



Postfeminism Perspectives in Female Portrayals within Peruvian Romantic Comedies Directed by Ani Alva

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Abstract. Romantic comedy is one of the most profitable and widely watched cinematic genres worldwide. It is characterized by depicting the pursuit of love through comedic situations, presenting this pursuit as the ultimate goal for everyone. This genre portrays models of masculinity and femininity, seeking to elicit an emotional response from the audience. In the postfeminist era, these narratives are transformed, reflecting social and cultural changes where women are more autonomous and have greater representation in society. With the emergence of more female directors, new narratives reframe the representation of women in Peruvian cinema. This trend, combined with postfeminism, promotes a new concept of empowerment, stripped of the political and transformative content of feminism. This article analyzes the representation of female characters in three romantic comedies directed by Peruvian director Ani Alva Helder: *No me digas solterona* (2018), *Medias hermanas* (2021), and *Soltera, casada, viuda y divorciada* (2023). These films topped the national box office rankings in their release years and subsequently became available on streaming platforms. The research was conducted from an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach through a case study. A content analysis guide was applied to 21 selected scenes from the three films, and 10 female characters were analyzed. The main findings indicate that the new romantic comedies directed by women in Peru represent postfeminist attitudes of a sector of the population. The representation in these narratives only highlights issues affecting white, slim, heterosexual, urban, middle-class women from Lima who are sexual beings enjoying their freedom, having agency, rights, and autonomy. Despite experiencing social pressure from the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes, these characters do not question the patriarchal system, and their goals remain related to traditionally assigned female roles. Finally, this article contributes to the study of Peruvian audiovisual products from a gender perspective and opens new lines of research related to audiences to explore their impact on Peruvian female audiences.

Keywords: Postfeminism, Romantic Comedies, Gender, Directors

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P. C. López-López et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Communication and Applied Technologies 2024 (ICOMTA 2024)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 28, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-596-6_54

1 Introduction

1.1 The Cinema-Woman Relationship: Representation of Stereotyped Female Characters

The discourse of cinematic narratives generates feelings and thoughts in the audience, framed within a specific historical context [1]. In classical cinema, women were depicted in domestic settings [2], as servants and romantic slaves [3] catering to the heterosexual nuclear family, with personal goals centered around motherhood [4] and holding less significant jobs compared to men [5]. These were secondary characters promoting stereotypes and clichés related to weakness, insecurity, and the necessity of commitment to a man for happiness [6]. During the 1930s and mid-1940s, the "screwball comedy," a subgenre of romantic comedy, featured couples where the woman was the true catalyst of the action [7]. However, their success or independence always brought them back to the domestic sphere through marriage, indicating that although they rebelled against male authority, they ultimately sought marriage to feel complete [7]. Films such as *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934), *You Can't Take It with You* (Capra, 1938), *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks, 1938), and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1940) illustrate stereotypical representations that are inaccurate and biased generalizations reinforcing gender inequality [8], presenting a hegemonic model of femininity linked to motherhood [9]. In the 1950s and 1960s, sexual comedies like *The Moon Is Blue* (Preminger, 1953) emerged, highlighting an interest in sexuality. The 1970s saw a significant shift with *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), which questioned romantic love [10].

Thus, hegemonic patriarchal cinema [11] has propagated dominant stereotypes that differ from the identities of real women [12]: the good woman and the bad woman [13], the fetish woman [14] or the self-sacrificing mother [4]. The 1980s saw the development of feminist film theory [15] which later focused on the importance of gender as a cultural, sexual, and social category [16]. This theory proposed the need to understand women as multiple subjects who can be represented in cinema without reproducing traditional female stereotypes.

