

Confronting the Gaze of the “Other”: A Feminist Interpretation of the Film Kim Ji-young: Born 1982

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Abstract: The film, Kim Ji-young: Born 1982 shows the survival predicament of the female groups under the context of the male gaze in South Korea and the persecution of females from the “other” in Korean society through the triggers of mental illness. It illustrates how females lose their voices under the Synopticon, adopting a strategy of internal focalization, which means the female groups may face a loss of power and be at a disadvantage in the social fields. The film tries to rationalize its narrative by constructing the image of one particular mental patient, and satirically highlighting the collective identity crisis among females caused by their low status, to starkly present a grand spectacle of the patriarchal siege on females in the Republic of Korea.

Keywords: Feminism; The other; Gaze; Knowledge and power

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1. Introduction

The existence predicament of female groups in East Asia has been a focal point of many realist artworks for a long time. The film Kim Ji-young: Born 1982 adapted from the book by Cho Nam-joo, a renowned Republic of Korean feminist author, resonated deeply with a wide female audience and laid the intellectual groundwork for subsequent feminist movements in the Republic of Korea. Centered on the life of protagonist Kim Ji-Young, this film portrays a symbolic lifetime of the Republic of Korean female groups, that of a compliant and accommodating daughter, a virtuous and respectful wife, a submissive and yielding daughter-in-law, and a considerate and selfless mother. Through these descriptions, it can be seen that a female needs to satisfy all the expectations imposed by the patriarchal society. As for Kim Ji-Young, the profound structural injustices and oppressions led to a loss of self-worth, and this resulting lack of identity finally resulted in her psychological fracture. Therefore, the author introduces a trigger for schizophrenia, utilizing a focused narrative perspective, and provides Ji-Young an opportunity to express herself as well as rationalizes the structural narrative

on a content level. This kind of realist narrative technique can starkly exhibit the cleaved social gap between different genders, to satirize the patriarchal culture that compresses women's living space in Republic of Korean society, by rendering women as the "other."

2. The mirror self: Female shaped in the process of socialization

2.1. Female as the objectified other in society

The "other" can be seen as one crucial keyword in Western literary theory, with deep philosophical origins. As one concept formed relative to the "self", the "other" can refer to anything that exists outside the "self", and can denote the counterpart to the "self" and encompasses all entities, individuals, and phenomena that are distinct from one's own identity and consciousness regardless of its form ^[1]. The concept of the "other" defines the "self" as the subject, while the external world distinct from the "self" is defined as the object. This dichotomy between subject and object is considered to underscore the presence of binary opposition and will highlight inherent inequalities. In Western philosophy, issues of the subject such as the primacy of "consciousness" or "existence", hold the initial focus, whereas issues of the "other" which refers to the concept of object, were often considered to be marginal, inferior, and chosen, which seems starkly contradicts the mainstream Western values of fairness and justice. Therefore, the concept of the "other" has long been a significant perspective in literary criticism and reflection.

The French philosopher, writer, and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir can be considered the pioneer in reflecting the concept of the "other" in social relations from the feminist perspective, she posited that "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other" ^[2]. It means in the long-standing patriarchal society of humanity, the female groups have been positioned as the "other" to the male-centric culture, as the objects shaped to meet male needs in a subtle process. According to Beauvoir's opinion, females are not born females, conversely, they have to be gradually "cultivated" into the familiar female archetypes, like dutiful wives, hardworking mothers, and demure girls, to meet the demands of a patriarchal society throughout their development.

2.2. Female's self-alienation

In the contemplation of feminism within the perspective of the "other", Jacques Lacan's Mirror-stage theory can be introduced as well. As Lacan posited the early developmental stage in human life always undergoes three distinct stages: the pre-mirror stage, the mirror stage, and the post-mirror stage. Therefore, he proposed that the infant perceives the mirror image as a real object but cannot distinguish between the image and itself in the first stage, then, the infant will realize that the mirror image is merely the reflection of another, and finally, they will recognize the mirror image as its own reflection, differentiating itself from the image and beginning to understand itself. It supported that the formation of the subject is not in birth but developed through the relations between the "other." This is not the confrontation of one self-consciousness with another self-consciousness, nor the domination of one entity over another. It is the enslavement of the "I" within the relationship between illusion and emptiness ^[3]. Females' self-construction can be dependent on both themselves and their reference object, such as the "other", according to Lacan's theory, the observation and shaping of the "self" through the mirror may be one key factor causing females' self-alienation.

