

Gender Bias and the Power Shaping: An Analysis of Female Characters in the Film Ne Zha 2

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze the four female characters in the film Ne Zha 2 -Lady Yin, Crane Girl, Ao Run, and Lady Shiji-by exploring the ways in which their roles are presented in the film, it reveals how traditional gender biases and societal expectations affect women's position in the power structure.Lady Yin, as a mother and female general, is marginalized as a sacrificial character in the story despite her leadership.Crane Girl has a high status among the divine attendants, yet remains as a subordinate to the male characters, reflecting a clear gender hierarchical order.The characters of Ao Run and Lady Shiji also present different gendered behaviors and dilemmas, demonstrating the invisible limitations of women in power struggles in traditional Chinese culture.This paper argues that these female role settings reflect deeper social gender norms and contribute to gender bias in contemporary media.

Keywords: Gender Bias, Power Shaping, Chinese Animation, Gendered Power Dynamics.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese animated films have gradually risen to prominence. Carrying the weight of traditional history and culture, and expressing a unique oriental aesthetic, they have become increasingly popular with Chinese audiences and even those around the world.Ne Zha 2 is an excellent example of this, adapted from an ancient Chinese mythological story with a wide audience.People love the story of Nezha and appreciate the diversity of adaptations and creative expressions.There have been numerous praises for the movie, but little attention has been paid to analyzing the female perspective in the movie.Therefore, this paper will analyze the four female characters in the movie through the lens of gender studies and explore how sexism and power structures shape their roles.

2. Role Analysis of Lady Yin

(1) Maternal Sacrifice and Invisible Deprivation of Power

Lady Yin, also known as Yin Shi, is a character from the Ming Dynasty's novel "The Enchantment of the Gods". She was the wife of Li Jing, the general officer of the Chentang Pass, and was the mother of three children, Jin Zha, Mu Zha, and Ne Zha.In Ne Zha 2, Lady Yin continues her role as a mother and is given the military position of "General", a position of great combat skill and leadership.However, the film's portrayal of Lady Yin as a general is relatively weak, with the director focusing more on her motherly glow, presenting her as a gentle, loving, selfless and devoted mother.Despite being a military general, Lady Yin ultimately sacrifices her life in the alchemy furnace of the Tian Yuan Ding, providing "emotional support" for Ne Zha's growth and the development of the story.

Is this sacrifice narratively necessary and justified?Does the movie have to rely on his mother's sacrifice in order to promote Nezha's growth?The answer is not in the affirmative.Nezha is portrayed as a strong and courageous hero. His growth and success did not depend on his mother's sudden death.Lady Yin's sacrifice does not have a decisive impact on Nezha's characterization or the direction of the

story, except for its emotional and tear-jerking effect.On the contrary, the film's use of "maternal sacrifice" as the end of Lady Yin implies a gender bias.This treatment undermines Lady Yin's independence as a general and reinforces the gender bias of "women as sacrifices," which means that women, even in important positions, are still being trained by society as tools to "fulfill men," contributing to the idea that "men dominate victory".The stereotypical gender narrative of "male-dominated victory" is promoted.

This "maternal sacrifice" is in line with Molly Haskell's theory.In her study, she points out that the sacrifice of female characters in movies is usually performed by mothers.This sacrifice often carries the social and cultural expectation that mothers need to make sacrifices for the growth or success of their families and male characters.Lady Yin in the film is a typical example of such a sacrifice, which not only weakens her personal power but also subconsciously reinforces the narrative structure of gender inequality.This also aligns with Foucault's emphasis on how knowledge discourse is closely tied to social power. Power, through discourse, constructs Lady Yin's role as a "sacrificial" figure. Under the dual constraints of patriarchy and nationalistic sentiment, Lady Yin is unable to give full play to her military talents and instead becomes a symbol of maternal greatness and sacrifice, reflecting the passivity and oppression imposed on women under patriarchy.

(2) Marginalization of Generalship and Gender Stereotyping

It is worth exploring the fact that Lady Yin, as a general, is bound to be battle-hardened, with excellent leadership and fighting ability, which should complement Li Jing's image as a military general of the same rank.However, there is a marked difference in the physical size and temperament of the two in the film, as Li Jing is portrayed as powerful and tall, while Lady Yin is relatively weak and short, and is given more gentle and maternal qualities.This contrast reinforces the gender stereotype that women should be soft and introverted even when they are in important military positions.

