

Feminist Themes in Films Directed by Men in the Chinese Movie Industry

Linying Cheng¹, Jing Li^{2,*}, Yunlei Liu³

¹ Nankai University, Tianjin, China, 300192

² Lingnan University, Hongkong, China, 999077

³ University of California, Davis, CA, United States, 95616

* Corresponding Author Email: Jingli9@ln.hk

Abstract. Film, as one of the mainstream media in the 21st century, has shaped societal norms, which molds public perceptions and values. With the emergence of feminism in the 21st century, it can be witnessed an increasing trend in the appearance of films on the theme of feminism. However, in the Chinese film industry, most of the positions are predominated by men (usually defined as director, producer, and writer), leaving women significantly underrepresented. This study aims to dissect the context of two films, "I am Not Madame Bovary" and "Lost in the Star", which are feminist-theme content directed by male directors. Through the detailed analysis, this study finds the underrepresentation of female voices within the film industry, along with its impact on the depiction of women and their interpersonal dynamics. This research underscores the contrast between the ostensible neutrality of film narratives and the inherent male-oriented discourse that sidelines female perspectives, which silence women's voices in the narrative fabric.

Keywords: "I am Not Madame Bovary"; "Lost in the Star"; the depiction of women.

1. Introduction

Film, as a contemporary art that populates the mainstream media, has become a critical tool in shaping female figures. This study exposes the dichotomy between the perceived neutrality of film narratives and the underlying male-centric discourse, which marginalizes female perspectives, thereby making women's voices "lost" in the narrative process. 2023 marked a significant year in challenging these entrenched norms, with films such as "The Universe in an Instant" and "Barbie" achieving global acclaim, underscoring the universal appeal and critical importance of women-centric themes in cinema.

From the emergence of Chinese film in 1905, however, most directors actively presenting productions on the screen are male directors. However, under male narratives, the portrayal of women often succumbs to stereotypical categories that align with male-centric ideologies. This study employs textual analysis and case studies to scrutinize the representation of female characters in two selected films, "Lost in the Star", directed by Rui Cui and Xiang Liu and "I am Not Madame Bovary", directed by Xiaogang Feng. These two films showcase the revolution in the portrait of female characters.

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By leveraging feminism criticism theory, this research seeks to dismantle the male-centric literary tradition and explore gender poetics' dimensions in cinema. The goal is to advocate for equitable representation of women on screen, emphasizing the necessity for films to reflect diverse and realistic images of women, thus contributing to the broader societal acknowledgment of women's value, status, and rights.

The significance of this research lies in its theoretical contribution to feminist media studies and its practical implications for the film industry. By dissecting the potential bias in male narratives, the authors advocate for a shift towards more inclusive and balanced narratives that encourage more creative female leading characters and directors in the film industry to present the complexity and richness of women's lives and relationships. As cinema continues to evolve, integrating female perspectives is crucial for fostering a more nuanced, diverse, and equitable cultural landscape.

2. Theoretical framework

Feminist criticism is one of the contemporary Western literary theories. It originated in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s. It is the product of the deepening political movement in the cultural and literary fields and is still developing continuously today. As an important part of criticism and literary theory in the 20th century, feminist literary criticism theory mainly focuses on deconstructing male-centered literature and reveals some literary phenomena from the perspective of women, which opens different discourse spaces for the study of literary creation and the development of female texts. Later, it entered the interdisciplinary cultural research. Feminist literary criticism has always had a strong gender consciousness, focusing on the interpretation of gender attributes and the combination of other categories, exploring the healthy two-sexual relationship mode, and seeking harmony among gender differences. This theory of literary criticism is directly applied to the content analysis of Chinese female films, and the related issues such as gender politics, power relations, identity and other issues have a profound influence on the interpretation and criticism of literary and artistic works.

3. Analysis of female image in film

As an important part of mass culture and entertainment in modern society, the status of film is becoming increasingly prominent. In the film, the importance of the female image has also increasingly attracted the attention of the audience. In different types of films, female characters often show completely different characteristics, which not only reflect society's expectations and requirements for women but also reflect society's understanding and view of gender roles. The display of female images on the screen not only touches the emotions of the audience but also triggers their in-depth thinking and attention to social issues.

