

*Film Criticism*

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STEPFORD WIVES MOVIE: A DECONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW

**Pervin TÜZER\***

## **Abstract**

Stepford Wives movie is of great significance regarding gender-issues and female roles in the modern society. As Stepford Wives is a productive film in terms of critical analysis and critical themes, it is one of the most prolific film regarding media and literacy department. The fact that the film is a productive film in terms of gender roles allows it to explain different meanings and expressions. The aim of this paper is to take a look at how gender roles are distributed in the film with a deconstructive analysis. Deconstructivism enhances critical reading or watching of any literary works or media works. Critical analysis and reflection can be enhanced with the help of deconstructivism. Deconstructivism takes its origin from Derrida's philosophy and deals with the deconstruction of a work to reveal its different meanings. Although there are studies on the subject in the relevant literature, there is a gap in the literature regarding the analysis of the Stepford Wives movie from a deconstructionist perspective. Therefore, understanding the film requires revealing the meanings behind the gender roles in the film. The purpose of this article is to work on a critical analysis of themes related to gender roles in the film. Therefore, evaluating a film critically with a deconstructive approach will develop the critical themes in the film and enable new related themes to emerge.

**Keywords:** *Critical view, deconstructivist view, movie analysis, Stepford Wives.*

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# STEPFORD KADINLARI FİLMİNİN ELEŞTİREL BİR ÇÖZÜMLEMESİ: YAPISÖKÜMCÜ BİR YAKLAŞIM

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## Özet

Stepford Kadınları filmi, modern toplumdaki cinsiyet sorunları ve kadın rolleri açısından büyük öneme sahiptir. Stepford Kadınları eleştirel analiz ve eleştirel temalar açısından verimli bir film olduğu için medya ve okuryazarlık alanında en üretken filmlerden birisidir. Filmin cinsiyet rolleri açısından üretken bir film olması, farklı anlamlara ve ifadelerle açık olmasını sağlar. Bu araştırmanın amacı, yapısökümcü bir analizle filmdeki cinsiyet rollerinin nasıl dağıtıldığına göz atmaktır. Yapısökümcülük herhangi bir edebi eserin veya medya eserinin eleştirel okunmasını veya izlenmesini geliştirir. Eleştirel analiz ve yansıtma yapısökümcülük sayesinde geliştirilebilir. Yapısökümcülük, kökenini Derrida'nın felsefesinden alır ve bir eserin farklı anlamlarını ortaya çıkarmak için yapısökümünü ele alır. İlgili alanyazında konuyla ilgili araştırmalar bulunmakla beraber, Stepford Kadınları filminin yapısökümcü bir bakış açısıyla analiz edilmesi konusunda alanyazında bir boşluk söz konusudur. Bu nedenle filmi anlamak, filmdeki cinsiyet rollerinin altındaki anlamların ortaya çıkarılmasını gerektirir. Bu makalenin amacı, filmdeki toplumsal cinsiyet rolleriyle ilgili temaların eleştirel bir analizi üzerinde çalışmaktır. Bu nedenle, yapısökümcü bir yaklaşımla eleştirel bir filmi değerlendirmek filmdeki eleştirel temaları geliştirip yeni temaların ortaya çıkmasını sağlayacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eleştirel bakış, film analizi, Stepford Kadınları, yapısökümcü yaklaşım

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# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STEPFORD WIVES MOVIE: A DECONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW

