



Negotiating Autonomy and Identity: A Feminist Comparison of Female Protagonists in *Runaway Bride* And *27 Dresses*

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ABSTRACT

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This study aimed to examine how women are represented in popular romantic comedy films by analyzing the portrayal of female agency and gender roles in *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses*. Grounded in feminist film theory, the research seeks to understand how the female protagonists negotiate personal autonomy, romantic expectations, and societal pressures within patriarchal cultural contexts. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the study systematically analyzed key scenes, character development, dialogue, and narrative structures in both films to identify recurring themes related to femininity, independence, and conformity to traditional gender norms. The findings indicated that while both films depict women striving for self-fulfillment and independence, their narratives simultaneously reinforced and challenging dominant gender ideologies. These ambivalent representations reflected broader socio-cultural discourses on contemporary femininity and empowerment. The study concluded that romantic comedies occupy a complex position in mediating feminist ideals, reproducing conventional gender expectations while offering limited spaces for female agency. By highlighting these contradictions, the research contributed to feminist media studies and emphasizes the importance of critical media literacy in interpreting gender representation in mainstream cinema.

Introduction

Romantic comedies have long served as a cinematic mirror reflecting social norms, gender roles, and cultural ideals surrounding love and marriage (Kaplan, 1983; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Beneath their light-hearted humor and formulaic storylines, these films often engage with deeper ideological questions about women's autonomy, identity, and social conformity (Doane, 2010; Mulvey, 1975). The genre's enduring appeal lies in its dual capacity to entertain while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging traditional conceptions of femininity. Within this context, *Runaway Bride* (Marshall, 1999) and *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008) emerge as significant examples that portray women negotiating personal aspirations within societal frameworks. Examining these films provides valuable insights into how mainstream cinema frames women's search for selfhood amid romantic and social pressures.

This study draws on feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (Mubarak, 2013; Salsabila et al., 2022; Van Belle et al., 2023) concept of the "male gaze," which critiques how classical Hollywood cinema positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure for the presumed male spectator. Building upon Mulvey's framework, scholars such as Mary Ann Doane (Girelli, 2006; Peirse, 2015; Staiger, 2010) and E. Ann Kaplan (Choi & Zeng, 2023; Nevin, 2020; Waldman & Walker, 1985) have deepened discussions on female spectatorship, emphasizing the complex oscillation between objectification and subjectivity in women's on-screen portrayals. In romantic comedies, this dynamic becomes especially evident as female protagonists seek personal fulfillment while being constrained by patriarchal ideals of beauty, domesticity, and romantic success. By applying these theoretical perspectives, the present research interrogates how *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses* either perpetuate or subvert the male gaze through their character development, dialogue, and cinematic framing.

Beyond classical feminist frameworks, postfeminist theory provides a complementary lens for understanding modern romantic comedies. Tasker and Negra (Ging, 2009; Lane, 2010) describe postfeminism as a cultural moment that both acknowledges and commodifies feminism, translating empowerment into consumer choice and personal achievement. Postfeminist heroines often embody paradox— independence entwined with conformity, autonomy within romantic closure. Films like *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses* epitomize this contradiction, as their protagonists simultaneously challenge and embrace the cultural scripts of love and marriage. Integrating postfeminist theory enables a nuanced exploration of how these films negotiate the boundaries between liberation and traditional femininity in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century popular culture.

Previous scholarship has examined how romantic comedies reproduce or resist patriarchal ideologies, focusing on female identity, narrative closure, and the social construction of romantic ideals (Gledhill, 2002; Haskell, 1987). Studies have highlighted the genre's ambivalent treatment of women's agency, revealing how heroines often find empowerment only within heteronormative resolutions (Doane, 2010; Kaplan, 1983). However, much of the existing literature either centers on single film analyses or broad

genre critiques, leaving limited comparative research between works from different cultural moments. *Runaway Bride*, situated in the late 1990s, reflects an emerging postfeminist consciousness, whereas *27 Dresses*, released a decade later, mirrors shifting attitudes toward career, friendship, and romantic independence. These distinctions underscore the need for a comparative approach that captures how representations of women evolve alongside broader social and cinematic transformations.

Despite the extensive feminist critique of Hollywood cinema, few studies have directly compared female protagonists across romantic comedies to examine patterns in the negotiation of autonomy, love, and social expectation (Tasker & Negra, 2007). The intersection of humor, emotional growth, and feminist discourse remains particularly underexplored. Moreover, the influence of narrative devices—such as repetition, irony, and comic exaggeration—on gendered representation has received minimal scholarly attention (Gledhill, 2002). Both *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses* feature heroines confronting the tension between independence and conformity, yet their approaches differ in narrative tone, resolution, and character motivation. Addressing this gap allows for a deeper understanding of how cinematic language and genre conventions mediate women's agency and the evolving concept of empowerment in popular media.

