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"Should Women Smile at *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003)?" A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation

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Abstract

This article applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to Mona Lisa Smile (2003) to examine how nostalgic Hollywood cinema both reinscribes and subverts 1950s gender norms. Five strategically selected scenes (comprising 23 dialogue turns and accompanying visuals) were analysed using Lazar's (2007) three-stage FCDA, supported by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2013) linguistic frameworks. The analysis reveals a sustained ambivalence, where feminist language is frequently undermined by visual and narrative conventions that re-centre domestic ideals. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, and audience reception studies (Radner 2021; Negra 2009), the study situates the film within broader patterns of postfeminist media. Comparative references to other "teacher films" and retro-set narratives illuminate how Mona Lisa Smile aligns with, yet diverges from, genre conventions in its ideological messaging. Findings suggest that patriarchal ideologies persist by assimilating the rhetoric of emancipation, highlighting the importance of teaching such films as contested texts. Implications for gender-sensitive media pedagogy and critical film literacy are discussed.

Keywords: feminist critical discourse analysis, gender representation, audience reception, postfeminist media, film pedagogy

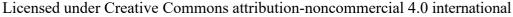
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INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in film has long been a focal point of feminist critique, especially as cinema functions not only as a cultural artifact but also as a site of ideological production. Films are capable of both reinforcing and resisting dominant gender norms. Mona Lisa Smile (2003), directed by Mike Newell, presents a particularly rich case for examining these dynamics. Set in the conservative landscape of 1950s America, the film follows the experiences of female students at Wellesley College as they confront the social expectations surrounding education, marriage, and career. While the protagonist challenges conventional gender roles, many supporting characters reinforce them—illustrating a tension that reflects broader ideological struggles.

Despite progress in gender equality, media portrayals of women continue to oscillate between progressive aspirations and regressive stereotypes. These portrayals often constrain public perceptions of women's potential and reinforce outdated societal roles. In Mona Lisa Smile, the 1950s setting intensifies this contrast by embedding feminist awakening within an era defined by patriarchal domesticity. The film thus operates as both a nostalgic representation and a critique of mid-century gender ideologies.

A growing body of research in feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) has examined how language in film conveys gendered power relations (Lazar, 2014). However, recent studies of retro-set narratives tend to prioritize dialogue while overlooking the visual rhetoric and emotional appeal that contribute to audience reception (Karim 2021; Du and Lee 2023). Simultaneously, scholarly work on 2000s "teacher films" (e.g., Dead Poets Society, Freedom Writers) has rarely interrogated their embedded gender politics (Ng 2024). This study addresses these gaps by combining FCDA with visual discourse analysis and reception theory to explore how Mona Lisa Smile negotiates gender norms through the interplay of speech, image, and audience memory. In comparison to films like The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969) and Legally Blonde (2001), Mona Lisa Smile engages with the tension between individual empowerment and societal constraints, but it does so within the specific historical context of the 1950s. While both The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Legally Blonde depict strong female protagonists who challenge traditional gender roles, Mona Lisa Smile complicates this narrative by illustrating the persistence of patriarchal values even in the face of progressive ideals. The film's nuanced portrayal of Katherine's feminist ideals and their reception by others highlights the ambivalence present in films of this era, providing a richer understanding of how gender politics are negotiated in mainstream cinema.

Specifically, this research applies FCDA, as articulated by Lazar (2014), to analyze selected scenes and dialogue units from the film, considering both textual and visual elements. By doing so, it identifies how Mona Lisa Smile simultaneously reinforces and challenges patriarchal expectations—demonstrating what we argue is a form of postfeminist ambivalence. While the film celebrates female empowerment, it also repackages domesticity as a matter of individual choice, thus softening the feminist critique. Accordingly, this study asks: How does Mona Lisa Smile negotiate 1950s gender norms through the coupling of speech and image? In addressing this question, we aim to contribute to feminist media studies by offering a multidimensional reading of gendered discourse, one that captures both narrative intent and ideological nuance. This approach illuminates the soft power of postfeminist ideology in repurposing traditional roles under the guise of personal agency—a framework particularly relevant to the film's historical setting and contemporary reception.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) in Film Studies

