

Lee Chang-dong “Poetry”: Feminism from the Male Perspective

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Abstract: With the development of the feminist movement and the concept of feminist cinema, feminist cinema has continued to develop. In recent years, feminist films have received widespread attention, but how to embody feminism from the male perspective in the male-dominated film industry has long been a hotly debated issue. This paper analyses the Korean realist director Lee Chang-dong’s film *Poetry*, combines Foucault’s theory of panoramic gaze, analyses the symbolic language in the film, and compares it with the works of other similar directors, aiming to discover the diversity of the presentation of feminist films through the analysis of the film and to explore how the male director can present feminism, to provide a reference meaning for the development of feminist films. It is found that the director presents feminism by symbolising the characters, reconstructing the gaze, and using religious symbols to sublimate the theme. In the film, poetry is also given various meanings to show women’s awakening and social problems. The director integrates feminism into the social background through the construction of characters and social environment and shows social problems through women’s sufferings.

Keywords: feminism, foucault, male perspective, symbolic language

1. Introduction

Divergent viewpoints exist concerning the definition of feminist film; nevertheless, it can be distilled as portraying “women’s consciousness and survival form” [1]. Starting in the 1970s, feminist film burgeoned, displaying a multifaceted developmental trajectory. However, certain data indicate an ongoing male predominance in today’s film production sector. According to Statista’s data regarding the male-to-female ratio of directors within Hollywood’s film industry, the year 2022 witnessed a mere 14.6% representation of female directors amidst the U.S. film realm. Within this industry marred by substantial gender imbalance, the question of fostering the advancement of feminist films and the potential impact of directors’ genders on propagating feminism in film materialised as a pivotal concern. In this context, *Poetry* directed by Lee Chang-dong, offers insights.

Lee Chang-dong, a critical realist filmmaker hailing from South Korea, employs surreal methods to convey profound emotional cores within his films. He disseminates emotional underpinnings while simultaneously presenting societal concerns. His films abound with metaphors yet concurrently utilise audiovisual language to craft a distinctive “poetic” demeanour. Notably, this “poetic” demeanour frequently emerges against the backdrop of harsh realities, effectively echoing emotional

cores—namely, solicitude for marginalised individuals’ humanity and critique of societal predicaments [2].

Poetry deviates from his prior works. His preceding creations often centred on male perspectives, emphasising heightened conflict and class disparities in their expression. Within Lee Chang-dong’s cinematic repertoire, the exploration of individual-world relationships features prominently, often focusing on societal castaways contending with objectification. However, *Poetry* narrates the tale of Miko, an elderly Korean woman navigating the acquisition of poetic skills amid her desolate and sombre realm. Confronted by her grandson’s transgression, she grapples with profound inner turmoil akin to that of a contrite transgressor. Evidently, the character architecture within *Poetry* exhibits a self-nurturing disposition rather than intense contradictions and stark juxtapositions [3]. Furthermore, the film opts for a composed portrayal from a female standpoint, revealing the lifelong tribulations and suffering experienced by East Asian women.

2. A Large Number of Symbolic Languages

2.1. Character Symbolisation

The East Asian region is influenced by Confucianism and patriarchy and familism are deeply rooted in people’s minds. This cultural system is characterised by a hierarchical and patriarchal social order in which men have dominance over women, the elderly have higher status than the young, and rulers have more power than their subjects. Confucianism not only governs family life, it puts great emphasis on educational credentials earned through the state examinations system. It also places a woman (wife) in a subordinate position relative to her husband. In traditional Confucian thinking, men and elders tend to be honoured. In such a social environment, women’s mobility is limited, and their lives are basically confined to the domestic sphere. [4].

Poetry is a movie that shows only three female characters, Yang Miko, the girl’s mother and the dead girl, who symbolise the different helplessness and suffering of a woman’s life. The girl committed suicide due to the extreme psychological pressure caused by the long-term sexual violence perpetrated by Yang Miko’s grandson and six other classmates. Her experience symbolises that in a patriarchal society, women’s destinies are abducted and suppressed by sex, and the little girl’s death is a silent indictment of this state of affairs. The little girl’s mother represents another kind of helplessness of women, the pathos of oppression under the patriarchal system, but there is nothing to be done, only the fruitless resistance to compromise. After the little girl’s death, when her mother cried bitterly in front of the hospital, no one was there to help her or pacify her. She tried to cry, report the case, and refused to accept the settlement, but when one of the parents threatened her with the fate of her son, she still had to compromise and stop pursuing the incident. Her experience symbolises women’s helplessness to sacrifice for their families and concession to the patriarchal society.

