

Stereotypical Representations of Female Characters in Film and Television in the Context of the Male Gaze and Their Breakthrough

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Abstract. By the end of the 19th century, the first wave of feminism emerged, advancing the plea and perspective of gender equality. This introduced feminism to the public's attention for the first time. With the development of diverse media as well as the cultivation and awakening of female consciousness, this has led to an increasing demand for female-oriented works in the fields of art, film, and other cultural and spiritual domains. However, in the context of the entire patriarchal society, many, including artists, remain susceptible to the influence of misogyny. As a result, there's a conscious or passive tendency to prioritize males, women are often easily regarded as the 'gazed-upon' other. Consequently, female characters in many films and television shows continue to be portrayed with certain stereotypes. This paper briefly discusses the definitions of feminism and male gaze, taking numerous classic Chinese films and television works as examples to analyze the portrayal of female characters under the male perspective. In film and television works, we should analyze and reflect on the three dimensions of women's 'othering', demonization, and sexualization. In recent years, through analyzing films and television productions related to women's awakening, we can observe how female characters progressively break free from the stereotypical impressions under the male gaze, finding their own path. The final conclusion drawn is that the plight of women begins with breaking free from the stereotypical perceptions of women within the male-dominated linguistic framework and male perspective and the process of self-affirmation of women's identity begins. It is encouraged that all professionals in the film and television industry, as well as all women, make every effort in liberating women. It is hoped that cinematic and television productions can revolve around the intrinsic value of women, creating self-empowered female characters.

Keywords: Breakthrough; Stereotypical Representations of Female Characters; Intrinsic Value of Women; Liberating Women.

1. Introduction

Since the inception of the concept of feminism in the 19th century, and with the escalating women's rights movement, there has been a gradual awakening of female self-consciousness. The role and status of women in society and culture have garnered increasing attention. It is becoming increasingly evident that the very identity of being a woman places one in a vulnerable and "gazed-upon" position within society. More and more progressive women have begun to challenge this subtle male gaze, and the world of arts and literature has commenced its introspection and evolution. Numerous scholars and critics have embarked on studies examining the stereotypes of female characters in contemporary films and television. Whether the portrayal of female roles can break free from these traditional stereotypes has also become a topic of fervent discussion.

The aim of this paper is to utilize a vast body of existing film and television works and theoretical foundations. Building upon the existing theories to unearth further instances of stereotypical representations of female characters commonly found in film and television productions. By doing so, it seeks to infer societal perceptions of women, hoping to make more readers aware of the kind of gaze Chinese women are subjected to. Simultaneously, it also examines certain popular film and television productions that have shattered gender biases through their portrayal of female characters.

Through this, it calls for the awakening of female self-awareness and the cultivation of their self-empowerment.

2. Feminism and the Male Gaze

(1) Basic Definition of Feminism

Historically, the term "feminism" originated from Western society. The utopian socialist and French philosopher Fourier coined the term in 1837. Subsequently, the terms "feminism" and "feminist" first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872. The Oxford English Dictionary (Third Edition) cites 1852 and 1895 as the first appearances of "feminist" and "feminism" respectively. Broadly speaking, feminists aim to amplify women's voice in society and ensure their equitable grasp on rights. They emphasize and advocate for gender equality across political, economic, and social domains. Many would organize or participate in a series of social activities aimed at achieving gender equality within societal systems. Feminism, also referred to as women's rights movement, constitutes a series of political movements, ideologies, and social efforts that revolve around the theory and practice of gender equality. Its collective objective is to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Compared to the general concept of feminism, women's rights activism delves deeper. It underscores the plight of women as the "second sex" in a patriarchal society, urging all women to awaken their self-consciousness, Breaking free from the traditional perspectives that define and confine women, and earnestly seek their rights and power.

From this, we can define feminism as an academic and practical system aimed at ending the exploitation, discrimination, and oppression of women in a patriarchal society. It represents a social theory and political movement formed and propelled to achieve gender equality. It is an academic study that abandons the male gaze to approach different fields from a female perspective, actively exploring the differences between men and women and the power dynamics constructed by these gender contexts within society.

