

Focus on the Transformation of Female Relationships - The Screen Portrayals from "Comet Woman" to "Miss Bird"

Jingxi Jiao¹, Yifu Zheng^{2*}

¹*Xi'an TieYi International Curriculum, Xi'an, China*

²*Dalian Maple Leaf International School, Dalian, China*

**Corresponding Author. Email: 23010031@students.mapleleafedu.com*

Abstract. This article aims to study the changes in the relationships between female characters in films from the 20th century to the present, reflecting the portrayal of women in different social conditions and under the lenses of different directors. The author analyze the factors of society, culture, and industry, looking at the big picture through small details. In the article, the authors compare the two films "Miss Bower" and "The Comet Princess", by using horizontal and vertical comparisons as well as analysis of the language of the shots, and employ text analysis and comparative analysis methods to conduct the research. The authors found that in the two films, the relationships between women changed from hostile and mutually harming to mutual support. This is also a progress in social culture and a necessary trend of historical development. In most current films, the trend can also be observed. From these two simple films, we can discover the progress, diversity, and the non-simple struggle between women in the perception of relationships among women by society and culture. This is also a foundation for the development of feminism, and more people understand that when women unite, it is a greater strength.

Keywords: female position, "Miss Bower" , "The Comet Princess"

1. Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century, the feminist movement has changed through several waves, from "striving for basic rights" to "achieving diverse identity recognition". Meanwhile, the portrayal of female characters in Hollywood films has undergone significant changes. Against the backdrop of the "she economy", the development of female-oriented films has seen a surge, with an increasing number of films focusing on women's life experiences and emotional worlds, and attempting to present more authentic and diverse female images. These characters often hold independent thoughts, emotions, and behavioral capabilities, differentiating from the typical female images in previous films and showcasing women's pursuit and realization of self-worth [1]. From the merely malicious competition or jealousy over male characters to mutual understanding and support among women, a classic female archetype that has always been used is the mother, the earth mother. Contemporary Chinese films operate with unique coding mechanisms and political rhetoric, and within this context, the "mother" image has taken on the role of carrying the core signifier of the mainstream "people" ideology—making it an image determined by multiple elements [2]. The

mother-daughter relationship, too, has undergone a shift: from being opposed and incompatible with each other to sharing mutual understanding and tolerance.

In this article, the authors project the reshapes in female character settings in two films onto the evolution of female values and social cultural trends in different periods, analyze the deep-seated causes of the opposite conditions among women, reveal the social, cultural, and industry factors behind it, and understand the characteristics of the shaping of female images and relationships in films at that time. By comparing the two films, the authors can trace the evolution of the narrative of female relationships in the film industry in different periods and then explore the multiple causes for this evolution, including social culture and the development of the film and television industry, providing case references for understanding the interactive relationship between films and social development. The authors start the research by taking "All About Eve" and "Lady Bird" as the objects of study. "All About Eve", roughly set in the 1950s, depicts a post-war American society that emphasizes "family return", where the Hollywood star system dominates the narrative and female characters are subordinate to the male system. It is regarded as a classic text that reveals the forced "inward competition" of women in a patriarchal structure. "Lady Bird", on the other hand, is set in the 2010s, a period marked by the rise of independent films, the #MeToo movement, and an increase in the proportion of female creators. The narrative focuses on diverse identities and generational resonance [3].

From the "rivalry among actresses" as the core to the focus on the "tug-of-war and support" between mother and daughter, it showcases a new paradigm of mutual assistance, understanding, and personal growth, which is highly significant for research.

In the research, the authors employed textual analysis methods to conduct in-depth analyses of the characters' dialogues, narrative structures, and dialogue relationships in the two films, paying attention to narrative logic, connection points, and different contradictions. The authors also used comparative research methods to make horizontal comparisons of specific characters in the two films and conduct vertical analyses by extending the time axis and projecting them into different social and cultural contexts. Additionally, the authors innovatively incorporated data on the employment of film industry personnel [4].