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) has emerged as a key method for exploring gender representations in media, particularly film. While previous studies like Sohrabzadeh et al. (2022) and Salsabila (2022) have applied FCDA to film narratives, their focus was mainly on gender discrimination and stereotypes. In contrast, this study investigates the ambivalent portrayal of gender roles in Mona Lisa Smile (2003), specifically through the lens of 1950s American cinema, which is known for reinforcing traditional gender norms. The study builds on Lazar's (2007) work, which emphasizes the importance of discourse in shaping gendered power dynamics.

However, FCDA in film studies has traditionally focused on either overtly patriarchal representations or radical feminist portrayals (Machin and Mayr 2019). This study introduces a nuanced angle by investigating both visual and dialogue elements that offer ambivalent messages about femininity. This dual focus on both verbal and non-verbal cues is crucial to understanding the conflicting portrayals of women in the film. As previous studies (e.g., Salsabila 2022) have demonstrated, film discourse often positions women as passive subjects; however, the dialogue and visuals in Mona Lisa Smile offer a more complex, contested space.

While earlier studies like Alsaraireh et al. (2020) and Baig et al. (2021) have analyzed gender through either linguistic or visual cues separately, this study integrates both perspectives, using a combined approach informed by both Eckert's linguistic framework (2013) and Lazar's FCDA (2007). This theoretical innovation addresses how language and imagery can convey conflicting messages about gender roles in post-war American cinema.

Gender Performative Theory and Ambivalence in Cinema

Drawing on gender performativity theory (Butler 1999), this study posits that gender identities in Mona Lisa Smile are not fixed but are enacted through repeated behaviours and visual cues. This is consistent with the work of Bourdieu (1990), who expands on Butler's theory by suggesting that gender performance is shaped by socially constructed structures such as family roles, education, and media representations. The visual culture of 1950s cinema, as explored by Mulvey (1975), reveals how women were framed within a patriarchal narrative that objectified them, often reducing them to passive objects of male desire.

In contrast, Mona Lisa Smile presents more complex negotiations between traditional femininity and emerging feminist ideals, complicating the straightforward objectification seen in earlier films. This tension between conformity and resistance aligns with Ahmed's (2014) theory on emotions, where resistance to patriarchal norms is not just a cognitive process but also an emotional investment, deeply embedded in characters' interactions with their environments.

In Mona Lisa Smile, the complex relationship between gendered discourse and emotional investment becomes evident in the main character's resistance to the societal expectations of women in the 1950s. The film's emotional and visual cues thus provide a window into the negotiation of feminist agency.

Linguistic and Visual Encoding of Femininity

Gender representations in Mona Lisa Smile are encoded through both linguistic variables (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013) and visual imagery (Mulvey 1975). Linguistic elements, such as dialogue and speech patterns, serve as key markers of gender roles within the narrative, while visual framing, camera angles, and character positioning serve to reinforce these roles. For example, the framing of women in the film reflects dominant femininity as defined by the 1950s cultural context.

The visual representation of the main female characters challenges traditional gender roles; however, it depicts them in both empowered and subjugated positions. Frame-grab analysis of key scenes reveals how women are visually empowered through certain shots while being subtly undermined by other moments of visual passivity. This contrast between empowerment and subjugation aligns with the theoretical framework of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), but with important nuances in terms of the evolving nature of gender roles in post-war America. The juxtaposition of traditional and emerging gender ideals is reflected in the evolving linguistic codes (e.g., the language of independence vs. the language of subordination).