With the emergence of films directed by women, the debate expanded, introducing new concepts such as women's cinema [17], cinema made by women [18], feminist cinema, feminine cinema, and *gynocine*. Consequently, female characters evolved from being depicted as mere images or sexual objects [19] in classical cinema to assuming protagonist roles [18], showcasing greater complexity and maturity in their psychological dimensions [20] and playing a key role in the narrative structure of films

1.2 Individualism and Self-Questioning of Female Protagonists in Postmodern Romantic Comedies

In the global film industry, the romantic comedy genre is characterized by depicting the pursuit of love through comedic situations [20] addressing themes such as marriage, the battle of the sexes related to gender roles, the obstacles protagonists must overcome to be together, as well as the importance of family and friendship [21]. In this context, the romantic comedy has evolved in recent decades with films such as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), and *Sex and the City* (2008). These narratives feature female protagonists with access to education and employment, who enjoy autonomy and rights. Protagonists self-question in response to social pressures from their environment. Elle Woods, protagonist of *Legally Blonde*, decides to study law at Harvard University to prove her boyfriend who left her that she can be blonde, feminine, and professional simultaneously. Bridget Jones is an overweight, middle-class London woman who breaks the standards of hegemonic beauty, living out her sexuality, desires, frustrations, and insecurities related to her singleness [22]. In both narratives, workplace sexual harassment is comically highlighted [23].

Finally, Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist of *Sex and the City*, and her three friends represent female success in a male-dominated world. They possess hegemonic beauty, are independent, hedonistic, and consumeristic. However, the central theme of the narrative is the protagonist's development in the romantic realm [24]. In all three cases, the quest for marriage or commitment serves as the starting point for the protagonists' journey of self-discovery.

1.3 New Gender Representations in Postfeminist Times

Since the 1990s, new postfeminist gender representations have developed in the media [25]. Postfeminism suggests that women have already secured their economic, political, and social rights, thus living fully and no longer needing to fight against the patriarchal system [26]. It strips the feminist movement of its political struggle against the system and the dominant male figure [27]. The consumer woman embraces conservative values about femininity, as her new purchasing power allows her to freely study, work, be a sexual subject, and simultaneously be feminine. This promotes narratives that celebrate femininity; however, women continue to be viewed under traditional demands of being young and beautiful, seeing their own bodies as objects of consumption and personal projects for social and economic ascent [28]. Popular culture disseminates a repertoire of new meanings mixed with conservative views on family and motherhood, combined with new concepts such as female empowerment and individual freedom [29]. In this context, normative femininity practices are proposed as an emancipatory discourse, abandoning the critique of patriarchy and the media [30]. The concept of empowerment is redefined concerning sexual agency, turning women into sexual subjects. In the media, they are presented as individualists, ignoring any critique of structural inequalities and overvaluing each woman's effort to achieve empowerment and freedom [29]. This is evident in the portrayal

of white, middle or upper-middle-class women like Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* and Andrea Sachs from *The Devil Wears Prada*, who are autonomous, hegemonically beautiful, successful in their careers, and seeking to consolidate heterosexual love, while valuing their group of friends as emotional support [31].

2 Methodology

The research is based on the interpretive paradigm [32] with a qualitative approach [33]. A case study [34] was designed, and a content analysis guide [35] was applied to analyze female representations in the narratives of three Peruvian comedy films directed by Ani Alva Helfer. The Peruvian commercial cinema is undergoing a period of renewal and growth, offering greater diversity [36]. Since 2013, there has been a notable preference for comedy films among Peruvian audiences. In this context, there are directors, screenwriters, and producers who tackle new themes and propose new roles for female protagonists in this genre [37]. One such director is Ani Alva, who stands out among other female filmmakers for creating box office hits with female leads. The three selected films, *No me digas solterona* (NMDS), *Medias Hermanas* (MH), and *Soltera, casada, viuda y divorciada* (SCVD), have topped the Peruvian cinema release rankings in their respective release years (see Table 1) and are comedies written and directed by women, featuring female protagonists. In these films, released between 2018 and 2023, ten female protagonists were analyzed.

Table 1. Technical Data Sheet of Selected Films

Films	NMDS	MH	SCVD
Director	Ani Alva Helfer	Ani Alva Helfer	Ani Alva Helfer
Screenwriter	Ani Alva Helfer	Ani Alva Helfer	Ani Alva Helfer
Country	Perú	Perú	Perú
Year	2018	2021	2023
Length	115 min.	108 min.	108 min.
Genre	Comedy	Comedy	Comedy
Cast	Patricia Barreto, Angélica Aragón.	Gianella Neyra, Magdyel Ugaz.	Gianella Neyra, Katia Condos, etc.
Producer	Bing Bang Films	Tondero, Gianella Neyra, Magdyel Ugaz	La Soga, Gianella Neyra
Box Office	868,257	50,853	1 036, 812
Synopsis	Patricia is 34 years old, and her boyfriend leaves her for a younger woman. She returns to her mother's house and tries to find new boyfriends to avoid being single.	Victoria and Marita discover they are half-sisters. To sell the house inherited from their father, Marita requests that they spend the summer together.	Four childhood friends travel to support Cecilia after she becomes a widow. During the trip, they discover how to move forward toward their life goals.