In this paper, the films "I am Not Madame Bovary" and "Lost in the Stars" are selected as analysis cases. Li Xuelian, in the movie "I am Not Madame Bovary," has been on the road to prove her own innocence. Although Li Xuelian's petition is blind, she showed strong stubbornness and persistence in the process of petitioning. She firmly believes that her demands are just and that the only way to solve the problem is through petitioning. Therefore, she did not hesitate to spend a lot of time and energy, even at the cost of giving up normal life and work, and constantly rushed between the complaint departments at all levels. Li Xuelian's complaint has a clear purpose; she wants to sue Qin Yuhe to regain her innocence. In order to maintain her reputation, Li Xuelian insisted on petitioning. She is not willing to be cheated by Qin Yuhe, and even more unwilling to bear such abuse in this female-demanding society. In the film "Lost in the Stars," the role of Chen Mai appears in front of the public as a gold medal lawyer, assisting He Fei to search and prove that the woman who returned was not his missing wife; however, Shen Man is actually a drama director who is clinging to pursue the trace of her missing friend. While helping He Fei to collect evidence, she also secretly collected evidence to prove that He Fei led to the disappearance of Li Muzi. Chen Mai's independence, autonomy, calmness, determination, and firmness of faith have all become significant and important features of the female image in the film. Although there are differences in the themes—"I am Not Madame Bovary" focuses on social reality and individual fate, while "Lost in the Stars" explores deeper themes of humanity, deception, and emotion—the release time and plot content of the two films, and the female images portrayed in them, have similarities, which can resonate with the audience.

3.1. The Female Character Li Xuelian in the Film "I am Not Madame Bovary"

The film "I am Not Madame Bovary" by Xiaogang Feng employs the highly gimmicky and imaginative term Madame Bovary to set an identity trap for the film's female protagonist, Li Xuelian. It builds up an image of a woman in a male-dominated space, using this female identity to seemingly tell a positive story about her name and her fight for women's rights. However, in reality, it positions women in a passive role in the conflict of values between men and women in exchange for more discourse and space for defense [1].

According to French thinker Simone de Beauvoir, men often consciously ignore women's life experiences, leading to a gradual loss of their ability to understand this aspect [2]. In society, women are primarily seen as "mothers" and "wives," roles that are considered most important. "Wife" is the definition bestowed upon women by nature and society, neglecting the real needs of men and even women themselves. This belief perpetuates the notion that women are ultimately destined to become "good wives and good mothers" [3]. Li Xuelian, the female character in the film, is also confined to the stereotypical identity of a "virtuous wife and mother." Being a rural woman, she devises a plan to legally have a second child with her husband, Qin Yuhe. However, her plan backfires, leading to unexpected consequences such as divorce, the birth of the child, and her husband's remarriage to another woman. During a confrontation, Li Xuelian is labeled as "Pan Jinlian" simply because she was not a virgin when she married him. Despite her efforts to explain that her divorce was only to have a second child and not genuine, she is disregarded as vexatious, silenced, and even imprisoned [4, 5].

The film appears to adopt a "true and natural" and "objective and neutral" narrative perspective, but in reality, the narrative agency is controlled by men. Li Xuelian spends years trying to clear her name to maintain her self-reputation. However, from the male narrative perspective, she is portrayed as a "wicked woman" who faces obstacles at every turn.

3.2. Beautiful but Hollow images of Women

In stark contrast to the complexity of the male protagonist, He Fei, there is the thinness of the other characters, especially the female characters. From the title, this film has a very clear female point of view, but from the film as a whole, she is still reduced to a symbolic male sidekick. All the female characters in the film can be summed up in one word: good. They are presented in a way that seems too positive to find any faults. Whether it is the kind-hearted Li Muzi, the wise and bold Shen Man, or the female classmate (the fake Li Muzi) who actively cooperates with Shen Man's plan, they are all the opposite of He Fei, the ultimate dark character, and the opposite of ultimate complexity. These female characters are bright yet one-dimensional and hollow.

