

# Analyzing Feminism in Silence of the Lambs from the Perspective of Power

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**Abstract.** The Silence of the Lambs, released in 1991 in the United States, is one of the first Hollywood films to feature women as subjects. The film has a certain historical background that makes it a good material for studying the development of the women's movement and the response of traditional patriarchal society to the improvement of women's status. This paper analyzes the feminist content in the film from the perspective of power, combining the history of the development of the women's movement with the growth of the characters, and refines problems faced by feminism from the past to today. The most problematic of which is the question of the authenticity of power and the establishment of subjectivity raised in the film by the contrast between the protagonist Starling and the villain Bill. Starling, with the help of Hannibal, acquires effective power through legal means, but fails to establish her own subjectivity outside of the male power discourse; Bill, while violently resisting power, also aspires to become powerful, but his power only stems from his own delusions and consequently kills many people, but he establishes an authentic subjectivity and a new rule independent of traditional patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, The Silence of the Lambs, Movie, Power, Gaze.

## 1. Introduction

The Silence of the Lambs, a thriller based on the novel of the same name by Thomas Harris, was released in 1991 in the U.S. It won the Best Picture Award at the 64th Academy Awards in 1992. It was one of the first Hollywood films to feature a female subject, and is therefore of considerable value in the field of feminism. The film follows the metamorphosis of Starling, a trainee FBI agent.

At the beginning of the film, Starling is used by her admired mentor to ingratiate herself with the cannibalistic demon Hannibal, hoping to use his powers to hunt down the emerging serial killer Buffalo Bill. During the conversation, her politeness, empathic abilities and paternalistic tendencies attract Hannibal. In order to rescue the victim, Starling is forced to confess herself and exchange personal matters with Hannibal for information about the murderer, and as Hannibal interrogates her, Starling's childhood experience full of feminist tragedy is gradually revealed. When Starling was still a child, she attempted to save some of the lambs that were to be slaughtered but failed. She joined the FBI to do her best to gain recognition, precisely because of her obsession with saving the lambs. She joined the FBI and did her best to gain recognition, precisely because of her obsession to save the lambs. And now Bill's appearance has become her chance to settle her childhood knot and save the lambs, so she works extra hard. In the end, with the help of Hannibal, she finds Bill alone and kills him, successfully saving Catherine as a lamb, and also successfully completing the rescue of herself. In this process, she succeeds in breaking away from the traditional image of female weakness, but seems to have fallen into another subjectivity trap, not free from the influence of the "father" image.

The shade line of the film tells the story of Buffalo Bill's failed transformation. Bill was abused by his stepmother for a long time in his childhood, so he was psychologically distorted and thought he wanted to be a woman. After the hospital rejects his request for gender reassignment surgery, he begins to kidnap and kill women to obtain their skin, which is used to make his own clothes in order to achieve gender reassignment. He is eventually punished by the social enforcement system, represented by Starling, and loses his life.

There are also important supporting characters in the film, such as Catherine as the victimized "lamb" and sanator Ruth Martin as the representative of power, both of whom are full of connotations of feminist theories and history of development.

## 2. The Growth Of The Lambs

Obviously, the “lamb” in the movie not only refer to the screaming lambs in Starling’s uncle’s barn, but also represents Buffalo Bill’s victims, both of these are metaphors for women screaming under the oppression of phallocracy. After long term of oppression, their discourse power was stripped, without the important method to fight back against sexism, so the only thing they can do is allowing men who are in charge to define women’s body, intelligence as well as morality, at last women become the silent aphasia[1]. In this case, they cannot call for help in a rational way, on the country, they can only screaming because of their fear or puzzle of their status.