According to the logic of the narrative, under the extreme heat of the Tian Yuan Ding alchemy furnace, a general who is experienced in combat should have greater endurance and

survival ability than an ordinary soldier. However, in the movie, Lady Yin, as a general, dies early, while her subordinate soldiers persist until the last moment. This kind of setting undermines Lady Yin's professionalism and toughness as a general. This treatment makes the movie's presentation of female characters too one-dimensional. The film's treatment of Lady Yin reflects the deep-rooted gender bias in contemporary commercial films, and its "maternal sacrifice" narrative not only does not help to enrich the diversity of female characters, but also hinders the expression of women's power and identity remodeling on the screen.

3. Role Analysis of Crane Girl

(1) Humiliation and Laughter: Objectification of Female Characters

Unlike the traditional maternal sacrifice assumed by Lady Yin, Crane Girl in the film shows another path of marginalization of the female figure. As one of the two attendants next to the movie's villain, the Immortal Master Wuliang, Crane Girl's role is constructed in such a way that it is full of playful and humiliating implications for female characters. In the movie, Crane Girl is repeatedly placed in embarrassing and even humiliating situations. For example, the Immortal Master Wuliang assigns her to guide Nezha to the toilet. On the way, she was yanked down by Nezha by the hem of her skirt, exposing her thighs, and then fled in haste. In addition, in the main hall of the Jade Void Palace, Crane Girl assumes the function of pouring Kunlun nectar for several male characters, including the Immortal Master Wuliang, Taiyi Zhenren and Ne Zha. She is splashed with water twice during the service, resulting in a messy makeup on her face, which becomes one of the movie's punchlines. Through these gender-shaming sequences, the film portrays Crane Girl as an object of amusement and objectification, triggering widespread discomfort among female viewers. Female users on the social media outlet Little Red Book reported that these episodes were offensive and ruined the comfort of watching the movie.

(2) The Service Function of the "Cat's Paw": The Marginalization of the Female Role

It is worth noting that as one of the highest attendants in the power structure of the Jade Palace, Crane Girl should have had a similar status and function as Deer Boy, another male attendant. Yet the movie assigns the two persons a very different division of functions. Deer Boy is portrayed in the movie as a serious and authoritative examiner, and serves as the chief examiner for Nezha's three ascension tests, taking part in the process of power and decision-making. The Crane Girl, on the other hand, is reduced to the image of an Cat's Paw responsible for service matters such as guiding the way and pouring wine. As Beauvoir argues, women are socially constructed as the "Other," often positioned as mere foils to the male-centered world. This gender division of labor maps the film's invisible reproduction of the gender power structure of "female service, male dominance," which further reinforces the traditional patriarchal expectation of women's roles as functional and subordinate.

In addition, the movie's use of the Crane Girl as a vehicle for some of the jokes also reflects the commercial movie's acquiescence to and pandering to sexism. As a mainstream movie that has achieved both box office and word-of-mouth success, Ne Zha 2 has been widely publicized, but it has also subconsciously reinforced the audience's stereotype of "women can be teased". This setting is worth reflecting on: Is

it the unconscious cultural continuation of the director, or the commercial strategy of actively catering to the interests of the market and the audience? No matter what the answer is, the film's treatment of female characters reflects the gender inequality that still exists in contemporary film and television, and provides a footnote to the objectification and marginalization of women's image in the real world.

4. Social Impact of Female Role Disenfranchisement and Gender Bias

(1) Mechanisms of Disenfranchisement and Gender Bias of Female Roles

Although Crane Girl and Ao Run in Ne Zha 2 have played a part in the movie and have won the hearts of many viewers. However, their portrayal is still stuck in the stereotypical mode of "women being watched" and lacks independent subjectivity and narrative dynamism. Their existence serves the male gaze more than being a key force in the development of the story. This gender bias undermines the expression of female characters' rights in the narrative and reinforces the structure of gender inequality in the cinematic discourse.

