

The "Gaze" Defect Behind Revenge: On the Ways of Female Revenge and Redemption in Sympathy for Lady Vengeance

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Abstract: In today's film and television genres that show women fighting against the powerful, women's revenge films are gaining more and more attention. These films have some positive significance in showing women's sense of independence. However, the problems behind most female revenge films are still under consideration. This article will take "Sympathy for Lady Vengeance", one of "The Vengeance Trilogy" by the famous Korean director Park Chan-wook, as an example and use the theory of gaze to analyze the otherness of the female gaze embodied in the film; from the way the female protagonist, Geum-ja Lee, takes revenge, it will analyze the otherness of the third-world female culture behind the violent revenge in the film; the similarity of women's revenge dilemma, that is, the inevitable self-alienation or self-destruction of excellent and weak women, is discussed by analyzing Geum-ja's revenge and redemption at the end of the film. Ultimately, the film tries to raise the discourse of the other and present a genuinely feminist perspective and voice.

Keywords: female revenge, Sympathy for Lady Vengeance, male gaze, otherness, the sense of sin

1. Introduction

As the film industry has grown, the way characters are portrayed in films has become increasingly diverse, and there are more and more films about a female getting revenge. The image of female revenge first appeared in European and American cinema. Some scholars have attempted to analyze, from the perspective of "deconstructionism", the attempts of the creators of female revenge films to reverse the "otherness" of the female figure in patriarchal culture by changing the subject and object of the "gaze" [1].

In recent years, images of female avengers have become a significant representation of Korean cinema. In Park Chan-wook's films, the subversive writing of both male and female characters and the conscious awakening of female characters show how gender is written and how Korean socio-cultural are changing. However, the revengeful woman still functions more as a symbolic 'cultural commodity' for consumption (physical voyeurism and sexual depiction), becoming a dynamic, sensual, and intense group of images encoded by the director and the audience in a closed and circular filmmaking project where the revengeful woman does not find a powerful way to challenge

patriarchal society [2]. Taking Park Chan-wook's film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* as an example, this study aims to analyze the dilemma of revenge and how to break women's "othering" in the "gaze".

2. "Gaze" and visual culture: female revenge and resistance to the status of the "other"

2.1. The body — the object of desire being voyeurism in the camera

The gaze refers to a method of viewing that carries a sense of power and is entangled with desire and identity. The viewer is primarily the subject of 'looking' and the subject of power and desire. Thus, the 'gaze' leads to complex and multiple social and political relations in the act of 'seeing'. Building on Lacan and others' theories of the gaze, Laura Mulville analyses how the female body is presented on screen from a feminist perspective, revealing the hidden patriarchal unconscious in cinema — the 'male gaze'.

In a world orchestrated by sexual imbalance, women become objects of gaze violence, targets of men's gaze, fantasy, and discipline in films and television productions dominated by male authority. In the film, women's sexy bodies and appearances are encoded by the director and the camera, and even by the desires of the audience, thus constructing them as objects of purposeful desire for the audience, with a kind of commercialism [3]. In Freud's theory, he argues that the strong human desire to watch (viewing fetish) derives from the sexual instinct to gain pleasure and sexual satisfaction from voyeurism. In this context, it can be understood that the commerciality referred to here refers mainly to the image of female revenge as an objectifying doll to be viewed and consumed by men [4].

Park Chan-wook calls *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* a subversive work that subverts the traditional image of the "Virgin" in Korean movies. However, the construction of the characters still falls prey to the clichés of male aesthetics and even reinforces female stereotypes. When the "virtuous" personality of Geum-ja is expressed, Geum-ja is portrayed as a gentle woman with a plain face and shoulder-length black hair; when Geum-ja needs to turn out to be an antagonist for her revenge, she is painted with exaggerated and sultry red eye shadow and wavy curls. It is a narrow view of the diversity of female aesthetics, which are still subservient to the male orientation. Moreover, the affable Geum-ja is "affable" not only because of her ability to compel the mind and body but also because of her beauty. Not only does the play include scenes in which men are overwhelmed by her beauty after her release from prison, but there are several scenes in the opening scenes in which Geum-ja's beauty is so pathetic that the "nation is shocked" and willing to believe that she is a good, kind girl. The priest himself even goes to the prison in the hope of clearing her of her sins. It is also hard to believe that the scenes showing Geum-ja being violated are only necessary to further the plot rather than for the pleasure and sexual gratification of voyeurism.

2.2. The Dilemma of the Otherness in the Dependency-Plot

The relationship between the sexes is a typical "subject-other" theory, in which the man defines the woman not in female herself but in the man [5]. Women are always subordinate to men. There is no concrete way for women to come together as a 'whole', and this whole can only establish itself through confrontation. In film and television, the male gaze confines the female character to an imaginary, symbolic 'other'. In the plotting of this film, the male gaze is manifested in three main ways.

