

From Singularity to Diversity: On the Image of Mothers and Daughters and the Construction of Relationships in Chinese Mainland Women's Films in Recent Years

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Abstract: The myth of motherhood in movies often portrays mothers as great, loving, self-sacrificing figures. In recent years, with the continuous development of feminist theories, more and more women with awakened subjective consciousness and anti-patterned images have appeared in Chinese mainland women's films, portraying more diversified and complex mother-daughter relationships. The reflection and scrutiny of the myth of motherhood have led to the construction of three distinct mother-daughter relationships, such as "antagonism", "interdependence", and "inversion", in recent years' domestic feminist films. Based on Beauvoir's feminist theory and Lacan's mirror theory, combined with Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory, this paper analyzes the dissolution of the myth of motherhood and the reconstruction of mother-daughter relationship in domestic women's films, and explores the individual female image of "self-awareness" awakened under the relationship between mothers and daughters in mainland women's films in recent years, which is helpful for subverting the patriarchal-centered discourse and constructing a rich and unique mother-daughter relationship. This is significant to the subversion of patriarchal-centered discourse and the construction of rich and diverse images of women on screen.

Keywords: mother-daughter relationship, myth of motherhood, feminism, beauvoir, mirror theory

1. Introduction

As a global narrative theme, the image of the mother has long been synonymous with greatness, and the image of the mother in movies has also long been portrayed as a great, loving and self-sacrificing figure. With the rise of women's consciousness and the deepening of gender issues after the 20th century, the "myth of mother" under the patriarchal vision began to collapse gradually, and more and more subjective, anti-faceted female images appeared in women's films, constructing a mother-daughter relationship from "single" to "multiple". "This paper aims to discuss the relationship between mother and daughter in the context of Laura Moore's film. The purpose of this paper is to combine Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and narrative cinema with Beauvoir's

theory of feminism and Lacan's theory of mirroring to analyze the dissolution of the myth of motherhood and the diversified construction of mother-daughter relationship in recent Chinese women's films, to explore the different forms of mother-daughter relationship such as interdependence, confrontation, and inversion, and to dig out the image of the individual woman who has awakened to her self-consciousness in the films.

It is worth noting that past researchers have mainly focused on overview studies of mother-daughter relationship themes, key studies of specific directors and specific films, and fewer studies on the change and comparison of the image of mothers and the reconstruction of mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of the mother-daughter relationship. This paper breaks down the typology of the mother-daughter relationship through a large number of film examples and analyzes different women's personalities and self-consciousness through the process of exploring the change of women's images from motherhood myths to the process of analyzing the diversity in the relationship between mothers and women. In the process of exploring the single to multiple female images from the mother myth to the mother-daughter relationship, this paper analyzes the personalities and self-growth possibilities of different women, which is of great significance in subverting the patriarchal-centered discourse and constructing rich and diversified female screen images.

2. Single: Traditional Female Screen Images under the “Myth of Motherhood”

Roland Barthes pointed out in “Myth - Interpretation of Popular Culture” that “myth” is not an ancient legend in the traditional sense but an ideology that represents the interests or purposes of a certain class [1]. The “myth of motherhood” is a product of patriarchal society and is a set of discourses used to repress women, as well as stereotypical male imaginings and perceptions of the social nature of women [2]. The “motherhood myth” disciplines women by labeling them as “good wives and good mothers”, thus making them tools for childbearing without subjectivity, and the important or even the only way for women to realize their value becomes to acquire the status of good wives and good mothers, which makes many women spend their lives pursuing the status of good wives and good mothers and makes many women spend their lives pursuing the status of good mothers. This makes many women pursue this value throughout their lives and gradually lose their independent consciousness and voice [3].