## INTRODUCTION

Stepford Wives movie is one of the most notable science-fiction films in that many critical concepts are resided in the movie. Film history has been affected changes emerging in the history such as technological, pedagogical and cultural. Innovations and new teaching techniques pave the way for the critical comprehension of the movies and literary works enhancing emotional and informative functions of the movies (Turaç & Yıldırım, 2021). This dynamic feature is advanced with the help of technological progress in the course of history. In line with this idea, films also possess the characteristics of transmitting some educational constructs to the individuals (Yakar, 2013). In this way, informal learning can be achieved by watching a movie and then negotiating on this movie by scrutinising critical elements in the movie. While scrutinising, students can experience new way of thinking and reasoning related to features in the movie. Therefore, movies offer a great deal of input that can be utilised by the learners in an authentic way. Upon watching a movie, a learner can make some internalisations of events emerging in the movies by having a critical view. Learners can transform input into output by reflecting on actions sequenced in movies. As in line with this, Türkmen (2010) points out that informal learning can be existed anywhere if there is a material from which information can be obtained. In this vein, informal learning and extensive watching can be reinforced with the value of watching movies critically.

There are many studies conducted on the topic of gender-induced roles resided in the movies. Each analysis provides a new gateway to the viewer with which the viewer will have an opportunity to reflect on the movie. To exemplify, Akter (2021) focuses on a feminist perspective of Nora: A doll's house modern play by having a critical-feministic approach because Nora is one of the sparkling feminist character in the movie history. In line with this, as pointed out by Calvani (2017) each reading revitalizes itself with the different viewer having different

backgrounds. Deconstructivism hereby plays a pivotal role to be accepted as a critical approach to analyse a piece of work. In this paper, Stepford Wives movie is a significant movie to understand gender roles and analysis of the movie regarding aforementioned roles from a deconstructivist perspective.

Cinema is one of the genre that people watch for entertainment. However, as in science fiction movies, the motive behind watching a movie is not stucked to entertain oneself. Rather, the function of the movie can be regarded as constructs activating some schemata of a society by giving a chance to the audience to construct negotiated and multiple realities (Yanmaz, 2011). When a person analyses a movie or any literary work, it becomes an experience ingrained in the person's mind and life throughout the life (Hoult, 2016). These analysis provide an insight for experiences someone encountered and deal with these experiences by building some strategies. Similarly, movies have the power to bridge the gap between culture and society. As in Stepford Wives movie, one can comprehend the roles endowed to women in the American society. However, one can go beyond of that culture by experiencing the same roles within a different culture and society. This enhances the idea of combining cultural elements and critical elements resided in the movies. Watching a movie advances learners to become multi-literate people in the society because learners go through a process of expanding their literacy level by adding different channels to their world by watching movies (Gee, 2012). As technological appliances have been utilised widely, the idea of multiliteracy will be expanded in the society. For this reason, movies have the opportunity to expand multi-literacy level of societies and widen their visions.

Deconstructivism and science fiction movies can be overlapped due to the fact that deconstructivism can be accepted as a critical approach to analyse science-fiction movies, which raises this genre's credibility and authenticity. However, selection of movie is of great significance in that the selected movie should cover critical elements that can be constructed and deconstructed again. Science-fiction incorporates unreal events with the enhancement of improvement in the technology and science (Liu, 2019). Yet, the definition is not

restricted to only scientific and technological improvements. Rather, science-fiction movies have the capacity to provide notable reflections from the audience to the writer and vice versa pertaining to cultural and historical values. Thus, employing science-fiction movies offers a variety of functions to the teachers and learners in the classroom settings since movies are rich in terms of cultural, historical and critical perspectives, which enhances students' critical literacy.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Deconstructivism can be regarded as a critical approach taken in this paper in that *Stepford Wives* movie can be analysed differently in each watching in the eyes of different audiences. It means that deconstructivism paves the way for the opening of new criticism and analysis towards a movie. There is always a dynamic interaction between the audience and the movie in the light of deconstructivism. In *Stepford Wives* movie, each viewer may comprehend scenes in diverse manners such as gender, hegemony, modern society and male-induced society. Deconstructive viewing sheds light onto the interaction between the audience and the movie itself. It is like a continuum existing between two variables reaching different goals. As in line with this idea, Saygın (2010) points out that the deconstruction is a way to reach meaning between the reader (audience) and the author (the movie).

