

# ***An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Film Turning Red from a Feminist Perspective***

**Jinzhi Fan<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Foreign Languages And Cultures, Chongqing University, Chongqing, 401331, China*  
*a. 15030340422@xs.hnuit.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** *Turning Red* is an animated film by Pixar, directed by Domee Shi, which tells the story of Meimei, a Chinese girl living in Toronto, Canada, with her friends and family during her adolescence. Meimei and Ming are very typical of the Chinese mother-daughter relationship. This paper focuses on the 'mother-daughter relationship' in this film from a feminist perspective and analyses the relationships and conflicts based on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Through the analysis, it can be concluded that the mother in the film is a strong character as an image with high demands on her child; the daughter is depicted invisibly as the Other, but thanks to her friends' support and the effect of her environment, she wakes her sense of self and reconciles with her mother. The mother and daughter appear to be in conflict and confrontation before, but in fact, both have the same inner choice, and the mother eventually agrees with her daughter's choice. These seemingly small shifts are the result of generations of women fighting for their rights. More and more women are able to be themselves without being bound by tradition and without being held hostage by habit, and this is the meaning of feminism to this day.

**Keywords:** mother-daughter relationship, feminist, film

## **1. Introduction**

The world's first feminist movement was launched by French women, and the French Revolution, a complete overthrow of the French feudal dictatorship, provided fertile ground for the feminist movement in France, which in 1949 saw the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, the most influential French feminist writer. It is considered the soundest, sensible and intelligent book ever written on women [1]. She uses the doctrines of biology and psychoanalysis to analyse how women should not be defined as a "second sex" after men.

*The Second Sex* analyses why and how a woman becomes the Other. Adopting an existentialist philosophical methodology, the author takes a positive look at the different periods of a woman's life (childhood, adolescence, the period of sexual initiation, marriage, motherhood and old age) while judging and evaluating the female experiences she may encounter throughout (homosexuality, becoming an intellectual, a star, a prostitute or a socialite, etcetera), providing insight into the female condition. It concludes by suggesting that the only way for women to achieve emancipation is through independence. It is also stressed that only when women's economic status changes with spiritual, social, cultural and other consequences, and only when women's consciousness of themselves

changes fundamentally, will it be possible to achieve true equality between men and women. Feminist theory was formed and developed within the feminist movement.

From an academic perspective, as a methodological principle of viewing and analysing issues from a gender perspective, at the heart of which is the critique, feminism is "the production of existing knowledge as a site for constructing and defending female oppression, revealing the place and perspective in which women find themselves" [2]. The feminist perspective is based on the masculine qualities of the male perspective and is an examination, critique and deconstruction of previous films.

Since the emergence of feminist theory, it has provided an important basis for women to achieve independent emancipation. In addition to exploring the causes of women's low status in terms of patriarchal oppression, economic roots, education and reproductive rights, many theorists have recognised the unique role of the mother-daughter relationship in awakening women's consciousness and achieving female independence. Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering figure in feminist theory, has studied mother-daughter relationships in depth, putting forward her famous view of 'woman-formation' as 'the other' and that mother-daughter relationships are an essential influence in the process of 'woman-formation'. The mother-daughter relationship is an indispensable influencing factor in the process of "woman formation", which also contributes to the transformation of the woman from the status of the other to that of the self as the subject. Based on this context, this paper takes the mother and daughter, Ming and Meimei, and the mother-daughter relationship between them in the film *Turning Red* as the object of study. Through theoretical and textual analysis, the mother and daughter image portrayed in the film is discussed from the perspective of cultural background and feminist development.

## 2. Synopsis

Born in Chongqing in 1989, Domee Shi immigrated to Canada with her parents at two. After developing a keen interest in art from junior high school, Domee enrolled in the animation program at the University of Toronto. Domee is very original and creative. In the film *Bao*, she visualises a mother's longing for her child into a bun, which becomes a baby to bring back family joy to an elderly Chinese mother suffering from an empty nest while at the same time making this mother understand that children eventually grow up. This kind of topic is unprecedented in Pixar animation, which is why she was able to win the trust of her team by winning against stiff competition.

