

Social Power and Women's Resistance - "Five girls and one rope" from the Feminist Perspective of Donna Haraway

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, feminist ethics has gradually emerged, emphasizing the unique moral experiences of women and attempting to break the male-dominated status quo. Donna Haraway, as a representative figure of feminist epistemology, proposed theories such as the concept of "cyborg" and "situated knowledge," providing new perspectives for understanding the relationship between social power and women's resistance. This article aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the film "Five girls and one rope" using Donna Haraway's feminist theory, exploring women's acts of resistance and their deeper roots within the social power structure. Through textual analysis and case studies, this article reveals the positioning of female characters in "Five girls and one rope" within the social power structure, the challenges they face, and their strategies of resistance, further discussing how these acts of resistance reflect the inequalities of gender power within a broader socio-cultural context. This article not only enriches feminist film theory but also offers valuable insights for understanding gender equality and social change.

KEYWORDS

Social power; women's resistance; Donna Haraway; feminist theory; "Five girls and one rope"

1 Introduction

Since the emergence of feminist ethics in the 1960s in Anglo-American society, it has been dedicated to revealing and challenging the power structures of male centrism, emphasizing the unique moral experiences and subjectivity of women. In this academic context, Donna Haraway, with her distinctive feminist epistemology, particularly through the introduction of the concept of "cyborg," has made new theoretical attempts based on contemporary critical thought on technology, opening up a new perspective for analyzing the relationship between social power and women's resistance^[1]. Compared to traditional feminist theories that often focus solely on opposing male hegemony, Haraway creatively integrates cybernetics and information theory to conceive the "cyborg"—a fictional cultural practice that merges machines and living organisms, providing profound insights into the fluidity of subjectivity.

In the realm of cinema, the image of the "cyborg" is frequently encountered. Since the 1980s, cyborgs have been regulars in European and American science fiction films: the replicant in "Blade Runner" (1982), who is obsessed with human identity yet ultimately discovers that he is an artificial being; the cyborg police officer in the "RoboCop" (1987) series, who upholds "justice" in a dystopia of monopolistic capitalism; and the cyborg assassin portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the "Terminator" (1984) series, who sheds his flesh from the flames and threatens humanity with "I'll be back." The cyborg has become a classic symbol of American pop culture in the 1980s and 1990s.^[2] In the field of film analysis, Haraway's theory similarly demonstrates its unique charm and profound insights. Through a detailed examination of female characters in films, scholars have discovered that the concept of the "cyborg" can cleverly reveal the multiplicity and fluidity of female subjectivity, rather than the traditional notions of fixity and rigidity. For instance, in the film "The Matrix," the character Trinity is interpreted as a metaphor for the cyborg, embodying both human and machine, showcasing the complexity and variability of subject identity. This analytical approach not only enriches the theoretical dimension of film studies but also provides new perspectives for a deeper understanding of the inner world and resistance strategies of female characters in films.

The text focuses on the film "Five girls and one rope," aiming to use Haraway's "Cyborg" concept, situational knowledge and other theories to deeply analyze the social power structure behind the oppression of women in the film. Through the analysis of the characters in the film, this paper tries to reveal how women in the rural areas of southern China showed their unique spirit of resistance under the double oppression of family and society on the eve of liberation. In the process, Haraway's theory will provide us with a unique and profound perspective, allowing us to better understand the suffering of the female characters in the film and their struggle in the specific social and cultural context.

2 Analysis of Women's Resistance Behaviors in "Five girls and one rope"

2.1 The plot synopsis and background of "Five girls and one rope"

"Five girls and one rope" is a film that reflects the marriage and family life of rural women in southern China on the eve

of liberation. The film tells the stories of five female characters and their families, showing the dilemmas and challenges they face in their families and societies. These female roles are profoundly influenced by social power structures in terms of family status, social roles, and personal life choices.