As for Yang Miko, as an older woman, she is still being held hostage by the patriarchy throughout her life. In Confucian culture, elders are honoured, and their status is very high, but here, Yang Miko, as a female elder, is still confined in the whirlpool of patriarchy and familism. Influenced by collectivism, a woman’s life in East Asia is defined as raising children, and a woman’s life is kidnapped by her family. As an elder, Yang Miko still has to go to someone’s house to work as a carer to support her grandson, and she is reluctant to tell her daughter about her Alzheimer’s disease after finding out that she has the disease in order not to worry her daughter. At the same time, in order to protect her daughter, she chooses to think of a way to raise money for her that she has to hand in the pension. In this case, it is a focus on the yoke of familism, and in this case, her grandson is a symbol of the bondage of the family to women in a patriarchal society. After learning of her grandson’s sins, Yang Miko, though pained and puzzled, still chooses to help her grandson atone for his sins, even at the cost of sacrificing herself. After agreeing on the compensation, Yang Miko

commits herself to the president's family, where she works in order to get the money. Here, the naked female sexual organ is no longer a symbol of desire but a kind of helplessness and embarrassment, which is an extreme action of Yang Miko's sacrifice for her family and also Yang Miko's guilt for the girl's death. She tries to make up for the sins through this kind of chastity sacrifice and connects herself to the girl's destiny to feel the girl's sadness and despair, which can also show the female's despair. She connects herself to the girl's fate and feels the girl's sadness and despair, which can also show that women are sexually coerced and suppressed by the patriarchal society throughout their lives.

2.2. Shifts in the Meaning of the Gaze

Since the gaze does not have a gendered meaning in this movie, this paper does not discuss the relationship between the male gaze and the female gaze. Lacan's theory of the gaze is often mentioned in cinema studies, and he believes that the gaze is about desire. Although there are sex and nudity scenes in the whole movie, none of them has anything to do with desire; on the contrary, the gaze in the whole movie is an exchange of power.

According to Foucault, in a panoramic prison, everyone is stared at, and the person at the centre is stared at by the surroundings. The world in which Miko lives in the film is a "panoramic prison", which is a patriarchal society, and she, as a part of this system, is watched over by the traditional patriarchal society [5]. Even though she is not asked to sacrifice herself to take care of her family, she still chooses to do so, which is a kind of distrust mechanism of the system under which she and even all women have developed a male-centred and patriarchal way of thinking, and under which even with the economic development and social changes, women's status is still underground and in a neglected position. Yang Miko, as an older woman in the film, is often neglected in her life, neglected by the president's daughter and neglected by her grandson, but this neglect is also a concentrated manifestation of the attention in the panoramic prison. In a patriarchal prison, due to the low status of women, there is no need to show respect to a woman, and it is possible to ignore what she says and her opinions; in the same way, indifference to the death of the little girl stems from the patriarchal gaze, where people realise that the girl's death is insignificant and unworthy of pity, and therefore choose to erase the event to preserve the future of the boys who violated her. During the first negotiation between the six parents, one of the fathers says, "I don't know what the boys are trying to do; the girl wasn't much to look at." This statement is a centralisation of the patriarchal society by viewing an individual like the girl from a position of scrutiny in the patriarchal society. Foucault believed that every position in this system is scrutinised, and for the entire film, director Lee Chang-dong places the audience in the position of scrutinising the film so that the audience is able to analyse and critique the words and actions of the characters by watching the play and triggers the audience to think about patriarchy and the status of women through the delicate portrayal of a patriarchal society.

The gaze is an exchange of power. When Miko goes to the victimised girl's house to persuade her mother, she is a spokesperson under the coercion of the patriarchy. In traditional thinking, the patriarchal perspective on women is a top-down perspective. When she is on the road, Miko sees the apricots on the road from a top-down perspective, but as her perspective shifts, she squats down, picks up the apricots and lifts them up to look at them in a flat view, observing the apricots, and here it is a shift in perspective, and a shift in power, which is a metaphor for female empowerment. It is a metaphor for female empowerment. Yang Miko represents a patriarchal society; and the apricot is a woman, and the ripe fruit is a symbol of desire in a traditional patriarchal society. Originally, the apricot in Yang Miko's perspective was trampled in the mud, but when the apricot was picked up, Miko gave up her power to scrutinise it and instead turned to feel and respect it, and in her feelings, she heartily praised it, which is a shift in perspective and a shift in power. It relies on the symbol of the apricot to allude to the situation of women, conveying the idea that even if they are in the lowly

position of the male-dominated society, defined by men as unpleasant, they are still beautiful individuals. The director utilises the shift of the line of sight to show the process of female empowerment, presenting the awakening and change of female consciousness in the change of the line of sight.