Laura Mulvey, in her theory of Male Gaze, points out that the mainstream film discourse is structured with men as the subject of viewing, and through the design of image language and narrative strategy, women are objectified as passive "objects of viewing" in order to satisfy the aesthetics and pleasures of male viewers. Through the camera work, character design and narrative structure, this image mechanism subconsciously reinforces the unequal power relationship between men and women. The characterization of Hetong and Ao Run is a specific response to Mulvey's theory. Their images and certain plot settings cater to the male gaze, and their feminine qualities are deliberately emphasized in the film, becoming visual symbols to be "viewed" and "consumed". For example, the scene in which Nezha pulls down the skirt of the crane girl, exposing her thighs, is a shot that does not have a substantial impact on the plot, but enhances the visual appeal by exposing the female body. This scene was even interpreted by some male viewers in the theater as a funny joke, and together with Nezha's repeated "so white" line, it triggered malicious fantasies among some male viewers, further exposing the film's pandering to the male gaze.

Similarly, Ao Run's brothers wear armor in battle, while Ao Run wears a bustier dress. This costume is designed to emphasize the curves of the female body, regardless of the real demands of combat. This clothing, full of feminine symbols, weakens the audience's identification of her as a warrior. Ao Run's image also fails to escape the logic of "being watched" and is forced to lose balance between female body symbols and warrior identity.

This stereotypical portrayal of women's roles reinforces the attribute of women as "being watched" and restricts women's agency, weakening women's narrative rights in the movie. At the same time, it affects the audience's perception of the reality of women in a wider social and cultural context, further aggravating the marginalization and suppression of women's subjectivity in the social gender system.

(2) Film Narrative and the Reproduction of the Male Gaze Cinema not only presents female passivity in characterization, but also further consolidates and reproduces

gender inequality in the social structure. In the real world, peering at the female body (e.g. thighs) is usually seen as transgressive and immoral behavior, and is condemned by social opinion. However, in cinema, this kind of gazing is rationalized by visual narratives and even packaged as a normalized visual experience. The audience enjoys the exposure of the female body on the big screen, a process that is entertained and artistic, thus reducing the critique of the phenomenon of "being watched".

As Laura Mulvey points out in her Male Gaze theory, mainstream cinema portrays women through visual pleasure and conforms to a male-dominated viewing mechanism. Under this mechanism, female characters lose their status as active subjects and are placed in the frame of male gaze, reduced to objects to be watched and consumed. This way of portrayal deepens the audience's inherent perception of female characters, perpetuating the stereotype of women as beautiful, passive, and dependent on men.

Men, on the other hand, hold the initiative of the narrative and assume the function of driving the plot forward. This gender division of labor is not only reflected in the plot arrangement, but also permeates the overall narrative logic of the movie. Female characters are marginalized, carrying symbolic and instrumental functions, and becoming objects to satisfy the audience's visual desires. Laura Mulvey further points out that the gender structure presented by mainstream films is the epitome and continuation of gender power relations in real society. Every film and television production with a male gaze will actually subconsciously deepen and consolidate the audience's stereotypical perception of women, further consolidating the gender imbalance in society.

Therefore, when analyzing *Na Zha 2*, we should not only focus on how female characters are visualized and marginalized, but also remain highly vigilant against such gender-biased visual and narrative mechanisms, and think about the far-reaching implications of film and television creations in terms of gender equality and social responsibility.

5. Betrayer and Self-Identity: Analysis of the Roles of Ao Run and Lady Shiji

(1) Ao Run's Dangerous Attributes: Femme Fatale and Female Betrayal Narratives

As the only female member of the Dragon Clan, Ao Run is endowed with superb combat skills and a beautiful appearance. However, her abilities are not utilized in the way of justice, and she is instead portrayed as an ambitious betrayer. She plans and leads the betrayal of her elder brother, Ao Guang, and joins forces with the other two brothers to challenge the authority of the family.

This narrative setting reflects the "dangerous attributes" of women in the gender power structure - that is, they are often portrayed as schemers or betrayers, possessing beauty and charm but at the same time being potentially dangerous. Ao Run's image perpetuates the stereotype of the "snake and scorpion beauty", and her sultry appearance and aggressive character design make her the classic embodiment of the dangerous woman. This type of characterization is commonplace in many literary or filmic works, and repeatedly reinforces the narrative pattern of combining femininity and danger. For example, in Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, the female protagonist Wang Jiazhi uses her beauty

to infiltrate the enemy, and despite the greatness of her espionage act, which is dedicated to the revolution, her use of beauty is still placed in the discourse of the "dangerous woman". Wang Jiazhi's charisma becomes a weapon that leads to the weakness of men, and Mr. Yi is thus presented as a typical male who is shaken by beauty and exposed to human weakness.