First, "marginalization" — the female characters are portrayed as victims of a patriarchal society. Throughout all of the female revenge portrayals, although there is a female-to-female revenge model, the vast majority of the targets of revenge are men, i.e., the women in the films are mostly persecuted by men. This may appear to remedy the lack of women's voices in cinema. However, in reality, it still places women in a vulnerable position when discussing the damage a patriarchal society has done to women and vulnerable groups. This is also the case in this film for Geum-ja, who has an unintentional unmarried pregnancy with her boyfriend, the bitter consequences of which she has to choose to bear

alone, and whose fear of social opinion becomes an easy handle for her teacher to exploit. The guilt of being imprisoned and accidentally killing a boy prompted her to fight back against men. This undoubtedly reflects the female group's "inherent weakness and smallness", a "poor physical confrontation", "cleanliness", and "physical destruction is unfortunate and fatal". These are all discourse representations of patriarchal social discipline.

Secondly, there is the cliché of "physical revenge". The specificity of women's revenge films makes the motive for revenge stem from women's physiological characteristics and their "lesser strength and weaker bodies," and the persecution of women's bodies becomes the "trigger" for most of their revenge. For example, Geum-ja's companion, Yi-Jeong, sells her body to get close to Mr. Baek for Geum-ja's revenge.

Thirdly, the stereotypical thinking of male directors believes that women are attached to men. While oppressing women and causing them to fall into the dilemma of revenge, men still fantasize about enjoying the pleasure of being relied on by women and giving them alms by playing the role of savior. In this film, for example, Geum-ja's first thought is to seek the help of her male teacher when she is pregnant out of wedlock with her boyfriend. In addition, before seeing Geum-ja, the priest wanted to go to prison to save her. He believed that he was the key to saving her life, and even after she was released from prison, he kept pestering her.

3. "Gaze" and Identity Writing: The Myth of Women's Violent Revenge

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance exposes both the loss and passive stranding of women's discourse power in addition to the viewing mechanism of "visual desire." Women are now faced with a double shackle of deconstruction of body and identity in a complicated and chaotic environment rather than a simple "binary opposition" dilemma. The director does a good job of expressing the variety of women's lives from the standpoint of challenging grandeur and authority, yet the characters in the movie are still trapped and striving to get out.

3.1. The loss of discourse power under the male narrative

Under the shots of male director Park Chan-wook, Geum-ja Lee presents a dramatic portrayal of tragic fate, which is reduced to a passive object state throughout the whole process and it is difficult to realize the dynamic writing of personal fate. Although Sympathy for Lady Vengeance shows a fresh female image on the screen and takes care of the hidden desires in women's hearts, it is still a "gaze" from a male perspective, which makes it difficult to realize its own demands. Throughout the film, it is not difficult to find that as the story of the film unfolds, it is difficult for Geum-ja Lee to rely solely on her own efforts to find liberation from beginning to end, so she has to approach the goal of revenge through additional means, which can be summarized as catering to the charm of religious theology and taking advantage of collective violence to revenge. In the long process of revenge, Geum-ja Lee pays the price of "self-castration" and gives her right to speak to "the other" without knowing it so as to realize the two-way "decompression" of spirit and body, but this "decompression" is only a short-term illusion of emptiness, gold cannot wash away the sense of guilt that goes deep into the bone marrow, and is reduced to the victim of the "gaze" of the other.

The whole film Sympathy for Lady Vengeance presents a strong film noir style, showing the director's obvious male narrative characteristics. For example, the desired image of the femme fatale, the polarized scene transformation of extreme push and pull, and the suspenseful string music with tension. Many rich elements make this film reveal the absurd sense of multi-dimensional binary opposition, forming a conflicting style logo. In general, there are two opposite styles in the film: one is that the film takes the name of "Sympathy for Lady Vengeance", but the whole film removes femininity and shows the female image under the filter of extreme masculinity; the other is that the

film combines the narrative elements of Eastern and Western films, such as the Christian Christmas costume in the film and the fast-paced narrative techniques, showing the dual characteristics of implication and richness. The director Park Chan-wook, through the writing strategies of simulation, hybridity, and ambiguity, shows a certain resistance to the invasion of the post-colonialism cultural trend of thought, and at the same time, actively caters to the western market and constructs his own unique identity by using eastern culture.