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative feminist analysis of *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses*, two films that span different cultural and temporal contexts within the romantic comedy genre. By juxtaposing these narratives, the study traces the transformation of female agency from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, decades that witnessed both the mainstreaming and commercialization of feminist ideals (Creed, 2015). Unlike prior analyses that treat such films in isolation, this study foregrounds shifts in gender discourse through narrative, cinematic, and symbolic dimensions. It examines how humor, characterization, and resolution contribute to evolving definitions of empowerment, thereby enriching the dialogue between feminist theory and popular culture.

The purpose of this study is to compare the female protagonists of *Runaway Bride* and *27 Dresses* through a feminist lens, focusing on how each navigates the complex interplay between personal aspiration and societal expectation. Specifically, the study aims to analyze the degrees of agency, autonomy, and conformity expressed through narrative structure, dialogue, and relational dynamics. Through this comparative approach, the research seeks to uncover broader trends in the portrayal of women within romantic comedies and to evaluate how these portrayals reflect or reshape contemporary understandings of gender and empowerment. Ultimately, this study contributes to feminist media scholarship by demonstrating how popular cinema serves as both a mirror and a mediator of shifting cultural discourses on womanhood.

Method

This study used a qualitative content analysis approach to examine two romantic comedy films— *Runaway Bride* (Marshall, 1999) and *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008).

Grounded in feminist film theory, the design focuses on how cinematic narratives construct, reinforce, or challenge traditional gender roles. The analysis is guided by theoretical perspectives from Kaplan (Kaplan, 1983), Tasker and Negra (Tasker & Negra, 2007), Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975), Doane (Doane, 2010), Gledhill (Gledhill, 2002), Perkins and Schreiber (Perkins & Schreiber, 2019) and Creed (Creed, 2015), emphasizing women's agency, autonomy, and negotiation of social expectations in transitional life stages.

The sample consists of two purposively selected films widely recognized within the romantic comedy genre. These films were chosen due to their cultural relevance and their representation of women navigating evolving social and gender expectations. The primary data included scenes, dialogues, character interactions, narrative developments, and supporting character influences that contribute to the portrayal of female subjectivity and empowerment.

Data were collected through multiple viewings of each film. Each viewing focused on identifying pivotal scenes related to decision-making, romantic choices, independence, and character development. Key scenes were transcribed and annotated, with attention paid to elements such as dialogue, framing, interactions, and comedic devices. A coding framework developed from feminist theoretical principles served as the primary instrument for organizing observations. Categories included independence, relational dynamics, career orientation, and conformity to traditional norms.

The study employed systematic coding and thematic analysis to identify patterns and contrasts in the portrayal of female protagonists. Coded data were organized into matrices to support cross-case comparison between the two films. Themes were refined iteratively, triangulated with established feminist film scholarship to ensure theoretical consistency and reduce interpretive bias. The analysis also considered each film's sociocultural and historical context to enhance depth and interpretive clarity.

Finding and Discussion

This study examined the representation of women in *Runaway Bride* (Marshall, 1999) and *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008) through a feminist lens, focusing on how female protagonists negotiate autonomy, identity, and societal expectations within the romantic comedy genre. Both Maggie Carpenter and Jane Nichols embody the tension between self-sacrifice and self-assertion, reflecting broader feminist concerns about women's agency and social conditioning. While *Runaway Bride* critiques the myth of the "ideal bride," *27 Dresses* exposed the emotional labor tied to female altruism. The following table summarized the key comparative features of the two protagonists as they navigate personal growth and gendered expectations.

Table 1. Comparison of Female Protagonists

Feature	Maggie Carpenter (Runaway Bride)	Jane Nichols (27 Dresses)
Autonomy	Initially indecisive about marriage; seeks identity outside societal expectation	Highly organized, sacrifices personal desires for others; slowly asserts independence
Relationship Approach	Runs away from multiple weddings; explores personal freedom	Supports friends' weddings; reluctant to pursue own love life
Career Focus	Limited; personal growth emphasized over professional ambition	Career-focused in event planning; work reinforces competence and self-worth
Societal Pressure	Conforms to expected female role but struggles internally	Over conforms to "helpful bridesmaid" role; feels trapped by expectations
Personal Growth	Learns to assert choices in romantic and personal life	Learns to balance self-interest and care for others; gains romantic and professional fulfillment
Feminist Themes	Exploration of agency, identity, resistance to societal norms	Negotiation between self-sacrifice and self-assertion; eventual empowerment
Resolution	Marries for love but on her terms	Pursues personal happiness while maintaining professional identity