(2) Definition of the Male Gaze

The concept of "gaze" has been frequently mentioned and discussed in Western literary discussions and academic criticisms since the 1950s. Originally, "gaze" in Chinese means to look without blinking. Today, it is widely understood to represent a social habit where those in power scrutinize and consume the weaker party from a superior position. The subject of the "gaze" is typically the powerful entity with a desire to gaze, whereas the object of the gaze is the target upon which power is exerted and which is consumed by desire. The act of looking and being looked at inherently constructs the concepts of the self and the other, differentiating between subject and object. In discussions concerning gender, men, being the beneficiaries of a patriarchal society, often take on the role of the "gazer", consciously or subconsciously examining women's appearance, character, and identity. Every woman living within the cultural background of a patriarchal society, regardless of her status, becomes to varying degrees an object of this gaze.

(3) The Male Gaze in Film and Television

In traditional patriarchal societies, women's status is lower than that of men, and they have long existed within the gaze of men. The male gaze can even be seen as a form of discipline, as it not only control society's aesthetics regarding women but also constrains women's freedom to flourish independently. For instance, within the moral framework of ancient China, principles such as "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the so-called "chastity arch" were standards women were expected to adhere to and pursue. Similarly, the East Asian concept of "following one's husband" and the global practices of inheriting the "father's surname" at birth and adopting the "husband's surname" upon marriage, relegate women to a secondary status, marking them as belonging to men. Under the longstanding influence of patriarchy cultural thinking, women have long been the object of gaze, and to some extent, being "gazed upon" has become the default consciousness for many women. Even though the feminist movement has existed for many years, what most women's movements aspire to

achieve is merely equal societal status and rights protection as men and opposition to discriminatory behaviors against women. It can be said that the absolute binary opposition between the sexes is a topic that has been universally and eternally present, from ancient times to the present, and from mainland to overseas.

Hence, in all art forms that possess the ability to articulate, the portrayal of female figures often carries undertones of the male gaze. For instance, frequent depictions of women's bodies in films and television, which do not necessarily advance the plot, can be seen as the most overt act of objectifying and commodifying women. This phenomenon will be further elaborated in the section titled "Sexualized Women" in this article. Due to the inherent gaze-like quality of the camera lens, film and television compared to other art forms more readily amplify the stereotypes of female characters under the male gaze. Such female characters then become the female objects presented from a male subject's perspective. Even many contemporary films driven by feminist ideals, due to cultural constraints, often cannot fully escape the male gaze.

3. Stereotypical Portrayal of Female Characters in Film and Television under the Male Gaze

Since the advent of cinema and television, the majority of creators have been men or women socialized within a male-dominated society. Consequently, female characters in their works are frequently saturated with a strong male gaze ambiance. Here, I will analyze domestic film and television works by categorizing them into three types: subsidiary, scapegoat, and materialistic.

(1) "Men's" Women

Simone de Beauvoir once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In many classic films worldwide, female characters are rarely the sole protagonists. Their identities are seldom autonomous, instead often being tethered to relations like "a man's wife/love interest," "a child's mother," or "a father's daughter." The growth, inner journey, and tribulations of such characters frequently revolve around male figures, often merely serving to advance the male protagonist's development.

Female characters under the male gaze can be roughly, yet accurately, classified into two types – those beneficial to the male lead and those detrimental to him. Nonetheless, they invariably have ties to a male protagonist or male figures. Classic films like "Farewell My Concubine," "Lust, Caution," "Kung Fu Hustle," "The Butterfly Lovers," and "Ip Man" have crafted idealized female images from the male perspective. For example, characters such as Wang Jiazhi, a patriotic spy who uses her "attractive young woman" identity to navigate elite circles and is showcased as a "product" among the nobility; Juxian, known for her dual roles as a famous courtesan and a respectable wife, embodying both allure and domesticity; and figures like Empress Wanrong, Princess Wenxiu, and Wang Baochuan, who have been systematically conditioned under China's feudal patriarchal system.