For example, as a typical gentle and submissive virtuous wife and mother figure, the female protagonist Li Muzi chooses to forgive her husband when she knows he is addicted to gambling. In the end, even though she knows that her husband is going to kill her, she chooses to give up the struggle and take off her oxygen mask herself, calmly going to her death. This act goes against the instinctive will of human beings to survive. All these serve to mold the strong wifely nature of Li Muzi. This is a typical image of a wife in a male-dominated society, a stereotype born out of unequal power. Throughout the film, Li Muzi is just an empty shell of He Fei's wife, not a female character with flesh and blood. In the works created by the sixth generation of directors, there are always such a group of extremely representative characters, who work hard and have a strong spirit of sacrifice and dedication. They are called earth-mother women. Earth-mother-type women have two basic characteristics: a strong spirit of self-sacrifice and a strong sense of salvation. These two points can also be reflected in the heroine Li Muzi.

The film is not an objective statement of truth, but is based on the creator's observation of the viewing angle. Although the film tries its best to present a positive image of women and also shows the bravery and intelligence of women through the plot of revenge of girlfriends, the characters of the three female protagonists still lack some flesh and blood realism, failing to escape the scrutiny of the male

discourse subject. In terms of characterization, the real and the fake Muzi are gentle and kind, while the other is ruthless and dark, perfectly fitting the binary impression of female characters: the good angel and the bad woman. The kindness of the real Muzi, in the face of death, according to human instinct, should struggle, but she seems to accept death calmly, choosing to pull out the oxygen tube, gazing at the bottom of the sea starry sky to die. This is an irrational scene that goes against the human will to survive. The beautiful image of her death presented at the end of the film may be a beautiful impression from the perspective of her best friend, but it is inconsistent with the swelling state of a normal human body after drowning, and it also diminishes the evil of the male lead's behavior to a certain extent, making it difficult for people to feel her pain as a victim directly and strongly.

3.3. Analysis of the Female Characters in "Lost in the Star"

In the male narrative system, the mother is imaginatively shaped as a mythical, angel-like existence, loses self-consciousness, and becomes an artistic carrier to satisfy the male aesthetic imagination [6, 7]. Li Muzi, the heroine of the film, is a kind and beautiful girl from a rich family. She can be said to be the most obscure character in the whole film; she does not make a formal appearance and does not have a self-monologue. This representative image of obedient and tame family women projects women under the male social order[8]. The "vivid" existence of women is the definition of women constructed in the mass subconscious according to the male standard. Her image is entirely composed of the relayings of He Fei and Shen Man. Some would say that she is a love-brain, a deluded fool, too soft-hearted, and a gambler in love. However, her character is formed by the environment she grew up in. Her love of art, introversion, lack of social interaction, and the fact that she only has two close relationships with He Fei and Shen Man more or less suggest that Muzi is a typical 'artist's personality' with a certain degree of mental cleanliness and eccentricity and that her character is more or less withdrawn and overly tolerant. This may have something to do with the environment in which she grew up. Li Muzi grew up alone, studying abroad, and had no friends other than Shen Man. Her parents were very rich, but they had no time to spend with her and pampered her and only tried their best to satisfy her in terms of material things. Although Li Muzi is from a good family, it is obvious that although her parents provide her with an excellent material foundation and a good school education, they do not allow her to become an individual who lives her own life and possesses the spiritual power to independently take charge of her wealth and career.

When He Fei appears in front of Li Muzi as a kind of protector, he brings her a sense of dependence that she has not felt for a long time and fills the sense of emptiness and uncertainty in her heart due to the death of her parents. So, even when Li Muzi learned that she was pregnant, she forgave He Fei. Because in her heart, she would feel that even if she had a child, she should submit to the mercy of fate, even if she is actually fully capable of raising the child on her own.

The character Shen Mann in *She Who Vanishes* is a complex and intriguing character. The following is an analysis of her character: firstly, Shen Man plays multiple roles in the story. During He Fei's search for his disappeared wife, Li Muzi, Shen Man suddenly intrudes into this story as Li Muzi's best friend. As the plot progresses, viewers gradually realize that Shen Man is not simply a lawyer but is inextricably linked to Li Muzi. This complex identity makes Shen Man's character full of mystery and attraction.

Secondly, Shen Man's character traits are also very distinct. She is smart, witty, and independent, but at the same time, she also carries some cunning and calculating. She performed well in her encounters with He Fei, not only able to respond quickly to various situations but also able to deliver a fatal blow at a critical moment. This makes her an indispensable character in the story and keeps the audience interested in her. As Li Muzi's best friend, an extremely talented theatre director, she puts on a fake drama to find her missing best friend.

