

A Study of Characterization in Feminist film in Historical Development

Han Wu

Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 211106, P.R. China

ABSTRACT

In order to deeply express the main idea of feminism, the character portrayal in the film is undoubtedly the most important, therefore, it is necessary to summarise and analyse the female image in feminist films for the public to construct women's independent consciousness. In this paper, several representative countries are exemplified and their feminist film studies are analysed. Here they are put on an equal footing to collate the research on the analysis of male and female images in feminist films respectively. Feminist films from different countries reflect women's problems and gender issues in their respective socio-cultural contexts, and at the same time explore new expressions of women's images and gender roles. Despite the limitations and challenges, feminist film, as a cultural phenomenon, continues to promote gender equality and the awakening of women's self-awareness.

KEYWORDS

Feminism; Film; Portrayal; Historical development

1 Introduction

Feminist film was born out of feminist ideology, which first appeared in France and later spread to Britain and the United States, where it became popular. Feminist ideology is a social theory and political movement that is primarily sourced and motivated by women's experiences. Topics explored include: discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, domesticity, oppression, and patriarchy, among others. Against the backdrop of these issues, feminist film was born, with filmmakers gradually focusing their narratives and themes on women.

However, there are still many different definitions of the concept of feminist film in the academic world: for example, scholar Judith Mayne divides women's film into two types: 'One is, according to the target of consumption, film aimed at a female audience. The other, based on authorship, are films made by female directors.'^[1] There are also articles defining feminist films as 'films about women's stories in family, marriage, and life and their group or individualistic ideological characteristics.'^[2] These two statements are relatively early definitions, with broader conceptual definitions, and some of them confuse films directed by women with feminist films. Since then, some scholars have continued to define the concept of feminist film. According to Chinese scholar Ying Yuli, 'The so-called "women's film" does not only refer to films directed by women or featuring female protagonists, but also films directed by women, with women's topics as the creative perspective, and with a clear sense of women's consciousness. The exact meaning of 'women's film' should be films, videos and multimedia experiments directed by women and created from the

* Corresponding Author: sx2211008@nuaa.edu.cn

perspective of women's issues with a clear sense of femininity.'^[3] In this definition, focuses its research on female consciousness. In this definition, the focus is placed on female subjectivity, a concept that is recognised by most people in the academic world. Scholar Dai Jinhua is an important representative of women's film who has borrowed the perspective of female subjectivity to position women's film, and to a large extent, this has influenced subsequent research. On the other hand, she emphasised that women's film should be 'in revolt or subversion with a male-discourse culture.'^[4] This is a higher level of analysis of the political nature of women's film, which considers that feminist film has a historical mission to rebel against a patriarchal society.

Based on this, Scholar Liu Jing has proposed a more detailed definition of the concept of feminist film, which includes: 1. It is mainly created by female directors, and the producers have a distinctive stance and tendency of equal rights for men and women. 2. The subject matter of the film embodies a critique, subversion, change, and transcendence of the male-centred cultural hegemony and gender ideology, and demonstrates women's autonomy and creativity in the process of subversion and change. 3. Due to the political nature of its creative theme, it is followed by a film aesthetics with political implications. Specifically, the creators change and transcend the logic of gender in film language, creative techniques, genre styles, and viewing forms, and then explore and create their own aesthetic forms.^[5]

2 Case Studies in Feminist Film Studies

Since the birth and development of feminist film, each country has contributed many excellent works, and professional researchers and scholars have also conducted detailed and comprehensive analyses of these films, exploring the characteristics, details and unique characterisation of feminist film. Therefore, the development status, characteristics, and current stage of feminist film in each country need to be discussed separately. Here, the changing times of feminist film studies and characterisation in films are analysed through representative perspectives such as Western and East Asian countries.

2.1 Western countries

First of all, feminist film theory in the West has experienced more than half a century from dualism to pluralism. Its theory was formed in the early 1960s and 1970s, and its development was deeply influenced by the feminist movement, and, to be precise, feminist film theory has developed from the calls of the second, third and fourth waves of the feminist movement. In her article 'Half a Century from Dualism to Pluralism: An Overview of Western Feminist Film Theory', Liu Tingting outlines the development of Western feminist film theory over the past half century, and roughly divides it into three phases according to the chronological order and thematic features: deconstruction of classical film narratives (1960s-1970s), exploration of female subjectivity (1980s-1990s), and multifaceted analyses of socio-cultural turn (2000s-).^[6]