Deconstructivism and science fiction movies go hand in hand because both of them are employed to reflect upon the movie. Deconstructivism is about working on a literary work by having an in-depth analysis, which enhances the criticality of science-fiction movies. That's why each analysis opens new multi-faceted meanings of the movie, which adds versatility to the process (Aker, 2022). From a Derridian perspective, deconstructivism is about looking at probable and improbable meanings from a different perspective. While analysing any movie, one can infer probable meanings and assumptions whereas the other can make inferences about improbable meanings resided in the movie. Therefore, deconstructive analysis revitalizes itself as any audience watches a movie and analyses it from a different angle. There might be subtle and ingrained meanings

discovered by different audiences. This idea is reflected on this paper to highlight the significance of having versatile analysis and meanings upon watching a movie, which is Stepford Wives movie in this paper. In the light of related literature, the relationship between deconstructivism and science fiction movies is a note-worthy one to unpack the critical elements in any movie. For this reason, it must be noted that deconstructivism should be valued to reveal meanings in the movies and literary works to have a critical and in-depth analysis.

Stepford Wives movie is a critical movie in which many critical themes resided. Stepford Movie is a movie that pursues a life of young woman Joanna and her new life with her family upon moving from the city to suburban town of Stepford. Stepford is a small countryside where women follow their routines and household chores like robots each and every day. The roles submitted to women are highly conventional and stereotypical in a patriarchal society. Joanne attempts to understand the suburban lives of Stepford women in a shocking manner. However, she finally finds out that the women behave like cyborgs as a representative of housewife profession. Throughout the movie, the women are representatives of superficial and sub-ordinate roles different from their husband counterparts. As pointed out by Elliot (2008), Stepford Women are regarded as serving excitement to the dull lives of sub-urban housewife. The robot metaphor is supported by Silver (2002) that the Stepford Wives see their bodies as in robots that never age and suffer from losing their beauties.

As for Deconstructivism, it deals with reading or watching any piece of work by possessing a critical stance and create new layers and meanings with this critical stance at hand. Critical analysis and deconstructivism go hand in hand because deconstructivism requires a critical watching or reading to deconstruct a piece of work. To analyse the critical themes resided in the Stepford Wives movie, deconstructivism offers a gateway to find out meanings attached to critical themes, which differ from one person to another. In other words, deconstructive reading or watching must always find out some relationship between the reader and the writer (Derrida, 1997:349). In this way, a comprehensive and analytic reading can be achieved regarding critical themes in the movie.

Deconstructive view is employed in this paper so as to cover the underlying meanings in the movie. As pointed out in Erkoç (2013), the meaning in different texts or works is always differentiated and varied from one person to another in the Derridian perspective. Deconstructive analysis helps the reader to go over the piece of work and comment on it by having a different stance on the related work. This will give a space to the readers wishing to delve into Stepford Wives movie and share their views from a varied view. To exemplify, Stepford women are always responsible for household roles whereas men are always in charge of going to work and Men Association. Each viewer can analyse these roles from a different perspective, which is the pivotal aim of deconstructive analysis. Each viewer can create new characters to the movie with which they have a chance to deconstruct the movie with their own frames. With deconstructive analysis, each audience will have a say over the movie with their own voices, which is one of the key elements in deconstruction process.

Contrastive roles between men and women in Stepford Wives can be considered differently in the eye of different audience possessing a modern view or a conventional view. In this vein, it is a must to have a critical and deconstructivist perspective upon watching the movie and analysing it. In the related literature, there is not much work conducted in terms of covering deconstructivism with gender roles in the Stepford Movie. Therefore, it will give an opportunity to the readers, students and audiences to reflect on the movie by covering a new perspective, which is deconstructivism. Then, they can utilise this approach while analysing other works.

