

I'm not Madame Bovary

The Dual Call of Law and Humanity

Fei Dang

Shaanxi Institute of International Trade & Commerce
Xi'an, China

Abstract—The film, *I'm not Madame Bovary*, is directed by Feng Xiaogang, a famous director. Fan Bingbing acts the leading role. This film tells the story of Li Xuelian, an ordinary peasant woman faking divorce in order to have an additional baby and get the house distributed by her husband's work unit. However, a false thing becomes true. Her husband takes advantage of the fake divorce and abandons her. What's more, she is humiliated and called Madame Bovary by her husband in public. New and old hatred arouses Li Xuelian's new fury and she starts her long "suing" career. Superficially speaking, *I'm not Madame Bovary* tells the story of a woman's "difficult rights protection" road. In fact, the film exposes and criticizes citizen's poor legal consciousness, lack of legal knowledge, social apathy, law-enforcement personnel's stiff manner and other in-depth social phenomena.

Keywords—law; humanity; *I'm not Madame Bovary*

I. INTRODUCTION

The film, *I'm not Madame Bovary*, is adapted from the namesake novel of Liu Zhenyun. It is released on Toronto International Film Festival on September 8, 2016, directed by Feng Xiaogang, a famous director, starring Fan Bingbing, a famous female star, and co-starring Guo Tao, Dapeng, Zhang Jiayi, Yu Hewei, Zhang Yi and Zhao Lixin. It achieves the accumulative box office of 483714 thousand after its release. Upon release, it immediately arouses heated debates among audience because of its unique story and composition.

I'm not Madame Bovary tells the story of Li Xuelian(played by Fan Bingbing), an ordinary peasant woman faking divorce in order to have an additional baby and get the house distributed by her husband's work unit. However, a false thing becomes true. Qin Yuhe(played by Li Zonghan), her husband, takes advantage of the fake divorce and abandons her. What's more, he humiliates her and calls her Madame Bovary in public. With grievance and hatred, after being abandoned by her husband, relied on the reputation of a very distant relative, Li Xuelian carries sesame oil and preserved meat by hands and heads to the home of Wang Gongdao(played by Dapeng), a judge, for the sake of redressing the scales. When Wang Gongdao pronounces the divorce valid again, Li Xuelian thinks that Wang Gongdao perverts justice for a bribe. Then, she stands in the way of Xun Zhengyi, the chief justice, at a rainy night. This time, she not only accuses her husband, but also accuses Wang Gongdao of perverting justice for a bribe. She believes that she will win justice with the help of the chief justice. However, people around the chief justice tell her that

her complaint can't be heard by the chief justice and she finds the wrong place. Not reconciled and in a rage, she holds the word of injustice in her hands and blocks the county head's car. However, Shi Weimin, the county lead, dodges the column and directly sneaks away. Then, she sits at the gate of provincial government and ends up in unprovoked several days of imprisonment. In the end, in a fit of anger, helpless Li Xuelian goes to Beijing to block the leading cadre's car and tell her grievance. The leading cadre gives an order and a large batch of officers are punished, excluding Qin Yuhe. Li Xuelian thinks that she "picks up the sesame and loses the watermelon", referring to the fact that Qin Yuhe is not punished. Then, she begins her petitioning which is as long as ten years.

II. POOR LEGAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND LACK OF LEGAL KNOWLEDGE MAKE LI XUELIAN'S ROAD OF COMPLAINT FULL OF TWISTS AND TURNS

In the film, Li Xuelian represents the kind of people whose legal consciousness is just aroused. They just touch the law with their finger tip and have no idea about what the law really is. Li Xuelian knows the law can protect her, but not knowing that the law can also protect others. She regards Qin Yuhe's calling her Madame Bovary as an insult, not knowing that her calling Qin Yuhe domestic animal is also an insult. She knows that she should turn to legal protection after being hurt, but not knowing who to turn to and how to protect her legitimate interest. Therefore, she adopts the set pattern of Chinese people in hundreds of years: Carrying sesame oil and preserved meat and using the reputation of a very distant relative. She knows that it is called bending the law for personal gain for Wang Gongdao to accept her sesame oil and preserved meat, not knowing that it is called bribery to bring gifts to Wang Gongdao and rely on relatives to obtain personal benefit. Let's return to the beginning of the story. Li Xuelian knows that it is wrong for her husband to cheat and abandon her, not realizing that her proposal of fake divorce is the direct reason of this tragedy. After failed complaint, Li Xuelian thinks out a twisted idea: She begs her younger brother and the butcher adoring her to help her kill her husband successively. She thinks that her brother just helps her press down her husband and her brother should bear no legal responsibility. She plans to use her body to exchange for the butcher's help in the murder. From the above, we know that, as the representative of grassroots citizens, Li Xuelian's legal consciousness is awakening, but not strong. This kind of people's legal knowledge is zero. When encountering a

problem, they don't know where to go and how to protect their legitimate interest. Their mindset about the law is just like Li Xuelian's when she just arrives in Beijing: She doesn't know where to file a suit, who she should turn to and who will accept her complaint. They have a kind of clueless legal consciousness. They know that the law can protect their interest. However, because of lack of legal knowledge, their behavior seems ridiculous and funny. For example, Li Xuelian is challenging the law personally when asking her younger brother and the butcher to help her kill her husband.