Using the female protagonist Wang Baochuan from "Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan" as an example: Wang Baochuan, the daughter of Wang Yun, a prime minister esteemed second only to the emperor, ignored the earnest pleas of her parents and decided to marry the destitute Xue Pinggui. This decision led to her being expelled from her family home. After Xue Pinggui was conscripted into the army, Wang Baochuan, left on her own, endured hardships in a cold cave for eighteen years. Even when Xue Pinggui eventually rose to a high-ranking position and was reunited with Baochuan, she unfortunately passed away due to illness just eighteen days later. The stark contrast between the eighteen years and eighteen days, and the cold cave and high officialdom, paints a poignant picture of Wang Baochuan's tragic fate as a woman dependent on a man. Yet, despite this sorrowful tale of a woman who abandoned everything for a man and the so-called love, such stories are repeatedly glorified in film and television productions, with numerous adaptations made just for television. Audiences empathize with Wang Baochuan's plight while applauding her "loyal and pure" actions. This celebration of suffering seemingly suggests that a woman who sacrifices everything for a man is noble and great; conversely, if a woman does not adhere to traditional female roles, she is portrayed

as evil and universally condemned. Apart from "Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan," there are numerous film and television productions that glorify and beautify the act of women sacrificing for men. Yet, characters who abandon everything for a woman are rarely seen.

In many film and television productions, female characters who maintain the "purity" defined by men or willingly sacrifice for men, regardless of their ultimate fate, are often portrayed positively and typically receive widespread acclaim and sympathy from the audience. Conversely, women who break away from their roles as "men's" women either have roles that are so minor they can be disregarded or are portrayed as antagonists, receiving mixed reviews. It's hard not to argue that watching these classic films is inherently a process of conditioning women to become products of the male gaze.

(2) The Femme Fatale and The Seductress

In sharp contrast to the "ideal woman" described previously is the male-created image of the "femme fatale" in films and television. In such narratives, alluring and captivating female characters are often labeled as "seductresses": they are beautiful yet malicious, and their sole purpose from their introduction to the conclusion is to lure men away from "success" and towards destruction. Take, for example, the character of the younger Green Snake in "Green Snake" and Daji in "The Investiture of the Gods." Such female characters typically possess enchanting beauty and seductive physiques but harbor sinister intentions. They are often symbolic of carnal desires and conveniently absolve all men of their misdeeds, saying, "It's all because of those temptresses. They seduced us, hurt other women, and are the reason we couldn't achieve xx. They are so wicked."

Using the 1962 version of "Yang Guifei" as an example, there's a pivotal scene in the film where Emperor Tang Ming secretly favors Concubine Mei. This angers the renowned Yang Guifei, who subsequently assaults Mei and shatters valuable artifacts within the palace. In a fit of rage, the emperor expels her from the court. This scene heavily emphasizes Yang Guifei's spitefulness and jealousy, setting an emotional backdrop for An Lushan's uprising and the subsequent requests for Yang Guifei's execution. The narrative implies that the reason the Tang Dynasty faced the crisis of being overthrown was primarily due to the enchantress Yang Guifei, whose power and influence combined with her greed and arrogance endangered the nation. Such allegations are baseless. Historical records depict Yang Guifei as gentle and uninvolved in state affairs. Those qualities that films label as "bewitching," such as beauty, dance, and music talent, are admirable attributes and skills in reality. Additionally, Emperor Tang Ming is not the romantic figure often portrayed in films. Historical records show that Tang Xuanzong set up a "Flower and Bird Mission" to search for beauties to fill his harem, suggesting that even without Yang Guifei, there would've been another favored concubine. Thus, Yang Guifei is merely an innocent symbol burdened with undeserved blame. Society needed a scapegoat to excuse the hedonistic tendencies of men, and as a result, Yang Guifei's beauty and charm had to be labeled as "catastrophic."

Such instances where a male's flaws are projected onto a female character are countless in films and television. Over time, women have been conditioned by this male gaze to adhere to certain standards: be beautiful, but not overly so; be sexy, but remain pure; be capable, but never surpass a man in competence, and so on.

(3) The Sexualized Body

In films and television dominated by the male gaze, one constant remains: regardless of the type of female character, her image invariably caters to male visual pleasure. In classic film and television, whether through attire, plot, or both, female roles are often sexualized. Whether the character is as innocent as the naive fairy Zixia in "A Chinese Odyssey" or as bold and fierce as the Lady Mayor in "Let the Bullets Fly", or even the male character Cheng Dieyi portraying a woman in "Farewell to My Concubine", the pattern remains consistent. These characters prominently display their figures on screen, whether it be curves accentuated by tight clothing or a pale, slender physique. Contrasting with the neutral or upward angles typically used for male characters, cameras tend to favor downward

or voyeuristic angles when filming women, possibly catering to the voyeuristic desires of the male audience.