2. Film analysis

2.1. Female character analysis

2.1.1. "The Comet Princess"

Eve, as Margot's backup actress, took the stage when Margot was unable to perform for some reason and achieved great success with her outstanding performance. Later, in the dressing room backstage of the theater, Eve was immersed in the joy of success, and her mindset gradually changed. She began to show ambition and even attempted to seduce Margot's boyfriend Bill, hoping to use this relationship to help her career. However, Bill sternly rejected her.

All of this was exactly noticed by the theater critic Addison Dewey. Addison recognized Eve's ambition and believed that the two were on the same path. So he began to talk to Eve, his words full of probing and inducement towards Eve. While Eve cleverly responded, trying to showcase her charm and value in front of Addison and also hoping to further enhance her status with his influence.

At this time, Margot came to the dressing room. She had already learned about Eve's actions and was filled with anger and dissatisfaction. She sarcastically criticized Eve with sharp words, mocking her ambition and hypocrisy, exposing her attempt to replace her. Eve pretended to be innocent,

pretending to be misunderstood, trying to win sympathy with tears and grievances, and hypocritically expressed her "gratitude" and "loyalty" to Margot.

The two exchanged words back and forth, appearing polite on the surface but actually full of hidden daggers. Every conversation was filled with hostility. Margot's words were full of disdain and warnings towards Eve, while Eve responded cleverly, secretly provoking her responses. This scene vividly displayed the open and covert struggles between the two, skillfully depicting Margot's pride and straightforwardness and Eve's hypocrisy and cunning, and highlighting the themes of the film about the struggle for fame and the complexity of human nature.

2.1.2. "Miss Bower"

The heartbroken Sophia, alone in her humble home, silently shed tears, filled with deep resentment and despair that she could not express. The Jewish tailor Fainstein, who lived downstairs, accidentally noticed the strange behavior of Sophia upstairs. She heard Sophia's suppressed cries, filled with worry and compassion. Fainstein knew how much Sophia had endured for this family, and also understood that she was currently suffering from the ruthless betrayal of her family members. So, she hurried upstairs and arrived at Sophia's home.

Seeing Sophia's despondent appearance, Fainstein's eyes reddened. She walked up to her and gently held Sophia in her arms, soothing her. As Sophia broke into intermittent sobs, Fainstein learned the full story. She was angry at the coldness and selfishness of Sophia's family members, and at the same time, she became even more determined to help Sophia. She tightly held Sophia's hand and said with a firm gaze, "Sophia, you can't just let them take your daughter away. You have to go to the dock and find your daughter back. She is your precious one!" Sophia lifted her tear-stained face, her eyes full of hesitation and confusion. She was afraid of facing the family's ruthlessness and also worried that she was powerless to change everything. Fainstein seemed to have read her mind and continued to encourage her, "Don't be afraid. I'll go with you. We will definitely bring your daughter back [5]."

After Fainstein's repeated persuasion and encouragement, Sophia finally gathered her courage. The two hurried towards the dock. Along the way, the sound of gunfire was continuous, the city was in chaos, and pedestrians fled in panic in all directions. But in their hearts, they had only one belief - to find Sophia's daughter. Fainstein tightly held Sophia's hand and moved forward through the crowded crowd, constantly comforting Sophia, who was a little panicked due to her anxiety. Finally, they reached the dock, amidst the chaotic crowd and the departing ships, and began the difficult search.

2.2. Cinematic language and visual meaning

2.2.1. Techniques in the narrative

In the dressing room confrontation scene of *All About Eve*, the film employs cinematic language to emphasize the competitive opposition between the two women, subtly hinting at their relationship to the audience. In this sequence, the camera moves with both Margo and Eve, but it predominantly follows Margo. Whenever the two encounter each other, the camera tends to stay with Margo. Most of Margo's shots are filmed from a low angle, often showing her full frontal face, which reinforces her aggressiveness and authoritative presence, underlining her dominance in this scene. In contrast, Eve is often placed at the edges of the frame or partially obscured, creating a visual opposition. When both appear in the same frame, they are positioned at the same depth (01:07:14) or

deliberately drawn closer through spatial angles and distance (01:07:33), creating a sense of pressure and intensifying the tension. The film also reveals the differing attitudes of other characters toward them. For instance, by comparing shots at 01:06:25, 01:07:14, and 01:08:08, the two men's positions vary: at times they stand aligned with Eve and encircle her, while at other times they oppose Margo, with the angles making them appear more distant. These placements are visually segmented by background lines. In *All About Eve*, the camera primarily employs fixed long shots with slow tracking movements, gradually tightening as the dialogue and plot unfold.