*Turning Red* comes from Domee's original idea, which continues her exploration of the parent-child relationship in *Bao*, the short film that was produced, while adding the growing pains of an adolescent girl, transforming emotional outbursts into a figurative red panda. The origins of the transformation can be traced back to ancient mythology and are cleverly combined with Eastern culture to tell the coming-of-age story of a second-generation immigrant of Chinese Canadian descent.

The story of *Turning Red* revolves around 13-year-old high school student Meimei. She is a typical Asian schoolgirl who has her girlfriends at school. Things like her mother stalking her, interfering in her relationship with her friends and being teased by the boys in her class for being mumbo-jumbo makes Meimei feel anxious. There are no contradictions between Meimei's perfect marks in her subjects and the fact that she also likes idol boy groups and begins to have natural sexual fantasies about boys, which are real human feelings. However, her mother's high-handedness makes her reject this version of herself for a while. A line in the film speaks to the feelings of a child who does everything her mother tells her to do and gets perfect marks in everything she does but still does not have her mother's trust. Thus, she questioned the point of doing whatever she was told.

The main thread of the film revolves around Meimei's desire to go to an idol boy band concert but her mother's firm disapproval. Director Domee adds multiple layers to the mother-daughter conflict, bringing the story step by step to this climax, and thanks to the film's visual effects director, Daniel, a woman who led a team that sought to create something different from the usual in its many details.

The whole team portrayed four girlfriends in the story, and instead of making deliberate distinctions between Asian characters, the focus is on the story of what happens during adolescence.

### 3. Mother-Daughter Discourse

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir mentions that young boys can see the penis as a reflection of their second selves and that girls' second selves are reflected through the 'rag doll'. Beauvoir sees the rag doll as both subject and object in the eyes of the little girl and the rag doll as her embodiment and her child, two functions that are not contradictory because the child is the mother's second self simultaneously [3]. They dress up the dolls and pamper them affectionately because the little girls want the same treatment from their mothers. However, when the little girls admonish the dolls, they take on the role of the mother, stern and harsh in their accusations, imagining the dolls justifying their mistakes in front of their 'little mother', just as they would if they were justifying their mistakes in front of their mother.

In the meantime, Beauvoir sees the daughter as both the embodiment of her mother and different from her mother, who both dotes on her daughter and is instinctively hostile to her. A mother would imprint her destiny on her daughter's body. She also believed that a woman who has to raise a girl, the woman will make the girl a woman like herself with an attitude of arrogance and resentment [3].

### 4. The Construction of Female Characters

#### 4.1. Mother - The Tough Controller

The patriarchal image of Meimei's father in the film is weak, but male authority is not absent from the film. Ming becomes the face of patriarchal authority in the film, exerting "patriarchal" discipline on Meimei [4]. For a mother like Ming, one of the things she is most proud of is having raised an exceptional child. If this wonderful child is well-behaved and obedient, it is a blessing from God. Ming's life is all about being the perfect mother, which means raising a brilliant and obedient child. She also always looks perfect and meticulous, wearing a dark green cheongsam with a small, broad-shouldered blazer of the same colour, a red jewelled necklace, meticulous make-up and hair, being serious but gentle. With inexhaustible energy, she manages the family clan house, takes her daughter Meimei to introduce visitors to the clan's history, and holds on to and passes on the traditions of the East. As a person who strives for perfection, Ming and the mothers like her inevitably demand that those around her also live up to her standards; only then will her life be perfect in every way. This is why she keeps a tight rein on her children.

