

An Analysis of Gender Roles and Power Dynamics in the Film “The Proposal”: A Sociological Perspective Approach

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the changes in gender roles and power dynamics in modern society, particularly by analyzing the case of the film *The Proposal* to investigate gender inequality in heterosexual relationships. Despite increased focus on gender equality, gender roles remain unevenly distributed in society, especially in the family and workplace. In particular, this study analyzes the transformation of gender roles and power structures in the film, thus exploring the changes in women’s positions and their sociological significance. Through literature review and case studies, it interprets the gender dynamics in the film through sociological theory, and using statistical data to define traditional gender roles. The results show that by reversing traditional gender roles, the film highlights the persistence of gender inequality in modern society and reflects the innovative transformation of power structures. Thus, it may provide new insights into understanding the evolution of gender roles and emphasizes the challenges and opportunities gender equality faces in practice.

Keywords: Gender Role Transformation, Gender Inequality, Power Dynamics, Sociological Perspective, *The Proposal*

1. Introduction

The workplace and family have long been environments where gender roles and power structures are deeply ingrained in society. Despite increased attention to gender equality issues in recent years, existing research indicates that traditional gender roles and unequal power structures still persist in many areas, particularly concerning women’s positions in leadership roles and within the family. Though the existing literature often focuses on various dimensions of gender inequality, there is limited research on the role of popular culture, particularly films, in reflecting the transformation of gender roles and power structures. Thus, the study analyzes the transformation of gender roles and power structures in the 2009 film *The Proposal*, exploring how the film portrays gender inequality in modern society and its sociological significance. In addition, it explores the reversal of gender roles in the film, examining how this shift reflects the evolving power structures between genders in society. It aims to analyze how the film’s portrayal of these transformations mirrors ongoing gender inequality in real life, while investigating the broader sociological implications of these changes. To this end, the study adopts a qualitative research method, analyzing the film’s plot and character relationships, framed within a sociological theory context, and supplemented with statistical data to define traditional gender roles. It may provide new perspectives on understanding contemporary

gender inequality and offer insights for the development of gender equality policies, the distribution of family roles, and social and cultural transformation.

2. Traditional gender roles and social structure

2.1. The social construction of gender roles

Despite women gaining the right to vote in 1919 and experiencing gradual improvements in social status, full gender equality has not yet been realized. In 2023, data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that women dedicate significantly more time to household chores than men, with 48% of women doing housework daily, while only 22% of men engage in the same task. In the same survey, women spend an average of 1.2 hours daily caring for children under the age of 6, while men spend just 34 minutes on this task [1]. These statistics highlight that women have historically shouldered more unpaid domestic labor, a legacy of their exclusion from the workforce until the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act [2].

While 57.3% of women participate in the labor force, compared to 67.9% of men, gender discrimination continues, especially in how family roles are distributed [3]. Society still expects men to be the financial providers, while women are expected to take on more of the household and childcare responsibilities. Similarly, in relationships, men are traditionally expected to be the ones to propose marriage. In the film *The Proposal*, however, Margaret Tate breaks the norm by kneeling to propose to Andrew Paxton, which reflects a reversal of traditional gender roles and challenges the conventional expectations of gender inequality. Moreover, gender role stereotypes are further reinforced in society via education, family structures, and social media. Girls are often expected to play supporting roles, such as cheerleaders, while boys are seen as athletes or main figures. Social media trends like showcasing traditional housewife roles, reinforce outdated gender expectations, where women support their husbands [4]. These traditional views shape societal expectations of gender roles and continue to influence how individuals perceive men and women. In the film, the reversal of gender roles breaks with traditional domestic and professional roles, critiquing societal norms around gender behavior. Andrew Paxton transitions from the breadwinner to Margaret Tate's assistant, supporting her in every aspect of her life. This role reversal amplifies the film's dramatic effect while reflecting shifts in real-life gender inequality and power structures, thus providing a thought-provoking critique of traditional gender norms.

2.2. Structural analysis of power and gender inequality

The gender pay gap is one of the most direct manifestations of gender inequality [5]. According to data from 2022, women in the United States earn 82 cents for every dollar earned by men. Although this gap has narrowed in recent years, progress remains slow, with the difference largely unchanged since 2002, when women earned 80 cents to the dollar. This inequality stems from the institutional structures in the workplace, where women still face gender bias in career advancement, particularly in leadership positions, where men are often perceived as more capable.

