

An Interpretation of Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* from the Perspective of Existentialist Feminism

Tianyao Du, Jiameng Sun*

School of Foreign Language, Chengdu University of Information Technology, Chengdu 61400, Sichuan, China

Abstract: *The Silence of the Lambs*, a suspense novel written by Thomas Harris in 1999, tells a story about a clever and courageous FBI agent, Clarice Starling, who overcomes difficulties caused by sexism and wins herself a reputation and honor by investigating a serial murder case. Since the novel was published, discussions about the plot and characters have never stopped. Nevertheless, research related to the protagonist Clarice Starling based on existentialist feminism are rare. This thesis takes Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and the concept of "the other" to analyze gender inequalities encountered by Clarice Starling and her resistance against the patriarchal society. Therefore, combined with most women's current living situation that gender inequality remains widespread, hindering their advance at work and in daily life, this thesis concludes that women should establish the subjective consciousness, prove their self-worth as females and avoid being "the other" through efforts.

Keywords: Clarice Starling, Existentialist feminism, Gender issues, the Other, *The Second Sex*, *The Silence of the Lambs*.

1. Introduction

1.1. An Introduction to Existentialist Feminism and "the Other"

Existentialist feminism is a branch of great significance in the first climax of the feminist movement which gives detailed and creative explanations of the concept of "the other". It is put forward by the distinguished French writer Simone de Beauvoir. Feminism, originally meaning women's liberation, was born in France and later spread to Europe and the United States, and gradually developed into an unstoppable trend and movement. During the past half century, it has been in full swing. With the improvement of human rights awareness, more and more people realize the huge gaps between men and women are so clear that they start to call for real gender equality. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir absorbs the theoretical framework of Sartre and Hegel and summarizes her own ideas of existentialist feminism in her masterpiece *The Second Sex*. In this book, she interprets for the first time that women are "the other". Beauvoir believes that in the traditional patriarchal society, women are defined as the subordinate and the secondary, while men are the dominant. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." [1] Women gradually lose their power and freedom for they are in the dilemma of being "the other".

1.2. An Introduction to *The Silence of the Lambs*

The Silence of the Lambs is one of the most outstanding books written by the master of mystery novels, Thomas Harris. It is commonly acknowledged as an insurmountable peak in the history of suspense novels. In 1991, the novel was adapted into a movie that won the Best Picture Award at the 64th Academy Awards.

The story starts with a serial murder case. The serial killer, nicknamed Buffalo Bill, brutally murders and skins five women. Intern agent Starling is appointed to investigate this

case by her supervisor Crawford. She is required to seek guidance and professional advice from the most remarkable psychiatrist but also a dangerous and notorious criminal--Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who is known as Hannibal the Cannibal. To get information about Buffalo Bill, Starling tells Dr. Lecter her childhood experience in exchange. During the investigation of the case, Starling encounters quite a few obstacles rooted in gender inequality, yet she never makes a concession. In the end, She finds Buffalo Bill and shoots him dead alone, proving herself more outstanding than those male fellow officials.

1.3. Literature Review

Since *The Silence of The Lambs* is published and adopted into the movie, it has attracted attention and discussions from scholars abroad and at home. Foreign studies on this novel mainly focus on three themes: the reason why Dr. Lecter, a cannibal, should be such an impressive character, the psychoanalysis of Buffalo Bill, and the relations between childhood disabilities and Starling's personality. On the other hand, domestic research regarding this novel are comparatively scarce, emphasizing themes of social crimes and characterization. Notably, studies on Clarice Starling based on feminism have emerged in recent years both at home and abroad because previously there have been a large number of similar fictions, but most of them featured male protagonists. Few authors would arrange a young female intern agent to be the protagonist. More scholars have conducted research from this angle. This paper analyzes gender issues Clarice Starling encounters from the view of existentialist feminism to reveal and explore ways to get rid of "the other" dilemma.

