

The Female Images in “The Crossing” and “Lady Bird”

Similarities and Differences of Feminist Construction in Chinese and Western Growth Films

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ABSTRACT

With the continuous development of feminism, the female images in films have changed accordingly in recent years. In order to explore the development status of female consciousness in China and the West, this research selects the Chinese film "The Crossing" and the American film "Lady Bird" as the objects, conducting in-depth analysis by the method of close reading and comparative study. In the multi-line narration of the film, we can see different female images in family and love. In general, the female consciousness in both Chinese and Western films has developed considerably. Among them, the construction of female image has its overall similarity, but also there are differences in style and performance.

Keywords: Growth film, feminism, text analysis, comparative study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the twentieth century, the feminist movement in the western countries has been developing rapidly and the women's liberation movement in China has also achieved a certain degree of development and progress. However, influenced by historical factors, human culture has continued and strengthened the male dominated gender relations for a long time. The measurement of the value and significance of women is based on the standards and norms of men's own interests. Men always occupy the central position of power discourse while women are deeply influenced by gender concept and become a hidden vulnerable marginal group in society. It can be seen that the cultural psychology and code of conduct formed by gender discrimination are deeply rooted. Nevertheless, some people are still making continuous efforts to break through the traditional patriarchal discourse system and reconstruct the value system of women so that they have made achievements in awakening women's subjectivity and self-consciousness. Therefore, in the films of the 21st century, we can see that there is concern, reflection, adjustment and reversal for gender issues in many works. During this period, the female images in both Chinese and Western films, have showed the awakening of

female consciousness and the thinking and breakthrough of the current social predicament after the awakening. It is undeniable that most of the women in these films are still not completely divorced from the traditional paradigm, and even just repeat the traditional female images from the male perspective, but we can not ignore the development and progress of female consciousness in these films.

Many scholars have already paid attention to the female image and female consciousness in the film, and have studied the female in the film and the female film from the perspective of feminism. There is a holistic study of the historical development of female films. In *Invisible women: women and women's films in Contemporary Chinese films*(1994), Dai Jinhua not only shows the development process of Chinese women's films, but also analyzes and evaluates the problems presented by women's films in different periods [1]. In *Women and Film*(1996), Jill Nelmes examines the position and role of foreign, predominantly British, women in filmmaking and film theory since the late 1960s, with a particular focus on the relationship between feminist practitioners and feminist film theorists [2].

In addition, there are film studies that take gender

topics as a particular perspective. For example, Astrid Haryantia and Fiona Suwanaa(2014) examines feminism in Jakarta society as shown in the film "Arisan 2!" [3]. Furthermore, *Queer Theory and Film*(Li Ershi, 2009) mentions the use of social mechanisms in gender consciousness and important concepts related to gender, which makes a specific analysis of how it constructs and affects the generation of film meaning and ideological systems [4].

What's more, some researchers also conduct comparative studies on Chinese and Western films. Zhou Wenting's research(2010), mainly starts from feminist theory and analyzes the similarities and differences between the two films in terms of female consciousness, female image and reference of feminist theory by using methods like close reading [5]. Xia Zengliang(2019) also compares the similarities and differences of female image construction in "Jasmine Women" and "The Hours" from the aspects of female theme and female characterization [6].

Generally speaking, there are relatively mature and detailed researches on the topic of feminism in movies. Among these studies, most of them focus on the study of a certain film or type of film in a certain country or region. Although some of studies comparing female images in Chinese and Western films, the number is still small. In these comparative studies, researchers mostly take classic movies as research objects. Even though these objects are representative, most of them are comparatively old and it is difficult to observe the development of feminism at present. Therefore, from the perspective of feminism, this paper selects two growth films with girls as the protagonists - the Chinese film "The Crossing" and the American film "Lady Bird" as the research objects by means of close reading. By comparing the female images and female consciousness in these two films, we can better understand the development of gender concepts in Chinese and Western societies, from which we can perceive the differences in cultural discourse and the similar growth process of girls. Moreover, the study of female images in Chinese and Western films is also conducive to promoting the development of gender studies, triggering social attention to gender issues, thus promoting the development of female awareness and improving women's social status.