In the film, gender inequality is embodied through a reversal of roles, with the female lead, Margaret Tate, occupying a high position while the male lead, Andrew Paxton, is in a subordinate role. This role reversal not only adds humor to the film but also critiques the power imbalance that exists in many real-world workplaces. For example, Margaret uses Andrew's career development and personal contributions to manipulate him into agreeing to a fake marriage, in order to obtain U.S. residency. Through this humorous manipulation, it highlights the power imbalance between

female supervisors and male subordinates, emphasizing how deep-rooted gender bias continues to undervalue women in the workplace and affect their professional roles. Historically, this bias stems from gender discrimination that views women as less competent than men, especially in professions requiring intellectual or physical strength.

Motherhood is another factor contributing to gender inequality in the workplace. Many women face the “child penalty,” where their career progression lags 20% behind that of men after having children [6]. This career lag further amplifies women’s dependency in family decision-making. In family relationships, when women earn less, decision-making power often skews in favor of the higher-earning male partner, particularly in financial matters, which are crucial for family stability [7]. This imbalance can lead to dissatisfaction and a loss of autonomy for women. In the film, Margaret, as the higher earner, dominates all decisions in their fake marriage, and this “dictatorship” is more pronounced due to the unconventional reversal of gender roles. The film highlights the power dynamics of gender in both the workplace and family, thus offering a sharp critique of the persistent reality of gender inequality.

3. Gender role transformation and social and cultural reflection in the film

The film flips traditional gender roles by featuring a dominant female character, while the male lead comes from a matriarchal family where the grandmother makes key decisions including those about the marriage ceremony. Through irony and humor, it critiques the traits of a patriarchal society.

3.1. Transformation of gender roles and the evolution of social gender views

The film challenges traditional gender roles by depicting a strategically arranged marriage, rather than one based on romance, with Margret Tate assuming the dominant role. This reversal of gender roles is most evident in Margret’s proposal to Andrew Paxton, a significant departure from the conventional expectation that men should be the ones to initiate marriage proposals. By having Margret propose, it highlights women’s agency and subverts the traditional, passive role women are expected to play in marriage. In traditional marriage dynamics, women are expected to passively wait to be chosen, while men are viewed as the active decision-makers. Margret’s role reversal disrupts this pattern, positioning her as the one who takes charge and proactively shapes her future. This shift from passivity to agency powerfully asserts women’s autonomy and challenges the notion that a woman’s worth is defined by her relationship status. The film’s transformation reflects a broader societal shift in gender roles, where women are increasingly taking control of their personal and professional lives. It critiques the deep-rooted gender biases that have historically confined women to passive, supportive roles, while positioning men as dominant decision-makers. Margret’s proposal serves as a metaphor for breaking free from these outdated norms and reimagining gender roles in relationships. The film not only reflects the evolving views on gender but also encourages the audience to reconsider traditional gender expectations. Through this act of agency, it illustrates the potential for societal change, where both men and women can transcend restrictive roles and embrace more equitable, self-determined identities. By empowering Margret to take the lead, the film suggests that women can and should step outside the traditional boundaries set by social and cultural expectations.

3.2. Gender innovation in the film and interaction with traditional views

The film presents a fresh take on gender roles, especially through the reimagined traits of its main characters. After their marriage registration, Margret Tate and Andrew Paxton visit his family home to celebrate his grandmother's birthday. Here, gender innovation begins to unfold. Margret Tate takes charge of the situation, dictating how to respond to questions about their living habits. She openly expresses her distaste for Andrew's living conditions in a blunt manner, a behavior typically associated with assertive male characters. She is unapologetic and confident in giving orders to Andrew, which contrasts with traditional expectations of female passivity.

In contrast, Andrew, typically seen as the male lead, surprises the audience with his attentiveness and attention to detail. He can recall small nuances about Margret's life, even deducing information based on subtle clues from his time as her assistant. In the film, assertiveness, usually associated with men, and attentiveness, typically seen as a feminine trait, are displayed by the main characters, challenging traditional gender stereotypes [8]. It disrupts these gendered assumptions by showing that women can be just as assertive as men, and men can be just as detail-oriented as women. Through these role reversals, the film challenges traditional gender stereotypes, presenting a more fluid and dynamic understanding of how men and women can behave. This shift highlights the characters' personal growth and critiques the limitations of traditional gender roles, showing that both men and women can embody traits typically associated with the opposite gender. By breaking these stereotypes, the film promotes a more inclusive view of gender expression.

3.3. Female support and cooperation

The portrayal of female support and cooperation in the film stands out as an unconventional and refreshing narrative. When the leading characters return to Andrew's family home, Margret engages with his mother, grandmother, and ex-girlfriend. Despite being aware of Margret's control over Andrew's personal and professional life, these women show notable kindness and support toward her. Unlike the typical rivalry or drama often depicted between female characters, their interactions are marked by mutual respect and cooperation.