2. Analysis of the Gender Issues Clarice Starling Encountered and Her Resistance

2.1. Male Gaze

“It is a fact and result of the construction of gender culture that women enter the vision of men and become the object of their desire.” [2] Starling is regarded as “the other” and gazed at by those male characters with subjective consciousness. She is an excellent member of the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Division, where female trainees are a rarity, outperforming many male trainees. However, when she is given the task to investigate related information about Buffalo Bill, Crawford considers her appearance instead of her competence. Crawford focuses more on Starling's material attributes than on her intelligence, which makes her disappointed and humiliated. Her outstanding grades and talents mean nothing to Crawford. It is purely because she is attractive that she gets the opportunity. Male gaze--that's what has happened between Crawford and Clarice. In a male-dominated working environment, the woman with the more pleasing appearance always has better chances of success, while the woman who is not beautiful enough tends to be ignored, even if both are equally competent. It seems that without a pretty face and a perfect body, a woman's ability is greatly diminished. Appearance has become a hidden criterion for the measurement of women's worth, and sometimes this criterion is so harsh as to be almost cruel. For men, however, physical appearance seems to be less important than what's in their heads. This is a gross injustice caused by the male gaze. Over time, the public has come to believe that attractive women rely on their looks to make achievements. Women's efforts and talents are often overlooked. It's not surprising that Clarice is subjected to Dr. Chilton's ill-disposed insinuation indicating Crawford used her to “turn Lecter on”. Clarice detests the male gaze and gender inequality. She chooses not to suffer silently but to fight back. This is when the feminist spirit in her came to the fore. She defends herself directly and decently by telling Dr. Chilton that she comes from the University of Virginia with honors, and it is not a charm school. She would not compromise the male gaze, on the contrary, she manages to disrupt men's gaze full of desire and arrogance, and that is what makes Clarice Starling unique. Under the patriarchal system, men enjoy absolute dominance and discourse power, and women exist as subordinate to men as “the other”. Under such a perception, a man would gaze at women in a condescending manner, judging whether they are attractive enough. However, when the object of his gaze changes to another male, his thoughts change. He will not care about whether that male's face is attractive or his body is perfect. Men don't need to please others by appearance, but women do. In this stark contrast, it is easy to conclude the fact that under the male gaze, when men look at a woman, they focus mostly on her appearance, as if the woman has no inner being or mind, and her entire value is only dependent on her appearance. Worse still, male gaze is not only harmful in that it distorts certain gender concepts, but also causes women to gradually lose their sense of self. Once acclimated to the male gaze, women can't help but construct their own image according to the standards of male judgment. They put on makeup, lose weight, and even get plastic surgery to achieve the standard of “beauty” under the male gaze. As a result, women's sense of femininity fades and they give in to the

identity of “the other” imposed on them. A large percentage of women today still haven't realized that they are subject to the male gaze and are even submissive to it. However, Clarice Starling, a character created in 1990, is aware that she should express her anger and disgust at the male gaze and preserves her dignity as a woman.

2.2. Objectification of women

Combined with the seven characteristics of objectification put forward by one of the most celebrated female philosophers of our time, Martha Nussbaum, Clarice Starling has experienced at least two types of objectifications when dealing with male characters in the novel: instrumentality and violability. In terms of existentialist feminism, instrumentality refers to the act of men regarding women as tools to achieve their own purposes, and violability means that men acknowledge no boundary integrity in women, which leads to the idea that women can be violated [3]. Crawford appoints Starling to negotiate with Dr. Lecter for she is a charming young woman who can attract his attention if possible. It doesn't matter whether Starling gets impressive grades, nor she could be harmed by Dr. Lecter only if she can attain Crawford's goal. Starling works so hard to make her way, but as “the other”, Crawford sees no value in her except that she can be a tool to help obtain information from Dr. Lecter. This is instrumentality. In the division of roles in society, both men and women are supposed to be of equal importance. However, because of the deep-rooted influence of the patriarchal system, the objectification of women emerges. It is not a phenomenon that has arisen in recent centuries. As a matter of fact, it has existed as far back as the Bible. According to the Bible, Eve, the first woman in the world, is not originally created by God. Instead, she is made from an extra rib of Adam [4].