2. FEMALE IMAGES SHAPING IN MULTI-LINE NARRATIVE

"The Crossing", directed by Chinese female director Bai Xue, focuses on the story of a special growth process of the girl Liu Zipei(Peipei). The protagonist, Liu Zipei, lives in a "single parent" family with a Hong Kong father and a mainland mother. She lives in Shenzhen, but studies in Hong Kong. In order to travel to Japan with her best friend and seek self-worth, Peipei

accidentally came into contact with the dark industry chain and became a "smuggler" who traveled between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, thus developing her growth story. "Lady Bird" is directed by American female director Greta Gerwig. Born in Sacramento, California, Christine was rebellious and maverick. She had red hair and named herself "Lady Bird". The movie vividly depicts the contradiction, confusion and transformation of this girl who is about to enter college from high school when she faces of family, friendship and love.

As two growth films, it is naturally inseparable from the writing on conventional themes such as family, friendship and love. However, unlike the chick flicks, these two films are not so keen on showing the heroines realizing their dreams after struggling, but more reflective of real life. It is this authenticity that resonates with the audience. The film breaks the spatial distance with a multi-line narrative structure, and uses the lens to connect different spaces so as to show the real female images in different spaces and relationships.

2.1. Women in the family

In the patriarchal discourse system, the female image in the "family" is often associated with the characteristics of "dedication" and "motherhood". The subversion and rewriting of such a patriarchal family is undoubtedly an aspect of the development of female consciousness in the writing of female growth. Therefore, the derogatory writing of the image of father or mother in the female growth story is also a symbolic resistance to the male discourse center. In the film "The Crossing", Peipei, as a daughter, has experienced a process from "attachment" to "giving up" in her affection for her father [7]. Peipei lives with her mother in Shenzhen, while her father works in Hong Kong and sets up his new family. In the beginning, Peipei would go to the construction site at midnight to find her father. Her father would silently give her some pocket money but could not give her more attention and company. In the last scene of her father in the film, Peipei sits alone in a restaurant and sees her father smoking outside through the window. This window shows the gap between Peipei and her father, and this scene also becomes a turning point in the growth of the heroine. When Peipei chooses to realize her dream through smuggling, it means that she is disappointed and deviated from the paternal power. She no longer relies on this authority but chooses to depend on herself. The images of mothers in both films are different from traditional mother images. Peipei's mother was idle and greedy for pleasure, playing mahjong and smoking all day long, so she lost her great and holy image as a mother [7]. In "Lady Bird", Christine's family is also centered on her mother, while her father suffers from depression and unemployment. As a nurse, her mother has become the helper and healer of father in a certain

sense. However, unlike the traditional female the Virgin Mary, the redemptive power of women here is not endowed by men, nor does it exist to further demonstrate the strength of men, but to show the tolerance and healing power possessed by mothers themselves. The role of the father in the family is reduced, the value of the mother is highlighted, and the relationship between the protagonist and the mother is more focused.

In fact, the growth of a girl is often a process of constant conflict with her mother. In the process of conflict with her mother, a daughter forms a sense of independence and realizes self-identity after resolving the conflict [8]. Therefore, the mother-daughter relationship in the two films has become one of the narrative clues of the films, from the initial tense quarrel to the final relief and reconciliation, which is their reconciliation to each other, but also their own reconciliation. The resolution of the conflict between Peipei and her mother mainly lies in the change of her own concept, because finally she realizes that the most significant thing is what her daughter wants rather than what other people's daughter has. *Lady Bird's* conflict with her mother, had more to do with their similarities [8]. Actually, *Lady Bird* and her mother have many hobbies in common, like visiting houses they cannot afford. Yet they argue countless times a day. Although they love each other deeply, they don't know how to express their love, so they end up hurting each other. *Lady Bird* grows up with a budding sense of self that clashes with her mother's original ideas. With the gradual improvement of *Lady Bird's* self-identity, she needs the control over her life. Although this mastery was initially not accepted by her mother, *Lady Bird* achieved her own identity that no longer had to rely on her mother to provide.

In these feminist films, the daughter's stepping out of the world constructed by her mother also symbolizes the mother's acceptance of her daughter's independence consciousness. A daughter's growth should be due to her mother's understanding. Thus, Peipei's ultimate growth stems from the mother's real concern for her daughter, while *Lady Bird's* growth benefits from her mother's understanding and letting go. In a way, when mothers stop limiting their daughters' self-awareness, they all grow. Whether it is "*The Crossing*" or "*Lady Bird*", they both break the authoritative status of patriarchal consciousness in the family through the mother-daughter relationship. Both daughters and mothers continue to improve themselves in the conflict, and the final restoration of the mother-daughter relationship also shows that the female image is liberated from the male perspective.

