

A Lacanian Mirror-Stage Reading of Female Subject Formation in Good Things

Yu Zhong

School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
yzhong246-c@my.cityu.edu.hk

Abstract. According to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, the subject constructs self-consciousness through the mirror. In the film *Good Things*, whether it is the superhuman single mother Wang Tiemei, the always somewhat detached child Wang Moli, or the romance-obsessed neighbor Xiao Ye, all three female characters in the film face the life issue of subjective construction. This paper employs Lacan's mirror stage theory—particularly the triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the real—to analyze how the three female characters in the film engage with external symbolic, undergoing a transformation from self-cognition to the reconstruction of self-identity. Although Lacan's mirror stage theory has been extensively applied to film and media studies, and while there is no shortage of contemporary cinematic works centered on female subjectivity, the intersection of these two areas remains underexplored. However, *Good things* diverges from traditional feminist cinema by transcending a singular narrative of gender oppression. Instead, it shifts the focus to the process by which modern women reconstruct their subjectivity in the face of adversity. This study employs Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory to analyze narratives of female subjectivity in film. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it seeks to dissect the root causes behind the predicaments of the female subject. It aims to address a gap in the application of Lacanian theory to post-feminist film studies while simultaneously offering methodological inspiration and a critical framework for contemporary women grappling with identity crises.

Keywords: Textual Analysis, The Psychoanalytic Reconstruction of the Female Subject, The Female Thing, The power of the Feminine, Subjectivity Formation

1. Introduction

Directed by Shao Yihui, *Good things* is a film that revolves around Wang Tiemei, a single mother, who moves into an old Shanghai lane with her daughter Wang Moli and unexpectedly forms a relationship with Xiao Ye, a romance-obsessed neighbor. According to director Shao Yihui, the character (hǎo) in the film's title, *Good things*, is composed of the radicals for (woman) and (child), implicitly signaling a female-centric narrative in this cinematic work. In the film, the character Wang Tiemei, a single mother, was formerly an investigative journalist. Following the closure of the news organization to which she previously belonged, she transitioned into a role as editor-in-chief of an entertainment-focused new media outlet, self-referencing ironically as a "hawker in live-stream

sales." The child character, Wang Moli, a primary school student, carries a subtle air of detachment in her demeanor and possesses a clarity and perceptiveness that exceeds that of her average peers. She consistently observes and critiques the adult world through a lens of childish candor and incisive articulation. Xiao Ye, the romance-obsessed neighbor, serves as the lead vocalist in a band. Her persistent yearning for love and validation stems from a lack of parental care and affirmation during her formative years.

Wang Tiemei, portrayed as a superhuman-like single mother, nevertheless encounters moments of misunderstanding in her familial relationship with her daughter, Wang Moli. Professionally, she becomes a target of online violence after publishing an article recounting her authentic experiences as a single parent. Under her mother's encouraging approach to education, which stands in contrast to the authoritative context of her formal schooling, Wang Moli perceives maternal guidance as lacking official endorsement and legitimacy. This dissonance plunges the young subject into a phase of self-doubt and existential issues. Driven by a deficiency stemming from her family of origin, the romance-obsessed neighbor Xiao Ye remains emotionally dependent on seeking external validation in her adult life. However, in a moment of clarity when Wang Tiemei breaks down in tears, Xiao Ye insightfully challenges her by asking, "Why does everything have to be done perfectly? Moreover, who is the judge?"

According to Lacan's mirror stage theory, a profound connection and analytical framework exist that links the construction of the subject, the formation of self-identity, and the functioning of ideology. As a gynocentric narrative film, *Good Things* primarily explores the awakening of female identity through the subjective construction process, as experienced by its three central female characters, each of whom confronts her own existential predicament. Therefore, in examining the film's central concern with the construction of female subjectivity, this paper employs Lacan's mirror stage theory—specifically the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—to delineate the transformative journey of its three female protagonists from self-identity issues to awakening and growth. To elucidate how the three female characters subvert the gaze of the Other and ultimately achieve the reconstruction of their subjectivity.