## **DISCUSSION**

Stepford Wives movie presents a discourse with which many thought-provoking events take place. This discourse-suburban housewife life shows many reflections on the American society, which could be regarded as flaw. By unpacking the relationship between housewives and robots, the movie unwraps that how women dedicate themselves to dull houseworks such as cleaning, cooking and washing. The portrayal of these themes highlight that housewives

are seen as inferior to males in the male-induced society. Housewives possess the role of domesticity and inferiority apart from their husbands shuttling between their house and The Men's Association in the Stepford suburban. Male-oriented system is enacted with Men's Association in which men come together to play cards, watch sporting events and drinking. This portrayal shows that Men's association is not only a pastime for men but also it emphasizes the collective spirit of their homosocial connections (Johnston & Sears, 2011). The Men's Association is of an unfriendly atmosphere towards women as women do not appear in this place throughout the movie as a red-line point.

### **Gender-induced roles**

Of all the elements resided in Stepford Wives, gender-induced roles are one of the most remarkable element which makes the movie critical for being deconstructed. Throughout the movie, the viewer could see scenes in which women are predominated by their male counterparts, which paves the way for a patriarchal society. Language generally separate women from an active subject position (Oh, 2005, p.3). Rather, women are seen as an inferior figure to the male in movies and other literary works. In the movie, women are always in charge of doing household chores while men are busy with outside works and Men's Association, which is a representation of male-oriented system. As in line with this, Irigaray (1985, p. 15 ) points out that masculine parameters shape the way female behave in the society. Additionally, women are believed to be happy with their household chores, which makes it hard to change their responsibilities. Deconstructivism hereby is of pivotal role with which the viewer can have critical ideas about the movie and their own perspectives regarding gender roles. Gender roles can be constructed and deconstructed by the viewer possessing versatile backgrounds, economic status and cultural beliefs. For this reason, gender roles go hand in hand with the deconstruction process in the movie.

Apart from household chores, women do not spend time on pastime activities, which are enacted by male in The Men's Association. Stepford women are always busy with spending their time on their endless household



chores, which impedes their participation to pastime activities. They even lack the encouragement to follow their own desires (Czarniawska & Gustavsson, 2008, 672). The women are always there to serve their husband with clean and meticulous chores and routines that deter the women from having a career and sustain their lives without their husbands' financial contributions. Joanna, as the main character, attempts to go beyond of this conventional occurings throughout the movie (Ruben, 2012). However, she ultimately tries to adapt herself to motherhood and family obligation, which shows that such a society forces women to abide by family routines and obligations. Without obligations, a woman can not feel efficient enough to live in the society however hard she tries to have a career or financial independency.

In terms of sexuality and body appearance, women are supposed to behave like models possessing a beauty standard. Such a standardization lack of reality hidden in the modern world since Stepford women pretends to be contented with their lives, which is a fallacy throughout the movie. The movie is based on Ira Levin's novel published in 1972- at a time feminism was a novel concept, which satirized the male lure for domesticity and sexy wives. These ideas are all related to patriarchal society system dominated by men.

This movie can be regarded as a horror comedy underpinning the gender roles in the Stepford community. The movie also incorporates the oppositions akin to gender roles. Joanne's disobedient attitudes oppose with other Stepford women in the district in that Joanne can be representative of women disobeying the rules of male-induced society. She does not follow stereotypical values and identities that Stepford Women stick to. Similarly, the artificiality women possess is reflected on their appearances in a so-called elegant, sexy clothes and exaggerated makeups so as to please their husbands (Özyol, 2012). Apart from their identity and views, Stepford women are enforced to have a flawless physical form to fit into societal norms. As in line with Creed (2002), women are defined as "the other" by men, which impedes an equal society system. Idealized society figures are lacking concepts in the movie as women are always regarded as a secondary role in the family and the Stepford society. Women do not have

any directive saying over contents emerging in the daily life as it can be seen from male dominance in Men's Association, which is a highly subtle and hidden association among women. It can be noted down that identity roles gained in the movie point out that gender roles are super-conventional as opposed to technological equipments and so-called modern world represented in the movie.