The power of myths is enormous and deceptive, and the myth of motherhood has ruled women in every era, seeping silently into women's values and unconsciously becoming a woman's independent choice. This is also evident in the art of cinema, as Laura Mulvey, a renowned British scholar of film criticism, reveals in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that many images of women in the past have been mere tools for the expression of the patriarchal unconscious. She argues that since women in movies are mostly under the male “gaze”, men are the bearers of the audience's sight, controlling the fantasy of the movie, as well as the promoters of the movie's narrative, projecting the obscured woman onto the screen [4]. Under socio-economic pressure, men cleverly use the trap of “good wife and good mother” to confine women at home as objects deprived of their autonomy. Therefore, the traditional mainstream image of mothers on the movie screen is usually closely associated with the meaning of love, sacrifice, selflessness, and more, and with the great halo of glorious motherhood, they are entrusted with the great social responsibility of bearing and raising children for men. They are given a great social responsibility to bear and raise children for men, and the identity of women as “mothers” is deeply rooted.

As one of the representative works of the third-generation director Wu Yonggang, the movie “The Goddess” (1934) tells the story of a woman from the lower class, played by Ruan Lingyu, who is forced to sell her body in order to support her son, and in the opening credits of the movie, it is stated that Ruan Lingyu, as a mother, has the great personality and image of the “Goddess” in

general, and it is not difficult to see the meaning of the movie in the text. It is not difficult to see from such a meaningful text that the movie celebrates the great love of motherhood. Therefore, the mother in the film, under the aura of the motherhood myth, sells her body and relies on men to raise her children, and even after being imprisoned for self-defense as a victim, she still prays others not to tell her children that she has a mother like her. A stoic, strong mother from the bottom of the class dedicates all of herself to her children in the face of the injustice and cruelty of society.

From “An orphan rescues his grandpa” (1923), “The Goddess” (1934), and “Chinese Mothers” (1995) in the last century to “Breaking the Silence” (2000), “The One Who Loves Me the Most in the World is Gone” (2002), and “Cherries” (2008) and other films in the new century, the history of cinema is replete with images of hardworking, self-sacrificing mothers. As feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted in *The Second Sex*, women are gradually formed by outside influences [5]. The exaltation of the familial role of motherhood in society actually puts women in a trap, as they subtly solidify the image of motherhood to achieve the ideological effect of domination of women by a patriarchal society. The image of the mother in the movie becomes the object of the screen’s “gaze” as a tool for the expression of unconscious male power under patriarchy, and many of the female characters on the screen appear stereotypical because they are expected by the “myth of motherhood”.

3. Diversity: The Construction of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Chinese Feminist Films in Recent Years

3.1. Symbiosis

Simone de Beauvoir states that the daughter is more like her double and alter ego to the mother. The excessive love and hostility of the mother towards her daughter lead her to entrust her fate to the daughter as a way of seeking revenge for her own destiny [5]. In assuming motherhood, mothers do not see girls as individuals separate from themselves, as they do boys, but rather as an extension of the self, attempting to project themselves onto their daughters, molding them to their own desires. At this point, a unique “symbiosis” develops between mother and daughter, with mutual dependence and benefits for each other [6]. However, the symbiotic relationship of over-dependence and covetousness can lead to a loss of independence, resulting in one partner being unable to survive without a counterpart.

The 2018 film “Girls Always Happy”, directed by Ming Yang, shows a new type of mother-daughter relationship that is different from the usual mother-daughter relationship, where they have an extra level of trust and understanding that seems to be of the same age on top of their family love. One is based on the fact that they share a common hobby, writing, and the other is bound together by the common purpose of possessing the inheritance of Misty’s grandfather. Despite their frequent disagreements and conflicting lifestyles stemming from differing habits, an inseparable bond exists between the two individuals. Their destinies are intertwined, fostering a continuous harmonious coexistence characterized by freedom and tolerance. This connection evolves into a complex alliance, surpassing the conventional mother-daughter relationship.

