

Portrait of a Lady on Fire -- The Hidden Patriarchy in a All-Female Environment

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Abstract: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) is a film directed by Céline Sciamma. In 21th century France, female identity and feminism has become a hot topic in society. It touches areas of politics, economics and art. Several feminism films frequently appeared in the 21th century, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* belongs to one of them. It portrays the relationship between two women in the late 18th century, Marianne and Héloïse. Héloïse is about to be forced to marry, and her worldview and experiences awakes Marianne's rebellious spirit in a patriarchal society. This paper thinks *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* well discussed female identity and awakening without involving in any male characters. Through applying queer subjectivity theory, the paper is going to discuss how is it possible for the film to achieve this progress. The theory us divided into three aspects: identity fluidity, female gaze, and intersectionality. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* provide a new possibility for discussing feminism and patriarchal questions in an all-female environment.

Keywords: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, feminism film, queer subjectivity theory

1. Introduction

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019), directed by Céline Sciamma, is a critically acclaimed French historical drama that delicately portrays the romantic and emotional relationship between two women in the late 18th century. The film centers on Marianne, a painter commissioned to create a portrait of Héloïse, a young aristocratic woman reluctant to accept her arranged marriage. As the story unfolds on a remote island isolated from society, the absence of male characters allows a uniquely intimate and female-centered narrative to emerge. Through the quiet, slow-burning romance between Marianne and Héloïse, Sciamma constructs a cinematic space in which themes of female empowerment, identity, and resistance against patriarchal norms are explored with profound depth and subtlety.

This paper will argue how *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* discusses female empowerment in context without males. To examine this, the analysis will employ the framework of Queer Subjectivity Theory, focusing on three critical concepts: identity fluidity, the female gaze, and intersectionality. By applying these lenses, this paper will demonstrate how the film subverts traditional gender dynamics and enables a redefinition of female identity and empowerment in a context shaped entirely by women.

2. Literature review

In 2010s France, gender issues gradually altered towards a political topic. Groups mobilized protests to confront ideologies they deemed harmful, and right-wing factions also began promoting feminine political subjects tied to traditional values. The presidency of Marine Le Pen is also connected with ‘femonationalism.’ As gender issues gain more attention in the society, media, and films also see them as a hot topic [1]. Several social acts had also taken place, including but not limited to the ‘marriage for all’ approach, the #MeToo movement, etc. In areas of lawmaking, ‘marriage for all’ discussed whether accepting same-sex marriage satisfies the condition for true equality of sexualities [2].

In films, female figures have always played an important role. As feminism and female independence became a hot topic, female figures in film experienced great changes.

Chick flicks are a type of film that is targeted at female viewers. These films often feature a range of female characters under a topic of female emotional exchanges. They also constantly challenge gender stereotypes [3]. Chick flicks are crucial in feminist movements. During the third-wave feminism movement, it engages young women in issues directly relevant to their lives. It also dares to speak of contemporary women’s struggles and fears, which help attracts viewers to identify themselves with the heroines [4]. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) belongs to this genre. Oria noted that since the 2010s, chick flicks have shifted their focus from heterosexual romance to a broader concern towards professions and personal fulfillment. Although romantic plots are still the center of the film, love sometimes becomes subordinate to ones professional achievements [5].

The female gaze is a commonly used strategy in feminist films. Films are entrenched in patriarchal ideologies. The image of a woman is often “tied to a ‘castration threat’ that maintains male dominance” [6]. The word female gaze is a significant concept against “male gaze” in empowering female perspectives and challenging gender stereotypes [7]. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the director integrates the female gaze into character settings. The two female protagonists, Marianne and Héloïse, act in roles of seeing and being seen. Marianne’s career as a painter granted her the right to “gaze,” while Héloïse, who is trapped in dilemmas brought by the 1770s patriarchal society and traditions, performs a highly representative subject. The combination of these two well-designed characters empowers this film to present the feminist topic through a single female portrait. This is very special in feminist films, because male characters are important under the topic of women. Male often appears in feminist film representing patriarchy. Through showcasing how females confront patriarchy or how male confront their own privilege, films encourage viewers to think more about gender dynamics [8]. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does this job without males, thus questioning whether a male character is a must under feminist topics.

