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FILM REVIEW
"Mona Lisa Smile": More than a smile

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Popular culture influences every aspect of our daily lives as we listen to popular music, read the press, and watch television and even go to movies. The images portrayed in popular culture influences our perspectives of people, of places, and of cultures. Mitchell in *That's Funny You Don't look like a Teacher* (1995), suggested that images of teacher in the media influences the ways in which students and the public conceptualise what is it to be a teacher. Thus, critiquing images of teachers in films such as *Mona Lisa Smile* is of considerable importance. A critical review of *Mona Lisa Smile* is a place to open a dialogue about teachers' images in films.

The film opens in the socially conservative setting of the 1950's drawn from the experience of Katherine Watson, a teacher of art history who relocated from California to work at Wellesley College, a prestigious New England women's school, the screen play casts Julia Roberts as Watson.

Thus, the film embraces the ethos of the days in which young women in prestigious schools are expected to memorise course contents as they prepare to become exemplary mothers who oversee the education of their children, and wives-to-be for the nation's elite males. Following Purvis (1985), the ideas about the schooling of girls in that time were persistently influenced by the dominant ideologies regarding the role of women in wider society. The dominant ideal upheld by the middle classes for women was that of the good wife and mother, so girls were "offered a curriculum that would make them attractive in marriage market" (Purvis, 1991, p. 30).

However, Watson challenges the College's status quo and presents more liberal feminist ideas that are taken especially by three students, Elizabeth ('Betty') Warren (Kristen Dunst), Joan Brandwyn (Julia Stiles), and Giselle Levy (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Three girls who "had everything and she showed them more." Their stories detailed below intertwine with Watson's eagerness to teach about life and choice.

Joan Brandwyn, a bright, enthusiastic young woman, is torn between her dream to become a lawyer and the social pressure for women her age to marry and have children. When Joan goes to discuss her "C" grade with Watson, the latter asks, "What is your plan after graduating?" "After I graduate, I plan on getting married," Joan replies. Watson enthusiastically asks, "Just for fun, if you could go to any law school in the country which would it be?" "Yale," Joan replies. Joan continues "They leave five slots open for women, one unofficially for a Wellesley girl."

In contrast, Giselle Levy is a promiscuous woman, perhaps the most self-destructive of this group of women. She does not seem to confront Watson's ideas as Joan Brandwyn and Elizabeth 'Betty' Warren do.

Warren, a fragile, malicious gossip and the editorial writer for the school newspaper is the greatest opposition against Watson's feminist perspectives. Betty is an example of "many young women who look to marriage as a pot of gold at the rainbow's end" (French, 1990, p.9). The post war era, and the incompatible tides of progressive thought versus tradition, is reflected in the struggle between Watson's and Betty's tense discussions. As Watson encourages her students to take career-oriented goals, Betty faces the prevailing pressure on single woman to marry and have a

family. Betty is threatened by her feminist teacher's independence, which she confronts with social orthodoxy.

Watson, who comes from the Bohemian West Coast, is filled with liberal and feminist values and the nebulous aspiration to "make a difference," is challenged by the traditional view of the College's alumni. In the film, Watson seems to be "giving up" and avoiding struggle. She is reinforcing and further developing the limitations of female teacher potential. The College administration conditionally accepts Watson's return to teaching the following year on strict condition decided by the alumni and the college's administration. These conditions are that she teaches the syllabus as outlined by the staff and agrees to submit her lesson plans for approval. She is not to counsel students on anything but the subjects she is teaching, and is to maintain a strictly professional relationship with all members of the faculty.

The central characters of the film are complex and can be read in multiple ways. For instance, Giselle Levy's character behaviour can be looked as a promiscuous behaviour; it can be also interpreted as the 'feminist' in the film who control men with her body. Also, the teacher, Watson's character was reflecting two positions, a feminist teacher who refuses to fall for women's traditional educational objective, or merely a female teacher who obeys the traditions herself by being a teacher of art history.

These different readings of the films' characters reflect my position as an Arab woman, and as a feminist. While the film mirrors the social conservatism and the feminists' struggle in the 1950's in England, it exemplifies women's struggle in some Arab societies in the twentieth century. In my culture women are still told that the main purpose of their education is to be prepared for the role of a wife and a mother, and until recently girls are taken out of high school to start a family. My view, my enthusiasm, and my analysis of the film differ from that of my Canadian colleagues. As a woman who advocates women's right of choice in all aspects of life (i.e., marriage, educational attainment, and job), I believe that the film challenges the traditional objectives of woman's education which is to be a good mother and a good wife. The teacher, Watson, tried to encourage these three young women and tell them, that there are other possibilities in life worthwhile to fight for.

