

# A Comparison of Women's Image in Women's Films in Chinese and Western Cultures from a Female Perspective

## --Carol and Woman-Demon-Human

Qian Tang\*

School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, United States

\* Corresponding Author Email: Email: tangqian@usc.edu

**Abstract.** In the different cultural backgrounds of China and the West, the trend of feminism and related films is different. The image of women is an important part of Chinese and Western culture and a special product of the times, which is extremely important for the understanding of female subjects and social development. Based on the films *Woman-Demon-Human* and *Carol*, this paper aims to explore the survival status of women and the manifestation of feminist awakening in different times from the aspects of feminism, self-consciousness, and gender differences, to show the dilemmas and struggles faced by women in modern China and the West, as well as the impact of gender manifestation on women. Women who can break through the inherent pattern, get rid of the fate of the male gaze, and have independent subjective consciousness are particularly valuable. The American movie *Carol*, with Carol and Therese as the main characters, tells the story of women with different personalities who have found themselves in life and have the courage to resist the pressure of the world and the oppression of patriarchal society. *Woman-Demon-Human*, directed by Huang Shuqin, tells the story of Qiuyun, who is obsessed with the art of opera, plays a male role, and dedicates her life to the stage. These two films portray the image of a true woman who can be autonomous and self-controlled, and deserve to be compared and analyzed in detail in terms of feminist awakening.

**Keywords:** Female subjectivity, Female self-consciousness, Female Power, Portrayal of Females, Chinese and Western Culture.

## 1. Introduction

As early as 1791, the women's leader of the French Revolution, Olympe de Gougeres, published the Declaration of the Rights of Women, which marked the awakening of women's consciousness and brought feminism onto the world stage [1]. Feminism argues that modern society is built on a patriarchal system; life is full of unequal treatment of women, opposes stereotypes, and objectifying images of women, and aims to end sexism, gender exploitation, sexual discrimination, and oppression, and to promote equality in the sexual class. With the development of feminism, the moderate liberal feminist school, Marxist female school, and existentialist feminist school have emerged. However, in the final analysis, the aim is to make society more tolerant of women, to gain the power to exist on an equal footing with men and to be respected by society, and to get rid of the subordinate status of women [2]. This paper analyzes and compares the portrayal of female characters in *Carol* and *Woman-Demon-Human* from a feminist perspective.

The director Huang Shuqin produced the movie *Woman-Demon-Human* in 1987. Huang Shuqin was first unaware that the film was mostly about portraying the "evils of human nature" rather than the theme of women. However, after Dai Jinhua put up a fresh interpretation from a female point of view, nobody seemed to be able to refute it, and even the director purposefully steered in the direction of women's consciousness. Huang Shuqin states, "Instead of just examining it from a single perspective, there should be a strong sense of inclusivity and multiple perspectives to be explored in this movie. There should not be just one theme." *Woman-Demon-Human* is one of the few films in mainland China that focuses on the female psyche during the 1950s. It has even influenced contemporary feminist cinema. The film's main character, Qiu Yun, is driven by her lack of awareness of her femininity to pursue an ideal Zhong Kui man, but the ending is still bleak and Qiu Yun is left

alone for the rest of her life. The film weakens the male figure, for example, the minimal portrayal of male characters and the showing of certain flaws of male characters, and focuses on the female figure and her inner world. Although the film does not highlight highly refined feminism, its distinct female consciousness makes it the first feminist film in China.

In addition, *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, is a feminist film as well as a lesbian love story; it depicts the emergence of women's self-awareness not just in Therese and Carol but also in other female supporting roles. Carol is about selling dolls in the shop under the coincidence of Therese meeting the sexy and elegant Carol. Once Therese knows the love of the elegant, independent Carol, they secretly fall in love. However, Carol is preparing for divorce from her husband, Haji, who hires a private detective to collect evidence of her homosexuality because homosexuality in the United States of America in the '50s was not recognized by the law, and was considered to be a serious psychological disease. Thus, Carol faces serious moral allegations and fights for custody of their daughters, while Therese is faced with her boyfriend's betrayal. The female figure has always been an essential part of the movie, and the different ways of portraying the female figure will have different impacts on the movie. The female image in both films reflects the awakening of feminism beyond the traditional male gaze and position, from the male perspective to the female gaze, which reflects the breakthrough in the portrayal of the female image in the two films. By comparing the two movies, the plight of women's existence is revealed.

## 2. Exploring Chinese Feminist Film Theory: Critiques and Perspectives

Chinese feminist film theory, as a school of contemporary film theory, began in the 1960s, integrating the theories and methods of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and semiotics, analyzing the presentation of women in film texts, and interpreting the ideology of gender narratives in film texts [3].

Feminist scholar Annette Kuhn has pointed out that in cinema, women are often socially structured as the other or the outsiders in a male-dominated world. Women are unable to tell their own stories because their influence is controlled by men [4]. Often, women are seen as sexual objects, valued only for their beauty and sexual attractiveness. The development of women's cinema is greatly linked to the rise of the women's movement. The rise of female consciousness not only led to more positions for women in the film industry, but also stories about women began to be exported. While in the beginning, it was usually family fare, today, there is an abundance of dramas that express the many sides of women. Feminist directors, regardless of gender, are trying to overcome prejudice with a fresh perspective.