After hearing the screaming, progressive feminists, represented by Starling, tried to save these lambs. However, as Beauvoir said, Women are complicit with men in the history of female oppression. To avoid the difficulties of survival, women are willing to take on the role of the other, which means exchange a batter and easier life with their freedom and Subjectiveness. Even their activities to strive for rights are “symbolic commotions; they earned only what men would yield to them; they took nothing” [2]. Women’s Resistance awareness is very weak. What’s more, for a long time women were excluded from the space of strict and public affairs, they are rooted in the domestic space and in activities related to the biological and social reproduction of the offspring, “in a world that she has not participated in creating, in a world of men, where she has to be completely dependent on their protection, she can never grow up.” [1] Even if they got a chance to run away from oppression, they were not able to survive alone. After all, these lambs were not ready to separate themselves from men’s “protection” and oppression to face the society alone as well as take responsibilities or fight for rights, they just “stood there, confused, they wouldn’t run.” And the feminists, represented by Starling, were still young and weak, too. They can not carry the lamb and run away, they were not powerful enough to protect women, actually they themselves were also still in the barn.

However, the Feminism gradually developed, awakened women in modern time started three feminist movements, creating “liberal feminism”, “radical feminism”, “socialist feminism”, and even “post-modern feminism”, which provided important rights for women such as the right to education, the right to vote, and the right to freely choose an occupation on an equal basis with men. These feminist movements also promoted the awakening of women’s consciousness and ascension. This process represented by Starling’s growth. After steadying and training for years, as a “rescuer”, Starling become more powerful. As a lamb, Catherine has also improved. Catherine was kidnapped by Bill because of her willingness to help. She has shed the past perception of women as weak and powerless, so when she saw Bill in need of help - even in strength - she chose to trust her own ability to go up and help, ignoring the traditional context emphasizes that men are physically stronger and it is mostly male to assist women.

After the abduction, at first, Catherine still hoped, to rely on her mother’s prestige and money, that is, power, to help her out of her predicament. This plot corresponds to the naivety of the early feminist movement, when feminists still had some expectations and even illusions about men, they expected men to take the initiative to give equal rights for women in response to their cries [3]. Catherine’s act of using her mother’s power for deterrence and pinning her safety on Bill’s compassion is of the same nature as feminists pinned their power on the upbringing of men and the power of their fathers and husbands, both hoping to gain their own power through the power of the Others, which is clearly unrealistic.

However, just as feminists quickly turn to more radical ways to fight for power after peaceful protests fail, Catherine finally recognized the reality after seeing the broken nails on the well wall, and turned to rely on her own strength to design the trap and successfully kidnapped Bill’s puppy to threaten Bill with violence, just one step away from getting the phone to call for help. At the same time, it should be stressed that this behavior is predicated on her ability to detect the importance of the puppy to Bill, and there is no doubt that this perception of the relationship is a feminine ability. This means, the lamb who once did not know and did not dare to resist now not only has the courage to resist, but also the ability to resist, making the rescuers’ burden much lighter.

### 3. Starling

#### 3.1 Women As The Traditional, Stereotypical Weaker Sex

Starling lost her mother when she was young, then her father, who was a police officer, was all she could rely on. There were two flashbacks in the film, both of which were about her father. The first flashback occurred after Starling's first visit to Hannibal, she was insulted by Miggs and failed to get a psychological statement. Stalin was hurt and terrified, leaning on the car, when she was reminded of the clip of her father coming home. This flashback shows that Starling was proud of her father, she trusted and relied on him. The second flashback occurs after being publicly discriminated against by her trusted mentor, she recalled her father's funeral. Both flashbacks are followed by shots of Starling worked with seriousness and vigor, especially after the first flashback, in which Starling, who was crying helplessly in the car a second ago, shoots at the camera with a determined expression, as if trying to smash her cowardly self. At this point in the film, Starling still retained the traditional female image of the "daughter" and was dependent on her father or father-like characters, i.e. Hannibal, as shown by the fact that she panicked after being humiliated in prison and followed Hannibal's instructions like a lamb, crossing the safe distance that she was repeatedly told not to exceed, she pressed herself directly against Hannibal's glass to seek refuge, and tried to gain support by begging. But this identity is extremely inconsistent with the identity she aspires to be, therefore she was eager to get rid of this mentality.