Identity is fluid in films. Characters could change their identity by changing clothes, aging, or experiencing turning points in their life. This flexibility of identity provides more possibilities for the film to present both female and male features in a whole-female world. By changing clothes, attitudes, or gaining new life experiences, characters’ identities become complicated and multi-layered. For example, Marianne’s identity changed from a symbolic male to a total female as she interacted with Héloïse. As an important aspect of feminist topics, identity fluidity is often applied in feminist films. Another important aspect is the intersectionality theory. According to this theory, an individual’s identity is decided by various aspects, including gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, etc. Anna Carastathis thinks that intersectionality in feminism explains the relationship between oppression and the construction of multiple identities and social locations. Thus the pressure one faces is also multi-layered [9]. This paper considers that although the film erases male characters, it presents patriarchy in other ways directly and indirectly. The era in which the protagonist lives experienced no feminist movements. Also, Héloïse’s fate of being forced into

marriage directly illustrates patriarchal society's impact on women. Meanwhile, the tragic fate of Héloïse's sister implicitly satirizes the oppression of patriarchal society.

3. Reclaiming queer subjectivity: identity fluidity, gaze, and intersectionality

3.1. Fluidity of identity: one character's embodiment of multiple roles

Clothing plays a crucial role in this film. Gilligan have shown in his research that changing of clothes could enable the construction, transformation, and performance of identities [10]. Clothes help subsidize the identity transformation of female characters, thus weakening the necessity of male character. Héloïse doesn't have her own dress when she returns home from the convent. The green dress she is given once belonged to her sister, who allegedly fell to her death, probably a rebellion against an unwanted marriage. Now that she was dead, by donning the green dress, Héloïse takes over her sisters' fate. Héloïse's identity changed from a nun to an unmarried women. This fluidity of identity indirectly reveals the burden patriarchal society had on female at that time.

The setting of painter and the model is also special in the film. Drawing and painting, in the area of anthropology, is a way for field workers to connect with environment and their subjects deeply. It is portrayed as a 'gradual gaze', an action that acquires attentive thinking and learning [11]. Through the 'gradual gaze', female characters experienced changes in mind. At first, the painter Marianne approaches Héloïse with the goal of creating a portrait that fulfills Héloïse's mothers' need. Marianne hide her identity and plays the role of a facilitator of feudal marriage. To complete the first portrait, she even cheats by drawing herself in the mirror, dressing Héloïse's dress. The ultimate failure of this painting underscores the importance of equality between male and female, since Marianne is making a top-down gaze as a representative of patriarchal society.

The shot of the angel of the maid Sophie also reveals her identity change. She is the shortest among the three women, Héloïse, Marianne, and herself. But when Marianne comes to ask Sophie a question, the camera always shoots from a level vantage point with Sophie.

Eye-level shots place viewers face-to-face with the characters, producing visual parity [12]. Though Marianne is higher and she is the guest of the house, the maid still enjoys private space and hobbies as a respected individual in the room. The angle of the shot expresses the necessity of equality between master and servant. Also, the identity of Sophie is complex. She is a maid, a woman with her own life, and a pregnant young mother. The film tells nothing about Sophie's lover and gives no reason for her embroidery or abortion. Marianne and Héloïse respond differently to Sophie's identity changes, making it possible for the film to discuss multiple social issues in a context without male characters.

3.2. Seeing and being seen: the dynamics of female relationships

Through the exchange of gaze between the two female protagonists, the power of discourse also shifts. Goddard mentioned that in the context of gazing, both parties are active participants in the construction of meaning and identity within gender interactions [13]. Female protagonists also take on the functions of male characters. When Marianne first arrived at the island, she lied to Héloïse about her painter identity and secretly painted the first portrait. Defined by Snow, male gaze is a 'singular, negative framework of patriarchal and ideological domination.' This vision is often characterized by 'identification, fetishism, scopophilia, and the portrayal of women as objects of male pleasure and bearers of male lack' [14]. Marianne performs scopophilia in the process of painting the first portrait. She In this stage, compared to Héloïse, she acts as a spokesperson for the patriarchal world outside. During her conversations with Héloïse, she observes each part of Héloïse's body, deconstructs them, and pieces them together to form a complete portrait. To her, Héloïse is not a complete living being. This is a clear form of the objectification of women.

