

The Portrayal of Female in Biographical Films

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to examine the reinterpretation of historical and social events in biographical films in order to ascertain whether female characters are simplified by stereotypes and to assess the evolution of their portrayal. Qualitative analysis was employed to analyse the portrayal of women in different periods in terms of promoting gender equality and challenging stereotypes in films through three biographical films spanning different periods, namely "*Oppenheimer*" "*Byron*" and "*Shadowlands*". The findings of the analysis indicate that the depiction of women's roles in biographical films includes some oversimplified stereotypes that obscure their actual roles in historical events.

Keywords: Biographical Films; Female Gender Stereotypes; Film Analysis; Historical Narratives.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Biographical films have long been a powerful medium for portraying the lives and achievements of famous people. One of the keys to biographical films is their ability to bring history to the screen, thereby providing a fuller understanding of our history and allowing us to remember the greats. Biographical films provide a unique lens through which viewers can witness the struggles, triumphs and revolutionary journeys of real people. Furthermore, these films offer a unique opportunity to understand the narratives of historical figures and to discuss their experiences, contributions and impact on society. In addition, biographical films are a practical and interesting way to preserve cultural heritage and to promote social awareness. It is therefore recommended that these films should allow the public to learn more about lesser-known or under-represented people and bring attention to their achievements and contributions that may have been overlooked, misunderstood or ignored. Furthermore, these films should give a voice to important people whose stories deserve to be told and let them be heard.

1.2. Problem Statements

From ancient times to the present, social factors have influenced the portrayal of women in biographical films, with a notable absence of female characters. However, since the middle of the 20th century, with the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the improvement of their social status, women's images in biographical films have begun to show more independence and wisdom. However, biographical films of different periods exhibit certain characteristics in their portrayal of women's image. They offer a more intuitive reflection of the progress of women's society and the unique values of contemporary women. This study aims to explore the differences in the portrayal of women's image in biographical films of different periods. This analysis will enable the identification of the specific evolution of women's image portrayal. The objective is to discover the rules governing this evolution and apply them to contemporary literary creation.

In order to achieve this goal, this study will pay special attention to three biographical films: "*Oppenheimer*" "*Byron*" and "*Shadowlands*", which are three biographical films from

different periods. The results will be drawn by comparing and contrasting the process and characteristics of different female portrayals in different periods, with the intention of promoting the further development of this topic.

1.3. Research Gap

However, there are not many exploration about how are female characters being depicted in a biographical films which are about males. Although the biopics might be around a male, but those female characters have interactions with the male, that's why there are spaces to analyze those female characters. This paper will explore the stereotypes that put upon them, whether they have same function or achievements with what really happened in history or in biography, and the evolution of the portryal of female characters. By doing this, this research will not only look into the historical information to compare, but also analyze the plots of the films "Oppenheimer," "Byron," and "Shadowlands," which are three films from different era.

1.4. Research Objectives

The portrayal of women in films is frequently contingent upon the socio-cultural context. An analysis of these images can provide insight into the societal perceptions of women's roles and status across different historical periods, as well as the evolution and change of these perceptions over time. Furthermore, the analysis of the evolution of women's images in biographical films can facilitate the raising of public awareness of gender equality, the challenging and changing of traditional gender role stereotypes, and the promotion of social progress in gender equality. Based on this, the main objectives of this study are:

- 1) To examine the process and characteristics of the portrayal of women in biographical films of different periods.
- 2) To analyse the commonalities in the portrayal of women in biographical films of different periods.
- 3) To identify the evolution of the portrayal of women in biographical films in different periods.

1.5. Research Questions

The portrayal of women in biographical films of different periods may exhibit varying characteristics. Biographical films are typically based on the life stories of real people. Studying the portrayal of these women can provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of historical

figures, especially those who may have been marginalised in traditional historical narratives. Furthermore, the portrayal of women is represented differently in different cultures and countries. Comparative studies can facilitate understanding and communication between different cultures. Furthermore, in accordance with the aforementioned research objectives, this study will address the following questions:

1) What are the differences in the process and characteristics of female portrayal in biographical films of different periods?

2) What are the commonalities in the portrayal of women in biographical films of different periods?