#### 3.2 The Image of Women Built On The Basis Of Masculinity

After the death of her father, Starling lost her spiritual support, since then she had to rely on herself, but her portrayal of that ideal self is clearly based on her father, or rather on masculinity. She joined a very masculine field, the FBI, and tried to attend Behavioral Science, which is her challenge to herself, just like Buffalo Bill, who tried to change into the other gender. In the final confrontation with Bill, her behavior at first is very masculine, especially her stern shouting to reassure the victim Catherine, this patterned brutality is opposite of the high level of feminine empathy she showed in the early stages. Her asperity can be considered as a parody of the male power represented by her father.

This is due to the fact that in the process of fighting for power, Starling has been suffering from the gaze from the patriarchal society. Chen Guangni believes that men gaze, while women are the objects to be gazed at and controlled, which is a way of power operation [4]. The men in the film, whether they are doctors of psychologies, local police officers or prison guards, all with the power endowed by being men in the patriarchal society, gazing at Starling, the weak woman who has entered the male domain and intends to gain status. Under their gaze, to avoid the discriminatory, she had to refuse her female identity, and on the country, emphasizing herself in a man's way, as well as making an exceptional effort to reach the same status as the men. This loss of femininity means "abandoning one's own feminine ways of being, experiencing, and speaking" and speaking exclusively in "the rigid, institutionalized, and rationalized tone, with vocabulary, intentions, and symbols of masculine society" [5]. This is the only way for women to gain voice in a world dominated by men, and it is the key to how they disappear themselves as men [1].

In the film, the image Starling hoped herself to achieve was "strong," "reliable," "professional," and "tough," all the words are all relatively masculine words in patriarchal discourse, so Starling repeatedly striped her femininity consciously or unconsciously, and masculinized or even objectified herself by acting as a battering ram in class or emphasizing her commonalities with men when being harassed, such as "I have a job to do" and "I graduated from the University of Virginia, which is not a grooming school."

#### 3.3 Save The "Lambs" In A Legal Way

Starling's imitation of male power is not simply due to insecurity, but also out of a desire for the power itself.

After her father's death, she was sent to her uncle's farm. One early morning, she was awakened by the screams of lambs and tried to save them. The lambs, however, had been confined for too long and did not know they were capable of escape. Starling had to pick up one of the lambs forcibly and carry it away. However, because the lamb was "too heavy" Starling was unable to run far and was soon caught by the police and sent to an orphanage by his angry uncle. The lamb also did not escape the fate of being slaughtered.

Clearly this experience had a profound effect on Starling. After losing the support, Starling clearly realized how weak she was, she was unable to save even one lamb. The noble act of rescue in her mind is a kind of theft in the patriarchal society's order represented by her uncle and the police, it was an act of stealing male power, so she was not only not recognized and helped, but inevitably hit by the social power system. After this, Starling recognized the reality that it is difficult for her to confront the male power system, so she gave up the act of stealing power through the way against the social order, instead, she tried to integrate into the patriarchal society to obtain the approval of higher power, that is, the approval of the FBI, in order to save the "lambs" and herself in a legal and rational way.

### 3.4 Utilize The Feminine Qualities

In order to gain the approval of the patriarchal society, Starling tried to perform "professionally, technically, and calmly like a man", taking her father, her mentor, and Hannibal as models. However, this is a wrong tendency: to measure the value of a female's existence and liberation by male's yardsticks and standards. This male-oriented equality of gender implies a male-centered presupposition, which is fundamentally not a real return for female to themselves, but rather a result of identifying and reinforcing the male scale in a deeper sense, thus deviating from the goals and intentions of the Feminism [6]. Such behavior is extremely detrimental for females to establish subjectification, it transforms women's material and spiritual dependence on men into spiritual and rule-based dependence on men.