Feminist film criticism in the early 1960s was primarily a critique of the stereotypes of women portrayed in classic Hollywood films. Feminist theorists at the time combed through the stereotypical images of women portrayed by the Hollywood film industry, i.e., the stereotypical 'Madonna' or 'Slut'. In the second phase of the development of feminist film theory, it was Mulvey's neglect of the female audience that became the focus of criticism by feminist scholars, triggering a series of discussions in the 1980s about the female audience, female spectatorship, and female subjectivity. The use of psychoanalytic methods gradually shifted from the earlier binary framework of gender to a more flexible and fluid gender identity. Finally, in the third phase, that is, after entering the 1990s, feminist film studies became more diversified under the studies of coolie

theory and multiculturalism, not only focusing on women's issues but also responding to the issues of race and class, and becoming more pluralistic in theoretical frameworks and practices.

Thelma and Louise is a film by British director Sir Ridley Scott, released in 1991. Prior to this, the protagonists of road movies were almost all men or couples. Influenced by social stereotypes, directors and audiences always thought that road, adventure and wilderness were subjects that weak women could not take on, but this film deconstructs the traditional theme of women's narratives, with two women as the protagonists, interpreting the story of their escapades on the highway. It rescues the perception of women from the image of being weak and in need of protection. The film also gives women the image of 'manliness', such as racing on the road, robbing, laughing unimaginationally, etc., which shows a unique and rebellious path for the image of women in the film. In addition, the film also embodies women's subjective consciousness from various angles. In the process of running away, the two women gradually escape from the imagination of 'being watched' and complete their stories as subjects only, and in the film, men's right to speak is gradually disappearing. All in all, the film *Thelma and Louise* deconstructs the narrative theme of women in traditional cinema, and embodies women's consciousness from multiple angles. The women in the film are powerful and independent, while the presence of men is relatively absent, and the image of men is relatively flat and typical, basically divided into two categories: the male head of the family and the roadside gangster.

Barbie is the hottest and most popular feminist film in recent years. Barbie is also an 'awakened' female figure, who initially lives a princess-like life in the so-called 'feminine' world of Barbie Land, but these delicacies are only objectified as 'a woman's need for youthful beauty and a body that never ages or blemishes'. When Barbie's exquisite life is destroyed, she has to come to the real world to find a solution, and it is at this point that Barbie is truly subjected to the gaze of objectification, and begins to embark on a search for her identity. In feminist cinema, it is not what the heroine looks like that defines her, but what she does.^[7]

The typical male in the film, on the other hand, has a different image of masculinity than in previous feminist films. Post-feminist media culture has dramatically reshaped the image of masculinity, introducing the notion of post-feminist masculinity as a discourse that celebrates the power of women while subtly criticising or gently mocking stereotypical masculinity,^[8] and thus we can see in the film some mockery of Ken's 'manly' stereotypes, such as liking horses and entering the building in the hope of being treated as a priority. Ken started out as a female dependent, becomes a patriarchal figure when he sees the real world, but in the end returns the subject of Barbie's world, which is not so much a male figure in the film as a male figure in the women's imagination, or an inverted version of the female figure. This, of course, also stems from the fact that *Barbie* is a popcorn consumerist film, and its need to please a female audience leads to a shallow gender shift, but does not detract from its success as a feminist film.

Currently, feminist film theory in the West has encountered another bottleneck, that is, the current feminist movement is fading out globally, the rise of LGBT and Queer theory,^[9] feminist film theory has begun to face both internal and external questioning, and the term 'women' is being undermined due to the refinement of gender studies, and the representativeness of the term due to the diversity and different formations of class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Feminist film theory research in Britain and the United States tended to slow down at this time.

2.2 Chinese

Chinese women's cinema began to sprout after the 1950s, but it was not until after the 1980s that it was taken up as an important topic for experts and scholars to begin researching and exploring, and came about under the introduction and influence of Western feminist film theories.

^[10]Compared to the stages outlined above, with their clear lines of development and scholarly debates, Chinese feminist film studies are less systematic.

In her article 'Interpreting the Male Image in the Film *Golden Age* Based on Feminist Theory', scholar Xu Junyan mentions that at first, Chinese women's cinema showed women's intrinsic gender factors being invisibly removed from their 'human' identity, and becoming the antithesis of men. Later, with the rise of directors such as Dong Kena, Lu Xiaoya, Ann Hui, Li Yu, and Huo Jianqi, the perspective of Chinese women's cinema has become more open, and they have blended Western feminist ideology with traditional Chinese cultural contexts, paying more attention to the ideology externalised in women, and dared to directly attack social issues in their films.^[11] According to Huang Shuqin, there are two types of women under the lens of Chinese male directors: one is the image of the traditional Chinese woman, who is meek and kind, faithful to love, soothing and considerate to her husband and children, and who can make great sacrifices in her husband's adversity. The second type of woman is the woman who has experienced the ups and downs of life, and often the male director is in a condescending position and has sympathy and pity for this type of woman.

