

Portrait of a Lady on Fire: Deconstruction of Female Identity

Jiaqi Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK
a. jiaqiz@hhu.edu.cn*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Portrait of a Lady on Fire is a drama film directed by Céline Sciamma and starring Adèle Haenel and Noémie Merlant. The film centers on the passionate love story between Heloise, a bride on the brink of marriage, and Marianne, the painter commissioned to create her portrait. This paper analyses the construction and deconstruction of female identity in Portrait of a Lady on Fire through the lenses of gaze theory and feminist identity theory. It begins by exploring Heloise's resistance to the objectifying male gaze, illustrated through her defiance against the passive model identity and her challenge to the myth of Orpheus, which traditionally casts women in powerlessness and rescue role. The paper then delves into the film's critique of the roles of wife and mother within the patriarchal, heteronormative family structure, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's ideas in *The Second Sex* to further contextualize the film's feminist discourse. Through these analyses, the paper reveals how the film reimagines and challenges traditional female identities, offering a detailed and subtle portrayal of women's autonomy and identity.

Keywords: Portrait of a Lady on Fire, Female Identity, Male Gaze.

1. Introduction

In 2019, French female director Céline Sciamma released the homoerotic film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which won the Best Screenplay award at that year's Cannes Film Festival and received several nominations. The film tells the story of the secretive, short-lived but passionate love between Heloise, a new bride-to-be, and Marianne, a painter.

Scholars have analysed the film around feminist film theory and gender theory. Most of these analyses refer to the male gaze and the female gaze of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, such as Bacholle [1], Knoblauch [2], and Esposito [3], who in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire: A Manifesto about the Female Gaze* provides a detailed analysis of the film's female gaze. Besides this, Bacholle [1] analyses the fluidity of the film's representation and proposes a denial of the binary view. However, although Bacholle[1] discusses the fluidity of identity and Cheng [4] mentions the continuity of identity, there is a gap in the analysis of female identity in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Therefore, this essay will analyse the female identity reflected in this film.

This paper will analyse the film concerning Mulvey's theory of the gaze and feminist identity theory. Firstly, the paper will analyse the film's representation of the character's resistance to the identity of the gazed under the male gaze through Heloise's resistance to the identity of the model and her opposition to the passivity of the identity of the rescued person, which cooperates with the discussion of the myth of Orpheus. Next, the essay analyses the film's characters' deconstruction of

the wife's and mother's identities within the patriarchal, heteronormative family paradigm in the context of Beauvoir's view of women's family identities in *The Second Sex*. Through this analysis, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*'s discussion of female identity will be presented.

2. Deconstruction of the identity of the gazed

“Male gaze” was proposed by Mulvey [5]. She suggested that in cinema, female characters carry male desires. “Male” includes both the male viewer and the male character, linked through cinematic apparatus such as the camera and the screen [5]. In other words, the female character implies being gazed at. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* represents the deconstruction of the female gaze about the gaze's identity (generally female) under the male gaze. This can be seen through Heloise's revolt against the model's identity and her reinterpretation of the myth of Orpheus.

2.1. Identity of Model

As Hedley and Merchant-Knudsen [6] suggest, the film enters the male gaze early on. As an eighteenth-century female painter, Marianne experienced the sexism of women not having the right to paint the male nude and that female painters could not create any significant subject matter and would rebel against male hegemony in fine art by painting in silence. However, she does not bring her own social experience to her experience with Heloise when she arrives by boat. In the film, her original purpose for the painting was to draw a portrait for Heloise's fiancé so that her hidden glances and stares include her depiction of Heloise for the painting and the gaze of the Milanese fiancé whom she represents. Here, Marianne assumes the function of a cinematic apparatus in viewing the male gaze; the male controls her, and the perspective she views comes from the male.

In Mulvey's view, the male gaze is motivated by men's desire to watch women as they are cast in the drive of desire, and women are thus presented in the film as intensely visual and erotic [6]. The woman in this image is gazed upon and exists to fulfill male desire.

This male gaze, which defines the position and relationship between the two sides, setting up the subject and the object, is destined to be unequal, and it makes differentiated expectations and demands on both the sender and the receiver of the action. The gaze Marianne exudes cannot be ignored from the perspective of Heloise, the viewer; it is forceful and rude. So, when Heloise looks at Marianne's first portrait of herself, she angrily questions, “Do you see me like that?” and Marianne replies, “Not only me”, which again confirms the angle from which she gazes at Heloise also includes the male gaze.

In the interview, director Sciamma mentions that she wants to avoid models to exist here as muse. She calls for an equal identity between the painter and the model. She practices her point of view in the film [1]. Heloise is not a model who does not speak in the movie; Heloise expresses resistance to the depicted, immovable identity of the model. When Marianne tries to explain her paintings in terms of advanced rules of painting, hoping to convince Heloise to approve of her work, Heloise directly accuses Marianne's work of being “lifeless”. This makes Marianne aware of her male gaze when viewing Heloise and unconsciously self-corrects through lighting and erasing.