2. Lacan's mirror stage theory

According to Lacan's definition, the mirror operates analogously to a literal looking glass: the subject apprehends itself through the reflection in the mirror. It comes to recognize that image as itself. This moment marks the inception of self-consciousness. According to modern neuroscience, self-awareness typically emerges in children around the age of 18 months, marking the developmental onset of the conceptual representation of "I" in the brain. However, Lacan's mirror stage theory posits a notably earlier onset. Lacan contends that infants begin to form a primordial sense of "I" as early as six months of age. Lacan's mirror stage places greater emphasis on a sudden, transformative moment in which the infant's self-awareness coalesces abruptly into the recognition of "I" [1]. It is for this reason that Lacan designates this developmental phase as the mirror stage. Lacan divides the development of the self into three distinct yet interdependent registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Each represents a fundamental order of experience, and all three are intricately nested within one another, forming an indispensable structural whole. A central tenet of the mirror stage theory is the assertion that I is an Other [1]. This signifies that the mirror image with which the subject identifies, along with other external figures, is collectively termed the Other. Lacan emphasizes that this Other plays a decisive role in the formation of the ego [2].

2.1. The imaginary

Within the register of the Imaginary, Lacan emphasizes that the subject constructs the ego through identification with the "image" (imago) of the other [3]. The "image" within the Imaginary encompasses a multitude of forms, whether conscious or unconscious, actively conceived or passively observed. It does not function merely as the opposite of objectivity, but rather manifests as a mode of perception through which the subject connects itself to the external world [2]. Within the register of the Imaginary, the ego is the little other (objet petit a). The little other constitutes the image of the self as perceived and reflected by others. Wu Qiong points out that imaginary identification not only shapes the subject's imaginary self-cognition but also constructs an imaginary perception of the object. Essentially, this form of cognition constitutes an "imaginary misrecognition" (méconnaissance) [4].

2.2. The symbolic

In contrast to the Imaginary, the Symbolic is more fundamentally engaged with the domain of linguistics. From a linguistic perspective, the Imaginary functions as a "pre-linguistic domain," constituted by sensory perception, mechanisms of identification, and the misrecognition of the self [5]. Within the Symbolic order, however, Lacan equates it directly with the structure of language, emphasizing that the subject operates in accordance with linguistic laws. Within the Symbolic order, the ego is the significant Other. As the embodiment of the symbolic order, the big Other disciplines the subject through sociocultural norms, thereby producing a "qualified" social subject [6]. One could argue that when the Big Other intrudes upon the subject, the subject begins to perform self-idealization [7].

2.3. The real

In his later years, Lacan regarded the Real as the most fundamental dimension of the human psychic structure, one that undergirds the operations of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It is for this reason that he positioned the Real at the forefront of his theoretical conceptualization of the mirror stage [1]. Later, Lacan not only inherited Freud's concept of the death drive but also refined it into a more primordial mechanism: the traumatic foundation of the symbolic order [8]. For Lacan, the Real does not refer to physically existing objects but denotes a dimension within the subject's psychic consciousness that is void and unspeakable. How, then, does this "Nothing" give rise to the "Something" of the Symbolic order? Lacan's answer is through the traumatic event [8].

3. Lacan's mirror stage theory and Good Things

This paper proposes to analyze the three central female characters in Good Things—the child Wang Moli, the single mother Wang Tiemei, and the neighbor Xiao Ye—through the triadic registers of Lacan's mirror stage theory: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

3.1. Wang Moli: misrecognition of the self and the gaze of the other

According to Lacan's definition of the Imaginary, the construction of the subject's ego essentially occurs through identification with the "image" (imago) reflected by the other, thereby facilitating the formation of self-identity [2]. The family, as the primary site of socialization, constitutes the initial

arena in which the subject seeks self-identity. The evaluations and feedback provided by family members exert a profound influence on the formation of the subject's selfhood.