In fact, for Starling, every time she truly made progress and breakthrough in the film, it was not out of her imitation of men, but benefited by her feminine qualities. Firstly, it was her delicate empathy, polite attitude and salvation mentality that won her Hannibal's help; secondly, during the autopsy, it was also her feminine perspective that gave her more clues, such as the three ear piercings, nail polish and broken nails, and the callus deep in the throat; again, in the final pursuit of Bill, she discovered the truth that Bill was skinning for clothes because of her strong empathy for the victim. Finally, in the battle with Bill, she defeated Bill with her keen sense of perception, while she was in a visual disadvantage, and Bill clearly took the advantage but played her pompously. These victories prove that in the process of gaining power and recognition, women should not rush to imitate male power, losing their own characteristics, and being assimilated by male power. The "negative" vocabularies given to women in the past are also female's advantages.

This film portrays a successful deconstruction made by feminism, which was about the image of females set under the traditional male power discourse, but it also points out one of the current feminism's problems, namely that females try to make the patriarchal society recognize and accept females by assuming fully equal responsibilities and obligations with males. However, regulating women's thoughts and behaviors by using males' value guide and value yardstick does not really introduce females to the door of their own emancipation, on the country, it is another compromise with male power, not facing up to the power struggling with men, so that females are forced to integrate into the social rules which were created to exclude them, and continue to live in a world of gender inequality [6].

### 3.5 Summary

At the end of the film, Starling graduated as she had hoped, gaining the power she had dreamed of, that was, the power to save the lambs. However, she still hasn't reached the end. The lambs are only temporarily silenced, and as long as they remain in the sheepfold, the oppression does not stop.

If the people represented by Starling stop here and are satisfied with the power they have gained, the lambs will continue to be killed. Because the power they have gained at this point is granted by the patriarchal society based on the oppression of female. To archive their own will, female have to compromise with the outside power because of the strong disciplinary power of the male gaze [4] But to some degree, the power obtained in this way is still a reproduction or exploitation of male power, it can treat the symptoms but not the root cause.

#### **4. Sanator Martin**

Senator Martin, the representative of the highest power in the film, presents a classic image of a woman who has achieved high power in a patriarchal society, and also offers some thoughts.

Martin's first appearance was on television as a worried mother, gently persuading Bill to let her daughter go. She made good use of her sympathetic feminine weakness to try to evoke Bill's empathy, which was clearly a wise tactic. But here she also showed her compromise with male power, saying "you have the power, you are in charge", praising him for being loving and strong, and pleading with him to let Catherine go. She pinned her daughter's safety on the mercy and kindness of those in power rather than calling on Catherine to resist, just like the mistake often made by early feminists, as noted above. Actually, her moving statement only struck Starling, who was also a female, while Bill still saw Catherine as prey.

Martin's second appearance was to meet with Hannibal, as an anxious mother, and humiliated female. Her first sentence was to provide Hannibal with an affidavit guaranteeing his new rights. Although she was followed by a large group of people, her haggard face and polite diction made her very vulnerable in front of Hannibal, especially after Hannibal mentioned her daughter. She was almost pleading with Hannibal anxiously for information. When she heard "done things with the skin", she was scared and worried - in contrast, the camera immediately cuts to her male assistant, who is calm and confident. Then Hannibal begins to insult Martin by asking her about her maternal behaviors, i.e., nurse. Martin is stunned but determined, and she endures the insult for her daughter until the last moment, even responding to Hannibal's every shout as she leaves, but the male assistant was immediately angry and began to curse.

Strangely enough, both appearances of the female senator highlight her motherhood rather than her power. All the shots that can show her power, her calmness, are done by her male assistant. She is portrayed in the opposite way to the common image of holders of power: she is sad, anxious and haggard. She represented the supreme power of the film, yet she still had to endure Hannibal's insults out of motherhood. She is less like a power player and more like one of the lambs, she seems out of place in that environment. As an individual female, she does achieve a very high goal of power, but her gender identity and the label given to it by the patriarchal society still subject her to oppression, the harassments she met are just like what the not-yet-powerful Starling is suffered from, which means that females as a gender are still excluded from the power system, by definition. Females cannot easily be placed in a structure that has been coded as masculine, and as long as the structure itself remains unchanged [7], women in power will not be taken seriously and remain as lambs.