Maggie Carpenter (Runaway Bride)

Maggie Carpenter's character arc revolved around her struggle to reconcile societal expectations with personal freedom (Kaplan, 1983; Mulvey, 1975). Outwardly conforming to traditional gender roles by repeatedly planning weddings, she internally resists these expectations—a symbolic rebellion against prescriptive norms governing women's choices in love and marriage (Haskell, 1987; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Her habit of fleeing the altar signifies both fear and defiance: a critique of how patriarchal norms dictate feminine behavior. Humor functions as a softening device, allowing subversive feminist commentary within mainstream entertainment (Gledhill, 2002). Ultimately, Maggie's decision to marry only after achieving self-understanding demonstrates that empowerment lies in self-knowledge and informed choice rather than social conformity (Creed, 2015). She exemplifies a woman who reclaims agency by defining marriage on her own terms.

Jane Nichols (27 Dresses)

Jane Nichols, by contrast, embodies the archetype of the overburdened caregiver, consistently prioritizing others' happiness over her own (Doane, 2010; Gledhill, 2002). As a perpetual bridesmaid and dedicated wedding planner, she becomes a symbol of how gendered expectations condition women into self-sacrifice (Haskell, 1987). Initially, Jane's inability to assert herself represents internalized social norms that suppress female agency (Creed, 2015). However, her gradual transformation—learning to vocalize her desires and pursue personal fulfillment—marks a feminist reconfiguration of romantic comedy conventions (Kaplan, 1983). Her professional success mirrors her personal empowerment, suggesting that women's competence in the workplace can coexist with emotional independence (Tasker & Negra, 2007). The film thus frames empowerment not as rejection of femininity but as balance between care for others and care for self (Mulvey, 1975).

Comparative Analysis

Both protagonists navigate societal pressures surrounding marriage and identity, yet their struggles manifest differently. Maggie's conflict was primarily internal, rebelling against external expectations through acts of defiance (Mulvey, 1975), while Jane's is external, characterized by self-effacing service to others (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Despite their contrasting paths, both women redefine empowerment as the capacity to make informed, self-directed choices (Doane, 2010; Haskell, 1987). Maggie's journey emphasized personal autonomy and resistance, whereas Jane's centers on self-recognition and professional affirmation (Kaplan, 1983). The use of humor and romantic closure tempers feminist critique, illustrating how mainstream romantic comedies must balance subversion with genre conventions (Gledhill, 2002). Through these narratives, both films demonstrate that female empowerment was contextually shaped by the negotiation between personal values and societal norms (Creed, 2015).

Social Expectations and Gender Roles

Societal expectations act as pivotal forces shaping both Maggie's and Jane's behaviors. Maggie faced the pressure to embody the "ideal bride," while Jane internalizes the expectation to be endlessly supportive and selfless (Doane, 2010; Mulvey, 1975). These portrayals expose how cultural scripts constrain women's autonomy, a key concern in feminist film theory (Creed, 2015). Both films used comedy as a subtle medium to critique these pressures, making the social commentary accessible without overt confrontation (Gledhill, 2002). Their resolutions implied that empowerment arises not from rejecting femininity outright but from negotiating space within it (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Thus, both narratives proposed a model of feminist agency rooted in balance—between independence and relationality, self-determination and social harmony (Kaplan, 1983).

Agency and Autonomy

Agency emerges as the central feminist theme uniting both films. Maggie's empowerment developed through active resistance and self-realization, while Jane's grows gradually through professional confidence and emotional honesty (Kaplan, 1983; Mulvey, 1975). Together, they exemplified the multidimensional nature of women's agency, encompassing emotional, relational, and occupational dimensions (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Both narratives challenged the romantic comedy trope that equates fulfillment solely with romantic success (Haskell, 1987), instead positioning self-knowledge and personal integrity as the foundations of happiness (Creed, 2015). Within the limits of mainstream cinema, these films contributed to feminist discourse by portraying women who navigate—rather than wholly reject—social conventions, asserting that true empowerment lied in the freedom to choose one's path (Gledhill, 2002; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

The comparative analysis of *Runaway Bride* (Marshall, 1999) and *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008) reveals how romantic comedies function as both mirrors and mediators of evolving gender norms. These films oscillated between reinforcing traditional expectations and promoting feminist ideals, illustrating what Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975) terms the “negotiation of the male gaze” within mainstream cinema. Maggie and Jane, the protagonists, embody distinct yet complementary strategies for negotiating womanhood in patriarchal contexts. Maggie's rebellion against the institution of marriage represents an active form of resistance, highlighting personal freedom and self-definition as central feminist ideals. Conversely, Jane's journey underscores the importance of self-assertion and professional competence alongside emotional fulfillment (Creed, 2015; Kaplan, 1983). Together, these characters challenged the notion that women's identities must revolve around romance, affirming Tasker and Negra's (Tasker & Negra, 2007) argument that postfeminist heroines reflected multifaceted, fluid notions of empowerment.