3.2. The identity of the Third World is uncertain

As the epitome of women in the Third World, Geum-ja Lee walks alone under the double suppression of the male gaze and cultural identity. In the film, only by praying to theology, self-compensating in the illusory subconscious, and taking revenge with the help of collective power can Geum-ja Lee try her best to achieve revenge, which reflects the hesitation of her identity and the cultural gene of "forbearance" in East Asia. Geum-ja Lee lost herself in the charm of religious theology and could not move an inch. In many scenes in the film, Geum-ja Lee seeks inner salvation through prayer, and the holy light beam becomes the phantom and props to wash away her inner sin consciousness. While relying on the spirit in religious theology, Geum-ja Lee is also forced to destroy the right to speak in the invisible charm.

"Subaltern can't speak" is one of the important conclusions of Gayatri C. Spivak's post-colonialism theory [6]. In *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, women cannot complete revenge entirely through their own strength. Only after a long plan and with the help of collective strength can it be achieved to a certain extent. Collective revenge becomes the climax of the end of the film, presenting the aesthetics of violence and bringing the audience a refreshing experience[7]. However, on the other hand, collectivism, as a cultural connotation that goes deep into genes, is rooted in the hearts of the people. The Oriental perspective emphasizes collective and symbiotic forces while ignoring or even rejecting individualism and individual heroic portrayals. While this cultural context shows the powerful power of collective cooperation, it also invisibly places third-world women in a marginal, subordinate, and alien "the other" status. In Foucault's view, "narrative" itself is the reproduction of power. Narrative can produce power, and behind this is the reflection of cultural discourse mechanism, the organic combination of cultural discourse and narrative, thus describing the outline of the word "identity". Compared with the female writing in the American film "Promising Young Woman" (women can revenge through their own efforts), Geum-ja Lee is suppressed by the double "gaze" of male power and Western hegemonic discourse and becomes a passive object and an absent empty signifier, which is reduced to the completely other. *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* is the reflection of the reality faced by the Korean people in the current context. As the epitome of the female group image in the third world, the identity dilemma of the women in the film deserves attention and discussion. The Third World is located in the Western world, and women walk alone in the confusion of identity fragmentation and are at a loss under the collision of Eastern and Western cultures in the global pattern.

4. Discussion: The Common Dilemma of Women's Redemption

The film has a strong Christian overtone, the most obvious of which is the "sense of sin" of the main character, Geum-ja, throughout the film. Ruth Benedict argues that, unlike the Eastern culture of shame, Western culture is a culture of sin, which is primarily rooted in the Christian concept of "Original Sin"[8]. When Geum-ja confronts her daughter with her inner monologue, she asks her why she killed Mr. Baek, and Geum-ja says, "Because he made me a sinner". When her daughter asks her why she cannot let go of these burdens and live with herself again, she replies, "It is too much pleasure for a sinner." It is clear that Geum-ja's sense of sin is extremely strong.

Ironically, Geum-ja is not the "Original Sin" in this case but an accomplice who is forced to be an accomplice. The "Original Sin" was the man she relied on and trusted and who betrayed her in the end. However, it was she who atoned for murderous crime, but not Mr. Baek himself, who was the main culprit. She lost thirteen years of her youth and the time she could have spent with her daughter because of this crime. Her heart, which was able to feel the warmth and love of people in a "pure" way, was already riddled with holes under the "sin". This is not only the shadow of "Original Sin" attached to her but also the continuation of the bone marks of "sin" after she chooses to take revenge. This is just as ironic and sad as the fact that the male who is the "Original Sin" is named "Baek" (meaning white in Korean), but the victim, who should be pure white, can never wash off the blood color of her body in the sense of sin.

The word "redemption" is originally from the Bible. "Redemption" is based on the sense of sin, and the two are closely linked. There is sin and repentance; repentance is self-condemnation, self-denial, and self-transcendence. It is a spiritual activity in which one re-examines and rediscovers oneself [9]. At the end of the film, Geum-ja saw a phantom of the young boy she once kidnapped, and she tried to tell him that she had helped him get revenge, but the boy refused to let her speak, and then the boy grew into the form of a youth and looked down at her for a moment before leaving. The actions of this phantom in Geum-ja's head are essentially proof that she still could not let go of herself, and even though she gave up the possibility of her own happiness in life to take revenge for the sake of justice for the murdered, she still could not forgive herself for having personally erased the possibility of a young life growing up. Thus, at the end of the film, when she and her daughter open a pure white cake on a snowy night, her daughter eats the cream, but Geum-ja cannot open her mouth to swallow the "innocent" and just buries her face in the cake. For Geum-ja, she could never remove the scab attached to herself, as the narrator said: "Because she used others to achieve her own desires when she was young, she never had the redemption she longed for." She can only make herself as white as possible but cannot make the white internalize herself again. The process of revenge to get redemption also accumulates more sins for her, and Geum-ja can only keep on repenting until the moment when she can forgive herself and see beyond.

