

Analysis of the Feminism in the Flowers of War

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Abstract: The film *The Flowers of War* depicts the story between 13 women and 13 female students in the crisis of the country, and the film ends with the self-sacrifice of the women, achieving the theme of sublimation. The whole story takes the Nanjing Massacre as the background, revolves around the contradiction and integration between women, reflects the common suffering of women and the awakening of female consciousness, and subverts the traditional image of prostitutes. This paper mainly studies the contradictions and entanglements between the characters in *Flowers of War*, analyzes the plot and characterization of the film based on socialist feminist theory and ancient Chinese literature, and finds that the film presents the aesthetic imprisonment of women, deep-rooted patriarchal ideological control, and the noble spirit of self-sacrifice. The hidden incomplete feminism, the estrangement between women and the inescapable male gaze and virginity complex broaden the audience's understanding of the film, break the traditional perspective of analyzing the film, and analyze the identity construction, consciousness awakening and sacrifice significance of women in the film.

Keywords: *The Flowers of War*, suffering, feminism, redemption

1. Introduction

The Flowers of War is a narrative film with a predominant focus on the female perspective. It recounts the events surrounding the fall of Nanjing in 1937, involving missionary school girls, Qinhuai River women, soldiers, wounded soldiers, and an American named John, who sought refuge in a church. The film primarily centers on the story of a schoolgirl and a prostitute. Under Japanese coercion, female students were compelled to participate in a Japanese performance, leading to their unwillingness to endure humiliation, and they even contemplated collective suicide. Fortunately, they were rescued by prostitutes led by Jade Ink. Ultimately, the prostitutes chose to stand in for the female students, entering into a tragic covenant leading to their demise.

The Flowers of War does not distinguish itself prominently among Zhang Yimou's extensive body of work, and most individuals prefer to analyze Yan Geling's original work, *The Flowers of War*. Nevertheless, when examining the film *The Flowers of War*, the majority of literature discusses aspects of female heroism and the bond between prostitutes and female students from a female perspective. There are only a few instances where literature delves into the patriarchal ideology and incomplete feminism within the film, and most of these works lack precision and comprehensiveness.

This paper places its focus on the consolidation of female aesthetics and female self-awareness as the foundation. It employs a socialist feminist lens to explore the prostitutes' willingness to make sacrifices. To a certain extent, this sheds light on the prevailing atmosphere of patriarchal autocracy at the time, encouraging readers to probe deeper into avenues for advancing gender equality while uncovering the root causes. It also serves to remind readers and viewers that feminism is a collective endeavor rather than the pursuit of a solitary individual. The primary target for exposure and critique should be the patriarchal power that clandestinely manipulates people's beliefs, rather than the victims who may not spontaneously awaken to it.

2. Theoretical Framework

Feminism refers to social theories and political movements that rely primarily on the experiences and motivations of women to pursue gender equality. This article adopts socialist feminism as its framework, which combines socialist theory and feminist theory to address issues related to gender inequality and social class disparities, striving for gender equality and social justice. The article explores the oppression and unfair treatment endured by women in traditional society, highlighting the constraints and hardships they face within their families and society. By drawing comparisons between prostitutes and female students, it encourages women to break free from traditional constraints and assert their independence and human rights.

Furthermore, this article applies social class theory to analyze the characters in the movie, who originate from various social strata, including Zhao Yumo, Hongling, Xiao Mosquito, Doukou, female students in the church, and Instructor Li, who broke barriers during that period. The interactions and conflicts among these characters illustrate how social class influences individual destinies and values.

Lastly, this article employs structuralism to examine the films. Structuralist theory posits that society and culture comprise interconnected structures and rules. In the movie, the concept of "prostitute" significantly shapes the behaviors and fates of the characters within the social survival structures and rules of that era. Consequently, through a structuralist analysis of Hongling, Zhao Yumo, and other characters' specific social statuses and responsibilities within the historical context, as well as the social relationships between these characters and the constraints imposed by the societal structure on the actions of prostitutes, the article aims to showcase the prejudice and discrimination against prostitutes in society. It sheds light on the prostitutes' status and role within the social framework while providing insight into the social circumstances and fates of the prostitute group portrayed in the movie.