In addition, although Starling saved her daughter, Martin still did not appear at the final banquet, and she was the only important character who did not appear, nor did she thank Starling in person, or encourage her. This also seems to hint at the difficulty of handing over and inheriting power, or even the mutual rejection among female power holders. There is little evidence for this, so it will not be analyzed here.

#### **5. Buffalo Bill**

##### **5.1 A Traditional Male Who Thirsts For Power**

According to Hannibal's introduction, Bill was not a transgender person in the true sense. Bill has been abused by his stepmother when he was young for many years, so in his mind, his stepmother

was a symbol of power, his desire for gender reassignment was actually a desire for power, he was not eager to become a woman, but he was eager to become a role like his stepmother, who owned power, but he could not become his stepmother, so he pursued to become a person of the same gender as his stepmother.

These were deeply reflected in the film. Bill's attitude toward women was not that of a person in power, but that of a prey or object, exerting his own power over them. After successfully luring Catherine into his car, he violently knocked her unconscious, then immediately ripped open her clothes to check her yardage, admired her skin, and be happy that the yardage of her skin fitted him; when Catherine cried loudly and tried to arouse his sympathy, he uses "it" to address Catherine, shouting impatiently, saying "it" puts the shower gel on its body, and here the sentence used was not a general command, but a statement, as if skipping the step of command and thinking that his prey should act as he wishes. It can be guessed that Bill as a child got the same treatment from his own stepmother. It is clear that in both scenes, Bill sees his victims as mere tools he used to complete his identity transformation, and although they are of the gender he desired to be, he had no respect or envy for them, but only oppression relied on power, so it can be assumed that Bill did not believe that "women are power", but rather "the stepmother is power". In Bill's mind, the weak women other than her stepmother are the disempowered rather than the powerful, and the hidden logic behind this is the law of the jungle, which is one of the logics of the primitive patriarchal society, so it can be said that although he aspires to be a woman, from the motivation of his behavior and the behavior itself, he is not a feminist, but simply a traditional male who thirsts for power, or even a representative of the male frenzy to suppress the emerging female power, still using his biological advantage to oppress vulnerable women.

## 5.2 Save Himself In An Illegal Way

The differences between Bill and Starling were obvious, but in the film the director used multiple shots, using imagery of skeleton moths and butterflies, to repeatedly hint at the commonalities between Bill and Starling. They both had tragic childhoods, both thirsty for power because of their childhood experiences, and the film's timeline was their intertwined metamorphosis, which is reflected in the empty shot of the artifact after Starling kills Bill: two pieces of wood intertwined and spinning, with the pattern on them changing from two butterflies to one. The allusion to this is obvious \_ Starling succeeded in his metamorphosis, while Bill failed.

The shallow reason for Bill's failure is obvious: he broke the rules of society, just as Stalin, who was caught back then, was inevitably punished by the power of society. The same story has played out countless times in human history, such as Medusa in Greek mythology, whose serpentine hair suggests the intent to usurp the power of the male phallus, and at the end of the story, male dominance is reaffirmed through the violent suppression of women's unwarranted power [7].

But unlike Starling, who was simply taken into an orphanage, Bill committed a much more serious crime and suffered a more irrevocable punishment, losing his life. After comparing with Starling, it was not difficult to guess that not having met any punishment before was an important reason that Bill has come to this end. His first victim was found by Hannibal, who chose to shield Bill, and the victim's body was hidden; the second victim sank into the river and was not found until the fifth victim was discovered. As Starling says, "he wouldn't stop because he was getting better and better at it." His repeated lucky escapes gave him the illusion that he was outside the jurisdiction of power and made him incredibly confident, and he eventually died because of such confidence.