2.3. Religious Symbols Sublimate Feminism

Against the backdrop of the rapid rise of Korean cinema in the 1990s, Korean filmmakers began to pay attention to Christianity, which has played an important role in Korea's modern history and real life. Korean filmmakers began to focus on Christianity, which has played an important role in Korea's modern history and real life, and they presented colourful images of Christianity on the screen. Lee Chang-dong's movies also often use realism to show the daily life of a Christian.

As the Korean taiji flag symbolises, Korean culture has a long history with traditional Chinese culture. "Confucianism, in Korea, is the most dominant traditional culture and still exists today as an important principle of order." Whereas Christianity in Korea is now the religion with the most adherents, it expresses a very different content claim than Confucian culture. In terms of human nature, Confucianism believes that people are born good, while Christianity believes that people are born with sins and that trusting in Jesus Christ clears them and accomplishes salvation. Confucianism does not believe in an afterlife and therefore puts all its expectations on real life, but Christianity believes that there is not only a present life but also a past life and that the past life is even better [6]. Under the intermingling of the two cultures, Korean films often feature traditional Confucian and religious symbols, but the core of attention is more in Confucianism, with God in a state of absence. In Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry*, the appearance of religious symbols fills this empty space.

The religious symbolism of the whole movie is concentrated in the poem left by Miko at the end, named Song of Agnes, who is a virgin and martyr honoured by the Christian religion. Legend has it that Agnes was a beautiful woman who, at the age of about thirteen, claimed to have no other love but Jesus and was determined not to marry. When her unsuccessful suitors exposed her Christianity, the authorities threw her into prostitution as punishment. Her clients were afraid to violate her because of her righteousness, and one attempted to do so and was immediately blinded. During the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, Agnes was martyred [7]. With this poem, Miko expresses solace to the departed girl, lamenting and sighing for the injustice of the girl, herself, and millions of women, but there is nothing she can do about it, and she sees every woman as a martyr for virginity, which is an ironic reference to the cult of chastity in Korean society. The family systems in Confucian societies share a number of key characteristics. On the one hand, the patrilineal kinship system practices patrilocality as a normative post-marital living arrangement.. A woman typically moved into the home of her husband's family after marriage and shouldered the responsibility of taking care of her parents-in-law. Since women lacked education and employment opportunities outside of the natal home, marriage became the expected "career" for women, and took place quite early in adolescence. In addition, the emphasis on chastity and virginity encouraged early marriage and further limited women's life course development. In the movie, after the girl is assaulted, both the school teacher and the parents of the other students think that it is not the boy's fault, and instead, they talk about the victimised girl with indifference and face the girl's death with indifferent expressions and attitudes. However, Miko, as a woman, does not see it that way. She even thinks that her own grandson is guilty, and under the concept of familism, she herself, who raised such a grandson, is naturally guilty, and she wants to atone for her sins, only to realise that the greatest sin lies in the society, not in herself. At the end of the movie, the girl's voice overlaps with Yang Miko's, and in Agnes's song, in the slow-moving river, Yang Miko's fate intersects with the girl's, yet forms a cycle - a woman's life cannot escape such suffering. The image of Agnes is a kind of self-congratulation, the only salvation from the pain that has nowhere to be vented, and perhaps in such a situation, death

is the best relief. Here, the director uses religious symbols to sublimate the feminism of the whole movie, making the women's resistance deafening in silence.