2.2. *Girls in love*

Influenced by the cultural environment of China and

the West, the two films adopt different styles of camera language when they show the love and lust of young girls in their growth, thus we can also see different kinds of emotions. In "*The Crossing*", Peipei's love is implicit and restrained. Hao was originally the boyfriend of Peipei's best friend Jo, but later accidentally took Peipei into a smuggling group and then the relationship between the two became subtle. In the scene of overlooking the night view of Hong Kong on the mountain, it is a close-up of Hao at first. Peipei is not in the picture, only her voice responded to Hao. The lens here seems to be Peipei's eyes, just like Peipei's staring at Hao. Through the gaze of this lens and Peipei's joking words off the screen, the relationship between the two people is suddenly brought closer, and the girl's secret admiration is also quietly revealed. Then the lens is a close-up of Peipei, as if it were Peipei in Hao's eyes. The last shot is back to the two people. The unfinished kiss between Hao and Peipei is like an unspeakable relationship between the two. One of the more erotic scenes between the two is in a warehouse where they help each other tie up mobile phones. From the visual point of view, it is a dark warehouse full of sundries, which a dark red light filling with and a beam of yellow light flashes from time to time outside the window. There is no explicit picture, but it is full of erotic atmosphere. As for hearing, it is the sound of gasping, breathing, and a few words of gossip mixed with the sound of the tape being torn. In general, there is no erotic action, not even a kiss. Just creating an atmosphere through sight and hearing has already made the audience feel the flow of lust between two people in this space. Such lens language is implicit and introverted on the surface but intense on the inside, so we tend to understand its internal expression through connection and imagination.

In "*Lady Bird*", love is straightforward and passionate, but the girl's performance is not rigid. Christine would quietly write the name of her beloved boy on the wall of the room, be curious about sex, explore the feeling of sex through the bathtub and water flow, and discuss the topic of sex with her friend. In the footage of the movie, we can see Christine and Denny kissing passionately. Christine would invite Denny to touch her body under the stars at night, get angry at Denny for cheating, but comfort him when she learns that Denny is distressed that he is gay. The film will also directly show the scene of Christine and Kyle having sex, but Christine will resolutely leave after learning of Kyle's deception. When Kyle and his friends aren't going to prom with her, she is determined to go with her best friend and be each other's date. On the one hand, Christine becomes Denny's comforter. On the other hand, she can voluntarily choose to give up Kyle as a dance partner and turn to the dance with her best friend Julie. This shows Christine's independent female consciousness and unique female power. She does not

need to be attached to any male, and can even help men with her own strength. In terms of the erotic desire shown in the shots, it is obviously bold and unrestrained. Christine, who dares to love and hate, expresses her feelings through direct actions and straightforward words. Unlike the montage of euphemistic hints in "The Crossing", "Lady Bird" obviously expresses the purest impulse directly in the shots. Perhaps this kind of performance is related to the character of the protagonist, but the difference in the way of emotional expression under the film lens is indeed consistent with the characteristics under the background of Chinese and Western cultures. In spite of the differences in the way of expression between China and the West, they have similar choices in love. In the end, they do not need to rely on men to realize their wishes, but choose to fulfill their ideals by themselves, so the self-consciousness of women is reflected here.

3. CONCLUSION

Consequently, there are some differences and similarities between the two. Christine's youth is more glaring while Peipei's youth is more implicit. This difference is in line with the cultural temperament of China and the West. In the expression of the film lens, the two films also show differences. "The Crossing" is more inclined to use the montage narration method, expressing the characters' thoughts and emotions through the metaphor of the picture and the suggestion to the audience's psychology. On the contrary, "Lady Bird" is recorded and expressed in more intuitive pictures. The heroine directly expresses her thoughts and emotions in her actions and behaviors. They are similar in that they share similar adolescent dilemmas, impulses and emotions. Their growth is accompanied by the formation of female self-consciousness and self-identity.

From the female images with independent consciousness shaped by these two films and their performance of constantly seeking self-identity in the process of growth, we can see the continuous growth and change of female images in Chinese and Western films, as well as the development of female consciousness. They both provide new female images, which is close to reality rather than existing in the patriarchal discourse system, showing new possibilities for female images. They make more people pay attention to the diverse and vivid female images and also inject new vitality into the development of feminist creation. Although there is still no clear solution to the plight of women, people are still trying to break through the traditional paradigm and find a new path for the development of feminism. It is believed that there are infinite possibilities for the future of women's films and feminism.

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