Taking the female characters in Stephen Chow's films for example, these characters exist to provide a romantic encounter for the male lead theoretically, adding a touch of femininity to his path to success. Yet, their depictions are strikingly similar: clad in tight clothes and mini-skirts, these characters are portrayed as sexy but with innocent looks and pure hearts. High-profile examples include the mute girl in "Kung Fu Hustle", Liu Piaopiao in "King of Comedy", and Qiuxiang in "Flirting Scholar". Their image is invariably enticing. Their fame doesn't arise from their individuality or personal growth, but from fitting male fantasies. Liu Piaopiao, a fallen girl with a pure and appealing look, is more of an object to satisfy male voyeuristic pleasure. Her unwavering affection for the male lead contributes to her fame. Qiuxiang, despite being well-educated and rational, doesn't have a pivotal role like male characters. Her qualities are showcased merely to highlight Tang Bohu's achievement in winning her heart. Clearly, she's there to gratify male viewers' fantasies about courting an "ideal" woman. She is mostly shown having romantic entanglements with various male characters, and in the narrative, uses her beauty to fulfill her mistress's tasks. Not to mention the character of Pomegranate, a caricature of a promiscuous woman. Her entire demeanor, from attire to behavior, is frivolous, using the trope of depicting women in a derogatory or sexualized manner for comedic effect.

In essence, these female roles, more than functional characters driving the plot, seem crafted primarily as objects of desire to satisfy the male gaze.

4. The Awakening and Manifestation of Female Self-Consciousness in Contemporary Film and Television Works

However, with the rising tide of modern female self-awareness and an increasing market demand for in-depth focus on individual women, the contemporary film and television industry has begun to gradually move away from the male-dominated paradigm, reshaping more three-dimensional female characters.

(1) The Rebellion of the "Marginalized" Female Roles

From the early 20th century to the 1970s and 1980s marked the second wave of Western feminist political movements. This wave emerged in the context of a global political shift after the two World Wars, and the feminist movement displayed more radical characteristics. Within this framework, various stances such as Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, and liberal feminism developed, each corresponding to its own school of thought. The former continued to focus on the political demand for "gender equality", while the latter went a step further to eradicate the remnants of male dominance in ideological realms, leading to seminal works like Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics". Consequently, films and television productions of this era began to exhibit more pronounced feminist undertones.

Firstly, female characters who have been "Marginalized" historically began to progressively display their awakening self-awareness and rejection and resistance to the patriarchal society in film and television works. Although in this phase, the films and shows still predominantly utilized the male perspective, and women remained the "others" who assisted the male lead or advanced the plot, these roles started to reveal more individuality rather than just serving as a symbol. This mirrors the gender differentiation advocated by French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray: a love where both parties remain independent without losing themselves - "Each 'he,' each 'she,' reserves life for oneself, for themselves." In the films of this phase, the most typical representation is the defiance against arranged marriages and an embrace of genuine love. Taking the classic film "Red Sorghum" as an example, the female lead expresses significant disdain for being "sold off" by her father and courageously breaks away from the feudal norms to pursue her own desires and meet a new man. After his death, instead of conforming to societal expectations and living a life of a "widow", she reconstructs a new family and embarks on a new chapter in her life. This narrative cleverly demonstrates both her rebellion against arranged marriages and the idea that a woman's life can have more than one love

story. No one denies the genuine love between Jiu'er and Yu Zhan'ao, but the film avoids the cliché of confining the female lead under the shackles of "true love", thus escaping the conventional male gaze.

Moreover, films like "Be Somebody", "House of Flying Daggers", "The Summer Palace", and "New Dragon Inn" have, to varying degrees, portrayed women as individuals with distinct and independent personalities. In these narratives, the female characters offer significant and tangible assistance to the male roles, helping them address societal issues, demonstrating the crucial role women, as independent entities rather than the secondary sex, play in society.

(2) Depiction of Women's Personal Growth Histories

Films and television works that focus on women's personal growth, independent of male influence, can be considered even more "feminist." For example, "Waterfall" tells the story of a single mother and daughter, adversaries due to longstanding resentments, forced to quarantine together during a pandemic, leading them to probe and understand each other. "Miss" depicts two women from different social classes who, with each other's help, manage to escape the cruel fates imposed upon them by men and the elite, culminating in a groundbreaking love story that lasts a lifetime. The emphasis of these works is on women achieving self-realization and leading lives independent of male influence. Currently, the fourth wave of feminism continues, dedicated to challenging societal gender norms, advocating for women, and fighting for equal work opportunities for all women. Its philosophy is also reflected in film and TV: for instance, "Go Lala Go!" is completely female-centric, portraying the progression of women in the workplace from novices to professionals taking charge. Films like "The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful", "Leap", and "A Touch of Green" showcase the mettle of women in political or power struggles, discussing the triumphs of female strategists in politics and business, overcoming numerous gender and class barriers.