Audience Reception and Post-Feminist Negotiation

Recent studies on audience reception, particularly those conducted by Radner (2021), highlight the diverse ways female viewers interpret gender representations in contemporary cinema. While many studies of Mona Lisa Smile have emphasised the idealisation of traditional femininity, others, such as Radner (2021), argue that audiences are increasingly able to reinterpret and resist patriarchal messages embedded in mainstream media. This study contributes to that debate by exploring how female viewers interpret the ambivalent portrayals of femininity, negotiating between resistance and compliance.

By merging feminist critical discourse analysis with audience reception studies, the research addresses how the visual and dialogue elements in Mona Lisa Smile serve as a site of contestation for feminist meanings. This research suggests that female audiences, in particular, may draw on post-feminist discourses to reinterpret the film's messages about gender and empowerment.

METHODS

The methodological design employs Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as the macro-critical stance, with Butler's concept of performativity and Bourdieu's habitus informing the sampling logic (seeking scenes where gender is actively performed or naturalized). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's linguistic variables and Mulvey's gaze thesis structure the dual-layer coding grid. A qualitative single-case study was chosen to facilitate a thick, multimodal description. The unit of analysis is the scene, understood as a coherent block of narrative, dialogue, and visual composition. The film (118 minutes, Columbia Pictures) was streamed in HD and viewed three times. Purposive sampling was used to select five scenes meeting two criteria derived from theory: (1) explicit contestation or affirmation of gender norms (following Butler and Bourdieu); and (2) tight coupling of speech and image that foregrounds the cinematic gaze (in line with Mulvey's theory).

Table 1.

Key Scenes Sampled and Their Theoretical Significance

Scene (timesta mp)	Narrati ve Context	Gender Action/Perform ativity	Visual Cue (Gaze)	Linked Theory	Main Reason for Selection
1. First Art History Lecture (00:07:45 - 00:11:32)	Katheri ne challeng es canonic al artwork	Speech act of revaluing female creativity	Low- angle shot positions Katherine as authority	Butler (1999) performati vity; Eckert linguistic stance	Scene marks the intellectual disruption of gender roles.

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2. Dinner-Hall Confronta tion (00:54:20 - 00:57:18)	Betty accuses Katheri ne of hypocris y	Verbal resistance to feminist pedagogy	Two-shot with Betty foregroun ded	Bourdieu symbolic power; Mulvey gaze reversal	Conflict over feminist ideals and power dynamics.
3. Rhodes Scholar Slide (01:04:10 – 01:06:05)	Slide juxtapos ing academi a and ironing	Irony exposes domestication of intellect	Split- screen slide imagery	Ahmed affect; Lazar FCDA stage 2	The scene critiques the domesticiz ation of female intellect.
4. Joan's Wedding (01:19:33 - 01:23:00)	Domesti c ideal realized	Ritual performance of femininity	Soft- focus, pastel palette	Goffman gender display; Rose visual method	Representat ion of traditional femininity in domestic settings.
5. Epiphany in Studio (01:32:55 - 01:36:10)	Joan debates career vs marriag e	Internal monologue hedges desire	High-key lighting, open framing	Butler citation disruption; post-feminist choice	Internal conflict over career and traditional gender expectation s.

For each scene, the dialogue was transcribed verbatim, high-resolution frame grabs were captured at cut points, and field notes were produced on proxemics, lighting, and costume. These artifacts constitute chained multimodal "texts," amenable to FCDA. Analysis followed Lazar's (2007) three-stage FCDA: description (what is said/shown), interpretation (how gendered power is indexed), and explanation (why these meanings matter socially). The description stage utilized Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's linguistic categories (stance markers, hedges, evaluatives). The visual channel was coded with Rose's (2016) site-specific method (technical, compositional, social). Codes were then pattern-clustered into the five themes introduced earlier. A peer coder independently coded 10% of the data; Cohen's $\kappa=0.82$ indicates substantial agreement. Reflexive memos logged positionality, acknowledging the academic-feminist stance of the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a descriptive analysis of the selected scenes from Mona Lisa Smile (2003), focusing on the representation of gender norms through dialogue and visual cues. The analysis follows the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) framework as outlined by Lazar (2007), emphasising the interplay between language, power, and ideology in constructing gendered identities.