After this, Heloise's dialogue while Marianne is painting announces Heloise's resistance to her status as a model. “When you look at me, who am I looking at?” says Heloise. In this dialogue, Heloise points to the bidirectional nature of the line of sight between the painter and the model. Beyond Heloise's resistance to the model's identity, it suggests Heloise's dissatisfaction with a submissive and silent identity and position.

2.2. Identity of Rescued Person

Women who become objects of the gaze often no longer have any function other than as objects of male desire projection [7]. This is reflected in the fact that when they become rescued under the male gaze, they are often impassive, or their thoughts and reactions are not represented in work. Using the symbol of Eurydice from the myth of Orpheus, this film discusses the initiative of the rescued.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire suggests the fates and choices of the identity of Marianne and Heloise by drawing on their different interpretations of the myth of Orpheus. During the fireside storytelling circle between Marianne, Heloise, and the maid Sophie, Marianne reads the story of Orpheus from ancient Greek mythology. In ancient Greek mythology, the myth of Orpheus celebrates Orpheus' courage and deep love. Orpheus' wife, Eurydice, was bitten to death by a poisonous snake; he begged Hades and Persephone of the Underworld to bring his wife back to life and conquer them with his talent; they then agreed to his request but asked him not to turn back until he stepped out of the underworld. Eventually, because Orpheus could not control his desires, Eurydice fell into the abyss of the Underworld. His wife, Eurydice, is passive; her fate depends on her husband, Orpheus, and she is only the carrier of Orpheus' emotions [8].

Three people give their opinions on the story: Sophie is the most conventional; like most readers, she is angry and regrets that Orpheus's rescue attempt failed just before the victory, and she feels pity for Eurydice's inability to come back to life. Marianne, a painter, argues that Orpheus made "not a lover's choice, but a poet's" and chose to turn back to remember Eurydice. Although there are differences between the two answers, the subject who decides to send out the action is the same, and the power of active discourse and choice is in the hands of Orpheus as a male. In contrast, Heloise argues that Orpheus turns back because he hears Eurydice saying "turn back" behind him. Heloise's reading is a deconstruction of the traditional understanding and popularisation of the Orpheus myth, and she displaces the active party in the myth by making Eurydice the owner of the discourse and the initiative from a female point of view and position.

At the end of the film, Heloise becomes what she describes as Eurydice, rejecting the passive identity of being rescued or abandoned and actively choosing her end: calling out to Marianne in her last moments before she leaves, and, as the door closes, Heloise's body drowns in the darkness. The film also uses the film's language to acknowledge Heloise's active identity. The shaky camera follows Marianne, gradually approaching the door with the increasingly tense music, and just as the door is about to be pushed open, a 'turn back' calls out to Marianne. Following Marianne's look back, it is Heloise. The puzzle is solved: Marianne's follow-up shot is Heloise's point of view. This camera setup allows Heloise to be the active side of language and plot and the active giver of the initiative regarding vision.

Heloise's reading of the Orpheus myth of Eurydice and her actions reflects her deconstruction of the identity of the rescued: the rescued are no longer just waiting without choice or voice but actively choosing their own destiny.

3. The Deconstruction of Female Identity in Patriarchal Heteronormative Families

Portrait of a Lady on Fire boldly attempts to create an independent utopian world without social attributes by constructing an independent female narrative space and withdrawing the male role [1]. While this space provides a venue for Heloise and Marianne's relationship to develop, it also deconstructs the three traditional identities of women in a patriarchal society—wife, daughter, and mother.

3.1. Identity of Model

The story is set in 18th-century Europe, where the Renaissance and the Enlightenment led to a certain degree of liberation and the emergence of early feminist ideas. Writing in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with strictures on Political and moral subjects*, argues that women at the time were trying to realize their social status through marriage rather than being career oriented. Women at the time were trying to realise their social status through marriage rather than being career orientated. This was at the expense of women's time and was also physically "often legally prostituted"[9]. Although the words are sharp and aggressive, Mary's writings clearly show that by at least the late 18th century, women writers had realized that marriage could be oppressive to women.

In the film, Heloise and her sister marry men they have never met. This is not a choice between lovers out of love but a one-sided and authoritarian choice for the man who wants to have a wife, an act of objectification in which patriarchal and matriarchal power combine to select a woman as a commodity. Male society encourages men to be husbands or fathers, but women in patriarchal, heteronormative families can only be subordinate and dominated by men [10].

Heloise's sister is the first character to revolt against the status of wife or fiancée, whose resistance predates the story. The film describes the events of Heloise's sister's resistance to her marriage and her death in a few lines of dialogue, which are added to the film as background to the story. Though only existing as a story and character in dialogue, the sister is still a rich character, reflecting a rejection of the identity of the wife in a patriarchal, heteronormative family. The sister's death is not accidental, as in Heloise's transcription, the sister "didn't scream" as she leaped from the edge of the cliff, implying that she chose to commit suicide because she did not want to marry a man she had never met. With a suicide that can be called a heroic act, this woman frees herself from her predetermined status as a "wife", which is the destiny of a woman who has been played by the patriarchal society and whose status as a wife is given by the patriarchal society is dissolved together with her life. Perhaps in her fall, the sister felt the end of her life and the beginning of her freedom.