Since the development of Chinese feminist cinema, the plight and awakening of women are transmuting step by step. In the article 'The Transformation of Women's Dilemma in Chinese Feminist Cinema - Taking <*Ghost Love*> <*A Story of Lala's Promotion*> <*Send Me to the Clouds*> as an Example', scholar Wang Lingyi exemplifies three films in different eras and argues that women in Chinese feminist cinema are transmuting from identity to finding individual value to self-awareness.

^[12]In *Ghost Love*, Qiu Yun struggles with her gender perception due to her family and childhood experiences, and eventually, under a series of conflicts, she reconciles with Zhong Kui, the man of her dreams, presenting her sense of returning to her feminine nature. In *A Story of Lala's Promotion*, the heroine is confronted with the dilemma of women in the new era - she refuses to accept the traditional and passive definition of women held by the male society and questions and subverts the power of men, challenging the patriarchal society. In the end, she finds a balance between her family ethics and her job position, and finds her individual value. Turning to the exploration of the desires of the female subject in *Send Me to the Clouds*, Sheng Nan is suffering from ovarian cancer, and she hopes to experience the pleasure of love in the end, which is the main purpose and core desire of the character's actions throughout the film, tearing down the traditional cover of shame and promoting the rationality of female sexuality in the public sphere, reflecting women's awakening of self-consciousness.

Sending Me to the Clouds puts women in the forefront of the film, but this forefront is not a depreciation of men, but puts men and women on an equal footing, presenting women's consciousness only through the portrayal of women's destiny. The image of women in the film is also multi-dimensional, there are not only rebels, but also a weak female figure who has been oppressed for many years, that is, the heroine's mother, and the heroine's attitude towards her represents the modern women's pity and dismay towards traditional women. In addition, the film not only tells the story of women's oppression in a patriarchal society, but also highlights the idea that men are also victims in a patriarchal society.

2.3 Indian

In recent years, Indian films have often sparked controversy in China, with *Dangal*, *Pad Man* and *Toilet - Ek Prem Katha* all setting off a wide-ranging discussion frenzy in the country. As a country with deep-rooted patriarchal culture and low status of women, many Indian films have superb social reality topics, *Mom* shows the extremely serious rape problem in India, *Toilet - Ek Prem Katha* shows the problem of women's difficulty in toilets, and *Pad Man* shows the health problems of women's physiological period.^[13] This is despite the fact that there are plenty of examples of many Indian films

where women are always ready to be the first to be sacrificed (or may be forced to be sacrificed) and are the softest targets of social criticism and condemnation.^[14] However, we can still find that with the spread of Western feminist thinking and India's own social progress and open-mindedness, India has begun to gradually focus on the portrayal and pursuit of women's independent personalities.

Current Indian feminist films have strong artistic characteristics. First of all, Indian films are very rich in the portrayal of women, including the submissive traditional housewife, women who dare to resist and have independent thoughts, the awakened one who endures oppression in silence and eventually rises up to fight back, and even the 'great heroine' who stands on the peak of power with both ability and thoughts. The portrayal of men is not the usual image of oppressors in feminist films, but also the image of men who actively advocate and help women, who are undoubtedly a great help in promoting the awakening of women's feminist ideology, which adds to the shock of the film. Secondly, Indian feminist films do not forget to combine reality and art when exploring the deep, dark social reality, as most of them are adapted from real stories, the films often bring people a great impact, but the creators do not always focus on the darkness, but rather, the theme of the small to see the big, from the daily small things slowly revealed, and often a happy ending, so as to comfort the people in the feudal reality, to achieve the effect of uplifting. uplifting effect. Finally, India has a deep-rooted traditional feudal ideology and culture of male superiority and female inferiority, and these old and corrupted traditional concepts are the root causes of women's problems in India. However, feminism can not completely negate the traditional culture, and while expressing the criticism of the corrupted ideology, many Indian films are also inheriting and carrying forward the excellent traditional culture, including women's clothing, etc., and they do not fall into the expression of tragic darkness but rather show the charm of women.