3. Common Suffering

In the film *The Flowers of War*, the Nanjing Massacre emerges as a crisis affecting all its characters. The women in the movie, whether they are prostitutes or students, share a collective hardship: the constraints imposed on them by traditional aesthetics. This constitutes the very essence of their struggles. The historical discipline of women in China can be traced back to the foundational work of Chinese literature, the "Book of Songs." In one of its articles, "Tao Yao," the author employs the metaphor of "peach blossoms, burning their beauty" to emphasize the expectation that young girls possess not only physical beauty akin to peach blossoms but also propriety and virtue [1]. This exemplifies society's demands for both external and internal beauty, encapsulating the historical expectations of women in pre-Qin China. Similarly, Li Bai's poem "After the day after the day after the chaos, Enliu Yelang remembers the old tour book Huai gift Jiang Xia Wei Taishou good Zai" contains the line "clear water out of hibiscus, natural to carve," which underscores the idea of the inherent purity of women symbolized by hibiscus. It conveys the notion that a woman's natural beauty,

unadorned, should be preserved, as any embellishment would mar her natural charm. This reinforces the importance of purity even during the Tang Dynasty when women held a higher status.

The film employs a rich palette of colors to illustrate the conflict between purity and allure, presenting two striking color contrasts. Female students don dark blue uniforms, symbolizing their simplicity and purity, while prostitutes wear vibrant cheongsam dresses that accentuate their extreme sensuality.

For the female students, their suffering primarily arises from the Japanese army's pursuit of them. Pure girls, as indicated earlier, embody innocence, beauty, and sanctity. Invaders often target the purest segment of a society - its maidens - to undermine and disgrace the nation. For these students, the physical violation is accompanied by unbearable inner turmoil. Additionally, the students, exposed to both traditional Eastern and Western cultures due to the historical context, grapple with the influence of the Bible, which holds a revered position in Western culture. The Virgin Mary's virgin birth of Jesus in the Bible reflects the expectation for women to be pure and chaste while bearing the responsibility of childbirth, aligning with Eastern cultural norms. In this environment, female students feel increasingly constrained, making it exceedingly challenging for them to accept sexual encounters, particularly with the enemy, which shatters their inner faith.

From the perspective of the prostitutes, their suffering revolves around the abandonment of their group identity. They are coerced into prostitution for various reasons, a decision that detaches them from the mainstream female group and traditional female aesthetics. Consequently, they become outliers among women, social pariahs subjected to greater abuse and scorn. Prostitutes face oppression not only from men but also from women. In the eyes of men and the patriarchal society at large, prostitutes are dehumanized and objectified, devoid of personality, dignity, or respect. This is the derogatory view held towards prostitutes [2]. Women, on the other hand, perceive prostitutes as an aberration, as they relinquish their pure identity to engage in busking or prostitution for survival. This departure from traditional gender roles, where women belonged to one man, intensifies the exclusion and prejudice against prostitutes, reinforcing traditional women's pursuit of purity to distinguish themselves from prostitutes.

Whether they are female students or prostitutes, they share a common suffering: the confinement of their thoughts. Ideological constraints make "sex" the root cause of their identity divide, contributing to the fragmentation of the female community [3]. For instance, the female students in the film express their disdain, saying, "they only took a moment to bring in the Qinhuai River, even the smell of powder." This reflects the internal divisions within the female community and their rejection of prostitutes. Their aversion is not solely directed at the physical act but also at the connotations of "looseness" and "sex" associated with it. This hostility cannot be attributed to any single party; these women are not merely individuals oppressed by a patriarchal society but also relics of a bygone era marked by feudal aesthetics. They collectively bear the burden of suffering imposed by their time.

4. Redemption and Fall

In the movie, an important theme is the redemption and degradation experienced by prostitutes and students. This theme highlights the impact of societal influences and personal choices on these characters through various roles and storylines.

To begin, the portrayal of prostitutes in the film depicts a marginalized segment of society. They find themselves compelled to engage in prostitution for their livelihood, all while enduring discrimination and societal oppression. Nevertheless, certain prostitute characters in the movie, like Zhao Yumo and Hong Ling, endeavor to alter their fate through clever and resourceful actions.

At the outset of the film, there is a prevalent male gaze and objectification of women, evident in camera techniques such as close-ups of women's bodies, shots emphasizing their appearance and

physique, and detailed descriptions of their attire and makeup. These cinematic choices direct the audience's attention toward women's outward appearance, emphasizing their beauty and allure but also reducing them to mere visual objects.

Furthermore, the meticulous depiction of women's clothing and makeup in the film further underscores their emphasis on appearance and adornment. Female characters wear opulent and intricate attire, and their makeup is carefully applied. This detailed portrayal underscores the superficial and ornamental aspects of women, rather than their inner qualities and personalities. This portrayal reflects the prevailing social context of the time, where women were not respected and were compelled to fulfill traditional roles like housework and nurturing their families [4]. Additionally, poverty and economic pressures contributed to the decline of prostitutes. The movie is set in Jinling City (also known as Nanjing) during a wartime period, where people faced hardships, and many families fell into poverty. In such an environment, some women resorted to prostitution to survive and earn a living. They were forced to compromise their self-respect and dignity, descending into their unfortunate circumstances.