For the moral and ethical standards of society, such a person with unbridled emotions and paranoid and crazy behavior is a representative of the breakdown of logos. But rationality and insanity are also structures that dictatorially separate power [8]. Rationalization leads to a concentration of power that deprives individuals of their diversity. The "insane subject" and "criminal subject" [9] like Bill is practicing the art of existence with his body, breaking free from the entanglement of individualized power and performing self-actualization. From this point of view, Bill actually achieves a more perfect subjectivity than Starling.

### 5.3 Ways To Fight For Power

For the society, Bill was not able to gain power, his power was born from his fantasy, but this kind of power, the prescribed norms and goals given by himself, belongs to his own, far more real than the power obtained by Starling's obedience to male power. But society does not recognize such power and will not tolerate his bloody and cruel behavior. It will only recognize the rule-abiding, very false from the subjectivity ones, like Starling's, only real in the current patriarchal society. This story is highly similar in its core to the story of Medusa and Athena: the story of Medusa is one of the most powerful symbols of the theme of male elimination of the destructive dangers to which the exercise of power by women can so easily lead in the classical period. And Medusa is beheaded and her head is proudly displayed on her breastplate as a trinket by Athena, a thoroughly "non-female" goddess [7]. Still, there are differences between the two stories, such as the fact that Bill's victims are women and Starling is not completely divorced from femininity, highlight the socio-historical changes that have occurred as women have become more conscious of their femininity and men have felt the power of women and fought back.

This reveals the situation that the feminist movement faces today. First of all, they are faced with a dilemma: either they choose to acknowledge and obey the rules of the patriarchal society, like Starling, and define themselves by male standards, giving up the construction of their feminine subjectivity, then they get the real power and approbation from the patriarchal society to save others; or, like Buffalo Bill, they openly defy the traditional social power system, and although they can establish their own subjectivity, they are inevitably suppressed by the social power. However, the good news is, they are also groping for a third path in the middle, which is to partially obey social rules while retaining their femininity. Just like Thatcher, while practicing her masculine voice, she made her feminine handbag a verb "to hand bag" to show political power [7].

## 6. Conclusion

Each of the important characters in the film has a deep symbolic meaning. Bill and Starling are both extremely complex characters with multiple symbolic meanings. Bill is not only a symbol of the traditional male who is disrupted by the rise of female power and intends to violently resist, but also a symbol of resistance to social authority and self-establishment of rules and subjectivity; Starling is both a feminist pioneer who intends to save unawakened women and one of the victims who is trapped under the gaze, control and bribery of patriarchal society and finally chooses to partially compromise. Catherine and Martin are the representatives of the female victim and the female power, respectively, but they are also unconventional, as the former chooses to resist while the latter is limited by the lack of information and motherhood. Martin has to submit to an unconventional male power figure, Hannibal, who is a prisoner but has enough information and the right gender to gaze, control and humiliate the female power holder and feminist pioneer in the film. Men, by virtue of their gender and social nature, are able to override women as gazers and even controllers, regardless of their situation.

The film illustrates the fact that most feminists, for practical reasons, choose to bow to the rules of traditional society and work hard to gain power before changing the situation of other victims. However, the current traditional society is based on male oppression, and as long as the foundation of male power is not broken, women's status as the weak, the victim and the gazed upon will remain unchanged. But the film also denies the other path, the Buffalo Bill type or the path of Starling when she was young. By forcing their own rules in total violation of social morals and laws, they are not only unrecognized but also suppressed by the social power system, and with their weak personal power, it is impossible to resist such a pursuit.

Feminism therefore requires discursive reformulations, i.e., the relatively peaceful conceptual dismantling of the patriarchal system and the re-establishment of a new social discursive structure with more feminist overtones. As Siobhan Byrne argues, moving beyond just adding women to

power-sharing institutions; instead, promoting inclusion through a feminist emphasis on sharing in power-sharing systems above a masculinist emphasis on [10].

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