However, we will also find that Indian feminist films have compromises under the reality, as mentioned by scholar Cheng Da in 'Seeing Her in Him - Compromise and Resistance in Indian Feminist Cinema': many of the higher rated feminist films have one remarkable thing in common, that is: men are the absolute protagonists. Feminist films with women as the absolute protagonists, on the other hand, do not perform nearly as well at the box office or in terms of social impact as feminist films with men as protagonists. This seemingly contradictory reality shows from another angle that the status of women in India is still quite low, which cannot be completely changed by a few feminist films based on true stories.^[15] Under such a national situation, Indian films adopt male protagonists to achieve 'affirmative action' with the help of 'patriarchal power', which is not only a compromise under the reality, but also the most suitable way in the Indian national situation. Not only does it make the film more realistic, but it can also serve as a positive example to men.

2.4 South Korea

Korea, as an Asian country, has historically had a relatively low status for women and a long history of feminist issues, and because of the cultural influence of the United States, there has been a great deal of interest in feminism and women's rights in Korea. Collaboration and networking among female filmmakers began in the 1980s, when ten women in the film industry formed an organisation called Yeonghuihoe, which means 'women who make films'.^[16] In 2019, a film called *KIM JI-YOUNG* caused an uproar in South Korean society. Unlike India and the West, South Korea does not focus on rape, discrimination, and other deliberate oppressions of a traditionally patriarchal society, but rather portrays the ordinary life of a common girl, which is nothing more than ordinary, and through the display of all the details, it makes female viewers more and more confident that this is the real life, and that they themselves are Kim Ji-Young, thus generating a strong sense of immersion. This creates a strong sense of immersion and reflects a sense of reality of contemporary women's lives. This is the strength of Korean feminist cinema: the dark oppression

that is painful at first glance can be easily seen through and escaped by anyone with a higher education, while much of the oppression and discrimination is subtle and undetectable without careful analysis.

The heroine of *KIM JI-YOUNG* is not a typical rebellious female character. Instead, she is a woman who recognises her identity as a mother, as a daughter-in-law, and that is why she is caught up in the infinite pains and predicaments brought to her by the patriarchal society. In her article 'Body, Gender and Identity in Contemporary Women's Cinema,' scholar Zhao Yanli says, 'There exists another kind of identity speech for women on the screen, that is, "virtuous wives and mothers," where some of their great qualities are magnified, such as hard work, kindness, and forbearance, etc., and it is hard to say that their eulogies are not made by the predominantly male creators of the works. Their eulogies can hardly be said not to carry the abduction of women by the whole male consciousness.'^[17] And this film describes the oppression of women from this perspective, the heroine is not persecuted in any substantial way, just as a housewife to complete her daily trivial work, but under high pressure mental illness, even if her husband is a responsible man with patience to tolerate her. Finally, after receiving treatment, a confrontation with a man in a coffee shop in which she was called a 'mom bug' was too much for her to bear, and she stood up and fought back.

The whole film is a 'silent' camera language to see the very fireworks of life scenes, the director gave up those hysterical conflicts, but with such a gentle and simple way to narrate, at the same time, the male image of the film is not all negative, in the most real and calm way to say that the plight of women's survival. In this way, the film addresses the plight of women in the most realistic and peaceful way.

In addition to revealing and exposing the hidden oppression of women, Korean feminist cinema has also entered another phase, with the birth of a large number of erotic films. However, the erotic films here are not just erotic films, but use the theme of 'sex' to explore gender and reflect on traditional Korean culture and social customs. The entry of modern civilisation into Korea has inevitably changed the tradition of men's superiority over women, causing it to be dislocated and deformed in order to adapt to the new social mechanism. The change in women's social and familial status has unknowingly changed the status of sex as well. Women's consciousness and feminism are distinctly expressed in most erotic films.

However, the sense of feminism in Korean cinema ultimately has certain limitations. Firstly, machismo constrains women to serve and accept the role of serving men. This is also reflected in Korean cinema. Korea is a more traditional country with an unshakable trust and adherence to the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. Therefore, it is destined to have a limited intensity of resistance to the patriarchal order. Secondly, some scholars believe that beauty and sexiness is a right for women that cannot be changed or denigrated. Paglia, an American scholar, esteems the popular icon Madonna as an example of 'true feminism', and Madonna succeeded in conquering the world with her unbridled sexual seduction. Says Paglia, 'She exhorted young women to be totally feminine, totally sexy, while still striving to take control of their lives.'^[18] Thus, many young women inevitably fall into the abyss of the pursuit of beauty, however, it also falls into the trap of male rules while pursuing beauty itself. It is as if men's dignity is placed on power and money, while women's dignity is placed on their faces. Thus, 'artificial beauty' has fallen into kitsch, ultimately catering to the visual pleasure of men and pleasing them.