3) What is the historical trajectory of female portrayal in biographical films of different periods?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Portrayal of Female in Movies

2.1.1. General Stereotypes

Female characters in commercial films exhibited lesser values of emotional diversity, spatial presence, temporal presence, and their function when compared to male characters. In most films, male characters are often portrayed as connected with talent and brilliance, while female characters are frequently overlooked. Additionally, there exist numerous stereotypes about women in movies that perpetuate gender biases. These stereotypes include the portrayal of women as always relying on males for support, being perceived as less intelligent or competent compared to their male counterparts, and being depicted to make foolish or irrational mistakes. (Gálvez, 2019) Moreover, female characters are frequently objectified or reduced to their physical appearance, reinforcing societal expectations and narrow standards of beauty. Another prevalent stereotype is the depiction of women as overly emotional and fragile, further marginalizing their roles and contributions movies. These stereotypes not only limit the diversity and complexity of female characters but also reinforce gender stereotypes and hinder the progress towards gender equality in film portrayals. These kind of stereotypes can be seen in many different famous film production company. A study was carried out to investigate the influence of Disney films on women's perspectives. The findings of this research revealed several themes related to physical appearance, interactions, and prevalent female stereotypes, leading to arguments that these films contribute to the sexualization and objectifying of female characters. (Wellman, 2020)

2.1.2. The Evolution of Portrayal of Female Characters through time

Over the course of cinematic history, the portrayal of women in films has undergone a profound transformation, reflecting changing societal attitudes and evolving cultural norms. Initially, women were often relegated to passive roles, constrained by prevailing gender stereotypes and societal expectations (Dhanapale, 2023; Zhang, 2023). The film that is talked in a paper depicts sexism in a way that makes it funnier, which shows women as a community who enjoy gossip, always being irrational, and also subject to sexism. (Mahmudah, 2021) Most biopics about female have the characteristics that they need to be protected by male, and their ambitions are ignored, because male tell the stories from their perspective and they control the media (Cui, 2022). Also, by analyzing two films under Nigeria cultural background, we can find out that female characters are portrayed as sex

objects and objects of gaze for men, which is prevailing in their social realities (Adewoye. Odesanya. Abubakar. Jimoh, 2014).

However, as societies progressed and modernized, there emerged a notable shift in the representation of women on screen. Female characters began to be depicted as more autonomous, self-assured, and career-oriented individuals, marking a departure from traditional stereotypes (Akçora, 2020). Despite these advancements, gender stereotypes continue to persist in Hollywood productions, with women frequently depicted in roles centered around themes of romance, physical beauty, and marriage. Nevertheless, there are indications of changing narratives and evolving representations as societal attitudes towards gender roles evolve (Kumar et al., 2022). Moreover, the portrayal of women in cinema has been significantly influenced by cultural dynamics, feminist movements, and the global spread of Western feminist ideologies. This influence is particularly evident in Chinese cinema, where the impact of Western feminist ideals has led to a notable reevaluation and reinterpretation of female characters on screen (Luo, 2023). Through examining these shifts and influences, it becomes evident that the portrayal of women in films is a dynamic and evolving aspect of cinematic representation.

2.2. Authenticity of Biographical Movies

For biographical films, sometimes the retell of history are celebrated by public, but sometimes will be criticized because people are not willing to see. (Pérez-Simón, 2014) The changes that are made in biographical films can give audiences different perceptions and understanding about the characters, it can be both negative or positive, which depends on what changes are made. For instance, a research is about comparing two biographical films about Stephen Hawking, the result shows that the analyzed works are bound to reinforce stereotypes that contribute to a distorted view of the scientist and scientific work, just as it happens in other kinds of movies (Fernandes, Lima, Aguiar, 2021).

However, biographical films will always make some changes based on the history context or some autobiographical novels, which can cause some impacts on the perception for our society. For example, Gerwig's adaptation of "Little Women", which is a book include some autobiographical context, incorporates historical elements, provides insights into literary criticism, and concludes with an open-ended final. "Little Women" adaptation of the novel reinforces notions concerning women and their achievements while also acknowledging the influence of a sexist society. (Thomas, 2021) We can say both historical novels and screen texts can be considered adaptations, as they revisit history to create narratives that follow, intersect with, or different from the past. Additionally, adaptations extend beyond traditional sources and may draw inspiration from artworks and artifacts, offering speculative interpretations of artists' lives and historical periods. (Strong, 2019)

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative analysis approach to delve into the nuanced portrayal of female characters within biographical films, aiming to dissect their character development, explore prevalent stereotypes, and assess whether they align with history.

3.1. Research Design

The design of this study centers on films analysis and comparative analysis, scrutinizing three distinct biographical films: "Oppenheimer" (2023), "Byron" (2003), and "Shadowlands" (1985), which are three film from different era to in order to answer the research question about the evolution of the portrayal of female characters, juxtaposed with relevant historical data. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how the depiction of female characters has evolved over time and been influenced by societal norms and cinematic trends.