Generally speaking, there are three forms of criticism of feminist films, one of which is the study of female images portrayed in film texts, which is the stage of image criticism. Through the study of women's images in film texts, the lack of subjective consciousness in women is explored to criticize the patriarchal society and awaken women's subjective consciousness. In feminist cinema, the original requirement is to de-eroticize the female image and avoid the female body becoming an object of erotic gaze, but in the genre of lesbianism, the naked female body is a silent rebellion against the patriarchal society [5].

## 3. Absence of female consciousness

What is shown in the film *Woman-Demon-Human* is not a group portrait of women's consciousness but focuses on individual women. An ordinary woman, not a Mulan-type heroine but an intermediary between tradition and modernity, does not yet have enough consciousness and courage to break out of her cocoon, but because of her spirituality, she is unable to remain silent [6]. Compared to those exciting moments of awakening in the history of feminism, the confused individuals on the prowl are more representative and allegorical and more expressive of the plight of most intellectual women. In response to the question of how women find their sense of self and discover their self-worth, in this

movie, the female protagonist is recognized by the audience by playing a successful male role. Success through playing a male role is not meant to be long-term for a woman, which is why Qiuyun continues to be ostracized and reviled afterwards. Because she is still ostracized for being illegitimate after she is removed from the male role she played, she has not won the hearts of the audience by showing the value of a woman in her own right to truly succeed as a female character in front of the public, apart from being able to successfully play a male character. The director's theme is not family ethics, and what Qiuyun faces in the story is not typical female problems, such as catching a man, keeping a man, bearing and raising children, and balancing marriage and career [8]. What the story has been presenting is her development, entanglement, and unraveling in her career.

At the beginning of the film, Qiuyun sits in front of multiple mirrors, examining herself as she is reflected in various ways—some distorted, some askew. This mirror imagery portrays her self-scrutiny, reflection, and contemplation. Qiuyun grew up in an unfortunate home with a father who was not her birth father and who was responsible for destroying her happy family. Growing up in such an environment, she puts her hopes on her imaginary "perfect man" and tries to change her fate by finding one. However, after experiencing betrayal, she realizes she can't rely on anyone but herself to achieve true happiness. Following the Cultural Revolution, she displays the role of Zhong Kui on the wall, asserting it as the part she always desired. In the film's conclusion, she stands alone on a dark stage, searching for something, yearning for a perfect man's care and love, as Zhong Kui emerges from the darkness, converses with her, and then vanishes.

In another film, *Carol*, also visually depicts the inequalities and stereotypes of women in the patriarchal system of the time. At a friend's party, Carol smokes by the window to help keep a lookout simply because her husband dislikes it. This scenario exemplifies the stereotyping and sexual oppression of women in the patriarchal system. However, Carol says, "as you like it", which is a reflection of Carol's awakening feminist consciousness. When Therese is playing the piano in Carol's house, Carol asks her if she likes photography and gives her advice, "Go with your feelings, keep what you find useful, and throw away the rest". In contrast to Carol's ego, Therese is extremely unegoistic. Therese doesn't know how to say no, can't be sure of what she wants, always listens to her boyfriend and follows the public's footsteps without any sense of independence, and even buys her resentment when they are recorded by the detectives as homosexuals [9]. It is clear from all the details that lesbians, at the time, were oppressed by both gender femininity and homosexuality.

#### 4. Building women's identities

In the film *Woman-Demon-Human*, the construction of Qiu Yun's subject lies in the care for life between her and Zhong Kui. Unlike the unconscious female identity, Qiu Yun's process of becoming Zhong Kui is forced, an exodus of grief and anger under the tragic prophecy that "female actresses do not have a good ending". To escape the fate of being "like her mother," Qiuyun resolutely says, "I will not play the role of a female actor, but a male one." Thus, a Mulan-type story is born. However, pretending to be a man does not help Qiuyun escape from her fate. This is because female androgyny is based on the premise of abandoning one's gender role and identifying with the norms of the male role, and one's gender and social identity are innate and cannot be thrown away. After Qiuyun is determined to disguise herself as a man, the male reproductive organs appear in the picture, which is a permanent barrier between Qiuyun and the real male, symbolizing the condescending rejection from the male world.

In the film *Carol*, the heroine is always elegant, beautiful, and mature; she loves her daughter. In that era, homosexuality was illegal, so she has to separate from Therese, whom she has just fallen in love with, live with her husband who is about to divorce, and pretend to cooperate with a psychotherapist to treat her "homosexuality disease." Even though the 1950s United States has become economically advanced, people are becoming more materially rich, and people are beginning to seek more of a rich spiritual world as well as more equal rights, Carol still suffers from oppression under a patriarchal society, unable to take care of her daughter and the lover she loves so much. This

is a blatant satire on the false and illusory equality and freedom of women in the 1950s and the sexual oppression of women under the patriarchy. Contrasting with Carol's elegant and beautiful image is that of her wretched husband, Haji, who is irritable, irascible, rude, and ugly as a man. Haji falls twice in the rare scenes where Carol is in the same frame, which is a reflection of Haji's resentment of Carol's control under the patriarchy. Even the private detective, with his prying eyes on women's privacy and disrespect for women, is a metaphor for the awakening of women's consciousness as Carol rushes up to the detective with a "pistol," a representative of masculinity[9].