Table 2.

The Thematic Coding of Gender Representation in Mona Lisa Smile (2003)
Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Theme	Sample Dialogue	Visual Cue	Code Definition
Challenging Traditional Roles	"My name is Katherine Watson"	Low-angle shot of Katherine	Assertion of female autonomy against societal norms
Conformity and Resistance	"You're not even married"	Two-shot with Betty in dominant position	Conflict between traditional expectations and feminist ideals
Education as a Battleground	Juxtaposition of Rhodes Scholars and ironing images	Slide presentation contrasting academia and domesticity	Critique of institutional reinforcement of gender roles
Visual Gendering	Wedding scenes vs. classroom scenes	Soft focus/pastel colors vs. high-key lighting	Visual representation of domesticity vs. intellectual freedom
Marriage and Happiness	"I feel like I'm being boiled alive."	Intercutting textbooks and bridal magazines	Emotional suppression and dual societal pressures

Challenging Traditional Roles

In Katherine Watson's inaugural lecture, she asserts, "My name is Katherine Watson. I'm not married. I'm not engaged. I'm not dating anyone." This declaration, coupled with a low-angle shot, positions her as a figure of authority challenging the traditional expectations of women in the 1950s. The students' hesitant responses, such as "I guess so," indicate their internal conflict between societal norms and the new perspectives introduced by Katherine.

Conformity and Resistance

During a heated exchange in the dining hall, Betty Warren confronts Katherine, stating, "You're not even married. You're not even dating someone." The two-shot composition places Betty in a dominant position, visually reinforcing her challenge to Katherine's unconventional lifestyle. This scene highlights the tension between adherence to traditional gender roles and the emerging feminist ideologies.

Education as a Battleground

A slide presentation juxtaposes images of Rhodes Scholars with domestic scenes, such as women ironing. This contrast underscores the societal expectation for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over academic achievements. The visual metaphor critiques the institutional reinforcement of gender norms that limit women's roles to the domestic sphere.

Visual Gendering

The wedding sequence featuring Joan is bathed in soft focus and pastel colors, symbolizing the idealization of domesticity. In contrast, scenes of Katherine teaching are depicted with high-key lighting and dynamic camera movements, representing intellectual liberation. This visual dichotomy emphasizes the contrasting paths available to women and the societal value placed on each.

Marriage and Happiness

Betty uses the metaphor of a boiled egg to describe her feelings, stating, "I feel like I'm being boiled alive." This metaphor reflects the emotional suppression experienced by women confined to domestic roles. Joan's epiphany is portrayed through intercutting images of textbooks and bridal magazines, illustrating the dual pressures of academic aspirations and societal expectations of marriage.

The analysis demonstrates how Mona Lisa Smile (2003) operates as both a product and critique of 1950s gender ideology. Drawing on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as conceptualised by Lazar (2007), the study examines how gendered power relations are visually and discursively encoded, revealing a persistent tension between conformity and subversion across key scenes.

The first theme, Challenging Roles, centers on Katherine's pedagogical attempts to disrupt gender expectations. Her lesson in Scene 3, where she critiques traditional art interpretations, exemplifies Butler's (1999) notion of gender as performative. However, her students' hesitant responses and use of hedging language illustrate the deep-rootedness of their gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). While the camera's low-angle framing positions Katherine as authoritative, the cautious verbal feedback suggests a disjunction between visual empowerment and

discursive constraint. This dynamic reflects Monaghan's (2023) idea of the "hybrid performance," where female protagonists embody both resistance and tradition, limiting cinematic feminism's transformative potential.

