

Analysis of Character and Theme in The Flowers of War

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Abstract: The film *The Flowers of War* is related to the Nanking Massacre in the year of 1937, in Nanking, China. The paper mainly studies the story of sacrifice and hope in the war, and the relationship between the two, against the backdrop of the Nanking Massacre. The purpose of this research paper is to bring to light a different side of the war. This paper introduces the cruelty of war and the importance of women in war through the analysis of characters and themes in The film *The Flowers of War*, analyzing the before and after of the characters and the personality traits of different characters. This paper finds out that war is essentially exchanging the lives of one group of people for the lives of another. Men are not the only ones who can contribute to war. At the same time, the position of women in war is not negligible and essential.

Keywords: The Flowers of War, sacrifice, hope, women

1. Introduction

The film *The Flowers of War* is set in the Nanking Massacre, which is six weeks of atrocities by Japanese troops against the Republic of China, including looting, massacres, and rape [1]. The film mainly tells the story of people, including prostitutes, Chinese soldiers and a pretended “priest,” to protect a group of schoolgirls. The film is cruel and brutal. In the film, people are constantly sacrificed, experiencing cruel torture. Although the ending of the schoolgirls succeeded to escape, it still in exchange for the sacrifice of others. In the usual war movies, men are often cast as heroes. However, what makes this movie different is that it has women as the main characters and heroes in the war, depicting how women save the people in the war. This paper focuses on the contribution of women in the war, the changes in the characters before and after, and as students of hope. The significance of this paper is to make audiences realize that not only men can save mankind in war, but women can also help people with their abilities.

2. Background of *The Flowers of War*

The movie is based on reality, not fiction, which is enough to show the cruelty of real events. If this movie is pure fiction, then there must be many judgments that the movie is too fake. However, the film is based on a novel by Geling Yan, *13 Flowers of Nanjing* [1]. According to the interview of Geling from BBC News, she was inspired by the diary of Minnie Vautrin, an American missionary who was the president of Ginling College[2]. Ginling College was relatively safer than other areas, so it was like a shelter for students and women. The news concluded in Minnie’s diary that on

December 24, 1937 that Japanese soldiers arrived demanding “comfort women,” they forced her to give them 100 prostitutes from those ten thousand women. The result was that Minnie was forced to give them 21 women. Thus, those 21 women were the original of the 13 women in the film. Her diary is enough to prove the authenticity and credibility of the event. Geling summarized the event as an “extraordinary action.” [2] It is true that the decision must have been very difficult for Minnie, and she certainly didn’t want any of the people to be taken away. The reality must have been even more brutal than what was written in the diary. It was definitely that those 21 prostitutes must have gone through a long internal struggle before deciding to step forward. No one can imagine how those 21 prostitutes would have been tortured by the Japanese soldiers. Their experiences were really miserable, and they were unable to resist and could only silently endure the gruesome torture of the Japanese soldiers. Thus, the film is not an exaggerated plot, adapting from real events, and the real situation must be more brutal.

3. Female Characters in *The Flowers of War*

Many characters in the movie *The Flowers of War* died, but there are some of them who can live to the end. For example, the death of Doukou and Xianglan. They totally had a chance to live to the end. It is hard to understand why they would risk their lives to run to the brothel to get pipa strings and earrings which were unimportant things in such a dangerous situation. Perhaps Doukou went to get pipa strings, because she thought of Pusheng as her brother. She wanted to express her miss and complete regret for her family in this way. When Xianglan got her earrings, the camera gave the earrings a 16-second-long shot. She took out the earrings and wiped away the dust on the mirror. When she put the earring on, she looked like a different person, her eyes full of hope, looking at herself in the mirror and smiled. At that moment it is easier to understand the reason she risked her life to get the earrings. The earrings must be very special and extraordinary to her and can make her consider it as her life. However, everyone’s beliefs are different. The earrings and the obsession of playing pipa were their faith, as important as their life [3].

While many war movies promote the bravery of male soldiers and their sacrifice for people, this movie is about a group of young and beautiful prostitutes saving the lives of schoolgirls. Those women may not have the same fearlessness and front-line spirit as the male soldiers, but they are protecting others in their own way. At 1:44:49, when Yumo persuaded others to sing to Japanese soldiers instead of schoolgirls, she said a Chinese verse, an ancient poem to describe them, “prostitutes never care about a falling nation, they sing and dance while others are dying.” The poem really impressed them and they were all willing to go. They also wanted to prove themselves through this opportunity that they were not as useless as everyone says and didn’t care about national affairs. Although the ending does not tell us what happened to them after they got into the car, it is instead a better way to still give the audience a glimmer of hope that some of them may escape and survive. However, we all know that what happened to them must have been tragic, suffering the cruelty of the Japanese soldiers and eventually dying. In my heart, they also died for the country and people. They are women, but they are also as heroic as the soldiers who went to war, but in a different way, doing what they can to protect others.

