

The Self-value Construction of Female Characters in Hidden Figures from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract: The Feminist criticism theory, which originated in the 1960s, is a literary criticism theory that interprets literary and cultural phenomena with female gender consciousness as its focus. The theory of criticism has gradually penetrated from political life to all aspects of culture, economy and social life, and has exerted a profound influence in the field of film. Film hidden figure depicts three women from 7 to revolt, from weak to strong career growth process, in the male-dominated field of science and technology have the courage to explore and create our own a piece of heaven and earth, through the career women are the epitome of difficulties and resistance, shows the wisdom of women dried fruits and individual consciousness. From the perspective of feminist criticism, Text Tong explores the self-worth construction process and important influence of the three women in Hidden Figures.

Keywords: feminist criticism theory, Hidden Figures, The construction of female self-value.

1. Introduction

Since the birth of feminist theory, many women have participated in the movement of telling their own lives and pursuing equal social identity. The film shows the behavior and thought of the current social life, and it is also an indispensable part of social culture. With the widespread concern of feminism, more and more films began to record and tell stories belonging to women. As an excellent biographical film, the Hidden Figures is properly artistically processed according to real people and facts in reality. It tells the story of three women who persistently smash the prejudice given by men, make outstanding contributions to the cause of science and technology by relying on their own excellent talents and perseverance, create a female image with great breakthrough spirit and exemplary significance, and become a progressive force to promote equal rights.

2. Feminist Criticism

Feminist critical theory criticizes the Western civilization and society dominated by men, pays attention to the oppression and discrimination suffered by women in the fields of economy, science, culture, religion and so on, and pays attention to women's own literature and women's unique way of thinking which have been submerged by the patriarchal culture for a long time.

2.1. Theory Introduction

The well-known "women's movement" in the 1960s is not the origin of feminism, but an innovation of traditional ideas in existing books. It is a social theory and political movement. Feminist criticism is a kind of literary criticism theory that focuses on the female gender consciousness to explain literary and cultural phenomena. It is indeed attributed to various feminist movements. It has pure textual criticism significance, exposing the hidden sexism and women related content in the text, and criticizing the unequal social facts in the study of the text.

2.2. Development

It is generally believed that the development of feminist theory can be divided into three stages as the women's movement in Europe and America around the French Revolution in 1789, the women's movement in 1920 and the feminist thoughts in Europe and America around 1970. In the first stage, the woman leader of the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges published *the Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizens*, saying that "women have equal rights with men". British female writers published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* to strive for women's equal educational opportunities and equal social status. Simone de Beauvoir, a French woman writer *Le Deuxième Sexe*, expounds how women become male appendages under the oppression of the patriarchal society and give up their characteristics as "independent people" to become the second sex.

In the second stage, feminism began to emphasize the differences between men and women, French writer Hélène Cixous, England writer Toril Moi and American writer Adrienne Rich has pointed out that taking gender equality as the goal of women's liberation ignores the essential differences between men and women. Women are still subordinate to the male dominated social structure and have not created their own language.

The feminist theory in the third stage began to be academic. Feminists of different factions took the theory as a part of social and cultural research. Due to the lack of a unified theoretical basis, they had different opinions on its concept, impact and existence value. New views continued to develop, enriching the feminist theory.

2.3. Major Factions

In the endless stream of historical trends, feminist theory has also been constantly combined with other literary criticism theories, emerging schools with different views and innovations, among which liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism are the main representatives.

2.3.1. Liberal Feminism

In terms of time, liberal feminism is the starting point of all feminist fractions, so it has also become the object of revision and transformation of all schools. It advocates rationality, mainly emphasizes legal and formal inequality, and believes that women have the same rational thinking ability as men. This fraction is committed to eliminating the differences between men and women in legislation, protecting vulnerable groups and paying attention to women's legal rights.

2.3.2. Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism is a branch created by the combination of Marxism and Feminism under the influence of scientific dialectics of Marx and Engels. They believe that capitalism and private property are the root causes of women's oppression. Only by eliminating this system and realizing communism can women's liberation be realized. Looking at women's gender and rights from an economic perspective makes marriage, childbirth and other practical issues that are directly related to women become trivial. Moreover, the demands to change gender discrimination and oppression are only valued by men on certain occasions.

2.3.3. Radical Feminism

Radical feminism came from the United States and developed from the male New Left camp. Those progressive women who do not belittle or discriminate against in the social movement use the word "radical" to imply a broader and deeper progressiveness than liberal feminism. This fraction believes that women's oppression is the most fundamental and profound of all oppression. It completely opposes men and women to discuss women's vital problems, excavates the root cause of all injustice suffered by women — patriarchy, and tries to find a way out to get rid of this oppression.

3. Analysis of the Hidden Figures

Feminist film criticism is a branch of feminist theory. Its purpose is to expose the suppression of women's creativity and the simplification of women's image in film and television works, criticize the patriarchal society and awaken women's subject consciousness. It is divided into three critical modes, namely, the criticism of female images, the criticism of narrative structure and the cultural criticism of constructing female values. The American film *Hidden Figures* has well demonstrated this literary criticism theory.