Released in 2021, “Hi, Mom” subverts the narrative foundation of the mother-daughter relationship and explores a deeper sense of “symbiosis: where do mothers and daughters go when they break away from a symbiotic relationship under outside or their own influence? After her daughter Jia Xiaoling accidentally crosses over, she and her mother, Li Huanying, become sisters, and they help each other and form a good symbiotic relationship [7]. However, in the end, the story is reversed as time passes. It turns out that when the daughter sacrifices herself for her mother, the mother actually understands and strives to fulfill her daughter’s vision. In neither time nor place did she base the value of her life on her daughter’s future. Although her daughter is always in trouble,

her grades are mediocre, and she does not look promising to outsiders, she says, “My daughter, as long as she is healthy and happy, that is all that matters.” As a teenager, Li Huanying was independent, and after becoming a mother, she still maintained her independence as a mother and witnessed her daughter’s independent growth. It made up for her untimely death and fully affirmed her daughter’s future. “A truly healthy mother-daughter love is characterized by mutual respect, recognition of each other’s independence, and the ability to tolerate contradictions and conflicts, with the ideal result that the daughter eventually develops an independent personality, an open sense of sexuality, and a positive attitude towards life[8].” In the movie, the death of her mother forces Jia Xiaoling to break away from the symbiotic relationship she has formed for a long time and to learn to face the world on her own without relying on her mother in her self-growth, which is the beginning for a woman to learn to love people through her mother’s love and to become a truly independent individual.

3.2. Confront

Lacan’s Mirror Stage, published in 1949, put forward the famous mirror theory that infants need to gradually complete self-knowledge through the mapping of the self and the self’s counterpart (the image of the self in the mirror), the Other, during the developmental process from 6 to 18 months of age [9].

The Other is the first step in establishing the subject, and relying on the Other allows one to gain an identity and confirm the relationship between the other and the self, thus establishing the subject. However, this subject arrived at in the mirror stage is actually a misidentification [10]. since the image reflected in the mirror is ultimately external, independent of the infant’s existence, and the infant can only see his or her full existence through an external image. This alien illusion is practically untouchable. Although the construction of the self-subject emerges from infancy in the form of “misrecognition,” as a social experience and life experience increase, the subject weaves a more complex self-image through multiple “misrecognitions” of the mirror image of the “other” and recognizes the true self-image [11]. Thus, the subject and the other is, in fact, a permanent human tendency to seek and cultivate a kind of integrity and ideality of the self to be recognized by the outside world. However, the process of human self-confirmation is an illusion in nature. The creation of illusory consciousness marks the initiation of an individual’s liberation from preoccupation with the “other” and the virtual “self.” It signifies the recognition of personal independence and the understanding that the self, within the context of external influences, represents not genuine self-fulfillment but merely a method of continual approximation towards the authentic self. This genuine self is no longer meant to be juxtaposed with the virtual specter of a mirrored reflection. However, rather, it should be directed towards developing the social self within the realm of reality [12].

In women’s films representing the mother-daughter relationship, daughters and mothers often use each other as counterparts [13]. When constructing their subjects, they will use each other as “mirror images” to make imaginative projections. This projection will be superimposed repeatedly in the form of alienation in “misrecognition”, constraining their self-perception, forming a subject that is not the real one, and forming a complex bond that influences and restrains each other. In this genre, the daughters typically observe the shortcomings in their mothers’ marriages, careers, or life experiences from an outsider’s perspective during their early years. They accumulate a sense of dissatisfaction and begin to question their mothers. Subsequently, they carefully analyze and contemplate their mothers’ life choices and personal histories. This process serves as a reflective mirror, allowing them to adjust their own paths of personal development. Throughout their journey to adulthood, they strive to grow in a manner resistant to surveillance and oppression, effectively breaking away from their mothers’ influence, overcoming the constraints imposed by their mothers,

and ultimately establishing independence. An illustrative instance of this can be seen in the film “Spring Tide” (2019), where Guo Jianbo’s formative years were marked by the dual challenges of a fractured family dynamic and his mother’s accusations directed at his father. She is in a paradox: the father from her mother’s mouth is not the same image as the one he remembers, the former is irresponsible and responsible for the misfortunes of her mother and the whole family, while the latter is gentle and considerate, a caring person who gives her love and kindness. Guo Jianbo chooses to believe in her own feelings amid the conflict and begins to imagine herself as an “other” in complete opposition to her mother’s hopes to paralyze and construct herself. For example, her mother wants her to have a stable partner, a decent home, and a secure life, instead, she gets pregnant out of wedlock and gives birth to a child, cohabits with a lover, and brings her suitor to her mother and scares him away after she approves of him.