In the film *Good Things*, the child Wang Moli draws on the wall and then shares her artwork with her father. He responds by saying, "You drew it very well, but it would be even better if you drew on paper. After all, you are not Michelangelo." Later, when her father says goodbye to Wang Moli, he asks, "Can you give me a kiss?" She replies coldly, "That will not necessary. After all, I am not Michelangelo. Goodbye, Dad." This scene reveals that Wang Moli seeks imaginary identification by sharing her drawing. She regards her father not only as an "approver" but also assigns him the role of a "judge," thereby positioning him as the little other within the register of the Imaginary. The father's negation of Wang Moli's artwork further undermines the child's narcissistic satisfaction in the Imaginary stage, dismantling her fantasy of an ideal ego. Regarding narcissism, Lacan interprets the ideal ego as predominantly imaginative in nature, manifesting primarily as a pursuit of primary narcissism [1]. As Lacan himself stated, the relationship within the Imaginary is fundamentally a narcissistic relationship. The subject must rely on the discourse of the Other for its preliminary construction; otherwise, the formation of cognition remains impossible. In Lacan's own terms, "There is no truth that can be accessed except through the Other" [9]. Lacan also appropriated Hegel's master-slave dialectic to elucidate this form of identification, likening it to the slave's identification with the master and the actor's identification with the audience [10].

In the film, the child character Wang Moli writes three essays, one of which is titled "I No Longer Fantasize". The content reads approximately: "I have realized I am not a genius, I have no special talents, and I am not from a wealthy family—so I no longer fantasize. When I was much younger, my mother said I was very clever; I could speak at ten months old and correctly address every family member." This inner monologue from Wang Moli reveals that the recognition and praise from her mother, Wang Tiemei, mark the beginning of her construction of an "ideal ego." Through the mother's language—as the little other—she internalizes a self-image of being "gifted." At this stage, Wang Moli's self-cognition is imbued with fantasy. However, as she matures and encounters the harsh realities of life, she gradually becomes aware of the gap between her early mirror image (the ideal ego) and her actual self. As Lacan asserts, the ego formed in the mirror stage is essentially a misrecognition of the self. Wang Moli's declaration, "I no longer fantasize," can be interpreted as an abandonment of fantasy—an acceptance that she is not the perfect subject of the Other's desire. This marks her gradual detachment from dependence on the desire of the Other and the nascent reconstruction of her subjectivity.

3.2. Wang Tiemei: language and symbolic violence

In Lacan's mirror stage theory, the Symbolic order constitutes a structure composed of language, signs, social norms, and cultural formations. It is through entry into this order that the subject forms a socialized self. While the linguistic order of the Symbolic provides a channel for the symbolization of desire, not every subject can attain its ego ideal within this structure. Under the imposition of social norms and the prejudices of the Other, the symbolic order tends to protect the majority of subjects while exercising negating violence and exclusion toward the desires of minority subjects [11].

In the film *Good Things*, the predicament faced by the single mother Wang Tiemei originates from the symbolic violence inherent in the linguistic order of the Symbolic realm. In the societal professional sphere, Wang Tiemei became a target of online violence after publishing an article recounting her authentic experiences as a single mother. This can be interpreted as follows: Wang Tiemei's self-conceptualization is symbolized by the identity of an independent and resilient single

mother. However, this symbolic identity conflicts with the normative familial ethics prevalent in the broader societal context. Furthermore, the authentic linguistic narrative of individual lived experience contradicts the socially expected discourse of "positive energy." Therefore, social norms are inherently incapable of accommodating the nuanced differences among minority subjects. On the one hand, the singular affective experiences of minority subjects exceed the intelligible boundaries of social norms as constituted by the significant Other. On the other hand, each individual internalizes a distinct framework of values derived from the significant Other, leading to the interpretation of others' behaviors through divergent cognitive standards and inherent biases. Therefore, Lacan explicitly contends that when the subject constructs its relation to the external world, rationality proves inadequate; instead, the process relies predominantly on the subject's personal imaginary framework [1].

