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Reconstruction of Gender Roles and Female Self-Identity: A Case Study of the Film *Kill Bill*

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Abstract. Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill was released in North America in 2003. The storyline is relatively simple, revolving around Beatrix, a former professional assassin in the underworld, who, upon discovering her pregnancy, decides to abandon her past life of violence and bloodshed and settle down as the owner of a video store. Bill, her former lover and boss, dissatisfied with Beatrix's silent withdrawal from the "Vipers" organization, leads his criminal associates to massacre the wedding rehearsal, leaving no one alive except the protagonist. After miraculously surviving and lying in a hospital for four years, Beatrix embarks on a journey to exact revenge on her enemies. Undoubtedly, Kill Bill is often labeled as a revenge-driven and violent Hollywood film. However, beyond its violent exterior, the film reveals deeper feminist perspectives: it challenges traditional male authority, reflects women's resistance to the constraints on personal and emotional freedom, and highlights the awakening of modern female consciousness.

Keywords: feminism, women's cinema, film aesthetics

1. Patriarchy – The Root of Oppression

In *Kill Bill*, the oppression of female characters stems not only from the male characters within the film but also from the male audience watching it.

Beatrix's body and profession once belonged to Bill. He sent Beatrix to an experienced master to learn Chinese martial arts solely to aid him in his killings. When Beatrix decided to marry someone else, Bill exhibited a demonic form of control. Out of personal vengeance, Bill massacred everyone at the church, including Beatrix, who was carrying his child. The wedding never took place, symbolizing Bill's destruction of Beatrix's right to freely choose a partner, a dual oppression of her body and spirit. Bill, representing patriarchal culture, stands in stark contrast to feminism, which advocates respect for humanity, freedom, and love. During Beatrix's hospitalization and coma, a mosquito is shown in close-up, biting her—a scene imbued with two layers of meaning. First, it symbolizes a kind of "penetration," suggesting that the nurse intends to inject Beatrix, leading to her death. Second, it hints at sexual violence. After Bill and his accomplices' massacre, Beatrix is the only survivor but remains in a coma for four years, during which she is subjected to repeated sexual abuse by the doctor and other men. Beatrix faces not only the threat to her life but also the insult to her dignity and body. The doctor, along with the clients he introduces, regularly assaults her, collecting fees while sometimes also participating in the abuse. The doctor embodies both the roles of a pimp and a client, while Beatrix remains unaware and passive in her victimization. In the film, the Japanese crime boss, O-Ren Ishii, endures similar oppression. As a child, she was sexually abused by Matsumoto, a pedophilic crime lord.

Many radical feminists argue that sexuality is a key issue in feminism because, in the practice of sex, the assumption that "men are naturally aggressive and dominant while women are inherently passive and submissive" normalizes and legitimizes male violence against women. Griffin argues that rape is the main force society uses to control and dominate women, stating that rape is a crime committed by a few men for the benefit of many, as most men capitalize on women's fear of rape. Liberal feminist Brownmiller emphasizes that "the male ideology of rape is a deliberate process of intimidation through which all men keep all women in a state of fear". [1]

In the film, female characters not only suffer from sexual violence, but also exist in a state of being 'observed.' It is not difficult to see that this is deliberately done by the director to cater to the male audience. For example, the two female bodyguards of Shino's Oren, Sophie, a Eurasian, often wears a black high-waisted cheongsam with a high slit, her voluptuous chest and long legs causing male viewers to be aroused; another 17-year-old high school girl, Guoguo, wears a super short skirt sailor suit, paired with bangs