Humor operated as a subtle yet powerful vehicle for feminist critique within these narratives. As Gledhill (Gledhill, 2002) and Doane (Doane, 2010) argue, comedy allows films to question gender hierarchies without alienating audiences accustomed to conventional romantic tropes. Maggie's comedic “*Runaway Bride*” episodes transform her resistance into a socially digestible spectacle, while Jane's clumsy selflessness humorously exposes the burdens of over conformity to ideal femininity. In both cases, humor softens ideological critique, enabling audiences to engage with feminist ideas through laughter rather than confrontation. This aligns with Kaplan's (Kaplan, 1983) notion that comedy in women-centered films provides a “safe space” for reimagining gendered power relations.

Career and agency further reinforced the films' engagement with feminist discourse. Jane's profession as a wedding planner symbolizes control and organizational mastery—traits historically undervalued in women but re-contextualized here as forms of empowerment (Kaplan, 1983). Her competence transformed labor into liberation, suggesting that self-worth need not derive from romance alone. In contrast, Maggie's

empowerment emerges through emotional autonomy rather than professional achievement, showing that feminist self-realization can take multiple forms (Haskell, 1987; Mulvey, 1975). This duality underscores the multidimensionality of agency in feminist cinema—where empowerment is not linear, but negotiated across personal, relational, and occupational domains (Doane, 2010).

The cultural context of each film also shapes its feminist message. *Runaway Bride* reflects late-20th-century anxieties surrounding marriage, individuality, and female independence, capturing the transitional moment between second-wave feminism and post-feminism. In contrast, *27 Dresses* incorporates early 21st-century concerns with careerism, self-branding, and delayed marriage—what Perkins and Schreiber (Perkins & Schreiber, 2019) describe as “neoliberal femininity,” where independence coexists uneasily with romantic aspiration. Comparing these two narratives illuminates how romantic comedies adapt feminist discourses to fit their cultural moment, blending irony, sincerity, and empowerment in distinct ways (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

Ultimately, these films exemplified the dual potential of romantic comedies: they can simultaneously reinforce and resist traditional gender scripts. As Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975) and Doane (Doane, 2010) note, the genre’s power lies in its contradictions—its ability to stage subversion within convention. Feminist representation in these films is therefore context-dependent, shaped by the interplay between cultural expectations, narrative form, and audience desire. The findings emphasized that empowerment in romantic comedies is rarely absolute; it is negotiated through autonomy, self-assertion, and compromise (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

This analysis encouraged greater critical media literacy, urging viewers to look beyond surface-level romance to the ideological negotiations embedded within cinematic pleasure. By understanding how humor, career, and cultural context interact in shaping female agency, scholars and audiences alike can better appreciate romantic comedy as a vital site of feminist discourse rather than mere entertainment (Gledhill, 2002; Kaplan, 1983).

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Maggie Carpenter in *Runaway Bride* and Jane Nichols in *27 Dresses* reveals that romantic comedies offered nuanced portrayals of female empowerment, balancing humor with social critique. Both protagonists navigated and challenging societal expectations of femininity and marriage, yet their paths toward autonomy differ—Maggie through acts of rebellion and self-reflection, and Jane through gradual self-assertion and the pursuit of professional competence (Mulvey, 1975; Tasker & Negra, 2007). These representations demonstrated that empowerment was not monolithic but multidimensional, encompassing personal, relational, and professional domains (Doane, 2010; Kaplan, 1983). By blending feminist ideals with the conventions of romantic comedy, such films mediate critical discussions of gender within accessible, mainstream narratives (Gledhill, 2002). This study thus contributed to understanding how popular cinema reflects and shapes evolving gender norms, emphasizing women’s

negotiation of autonomy within cultural and emotional constraints (Creed, 2015). Ultimately, the findings affirm that female empowerment in media was an ongoing process of self-definition and contextual resistance. Future research could extend this analysis to other genres and transnational contexts to explore how feminist representations continue to evolve in global cinematic discourse (Perkins & Schreiber, 2019).

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