

Female Departures: an Existentialist Feminist Reading of "Like a Rolling Stone"

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ABSTRACT

Feminist issues have received growing attention in China in recent years, along with an increase in feminist films. However, current discussions tend to focus on the personal development and self-realization of middle-class women, while overlooking structural problems that still exist. This paper examines the film *Like a Rolling Stone* from the perspective of existentialist feminism, exploring the shift from being the "Other" to becoming a "Subject." It discusses the challenges faced by ordinary women and points out the limitations of elite feminism.

KEYWORDS

Existentialist feminism; Female subjectivity; Structural oppression; Chinese feminist cinema; *Like a rolling stone*

1 Introduction

The rise of feminist discourse in China has been accompanied by a wave of feminist-themed films, including *Myth of Love*, *Her Story*, and *Send Me to the Clouds*, all of which have attracted considerable attention. However, the female images presented in these films are becoming increasingly stereotyped. Most media representations focus on the self-realization of middle-class women, leading to a narrowing and distortion of how feminism is understood by the public. As a result, the struggles and resistance of ordinary women risk being marginalized—or even misrepresented.

Feminist criticism within China has also noted this trend. Gai Qi argues that current feminist expressions in Chinese media increasingly reflect a neoliberal orientation: by following a "struggle-to-success" narrative, they equate individual empowerment with the realization of gender justice, while avoiding any meaningful critique of structural oppression. According to Gai, such elite feminist discourse reinforces praise for personal effort but neglects collective female experience and social empowerment, thereby weakening the critical force of feminism. These observations suggest that the elite orientation of recent feminist cinema may be undermining its radical potential, shifting its focus away from structural critique and toward individual achievement.

Against this backdrop, the film *Like a Rolling Stone* stands out for its focus on the survival struggles and acts of escape of an ordinary woman. Rather than framing liberation through conventional success, the film directly confronts the awakening and resistance of women under structural constraints. In doing so, it challenges the limits of elite feminist narratives. This paper analyzes the protagonist's transformation from "the Other" to a self-determined subject through the lens of existentialist feminism, and explores the process of subject formation in the context of ordinary women's lives. In doing so, it aims to broaden both the theoretical scope and social concern of feminist film studies.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Feminist film criticism in China

Feminist theory entered film criticism in the 1970s and has since evolved through stages such as image analysis, narrative critique, and cultural criticism. In China, Yuan Ying was among the earliest to apply feminist theory to local cinema. She reviewed feminist developments at home and abroad, emphasized China's unique context, and examined how directors like Dong Kena and Wang Ping challenged male-centered standards. She also noted the efforts of Chinese Fifth Generation women directors in depicting women's inner worlds. Qin Xiaohong traced how female images in Chinese film shifted—from the gender-neutral ideal of "men and women are the same," to renewed gender differentiation, and later to women being turned into symbols of visual consumption under consumerism.

In recent years, critics have begun focusing on how neoliberalism shapes feminist discourse. Gai Qi points out that the popular narrative of "female striving" often equates gender justice with individual success, promoting a model of

empowered middle-class women. This narrative celebrates personal effort but avoids addressing structural inequality, weakening feminism's original collective and critical stance. Although her work is not centered on film, Gai's critique of "elite feminism" offers useful insights into the class bias and limited vision in today's feminist media.

2.2 From "other" to subject: an existential feminist analytical approach

Compared with more clearly oppositional social binaries such as class or race, the gender binary is marked by a complex relationship of dependence and coexistence. The connection between women and men is not one of absolute opposition but rather a long-standing inequality that often remains obscured. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir identifies three mechanisms that keep women confined to the position of the "Other": first, women lack collective power strong enough to transform the social structure; second, women accept their close relationship with men but deny the necessity of equal treatment; third, women do not openly reject their status as "Other," often internalizing and identifying with prevailing social norms (de Beauvoir, Taiwan edition, pp. 54-57). This insightful analysis reveals not only women's socially constructed position but also the cognitive and practical challenges inherent in their process of consciousness-raising.