The Mandela effect is repeatedly emphasized in the film, creating false memories. It is used when He Fei selects Chen Mai, her pseudonym, as a multinational gold-medal lawyer for the first time, appearing in front of He Fei during their initial encounter to inform him that he is in danger. She is

then surrounded by people copping a feel of things. The second time, during a game of pool, he is informed by someone that this is a multinational gold-medal lawyer. The third time, when He Fei takes the initiative to visit her law firm, and upon seeing her send her 'client' away, he speaks as if he is assisting a criminal to escape, further solidifying He Fei's impression and gradually earning his trust. Everything she did was to find Li Muzi; she saved her from a high building; she searched for her in the deep sea. For Shen Man, Li Muzi is the salvation, the savior, a friend, a bosom friend, and a loved one; if it is not Muzi, perhaps she has long jumped off the building to commit suicide because of the violence in the school, in the cage to see the body of Muzi when she has been despaired of in her heart.

4. Discussion

A Chinese female director portrays the spiritual history of Chinese women with images[9]. In "Lost in the Star" s, despite initially appearing as a narrative focused on women, aimed at a female audience, and seemingly aligned with feminism, it ultimately glorifies female pain and suffering. The depiction of women in the film mirrors the prevailing male perspective evident in many contemporary Chinese films, maintaining a strong patriarchal gaze and set of expectations. Approximately two-thirds of the film is told from the viewpoint of Zhu Yilong, a male character entrenched in gambling addiction, thereby naturally eliciting empathy for him.

In "I Am Not Panjin Chain," Li Xuelian stands as the sole female amidst a sea of male characters. The narrative, to a large extent, revolves around the men surrounding Li Xuelian, ranging from the county court judge and president to the mayor and governor, with even the highest-ranking authority figure remaining unnamed, including Zhao Dou. While the film diverges from feminist themes, it delves into the intricacies of officialdom, exposing its absurdity, greed, and dark humor. Feng Xiaogang and Liu Zhenyun, cognizant of political sensitivities, have deliberately refined the narrative to make it more palatable, akin to the circular composition within the film, accentuated by table-pounding and impassioned speeches. A deeper understanding of Li Xuelian's narrative can be gleaned by examining real-life petitioning stories and documentaries on similar themes.

Despite ostensibly centering on Li Xuelian's quest for exoneration, the film tacitly endorses male prejudices, evident in the association of Pan Jinlian with adultery and the title's declaration, "I Am Not Bopan Jinlian," reinforcing male dominance. Li Xuelian, while ostensibly championing women's agency, ultimately seeks validation solely from male society, yearning to be acknowledged as innocent and wronged. This stance places her struggles at a remove from feminist ideals.

The subjective perspective of creators shapes films, evoking emotional resonance and blurring moral judgments. Films serve as subjective observations rather than objective statements of facts, offering a lens through which to view reality. Embracing diverse narratives and portrayals of women on screen can facilitate a deeper understanding of their value, status, and rights within society, fostering broader recognition and acceptance. In the film, if women want to break the narrative field dominated by men, they need to break the original relationship between "seeing" and "being seen" in the film with men as the main body. Women need to look at themselves and men at the same time [10].

5. Conclusion

This essay intricately explored the presentation of female characters within Chinese cinema as viewed through feminist criticism. The study primarily centered its argument on the films "I am Not Madame Bovary" and "Lost in the Stars," highlighting the bias in the shaping of the female image and the insufficiency of female subjectivities in the film. The prevailing male narrators are often overwhelming and ignore or silence womanly expressions. However, it should be clear through this critique that the representation depicted in these films went beyond the narrative of the featured filmmakers. These depictions are not standalone or isolated processes but extend to the societal constructions and understanding of the women's role. This analysis, despite the advancements in feminist literary criticism and the increased issuance of material authored by women, presents that

the womanly image still occupies a lesser and subjugated point, which is reflected in film narratives. This paper contributes significantly toward the broader discussion of the representation of gender in the media by critically evaluating how women constructs are presented in a mostly male narrative. However, the examination is limited by the few films considered; a broader exploration may reveal more diversity in the perceived construct of female characters. Accordingly, prospective studies can bring in more relevant films to analyze to understand the portrayal and impact of female expression through cinema. Through dissecting the narrative of gender prevalent in the modern China film industry, imperative to not only complicate but clarify how women and femininity must be represented on screen to break patriarchal norms.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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