2.2 The oppression and resistance of women in "Five girls and one rope"

In "Five girls and one rope", the influence of the family power structure on women is particularly significant. Male heads of household dominate the family and have strict control and expectations over women. Women are often expected to play submissive, virtuous roles and take on heavy housework and childcare responsibilities in marriage and family. This family power structure restricts women's freedom and choice, making it difficult for them to pursue their own personal development and happiness. In the play, Aiyue's grandmother hoped that she could eat at her 80th birthday banquet, and her well-known filial son directly rejected her request, and her "filial son" said to relatives and friends who came to celebrate her birthday in front of the public that her mother was really old and confused, how could a woman be on the table? Of course, all the relatives and friends here are men, and all the people who come to celebrate the birthday agree with the saying of "filial son". It turns out that there is a rule in the village, and people are only worthy of eating on the stove after marriage. After receiving the denial, the grandmother turned away blankly, and the grandmother lay on the bed late at night and muttered, "I regret it....." Aiyue's tears flowed, she knew what her grandmother regretted. How ironic is the name of filial piety, there are many female tragedies in the play.

Ai Yue, with its alluring appearance, took the lead in the grand event of "playing Guanyin Bodhisattva", and happily held the prize money won in front of his father, but only got a ruthless sentence "After all, it is a money-losing goods". Her smile froze in that moment, and the flame of hope ignited in her heart was ruthlessly extinguished by the cold wind of reality.

Ming Tao's fate is even more bumpy, her stepmother privately marries her to a man who is riddled with tuberculosis, she is like a pawn played by fate at will, powerless to resist. The only male in the family, her younger brother, instead of giving her the slightest sympathy and protection, relied on his gender advantage to bully and molest her unscrupulously. Her tears could only flow silently in the endless darkness.

Jin Mei is still young, but she has infinite love and yearning for opera in her heart. However, this dream of innocence was shattered by the indifference and blame of his parents. "Marry her, and if you marry, you will be sensible." These cold words, like a sharp blade, cut off all her visions of a better life.

He Xiang, seeing her sister-in-law being whipped and paraded through the streets because of her pursuit of free love, was criticized as a slut, and her heart swelled with endless anger and sympathy. She wanted to stand up and protect the helpless woman, but she was ridiculed and ridiculed by the indifferent crowd around her. "It's only natural for a man to hit a woman." These ridiculous words were like heavy shackles, restraining her will to resist.

Gui Juan has experienced the most unbearable grief in her life. She witnessed her sister being helplessly placed on the back of a cow during a difficult birth, and blood spilled all over the earth, a cry of death as she died. However, the next morning, her mother forced her to continue her brother-in-law's chord, as if her fate was only a tool for the continuation of the family, with no dignity or freedom at all.

These stories, like poignant paintings, show the social power oppression and injustice suffered by women in the film "Five girls and one rope". They are like flowers tricked by fate, swaying in the wind and rain, but they can never escape the fate of being devastated. This pathos not only makes people sigh, but also makes people think deeply: in that society, what is the status and dignity of women?

On what should have been a festive day, Shu Yun, a flower-like bride, sat in a gorgeously decorated sedan chair, the outside world was noisy and lively, but in the sedan chair, she was in tears, holding a rope in her hand, and made a decisive choice - to hang herself. This sudden turn of events instantly transforms what should have been a wedding full of joy into a heart-wrenching tragedy.

The five girls in the distance—Ai Yue, Ming Tao, He Xiang, Jin Mei, and Gui Juan—witnessed all this, but their faces showed no sadness. Instead, there was a glint of envy in their eyes as Shu Yun had achieved the freedom they had longed for in this way. In their innocent hearts, "visiting the garden" has become a symbol of freedom, and Shu Yun hangs herself with the same rope in the old oil mill by "hanging her neck", which is not only a deep sympathy for the fate of women, but also a strong celebration of women's spirit of resistance under the oppression of social power. At the cost of their lives, five girls proclaimed to the world their desire for freedom and their commitment to dignity. The movie "Five girls and one rope" opens with this shocking opening, profoundly revealing the tragic fate and unyielding struggle of women under the oppression of social power.

Did they actually go to the "garden"? We have no way of knowing. But what is certain is that they are finally free from oppression and enjoy the freedom to dominate their lives. The whole movie is intertwined with sorrow and music, beauty and ugliness, and the heavy story theme makes people stunned, trembling, sighing, and thinking deeply.^[3]

In fact, the root of this tragedy lies in the severe oppression of social power. Shu Yun visited the "fairy girl" on the eve of the wedding, and learned from the fairy girl that going to heaven and visiting the garden is the most beautiful destination that a woman can pursue. Behind this, what is hidden is women's deep despair about gender inequality in real society, unfree marriage and love, and trampled on dignity. The "garden" depicted by the "fairy girl" has undoubtedly become the last safe haven in their hearts, an ideal world where equality between men and women, freedom of marriage and love, and women's dignity can be demonstrated.