This portrayal challenges the common trope of female rivalry, highlighting instead the strength of female solidarity. The film also passes the Bechdel Test, which requires that at least two women have a conversation about something other than a man [9]. In this case, the women discuss their personal experiences, life goals, and interpretations of love, thus reinforcing the idea that women's identities and relationships are not solely defined by their connections to men. The lack of malicious drama between the female characters not only portrays a positive image of female friendship but also emphasizes the value of support networks among women. This is significant as it challenges societal expectations that women must compete or conflict with one another, instead highlighting how authentic collaboration among women can lead to positive outcomes, such as the successful wedding of the leading characters. The film thus offers a powerful statement about the potential for female alliances to challenge traditional gender roles and promote gender equality.

4. Gender inequality, power structures, and cultural impact in the film

The film contains several plot elements that reflect traditional power structures. For example, men are often portrayed as having a higher social status than women, similar to the "damsel in distress" or "Cinderella" type of story, where women tend to rely on men to solve problems. These plots

reflect traditional views in which women are depicted as more dependent on men in certain situations, failing to fully showcase women's ability to independently solve problems [10].

4.1. Persistence of traditional power structures in the film

The film reflects traditional power structures, especially in how gender and wealth are interrelated in the plot. For example, when Margret Tate arrives at Andrew Paxton's hometown, she discovers that the Paxton family not only owns property in the town but also controls much of the daily economic activities. This setup implies that despite Andrew being Margret's assistant at work, his higher economic status still positions him as a symbol of traditional male power, especially in their relationship. While the film superficially challenges gender roles by presenting a female-dominated workplace, Andrew's financial position re-establishes a traditional gender balance, revealing the conflict between the film's attempt to break gender biases and the entrenched societal norms.

This setup highlights the contradictions in the film's portrayal of gender equality in heterosexual relationships while also reflecting the deep-rooted societal connection between gender and wealth. Traditionally, men are seen as the financial backbone of the family, and it reinforces this structure via Andrew's character, even though Margret exhibits more power and autonomy in the workplace. This arrangement suggests that, while women may gain more power in modern professional settings, they are still limited by economic and traditional gender norms, unable to fully break free from the societal expectations of male and female roles. This illustrates that, though the film explores gender equality, it does not fully break away from traditional societal models. While women are gaining more power in modern workplaces, men still dominate in terms of wealth and economic structures, revealing the deep-rooted causes of gender inequality.

4.2. Cultural reactions to gender stereotypes

The wedding preparations and the grandmother's comment in the film not only reinforce traditional gender and age stereotypes but also reflect broader societal and cultural norms that persist in real life. The expectation that women should raise their social status through marriage is a deeply ingrained idea that transcends the fictional world of the film, and it continues to shape how women are perceived in many cultures. In the film, although Margret holds a position of power in her professional life, her role in the Paxton family and the wedding preparations highlights the limitations placed on women when they navigate personal relationships. This dynamic mirrors the persistent societal expectations that women, even in positions of power, are expected to conform to traditional roles in the domestic and emotional spheres, particularly in the context of marriage. Furthermore, the grandmother's comment about Margret's age challenges a social norm that values youth and beauty in women, reinforcing the age bias that still exists in many societies today. This cultural bias, wherein men are often expected to be with younger women, reveals a persistent inequality in how age and attractiveness are valued based on gender. The film's failure to address or critique these stereotypes suggests that, even while it challenges certain gender roles, it still upholds others. These stereotypes have far-reaching implications, impacting real-life expectations, behaviors, and perceptions across various areas of life, from romantic relationships to broader societal roles.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of gender roles and power dynamics in the film *The Proposal*, the study shows the persistence of gender inequality and traditional gender roles in modern society. The role reversal

in the film, particularly the scene where the female protagonist, Margaret Tate, proposes to the male protagonist, Andrew Paxton, challenges traditional gender expectations and exhibits the increasing autonomy of women in both family and workplace settings. However, despite the film's challenge to some gender stereotypes, it does not fully escape the traditional connection between gender and wealth, highlighting that even though women have gained more power in modern workplaces, men's dominance in economic and societal structures still persists. By employing humor and role reversal, the film both exposes the continuing existence of gender inequality and offers a profound reflection on traditional gender roles. Particularly in the family and workplace, the manifestations of gender inequality continue to deeply influence behaviors and societal structures. This study offers a fresh perspective on contemporary gender inequality and presents valuable insights into the development of gender equality policies and social-cultural transformation. While gender equality has made notable strides, the film's plot highlights that the evolution of gender roles still faces considerable social and cultural obstacles, necessitating further progress and innovative approaches in practice.

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