and a cute Japanese doll outfit, such an image is hard not to pique the interest of male viewers. Peeping refers to obtaining sexual satisfaction through watching others without being noticed. In contrast to this is exhibitionism, which achieves sexual pleasure through exposing one's body (or a part of it). Such pleasure derived from being watched coincides with exhibitionism, with peeping being an active attitude; the most common pattern is that men are the peepers, and female stars' bodies are the objects of observation. The benefit of this approach is to cater to a 'male-centric' perspective. By interpreting the desires and needs reflected in the film, the presentation of male and female characters, and even exploring the characteristics of film devices, as well as gender divisions in viewing behavior, we can decipher the patriarchal ideology that manipulates Hollywood films. [2] In 1975, Laura Mulvey published an article in "Screen" titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," laying the basic paradigm for Western feminist film theory and criticism. Using psychoanalytic theory as the basic method, guided by the concept of 'gaze,' she established a theoretical framework of the binary opposition between seeing and being seen, subject and object, narrative and spectacle, thereby revealing the passive position of women. Mulvey believed that films reflect and reveal a deep understanding of manipulating societal perceptions of gender differences, determining the images in the film, the way of viewing eroticism, and the portrayal of landscapes. In films, women are not only objects of desire for the characters in the film, but also objects of desire for the audience in the cinema. [3]

So far, the female protagonist and other female characters endure various oppressions, their misfortune lies in being trapped in the context of patriarchal culture.

2. The Awakening of Female Consciousness and the Dissolution of Male Dominance

If the previous section focused on the director shaping the part where women are oppressed by patriarchal culture, the subsequent plot development brings about a dramatic reversal. Female characters in the drama begin to challenge the authority of patriarchy. To highlight the significant transformation of the female protagonist from victim to perpetrator in this film, Quentin used a magical realism style to create a woman detached from reality, filled with legend. The protagonist, Beatrix, on the road to revenge, is repeatedly put in life-threatening situations only to survive, all set in several impossible contexts devised by Quentin, followed by numerous twists. In this context, the female protagonist experiences being shot in the head, undergoing a dream cesarean section, waking up and, with strong willpower, regaining consciousness in her legs lost for four years, wearing a leather jacket and jeans from an unknown source, using money from an unknown source to buy a plane ticket to Okinawa, being sealed in a coffin, having shotgun pellets in her chest, suddenly regaining physical strength, using martial arts and a samurai sword to kill many enemies, persevering until the end, not being pursued by the police, and ultimately destroying Bill, who once deeply loved her and orchestrated the massacre at the Two Pines wedding.

In addition to the female protagonist's miraculous survival, other female characters in the drama, such as Shino Oren, also represent a counterattack. She grew from an orphan whose parents were killed by a yakuza boss to the leader of the Tokyo underworld. Due to her Chinese-American-Japanese heritage, she faced opposition from a man named Tanaka in the yakuza council, questioning her impure lineage. Oren immediately ran over and cut off his head, holding it up to the other men present, saying, 'If you insult my Chinese or American heritage, this is what will happen, your head and body will part ways, just like this dead fool. If any of you pigs have anything else to say, say it now, I doubt there is.' One-eyed Elle, cunning and deceitful, to obtain Hattori Hanzo's sword stored by Budd, falsely claimed she was willing to pay a huge sum for it, then put a venomous snake in the box, killing Budd, as well as poisoning White Eyebrow, who had blinded his own eyes with formidable skills; and the beautiful Gogo, who thrust a samurai sword into the heart of a lecherous man with desires for her, saying, 'Now, am I inserting into you, or are you inserting into me?' and casually teasing the owner of the O-Ren Ishii's House of Blue Leaves, Charlie Brown. Although these female characters all meet their end under the blade of the female protagonist due to their involvement in the massacre at the church, their intelligence, bravery, strength, and courage are all evident, surpassing many men.

On the other hand, looking at the male characters in the drama, Bill's younger brother, Bud, although he participated in the wedding massacre back then, has since retreated and become one of society's lowest individuals, working as a club bouncer to make ends meet. The once legendary assassin now endures the scolding and complaints of his boss, cleaning toilets where filth flows. The legendary swordsmith, Hattori Hanzo, has also retired from the world, now running a sushi restaurant as a small business owner, no longer concerned with worldly affairs. The male lead, Bill, who only had his charismatic voice and close-ups of his feet and hands in the first part, never appeared in a frontal shot. The director undoubtedly consciously undermines male authority to highlight the awakening of female consciousness.