3 Interpretation of "Five girls and one rope" from the perspective of Donna Haraway's theory

When conducting an in-depth analysis of the film "Five girls and one rope", Donna Haraway's feminist theory offers us a unique perspective, particularly with her concepts of "cyborg" and "situated knowledge," which provide powerful tools for understanding the resistance behaviors of female characters in the film and their deeper meanings.

3.1 The heterozygosity of the cyborg and the rebellion of the women in "Five girls and one rope"

Haraway defines "cyborg" as "a control of organisms, a hybrid of machine and biological entity, a creation of social reality, and also a fictional creation."^[4] Donna Haraway attempts to eliminate the binary oppositions between human and machine, self and other, subject and object, male and female, body and mind, through the concept of the cyborg. In Haraway's view, dualism is not merely a matter of delineation, but rather implies deeper levels of oppression and domination.^[5] In "Five girls and one rope", the binary opposition between male and female is undoubtedly prominent, and the hybridity represented by the "cyborg" is vividly reflected in the rebellious actions of female characters. Taking Ai Yue as an example, she attempts to challenge her established roles in family and society by participating in the grand event of "dressing as Guanyin Bodhisattva." In traditional societal views, women are expected to be gentle and virtuous, while Guanyin Bodhisattva symbolizes compassion and is a sacred, illusory figure. By choosing to portray Guanyin, Ai Yue embarks on a path of evolving into a "cyborg." She hopes to demonstrate her value through this role, shedding the label of being a burden. I believe Ai Yue aspires to receive not only the admiration typically reserved for women but also the respect of men, and the image of Guanyin fulfills this desire well. From a materialistic perspective, Guanyin Bodhisattva, within Haraway's theoretical framework, is an illusory creation. In Buddhism, we also understand that Guanyin's gender lies between male and female, making her a typical "cyborg." This image allows Ai Yue to prove that she can earn a living like men while embodying the grace and compassion of femininity. Haraway once stated, "The cyborg is a hybrid of organism, a machine and a living being." Ai Yue's actions are a concrete manifestation of this hybridity; through her act of "dressing as Guanyin Bodhisattva," she retains certain qualities of traditional femininity while integrating the spirit of modern female rebellion.

3.2 The diversity of contextual knowledge and women's resistance strategies.

Haraway also proposed a new feminist epistemology and methodology in his essay "Contextualized Knowledge: Feminist Scientific Problems and the Superiority of Partial Perspectives" (1988). Insisting that there is no such thing as an impartial, value-neutral perspective that goes beyond a particular historical context, Haraway asks both researchers and participants to be aware of the "contextualized knowledge" and one-sided perspectives on both sides. The deeper meaning of "contextualized knowledge" is that there is no such thing as a truth waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, all knowledge is contextual knowledge based on specific situations and has partial objectivity, with the background in which it was produced, as well as the stigma of specificity, limited location, and one-sidedness.^[6] In "Five girls and one rope", the differing resistance strategies of various female characters stem from the contextual factors of their respective family backgrounds, social relationships, and personal experiences. Taking Jin Mei and Gui Juan as examples, Jin Mei harbors an infinite love and yearning for traditional opera; however, this pure dream is shattered by her parents' indifference and reproach. The situation she faces is one of familial neglect and suppression of women's personal dreams. Her parents' greatest reproach is not akin to the accusations directed at Ai Yue by her father regarding financial burdens, but rather a criticism that Jin Mei is ungrateful, only interested in watching performances, believing that once she is married and has children, she will become sensible. Jin Mei's form of resistance is to go to the "garden" to watch and learn opera. In contrast, Gui Juan's sister faces the agony of childbirth, as her mother-in-law and husband choose to pursue the "Nezha fetus," which is nearly killing her sister. To obtain the "Nezha fetus," they unanimously agree to follow the midwife's suggestion to place Gui Juan's sister on a cow's back to force the child out, a method that leads to her already frail sister bleeding to death. Despite Gui Juan's pleas and attempts to persuade her sister to abandon the child, her sister insists on giving birth to a boy, seeking to demonstrate her value as a woman in the family, even at the cost of her own life. The contrasting resistance strategies vividly illustrate the theory of "contextualized knowledge" in "Five girls and one rope":

one is the family of an unmarried girl, criticizing her for being unrealistic in her dreams; the other is the family of a married woman, desiring the birth of a male child.