## 5. Women's Self-Redemption

Feminist scholars have proposed a model of women's identity development, which suggests that women's perception of feminist identity is divided into five stages, the first two of which are passive acceptance and revelation [10]. In the first stage, women do not realize or deny the prejudice and discrimination against women in the social environment, individuals, and systems, and therefore, accept the rules of the male society; in the second stage, when women are exposed to more and more crises and contradictions against women, they begin to feel angry and guilty, and then change their personal reference coordinates [11]. The female group represented by Qiuyun is in the transition from the first stage to the second stage as they have received their social identity in the traditional social context, and have been allowed to develop in the modern society, but at the same time, they are frequently frustrated on the way forward. Therefore, the transition from the first stage to the second stage is accompanied by the pain of being torn apart and the confusion of repositioning. This ambiguous cultural state constitutes a threshold, which is the source of the "Qiuyuns'" uncertainty.

In the movie *Carol*, the female protagonist, Carol, after going through a relationship with Therese and a divorce from her husband, becomes acutely aware that she is homosexual, and realizes that she needs to truly break away from her current marriage and find her true self. So she changes her style of dress, which was once heavily red, to plain colors. Even though she loves her daughter, she chooses to give up custody of her daughter in order to truly break from the marriage that binds her. This is a departure for Carol from the stereotype of a patriarchal society where women are supposed to take care of their families and children, but it is an important choice for her self-awakening. Meanwhile, the other female character, Therese, starts out as an unassertive and relatively weak person. She dreams of building trains but repeats her boring job selling toys in a department store. She goes to restaurants with Carol but only orders the same meal as Carol. From the beginning, she is afraid to look at Carol when she talks to her, but in the end, she is able to directly and firmly reject Carol's invitation to live with her. This shows that both female characters have great success in their self-realization and redemption.

## 6. Comparison

Both *Woman-Demon-Human* and *Carol* depict protagonists who undergo significant personal growth and self-awareness, although they reach different outcomes. Carol and Qiuyun share a longing for genuine love, yet their approaches to achieving it differ drastically. Carol opts to break free from the constraints of a male-dominated marriage, prioritizing personal fulfillment over societal expectations, even at the cost of losing custody of her daughter. Conversely, Qiuyun constructs an idealized image of a redeeming man and assumes that role herself, challenging traditional gender roles but ultimately failing to attain true redemption. Despite these differences, both women assert their own desires and standards in relationships, marking essential steps toward self-realization. However, Qiuyun's success in the opera industry by masquerading as a man does not equate to genuine feminist achievement; it underscores the barriers women face in achieving authentic success. True progress for women lies in achieving complete independence and autonomy, free from reliance on patriarchal structures.

## 7. Conclusion

The themes explored in *Woman-Demon-Human* remain pertinent in contemporary feminist discourse, resonating with ongoing struggles for gender equality. Western feminist narratives, exemplified by *Carol*, emphasize women's pursuit of self-realization and liberation from patriarchal constraints. In contrast, Eastern narratives, represented by *Woman-Demon-Human*, illustrate women's attempts to navigate societal expectations through unconventional means, often at the expense of true empowerment. Historical and cultural contexts shape these disparities; while Western societies had progressed economically by the 1950s, enabling women to pursue independence, Eastern societies like China were still grappling with fundamental economic challenges. Despite these differences, both films underscore the need for women to break free from patriarchal influences and assert their autonomy. However, the journey towards genuine empowerment remains fraught with sacrifices and societal pressures. The portrayal of women in these films reflects the ongoing struggle against gendered expectations and the imperative for collective action to challenge patriarchal norms. To achieve tangible progress, women must confront gendered biases in all spheres of life and strive for genuine independence and self-determination, transcending societal limitations and gendered stereotypes.

This comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex challenges women face in their pursuit of autonomy and self-realization. By juxtaposing Western and Eastern feminist narratives, it highlights the diverse strategies employed by women to navigate patriarchal structures. However, the analysis is limited by its focus on only two films and the broader implications of gender inequality in society. Future research could expand this analysis to include a more extensive range of cinematic representations and explore the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, such as race, class, and sexuality.

Moving forward, it is imperative to continue examining cinematic representations of women's experiences and their implications for feminist discourse. By amplifying diverse voices and narratives, cinema can serve as a powerful tool for challenging entrenched gender norms and advocating for social change. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches integrating film studies with feminist theory and sociological analysis can provide deeper insights into the complexities of gender inequality. Ultimately, by fostering critical dialogue and promoting inclusive representations, cinema has the potential to catalyze transformative shifts towards gender equity and justice.

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