Furthermore, Quentin deliberately arranged some details to prove the elevation of women's status and the awakening of feminism. The main members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad in the movie are mostly women. The female protagonist, Beatrix, fights with O-Ren Ishii in Japan, engages in hand-to-hand combat with Vernita, and confronts Elle in California after coming out of the grave. These bloody and violent confrontations, typically seen between men in most films, happen on the delicate bodies of women, reflecting that women in today's society can be as strong as men. This breaks the stereotype of women being easily dependent and settling for compromises, showing that women are no longer in a socially disadvantaged position. Quentin also designed some small details to highlight the elevation of women's status, such as Pai Mei, a martial arts master, taking in two female members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad as disciples to teach them martial arts. It's worth noting that historically, many martial arts have been passed down from males and not females. Bud learns about Beatrix through a burial alive method,

and Elle cunningly poisons Bud, Bill's brother, using underhanded tactics, avoiding a direct conflict between Beatrix and Bud. This undoubtedly signifies Quentin's intentional expression that the male status has declined to the point where they cannot contend with women.

Looking back at the role of the police in the drama, they only appear at Beatrix's wedding rehearsal, and their silence is based on the justice of female revenge, allowing the female characters to undergo a successful transformation from weakness to strength. From these details, it is not difficult to see that the film consciously undermines male authority and elevates the status of women.

3. The Deep Identity of Female Gender—The Return of Motherhood

From the outset, one can easily sense the suspense deliberately set by the director: Why is Beatrix, the protagonist, so determined to kill Bill and complete her revenge? In the first volume of *Kill Bill*, we are left without an answer, but in the second volume, the mystery is finally revealed. The reason behind her vengeance, and the strong resolve driving her, is love—her love for her unborn daughter, her desire to marry her fiancé, and even her past love for Bill (which later turned into hatred). Some have labeled Quentin Tarantino's film as a work of "violence aesthetics," magnifying the negative emotions of "violence and gore," which is an unfair assessment. Beneath the grotesque and bloodshed, there is the return of motherhood, representing the director's deeper recognition of female gender identity. Beatrix's motherhood is evident in various moments throughout the film. First and foremost, her pregnancy ignites her desire to break free from Bill's control and assert her independence. She expresses this clearly:

"Before the pregnancy test turned blue, I was a woman. I was your woman. I was your killer, killing for you. But once that pregnancy test turned blue, I could no longer do those things because I was going to be a mother. Do you understand? I made the right decision for my daughter. The world she is coming into should be a clean world. But if I stayed with you, she would have been born into a world she didn't belong to. I had to make a choice, and I chose her…"

Beatrix's pregnancy compels her to leave behind her life as an assassin for Bill. She admits that, as an individual, she was fearless and could carry out any mission. However, once she became pregnant, she began to feel fear. Her identity shifts from being a lover and assassin to that of a mother. She is confronted with a dilemma: remain as Bill's dependent or escape with her child and live freely. Ultimately, Beatrix chooses to become an independent, empowered mother. For a mother, the identity of a "killer" is sinful. Beatrix, in her pursuit of dignity as a good mother, no longer wishes to touch her child with bloodstained hands—a symbol of evil.

In addition, when Beatrix is in the final stages of her fight with the Japanese gang and only a trembling young boy remains, her maternal instinct kicks in. She pulls the boy over and gives him a good spanking, all the while scolding him: "What are you doing joining the yakuza? Go home to your mother!" This humorous scene serves to significantly diffuse the intensity of violence and is a clear expression of her maternal consciousness.