3.2. Research Procedure

3.2.1. Data Collection

The data collection process include meticulous watching of the selected films, focusing on the portrayal of female characters. This involves analyzing their interactions, dialogue, character arcs, and personal experiences depicted on screen. Concurrently, extensive historical research is conducted to gather contextual information and corroborate the on-screen narratives with real-life events.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

1) Stereotype Identification

This part involves identifying and dissecting prevalent stereotypes associated with female characters in biographical films.

2) Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis will not only will be compared with other historical information to see the differences, but will also explore the evolution of the portrayal of female characters through time and explore if there are any trends or patterns.

4. Results and Discussion

Because this is a qualitative research, the raw data, such as descriptions of films scenes, are often need to be presented together with the analysis and interpretation, which will also easy to read and understand. Therefore, the results are combined with the discussion part.

4.1. The Process and Characteristics of Female Portrayal in Biographical Films of Different Periods: Stereotypes of Female Characters

The portrayal of women in biographical films across different historical periods reflects shifts in social culture and the status of women. To illustrate, in the early days of Chinese cinema, women were often depicted by male actors, with their roles typically characterised by submissiveness, docility and virtue. This emphasis on traditional values, such as the role of a "good wife and mother", reflects the societal norms of the era. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the representation of women in cinema underwent a significant transformation. This began to emphasise the courage and independence of women, the emergence of female consciousness and their contribution to society. In the 21st century, the image of women in cinema demonstrated a more profound and complex appearance. It no longer solely focused on women's roles and challenges in society. Instead, it began to explore in-depth women's aspirations for personal growth and self-fulfilment. It can be observed that the portrayal of women in biographical films across different

historical periods not only reflects the changes in the social status of women in China, but also reflects the changes in social culture and the times. As society progresses and gender equality awareness increases, the portrayal of women in biographical films has become more diverse and three-dimensional.

The simplification of female roles in biographical films serves to reinforce the general stereotypes that society typically ascribes to women. This is evidenced by the fact that the portrayal of female characters in these films consistently adheres to historical gender norms, particularly given that gender inequality is a historical phenomenon.

Kitty Oppenheimer's character in the film "Oppenheimer" demonstrates some of the common stereotypes about women in our lives and movies, especially in the male-dominated fields of science and politics. The film first portrays Katie as a supportive wife and mother, reinforcing traditional gender roles that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities over their abilities in professional fields. This image perpetuates the idea that women should prioritize their husbands' careers and emotional health over their own feelings and accomplishments. Katie's role in the film as an "intellectual Muse" further belies her own academic and scientific contributions, making her a figure who exists primarily to inspire and support her husband.

In the TV movie "Byron," Anne Isabella Milbank's portrayal fits many classic stereotypes. A prominent stereotype in the film is the portrayal of Anne Isabella as a paragon of virtue and moral rectitude. She is portrayed as a proper and respectable woman, embodying the aristocratic class's expectations of female purity and modesty. Her adherence to these values stands in stark contrast to Lord Byron's scandalous behaviour, especially his philandering and libertine lifestyle. The film also perpetuates the stereotype of women being passive and submissive, especially in their relationships with men. Anne Isabella's character is often portrayed as being covered by the dominant men in her life. Despite being intelligent and well-educated, she is constrained by society's expectations of her and eventually finds herself become to the role of a supportive wife and mother rather than pursuing her own ambitions and interests.

The film "Shadowlands" positions Joey as a secondary character whose primary narrative purpose is to serve as an emotional catalyst for Lewis, thus reinforcing the stereotype of Joey. This description perpetuates the idea that women's roles in stories, especially those centered around prominent male characters, are meant to support and inspire men, rather than highlight their own stories and accomplishments. The film emphasizes Joy's condition and her role as a devoted partner, reinforcing the stereotype that women are self-sacrificing caregivers. This description not only devalues her intellectual contributions, but is consistent with traditional portrayals of women defined by their relationships and the personal sacrifices they make for men.

4.2. Commonalities in the Portrayal of Women in Biographical Films of Different Periods: Simplification of Female Roles

In biopics, female characters are often simplified, adhering to historical gender norms and marginalizing or devaluing their roles and achievements. The image of Kitty Oppenheimer is very different from the one she has in real life. Despite her accomplishments and complex personality, the

film perpetuates traditional gender roles by portraying her as a supportive wife and mother, reinforcing stereotypes about women's roles in society.