3.3 The extremity of the social power structure and women's modes of resistance

We can see the deeper problem of social power structure behind the women's rebellion in "Five girls and one rope". The film reveals the profound impact of social power structures on women by showing the oppression and injustice suffered by female characters in the family and society. Male heads of family dominate the family and have strict control and expectations over women, and this family power structure restricts women's freedom and choice. At the same time, societal expectations and gender norms further shape women's roles and behaviors, making it difficult for them to break free from traditional constraints and pursue personal development and happiness. However, it is under this oppression that women begin to awaken and seek revolt. Their resistance is not only a struggle against personal fate, but also a challenge and reconstruction of social power relations.

Further, starting from Haraway's theory, the extremes of women's resistance in "Five girls and one rope" are a striking phenomenon. So-woon chooses to hang herself on the eve of her wedding, while the five girls witness it all and develop a longing for freedom in their hearts. This extreme way of resistance, within the framework of Haraway's theory, can find its "rationality". The restrictions and oppression of women by social power structures make women often lack effective means of resistance in the face of injustice and oppression. Violent disobedience is not feasible in most cases, as women are often in a vulnerable position to compete with men. At the same time, it is not easy to escape from the existing social environment, because women are often bound by multiple factors such as family and society. In such a situation, women can only choose a more extreme way of rebellion, which is to seek relief and freedom by sacrificing their own lives.

The theory of "contextualized knowledge" by Haraway informs us that knowledge is constrained by specific socio-cultural backgrounds and individual experiences, and forms of resistance are also disciplined within this context. Therefore, under the social power structure depicted in "Five girls and one rope", the extreme forms of resistance chosen by women are, in fact, a "rational" choice in their specific circumstances. None of the women in the film are capable of taking up arms to resist; they have been indoctrinated from a young age to believe that men are the authority in the household, that men are born to dominate women, and that as women, they must obey their fathers and husbands. They are like the kitchen knives in their hands, which can only be used for cutting vegetables, and the sickles, which can only be used for harvesting. Having been oppressed for so long, some have become unaware of their subjugation under a male-dominated social power. They accept their singular functionality: to obey men and to bear new males for the family. Even if some women awaken, it is only a partial awakening. Within their limited understanding, the only way they can find means of resistance is to seek out the village's most "knowledgeable" fairy. The fairy, seeing this group of girls who are similarly bullied and oppressed, reveals the method to "visit the garden." This indicates that in the fairy's perception, even if women die, it is better than their current situation. When the five girls learn of a way to escape their current lives, they begin to prepare for the "garden visit." In reality, older girls like Ming Tao, Gui Juan, and Ai Yue know that going to the "garden" means committing suicide by hanging. They also feel fear and hesitation, but the repeated tragedies occurring around them or to themselves strengthen their resolve to pursue the idea of the "garden visit."

4 Conclusion

This study uses Donna Haraway's feminist theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the film "Five girls and one rope", revealing the rebellion of women under the social power structure and its deep roots. By analyzing the influence of family power structure on women, the shaping of women by social expectations and gender norms, and the diversity and social significance of women's rebellious behavior, this study draws the following conclusions: the female rebellious behavior shown in "Five girls and one rope" occurs in the context of social power structure; These acts of resistance reflect women's challenges and reconstructions of social power relations; Further, these acts of defiance reveal inequalities of gender power in broader socio-cultural contexts. This study not only enriches the content of feminist film theory, but also provides new theoretical perspectives and empirical support for understanding gender equality and social change.

This study provides a new perspective and tool for understanding the relationship between social power and women's resistance in terms of theoretical contributions. Through an in-depth analysis of "Five girls and one rope" using Donna Haraway's feminist theory, this study reveals the diversity and social significance of women's defiant behavior, and explores how these defiant behaviors reflect gender power inequalities in broader sociocultural contexts. However, there are some limitations to this study. For example, since the research data is mainly derived from the texts of film and television works and related literature, there may be a lack of support from first-hand data such as field surveys and interviews.

In addition, this study only analyzes the work "Five girls and one rope", which may not fully reflect the commonalities

and characteristics of all women's defiant behaviors.

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