In addition, personal fate and choices have also had a certain impact on the corruption of prostitutes. The prostitute characters in the movie have their own backgrounds and stories, and some of them may have taken this path due to personal mistakes or unfortunate experiences. For example, in the film, Zhao Yumo was sexually assaulted by his stepfather at the age of 13 and forced to pick up guests. In various specific situations, men are always the privileged party, while women seem to have to endure [5]. Over time, oppression and gender inequality for women have become a common phenomenon in class society at that time. Disappointment with patriarchy and colonized society at that time, excessive pursuit of money and status, and every pile becoming the last straw that crushed them, forced them to fall into the abyss.

So, when observers witness female students, they also appear to envision those who were once isolated and helpless. Some individuals with backgrounds marked by childhood trauma, a majority of whom have been immersed in long-term exposure to challenging environments without the capacity for independent thought, are still driven by the kindness that resides within them. This inner kindness leads them to believe that these children should not endure cruelty at the hands of the Japanese army. Consequently, there is a scene in the movie where Yumo Hongling and her group convince female students to leap from a building and end their lives.

They are aware of the impending mortality, yet they aim to assist female students in confronting unprecedented challenges. Prostitutes, viewed through the lens of society at the time as tragic outcomes of the male perspective, possessed the "power of 'sex'" that could lead them astray and ultimately erode their dignity and faith. They did not want these inexperienced female students to tread the same path. They knew there would be no return this time, only a descent into an endless abyss, so they entrusted their valuable possessions to the female students. In this way, female students could carry on with their lives, and, in an unspoken manner, this act served as redemption for their past selves. This decision, therefore, embodies both moral decline and redemption.

5. Incomplete Feminism

Although *The Flowers of War* is a typical film reflecting the awakening of female power, in fact, the feminism expressed in the film is still incomplete. The concrete can be reflected in the following two levels.

First of all, in terms of the plot, why does it end up being a prostitute and not a schoolgirl? It is because there is a division within women, and by the end of the story, the prostitute and the schoolgirl seem to have completely identified with each other. However, the final result shows that the cognition of their own value has not changed; "sex" is always low, "purity" is always noble, so they choose to face evil with low in order to eliminate the original sin brought by "sex". For them, however, this is

not sacrifice but rebirth [6]. They have a strong sense of identity of their own. Although they have abandoned the so-called virgin complex in the body, but the heart is still longing for innocence. Therefore, they regard this group of female students as another self - not reduced to the dust of their own despair in exchange for their hope, in order to wash away the "business women do not know the hatred of the country" and get the spiritual sublimation.

Moreover, the profession of prostitute itself is full of contradictions. They are not only the representative of the awakening of female consciousness but also the ingratiation of the patriarchal society. Among them, female consciousness includes two levels: physiological and social. The physical level is women's physical experience and emotional experience, which is women's affirmation of their own special physiology and understanding of their own charm [7]. Combined with the plot, under the oppression of the national crisis, Zhao Yumo and other people were reduced to dust and forced to sell themselves, but they also worked hard to learn piano, chess, calligraphy and painting and tried to be educated and reasonable, which can be said to be the cognition of their own charm. Together with their self-reliance and attempts to escape the prejudices of the world, this seems to make them fit the definition of female consciousness awakening. However, the prostitute profession itself is to please the male-dominated society; Zhao Yumo and others in the film have repeatedly tried to please men to get a chance at life, including cardamom, and the last wish is to go home with Pu Sheng to live, even if there is no money and no land. In their concept, fundamental survival always needs to rely on men; only by men can they get rid of fate. This makes their female consciousness become a paradox and an imperfect feminism [8].

6. Voluntary or Forced

In the movie, Zhao Yumo, Hong Ling, and a group of prostitutes willingly set aside their rights to education and personal choices for the sake of the female students. They made the decision to step in for the female students and provide assistance to the Japanese in order to create a window of opportunity for the students to escape Nanjing. This act of sacrifice encompasses both voluntary and coercive aspects.

For Zhao Yumo, Hongling, and their fellow prostitutes, this sacrifice holds several dimensions. Firstly, it draws attention to women's rights and education. Through their voluntary sacrifice, the audience is made aware of the importance of granting female students the autonomy to determine their own bodies' destinies, rather than compelling them into promiscuous relationships, as they themselves were. It underscores the notion that female students should have access to education under all circumstances, a right that should be universally upheld and supported.

Secondly, this sacrifice highlights social injustices and power dynamics, unearthing the concealed issues of injustice and the patriarchal and colonial power structures embedded within society. These women turned to prostitution due to various economic and social constraints, revealing the disparities in class and inequality prevalent in society [9].