Ming's high expectations of her daughter Meimei come from her high expectations of herself. She is good at criticising herself because someone once kept criticising them and made them feel that it was so difficult to please someone and that they could not do it well no matter what they did. Accordingly, Meimei's achievements are an important part of achieving a perfect life for Ming, and when Meimei succeeds, her efforts are rewarded, and her value is confirmed [5]. Ming pins all her hopes and dreams on her daughter Meimei and takes care of all aspects of Meimei's life. This creates an intergenerational legacy. It is this care that makes Ming authoritarian. She has an overwhelming desire to be in control of her daughter. As soon as Meimei gets out of her control, she goes berserk. Meimei's only hobbies are helping out around the house, learning maths, getting first places, and more. Ming gives her daughter "downward freedom", and Meimei can only do what Ming allows her to do.

Beauvoir believed that the mother would see her daughter as a stand-in and would project all the ambiguities of her self-relationship onto her daughter. Moreover, when the fact that her daughter is different from herself is confirmed, the mother will feel betrayed [3]. Thus, when Ming finds out that her daughter has fantasies about Devon, she cannot control herself and runs straight to the shop and

tells Devon to stay away from Meimei in front of everyone; when Ming finds out that Meimei is using her identity as a little panda behind her back to make money and her grades are slipping to B, she is furious, and she accuses Meimei's friends and does not allow Meimei to hang out with them. She blew up at Meimei's friends, believing they were a bad influence on Meimei. "Any influence that doesn't come from her is a bad one" [1]. Ming seems unwilling to acknowledge Meimei as an independent person; she fiddles with Meimei as if she belongs to her own rag doll, and whenever it does not match what she thinks it is, then there is something wrong with the people and environment around the rag doll.

#### 4.2. Daughter - Passive Object

Beauvoir saw a conflict in women between surviving autonomously and becoming the Other. From an early age, women are taught to be likeable, to portray themselves as popular, and to become the Other unwittingly [3].

Children are susceptible to their parents' faces and emotions. They fear abandonment and quickly adjust to their parents' desires to soften their internal disappointment [6]. Brandcraft has described how children unconsciously connote the desires of the object of their perceived attachment. [7] Sometimes this submissiveness develops to the extent that the child's subjectivity is usurped. Brandcraft calls this the "pathological structures of accommodation"[7]. What is even more frightening is that children who are used to satisfying their parents' desires and stifling their own will also unconsciously put others first in their dealings with others and put their own needs repeatedly on the back burner. This repeated retreat deepens their suffering, and they blame themselves for being weak and incompetent. This is what Brandcraft says, "the automatic perpetuation of the principle of unconscious and pathological connivance in order to maintain the connection with the object of earlier attachment [7]." They isolate themselves from their own innermost nature because when they think about what they want or try to do what they want, the fear of betraying and being abandoned by their parents rises up inside them. They unconsciously pay a huge price to maintain their connection with their parents.

Meimei has pleased her mother by making helping out at the shrine her after-school activity; doing maths her hobby; never allowing her grades to fall below an A; watching her mother's favourite dramas with her; and planning just to give up when she refuses her request to go to a concert. She is domesticated into being likeable and trying to please. She turns herself into an object, which allows her to receive more of her mother's love and compliments. When Meimei's friends are questioned about whether Meimei's girlfriends are using Meimei, Meimei is afraid to admit that it is her own idea. She was afraid of losing her mother's love and of her image as a "good girl" being destroyed. After her mother finds her notebook full of love scenes and publicly humiliates her, instead of being angry with her mother for what she has done, Meimei turns to herself in the mirror and yells, "You are her pride and joy, so I don't like it! This will never happen again! " and then flung herself in the face. Throughout the whole incident, the mother does not accuse or chastise Meimei in any way. However, the daughter accurately recognised the subtext and the demand for punishment in her mother's concern-filled gesture and willingly became her mother's punching bag [8].