III. HUMAN COLDNESS AND CHEAT MAKES LI XUELIAN INCIDENT "CHANGE FROM A SESAME TO A WATERMELON"

According to the professional explanation of Li Xiaomei, the presiding judge of the trial court under Xuzhou economic and technological development zone's people's court in *Is There Legal Mechanical Damage in Madame Bovary Event? Professional Interpretation: Is Li Xuelian Wrong or Not*, firstly, since Li Xuelian brings out her divorce certificate, it means that she is already divorced. She can only prosecute in terms of property controversy after divorce instead of lodging a complaint on divorce. Secondly, if Li Xuelian asks the court to confirm the divorce as fake, the lawsuit can't be established. According to the film, Li Xuelian asks the court to identify her divorce as fake, which belongs to declaratory judgment. But her complaint has no legal basis and is beyond the acceptance range of court. Therefore, it is correct for the court to refuse the case or accept the case and argue about it instead of making judgment. Thirdly, if Li Xuelian thinks the divorce is fake, she should sue the civil affairs bureau and demand revocation of the issued divorce certificate. Qin Yuhe should intervene as the third party. In fact, controversy still exists in whether divorce certificate is revocable or not as an administrative act. Therefore, at the beginning of the film, Li Xuelian's divorce has no possibility of existence. If the court has to be blamed, it is an administrative case instead of a civil case of divorce. The defendant is the civil affairs bureau rather than Qin Yuhe, her ex-husband.

Then why is the case without the possibility to exist delivered to Beijing with a long process of 10 years? Just as the leading cadre in the film says: "It is governments at all levels and governmental officers at all levels that fail to care about the people. They leave the case alone, shuffle and deliberately put obstacles in Li Xuelian's way. Just like that, a sesame is turned into a watermelon and an ant is turned into an elephant. Who drives her to revolt? The answer is the people obtaining official's salary and riding on top of people as a tyrant instead of serving people."

Cases like Li Xuelian's are quite common in real life and there are also many similar criminal incidents. Many vicious incidents are caused by some trifles. If these trifles can't be resolved by law, murder and burn will be adopted, just like the person beside the mayor says. These incidents don't break the law, but they hurt some individuals. If not being dealt with timely, accumulated rancour will lead to catastrophic consequences. In the film, Wang Gongdao, the judge, holds a court and tries the case, the chief justice criticizes Li Xuelian for coming to the wrong place, the county head directly sneaks away and the mayor is too busy to care about it. Shuffling of

one level after another makes Li Xuelian, a weak individual, even more vulnerable. She has no route of retreat but to appeal to a higher court successively. Before filing a suit, she thinks that the law and government can bring justice to her. After filing the suit, she finds herself vulnerable and her rage is accumulated more and more.

In the film, officials at all levels only care about their work and their official hat. None of them wants to listen to Li Xuelian's sad story and they hold a hostile attitude. If the basic-level government can listen to her carefully, learn about her situation and deal with her case reasonably instead of the cold "following the rules", Li Xuelian won't be so stubborn at the end. These officials just want to stabilize their position and earn money, and they hold a cold attitude towards other people's suffering, which arouses great hatred in Li Xuelian.

IV. ZHAO DATOU: HUMANITY MELTS HATRED AND BETRAYAL DEEPENS HATRED

After experiencing being abandoned by her husband, failed complaint, imprisonment, and the desire to perish together with those officials in helplessness and disappointment, Li Xuelian encounters Zhao Datou, her middle school schoolmate. In the film, Zhao Datou is a chef acting as a link between the official and the civilian. It is with the help of him that Li Xuelian successfully blocks the leading cadre's car. Zhao Datou is in deep love with Li Xuelian. Like spring time after cold winter, his love melts Li Xuelian's rage, grievance and hatred. Under the influence of Zhao Datou, Li Xuelian gradually gives up her idea of going to law. During their climbing, Li Xuelian is no longer the embodiment of stubborn hatred. She looks like a brand-new life full of vigor and hope. It seems that Li Xuelian is just awakened from her deep sleep with every cell in full swing.