Through the Republic of Korean film *Kim Ji-Young: Born 1982*, protagonist Kim Ji-Young has developed in a family environment that favors boys over girls, throughout her life, she plays the role of the “other” in her existential space, as an obedient daughter, virtuous wife, selfless mother, and dutiful daughter-in-law. In her childhood, she had been deeply affected by her aunt with gender-discriminatory remarks, such as only sons can achieve great things, her father also exhibited gender-discriminatory behaviors, like only bringing special gifts for his sons instead of daughters when returned home. Thus, during her upbringing, she was frequently influenced by the image of the “other” in the mirror, and gradually became the embodiment of male fantasies about a female. Although she used to harbor dreams of becoming a journalist when she was young, with profound writing skills, a keen sense of topics, and outstanding professional performances, she fell behind her male colleagues due to time lost to marriage and childbirth in the workplace. After getting married, she had to give up the job, abandon her dreams, and forsook her sense of self, dedicating herself to managing all the trivial matters at home ^[4].

3. Forced silence: Disempowerment under collective gaze

3.1. The male gaze in a patriarchal context

Michel Foucault’s theory of knowledge-power posits that “Power and knowledge directly imply one another... There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitutes at the same time power relations” ^[5]. It saw the language as a kind of power so that the silence means a loss of power, the power here means not a specific entity but a network of power relations, and with the context of a patriarchal society, the unequal power dynamics between males and females may lead to the inequality in discourse. Therefore, within Foucault’s understanding of knowledge and power, knowledge can be considered as a form of discourse that may reinforce the authority of power. Through a deep analysis of the social ethos depicted in this film, it is obvious that female groups always face more difficulties than males in obtaining opportunities for knowledge acquisition throughout processes such as education, job seeking, and employment. For example, within the same family environment, boys are often given priority in accessing education instead of girls; and in the workplace, females always face a loss of competitiveness due to maternity issues when competing with males, and a loss of educational rights (also competitiveness) means a loss of discourse power in the social domain for female groups as well ^[6].

Michel Foucault posits that discourse is not merely an individual’s act of will or the result of an individual’s action, but rather the result of the complex interplay of a variety of factors, that means sometimes, the speaking subject is subjected to discourse, and discourse is subjected to the group of speakers. In a patriarchal society, males always occupy the central position of power as speakers, they achieve the goal of controlling discourse hegemony by squeezing the living space of females with mainly two kinds of typical conspiracies: helping males to occupy the dominant position in society (power), and prohibiting females from having power. All these performances are vividly reflected in the Republic of Korean film *Kim Ji-Young: Born 1982*, where characters like Kim Ji-young, no matter in the process of education, job seeking, working, or backing to work, are forced to yield to the male groups. Males from the Republic of Korean society all selfishly enjoying the dividends of gender, and the buried females become stepping stones on their paths of self-development. In the film, the protagonist Kim Ji-young has made a lot of efforts in the pursuit of her self-worth, but the disciplinary

society has alienated her into a so-called qualified “wife.” Although she has tried to speak out to the outside world many times, to reclaim her power which is normal and rightfully, the underlying pressure of a patriarchal society has gagged her mouth again and again.

3.2. Intergeneration trauma: The circulating female gaze

The society under patriarchal culture can be considered not only subjected to the male gaze toward female groups but also subjected to the female gaze towards other females. These kinds of unequal gazes may become inducements for females to lose their voice with a harsh social system, and become one main factor contributing to the strong response elicited by the film. Particularly in the patriarchal society, many females may adopt a “patriarchal” attitude when facing the “other” females, and present as “accomplices” influenced by the culture of male dominance. Refers to Bell Hooks’s viewpoints, from her influential publication *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, “The notion of shared oppression is a false and dangerous concept that obscures the very real differences among women. Sexism, racism, class exploitation...”^[7]. The repetitive cycle of women’s extremely similar destinies intensifies the artistic satirical effect of the film.

In the cinematic narrative of *Kim Ji-Young: Born 1982*, Kim Ji-young’s mother relinquished her educational opportunities, to support her male family members during her formative years, this kind of sacrifice echoes in Kim Ji-young’s course of life again, shown as her defers to males in her education and professional pursuits. As for Kim Ji-young’s mother-in-law, she epitomizes a successful internalization of societal norms, tends to embrace the patriarchal ethos, and imposes high pressure on her daughter-in-law to face up to such domestic responsibilities. It can be seen that shaped by societal conditioning, females within this film had perpetuated a cycle of discipline and oppression upon subsequent generations of females. It shows a discernible pattern: mothers always coerce their daughters into prioritizing the familial sons, while mothers-in-law demand that daughters-in-law acquiesce to the needs of their husbands, following their sacrifices in their growth. In conclusion, females like Kim Ji-young’s mother and mother-in-law used to succumb to the inequitable societal dictates, and they prefer to amplify their suffering to the next generation of females, as the accomplices within the patriarchal framework, as they always feel a loss of power discourse within the family, and prefer to feel their authority through the interactions with daughters and daughters-in-law, and seeking for retrieval of their self-worth.