The content analysis guide was designed based on four narrative categories: character construction (physical, psychological, and social dimensions) [38], actions [39], transformation arc, and story context. It was applied to 21 scenes from the three films. The 7 scenes from each film were selected based on a narrative criterion. Therefore, a synopsis breakdown was conducted beforehand to determine the initial state, inciting incident, first plot point, midpoint, second plot point, climax, and resolution of each story for analysis.

2.1 Ethical Considerations

The films were viewed on the Netflix platform with a paid subscription. The research adheres to the principles of gender equality and has employed inclusive language in both data collection and the publication of results.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Middle-Class Postfeminism in the New Peruvian Romantic Comedy

The ten female characters analyzed are white and slender, corresponding to physical profiles associated with the middle class of Lima. Psychologically, all of them exhibit goal-oriented objectives related to family, partners, or self-discovery in order to maintain familial or romantic relationships (see Table 2).

Table 2. Character Construction

Name	Physical Dimension	Psychological Dimension	Social Dimension
Cecilia (SCVD)	40 years old, white, dark hair and eyes, slender. Casual attire.	Extroverted, grieving and depressed. Goal: pursue her vocation.	Upper-middle class, childless widow. She is a doctor and works. Friends as emotional support.
Conny (SCVD)	Over 40 years old, Caucasian, with light-colored eyes, wears wigs, slim. Eccentric clothing.	Extroverted, with a fear of aging and losing beauty. Goal: to continue working.	Upper middle class. Divorced with a child. Unemployed actress. Friends as emotional support.
Daniela (SCVD)	Over 40 years old, Caucasian, with dark hair. Sportswear.	Submissive, avoids conflict. Undervalued. Goal: to be recognized by her family.	Upper middle class. Married with three children. Homemaker. Friends as emotional support.
Lorena (SCVD)	Over 40 years old, Caucasian, with blonde hair and green eyes. Wears tight clothing.	Pragmatic and determined. Fears being alone. Low self-esteem. Goal: to break free from her married lover.	Upper middle class. Single and involved with a married man. Successful executive. Friends as emotional support.

Patricia (NMDS)	35 years old, Caucasian, with dark hair and eyes. Slim. Casual clothing.	Fears being alone. Dependent on her partner. Goal: to get married.	Upper middle class. Employed. Lives with her widowed mother. Friends as emotional support.
Sol (NMDS)	35 years old, Caucasian, with blonde hair and light-colored eyes. Tall and slender. Casual clothing.	Self-confident. Dissatisfied with her marriage and mother-in-law. Goal: to help Patricia get married.	Upper middle class. Unemployed. Married without children. Friends as emotional support.
Chío (NMDS)	35 years old, Caucasian, with brown hair and eyes. Sturdy build. Casual clothing.	Extroverted, exaggerated in her affections and expressions. Goal: to help Patricia get married.	Upper middle class. Married without children. Unemployed. Friends as emotional support.
Mariana (NMDS)	35 years old, Caucasian, with dark brown hair and eyes. Slim. Casual clothing.	Casual and irreverent. Goal: to enjoy her freedom.	Upper middle class. Professional. Employed. Promiscuous lover. Friends as emotional support.
Victoria (MH)	40 years old. Caucasian, with dark hair and eyes. Slim. Formal clothing.	Serious and responsible. Insecure. Avoids the past. Goal: to be valued by her children.	Upper middle class. Married with children. Employed.
Marita (MH)	Almost 40 years old. Caucasian. Dark hair and eyes. Tall. Colorful clothing.	Childlike and sociable. Fear of loneliness. Goal: to unite her family and meet her sister.	Middle class. Engaged.

In the social dimension, the protagonists are conceived as women who represent conventional femininity. Some female characters remove women from the domestic sphere (see Table 2). These protagonists are presented as empowered, having achieved financial stability to build agency in economic, social, political, and sexual terms [40], thus constituting independent and autonomous female characters. Traditional female characters are also presented, who do not work and are financially dependent on their husbands, such as Chío and Sol (NMDS) and Daniela (SCVD), representing the roles of housewife and mother.