Taking "Go Lala Go!" as an example, the film captures the diverse personas of women in the workplace. It revolves around the ambitious and beautiful Du Lala and her conflicts within a fast-paced Fortune 500 company. Through this film, audiences can appreciate the charm and value presented by different female persona. The message is clear: there shouldn't be a single standard to assess a woman's worth, nor should it be confined to any domain. Be it family, marriage, or the workplace, women should have space to manifest their value. A woman might have personality flaws, but she can still be a valuable and remarkable figure in her domain. Vivian might be too dominating and lacking empathy to be a good wife or a compassionate boss, but she can excel as an employee devoted to her career. Rose, perhaps because she ultimately chose friends and a calm life, may not continue to be an excellent employee, but she remains a caring friend and gentle lover. Regardless of their roles, they affirm their self-awareness and actualize their worth. They chase their dreams, become who they want to be, and thus, women's value is both realized and elevated.

(3) The Fate of Being Seen

There are cinematic works such as "The Goddess", "Blind Mountain", "The Handmaid's Tale", and "Why Women Kill" that directly oppose the male perspective. They vividly and concisely present to audiences the oppression women face in a patriarchal society and the tragic fates that all women encounter or are bound to encounter. These works depict the various reactions of female characters after suffering oppression from male collectives. During their resistance, these women often experience isolation within the patriarchal system and the top-down united oppression by men. One of the founders of the feminist movement, Simone de Beauvoir, once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.". Hence, such cinematic works starkly call upon all women to break free from societal shackles, to awaken and fight for themselves.

"Ode to Joy" can be regarded as the most popular TV series in China during the summer of 2016. The drama adopts an entirely female perspective, narrating the stories of five women from different generations living under the same roof and their varied approaches towards love, family, and career. The series not only delivers a captivating story to the audience but also successfully portrays the

distinct life challenges faced by women of different social statuses. For instance, Fan Shengmei, one of the characters, was born in a rural area where gender equality remains an elusive concept for many women. Under the reign of patriarchy, a large number of women completely lose their sense of female identity. The drama reflects this through various subtle plot points. In one subplot, when Fan Shengmei's younger brother needs money to buy a house, though Fan doesn't have spare funds, her entire family places their hopes on her. At first, Fan routinely sends money home, as if she was naturally born to serve her brother, without any thought of equality. To her family, Fan seems to be nothing more than a superior maid. This is not just Fan's fate but represents the destiny of countless women who haven't awakened their feminist consciousness. Even today, prevalent notions like favoring males over females and the belief that household chores should be women's responsibility still exist. This work, using the medium of "female portraits," establishes female identity and also sparks some women's exploration of self-awareness.

5. Conclusion

French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray once stated, "Civilization, under the manipulation of the male linguistic system, positions itself in a state controlled entirely by logic: the logic of capital, technological rationality, the discipline of micro-powers, and the authority of modern knowledge systems. This discursive logic makes people live within an impermeable web centered around object logic." The predicaments of women depicted in feminist cinematic works start with their attempts to free themselves from the stereotypical impressions created by male linguistic systems and the male gaze, as well as from the need for women to self-validate their identities. Within this logical web, women seem to be inherently treated as both the embodiment of personal needs and the objects of others' observation, constantly struggling between these intertwined forces.

Therefore, it's imperative to first recognize women, seize narrative authority, and then accurately understand and shape female characters. Only by achieving these foundational steps can one aspire to produce cinematic works that center on the inherent value of women. Such works present self-aware female characters in terms of "knowledge prestige, ideological status, and aesthetic value declared or conferred by the work, author, narrator, character, or textual behavior". If one aims to produce truly influential feminist cinematic works with a broad audience appeal, filmmakers must dare to genuinely portray the challenges women face in society, especially within the cultural context where women are collectively silenced, whether actively or passively. They should also emphasize and guide the self-awareness of female autonomy. The realization of this vision requires every woman to fervently take her rightful place in society. This not only concerns every "she" but also every "I".

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