Similarly, in the many movie and television productions adapted from the Chinese classic *Jin Ping Mei*, Pan Jinlian is the representative of the image of the "snake and scorpion beauty", who is depicted as a beautiful and slutty figure. Pan Jinlian, who was the wife of Wu Dalang, violated traditional ethics and committed adultery with Ximen Qing, which ultimately led to the death of Wu Dalang, while his brother Wu Song was a man of honor and integrity. And Wu Song has been celebrated to this day as a heroic character full of righteousness who was not tempted by Pan Jinlian's beauty. Her beauty and viciousness are the only things that remain unchanged in all the film and television adaptations and renditions of the character, and the stereotype of the "beautiful woman = betrayer/dangerous" continues to be solidified in popular culture.

It is worth noting that in many of these narratives, although female characters are highly attractive and attractive, their abilities and subjective initiative are limited to the framework of negative attributes, and they are labeled as betrayers and conspirators. This binary narrative mechanism undermines the multi-dimensional portrayal of female characters, and further deepens the audience's perception of female charisma as equal to danger.

(2) Lady Shiji's Attribute of Love of Beauty: Appearance Identity and Women's Social Discipline

In the movie *Ne Zha 2*, Lady Shiji is portrayed in a way that contradicts traditional Chinese female aesthetics. With her plump body and rugged features, she is far from the "beautiful and dignified" goddess image that audiences are accustomed to. This setting breaks the stereotype of "women are beautiful" commonly seen in animation, but also reveals society's inherent expectations of women's image through exaggeration, comedy, and even satire.

Susan Bordo's theory of "body politics" points out that the female body is often used as a projection of cultural ideology in the media, carrying gender regulation and social control. Although Lady Shiji possesses powerful magical powers and an optimistic personality, which are enough to symbolize women's independence and strength, the film arranges for her to ask the mirror "who is the most beautiful" many times, longing for affirmation of her physical appearance. Although this sequence has a certain comedic effect, it also reflects that the real society continues to regulate women's appearance. It is as if women, even if they are "sitting on the mountain as the king", can't escape the obsessive pursuit of beauty. This plotting carries with it a kind of flirtation with reproduction of the anxieties of female look.

Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, suggests that beauty standards are a way for society to control women. As women have risen in political, economic, and social status, the beauty myth has reinforced the demand for women's appearance as a new form of social control that continues to shape the structure of women's perceptions of self-worth. Women are generally endowed by society with an invisible evaluation system, and their social value and social identity are inextricably linked to their appearance and attractiveness. With the help of Lady

Shiji's desire for beauty, the movie maps out society's regulation of women's inner being and society's underestimation of women's inner strength. This setting makes the viewer wonder: can women only define themselves within the binary framework of beauty and unattractiveness? Setting out on a deep reflection on women's external appearance regulation.

The character of Lady Shiji presents a complex paradox of femininity and self-identity in modern narratives. She not only breaks the single framework of the beauty symbol, but also ironically reveals, through the self-scrutinizing plot arrangement, the dilemma of social expectation and value that female characters still find it difficult to escape from in film and television works, and even in the context of social reality. Her image is not only a figurative presentation of women's identity dilemma, but also exposes to a certain extent the misinterpretation and weakening of women's subjectivity and inner strength in film and television works.

6. Conclusion

Ne zha 2 has its successes as a popular mainstream commercial movie. However, the gender narrative behind the movie reveals the bias against female characters and the deprivation of women's power. By analyzing the four female characters in the film, it can be seen that the film still perpetuates the traditional gender frameworks of "female sacrifice", "female being watched" and "female serving male" in the patriarchal society. These roles are solidified in a single image, and become the auxiliary to the growth and narrative advancement of the male characters, lacking the diversity and

subjectivity that they deserve.

By reinforcing the dependency and sacrifice of female roles, the film not only reproduces the gender power relationship of "male dominance and female marginalization" in the visual presentation and narrative structure, but also subconsciously intensifies the stereotypical image of women in society. This gender discourse hidden behind the images and narratives caters to the market's interest and at the same time affects the diverse expressions of women in mainstream movies. Therefore, when we enjoy movies, we should also reflect on the hidden gender ideology in the image narratives, and expect that future movie and television works can break through the traditional gender discourse framework and provide more independent, multi-dimensional and powerful space for female characters to be portrayed.

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