores the complex relationship between institutional oppression and women's agency using the following research questions:(1)How did institutional structures in 1950s America perpetuate gendered oppression?(2)How did Katherine's teaching practices catalyze female awakening? (3)What are the limitations of individual idealism in confronting institutionalized patriarchy?

By combining film analysis with feminist frameworks, this study aims to uncover the intersection of education, culture, and economic dependency in shaping women's experiences [3-5].

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

2.1. Feminist theory and institutional oppression

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* [3] and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* [1], this paper interprets the film's narrative as a critique of patriarchal systems. Institutional oppression is further analyzed through Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power [4], which explains how norms are internalized through education and media. These frameworks illuminate how women were conditioned to accept subordinate roles [5].

2.2. Methodology

This study uses qualitative text analysis to examine "Mona Lisa Smile" as a filmic text encoding and subverting gender ideologies. Dialogue, visual symbols, and character evolution are studied to analyze the construction and contestation of femininity and domestic roles [6]. One approach is the coding of repeated domestic objects—kitchens, wedding veils, engagement rings, and household appliances—and analysis of spatial relations within the *mise-en-scène*, particularly the positioning of women characters in domestic versus institutional locations (e.g., kitchens vs. classrooms, dormitories vs. lecture halls). The visual tropes are interpreted as narrative structures conveying gendered power relations. To analyze further, the film is triangulated with secondary sources including 1950s laws (e.g., marriage and work acts), sociological data about women's work and education, and feminist theoretical arguments. Media discourses are fascinating—such as domestic appliance advertising (e.g., General Electric's "Live Better Electrically" campaign [7]) and women's magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*—that helped construct and circulate idealized models of womanhood [2,8,9]. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the study discusses how "Mona Lisa Smile" mirrors and criticizes the prevailing gender norms of its era.

2.3. 1950s gender norms in American sociocultural context

The United States had experienced a step up in gender conservatism during the 1950s based on the Cold War fears and the regression of society back to pre-war social positions, which focused on stability in the home [2]. Women had been idealised as the moral hub of the household, where they were supposed to be caring wives, conscientious housewives and passive lifters of male ambition. These were culturally supported and actively entrenched through education, media and government policy [8]. Such magazines as *Better Homes and Gardens* and advertisements promoted a suburban life, glorifying the image of a happy housewife, the perfection displayed in kitchen equipment and the latest models of domestic items [7]. The educational materials made college a significant source of women getting the right husbands and not obtaining intellectual or professional goals [10]. Such ideological framework can be traced back as in the case of the film *Mona Lisa Smile* where the character name Betty initially made herself justified to make the traditional value and condemn women who violate it to raise herself is because in her era it was expected that even a highly-educated lady should choose marriage in preference to independence [1]. After a happy beginning of the story, as it reaches its middle, the reader also faces the harsh reality of unhappy Betty, who is in an emotional desert, and no one respects her voice. Although she previously envisioned marriage as the source of happiness and safety, she slowly realizes that she is in a gilded cage created along to what society demands [3]. Betty doubts her self-worth and the future when describing the encounters with loneliness and frustration. At last, she decides to leave the marriage to renounce

what she should do as a married woman, the ideal wife and enter the process of self-discovery and independency. The change in Betty's character underlines all the inconsistencies about gender roles in the 1950s: even the staunch representatives of the tradition are chained and dissatisfied with the restrictions. Her story foreshadows a conflict between inner desire and political forces that ultimately reject those who seem to defy the status quo and condemn the historical trace of gender ideology that women were subjects of domestic labor in this period [11].

3. Analysis

3.1. Institutionalized oppression in 1950s America

In the 1950s, social institutions Through cultural socialization, economic systems, and education, America methodically perpetuated gender oppression. For instance, adding home economics and marriage preparation classes at Wellesley College demonstrates how higher education was intended to create "ideal wives" rather than autonomous thinkers [10]. Young women practicing arranging a table for a steak dinner is one example of a visual that symbolically reduces female intelligence to domestic servitude [10]. Women remained economically inferior during this time, earning only 59% of men's earnings [12]. Ads and popular media were examples of cultural propaganda that normalized the idea of female subservience and romanticized housework [7-8]. When Betty's mother says, "Law school is not appropriate for a lady," the movie echoes this sentiment, highlighting how institutional gender roles were internalized and passed down through both familial and societal voices [1].

3.2. Katherine's pedagogy as a catalyst for awakening

Katherine Watson's teaching shook up the patriarchy. She shattered beauty norms and promoted critical thinking by introducing abstract expressionism, like Jackson Pollock's paintings. With "What do you see?" she undermined students' ingrained values. Katherine unveiled many hypocrisies, like how Wellesley was supposed to be smart, but had to marry well. She believed in Betty's law school dreams - telling her parents a woman does not have to get married to be valuable, which put into practice what Freire described as "critical consciousness" [13]. Moreover, when Katherine criticized sexist ads, she made the students aware of how consumerism reinforced women's domestic roles [8].

3.3. Limitations of individual idealism

Katherine Watson's influence on Betty highlights how one person's efforts can be undermined by institutional resistance. She was forced to resign. The film shows that even when individuals resist, they cannot overcome patriarchy within institutions [14]. Betty's evolution from conservative enforcer to independent thinker demonstrates personal awakening potential. However, the film also shows the societal resistance that women faced [4]. When Katherine asks, "Am I happy myself?" she admits to the loneliness of being a liberator that the society still expects her to be bound by [1]. The film concludes that education can awaken resistance, but to bring about change, people must unite [11].

4. Conclusion

4.1. Self-liberation paths in the film

Within the boundaries of *Mona Lisa Smile*, several paths of liberating women are shown, the first one is education, self-discovery, and the careful rejection of traditional gender roles. The lesson offered by Professor Katherine Watson also directly encourages criticism and questioning of the prescriptions she provides her students because of their gender [13]. An example of this is that of Joan, who accepts an orthodox path to marriage but ends up reviewing her dreams and going to law school. Giselle, in her turn, gladly takes on independence and uses her sexual agency and openness as the means of revealing the moral hypocrisy of modern society [8]. The other and most noticeable of changes, however, is that of Betty, the household's daughter who grows as a hard keeper of traditional principles until she realizes the emptiness of her leading life marred by restrictive boundaries [1,3]. Combined, these stories create a shared history of awakening and accentuate that mental or intellectual awakening, lived experience, or emotional age can be all paths towards self-liberation [14].

4.2. What self-liberation of women means

According to the movie, true liberation for women lies in defining themselves and becoming a woman of individual awakening consciousness. Instead of being controlled by outside models of the ideal woman, the main characters ask themselves: What do I want? This shift of the outer obedience to the inner openness is the nature of the liberation. Such an emancipatory moment can be seen through the decision made by Betty to divorce her spouse despite pressure to continue with her marriage [1]. *Mona Lisa Smile* therefore cogitates that freedom cannot be understood by complete denial of marriage or tradition, but by free, consenting, well-informed choices [3]. The film, therefore, postulates that self-liberation presupposes a recovery of speech and agency, and the same action alters the liberated individual and strikes at the societal framework that previously bound her [11,14].

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