In the film, the first scene of 10 years later is that Wang Gongdao, the chief justice 10 years ago, comes to Li Xuelian's home. Upon entering her home, Wang Gongdao calls her cousin. After entering the house, he skillfully hangs the meat on the stake and scoops up a bowl of beef bone soup himself. Continuing to call her cousin, he says again the name of Li Xuelian's distant relative. Through these behaviors, we can know that Wang Gongdao go to Li Xuelian's home constantly in recent ten years. Although Li Xuelian gives him hell, he still shamelessly calls cousins with Li Xuelian, which may have a correlation with the fact that Li Xuelian gives up complaint.

However, distrust and betrayal between people destroys everything at the end. When county head Zheng comes to Li Xuelian's home and asks her to write a guarantee, distrust lights up Li Xuelian's rage again. Zhao Datou's betrayal turns her back to hatred. Her hatred is even deeper and she returns to the previous stiff and dull mental state.

V. HUMANITY AND LAW: COMPOSITION OF SQUARE AND ROUND PROVIDES THE ANSWER

Upon release of *I'm not Madame Bovary*, composition of square and round arouses heated discussions. In the film, round picture is adopted for Li Xuelian's country, province and city, and square picture is adopted for scenes in Beijing.

The scene goes back to normal size at the end when Li Xuelian gives up going to law.

Chinese people have a particular feeling towards square and round and give them unique meanings. Taoists think that round refers to the heaven, which is turbulent and unstable. The round heaven refers to harmony in mind to achieve understanding. Square refers to the earth and convergence. Square earth means that precise rules should be adopted in arrangement of duty. "Round sky and square earth" is an embodiment of yin-yang theory in Chinese traditional culture and a norm of behavior. In art theory, square has the features of straight lines and it reflects character through fold line with male and strong character. Round has the feature of curves. The circle consists of a smooth curve, reflecting female and mellow character.

According to the director's explanation in an interview, Beijing, the capital of China, represents the right and rule. Therefore, Beijing is endowed with traits of square in the film. Round picture is used in local county, province and city of Li Xuelian to demonstrate the female gracefulness through curves, which is not owned by Li Xuelian, the female leading role. In addition, round is given to civil servants of basic-level government, hoping that they can have more human care for people at the same time of abiding by legal deadline.

Through square and round, the director tells us the intrinsic meaning behind the film again: Our society needs law to regulate and a harmonious attitude to provide more human care within the range of law. Only by doing so, can our life and society stable and full of happiness.

VI. CONCLUSION

During the 10-year complaint, Li Xuelian constantly circles round and fights a battle of wits and courage with officials at all levels. Li Xuelian uses a "complaint" without legal basis to carry her grievance, feeling that justice can only be brought to her through winning the "lawsuit". Using Mayor Ma's words to say, "Originally, Li Xuelian is not right in this lawsuit. Her lawsuit is like a sesame trifle to officials at all levels, not reaching the serious degree of murder and burn. According to law, officials at all levels do nothing wrong and they all want to deal with this thing well. However, through ferment of governments level by level, the trifle without righteousness evolves into a 10-year complaint story. Why is so? Because they neglect human care. Li Xuelian incident is more about hatred deriving from love and emotional hurt. If officials at the basic level can tell her some legal knowledge and listen to her at the beginning of her complaint, maybe the following story won't be the same.

In conclusion, nothing is more suitable than saying that *I'm not Madame Bovary* is a modern satire film. Through the "complaint" process of a stubborn countryside woman, the director reveals social blemishes, like contemporary social civilian's lack of legal knowledge, stiff and rigid attitude of officials in government, stiffness in law and missing of human care. In his *Humanity Analysis on Law Origin*, Dr. Jiang Dengfeng says, "Human conflict is the driven force of generation of law and the important basis for law to exist. No matter it is governance of modern countries or building of

spirit of rule of law, humanity is always the important core interpreted by law in a positive or negative way. Only by knowing humanity and sense, can the law fully play its important role in governing people and the country".^① Therefore, the film is not a simple "Exposure of the official world", but a dual call of law and humanity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mu Qichun. Is There Legal Mechanical Damage in *I'm not Madame Bovary*? [N/OL]. Phoenix Entertainment Network, 2016-12-27. http://news.china.com/socialgd/10000169/20161127/30053836_1.html
- [2] Xu Yong, Xu Gang. Sesame, Watermelon and History — Comment on Liu Zhenyun's *I'm not Madame Bovary*[J]. *Literary Criticism*, 2012(11)
- [3] Shen Xinran. Incredible Satire Humor——Analysis on Liu Zhenyun's *I'm not Madame Bovary*[J]. *Popular Literature*

^① Jiang Dengfeng. *Humanity Analysis on Law Origin from the Perspective of Humanity Conflict*[J]. *Political and Legal Forum*, 2012(3)