By contrast, in *Lady Bird*, the visual depiction of the mother-daughter relationship tends to emphasize emotional resonance and equal dialogue. In the airport farewell scenes, Lady Bird's mother stands inside the driver's seat, reluctant to leave. The long shot places her figure within the car window, suggesting a state of "inner suppression." Meanwhile, the overall pace is slower, with each shot allowing enough time for emotions to flow naturally, highlighting the complex relationship between the two characters, filled with suppression, struggle, and affection. Here, the interaction emphasizes the "emotional flow" between women rather than mere "power struggle" or "female competition," showing a softer portrayal of female relationships in contemporary cinema.

It can be seen that society's impression of women has shifted from being mutually antagonistic to supportive of one another. Women can now live more for themselves and rely on each other in times of need, rather than engaging in the one-sided competition of the past [6].

2.2.2. Rhythm

Through composition, it can be observed that the former (*All About Eve*) often adopts stage-like, tightly framed compositions, placing characters within the cramped backstage and theater spaces, while situating capitalists in spacious and well-lit environments. This contrast highlights the hierarchical structure within the entertainment industry. For example, Margo often occupies the center of the frame in the dressing room or banquet hall, reflecting her star status; whereas Eve initially appears at the margins, struggling to gradually enter the main perspective. By contrast, the latter (*Lady Bird*) employs open, realistic settings to depict youth and family life—such as living rooms, car interiors, and churches—allowing characters to move within authentic urban and domestic environments. Here, there is no rigid hierarchy, but rather equal social relationships. The camera sometimes adopts symmetrical or natural medium shots, placing Lady Bird within everyday settings to experience various challenges, face setbacks, and ultimately achieve personal growth.

In *Lady Bird*, the camera more often employs tracking shots that follow the characters' movements, creating a relatively gentle, grounded rhythm that allows the audience more time to engage with the characters' emotions. This contrast also reflects the two films' differing approaches to positioning female characters: the former emphasizes the tension of performance and struggles for power, while the latter highlights the fluid experience of individual growth.

3. Analysis of film-related staff

The full cast and crew lists of *All About Eve* (1950) and *Lady Bird* provided by IMDb and other related materials.

All About Eve (1950) has a total of 79 cast and crew members, including actors and the entire behind-the-scenes staff (including uncredited personnel). The authors have categorized these individuals by gender and present the following statistics (an example of the source can be seen on the IMDb page): there were 59 men and 20 women. The total number of women was 20, which is

approximately 25.3% of the total number of men and women. Gender was not specified for 3 individuals [7, 8].

According to the report and the cast and crew list of the film *All About Eve*, the number of male workers is significantly higher than that of female workers. However, based on the report, the proportion of female workers in the film industry has increased significantly and is showing a yearly upward trend. This indicates that societal prejudices against women are gradually diminishing and gender equality is being steadily advanced.

The report titled "Inequality Across 1,800 Popular Films" provides a detailed analysis of the gender and age distribution of leading roles in the top 100 box office films in North America from 2007 to 2024. It shows that, although the proportion of female leads has increased in recent years, middle-aged and older women are still severely underrepresented. For example, in the top 100 box office films of 2024, only eight movies feature women aged 45 or older as sole or co-leads, compared to 21 films with male leads in the same age group. In other words, the number of films starring men aged 45 and above is about 2.6 times that of their female counterparts. This gender disparity is not a sudden phenomenon but rather the result of years of accumulated inequality: in 2007, there was only one film in the top 100 with a female lead aged 45 or older, and in 2019, there were still only three such films. The highest number of leading roles for middle-aged and older women was reached in 2018, with a brief increase to 11 films. Overall, once women enter middle age, their opportunities to take on leading roles in popular films remain few and far between. Although there has been some improvement in recent years, the progress is still volatile and far from matching that of their male counterparts of the same age. This age inequality is not confined to leading roles but is also reflected in the overall age distribution of female characters on screen. According to research from San Diego State University, there is a sharp drop in the age distribution of female characters between their 30s and 40s: in popular films, female characters in their 30s account for about 35%, but this proportion plummets to 16% once they reach their 40s. In conclusion, while the status of women has gradually improved, the unfair treatment of older female actors still persists [9,10].