Mothers, on the one hand, must have been deeply influenced by their mothers and formed a missing self without getting rid of this “misrecognition”, on the other hand, when facing their daughters, who are not yet independent, they have formed a false sense of independent self, either controlling them strongly or clinging to them passively. However, all of them reflect their unilateral bondage to their daughters.

In “Spring Tide”, the character Ji Minglan challenges the conventional portrayal of a “loving mother” associated with the concept of motherhood. Instead, she reverts to the actualities of life. This portrayal vividly illustrates the arduous predicament of an unfortunate woman trapped in a marriage that has disintegrated, leaving her powerless to rescue herself. In the absence of a male figure, she assumes an absolute authoritative role within the family. This transformation is evidenced by her shift from ceaseless grievances directed towards her husband to the assertion of maternal dominance. This dominance takes the form of verbal aggression, exertion of control over her daughter’s and grandchildren’s lives, and the degradation of her own individuality.

3.3. Invert

An inverted mother-daughter relationship means that the roles of both parties in the mother-daughter relationship are reversed. In recent Chinese women’s films, the daughter is often seen as the “caregiver” at a young age, taking care of her mother, who gets into trouble and is not independent, while the mother is dependent on her daughter as the “cared-for” object. In Bai Xue’s “The Crossing”(2018), Pepe, a 16-year-old single-parent girl, commutes between Hong Kong and Shenzhen daily to study, while Pepe’s mother often organizes her best friends to play poker at home. Due to the lack of parental care and emotional concern since childhood, Pepe has been forced to grow up in an inverted mother-daughter relationship, becoming the family’s pillar. The movie shows a drunken mother staggering to her daughter’s room late at night and sleeping in her daughter’s arms. The mother panics when there is a fire in the house while Pepe calmly puts out the fire. When tricked by a man into cheating, Pepe similarly stands up for her mother.

Such an inverted mother-daughter relationship is also seen in Teng Congcong’s “Send Me to the Clouds”(2019), in which the daughter, Shengnan, is independent and capable, while the mother, Liang Meizhi, relies on her daughter for help in both life and spirit. From the inverted mother-daughter relationship, it is easy to see that most of the mother characters in the movie are dependent on the male aesthetics, without the ability to deal with emergencies independently, and will first rely on others in times of difficulties, which shows the traces of patriarchal training in the past, while most of the daughter characters are influenced by their broken families of origin, showing their maturity and independence beyond their peers.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, whether it is the hysterical, almost crazy mother and painfully numb daughter in the Chinese mainland movie “Spring Tide”, the meek and passive mother with a “teenage girl” mentality and self-reliant daughter in “Send Me to the Clouds”, or the naive and submissive mother and withdrawn and stubborn daughter in “Better Days”, all these female figures have subverted the traditional “good wife and good mother” and “daughter” who are selfless and dutiful under the new relationship between mother and daughter. All of these female characters have subverted the traditional image of the selfless, dutiful “wife and mother” and the docile “daughter” in mainstream movies under the new mother-daughter relationship. More and more female characters emphasize the real experience of women’s bodies and the real expression of women’s discourse.

This article analyzes the multiple mother-daughter relationships that have appeared in domestic feminist films in recent years by sorting out the “mother myth” images solidified on the screen, points out the survival dilemma of women being obscured under the halo of myths, and explores the anti-male sentiments in current film works. The image of women disciplined by power reconstructs the “female myth” in the new era, which is of great significance for more creators in the future to construct rich and diverse female screen images. Of course, the angle of “mother-daughter relationship” is only a tiny cut in the huge issue of women’s movies, how to break the invisible shackles on women under the patriarchal system for a long time, and how to construct a more realistic and vivid image of women in the screen, domestic mainland feminist movies still have a long way to go.

Authors Contribution

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

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