Similarly, in the female revenge film *Promising Young Woman*, the main character Cassie uses a "corrective" approach to those who disrespect women in contrast to the previous norm of violent revenge. She did not want to kill anyone but only wanted to subvert and change the discrimination and malice in the minds of the perpetrators. However, before she could take revenge on the people who hurt Nina, Cassie considered herself an "abuser". She felt fear and shame for using violence to resist the sexual advances of men in nightclubs. When Cassie discovers that the rape is done by indifferent men and women, she reestablishes her hostile stance against the patriarchal society itself and takes revenge on Al Monroe and others. However, Cassie ends up like her best friend Nina, who ends her life as a "victim", making the audience feel helpless and sad. From a woman's point of view, it is so difficult and painful for women in real life to achieve revenge, and they even have to pay the price of their lives [1].

Both Eastern and Western female revenge films see a similar resultant dilemma: women inevitably have to sacrifice their own integrity - either through self-alienation or self-destruction. In the midst of the seemingly pleasurable "killing of men," the vengeful woman herself is then trapped in a cage of crime and atonement. As in *Lady Vengeance*, the perpetrator lived "openly" without any sense of sin, and when the child's parents asked Mr. Baek why he killed the child, he simply said arrogantly and helplessly, "There is no perfect person in this world." The sense of sin and repentance fell back on Geum-ja, the living victim. The irony can be seen in this: compared to men who are used to inflicting harm and not being harmed, Geum-ja, who represents the vulnerable group, is not used to inflicting harm but to being victimized. Both the wife who participates in Geum-ja's revenge plan by pretending to submit to Mr. Baek and the parents of the children who finally take revenge on Mr.

Baek show signs of pain, fear, and even retreat from torment. In a way, the social and moral discipline advocated by the powerful only binds the weaker and is of no great use to the powers themselves, which deserves more thought [10]. The design of the psychological plot of these characters is essentially a rejection of the killing conducted by the weak, and its insinuation aims to question and deny the legitimacy of the vulnerable against the powerful. Therefore, in this seemingly criminal revenge, the gender concept shown in the film is only partially transformed, and the subjectivity of women is not really established [11].

In fact, at this stage, it is difficult to find a completely effective way to break through the dilemma of women's revenge, which is also a yoke that falls on feminism at this stage. Although we cannot clearly point out the way to reconstruct a new order, we can continue to improve the discourse of the "Subaltern" in deconstructing the domestication imposed by hegemonic centralism. Just as in today's literary and artistic world, more and more women creators are providing the world's audiences with the voices of real women through their unique perspectives and techniques. These voices reflect the thoughts and lives of real women, rather than the symbols of women who are always gazed at in the male imagination. Let more and more women draw their own world, and let more and more women hear the cries of their compatriots, let the order that has been filled to overflowing with male voices be revised and supplemented by women, and let the subalterns' voices that are buried in the hegemonic center no longer "be expressed", and let all people break away from symbols and become human. This is the ideal expectation of feminism, but also the reality of a long way to go.

5. Conclusions

In the process of industrialization of Korean cinema, "revenge film" has gradually become a mature film genre, which is good at capturing social contradictions and exposing the real, typical, and even dark spiritual dilemmas of human nature with fictional stories. The film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* enriches the image of female revenge on the screen, focusing on the oppression of sexual violence faced by women, the lack of protection of the interests of vulnerable groups, and the shortcomings of law enforcement and judicial mechanisms, achieving a certain breakthrough in visual expression. However, after further analysis, this paper finds that the film still has limitations due to the double "gaze" of Western culture and men: First, the male perspective of interpreting women creates an inevitable "the other" and "the other" is reflected both in the body gaze of the filming perspective and the dependence of women in the plot. secondly, the distortion of the third world women's discourse under the influence of Western culture, and the fact that third world women can only rely on outside forces to interpret themselves, which brings about the deficiency of This image building. However, women in the Eastern and Western worlds inevitably fall into male gaze and face the same dilemma of female redemption.

This paper selects the representative of East Asian cinema, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and takes the "gaze" as a clue to sort out the visual culture and identity writing dimensions, exploring the construction of East Asian women's discourse identity based on the myth of revenge, and finding that women's resistance writing is still in the dilemma of being gazed at and interpreted. At the same time, due to the limited content of this paper, it is not possible to compare the differences between male and female directors' perspectives and plot designs of female revenge films, nor is it possible to further explore other films that show female revenge in the Third World for analysis. Therefore, it is expected that scholars will conduct more in-depth and detailed analysis and research in the future, and it is also hoped that more female directors can create true female films to express women, and build a more balanced gender order through the film media.

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