Lastly, their willingness to sacrifice can be attributed to exploitation and oppression. Amidst the Nanjing Massacre, these prostitutes and female students found themselves at the lowest rung of society, exploited and terrorized by the Japanese. In the film, the Japanese lured female students to a Christmas dinner party, both overtly and covertly, making them believe they were being manipulated. With everyone aware of the implications of such encounters, the prostitutes, realizing they could not alter their circumstances, chose to seek spiritual liberation by sacrificing themselves for the female students.

Another frequently discussed topic pertains to whether these thirteen women of business willingly made such an immense sacrifice, including the sacrifice of their lives. In the film, it is evident that the youngest among them, Little Mosquito(Xiao Wenzhi), harbored a reluctance deep within. She was only caught up in the Japanese army's orders while chasing her kitten. Older individuals like Zhao

Yumo and Hongling might have understood that such sacrifices could offer female students a chance at survival, but were the rest truly willing? It is precisely due to these conflicting perspectives that their greatness shines through. People have often misconstrued the focus on labels such as "chastity," "prostitute," and "student," assuming it promotes the idea of "unclean individuals substituting for the pure." However, have we considered that concentrating on the prostitute identity inherently stems from a biased viewpoint? Whether in movies or the original works, the women from the Qinhuai River were not the only ones willing to sacrifice for their students. In the TV drama, figures like Instructor Dai, who took their own lives after being captured by the Japanese army, and George, who disguised himself as a woman and joined the "female student" group, did they not know what lay ahead? Nonetheless, they selflessly contributed, expecting nothing in return, and made sacrifices driven by a strong sense of duty. The recurring theme of 'voluntary and forced' in the narrative merely serves as a depiction and critique of the oppression faced by women at the lower echelons of society during that era [10].

Certainly, when logic and context are set aside, and one solely delves into emotions, a specific scene in the movie emerges where Japanese soldiers initially enter the church, and the women take over the students' hiding spots. Although Zhao Yumo allowed the female students in at the time, they inexplicably went upstairs, in a way, saving them. Consequently, the students could not help but feel grateful. Later, Instructor Li conveyed to Yumo, "We must ensure these female students do not fall into the hands of the Japanese; otherwise, my brothers' sacrifices will have been in vain." Yumo listened and, as a result, they offered themselves as a sacrifice for the female students who could have escaped from Nanjing. Ultimately, Instructor Li's words to Yu Mo placed a significant responsibility on her shoulders. This is not about their roles as prostitutes but rather about Yumo's responsibility to protect her sisters. They made the ultimate choice to lay down their lives as a gesture of appreciation, sisterly compassion, and responsibility towards their younger counterparts—an act rooted in the hope for a better future, safeguarding, rather than coercion or force. This sacrifice fundamentally aligns with the willingness of soldiers to sacrifice themselves to protect students. There is no real distinction between 'voluntary or forced' in this context.

7. Conclusion

The movie *The Flowers of War* is a profoundly moving piece of work that narrates the experiences of Zhao Yumo, Hongling, and other individuals in the profession who willingly make sacrifices for female students. This narrative exposes the societal injustices and exploitation, as well as the individual principles and bravery.

Firstly, the story unfolds in ancient China, where two distinct social groups exist: those engaged in the profession and female students, leading to conflicts between them. Individuals in the profession are marginalized by society, ensnared in poverty and physical suffering due to exploitation and promiscuity. In contrast, female students symbolize hope and a brighter future, offering opportunities for higher education. This clash of identities generates inherent contradictions and confrontations between these two groups.

Secondly, the empowerment of women also plays a pivotal role in these conflicts. Throughout the film, individuals in the profession, including Zhao Yumo and Hong Ling, gradually experience a transformation as they interact with female students. They come to realize their own worth and dignity, embarking on a quest for freedom and equal rights. Through supporting the living arrangements of female students, they express women's longing for independence, equality, and liberty.

Amidst these contradictions, the film also portrays the resolution of these conflicts and the act of self-sacrifice. Within the film, individuals in the profession willingly take risks and offer their lives in lieu of female students, altering their destinies. This form of self-sacrifice stems not just from a

sense of responsibility and compassion for society but also from the pursuit of personal worth and integrity.

In summary, this film possesses exceptional entertainment value. Director Zhang Yimou employs exquisite visual artistry and outstanding acting performances to depict the inner worlds of characters like Zhao Yumo and Hong Ling, showcasing their kindness, tragic circumstances, and unwavering determination in life. Concurrently, the film casts a critical eye on society's discrimination and oppression of individuals in the profession, unveiling class disparities and power dynamics within society.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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