3.1. Brief Introduction of Hidden Figures

Hidden Figures is a biopic based on real people and true stories released by 20th century Fox in 2017. It tells the story of three women unfolded against the background of the era when the United States built a manned rocket capable of space flight in the 1960s. Although the three heroines are all African Americans, the film does not use violence as a foil, but tells the story in a gentle way, starting from the delicate psychology of women.

Catherine Johnson is a mathematician with great computational talent. She skips grades constantly due to outstanding learning ability. However, at the early stage of her entry into NASA, her talent was not valued, and male mathematicians were still the mainstream in the workplace. Dorothy Vaughn worked as a so-called supervisor at NASA. In fact, she was not respected by her colleagues and did not receive a matching salary. Mary Jackson, a mathematician with excellent ability and perseverance, was treated the same

as Catherine—ignored, ignored, or ignored.

Even if Catherine and Mary were given the opportunity to enter higher-level projects and give full play to their talents, there were still many difficulties and obstacles in the workplace: facing toilets that were not convenient for women to use, discrimination from male colleagues, and the inability to fully express their personal opinions... Even though there were many difficulties, they still insisted on themselves, expressing their demands as much as possible, doing things as quickly and neatly as possible, both in life and work. They bravely rejected the wrong ideas of male colleagues and seized every opportunity to show their talents. With their own efforts, they broke all kinds of unreasonable frameworks imposed on women by the male dominated society, fought against discrimination and improved the status of women. Finally, Catherine became a space calculator trusted by her superiors and astronauts. Dorothy became the first African American director of the space agency. Mary tried to make a court decision and enter the school for classes, becoming the first black female engineer of NASA.

3.2. The Self-worth Construction Process of The Three Female Figures

Various details in the film reveal the oppression and discrimination against women in the social environment, but the three figures did not use violence to solve the problem, but relied on their own talents and unremitting efforts to obtain their due rights and interests in the gap of inequality.

3.2.1. The Plight of Women in A Male Dominated Society

At the beginning of the film, by means of flashbacks, Catherine's reflected her childhood as a student. The math teacher handed the chalk to her sitting in the last row and asked her to write down the solution of an equation on the blackboard. Catherine worked out the answer smoothly on the blackboard, with a confident smile on her face. Different with her mien, there was a classroom full of male students behind her. Even the teacher was stunned. In the symbolic order of male society, according to the concept of "male other", women are constructed, and women are always naturally positioned as the object of appreciation. They are either female images created according to male aesthetic standards, or women's self projection under the influence of "male other" culture. In real life, "girls' logical ability is not as good as boys' and" girls just can't learn math well "are heard all around. For a long time, not only men have such prejudice, but even some women acquiesce in this statement. This is the result of the long-term prejudice that has imperceptibly shaped women in a patriarchal society.

The second picture was the adult Catherine, together with her two sisters Dorothy and Mary, stopped on the road because of the car failure: Catherine sat in the co pilot waiting, Dorothy lay on her back at the bottom of the car for repair, and Mary mended her makeup by looking at the mirror in the rear engine. They attracted the attention of a state policeman. The state police suspiciously looked at the three women's ID cards which presenting that they worked in the space agency, then said, "I didn't know they hired...", and even looked up at the sky. After knowing that they worked with astronauts, the state police changed previous contempt attitude. They not only talked about the U.S. - Soviet military competition, but also took the initiative to help the figures go to the space agency after being recognized by the heroines. In this scene, women's obedience to men's rights is also very consistent with the social moral framework at that time. In order to avoid

regeneration, their cautious obedience is the product of the cultural cognition of patriarchal society [1].

Before Catherine entered the space task force, her leader warned her that "the skirt she wears at work must be over the knee, the blouse should be matched with a sweater and jewelry is not allowed". Even though the leader is also a woman, she has obeyed the restrictions on women's freedom to wear and express their rights set by these men. In the course of her work, she also faced many gender discrimination and devaluation. As soon as she entered the office, Catherine was mistaken as a cleaner and asked to dump garbage; she's coming also attracted the attention of men in the whole office, who were confused about the existence of women in the field of science; in order to distinguish the coffee machine she used, male colleagues put on eye-catching labels; when the supervisor asked her to verify her colleague's calculation results, the colleague subconsciously refused; as a black woman, she can only go to the "colored toilet" 40 minutes away from the office to go to the toilet regardless of wind or rain; when a male friend met for the first time to talk about their work, the relaxed atmosphere suddenly stopped when he blurted out "they actually let women do this kind of work". The scenes presented daily affairs which are the oppression and discrimination that every female may suffer in the social environment. Beauvoir wrote in the second sex: "women are not born, but acquired." [2] Men always impose various restrictions on women. They believe that women should be virtuous, fair, considerate, focus on family rather than work, and that women only need beautiful appearance rather than wisdom. In the public's more popular moral cognition, women of any color and position need to accept and obey such constraints.