In the film, the single mother Wang Tiemei, having become a target of online violence, retreats into a stairwell to weep in solitude. This moment is inadvertently witnessed by her neighbor Xiao Ye, leading to a mutual confession of vulnerabilities between the two women on the rooftop. Wang Tiemei emphatically states, "Because I am a woman and a mother, I must excel." She further adds, "But the rules of this game are not supposed to be like this." For Wang Tiemei, the signifiers "woman" and "mother" carry the weight of social norms and expectations, thereby compelling her to construct her self-worth within this symbolic order. The assertion "I must excel" reflects the internalization of these very social norms and expectations. This notion of "excellence" is pursued not for the self, but to satisfy the gaze of an invisible significant Other. Finally, the "game" to which Wang Tiemei refers is precisely the order imposed by the symbolic big Other. Her statement, "not supposed to be like this," functions as an internal cry—one that reveals a tragic paradox: she is both a product of this symbolic order, having internalized its social norms, and yet unable to find a place for herself within its structure.

3.3. Xiao Ye: the unsymbolized trauma

According to Lacan, the Real constitutes that dimension of reality which the subject cannot integrate, and which inevitably returns in the form of trauma. Concerning trauma, the subject exhibits two distinct mechanisms of response: On the one hand, the trauma may be integrated into the symbolic order and incorporated into the subject through symbolization; on the other hand, it may be assimilated in a repressed form, intruding upon the subject through manifestations such as neurosis, dreams, anxiety, alcoholism, and other symptoms [8].

For the neighbor Xiao Ye, the harm inflicted by her family of origin remains unsymbolizable and unspeakable. It persists within her as an unconscious form of existence. During Xiao Ye's developmental years, she endured an abusive father and a misogynistic mother, devoid of parental attention or affirmation. Consequently, she habitually represses her emotions and affects, striving to appease others while perpetually seeking external validation. For Xiao Ye, her father's domestic violence did not function as "punishment," since a logic of cause and effect underpins punishment—i.e., "I am being punished because I did something wrong"—which is already symbolized. However, the violence inflicted by Xiao Ye's father more closely resembled an instinctual and unpredictable force. This form of violence was meaningless and repetitive, and as such, this unsymbolizable experience of violence transformed into a state of perpetual vigilance and fear within her unconscious, leaving her in constant anticipation of the next sudden storm. The mother, as the primordial Other, facilitates the child's integration of instinctual sensations and needs into the Symbolic order, enabling the child to comprehend and express them through language and rules. However, the mother's aversion and negation convey not merely "you have not done well enough,"

but rather something more fundamental: "your very existence is an error." This engenders in Xiao Ye the most profound existential anxiety. Her traumatic experience manifests not as shame about any particular action, but rather as a deep-seated shame toward her very being. In the film, this manifestation is evident when Xiao Ye tells the child Wang Moli: "She does not dare tell her mother that she has started her period, because the first time she menstruated, she stained the family sofa." Here, it can be interpreted that Xiao Ye's existence—her body—is perceived as having defiled the mother's world (represented by the clean sofa/family order). The phrase "doesn't dare to tell" signifies more than mere fear; it reflects how this unspeakable traumatic experience has permanently bound Xiao Ye to shame and guilt within her unconscious.

For Lacan, trauma possesses not only a historical dimension but also a temporal duration. Even after the subject's psychic structure has matured, highly intense and stimulating traumatic events from the past can intrude abruptly into the unconscious psyche in contingent forms, re-actualizing the traumatic experience. This process is what Lacan terms the retroactive construction of subjectivity [8]. Xiao Ye's insomnia, reliance on medication, and alcoholism precisely exemplify this intrusion of the unsymbolized Real. Her trauma—comprising past wounds, unresolved desires, and unbearable realities that resist articulation—persistently retroacts and reconstructs itself through symptoms (insomnia, dependency).

4. Not a perfect being, but a whole subject

In *Good Things*, each female character pursues her spiritual belonging under the pressure of mainstream social norms. This signifies the profound yearning for self-identity among each female character in the film—a desire to reclaim the possibility of reshaping their space of existence within structural oppression. The narrative begins with Wang Tiemei, a single mother, moving into a Shanghai lane house with her daughter, Wang Moli, where she encounters her neighbor, Xiao Ye. Through director Shao Yihui's lens, each female character embodies an exploration of how self-reflection can dissolve personal confusions and dilemmas, how to re-examine the social discipline imposed upon women, and how to redefine and rediscover the self. Simultaneously, it conveys a call to challenge gender stereotypes and aspires to foster a more inclusive social environment for women.