However, in the end, with the encouragement of her father and the influence of her surroundings, Meimei chooses to be herself. She bravely took back her initiative and rebelled against her mother's oppressive love. Meimei is undoubtedly fortunate that her girlfriends' unconditional love and acceptance give her the courage to challenge the dark side of the panda and hedge her separation anxiety from her mother. In developing her "panda power" resources on all fronts, she gradually breaks free from her narcissistic environmental predation and obsession with perfectionism, and begins to become a leader who transforms her environment, motivates others and interacts well with it. In reality, it is often difficult for "Meimeis" to interact well with the outside world and build a

positive support system outside the home. Leaving a mother is one of the hardest things in the world, and it can take an apocalypse and a myth to get a "very sick" mother to acknowledge, apologise and release herself.

## 5. A Consistent Mother-Daughter Relationship

Feminist researchers have argued that the mother-daughter relationship is coherent and that coherence manifests itself in the mutual influence of both parties and their consciousness and choices. Irigaray sees an interdependent relationship between mother and daughter and emphasises the mother-daughter relationship's critical role in constructing a woman's self-identity [3].

The first half of the story focuses on Meimei, but in the second half of the film, Meimei's mother, Ming, is in crisis and needs to be rescued by her daughter. The film not only focuses on the relationship between Meimei and her mother but also extends to the relationship between her mother and grandmother. Regarding the internal conflict between the three generations, the mother's fear of her grandmother makes her another version of Meimei, who has also constantly met her mother's demands, but always without her approval. The problems faced by her mother are no longer about academic performance but have shifted to the level of her choice of spouse. When her father brings up this past with Meimei, one can sense that, in fact, Ming is also a very strong emotional person, only now she puts everything into being overprotective of Meimei. There is also this consistency between Ming and Meimei. Ming is a strong and opinionated woman, and under her influence, Meimei is actually very opinionated too. When Ming's mother dislikes Meimei's father, Ming rebels against her submissive mother for Meimei's father and leaves a scar on her mother's face; Meimei is also brave enough to rebel against Ming for her friends and her dreams. They make the same choice when faced with the same problem. It may seem like a conflict between mother and daughter, but Meimei only makes the same choice as her mother - to become herself.

*Turning Red* wants the audience to see the mother, Ming, as just a wounded daughter. When she has the opportunity to connect with her wounded self, to confront her own fervent desire to return to motherhood, and even to mobilise positive motherhood to embrace her inner child, she is able to not only honour her daughter's life journey but bless and release her daughter into a wider life as a mother, revolutionising and rewriting the family myth of womanhood [9].

## 6. The Metaphor of the Red Lesser Panda: The Awakening of Self-Awareness

Transformed into a red lesser panda was an opportunity for Meimei to awaken, a life-changing transformation to say goodbye to her past self. The huge change in her appearance has made her sensitive, and she feels emotionally out of control and hysterical. Her parents' nightly discussions and sighs at the door terrify Meimei, who wishes it was all a dream. At school, Meimei keeps herself calm, careful to maintain her human appearance. Ming, however, steps in at such times and even sneaks into the school to peek at Meimei. Tormented by both psychological changes and physical changes, Meimei breaks free and finds her sense of self, inspired by her friends and her dreams [9].

At the climax of the conflict with Ming, Meimei sees her mother's innermost thoughts and chooses to reconcile with her, and Ming says, "I understand you" to Meimei. Ultimately, she chose to let go and encouraged Meimei to be brave enough to be herself. Meimei also made a very different choice from her elders, retaining the form of the red panda, no longer fearful, no longer repressed, but living with it. Because the red panda is a part of Meimei, accepting the red panda's form means that she identifies with herself.

Meimei ends up being able to transform at will in real life without being in the news or the newspapers but instead is loved by everyone. More people visit his family's temple to pray for blessings, a utopia for modern society. The film does not emphasise people's overreaction but shows



them naturally accepting Meimei. Such a higher expression reflects that in a time of multicultural coexistence, being different is no longer even a subject to be discussed.