The simplification of female characters in biopics can be attributed to the simplicity of narrative, as analysis of character and plot structure in biopics often finds examples of female characters being changed more or less by male characters. Filmmakers often prioritize compelling, simplified narratives that appeal to a broad audience, which can lead to the marginalization of complex female characters. This approach tends to favor stories with male protagonists while downplaying female characters to supporting roles that conform to traditional gender stereotypes. Historical documents provide detailed information about the multifaceted contributions of women and life, but biopics alter these to fit traditional narrative structures. Historical documents provide detailed information about the multifaceted contributions and lives of women, but biopics often modify these narratives to fit pervasive gender stereotypes.

In "Oppenheimer," for example, Kitty Oppenheimer's performance does not adequately reflect her intellectual achievements or political commitment. In the film, she encouraged her husband, J. Robert Oppenheimer, to lead the Manhattan Project and support it during the crisis, but she failed to fully explore her own professional and personal struggles.

In fact, Kitty Oppenheimer is a biologist and botanist with a keen interest in politics. She joined the Communist Party as a student and became active in politics. Her second husband was a political activist who volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and Kitty had planned to join him on the front lines before she died. This aspect of his life is a testament to his commitment to the political cause and willingness to take significant personal risks. However, these elements of her personality are largely absent from the film, which instead focuses on her family role in the Manhattan Project. Kitty's scientific knowledge and contributions are also minimized in the film. During her time at the Manhattan Project, she used her expertise in biology to conduct blood tests to assess radiation risk, demonstrating her professional competence. However, the film focuses on her struggle with isolation and the stress of raising a child under FBI supervision, thus making her a family figure. Her increase in alcohol abuse under stress has been described, but her resilience and ability to support herself and her family in these difficulties has not been fully explored.

While the film emphasizes Anne Isabella's moral integrity and strong soul, it also portrays her as a person limited by society's expectations, ultimately reducing her to a supporting role as a wife and mother. This description reflects the gender norms and power dynamics that prevailed in that era's society, in which women were expected to conform to specific feminine ideals and be submissive to male. However, the film's performance may not fully appreciate the complexity of Anne Isabella's character and her historical significance. Anne Milbanke is portrayed as a person of high character and moral integrity who have the ideal of female purity. Anne's character contrasts with Lord Byron's shameless behavior, making her a "perfect" wife.

She is also portrayed as passive and submissive. And She is overshadowed by the dominant personalities of the men in her life. Anne Isabella was a woman of considerable intellect and accomplishment, with interest in mathematics and

education. The thing shows in the film that align with the real history is that her decision to separate from Lord Byron was motivated by concerns for her well-being and that of her daughter, Ada Lovelace. Anne Isabella played a significant role in Ada's education and intellectual development, particularly in mathematics and science, which is not fully explored in the film. What can be seen in the film is a tough woman who were tortured by her marriage and were trying to defend herself and her daughter, but not an intelligent woman who studied in Cambridge and interested, good at classical literature, philosophy, science and mathematics, and educated her daughter very well who later wrote the first computer program in history and her algorithm is considered the earliest computer program and software.

In the 1985 film "Shadowlands," Joy Davidman is depicted through a lens that emphasizes traditional female stereotypes. She is primarily shown as a supportive figure in the life of Lewis, a role that aligns with the stereotypical portrayal of women as nurturers and emotional anchors for men. Joy's own intellectual capabilities and achievements are overshadowed by her role in Lewis's life, reinforcing the stereotype that women's worth is often measured by their contributions to the lives of men. The simplification of Joy Davidman's character in "Shadowlands" can be attributed to narrative convenience. Filmmakers often prioritize creating emotionally compelling and streamlined narratives that appeal to broad audiences. In this case, focusing on Joy's role as a supportive partner to Lewis and her battle with cancer provides a clear, emotionally charged storyline that underscores Lewis's personal growth and emotional journey. This narrative choice simplifies Joy's character to fit neatly into the overarching story of Lewis's life, making her more of a plot device than a fully realized character. Additionally, the film aims to evoke a strong emotional response from the audience, and focusing on Joy's illness and her impact on Lewis serves this purpose more directly than exploring her intellectual.

4.3. The Evolution of Female Portrayal in Biographical Films in Different Periods: From Simplicity to Complexity

Although the portrayal of female characters has been tried to get closer to their real historical figures, their true functions or achievements are still not fully represented in biographical films. From "Shadowland" (1985), "Byron" (2003) to "Oppenheimer" (2023), the evolution of female characters has been limited. While filmmakers have historically come a long way in terms of accuracy, continued attention to male stories and failure to pay attention to women's achievements or contributions has held women back from improving their sexuality.