In the film's conclusion, the child Wang Moli writes her third essay, titled "My Favorite Thing," in which she admits that she does not enjoy playing the drum and prefers to be an audience member appreciating art. Her genuine passion remains writing, and she continues to regard her mother as a role model. This conclusion also signifies a subtle awakening of her self-awareness, as she has gradually learned to experience and observe the world through her own agency, thereby forming her own judgments. The single mother Wang Tiemei ultimately comes to accept her own imperfections. Whereas she once felt compelled to excel in every endeavor, constantly suppressing her authentic emotions and arming herself with an iron-like exterior, her vulnerabilities were fully revealed to her neighbor Xiao Ye. However, Xiao Ye's words to her on the rooftop—"Then let us just stop playing by their rules"—prompt Wang Tiemei to engage in self-reflection and re-examine her own position. For the neighbor Xiao Ye, genuine growth began not with encountering the mother-daughter pair Wang Tiemei and Wang Moli, but rather with her decision to escape her family of origin in adulthood. Although the trauma inflicted by her family of origin continues to accompany Xiao Ye, her vulnerability is also seen and acknowledged by both Wang Tiemei and her daughter, Wang Moli. Despite the trauma from her family of origin, Xiao Ye's vulnerability is recognized and validated by both Wang Tiemei and her daughter, Wang Moli.

5. Conclusion

The English title of *Good Things, Herstory*, creates a deliberate contrast with "History," implying that the prevailing rules of the contemporary world remain predominantly male-dominated. This paper employs Lacan's mirror stage theory to examine how the female characters in *Good Things* construct their connections with the external world through the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, ultimately accomplishing a process of subjective reconstruction. Director Shao Yihui portrays the coming-of-age narratives of the three female protagonists through a nuanced, light, and charming approach, deliberately moving away from the earlier "superwoman" model that often accentuated gender antagonism. It conveys a more profound message of learning to embrace one's authentic self, free from the constraints and disciplining of societal frameworks imposed on women, to live genuinely and become who one truly aspires to be. May we each find our own authentic way of being, achieving reconciliation with ourselves and harmonious coexistence with the world.

References

- [1] Yan, Helai. (2023) *Lakang Shi Jiang [Ten Lectures on Lacan]*. Guangxi Normal University Press.
- [2] Sun, Y. (2019). From the imaginary order to the symbolic order: On Lacan's mirror stage. *Mudanjiang University Journal*, 28 (2), 10-13.
- [3] Xie, Yuhang. (2022) *A Study on Lacan's Thought of Subjectivity*. Master's thesis, Southwest University.
- [4] Wu, Q. (2011). *Yake Lakān: Yuedu ni de zhengzhuang [Jacques Lacan: Reading your symptoms]*. Remin University of China Press.
- [5] Cui, J., & Shu, L. (2021). The inspiration and limitations of Lacan's 'Three Orders theory' on ideological theory. *World Philosophy*, (1), 103.
- [6] Shu, L. (2023). The fetishism of the 'non-thing': A deep perspective on consumerism from Lacan's 'object a'. *World Philosophy*, (5), 91-99.
- [7] Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's papers on technique 1953-1954* (J. Forrester, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1975).
- [8] Hou, Y. J. (2022). The evolution of female self-consciousness in "Zulieihā Opens Her Eyes" from the perspective of mirror theory [Master's thesis, Harbin Institute of Technology].
- [9] Lacan, J. (2006) *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Company,
- [10] Lacan, J. (2001). Aggressivity in psychoanalysis. In A. Sheridan (Trans.), *Écrits: A selection* (pp. 8-29). Routledge. (Original work published 1966).
- [11] Ding, Y., & Li, D. D. (2023). Journey to the West: A healing assembly in Lacan's symbolic order. *Movie Literature*, (16), 138-141.