Further, in the final chapter, when Beatrix opens the door and points her gun at Bill, she is confronted with the daughter she had longed for, unsure if her child was even still alive. In that moment, Beatrix melts. Her maternal instincts strip away any resistance, and her hatred vanishes in an instant. Beatrix's maternal strength is also evident in her interaction with Copperhead (Vernita Green) and her daughter. Before their final showdown, Vernita pleads with Beatrix: "I had no choice when I tried to kill you. I deserve to die, and I know you'll come for me sooner or later. You should have your revenge, but not in front of my daughter, please..." Before this, the two had been engaged in a fierce battle, but when Vernita's daughter Nikkia arrives home from school, she begs Beatrix not to kill her in front of her child. Beatrix, showing empathy, hides her knife behind her back and pretends to be an old friend of Vernita's, greeting the young girl kindly: "What's your name, sweetheart?" After learning her name is Nikkia, Beatrix says, "Nikkia, what a lovely name for a lovely little girl." Upon hearing that Nikkia is four years old, Beatrix reflects: "I had a daughter too, and she would be about four now." After Nikkia goes upstairs, Beatrix reassures Vernita: "I won't kill you in front of your daughter." However, Vernita breaks her promise and attempts to ambush Beatrix, only to be killed herself. In the end, Beatrix tells Nikkia: "I didn't want to do this in front of you, and I'm sorry for that. But you can believe me when I say this was your mother's fault. If, when you grow up, you still feel sore about it, I'll be waiting."

French Professor Elisabeth Badinter published *Mother Love: Myth and Reality* in 1980, a book in which she referenced historical records and empirical data to conclude that the expression of maternal love varies with time and place, and is not inherently linked to a woman's nature. Badinter argued that the emphasis placed on maternal love shifts according to historical circumstances, proving that maternal affection, like other human emotions, is often dictated by practical considerations rather than solely by innate qualities. Based on her views, a definition of maternal love shaped by the demands of the times can be summarized as follows: 1. Maternal love as "strict discipline": This concept implies that mothers should not overly indulge their children but must assert authority through a solemn and serious demeanor, instilling fear and obedience in their children to prevent them from engaging in wrongful behavior. If they do not, it is seen as the mother's fault. This can be observed in Beatrix's interaction with the young boy from the gang, as she disciplines him to prevent him from following a criminal path. 2. Maternal love as the "duties of a nurse": This refers to the idea that if a mother cannot find emotional fulfillment, all that remains is the hardship of nurturing and caring for the child. 3. Maternal love as a "non-moral value": In the past, especially around 1780, there were many reasons why women could not personally raise their children, such as frailty, interference with marital life, lack of time due to the hardships of life, boredom, damage to their beauty, or lack of social interaction. At that time, maternal love was not considered superior to other values. 4. Maternal love as "patriotic duty": In periods such as the late Qing Dynasty in China, the idea that "a strong nation

must have a strong population, and strong population begins with maternal education" emerged. To ensure population growth, women were urged to fulfill their roles in raising children for the benefit of the nation. 5. Maternal love as "the glory of the sun and moon": In modern times, nations around the world have almost unanimously persuaded women to embrace motherhood, praising it as a sacred duty and the greatest honor a woman can achieve. Women unable to bear children are often regarded as incomplete, and once they have children, they are expected to abandon their careers and dedicate themselves to caring for their families. The hardships of motherhood often require self-sacrifice to manifest its brilliance.[4] For example, in *Kill Bill*, the film's protagonist, Beatrix, is portrayed as a highly skilled assassin with a thriving career. However, after discovering her pregnancy, she gives up everything, including her greatest love, Bill. She wishes to leave the world of violence behind and raise her daughter in a normal life. When she learns that her daughter has been living with Bill for four years and even recounts how she "killed" a goldfish, it solidifies Beatrix's determination to kill Bill and take her daughter away to live a normal life. Postmodern feminist theorist Christine Delphy views motherhood as a powerful method to challenge phallocentrism. She promotes pregnancy and child-rearing as one of the pathways through which women can experience joy and fulfillment. Through the act of caring for children, women can transcend the boundary between self and others; love, Delphy argues, is capable of dissolving the oppressive dynamics between subject and object. Psychoanalytic feminist Dorothy Dinnerstein observed that the mother-child relationship, as described by Melanie Klein, stems from the gender role arrangements within patriarchal families. The mother becomes the infant's sole figure of reliance, and this female authority, according to Dinnerstein, serves as the earliest prototype of absolute power. This concentrated female power is so overwhelming and dangerous that it cannot be left unchecked in the lives of adults. For every person raised solely by a mother, there arises a vital need to contain, control, and master this power, as it becomes a matter of survival.[1]

It is evident that the choice of a female protagonist in *Kill Bill* is not solely an expression of feminist awakening, but also underscores the notion that women's emotions, compared to men's, are often portrayed as more intense and profound. The unique force of maternal love, in particular, is a powerful and indescribable strength. It is this strength that sustains Beatrix through her many trials, allowing her to endure and survive. This force makes her both softer and stronger.