In "Oppenheimer" (2023), Kitty Oppenheimer's contribution to the Manhattan project and his political activism are largely overlooked. The film highlights her pressures of isolation and parenting, and the surveillance from FBI, while doesn't show her expertise in scientific research. Kitty was not just a supportive wife, but also a biologist and botanist who applied her expertise to the Manhattan project. The film did not sufficiently cover the active political participation that were an important part of her life. This choice of narrative continues the trend to simplify the female character to the traditional male-centered narrative structure.

Similarly, "Byron" (2003) portrays Anne Isabella Milbank as a good but obedient person who pays little attention to

intellectual activities and plays an important role in the education of her daughter Ada Loveless. Anne was a very intelligent woman, deeply committed to mathematics and education reform. But the film focuses only on her marriage to Lord Byron, and overlooks her academic work and her influence on Ada, which later became the pioneer of computer science. This persisted the stereotype of defining women by relationships and morality rather than intelligence.

In "Shadowlands" (1985), Joy Davidman's intellectual influence and partnership with C.S. Lewis are downplayed. The film emphasizes her role in his emotional journey rather than her own literary achievements and intellectual companionship. Joy was a talented poet and writer, yet the film reduces her to a supportive figure, overshadowing her personal and professional contributions. This portrayal reinforces the stereotype of women as secondary characters whose primary function is to support and inspire male protagonists.

It is clear that in these three movies from different era, both the main female characters, the wife of the main male characters, are both depicted on the perspective of how tough they are when they are supporting their husband and their family, but ignore their own value and achievement. The persistent lack of emphasis on female achievements and contributions shapes the depiction of women in these films. Despite changes over time, female characters remain largely defined by their relationships to male protagonists rather than being depicted as multifaceted individuals as other male characters who also have interactions with the main male character in biopics. Women appear as a foil to men, rather than as equals to male characters. This ongoing issue reflects a trend in biographical storytelling that doesn't change much through time, which is that the complexities and accomplishments of female figures are overshadowed by their roles in the lives of men.

5. Conclusion

For a long period of time in the history of human , the portrait of female is seriously absent, they not only encounter many obstacles on the road of scientific research, literature or any other fields, even if they have made achievements, they are rarely recorded and disseminated, because the historical narrative is always dominated by men.

This research reveals that, despite attempts to bring female characters closer to their historical counterparts, their real functions and achievements remain underrepresented in biographical films. From "Shadowlands" (1985) to "Byron" (2003) to "Oppenheimer" (2023), the evolution in the portrayal of female characters shows limited progress. While filmmakers have made efforts in historical accuracy, the persistent preference of emphasizing male characters and the lack of emphasis on female achievements and contributions continue to minimize the representation of women.

The simplification of women's roles in biopics often reinforces prevalent stereotypes and upholds historical gender norms, marginalizing or devaluing their roles and achievements. In "Oppenheimer," Kitty Oppenheimer's persona is reduced to a supportive wife and mother. This image perpetuates traditional gender roles that a woman should prioritize her family responsibilities over her own professional ambitions, totally covered her intelligence in scientific area and political engagement.

Similarly, in "Byron," Anne Isabella Millbank is described as an kind but submissive person, paying little attention to her

intelligence and the important role she played in the education of her daughter Ada. Although she is a quite intelligent woman in mathematics and education area, the film focuses on her marriage to Byron, ignoring her academic achievements and the considerable influence she had on Ada.

In "Shadowlands," Joy Davidman's intellectual influence and relationship with C.S. Lewis was downplayed. The film emphasizes her role in Lewis's emotional journey rather than her own achievements in literature and poetry and the influence of Lewis's works. Despite her talents as a poet and writer, the film reduces her role to a supporting role, reinforcing the stereotype of women as secondary characters, the role that who always support the male characters under any situation.

These depictions suggest that biopics continue to simplify female characters for narrative convenience, keeping with traditional narrative structures centered on male protagonists. This trend still persists despite there are many detailed historical records that provide much information about women's contributions and multifaceted lives.

In summary, despite efforts to portray female characters more accurately, biopics still largely define them by their relationship to their male protagonists. In order to achieve a more balanced and accurate portrayal, future biopics will need to more accurately depict the achievements and contributions of female characters to historical events, as well as their impact on others, presenting them as an integral part of the historical narrative, rather than just a foil to the male story.

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