4. Conclusion

"Comet Beauty" constructs a pattern of female relationships that is filled with competition and calculation. Eve deliberately approaches Margot, presenting herself as a weak figure to gain trust, and then uses various means to seize Margot's opportunities, attempting to replace her as a Broadway star. However, after Margot realizes Eve's ambition, she fiercely counterattacks. The relationship between the two has completely turned into a power and status game, filled with lies, betrayal and jealousy, which undoubtedly reflects the mutual opposition among women. This relationship reflects the specific social environment where women, in their pursuit of personal career success, get trapped in vicious competition due to limited resources, and their relationships are completely distorted by interests. It is a rather traditional female relationship pattern. "Countess" showcases another dimension of female relationships - warmth, mutual assistance, and overcoming difficulties together. In the specific social context, Sophia, as a descendant of the Belarusian nobility, received sincere help from other women in difficult times. The friendship among the dancers became a comfort and support for their souls during the tough years. They supported each other in the mire of life and faced the cruelty of war and the unpredictability of fate together. This female bond, which is not about competing for interests, is pure and profound. It is a natural expression of kindness and compassion in human nature, highlighting the powerful force of women uniting as one and warming each other in times of adversity.

By comparing the two films, it can be observed that the narrative focus of female relationships has shifted from "internal hostility" to "emotional support". This phenomenon reflects the synchronous evolution of female values, social gender concepts, and marketing strategies of the film industry. From "The Comet Princess" to "Countess", the female relationships depicted in the films have changed from cold interest competition to warm emotional connection, reflecting the progress of social concepts in understanding female relationships. Society no longer simply places women in a competitive and opposing position, but gradually recognizes that women can establish sincere and mutually supportive emotional bonds. This change also indicates the transformation of women's roles and status in society, moving from isolated individuals to mutually supportive groups, injecting new connotations into the development of feminism, emphasizing the importance of female solidarity and collaboration in breaking free from social constraints and achieving self-worth.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Dai, J.H. (2011) Visible and invisible women: Women in contemporary Chinese cinema and films about women. Retrieved from <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/40443.html>
- [2] Du, Z.J. and He, Z.J. (2021) Female images in films from the perspective of feminism. *Literature Life*, 15, 131-132.
- [3] Qiu, F. and Zhou, Y. (2024) A brief analysis of character image construction and self-awakening in female films. *Popular Literature*, 22, 76-78.
- [4] Wang, J.X. (2018) The Breakthrough and Transformation of Women's Films as seen from "Miss Bird". *Movie Literature*, 13, 140-142.
- [5] None. (2020) A Thrilling and Exciting Account of the Sufferings and Horrible Tortures Inflicted on Mortimer Bowers and Miss Sophia Delaplain. *Empire and The Literature of Sensation*, Rutgers University Press, 201–228,
- [6] Tran, Thuy. (2017). READING IMAGES - THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*. 33. 10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4217.
- [7] All About Eve Cast and Crew (Rotten Tomatoes). (n.d.). Rotten Tomatoes. Retrieved from https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1000626-all_about_eve/cast-and-crew#:~:text=Joseph%20L,White%20Autograph%20Seeker%20Actor%20William
- [8] "Lady Bird Cast & Crew." The Movie Database (TMDb), www.themoviedb.org/movie/391713-lady-bird/cast?language=en-US#:~:text=El%20Bush Accessed 9 Sept. 2025.
- [9] Smith, S. L., Pieper, K., & Wheeler, S., (2024) Inequality in 1, 700 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ & disability from 2007 to 2023 (Report), USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.
- [10] Marta M. (2023). From Margo Channing to Margaret Elliot: The Aging Actress.... *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, Vol.10, Issue 3