

Feminist Representations in Australian Film History

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Australian film has often been used as a representation of topical cultural and social ideals. Film is used as a medium to portray opinions and social commentary through an entertaining and easily understood resource. Second wave feminism in the 1970s encouraged a higher demand for female involvement in the Australian film industry, which also coincided with the Australian film boom. This saw progress in feminist themes and the female voice being represented in film. Feminist themes in film have developed and altered as a reflection of cultural and social ideologies as 'femininity (and masculinity) are, as many feminist historians and theorists have pointed out, historical constructions' (Lake 1995, p. 61). Therefore their representation is constantly evolving and progressing with social and cultural developments in history.

Caddie (1976) is a representation of the Australian Film Revival, which occurred during the 1970s. Chapman (cited in Kirkby 2007, p. 279) defines a historical film as 'one that is based, however loosely, on actual historical events or real historical persons'. *Caddie* is based on an autobiographical novel of Catherine 'Caddy' Edmonds who was a barmaid in Sydney during the Great Depression in the 1930s. This film has the advantage of hindsight as it was filmed in the 1970s yet set in the 1930s, therefore the film was created through a lens of historical perspective. Historical perspective is important when considering themes of gendered identity as it shows how ideals and social beliefs were propagated and influenced. Using *Caddie* as a historical representation means that through the use of film, insight into different historical events is made available to a mass audience. Lydon (2004, p. 138) states 'we all know that a film can't *actually* recreate the past...since its early days, [film] has been implicated in the construction of the public sphere and its role in providing a medium for the organization of human experience'. This is seen through the representations of gender and class evident in *Caddie*, as it was a precursor in what Moran and Vieth (2006, p. 192) call 'Women's Film.' They claim 'Women's Film' is an important and controversial genre, as it 'places at the centre of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman.' *Caddie* develops these social issues by highlighting that they are directly related to the fact that she is a woman daring to break certain gender specific ideals.

The opening scene shows Caddie being forced from her home by her promiscuous husband. This shows the lack of rights and agency women held at the time as her husband exclaims, 'I don't care what you do, as long as you leave the children.' Caddie insists on taking the children and getting a job to support them; however her husband responds, 'How are you going to support them? As a waitress? That's hardly a life' (5.51). This shows that the woman's role as wife and mother was the only acceptable role in society during the 1930s. This was a common attitude within Australian culture with a woman in the 1940s (cited by Lake 1995 p. 64) stating 'the husband of today wishes his wife to be a mother and a sweetheart and he is in his rights'.

It was common to see a woman kicked out of home after her husband had been unfaithful, leaving her with no options, which is represented in *Caddie* (10.30). Caddie is then forced into situations, which were previously not required of her as a married woman. In her effort to support her children, Caddie attempts to sell her jewellery at a pawn shop but is taken advantage of by the male shop owner as he claims ‘I’m losing out at 18, I’m only doing it to help you’ (7.05). This shows how little women were respected independently in society and how little agency they had. Once Caddie is successful in getting a job as a barmaid, she is openly harassed by the male customers and talked to in a derogatory way (16.55). There are also examples of segregation between the men and women in the bar and the blatant disdain for women who drank and a general acceptance for the men (17.20). However, there is not only gender degradation but also contempt between classes. This is seen when one of the male customers is asked to apologise to Caddie after harassing her, to which he replies ‘she is only a barmaid’ (21.27). This highlights that not only is Caddie disadvantaged due to her gender, but also as a single, working class mother.

Caddie shows examples of the, often precarious, circumstances single women were exposed to through Josie’s dangerous abortion (35.30). Women were so ashamed of being single mothers that they were willing to go to dangerous extremes to prevent it. This was because there was a general understanding encouraged in *Caddie* that a woman’s only goal should be to find someone to marry and be ‘kept’ (38.36). This recurring concept that women are viewed as possessions is emphasised through Caddie’s boss encouraging the ‘girls’ to ‘shorten your skirts, it’s good for business, men like to look at a well-tanned leg’ (48.49), as well as through Caddie’s first interaction with Ted when he gives her the nickname ‘Caddie’ as she is ‘beautiful and classy’ just like his Cadillac (26.17). He likens her to one of his possessions that he admires for its visual appeal and Caddie is thrilled by this compliment (26.52). This is understandable, as the patriarchal society of the 1930s had ingrained so heavily the ideals of female gender being inferior that, despite her attempts to break these confines, she returns to oppression. Caddie acknowledges the injustice that ‘there are plenty of women like me slaving away to support their children, but do they get paid a parents wage? Officially women aren’t supposed to be supporting anyone’ (1.07.22). This shows her desire for better circumstances for women, yet her social conditioning to believe that women are not to break the mould of wife and mother.

