

Reconstructing Female Identity and Liberation: An Existential Feminist Analysis of the Contemporary Film “Sister”

Ge Xiao, Xiuhui Li

Cheongju University, Department of Film and Media Content, Cheongju 360-764, Korea.

Abstract: The contemporary Chinese feminist film “Sister” vividly reflects the current state of women’s existence, revealing the plight of “the Other” in a patriarchal society, both within the family and society, promoting the awakening of women in real life. This paper, from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism, proposes an existential feminist analysis of women’s existence in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Existentialist Feminism; The Other

1. Introduction

“Sister” is a film about family affection, narrating the cross-narrative of “Chinese-style” family ethics and “affection healing.” The “Chinese-style” family ethics refer to the emotional conflicts caused by the Chinese family’s preference for sons, a deeply ingrained gender bias in Chinese psychology. This preference, intensified by contemporary birth policies, often causes significant psychological trauma to daughters, especially those in the role of an elder sister. In existentialist feminist theory, Beauvoir points out that women are not inherently subordinate, passive, or secondary. In the film, Anran is subject to the surveillance of societal principles and male discrimination within the family, forcing women to completely submit to patriarchy, clearly depicting the difficult situation of the female protagonist in both society and family. The film reflects the inequality between men and women in patriarchal society, the objectification of women by men under social principles, limiting women and hindering their self-transcendence.

2. From Oppression to Liberation: Exploring the Transformation of Women in a Male-Dominated Culture

2.1 The Existential Situation in a Patriarchal Culture

In her familial situation, Anran, as a woman in the family, is forced to play various roles throughout her upbringing - to conform to the one-child policy, she is forced to feign disability; to meet her parents’ desire for a son, she is compelled to accept the arrival of her brother and the consequent redistribution of family resources. Anran’s educational and career choices are also directly intervened by her family. Her dreams are ignored by her father, her major changed without her consent. After the death of her parents, Anran faces a dilemma under social and familial pressure. She is expected to unconditionally accept and raise her brother, but her personal sacrifices and sufferings are taken for granted.

Under patriarchy, women are seen merely as tools to help men take care of the family and do household chores, but women’s sacrifices and needs are ignored by men. These social principles force women to submit to men, causing the women in the film to suffer greatly. Women are oppressed by men in their familial roles. Social norms act like invisible eyes covering women’s thoughts and actions. The women in the film suffer not only from familial oppression but also from societal oppression represented by patriarchy. Unlike traditional female images, Anran cannot receive any support, even oppressed by women who do not understand her “Other” identity. In the film, the familial affection that forces Anran to raise her brother is the defender of patriarchy, seeing patriarchy as a code of conduct and principle, forcing women to submit to patriarchy. Anran, in such a patriarchal oppressive situation, finds it difficult to achieve self-transcendence. According to Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism, women often suffer from the oppression of social principles in public spaces. Given women’s existential predicament, the film “Sister” also describes the societal and economic pressures brought by social principles. Women, wherever they are, are subject to disadvantage and oppression by men. Essentially, women must comply with social principles because they lack social status. Anran suffers

not only from her father and uncle's harm in the family but is also oppressed by relatives, under the supervision of social principles, women are not free. The situation creates a subjective sense of tension and a dilemma of choice in the characters, making it difficult for women in these contradictions to make choices.

In her emotional situation, in Anran's relationship with her boyfriend, although he appears to support her after the death of her parents, he fails to offer real understanding and respect. He is only concerned about how to satisfy himself and please his parents, hoping that Anran would live with his mother after marriage and undertake household labor. Absolute obedience to him and playing the role of a submissive wife. Anran is not even allowed to have a say, there is no discussion, but a dictatorial announcement of his actions. He does not respect women's thoughts, only issues commands. This expectation not only ignores Anran's personal wishes and career plans but also confines her within traditional gender roles. In the film, Anran gives up her dream of going to Beijing with her boyfriend to take the postgraduate entrance exam because of her brother's presence. This plot also shows how women are forced to sacrifice their personal desires to fit into family responsibilities, using social norms to force women to submit to men. In addition to family and social oppression, women also begin to suppress their own thoughts, practicing self-oppression. This unequal gender relationship constitutes the essence of patriarchy.

2.2 The Non-Essential Status of the "Other" Identity

Beauvoir points out that living in extremely unfavorable living conditions, according to male demands, women are forced into the status of "the Other." In the film, women still face many dilemmas in the new era, and Anran's "Other" identity comes from two aspects, one is the oppression of social gender, and the other is the predicament of physiological gender in family ethics. Under the gender oppression of patriarchal society, women are marginalized in power and discourse and will consciously or unconsciously become "the Other." As a girl, Anran did not receive appreciation from her parents and was beaten. Because she did not pretend to be lame, it led to the bankruptcy of her parents' plan to want a boy. The family photo with her parents is all about her brother, her personal wishes are ignored by her parents, just because she is a girl, her wish to go to college is changed, so she only needs to study nursing nearby to earn money to support the family as soon as possible. Anran's emotional pain at home is caused by feudal moral gender concepts. The traditional concept of preferring sons to daughters makes Anran's family memories full of indifference, tension, and unease. It is the arrival of her brother An Ziheng, as a "sister," she is given the mission and responsibility to raise her brother by the family and society. However, Anran hopes to change her fate by taking the postgraduate entrance exam to go to Beijing, but no one pays attention. In the process of human socialization, there is always a change in the subject and object between "Self" and "the Other." When Anran and her brother are both children who have lost their parents, the need to raise her brother is actually based on Anran's abandonment of her personal future ideals. Anran's personal will and life value are once again placed in the position of "the Other," and the oppressed "sister" identity and female identity in the family become the main source of Anran's confusion and perplexity.