Héloïse acts as the traditional rebellious figure in feminist movies. She criticized Marianne's first portrait as lacking vitality, and encouraged her to paint one more. This action of gazing back towards the painter symbolizes the female's attitude towards the patriarchal gaze. Rather than avoiding patriarchy's harm towards women, they choose to stand up, point out the distorted standards, and change the society by themselves. Héloïse's rebel encourages Marianne to give up on the patriarchal requirements and understand Héloïse's charm from an equal perspective.

The gaze is not limited to the two protagonists. Sophie, the maid, is also involved in the story. The protagonists' respective gazes towards Sophie also reveal their different mindsets. The paper argues that the existence of a male character may break the balance created by the interaction between three female characters. Research has shown that ideology is unconsciously performed in films [15]. Females and males have different ideologies; thus, the atmosphere created by a female-only environment differs from one that includes men. In the film, Sophie's decision to have an abortion rebels against the oppression of patriarchy. Fertility decisions are controlled by patriarchy. Women in families usually choose to give birth due to oppression from patriarchy. The cost of children mostly relies on mothers, since fathers need to work outside. The coercive pronatalism also works. Marriage laws, social norms, and abortion limits all encourage women to give birth [16]. During the abortion, Marianne turns her head away. Héloïse encouraged her to observe and record the hardship Sophie is going through. This reveals a different view inside the female group: some encourage advocates not to show how women suffer from patriarchy to the female community in order to provide them more psychological comfort. Others see women's suffering as an act of courage. They believe that confronting suffering is the only way to solve it.

3.3. Intersectionality: hidden patriarchy

Theory of intersectionality better explains why the film better discusses patriarchy and feminism issues without male characters. The theory notes that individual faces multi-layered influence in a society. Aspects such as changing social norms, social perceptions, identities have mixed influence on individual's life and experience. The personality and social feelings an individual gets is a mixed result. The paper considers that, not only do these influences help shape one's identity, they also add various pressure to individuals. Appearance of male character isn't the only way to feature a patriarchal society, presenting various factors of pressure also works. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* presents an intricate exploration of intersectionality by depicting how different women navigate patriarchal constraints based on their societal position. This narrative style makes the film more realistic, like the way how patriarchy permeates women's lives. It only becomes evident when marriage and love issues are serious. The life experience of Héloïse fulfilled this need. Her sister's fate better exemplified the assertion that to convey a theme, characters do not even need to appear. The film never directly tell us why Héloïse's sister fall off the cliff. But a series of clues encourage the viewers to predict a most plausible answer—she fall in refusal to her marriage. After her sister's death, Héloïse's mother restricts Héloïse from walking near the cliffs by the sea. Her mother knew that Héloïse too is angry about the marriage. Also, Héloïse wears a green dress that does not fit her size. The owner of the dress remains a secret, but its style is similar to what Héloïse's mother wears. All these clues tell audiences that the fate Héloïse's sister had rejected has been passed down to Héloïse. The film well criticized the patriarchal pressures on women's life. Not only does it try to project the society in 18th century, it also metaphorically points the oppression of women in a modern society.

The setting of three female characters also shows that women are suffering in a patriarchal society. Héloïse went back home to marry because her sister had just committed suicide in refusal of marriage. Because Héloïse's mother needed Héloïse's portrait for her marriage, Marianne came to the island. The maid Sophie also suffered two abortions. The reasons for their suffering, marriage

and giving birth, are all problems created by patriarchy. Because of the traditions, females had to marry against their wishes and abort secretly. In conclusion, the film creates a story that could convey feminist themes simply through showing the reason why females suffer. This innovative act erases the existence of male characters.

4. Conclusion

The film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) discusses feminist topics without involving any male characters. These topics include but are not limited to: the power dynamics between male and female in a patriarchal society, female gaze and male gaze, problem of giving birth..etc. By using queer subjectivity theory (i.e. intersectionality), the paper explains how the film progressed. It empower female protagonists with fluid identity, and exchange the position of seeing and being seen between female characters.

The film shows a new possible way for chick flicks: to tell women's story from an all-female perspective. This could also help feminism film category to improve some of its existing issues. All-female films do not highlight feminism by weakening female characters, nor do they vilify male characters to create resentment. Through the equal communication and interaction between female characters, this kind of film better criticized the inequality between genders in patriarchal society.

Overall, this paper fulfill the gap shown in previous researches on feminism films. Though the topic of queer subjectivity and chick flicks are often discussed, none of them take *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) s an example. Also, few researches are set in the historical background of 2010s.

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