Drawing on Sartre's existential philosophy, de Beauvoir appropriates his concepts of *être-en-soi* (being-in-itself) and *être-pour-soi* (being-for-itself) as analytical tools for understanding gender. In Sartre's terms, *être-en-soi* refers to a passive existence lacking self-awareness, freedom, and choice, whereas *être-pour-soi* denotes a conscious subject who acknowledges their situation, confronts "nothingness," and affirms their existence through freedom and action. De Beauvoir argues that within patriarchal societies, women are frequently positioned as *être-en-soi*—objects defined by others' subjectivity and deprived of autonomy. It is only through conscious awakening and taking responsibility for their actions that women can break free from the "Other" position and become *être-pour-soi*—self-determining subjects embracing their existential freedom.

In recent years, feminist film theory has witnessed a shift from focusing primarily on representation to emphasizing the formation of subjectivity. As Cate Ince observes in *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Women's Cinema*, contemporary feminist filmmakers move beyond analyzing how female characters are regulated by the male gaze. Instead, they highlight how female subjectivity emerges through acts of viewing and embodied experience, cultivating a recognition and affirmation of selfhood. This shift resonates closely with de Beauvoir's idea of subjectivity being forged through conscious action.

In sum, this study adopts the trajectory "Other → Being-in-itself → Conscious Awakening → Bodily Practice → Expression of Desire → Act of Leaving → Being-for-itself" to analyze how Li Hong, the ordinary woman in *Like a Rolling Stone*, constructs her subjectivity amid family and social pressures. Her silence, hesitation, and eventual departure are not merely emotional responses or acts of escape, but existential practices through which she affirms her subjectivity via embodied action.

2.3 Women's departure in Chinese cinema

The theme of women's departure has undergone rich and varied developments throughout the history of Chinese cinema. In the family morality dramas of the 1920s and 1930s, such as *The Abandoned Woman* (1924) and *An Orphan* (1929), female departure often stems from a husband's betrayal or domestic abuse. However, these acts were frequently punished within the narrative, reflecting traditional moral frameworks that sought to discipline female transgression. In *Love and Duty* (1931), Yang Naifan's choice to follow her emotions and break away from marital obligations marks an early depiction of women's struggle for subjectivity.

In the 1930s, leftist cinema imbued women's departure with greater political significance. Films like *The Light of Maternal Instinct* (1933) and *National Customs* (1935) portrayed women who, after familial collapse, joined revolutionary collectives. Here, departure symbolized a break from old systems, though female subjectivity was often subsumed under grand political narratives. Notably, Su Lanying in *The Road Ahead* (1933) exhibited stronger individual agency by rejecting arranged marriage and actively planning her future, embodying modern women's assertion over their destiny.

By the late 1940s, departure narratives became increasingly introspective and psychological. In *Spring Scenery Cannot Be Shut In* (1948), Mei Chunli is isolated and controlled by her husband, her eventual escape marking a quiet assertion of autonomy. *Spring in a Small Town* (1948) shifts the focus inward, with Zhou Yuwen's emotional struggle embodying an "internal departure" that deepens the theme's complexity.

Since the turn of the century, cinematic portrayals of women's departure have shifted from narratives of survival to

explorations of spiritual autonomy and self-creation. *The Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002) presents a young woman who, following a literary awakening, leaves on her own—a romanticized yet powerful gesture of emerging female subjectivity and self-authorship.

Still, films that confront the structural constraints faced by ordinary women and trace their path to subjectivity remain scarce. In this context, *Like a Rolling Stone* is especially significant. It inherits the historical meaning of departure while offering a realist depiction of contemporary women's struggles and their acts of leaving, thereby grounding feminist cinema in the lived realities of its subjects.

Building on this historical and theoretical foundation, the present study adopts an existential feminist lens and close textual analysis to examine Li Hong's transformation from "Other" to subject in *Like a Rolling Stone*, focusing on how the film renders departure as a process of subject formation for an ordinary woman.