The two scenes in the film, Anran's questioning of the pregnant woman's family and the conversation with her aunt, deeply reflect the non-essential status of women in patriarchal society. Anran shouted at the pregnant woman's family: "You are committing murder, is a son so good?" This is the first time Anran speaks not for herself, but for the "Other" who experiences injustice. Anran's aunt, a typical representative of oppressed identity, is the opposite of Anran's active resistance. The aunt, as a "sister," has experienced a disciplined life. She tells Anran that when she was a child, her parents would deliberately avoid her and only give her brother good watermelon to eat. She knows Russian, but her parents asked her to give up the opportunity to do business in Russia and take care of her brother's family. Like Anran, she suffers from family indifference and is forced to give up her career. The tragic color of her personal fate also comes from her acceptance and identification with her discipline. When she understands that Anran does not want to raise her brother, her opposition confirms that she has lost her self-awareness and merged with the patriarchal social discipline consciousness. She accepts the oppression at home and becomes the most loyal slave. On the surface, she is just doing the daily housework of taking care of her brother's family. But fundamentally, oppression is an inevitable result. Women are oppressed in such a system in patriarchal society, and everyone is a gear in a large social machine. It means that women must operate like machines, being constantly manipulated, rather than free. The aunt cannot resist, is completely suppressed and obedient to the family arrangement, and eventually becomes completely "the Other."

When the aunt and Anran open their hearts to talk, self-consciousness begins to awaken, stops the unconscious harm between “the Others” to Anran, and decides to support Anran to be her true self in the patriarchal world, giving way to Anran’s transcendence and freedom of choice. As Fraser said: “Men create gods, women worship gods.”^[1] Although women are deeply controlled and physically inconvenient, it is not for these reasons that women should obey men and cannot create their own value. Therefore, physiological conditions are not the reason. Why women become “the Other” is men’s control, turning women into the Other, men think women are naturally “the Other.”

2.3 Breaking the Limitations to Pursue Freedom

Beauvoir emphasizes that if women want to be liberated, they must find self-confidence, establish their subject status, and not forget themselves, so as to regain transcendence and truly develop freely and genuinely^[2]. In “Sister,” Beauvoir’s idea - “Be a person first, then a woman.”^[3] Anran’s story is a vivid interpretation of this. Under the oppression of patriarchy, women must understand their situation, re-establish their identity, have the courage to pursue freedom, to break away from the identity of “the Other,” and gain independence. According to their own needs to make choices, break the restrictions on themselves, and finally achieve physical freedom, only when they have material freedom, can they do whatever they want, and achieve their goals without any influence.

Anran’s life path is determined by herself. Anran’s boyfriend’s family is very rich and has invited her to move into his house several times. You don’t need to argue with relatives for school district housing. Anran’s uncle asked her for money and joked that her boyfriend lives in Poly Garden, do you still want my money? As a woman, it seems that she can rely on her boyfriend. But reliance means not free. She refuses to depend on her boyfriend’s family, refuses to become a “cash cow” in her uncle’s eyes, and insists on her career dream. Her insistence is not only the pursuit of personal dreams but also the resistance to the oppression of patriarchal society.

Anran’s brother an Ziheng initially shows a self-centered and domineering attitude, but as he gets along with his sister, his role changes, from a spoiled master to a dependent. The death of their parents brings a choice to Anran and also allows an Ziheng to re-recognize his blood relationship, his worldview is broken and reshaped, and his character gradually becomes considerate.

The end of the film depicts the scene of Anran and her brother happily playing football, providing an open ending for Anran’s stay or leave, which is a topic that the public and society must think about. This scene symbolizes Anran’s control over her own destiny, she is no longer the “Other” in patriarchal society, but an independent individual capable of making choices according to her own will. Anran has completely owned the independent consciousness of women, able to make her own judgments and choices independently according to her own pursuits. In the true sense, she is no longer oppressed by patriarchal thought, able to think independently, make choices, and take responsibility.

3. Conclusion

The film “Sister” has a certain enlightening significance. Under the perspective of patriarchy today, it not only allows female audiences to review and reflect on their own value but also explores the female group image under the delicate mirror language of female films, studying the reshaping of “women” in the time context, thereby triggering reflections on the self-worth of women. The enlightenment of the film for future female films is that with a new ideology, the female subject structure of patriarchal society should be dissolved, the female image and female consciousness should be reconstructed.

References

- [1] Beauvoir, S. de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Tao Tiezhu. Beijing: China Books Publishing House, 1998:23.
- [2] Scholz, S. Beauvoir. Trans. Gong Xiaojing. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014:118.
- [3] Lin, S. *Feminist Literary Criticism in a Multidimensional Perspective*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004:336.