3.2 Sisterhood and Neoliberal Values in the Pursuit of Autonomy

The protagonists operate in a postfeminist context where neoliberal values related to individual freedom and rights predominate. However, their actions do not reflect any emancipatory discourse [41]. Characters like Mariana (NMDS) and Lorena (SCVD) seek to achieve freedom, autonomy, and agency, and they promote the idea of female empowerment. However, they do not question the dominant male figure or the asymmetric relationships between the sexes [42].

Despite this, the protagonists' actions tend to form groups among themselves as a means of survival, representing solidarity, unity, and constant support among friends, an exercise in sisterhood [43] within the patriarchal system that provides contexts for all the narratives. The contemporary urban woman conquers the individualistic life project as a manifestation of her own empowerment. The groups of friends in the three films highlight this sisterhood with an ethical and political dimension by eliminating hierarchies and seeking mutual help [43]. The bond of friendship, despite the tensions between them, fills emotional voids [42]. However, in *NMDS*, the friends play a dual role of support and emotional harm simultaneously. Patricia's friends convince her that someone will propose to her and then belittle her by comparing her to the new girlfriend she was left for, a stereotypical representation of relationships between women from a conservative perspective [44] with phrases like "she's pure 90, 60, 90" [alluding corporal measurements] or "she looks like she stepped out of a *chelas* [beer] commercial." The women view female bodies from a masculine subjectivity, using sexist expressions. On the other hand, Cecilia (*SCVD*) is depressed due to her widowhood, and her friends propose a trip to the beach of her childhood, showing the need for other women to pull her out of her anomie, as seen in some Hollywood romantic comedies [23].

In all three films, however, the protagonists expand their vision of life, acquiring self-love, confidence, and strength [40] eliminating their subordination to men and thus presenting new female models in Peruvian audiovisual narratives [45]. Patricia, Victoria, and Cecilia have financial stability and continue their lives without a male romantic partner, overcoming the stereotypes of the hegemonic nuclear family. For example, Victoria and Marita (*MH*) move from being two half-sisters who did not know each other to forming a new type of family under a matriarchal figure. The development of all the protagonists presents an internal journey of learning in a patriarchal society, where they challenge external voices to forge their own postfeminist empowerment in a neoliberal context [46].

Director and screenwriter Ani Alva presents turning points for her protagonists that imply a life change. However, Patricia (*NMDS*) decides, in the climax of the story, based on the recommendation of a man, her new romantic partner, who advises her to "love herself." This lesson given by the male character is far removed from narratives like that of Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001), for example, where the male character is the one who receives the lesson.

In Alva's latest film, *SCVD* (2023), we observe that the use of stereotypes is moderated, and characters with greater psychological dimension and social background are presented. For example, Cecilia prioritizes the pursuit of autonomy as her ultimate goal. Despite her widowhood, she does not abandon her decision to prioritize her profession as a doctor and maintains her decision not to have children.

4 Conclusions

The analyzed Peruvian romantic comedies draw on Hollywood films of the same genre, engaging with the aspirational values of the Peruvian middle class and the traditional gender stereotypes of conservative Lima. These comedies depict female protagonists in postfeminist contexts, some of whom operate outside the domestic sphere, autonomously defining personal life projects without any emotional dependence on men. However, despite attempts to break with traditional stereotypes by portraying the pursuit of personal fulfillment, empowerment, and self-love as the protagonists' primary goals, many scenes limit these characters to roles predominantly tied to being mothers, wives, or potential wives.

The new romantic comedies directed by women in Peru reflect postfeminist attitudes of a segment of the population, as the representation in these narratives only highlights issues affecting white, slim, heterosexual, urban, middle-class women from Lima who are sexual beings enjoying their freedom, possessing agency, rights, and autonomy. Despite experiencing social pressure from the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes, they do not challenge the patriarchal system, and their goals remain linked to marriage and motherhood as the ultimate aspirations for personal fulfillment, suggesting that their time has simply not yet come.

Finally, this article contributes to the study of Peruvian audiovisual products from a gender perspective and opens new lines of research related to audiences to explore the impact of these narratives on the Peruvian female audience.

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