Although Dorothy had excellent leadership ability, her supervisor application has been repeatedly ignored and ridiculed by her superiors. This plot reflects the biased idea that "women are not important and have nothing to do with historical development" in men's subconscious. The thought of "women do not participate in the plot situation" is a strategic code to suppress women. They excluded women from the discourse power, refused to hear women's voices and demands, and actively ignored women's contributions, thus maintaining their own set of governance. Spivak's classic book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* also elaborates on the lack of female discourse. She believes that women are being suppressed by dual power discourse or cultural hegemony. While imperialists try to homogenize them, they also apply male culture to further oppress their reasonable rights. In this way, women are in a state of complete "Aphasia" and become the "other" under the dual construction of male consciousness and western ideology [3].

During the picnic, Mary's pleasure was also undermined by her husband's merciless words "NASA will never recognize your contribution". Even though she had two bachelor's degrees in mathematics and physics, which met the requirements of the engineer's position, she was blocked by her repeatedly advanced education. "Every time we had a chance to make progress, they moved the finish line", directly reveals that men have hegemonic control over power and suppress women's promotion space. "In most societies, the distribution of power is uneven. It depends not only on individual character, but also on social position. Different people have different social status, men have different social status from women, and class inequality and gender inequality exist." This is the rule that women must follow in

constructing discourse, otherwise it is "inappropriate and inappropriate", which can not meet the psychological needs of a patriarchal society [4].

On the whole, the film does not directly render and show three figures' toil and pain, but highlights women's resistance to reality injustice and their persistence and pursuit of their dreams through the surrounding environment and men's subconscious discriminatory attitude.

3.2.2. Women Break Stereotype and Build Individual Value

Although women are often hindered in the story, it is not difficult for the audience to see the shining light that they dare to be first, so that men who have been numb to the patriarchal society for a long time will also be infected by its light. When calculating data, Catherine would "go beyond the surface of numbers and think about the essence of mathematics", which not only won over the repeated and meaningless calculations of male colleagues around, but also provided help and inspiration for her boss. After witnessing Catherine's talent in mathematics, her boss broke off the discriminatory slogan in the bathroom with a hammer. The dating mate who had a good impression on Catherine was also impressed by her wit and optimism, and sincerely apologized for her rash words. Mary spoke loudly in the court, clearly explained the current life situation and workplace needs, and persuaded the judge to approve her to take advanced courses to become an aerospace engineer. After everyone witnessed her hard work, the birth of "the first female engineer" was also recognized by everyone.

Even though they live under the male centered rules, they can finally be fully respected and approved by men with their excellent skills and good qualities.

It is worth mentioning that, in sharp contrast to the stereotyped requirements given by men to women, there are some women's positive attitudes towards women in the film, as well as women's positive affirmation of themselves. Catherine's mother will gently encourage "there is nothing you can't do" when her work suffers setbacks. In the face of male friends' doubts about her work ability, she can confidently and appropriately say that she is the first black female student who graduated from the Graduate School of West Virginia University; We can also confidently say that "the space agency employs women not because we wear skirts, but because we wear glasses", which means that we get jobs by relying on the wisdom of our minds.

During the meeting with the astronauts, Mary generously expressed her view that any race has the ability to appreciate beauty, affirmed her aesthetic ability, and showed a tolerant attitude.

Before Dorothy's position as director was officially recognized, she constantly encouraged the girls engaged in computing in the office to do every job at hand diligently, and encouraged them to recognize their value and contributions to manned rockets. The emergence of large-scale computers threatens the job opportunities of girls who do manual computing. Dorothy was not discouraged, but advocates that everyone learn to master computer related skills in depth. The most common thing on the big screen is men's rescue of women. They reproduce women's "original wounds" in adversity, and then realize the redemption of another sex by embodying men's initiative. In fact, women can change their situation, but most women mistakenly seek salvation in love [5]. In this film, it is women, or even women themselves, who help women. They do not easily bow to the reality, strive to

rise up, have strict requirements for their talents, show their self-worth in continuous skill learning, seek subjectivity and obtain liberation [6].

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of female, feminist critical theory analyzes women's behavior characteristics and self-consciousness with a unique way of thinking, and tells the story of the injustice and oppression suffered by women in the patriarchal society. In this perspective, women are no longer the stereotype in the conventional cognitive culture, but a vivid, three-dimensional, complete individual with rich emotional colors and self characteristics. The *Hidden Figures* reveals the scars of the society, presents the various shackles that women face and bear under the social order of male chauvinism and the collective unconscious, takes care of the reality, and also brings reflection to people. It enlightens that the improvement of women's status and the achievement of goals cannot only rely on the support and help of others, and the awakening of self-awareness and the spirit of daring to fight first are the key to breaking the constraints of male dominated culture.

The value of women is not a single marriage, childbirth, husband and child rearing. The image of women cannot be limited to the stereotype of good wife and mother, innocent girls and scheming beauties. Women themselves should not

appear in front of the public as male vassals. The factors that make a woman a "real woman" are profound knowledge, broad vision, bold action, courage to fight to the end, unfulfilled enterprising and the ability to think independently. Here, I also hope that in the future, the Chinese film market can turn the lens to the complex situation and self-growth of women, tell about women's simple vitality and exquisite perceptual emotions, and become a progressive force to promote equal rights.

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