The most unexpected plot about this movie is George’s final action, pretending to be one of the schoolgirls to fill the thirteenth slot, because he must have ended badly after being discovered. He was an orphan and the priest took him in and raised him. Before the priest died, he told George to protect the schoolgirls. He decided to do so to fulfill the priest’s last wish and to repay the priest for raising him.

4. Changes in the Main Character in *The Flowers of War*

John is one of the main characters of this movie, and also the person who had the biggest contrast between the beginning and the end. Students would not have been able to escape successfully without him. Although his change was very sudden, it is reasonable. People will indeed be suddenly changed because of a certain event or a certain moment [4]. At 46:21, the background music suddenly became sacred and heavy as he arranged his clothes, and his eyes became very determined [5]. In that situation, he saw he was wearing the clothes of the priest and thought that he was the only one who could protect the people in the church. He was their last hope, so he decided to stand up and pretend to be a priest to protect them. Especially at 49:28, he saw a schoolgirl fall from the upstairs by a Japanese soldier and there was nothing he could do about it. Then at 50:56, he held the schoolgirl's hand and cried bitterly. That's the moment when he started to really decide to help the group of schoolgirls. At 1:20:40, when his friend was urging him to take a boat together and expressed incomprehension of his behavior, he still chose to say goodbye to his friend. At that moment he must have been moved to go with his friend, but he had more important things in mind for him to do, and there were more lives in his hands. In the face of war, there are no national borders. Compassion and humanity can transcend everything.

Shujuan's father, Mr. Meng, was also shot dead by a Japanese soldier at the end of the film. This role of his is a good illustration of how people put their lives and benefits first in the face of danger. He defected to the Japanese and became a spy in order to live by himself. However, when John asked him for tools to fix the truck and permit to flee Nanjing, despite the danger, he chose to help John. The truck was their only means of escape, so it was very important to them. Although it was risky for Mr. Meng, he brought them the tools. Thus, the schoolgirls survived and fled Nanjing could not have done without his help.

5. Sacrifice and Hope in the War

In the film, those students symbolized hope and the future. Everyone in the film tried their best to help and support students, the "priest," George, prostitutes, and Chinese soldiers. It is also because of their sacrifice and dedication that the schoolgirls could successfully escape. I really like the scenes looking out from the small hole in the stained glass. The scenes from the small hole are symbolic of the hope of living. For example, at 24:20, students are looking at the small hole that the prostitutes are trying to get in the church, and these prostitutes exchange with them and save the schoolgirls' lives in the end; At 55:30, Shujuan looked out of the hole and saw the sacrifice of the Chinese soldier. He guessed that the Japanese soldiers would come to kill the schoolgirls, so he set up several traps in advance and strapped a bomb on himself to prepare to die with those Japanese soldiers; At 1:11:16, Yumo looked out of the hole and saw John was fixing the car, and John helped all of them to deal with the exchange and helped students to flee Nanjing in the end of the film. I think the "hole" reflects that although the hole is too small to get out, which is that there is only a glimmer of hope, we will also succeed because of the people in the "hole."

6. Theme in *The Flowers of War*

In the end of the film, John successfully fled Nanking with schoolgirls. He drove the truck with tears in his eyes while the sun reflected on them. The sun represented hope, carrying the expectations of the group of schoolgirls into the future. The schoolgirls finally survived and managed to escape without the help and sacrifice of all, including Chinese soldiers, John, George, Shujuan's father, and prostitutes. Simply to say, the story of the movie is using the lives of a group of people to exchange for the lives of another group of people, using Chinese soldiers to exchange Chinese citizens and using prostitutes to exchange schoolgirls. In this exchange, someone must be sacrificed, while giving

hope to another group of people. Those sacrifices are heroes, the last surviving schoolgirls would definitely live with hope. Just like these prostitutes chose to put all of their hopes on the groups of schoolgirls. They knew that the schoolgirls were still young and educated, and had brighter futures than them.

7. Conclusion

This paper mainly takes the film *The Flowers of War* as a case to analyze the contribution of females in the war, and the sacrifices they made for those schoolgirls. The conclusion is that not only men can contribute to war, but women can also contribute in their own way. Also, war is essentially one group of people exchanging their lives for the hope of another group of people. Moreover, people's character and attitude can be moved and changed by what happens in the war. This paper could have more analysis on the background and characteristics of those schoolgirls, and more on the relationships between prostitutes and schoolgirls. Future studies could continue to focus on the contributions and efforts of women in the war and the comparison between men and women in the war effort.

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