4. Reflection on Feminist Ideologies in Cinema

In recent years, Hollywood has produced an array of feminist films. In addition to *Kill Bill*, there are classics such as *Thelma & Louise*, *The Hunger Games*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, and *The Hours*. The origins of feminist cinema in Hollywood can be traced back to the 1970s, where film content tended to focus on domestic dramas. By the 1980s, feminist cinema critiques began to address social factors beyond gender relations, including the social status of Black women, as seen in Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. The 1988 film *The Accused* tackled the issue of sexual violence, highlighting the unjust treatment of female victims.

By the 1990s, feminist cinema in Hollywood had reached its peak. The irreconcilable conflict between men and women became a prominent theme, with films emphasizing confrontation between the sexes as well as between women and society. Women were no longer portrayed as delicate lambs in need of male protection but rather as warrior goddesses capable of going head-to-head with men. The feminist films of the 1990s mainly focused on radical rebellion and rupture between women and men, condemning the oppression women suffered at the hands of men. These films portrayed men as threats to women's rights, calling for women to rise up and resist this oppression to gain equal status and the same level of discourse. However, this form of radical feminist cinema did not grant women true discursive power. To a large extent, it borrowed from male modes of resistance. Films like *Thelma & Louise* from this period became emblematic of this radical feminism. In *Thelma & Louise*, there is a relentless advocacy for the overthrow of patriarchy and the depiction of men as enemies. The film showcases an extreme and narrow feminist ideology, suggesting that when women suffer harm from men in real life, they should completely abandon their female identity and take up arms to fight men to the death. In such a relationship, men and women are positioned as polar opposites, eliminating any possibility of dialogue and straying from the true essence of feminism.[6]

In the 21st century, Hollywood feminist films have generally matured, often using subtle techniques to depict the emotional journeys of women's growth. Although conflicts between men and women still exist, the methods of resolving these conflicts have become more tempered and less violent compared to the irreconcilable tensions of the 1990s. For example, *The Hours*, which won the Oscar in 2002, used parallel montage to depict three women from different time periods, all connected through Mrs. Dalloway. Each woman faced oppression, yet instead of fleeing, they resisted and fought for their freedom. Modern feminist films no longer use violence and sexual transgression as the sole means of expression. The affirmation of women's discourse does not necessarily come through the subjugation of men; it can manifest through new reflections on life itself or through the loss and transformation of women's discourse.[5] Women should approach men and society more maturely and rationally, as Elizabeth Grosz once said, "Construct yourself apart from men, not in opposition to them; be women in relation to men, but become women yourselves." In a dual-gender society, men and women are interdependent and inseparable, and stepping out of the oppressive and confrontational relationship teaches both genders how to coexist harmoniously. Such feminist films are more likely to gain recognition.

When Quentin Tarantino made *Kill Bill*, he aimed to avoid having the film labeled as an "extreme and narrow feminist film." In the second installment of *Kill Bill*, he did not solely focus on Beatrix's tough "warrior woman" persona, but also explored her most essential female characteristics, especially motherhood and tenderness. After avenging herself and killing Bill, she tearfully looks at him, once her beloved, and says, "I'm the bad guy," while holding his hand as he dies. She wipes away her tears after he

collapses. The next day, as her daughter watches cartoons in the house, Beatrix lies in the bathroom, hugging her daughter's toy, crying tears of joy and repeatedly muttering "thank you" to herself. This portrayal of a strong yet tender woman adds complexity to what had previously been a film focused entirely on violence. Indeed, the film presents intense conflicts between men and women. Bill, having misunderstood Beatrix's "infidelity," refuses to listen to her explanations and shoots her in the head. He never truly considered the real reason for her leaving, and when he later learns the truth, he merely dismisses his violent actions as "a little extreme." Similarly, when Beatrix seeks revenge, she is decisive, despite the fact that Bill had lovingly cared for their daughter over the past four years. Even though Bill and Beatrix still have feelings for each other, Bill, in his final moments, tells Beatrix, the woman who killed him, "You're not a bad person. You're a remarkable person. You're my favorite person." This line is the director's way of expressing the film's core message: that through her struggles, the female protagonist has earned the heartfelt admiration and respect of the male protagonist.