On the other hand, once the objectification of women in a society deteriorates to a certain extent, violability will go along with it. The serial killer, Buffalo Bill, is an extremist who is deeply influenced by the idea of objectification of women. He is convinced that women are just things that can be mutilated and violated, so he murders and skins five innocent victims with impunity. Clarice Starling, who is tasked with stopping and capturing Buffalo Bill, even risks her life when confronted with him alone. The idea of objectifying women has never stopped swelling and fermenting, and all along this prominent problem has gone uncorrected. From the perspective of history, women are always attached to men. As “the other”, women are weak and powerless in society, being compared to paintings, bouquets of flowers, or those flashy decorations just for enjoyment; then the macho ideology expands indefinitely, leading men to believe that women lack boundary integrity, instead, women are treated as objects bearing the responsibility of procreation and sexual attraction [5]. Eventually, the ideology continued to intensify until violability happens. Today, the objectification of women is still a common phenomenon. Some men, like Buffalo Bill, develop the distorted perception that women are just things and that men are the dominant ones to decide the value, role, and rights of life of women.

The ending of the novel is no doubt a protest against extreme patriarchal ideology and the objectification of women. Even when Starling is aiming the gun at Buffalo Bill, he shows no fear or regret but greed. All he is thinking about is “he remembered her hair though, from the kitchen, and it was glorious, and that would only take a minute. He could slip

it right off. Put it on, himself.”[6] He doesn’t treat women as humans. In the end, Starling shoots him and ends his life, making him pay for his arrogance and crimes. On the surface, she puts an end to evil and cruelty and stops Buffalo Bill from continuing to brutalize innocent women; but in fact, Clarice Starling, as a female, triumphs over the extreme objectification of women. Her victory proves that the idea and act of viewing women as objects are wrong and need to be stopped.

2.3. The Ubiquitous Sexism

The relationship between the two above and gender discrimination is inextricably linked. It can be said that the male gaze and the objectification of women are manifestations of sexism. Beauvoir believes that in the long-term patriarchal society, men push women to the peripheral position in order to highlight their dominance. As a result, women exist as “the other”[7]. This, according to the doctrine of existentialist feminism, is the root cause of ubiquitous sexism. In the novel, the author describes how Starling is scorned, questioned, and excluded by those male characters, from which acute gender discrimination and inequality are revealed. She has excellent grades and outstanding abilities, but because she is a woman, she has to suffer more. This is blatant sexism. When the police find the first victim’s body, Crawford stands in the middle of a room full of police officers discussing the case. But soon he and the sheriff leaves the room to have a further conversation because Crawford tells the sheriff that “this kind of a sex crime has some aspects that I’d rather say to you just between us men”[8]. Then, as the only woman in the room, Starling immediately catches other male officers’ attention. She is a professionally trained agent, qualified to know every detail of the case, yet she is excluded deliberately from the discussion for her gender identity. No one else in the room notices this is inappropriate. On the contrary, the officers find it surprising that Starling, a female agent, is involved in the case.

This is a clear case of gender discrimination, but the situation is even worse when the discrimination is manifested in Crawford. Compared to other male characters in the book, such as cocky Dr. Chilton and arrogant Krendler, Crawford is undoubtedly one of the few positive characters. He is strict and serious about his work and also gives Starling valuable opportunities so that she can improve her abilities. Starling feels grateful to him because he wants to teach her, he wants her to do well. Yet even such a decent man still shows his deep-rooted patriarchal ideology when working with Starling. As Crawford does so, the readers can get a glimpse of not only how seriously sexism exists in the environment Starling is in, but the whole society’s attitude toward women. Many men, represented by Crawford, are supposed to have a sense of equality when they are working or communicating with women, but despite their higher education and social standards, they subconsciously believe that females are not trustworthy. In other words, they don’t think women have the same competence as men, and that women as “the other” cannot undertake important responsibilities. As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, “Few men wish from the bottom of their hearts that women should make full use of their talents.”[9]

Thousands of years ago, since the patriarchal system was established, it has curbed the development and freedom of the female, and women have been subordinated to men. Sexism has given rise to many stereotypes. For example,

misconceptions convincing people that women are not suited to be police officers, judges, pilots, and scientists are not new. But the fact is, women have the same rights as men to choose their careers and the potential to do everything they determine to. Even though there is gender discrimination everywhere in the workplace, Clarice Starling is not pessimistic or retreated. The way she responds is admirable. She is brave enough to express her grievances or honestly state her demands for the benefits and rights she deserves. She is overwhelmed with anger when Crawford and the sheriff deliberately avoid her to discuss the case. Afterward, Crawford feels her anger and asks her about it, Starling answers with honesty and stresses “it matters”. Rather than choosing to hide her feelings to curry favor with Crawford, she speaks them out for she needs to be respected just as men do in her work. Undoubtedly, Clarice Starling is a feminist, a fighter for women's rights, and does not compromise easily.