3 Conclusion

Feminist film theory has undergone a global evolution from binary opposition to pluralistic

coexistence. Western feminist film theory has gone through three major stages of development between the 1960s and the beginning of the 21st century, from deconstructing classic film narratives to exploring women's subjectivity, and then to pluralistic analyses of socio-cultural turn. Chinese feminist cinema started late, but gradually developed a unique perspective and mode of expression. Indian and Korean feminist films, on the other hand, have shown strong artistic features of female awakening and resistance in the context of a patriarchal society. Feminist film studies usually focus on female figures, but also recognise the importance of male characters. Male figures should not be simply profiled; they play key roles in women's destinies and have a positive effect on both narrative structure and female characterisation. The diversity of male roles helps to enrich the content of the film, presenting femininity through different perspectives, contributing to the integrity of the narrative and deepening the portrayal of women's journeys. Feminist films from different countries have reflected women's problems and gender issues in their respective socio-cultural contexts, while exploring new expressions of women's images and gender roles. Despite the limitations and challenges, feminist cinema, as a cultural phenomenon, continues to promote gender equality and the awakening of women's self-awareness. Not only does it provide women with a means of self-expression and identity, it also provides society with an opportunity to reflect on and explore gender issues. With social progress and open-mindedness, feminist films will continue to exert their influence globally, promoting gender equality and women's rights.

References

- [1] Qin, Xiqing. *Western Feminist Cinema: Theory, Criticism, Practice* [M]. Beijing: China Film Press, 2008.
- [2] Li Hui. An exploration of western women's cinema in the late twentieth century[J]. *Film Review*, 2017, (9): 35.
- [3] Ying, Yuli. *An outline of women's cinema* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2005.
- [4] Dai Jinhua. *Invisible Women: Women in Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women's Cinema* [J]. *Contemporary Cinema*, 1994, (6): 43-45.
- [5] Liu Jing. Discussion on the Concept of 'Women's Cinema' [J]. *Journal of Fujian Jiangxia College*. 2017, 7(04).
- [6] Liu Tingting. From Dualism to Diversity in Half a Century-A Review of Western Feminist Film Theory [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Second Normal College*, 2022, 35(03): 73-77.
- [7] Killian, K. D. (2019). How Wonder Woman is, and is not, a feminist superheroine movie. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 31(1), 59-61.
- [8] Yakali, D. (2024). "He is just Ken: " deconstructing hegemonic masculinity in Barbie (2023 Movie). *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, 1320774.
- [9] Huang, Y. (2013). Being Feminist as a Discourse? Investigating Narrative Cinema with Female Protagonists Directed by Chinese Post-Fifth-Generation Filmmakers.
- [10] Wang, X. (2022). Transcending "Otherness": Exploring Women Filmmakers and Women Representation in Chinese Women's Cinema (Doctoral dissertation, ResearchSpace@ Auckland).
- [11] Xu Junyan. Interpretation of male image in the film 'Golden Age' based on feminist theory [J]. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2020, (13): 138-139.
- [12] Wang Linyi. Transmutation of Women's Dilemma in Chinese Feminist Cinema--An Example of 'Man-Ghost-Love', 'Dulala's Promotion' and 'Send Me to the Green Cloud' [J]. *Chinese Film Market*, 2021, (02): 47-50.
- [13] Jiang Shanshan. Analysis of Indian Feminist Cinema in Recent Years [J]. *Classics*, 2022, (16): 22-25.
- [14] KRITI, S. (2023). Ecofeminism: from the Perspective of Indian Cinema and Performing Arts. *IJFMR Volume 5, Issue 3*.
- [15] Cheng D. Seeing Her in Others - Compromise and Resistance in Indian Feminist Cinema [J]. *Film Criticism*, 2020, (17): 49-53.
- [16] Seon Park, H. (2020). South Korean Cine-Feminism on the Move. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 12(2), 91-97.
- [17] Zhao Yanli. Body, gender and identity in contemporary women's cinema [J]. *Film Literature*, 2016, (12): 45-47.
- [18] Sophia Vuka. *Post-feminism* [M]. Wang Li, translation. Beijing: Culture and Art Press, 2003.