Muriel’s Wedding (1994) is another example of ‘Women’s Film’ (Moran & Vieth 2006, p. 192) that places a woman’s social and emotional challenges at its axis. The opening scene shows all the elements of a stereotypical white wedding; however, this is simultaneously contrasted with Muriel’s lack of feminine presence and poise, which labels her as an outsider from the beginning. Muriel is constructed as the opposite of all that femininity entails. Lake (1995, p. 67) claims that ‘women are incited to be attractive, alluring, exciting – objects to men’s positioning as subjects’; however, Muriel’s character is constructed as socially awkward, unattractive and unwelcome by her female ‘friends’ when they confront her because she ‘didn’t even get a new dress’ (2.01). Muriel’s friends then go on to ‘dump’ her because she ‘doesn’t wear the right clothes’, she is ‘fat’ and she ‘never does her hair right’. Muriel’s only defence is, ‘I know I’m not normal but I am trying to change, I’m trying to be more like you’ (15.15). This is then followed by her display of emotional vulnerability, which is viewed negatively as

women are supposed to be 'attractive, youthful-looking, self-sacrificing, empathetic, composed and constantly seeking advice and approval to improve [their] appearance' (Warsh 2011, p. vii). These forced gendered identities are seen through the use of Muriel's bedroom as a tool to show an insight into her personality. A wall of magazine wedding photos with an abundance of pink and feminine touches emphasises her desire to be seen as a beautiful woman. This is then contrasted with her face in the mirror, which emphasises her struggle to assimilate to that (7.47).

Many of the problematic feminist themes are seen in the character of Betty and her role within the family dynamic. This is evident when Bill asks for a cup of tea and the children's response is 'Mum! Make dad a cup of tea! Me too!' (5.04). This shows Betty as an oppressed housewife who attempts, yet fails to fulfil her wifely duties adequately. Betty is treated appallingly by everyone in her family, especially her husband. Bill continuously blames his life failures on Betty and this is seen when he says, 'look at this [house], I never stood a chance' (1.18.24). When Betty is struggling with depression and the deterioration of her mental health, Bill literally silences her with the radio while she is begging for help (1.17.02). The final act of indifference from Bill comes after Betty's suicide when his mistress claims Bill will get a lenient sentence for his criminal acts because of Betty's death. She claims, 'she did your father a favour, she will be glad her life amounted to something' (1.21.05). The introduction of Deidre as the epitome of femininity purposefully contrasts with dowdy Betty and places added emphasis on her superiority as a female (11.15). Betty is seen as a background character as she is compliant and desperate to please her family (17.22); however this highlights the 'contradiction of the patriarchal construction of the female citizen' (Lake & Damousi 1995, p. 6), as although she embodies the perfect housewife in her willingness to please, she still fails to meet the entire criteria.

When faced with other cultural and social female expectations, the choice for Muriel appears to be: get married, or attempt a career in one of her dad's pre-approved female stereotyped jobs such as a secretary or a 'beauty consultant' (10.11). While these options are still confining women to gendered identities, they are a progressive step away from the social ideals during the time of *Caddie*. Perhaps her mother's failure fuels Muriel's desperation to be a wife, which ultimately means she is a 'success' (21.17). This is also seen when Rhonda says, 'someone wants to marry you, you've made it' (30.47), which shows how heavily ingrained these ideals are in Australian identity as even Rhonda, who represents a rebellion to conformity, places value in them. Muriel's relationship with Rhonda demonstrates an emergence of a new type of story, one with an added emphasis on the female friendship (29.43). This employs the concept of mateship so often seen in Australian films, however typically reserved for male characters. There are elements of 'the ethos of mateship', which explore friendship over family and strong loyalty (Moore 1965, p. 49) evident in Muriel and Rhonda's relationship (49.02). Muriel finds her identity and sense of belonging in her friendship with Rhonda and replaces her desire to be a wife with her desire to be a good friend. The closing scene emphasises this turning point in finding identity through female comradeship and support.