As *Turning Red's* Chinese title suggests, it is not just about menstruation and menarche but about the journey that comes with it, the journey of a young girl into womanhood. They need to determine whether those uniquely feminine desires and emotions are "power" or "trouble" [10]. They need to decide whether to hide, repress and domesticate their emerging femininity and feminine consciousness. While the ancestors of the warring clansmen were protected by the power of the red lesser panda, her descendants chose to seal the risk of losing control of the panda in the "new world" of peace and prosperity, becoming good wives and mothers, the "perfect women". In a somewhat absurd and symbolic story, it shows girls that women can choose to hide and seal, but they can also choose to believe in white magic and accept and embrace the red panda in their bodies.

Throughout history, many women have been bound by the duties and obligations imposed on women by society and have abandoned their true selves. Although generations of female elders have sealed the panda to reflect their true emotions, Meimei did not follow her mother's rules. After experiencing the 'pain' of adolescence, she chose to listen to her innermost thoughts and face the existence of the panda within her body and has since become one with it. This unrelenting pursuit of independence and freedom is a constant theme of female subjectivity.

## 7. Conclusion

Animated films seek richer connotations and more profound themes as society progresses. *Turning Red* reflects another side of female growth that can easily be overlooked. This story of adolescent women facing various contradictions and finding their true selves vividly portrays the emergence of a sense of female subjectivity. The analysis of the mother-daughter image and relationship in this film and the exploration of the awakening of self-awareness have provided a deeper understanding of the relationship between mother and daughter. The "rag doll game" makes the nature of the mother-daughter conflict clearer. Through the analysis of the film's plot, the image of the mother and daughter is deconstructed and empathy for the defined "the other" is created. Only through the awakening of women's consciousness can women truly have a voice in the family and in society and be their own masters rather than the objects of anyone. Young people, who are more exposed to advanced ideas, can use this 'symbiotic relationship' to positively influence those who have been traditionally indoctrinated.

This paper focuses on the mother-daughter relationship only in the film, *Turning Red*, which is a limited study. It is also a single theory of mother-daughter relationships, ignoring the influence of cross-cultural context on the formation of mother-daughter relationships. It does not delve into whether the mother and daughter in the film are stereotyped when they are portrayed as Asian, and these are the shortcomings of this paper. It is also hoped that the study will contribute to the development of feminism and the awakening of female self-awareness.

## References

- [1] Liu, T.(2011).The full translation of "The Second Sex" is available for the first time and has been hailed as the "women's bible". Retrieved from [http://culture.ifeng.com/whrd/detail\\_2011\\_10/12/9790400\\_0.shtml](http://culture.ifeng.com/whrd/detail_2011_10/12/9790400_0.shtml)
- [2] Xiao, W. (2000). *Feminist ethics*.Sichuan: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- [3] Beauvoir, S.(2015).*The Second Sex* (K,Zheng,Trans.).Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Press.(1949)
- [4] Wang, J.(2021). *An analysis of mother-daughter relationships in women's films from a feminist perspective* (Master's thesis), Shanghai Normal University.
- [5] Jin, D.Y.(2021).*Image aesthetics and cultural interpretation*.Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- [6] Dai, L.(2022)*The awakening of female subjectivity in adolescence from the viewpoint of "Youth Metamorphosis"*. *Delta*, 23,143-145.

- [7] Qin, X. Q. and Chi, Y. P. (2021). *Alienation - rebellion - tenderness: A look at Chinese women's cinema in the 21st century*. *Contemporary Cinema*, 09, 45-52.
- [8] He, L. and Lu, H. Y. (2022). *The "symbiotic fantasy" in the narrative of the "mother-daughter relationship" in recent Chinese cinema*. *Film Art*, 04, 54-59.
- [9] Bai, D. (2007). *Western Feminist Literary Theory*. Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- [10] Tian, S. (2019). *Exploring the growth narrative of domestic women's films*. Jiangxi: Media Forum.