3. Practical Solutions to Avoid “the Other” Dilemma from Existentialist Feminism Perspective

It is undeniable that the three types of gender issues--the male gaze, the objectification of women, and sexism, remain unsolved in today’s society. There have always been women experiencing what Clarice has encountered, both in their daily life and in the workplace. She is not the first victim, nor the last when it comes to gender issues. She is the epitome of thousands of women seen as “the other”. When men are the dominant social leaders, everything they do is for their own interests, so women's rights and living space are constantly compressed. Therefore, due significance should be attached to gender inequalities. More importantly, women have to establish the subjective consciousness and get rid of the dilemma of “the other”. Combined existentialist feminism with Clarice Starling’s resistance and endeavor against gender issues, practical suggestions are as follows: repel the internalization of “the other” and demonstrate and improve self-worth.

3.1. Repel the Internalization of “the Other”

Virginia Woolf, one of the feminists in the 20th century, puts forward the concept of Androgyny in *A Room of One’s Own*. She holds the view that there are two forces in every human being, one is male-dominated and the other is female-dominated. In men's minds, male power has the upper hand[10]. They approve of this notion and preach it, resulting in self-depreciation and an inferiority complex in women. To deal with this situation, women should convert the idea that their worth is determined by men. According to existentialist feminism, refusing to identify with self through male eyes is the first step to repel the internalization of “the other”. For many years, under the dominance of the patriarchal system, men have habitually observed various social phenomena through a patriarchal perspective and turned a blind eye to gender issues. They propagate the idea that women are incapable of creating new things or making contributions to the world. However, more and more emergence of female writers, scientists, and Nobel Prize winners have proved it wrong. Women should develop self-awareness and realize that they can achieve any goals they intend to accomplish, not as accessories to men, but as individuals. In the novel, Clarice Starling has never flinched from sexist threats and oppression even though she is under much pressure. She firmly believes

that she can do anything her male colleagues do, instead, she keeps inspiring herself to do better than other men. Starling is faced with uncertain danger; she must work harder than those male officers so that she won't make mistakes. In the traditional sense, an FBI agent is not a fit career for women, but Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* is an affirmation of converting the ingrained consciousness of women being "the other".

If self-consciousness is missing, women's living space and their situation will suffer an even more dramatic deterioration. In the novel, every victim Buffalo Bill skins and kills is female. What lies behind this series of gruesome murders is extreme male chauvinism, which arrogantly denies the survival rights and values of women as human beings. Without self-consciousness, Starling's anger and determination of bringing Buffalo Bill to justice may not be motivated, and she may not be the heroine managing to the entire FBI agency fails to do on her own. In that case, women will still be victims that always need to be saved by men, and they will never escape the fate of being "the other". Self-consciousness is instrumental in Clarice Starling's success. Once women construct the sense of self, they are bound to change their mindset about the gender structure in society. In effect, they will notice there are astonishing amounts of gender inequality in the environment in which they live every day. Then they will be sensitive to the patriarchal perspective that has led to the persistent failure to completely resolve gender issues. The awakening and transformation of women's minds can help them break the shackles of male domination.

3.2. Demonstrate and improve the self-worth

Existentialist feminism points out that women must be engaged in public work to change the division of labor and create economic value[11]. To break away from the fetters of "the other", practical actions which can demonstrate women's value must be taken based on awakening the dormant female self-consciousness. Participate in social activities and work hard so that all women improve their abilities and prove their self-worth of themselves. One of the most direct ways to achieve that goal would be to speak out about demands for opportunities. It is not a shameful thing to have the courage to say it out loud when it comes to seeking opportunities. However, many women are so shackled that they don't even dare to do so. "To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile." [12] After all, that's what they have been educated since they are little. In the fiction, there are many descriptions of Clarice's anger when other male officers question her ability. Instead of suppressing her emotions, she will curse or defend herself, letting those men know that she is not soft or weak. As advocates for their own interests, authorities in patriarchal society deliberately convey the notion that ambition for power and success in women is ignominious. For women, ambition means sin, and demonstration of self-worth is equal to rebellion against the orthodox. Yet, with the development of feminism, more women come to realize that this misconception makes no sense except in leading to constant oppression of women's living space.