4. Ironic reflection of reality: An attempt to break through the Republic of Korea’s misogynistic predicament

4.1. Entrenched misogyny in the Republic of Korean society

The concept of misogyny can be defined as a refusal to acknowledge females as subjects equal to males, which leads to objectification, otherization, and scorn for female groups. The Republic of Korea is a capitalist nation that has been deeply influenced by Confucianism since the Goryeo period, with many inducements for gender inequality. The Marxist feminist theory can be used to analyze the origins of gender oppression within the Republic of Korean society, from the perspective of the framework of “capitalism in general”, traditionally, females’ existences are mainly leeches to the family, and in such so-called normal families, the stereotypical gender role of female members is to take on domestic chores, as well as care for the household, while males are assigned the role of going out to work and earning money. This division of labor within families partly contributes to the lower

status of females' voices, as they have to rely on their males for survival, with a loss of controlling power for means of production.

As society evolves, gender awareness of women is gradually increasing, with the implementation and promotion of policies as well as welfare particularly serving female groups. However, constrained by traditional concepts, these actions still face huge challenges in changing the destiny of the vast majority Republic of Korean females from supporting their husbands and raising their children, and even showing aggravations to gender conflicts. With the popularization of gender equality concepts, more and more outstanding females prefer to enter the workplace, which leads to an intensification of competition, as well as the intensification of misogyny among the Republic of Korean males.

4.2. Severe deficiency of female self-identification

As aforementioned, under the social atmosphere of misogyny in the Republic of Korea, the survival situations of female groups are challenging, many females are facing the profound absence of self-identification and psychological distress. With the pressures of class and gender oppression, these female groups may appear powerless and inadequate in both family settings and workspaces. Because females confined within the domestic sphere are unable to pursue the realization of their self-worth, their contributions to the family may also be unrecognized by male members and society. The immense sense of absurdity, in reality, may cause self-sacrifice and self-loss feelings among females, with a deficiency in both personal and collective identity.

From the perspective of Sigmund Freud, gender identification is contingent upon the fear of castration. Under the combined influence of the "castration complex" and the "Oedipus complex", girls may develop a sense of self-defeat, ultimately conforming to their mother's temperament and regulating themselves according to their mother's characteristics ^[8]. All female characters in this film can be seen as subjects of castration, they have become accustomed to the oppression of patriarchal society, and achieving spiritual self-disciplines. Kim Ji-young in this film longs to return to the workplace for heaps of time, she even enters a bakery and looks for opportunities to be a salesperson, genuinely seeking to earn wages through her labor, gaining recognition, and manifesting her own value. As a graduate of a prestigious institution, Kim Ji-young deserves wide opportunities in her future, instead of being trapped within the family, tasting the bitterness of depression and frustration, all her efforts for the family are unrecognized by society. Within the distorted societal discipline, her self-identification is gradually disintegrated, the subtlety and cunning of patriarchal society can be vividly reflected, as well.

4.3. Promoting social ideological change in the Republic of Korean

Following the release of the film *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*, there was a stark contrast in the feedback from female and male audiences. The interpretation of the film's content revealed a significant divergence between different genders, most female audiences in the Republic of Korea perceived the film as an authentic portrayal of their lived realities, they even regard this film as a documentary of Korean females' lives, which can resonance with the vast majority of Republic of Korean females, and therefore, received a high score of 9 points and above on social media platforms. Conversely, males in the Republic of Korea maintained a critical stance towards this film, as the content of this film seems too realistic and sharp for them to empathize with females' loss of rights, and from their perspective, males always bear heavier social responsibilities such as military service, while females are seen as

ones enjoying coffee earned by their husbands, thereby reaffirming that the vast majority of males in society used to completely deny and ignore the social value of females, on the realistic level.

The film and the reality exhibit a high degree of intertextuality, and the reality presented by light and shadow gives people the courage to examine reality. The film's release sparked a strong social response and caused the Kim Ji-young effect, which promoted the development of feminist thought in the Republic of Korea. Within a month of the film's debut, the Kim Ji-young Act of 1982 was officially put on the legislative agenda, encompassing issues including females' reinstatement after childbirth, and anti-voyeurism in public places, as a part of social welfare guarantees for females. So that this film can be considered to truly strive for a more equitable social environment for the Republic of Korean females from the legal level.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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