Identity is another significant theme that needs to be analysed throughout the movie. Stepford women identity are eliminated by the societal needs and family obligations. Technological tools and devices are employed as an important metaphor to comprehend the eliminated roles given to the women throughout the movie. Robot figure helps the audience to understand the relationship between women and man because women are seen as servant equipped with all technical knowledges and skills as in robots. Technological improvements are emphasized to show the simplicity and triviality of house chores, which opposes with the roles bestowed to Stepford women in the community. Science-fiction movies give a chance to reflect upon critical issues given in the movie. Stepford wives movie is an exemplary one in that it gives a chance to observe the relationship between robots and women by having a subtle relationship. Robots are used to show women roles in this hegemonic patriarchal world mostly managed by their male counterparts.

Hereby, it can be noted that technological improvements are utilised to manifest domesticity and docility that should be possessed by women. From a modern perspective, an analysis of Stepford wives will give a chance to women to think about their roles in the larger contexts. These roles should be questioned so that women can have a say over their stable and routinized lives as in Stepford Wives movie. With its themes and critical scenes, Stepford movie is not a horror comedy on its own but it also covers the elements of satire and irony. The movie incorporates the subtle clash emerging between male and female pertaining to societal and family roles. Additionally, it can be contemplated as a critical anecdote and review with the help of deconstructivist view. Technological appliances are not used to foster the conformity of family life. Rather, these tools are used to highlight the hidden pressure of women role in the family and

larger society. For this reason, deconstructivism is a generative approach to help researchers and students to work on numerous critical movies and works by scrutinising this paper as an exemplary one.

## CONCLUSION

By depicting gender roles within the movie, this paper attempts to highlight the features of *Stepford Wives* movie from a deconstructivist manner to enhance university students' or any audience's critical thinking skills. Without having a deconstructivist view, one can not reach a whole understanding of the movie. It is also pointed out by Güler (2016) that Derrida presents an eternal journey of watching that incorporates deconstruction and construction of each scene with the help of deconstruction. The deconstructive watching process will help the audience to reflect on what is covered and what might be beyond of superficial watching since deconstructive watching will pave the way for second and third watching as well. Further, while watching each scene, one can take into account the value of deconstructivism as a critical approach. *Stepford Wives* movie is a remarkable example with which it covers critical issues and meanings that can be deconstructed and constructed again with the help of different audiences. It must be noted that each viewing from a deconstructivist view enhances the unfinished feature of each literary work, which is a part of deconstructive reading (Küçükhan, 2020). With the help of deconstructive analysis, media and literacy students might have an opportunity to work on a movie critically and analytically. This study aims to provide some insights not only to the researchers wishing to work on deconstructivism to analyse any critical movie but also students scrutinising critical analysis of movies and literary works. This paper is of value in that it gives a novel perspective to be utilised in different educational settings, which is deconstructivism. For this reason, this study will pave the way for the enhancement of deconstructivism as a novel concept at the university level programs, notably, media and literacy studies.

Stepford movie is a highly remarkable science-fiction movie in that it presents many thought-provoking themes in terms of gender roles in the modern American society. With its themes, oppositions and critical ideas, the movie sheds light onto unequal distributed gender roles within a community. With this community in mind, the audience can reflect on different communities and wider contexts to personalize the movie. With its comic and critical concepts, this movie is a powerful device in communication and media sector since it covers many crucial elements regarding male-induced society by eliminating the role of women with the help technological properties (Doanne 2000, p. 113). Additionally, deconstructive reading paves the way for analysing the movie from an eye-bird view, which enhances one's critical thinking skills. In the light of deconstructivism, this paper aims to give insights to researchers wishing to improve themselves in the field of media and deconstructivism. Further, educators and students could work together to spice up their classroom settings with deconstructivist elements resided in movies and works.

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