Looking for Alibrandi (2000) is another example of a film that places a woman at its centre and follows her emotional and problematic journey. Where *Looking for Alibrandi* differs from *Caddie* and *Muriel's Wedding* is that not only does it explore issues of gender stereotype and inequality, but it also explores the topical issue of racism and Australian multiculturalism. This is progressive and a new approach to feminism in film as 'earlier film feminists had a primarily Anglo and Eurocentric focus, now a global perspective comparatively aligns disparate feminisms, nationalisms, racial, and ethnic groups throughout the world' (McHugh & Sobchack 2004). Josie is a new female character because she is aware of her oppression due to gender and race, and openly rebels against the confines that society places her in. She is a feminist, as she boldly 'challenges the traditional ideology and culture of sexism in Australia' (Elliott, Clark & Hamlyn 1996-7, p. 43); however she also defies the notion that 'the idea of the Australian nation has historically been linked with racism' (Mortimer 1993, p.139). Josie's struggle to find her identity is on display through the film with an amalgamation of other topical and controversial social issues such as mental health and teen suicide, class issues and religious issues.

The opening scene places Josie at a traditional Italian family event making tomato sauce with the female members of her family. This opening is noteworthy because it fuses the issue of gender and race seamlessly and provides a frame for the story to develop. When Josie speaks of her place within her Italian family she asks, 'this may be where I come from, but do I really belong here?' (2.30). This shows a resistance to her Italian ethnicity and highlights her desire to assimilate as she speaks with an overtly Australian accent to emphasise the fact that she is an 'Aussie'. Josie then goes on to claim that she is 'moving out of little Sicily and it's not a moment too soon' (4.00). The film places an emphasis on the females in Josie's life and the role of the absent father plays a key part in this. She claims that her friends Sarah and Jessica 'don't really get the Mumma thing' (6. 49) as she goes on to explain that she is 'surrounded by girls whose fathers treat them like princesses' (8.50). Her resistance to her father is seen when she says, 'I never thought I would meet my father, they all seem pretty useless to me' (8.15). This further highlights the significance of the female relationships in Josie's life and further denotes the role of the patriarchal influence.

Despite her strong matriarchal influences, Josie highlights her resistance to the role of women in Italian culture as she says, 'give me a few years and I'll be running things, and it's not going to be a small Italian family either. I'm not going to be trapped like them. I'm going places' (4.15). Josie evokes an ambitious young woman, as when her grandmother suggests she marry a family friend because he will become a solicitor, she explains that she is going to be one herself (1.10.50). The development of cultural ideals of gender roles between generations is evident in the way Josie's Nonna replies, 'Why, when you can marry one?' (1.10.33). This shows how fast cultural ideologies have developed within Australian culture. This is also seen when looking at the progression from *Caddie*, who shouldn't work, and *Muriel*, whose choices are limited to a secretary, a beauty consultant or a wife. Josie explains that she will 'be the first Alibrandi woman who has a say in how her life turns out' (5.21). The closing scene of *Looking for Alibrandi* shows her identity being found in the strong female relationships she has with her mother and grandmother. Josie says, 'I am loved by two of the strongest woman I will ever

know' (1.30.41), which displays her reliance on a strong matriarchal influence and her validation through that. This essentially shows how far feminists have come since the second wave of feminism in 1970. When viewed comparatively with *Caddie* and *Muriel's Wedding*, it is clear that all three films follow the progression and development of Australian inequality and gender issues throughout history. In earlier films it is evident that 'culture was more narrowly defined by a dependable and commercial genre that initially repressed a diverse culture and history' (Elliott, Clark & Hamlyn 1996-7, p. 43); however with the introduction of films like *Looking for Alibrandi*, this is being openly challenged.

Although there has been progress in female representation in movies since the 1970s, Saunders (1995, p. 14) has suggested that 'society still believes that gender roles are only to be slightly modified, not realigned' and this is seen in the way that female characters are currently portrayed in film. However, in order to 'achieve change and rectify this imbalance, there first must be recognition that there *is* inequity, that the progress of women has been too slow, and change is overdue' (French 2014, p. 188). Although progress has been slow there has been demand for change, and this is seen in the recent reflection of Australian culture in film.

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