After her sister's death, Heloise is forced to take over her sister's fate and become the fiancée of a man she has never met in Milan. Instead of her sister's straightforward struggle, Heloise deconstructs her wifely identity in a more subtle but equally daring way, which can be called deconstructive because Heloise displaces and dismantles her wifely identity. Firstly, by falling in love with Marianne, she displaces the identity of the wife of the man she has not met as Marianne's wife. In addition, at the exhibition at the end of the film, Marianne sees a portrait of the Countess Heloise, who has become a mother. In this portrait, the book in Heloise's hands reveals the folded corner of the twenty-eighth page on which Marianne's self-portrait was left, and Heloise's silent betrayal memorializes their love and dismantles the identity of the wife who, in the 18th-century context, is at the service of her husband's heart and soul. This can be explained in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* [10], where a woman married to a man becomes owned by him, and the woman's life becomes increasingly closed off, centered only around her husband and family.

Heloise and her sister each express, in their way, their resistance to the identity of the wife in the patriarchal, heteronormative family paradigm, and together they complete the deconstruction of the wife's identity. Because, arguably, without the sister's revolt and suicide, Heloise's displacement and dismantling would have lost its precondition, there is a continuity between the two, with the former having an impact on the latter.

3.2. Second Section

The film represents two types of motherhood, one bound to the heteronormative family structure under patriarchy and one naturally possessed by women. Bacholle [1] argues that Heloise's mother

appears as a representative of patriarchy. In place of Heloise's father, she represents the center of power in the heteronormative family. She will oppress and discipline other women who are not sheltered by men or who do not want to submit to the patriarchy. However, she is also emotionally rich due to the natural emotional connection between mother and child.

She projects her desires on her daughter, who wants to be superior to herself but does not want her not to experience her failings [10]. In the dialogue between Marianne and Heloise's mother, it is clear that Heloise's mother, like Heloise herself, had initially given portraits to strange fiancées, waiting for her success in being chosen as a wife. She takes this behaviour for granted and applies it to her two daughters. She is unrepentant even when this results in the death of her eldest daughter and continues to oppress her youngest daughter. However, she does love Heloise, whom she wants to take to Milan, where she likes to live, and will ask her daughter for kisses "just as a child".

In contrast to this identity of a mother who is given the role of advocate of the patriarchy by heteronormative families is the natural motherhood of women. In patriarchal societies, motherhood is seen as a woman's vocation because of the unique body parts she possesses to bear children and become a mother. By praising the importance of motherhood and granting empty honours to women who become mothers, society tries to cover up the adverse effects of female reproduction on women with the title of greatness [10]. The patriarchal society gradually forfeits women's reproductive rights under what appears to be a negotiated compulsion. However, it has to be recognized that reproduction is a woman's 'natural' right [10] and that decisions and choices should be left in the hands of women. The film uses abortion to return reproductive power to women.

After learning of Sophie's pregnancy, Marianne doesn't ask about the baby's father but asks Sophie if she wants to have the baby. After receiving a negative answer, Marianne and Heloise accompanied Sophie to have an abortion. The act of abortion was not an immediate one, and due to the medical and cognitive limitations of the time, they started with running and jumping and herbal remedies, which were unsuccessful and eventually required human intervention. In this episode, Sophie lies in pain on the bed, and another baby next to her is shown holding her hand and wiping the tears from her face. New life and death are interwoven, and in the throes of abortion, reproductive power is returned to the woman, the baby representing the power to give birth, and Sophie representing the power to abort, which declares that a woman can make her own choices to either give birth to live or to give it up. With the disappearance of the baby, Sophie's identity as a mother is stripped away, but it is a declaration of the return of a woman's natural motherhood.

It is worth mentioning that Heloise and Marianne watch abortion take place, in which the pain of female childbearing and abortion are equally confronted; abortion is equally painful, and there is a price to be paid for any choice. The two's presence also expresses the film's belief that abortion is not a symbol of impurity that needs to be avoided or covered up. In the narrow, shabby, hidden room, the exaggerated sacredness and inevitability of motherhood are dissolved, and procreation is returned to the natural, optional, and non-essential power that women are born with.

4. Conclusion

The film ends suddenly when Heloise smiles as she is absorbed in the piano piece *The Four Seasons*. In these two minutes, Heloise thinks of the concentration of her lover as she plays this piece for her, of the hood that fell off her head when she first met Marianne, of her blonde hair blowing in the sea breeze and of her run that finally came true, or of her gaze with Marianne after the sun has set, amid the chanting, with the burning hem of her dress.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire uses its artful audiovisual language to deconstruct women's identities in narrative depth, offering new possibilities for the practice of feminist cinema. The film challenges the one-way gaze and muse identity between the painter and the model. It challenges the discourse of the rescued in the myth of Orpheus, demonstrating the equality of gaze and identity. At the same time,

the film attempts to deconstruct women's identities as wives and mothers in the patriarchal, heteronormative family, calling for equal and accessible power and identity for women.

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