However, it is worth noting that the women in the film undergo a transformation from victims to perpetrators. While this effectively illustrates women's liberation, does this method of expression fundamentally differ from the radical feminist films of the 1990s? Both films seem to resolve conflicts between men and women through violence. Beatrix is undoubtedly portrayed as a "heroine," and from this perspective, Tarantino's *Kill Bill* can be seen as a continuation of *Thelma & Louise*. The reason behind this phenomenon cannot be separated from the fact that Tarantino, as a male director, handled this feminist subject matter. *Kill Bill* reflects a form of male-directed charity and concern.

According to feminist film criticism, a truly female-centered work must view the world through a female perspective, focus on women's living environments and the problems they face, and explore the psychological traits and common needs of women in specific times and regions. It should offer women as many possibilities as possible to express their views freely, voice their feelings, solve their problems, and choose their paths.[6] Since Tarantino, as a male director, habitually observes women from a male standpoint through the lens, the female characters in his films, despite being gangland killers, are still portrayed as objects of male desire. Whether it's the seductive and sexy Sofie, the cute and charming Gogo, the mature and dignified O-Ren Ishii, or Beatrix, who is both beautiful and brave, they all become objects of men's desires. Although they wield samurai swords to slaughter men and break away from the traditional "gaze," their cruel, absurd, and bloody actions lack depth and border on madness. The film does not offer any profound reflection on the current state of women's existence.

In conclusion, while *Kill Bill* has progressive significance in expressing feminism and awakening female independence, its method of expression is somewhat radical. However, it is believed that in the near future, feminist films will continue to mature.

5. Research Conclusions and Prospects

This paper, through an analysis of the film *Kill Bill*, reveals the reconstruction of gender roles and women's self-identity, particularly the elevation of women's status and the return of maternal consciousness under the patriarchal system. First, the female characters in the film, by displaying formidable combat skills and a strong will for revenge, break traditional gender stereotypes, proving that women can stand on equal footing with men, showcasing the same strength and courage. Second, through detailed design, such as placing female characters in dominant positions during fights and depicting the decline of male characters, the director conveys the dissolution of male authority and emphasizes the elevation of women's status in society. Finally, through the combination of Beatrix's revenge motives and maternal consciousness, the film demonstrates how women, in the process of seeking self-identity, combine maternal emotions with personal power, forming a unique feminist perspective. This reflects the deconstruction of traditional male authority and further highlights the reconstruction of women's self-identity.

Despite providing a relatively comprehensive analysis of the reconstruction of gender roles and women's self-identity in *Kill Bill*, this study has some limitations. First, it mainly focuses on the primary female characters in the film and fails to sufficiently explore the marginal characters and their potential influence on gender issues. Second, while there is an in-depth critique of patriarchal culture, the study lacks a broader perspective on the cultural context and its shifts across different societies. Additionally, the theoretical framework of this research is primarily based on feminist perspectives and does not incorporate other sociological or psychological theories for cross-analysis, which leads to a somewhat limited understanding of certain complex phenomena. Future research could consider adopting more diverse theoretical perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between gender roles and self-identity.

In future studies, the author plans to further explore the reconstruction of women's self-identity across different cultural contexts, particularly expanding the scope of research to include other types of films to compare the portrayal and transformation of gender roles in different cultures. Given the unique nature of film as a form of visual culture, future research could also incorporate audience viewing experiences to examine the psychological impact and responses to gender roles. Through the analysis of more case studies, it is hoped that this research will provide richer perspectives and deeper insights into the field of gender studies, promoting the development and application of feminist theory.

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