3. Male Perspective Without the Gaze

3.1. The Power of Poetry with a Difference

Poetry has multiple meanings in the movie. In the movie, Miko comes to the literature club to learn poetry, and her teacher tells her that poems can only be written through observation, so she begins to observe the world [8]. At that moment, She is transformed from the scrutinised in the panoramic prison that is a patriarchal society to the scrutiniser. She looks at the world with a delicate perspective, observing nature in all its glory. Her love for natural things also contrasts with the worship of technology in the patriarchal society. In contrast, although she always wished she could write poems, she always had only fragmentary verses, and here she is pursuing more than just a poem. The teacher of the Literature Club says, *It's not that it's hard to write poetry, it's that it's hard to have the heart to do it* and sighs, *In an era when poetry is dying, it's hard to find someone like Miko who wants to write poetry*. In the class, the teacher will lead us to recall our own good memories and happy times, and it can be seen that for the teacher and Miko, poetry is not only poetry but also a kind of order, a kind of beauty, and a kind of ideal. However, people are allowed to say nasty things and make loud noises while reading the poem, as well as write limericks insulting women, which Miko considers blasphemy. What is even more distressing is that there is a segment of women who take pleasure in this matter. What is reflected here is not only the contradiction between ideals and reality for Miko but also the contradiction between women's sense of freedom and the gaze of a patriarchal society. Women seek beauty and long for freedom, but just like the woman who claps her hands at poems insulting women in a poetry club, she is unable to realise that she has been controlled by the patriarchal society. As Chizuko Ueno puts it, this is a woman cut off by two values [9].

At the same time, poetry is Miko's weapon against the oppression of a patriarchal society. Miko has always lived in a world surrounded by men, and a severe gender imbalance surrounds her; her grandson and the place where she works are all made up of men. When negotiating with the parents of several other boys, all of whom are also male, Miko sits in the middle of several male parents during the first meeting and negotiation, and as the group discusses the pension and demands that all of them should be a united front, the parent next to her hands Miko a glass of wine, meaning that she is to be brought into the fold. After clinking glasses and drinking, several male parents began to discuss why their children had looked at the girl, saying that the girl had also said she liked it at first. Miko listened to the men's insults and slights to the dead girl, choosing to walk outside the glass and look at the blood-red cockscomb. She writes the phrase *blood, blood as red as a flower* and says the flower word for cockscomb is a shield, and at this point in time, the poem is also her shield against the ugliness of the outside world. Moreover, she wrote lines related to the cockscomb flower to show her dissatisfaction with the male-dominated society. The red colour represents vigilance, and the blood indicates that the girl's death is a bloody reality and that the girl is being plucked apart layer by layer like the stamens of the flower until she dies.

Miko has never been able to write her own poems because poems are expressions of emotions, and she has been experiencing contradictory dilemmas in her poems; she represents the cleavage and contradiction between the ideal and the reality. She pursues beauty, but her Alzheimer's disease will make her forget the beauty. She observes apples, but in the end, she still thinks that apples should be used for eating; she praises flowers, but she is told that they are fake; she loves to confide in others, but she is only surrounded by her silent grandson, and she can calmly accept the departure of her grandson the first time she plays badminton with him [10]. She cannot be sure what she wants to express in such a contradiction, and this confusion is the same as when she learns of her grandson's

sins. She believes the grandson is guilty, but all the voices around her tell her that she should find a way to get rid of the grandson's sins instead of atoning for them. She feels ashamed when confronted by the girl's mother, ashamed when confronted by the girl's memorial, and she cannot forgive herself, her grandson, or society, so she has to be silent, but she feels guilty for her silence. The river appears at the beginning and end of the movie and at Miko's most desperate moment. Water carries rich and complex connotations; it nurtures thousands of lives but drowns them, and its symbolism is very contradictory, meaning both life and death. It also symbolises the patriarchal society that enables people to live in peace but deprives countless women of their lives and freedom. At the movie's end, Miko Yang's voice merges with the girl's voice reading the poem, which is not only Miko's choice to vocalise but also Miko's awakening of consciousness and the elimination of contradictions.

3.2. Breaking Limits: Symbolic Languages and the Male Gaze

As a male director, Lee Chang-dong breaks the limitation of the male perspective in the movie's presentation, showing the suffocating situation of patriarchal society and women's resistance through much symbolic language. At the end of the movie, Miko writes *Song of Agnès*, which is the voice of struggle and resistance for the thousands of women who have been oppressed, and also for the little girl, showing the idea that women should not be martyred for chastity, and that sexuality is not a sin. Women who are oppressed by the patriarchy are often powerless to break the existing order, and they often choose to succumb to their physicality and do not choose to live their lives as independent individuals. In such a situation, Miko has compromised, but her sense of femininity continues to awaken, and she begins to rebel in search of balance. In terms of characterisation, Yang Miko is an old lady who dresses up in a fashionable light, breaking through the stereotype of the traditional image of old age. Not only did she resign in anger after discovering that the president had taken sex pills, but also after attending the girl's memorial service, she took the girl's picture home and put it on the dining room table for her grandson to see. Although she was forced to go forward to negotiate with the girl's parents, she avoided the topic of compensation after meeting them. She is also able to watch with determined eyes as her grandson is taken away when she plays badminton with him for the second time at the end. All of these can reflect her calm, kind, sensitive, stoic, and resilient. It can also be seen that Miko is a growing presence for women in today's society, and her "ease of expansion and contraction" is enough to reflect the versatility of women and the multiplicity of their consciousness. She constantly fights against her own heart, against the unsatisfactory life, and against the bad culture of the real society.