Women should take every possibility to improve themselves and demonstrate their value, rather than shying away from opportunities to achieve success. Clarice Starling is eager to join Buffalo Bill's case, but at first, Crawford seems hesitant to let her in. So, she finds Crawford and tells him in all seriousness, "I'm as good as anybody you've got at the cop stuff, better at some things. The victims are all women and

there aren't any women working this. I can walk in a woman's room and know three times as much about her as a man would know, and you know that's a fact. Send me." [13] Clarice Starling, who grew up in an orphanage after her father's early death and later relied on scholarships to complete her education, understands the significance of seizing chances and demonstrating her value. What's more, she knows how to bring her superiority into full play. Only in this way can she be seen and given more chances. She sets a good example for all women. Of necessity, women will encounter more obstacles than men if they want to succeed, but that is all the more reason for women to fight for their rights and interest. Otherwise, women will always be silent lambs manipulated by men. It's time for women to control fate in their own hands and end the history of being "the other". Gaining knowledge from work and study, promoting abilities, and elevating status in society are all feasible solutions for women to have more of a voice and thus fundamentally shake the tilted gender scales.

4. Conclusion

Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* is no doubt an excellent mystery novel. The protagonist, Clarice Starling, from the perspective of existentialist feminism, is not an eye candy in the traditional sense but a remarkably disruptive character.

This thesis discusses what gender issues Clarice Starling has encountered and how she fights against the dilemma of being "the other" caused by the patriarchy from the existentialist feminism put forward by Simone de Beauvoir. Through the analysis of conflict between Starling and the male characters, it can be concluded that the male gaze, the objectification of women, and ubiquitous sexism are three striking obstacles impeding the progress of gender equality. Under the concept and explanation of existentialist feminism and "the other" predicament in Beauvoir's masterpiece *The Second Sex*, this thesis sets forth the social roots that lie behind sexism, that is, male chauvinism and patriarchy. By interpreting Clarice Starling's reaction to these phenomena and her resistance, practical solutions for women to get rid of "the other" can be summed up as follows: repel the internalization of "the other" and demonstrate and improve self-worth.

All in all, this thesis offers a different research perspective on Clarice Starling and *The Silence of the Lambs* and provides feasible suggestions for women's liberation from "the other". The development of gender equality still has a long way to go. Hopefully, in the near future, both feminism and gender equality will become themes of the times truly applied in life, and women can gain freedom and equality. Nevertheless, due to the limitation of the preparation time and the author's ability, this thesis doesn't discuss the enlightenment existentialist feminism can give to those women who have been infused with ideas of patriarch supremacy and standing on the male side against women's liberation. Therefore, the study of *The Silence of the Lambs* from this perspective still needs further exploration.

Acknowledgment

Funding Project: 2022 Education Research and Reform Project of Chengdu University of Information Technology: Student-competency-centered development of core values through Interpreting course reform of translation major

(JYJG2022026)

References

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- [2] Zhu Xiaolan. *Research on Gaze Theory* [D]. Nanjing: Nanjing University, 2001.
- [3] Nussbaum, Martha C. (1985). "Objectification". *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. 24 (4): 249–291.
- [4] Chen Zhongxiang. *Biblical Female Images from the Perspective of Feminism* [J]. *Journal of Yangtze University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2014,37(06):42-43.
- [5] Cao Yingzhe, Chen Jingqi. *The Handmaid's Story from the Perspective of Existentialist Feminism* [J]. *Journal of Shangqiu Vocational and Technical College*, 2021,20(02):44-47.
- [6] Harris, Thomas. *The Silence of the Lambs*. Yilin Press, 2013
- [7] Liu Huimin. *Existential Feminism and Women's Freedom and Liberation: A Brief Analysis of Beauvoir's Second Nature* [J]. *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 2010(13):39-40+48.
- [8] Harris, Thomas. *The Silence of the Lambs*. Yilin Press, 2013.
- [9] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- [10] Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin Books, 1929.
- [11] Wang Han. *A study on Beauvoir's Second Sex feminism* [D]. Heilongjiang University, 2020.
- [12] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- [13] Harris, Thomas. *The Silence of the Lambs*. Yilin Press, 2013.