Mona Lisa Smile underlines the ways in which women's lives were shaped and limited by existing social structures, and examines the ways in which girls' attitudes are reproduced in a society still dominated by male hegemony. It also explores these young women's expectations as they graduate from College and the ways in which Betty and Joan approach the central problems in their personal lives. Betty's beliefs are challenged yet again, when her mother refuses to have her at her home because of the stigma of the divorced woman.

I view Watson's aspiration for a nuanced teaching method as reminiscent of Kathleen Weiler's views of feminist teaching as counter hegemonic, in *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class, and Power* (1988). Weiler argues that opposition to power in teaching is counter-hegemonic. In particular, Weiler refers to self-conscious analysis and the development of organised practices as key components that oppose the existing hegemonies' order. Weiler believed that encountering hegemonies would lead to a new base for societal transformation (Weiler, 1988, p.90).

Another connection I found in Magda Lewis' views, in *Without a Word Teaching Beyond Women's Silence*, when she eloquently suggests, "In the academy, those of us who teach from a feminist perspective know that the intense scrutiny of our teaching stands in stark contrast to the review of the teaching of those who instruct from social/political positions that do not challenge the status quo" (1993, p. 147). Indeed, the tension evident between Watson's teaching "views" and/or method and Wellesley's administration provides an example of what Lewis and other feminists in academia are evaluating namely, "the political and ethical parameters of teaching from a feminist standpoint" (Ibid, p. 148, Mohanty, 1991). In a similar vein, Ursula Kelly's (1997)

Schooling Desire, refers to "disarming femininities," dominant schooling practices that are implicated in the production of specific forms.

The *Mona Lisa Smile* as a film tried to *superficially* challenge the status quo with a female teacher. Watson presents feminist pedagogy as a singular excluding any different points of view. On the contrary, Kelly, Lewis and others, including myself, view feminism in a pluralistic way. Feminist pedagogies' premise is acknowledging difference and diversity in ways that enhance individual's opportunities and not restrain them. At least, the film highlighted the objectives of women's education in the 1950s, and namely, unfortunately, this still exists in some parts of the world. *Mona Lisa Smile* intended to empower women, but raised questions that have no easy answers. Though the film lacks character development and has a one-sided viewpoint of feminism represented by Watson's image on housewives, it still presents a message of independence for young women. The film fails to include the struggle of working class women whose choices tend to be more restricted than those of middle-upper class women represented in the film. It also neglects the struggles of Blacks in the fifties with respect to racism.

Mona Lisa Smile allows us to examine the ways in which dominant popular culture of a society is a construction of reality that may represent or misrepresent real-life experiences. It is significant to review popular culture about teachers' images and roles, especially those of feminist teachers, since the central character of the reviewed film is a woman. Watson's portrayal in this film, as a teacher who refused to compromise her principles, is instructive to feminists in academia today. This follows the teacher images in films, stereotypes and Hollywood conventions of presenting teachers as dedicated, able to make connections, unsupported, eccentric, with wavering confidence (Rosen, 2004). Reviewing similar films about women teachers helps to comprehend the historic and contemporary constraints imposed on women teachers, and the teachers' resistance in the contexts of dealing with alumni and/or administration (e.g., as in Watson's story).

Although *Mona Lisa Smile* did not live up to the expectation and has many flaws with its theoretical base, it can bring the discussion of feminists and teachers back to stage. Consistent with Kaplan (1992) I agree that many, if not most, American films regarding teachers and educators "lacks distinction" (Weinstein, 1998, p. 39). Independently, films that portray teachers do not form a distinct type or genre. By most definitions, they belong somewhere in a subclass loosely labeled "social problem films" (Rosen, 2004, p.22). However, I agree with Rosen that all movies about teacher images and feminist teachers could be an encouragement for the dialogue to start not only about unrealistic teacher images, but also about a desire to reflect the 'real' schooling scenarios for female teachers.

As teachers, we need to acknowledge that "schools are sites of cultural politics organised through modes of semiotic production...thought of in this way, schools are set of social, textual and visual practices intended to provoke the production of meanings and desire that effects people's sense of their future identities and possibilities"(Roger, 1992, p. 40). Thus, traditional schools' ideologies including that of Wellesley College about women's role in society, are affecting female students' sense of their future identities as well as possibilities. As educators we can prepare the next generation of feminist teachers to be prominent leaders. Knowing the struggle of feminist teachers in literature throughout the past several decades teaches us to appreciate the current state of affairs and prepare strategies for the future. It is essential that educators believe we "should consider implementing more carefully structured critiques and deconstructions of socially constructed images of teachers, women teachers, and teaching practices, "*as well as carefully structured use of film images of teaching as an invitation to dialogue*" [Italics in the original] (Rosen, 2004, p. 25).

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