Throughout the film, in addition to portraying the awakening of women's feelings through details, the director uses much symbolic language to portray the patriarchal society and male characters to portray the awakening of women's consciousness. When Miko attends her first poetry reading, there is a man who stands on the stage and speaks dirty jokes to reflect his masculinity; when he tells his story about the car accident, he says a lot of dirty jokes.; when he learns that Miko has said that he has blasphemed the poem, he apologises by holding up a glass of wine, which is a typical patriarchal symbol here. Similarly, wine appears when Miko meets with several other male parents. The fact that the wine and the glass are in the centre of the frame means that the wine brings balance and communication, and the fact that several of the parents clink their glasses indicates an alliance, whereas Miko's reluctance to clink her glass with them is a sign of her unwillingness to be in the same boat as them. Modern technological products also symbolise patriarchal society in the film. Miko observes nature throughout the movie, and the male characters in the movie are overwhelmingly dependent on modern technology, such as the male parents' daily use of cars as a means of transportation and the grandson's addiction to electronics such as TVs and stereos. One day, Miko discovers, after her grandson has left for school, that the music on his computer has not been switched off. She attempts to turn off the music, but she cannot, so she starts smashing the piano to release her

rage, and what she smashes is not only the keyboard but also a silent condemnation of patriarchal society.

4. Male Perspective Without the Gaze

As a male director, Lee Chang-dong breaks the male gaze inherent in traditional male directors when filming by utilising a large amount of symbolic language in his presentation of stories and the way female characters are represented. Take Korean realist director Park Chan-wook as an example. In recent years, his high-profile works *The Handmaiden* and *Decision to Leave* are both dominated by female characters. Those films embody the awakening of the concept of women's love and the desire and pursuit of freedom through the telling of women's stories. However, in the process of the narration, he still prefers to use women's bodies as a medium, as symbols to trigger the desires and the advancement of the story [11]. In the movie *Miss*, although it is about love between women, the desire in the movie still comes from the naked body, a female perspective filled with the male gaze. In *Poetry*, Miko's naked, aged body is not a symbol of desire but of female helplessness, and Lee Chang-dong chooses to start from a female perspective in the process of expression, observing the world from a female point of view. In traditional concepts, it is often believed that women's thinking is more delicate and gentle. Lee Chang-dong adopts a bright colour palette and a relatively calm narrative to show the world through a woman's eyes and also chooses to portray an older adult in his characterisation, breaking the traditional desire-filled gaze on the female character and narrating the suffering of this marginalised character from an equal perspective, which triggers the viewers to think about the life of the attention to the female community. While Park Chan-wook's films often have exaggerated story climaxes, ups and downs, and show the struggles of women through many conflicts, Lee Chang-dong utilises a bland narrative in his portrayal. This blandness makes the movie more life-like, making the audience empathise with it and triggering empathy.

5. Conclusion

In recent times, there has been a growing discussion surrounding the depiction of feminist themes in films. Lee Chang-dong's movie, *Poetry* employs symbolic characters, a symbolic gaze, and religious imagery to portray the plight of oppressed women within the context of East Asia. Diverging from similar works, this film moves beyond the constraints of the male gaze that objectifies women's bodies as symbols of desire. Instead, it adopts a female perspective, utilising techniques of critical realism to authentically depict women's hardships through poetic storytelling. Through the lens of critical realism, the movie embraces the female perspective and encapsulates women's suffering in its poetic narrative.

The film forgoes a traditional climax, favouring an unembellished narrative approach. It presents suffering and sorrow in a straightforward manner, prompting contemplation on women's circumstances and broader societal issues. This aspect holds value for filmmakers seeking insightful references.

This study's innovation lies in examining how male directors present feminist themes, offering insights applicable to similar creative endeavours. However, limited audience engagement, stemming from the film's literary attributes, restricts the extent of feedback. As a result, the practical applicability of this approach in spreading feminist ideas remains unexplored. Subsequent efforts should centre on delving into feminist symbolism within films, gauging their impact and audience reception. This research will further investigate the most effective methods for conveying these symbols, ensuring a nuanced exploration of dissemination avenues.

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