3 Female subjectivity and the practice of "departure" in *like a rolling stone*

3.1 Li Hong's identity struggles and subjectivity awakening in *like a rolling stone*

Like a Rolling Stone centers on Li Hong's life, exploring her identity struggles and gradual self-formation through multiple social roles—daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother. The film traces her navigation through structural constraints and relational pressures, revealing how limited opportunities and dependence shape her evolving sense of agency.

As a daughter, Li Hong dreams of exploring the world and pursuing higher education. However, her father forces her to drop out of school, citing her responsibility as the eldest daughter to support the family. At this stage, Li Hong's existence is defined by "being-for-others," with her personal aspirations suppressed under familial expectations. Her mother, upholding traditional norms, reinforces this dynamic by urging Li Hong to prioritize family duties. Though her awareness begins to surface, Li Hong remains largely confined within these roles.

Marriage marks Li Hong's first attempt at "departure," a hoped-for escape from previous constraints. Yet, marriage itself becomes another form of entrapment. Her husband's indifference, coupled with Li Hong's lack of education and subsequent unemployment, results in economic dependence and minimal influence within the household. To reclaim some control, she takes on labor-intensive work, striving for financial autonomy and contributing to household expenses, while still shouldering the bulk of domestic responsibilities.

In her roles as mother and grandmother, Li Hong bears heavier caregiving burdens. While her daughter understands her more than others, this relationship also limits her freedom, as Li Hong often sacrifices her needs to meet her daughter's. Within the family, her husband sees her solely as an unpaid contributor whose efforts go unrecognized. This persistent negation silences her voice and diminishes her self-worth. Li Hong's journey thus reflects a gradual shift from passive compliance to active resistance, with her "departure" embodying a determined assertion of selfhood against long-standing suppression.

3.2 The practice of "departure" and the reconfiguration of female subjectivity

Li Hong's act of "departure" is first and foremost a personal assertion of agency. Rather than a dramatic escape or direct rebellion, the film frames her departure as a slow, deliberate effort to break free from structural constraints and move toward a mode of existence rooted in being-for-self. This process unfolds through prolonged silence, isolation, and discipline—a quiet yet profound interrogation of her own existence and a deeply ethical response to systemic oppression. As Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, women have long been defined as the "Other," a position embedded in a binary social structure that individual will alone can rarely transcend. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, Li Hong's departure embodies a quiet defiance against normative expectations and a reassertion of subjectivity. It is not an endpoint, but rather the beginning of a transition—from otherness toward autonomous being. Her departure represents a refusal of assimilation and silence, and a fragile but resolute search for freedom within constrained realities.

At the same time, the film gestures beyond the individual, revealing the structural dimensions of women's departures. Through its intimate portrayal of Li Hong's everyday life, the narrative brings into focus the entangled oppressions of gender and socioeconomic marginalization. Her struggle is not merely personal—it reflects the systemic barriers faced by many women in similar positions. By shifting attention away from elite, individualistic narratives of "self-actualization," the film broadens the scope of feminist critique to include the lived, often invisible realities of ordinary women. Only by confronting the structural nature of female oppression can feminist film criticism fulfill its critical and emancipatory

potential.

4 Conclusion

The act of “departure” depicted in *Like a Rolling Stone* is not a sign of weakness or retreat, but a deliberate practice of resisting discipline and reclaiming control over one’s life. In a reality where Li Hong is constantly expected to “exist for others,” she chooses to respond to oppression through action, gradually moving toward a subjectivity of “being-for-self.”

Grounded in Beauvoir’s existential feminist theory and tracing Li Hong’s life trajectory, this study seeks to illuminate the process by which ordinary women construct subjectivity under the dual pressures of gender and class. *Like a Rolling Stone* rejects the elitist narrative of “self-actualization,” focusing instead on the raw realities of life and revealing the complexity and difficulty of female awakening. This process is not a tale of individual triumph, but a struggle to affirm existence and rebuild sovereignty amid silence and repression. At a time when contemporary feminist discourse increasingly leans toward elitism and symbolism, Li Hong’s story offers a grounded and sharply critical response.

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