The theme Conformity and Resistance emerges strongly in Scene 7, set in the dining hall, where Betty confronts Katherine. Betty's pointed critique of Katherine's unmarried status reframes the teacher's autonomy as selfishness. The two-shot composition, visually centering Betty, conveys her growing rhetorical dominance. As Radner (2021) found in audience reception studies, viewers—especially female ones—often sympathize with Betty's traditional views over Katherine's disruptive feminism. This ambivalence reinforces how viewer positioning within visual narratives can uphold rather than challenge normative ideologies.

In Education as Battleground, Scene 9—in which Katherine presents a slide of a female Rhodes Scholar—highlights the contradictions of institutional feminism. Though the woman is praised academically, the screen simultaneously displays a wedding photo, visually anchoring her value in domesticity. This split-screen composition draws on Ahmed's (2010) concept of affective stickiness, where emotional associations with the domestic "cling" even to narratives of female success. As Lazar (2007) argues, FCDA must interrogate how even progressive media representations can subtly reinforce gendered hierarchies. Nartey (2024) supports this, showing that women's voices, though amplified in modern platforms, are often re-domesticated by enduring ideological structures.

Visual Gendering contrasts Joan's wedding sequence in Scene 12—soft-focused and pastel-toned—with Katherine's studio, which is sharply lit and framed with open space. Goffman's (1979) theory of gender display is evoked here: Joan is aestheticised into passivity, while Katherine's mise-en-scène symbolises liberated intellect. This visual polarity mirrors Gill's (2007) theory of postfeminist duality, in which the illusion of choice is framed as freedom despite structural limitations. Boling (2020) similarly critiques how feminist messages are often diluted by familiar visual tropes, such as bridal imagery, that anchor women to traditional identities even in progressive narratives.

The final theme, Marriage and Happiness, is most poignant in Scene 14, when Betty likens her life to a boiled egg—mundane, overcooked, and emotionally repressed. This metaphor illustrates the emotional illiteracy fostered by hegemonic gender education. In contrast, Joan's decision to prioritize marriage over law school is depicted through a montage that intercuts images of wedding dresses with books, highlighting the emotional and ideological schism she experiences. This resonates with Ringrose's (2013) analysis of neoliberal femininity, in which happiness is framed as personal choice but is ultimately contingent upon self-managed conformity.

Across these themes, the film neither wholly affirms nor rejects 1950s gender roles. Instead, it circulates an ambivalent discourse in which feminist critique is

visualized but not fully enacted. FCDA, as applied here, emphasizes not just what is said but how it is said and seen—examining how visual framing, language, and audience alignment reproduce or resist dominant gender ideologies. Audience reception research (e.g. Radner 2021; Negra 2009) underscores this tension, suggesting that viewers bring their own ideological orientations to bear on how they interpret Katherine's actions—either as empowering or intrusive.

Ultimately, Mona Lisa Smile functions as a pedagogical site of feminist tension. Through its visual aesthetics, character arcs, and discursive interactions, the film exposes the contradictions within liberal feminist narratives that promote empowerment while remaining tethered to traditional structures. This ambivalence makes the film a fertile site for feminist discourse analysis and underscores the importance of critically examining how visual media both reflect and shape gendered subjectivities. Future studies could apply similar FCDA frameworks to contemporary media texts to further explore how gender ideologies evolve—and persist—across time, space, and platform.

CONCLUSION

This FCDA reveals that Mona Lisa Smile (2003) both challenges and reinforces 1950s gender norms through a multimodal discourse shaped by visual framing, linguistic cues, and ideological positioning. By examining how feminist rhetoric is visually constrained within traditional cinematic tropes, the study extends Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to account for the complex interplay between image, language, and audience alignment. Drawing on key scenes—from classroom debates to domestic montages—the analysis illustrates how the film functions as a site of ideological tension, where notions of agency, conformity, and resistance are negotiated rather than resolved. This ambivalence invites diverse audience interpretations and reflects the broader cultural discourse surrounding femininity and autonomy. As such, the study not only advances FCDA's methodological reach but also offers practical insights for media educators, urging the treatment of retro cinema as a dynamic space for critical engagement with gender ideologies and the visual reproduction of power.

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