

A Study of Female Images in the Movie *The Reader* from a Feminist Perspective

Huan Zhao¹

¹ Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea

Correspondence: Huan Zhao, Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea.

doi:10.56397/SAA.2024.06.30

Abstract

The story of the movie *The Reader* focuses on Germany during World War II and describes the lifelong love story between a middle-aged woman Hanna and a young man Michael. The film uses personal emotional journeys in the context of a grand narrative to reflect on the distortion of war on people and human nature. Among them, it is not difficult for us to find that female consciousness is constantly awakening. Therefore, this article analyzes three female images in different periods in the movie *The Reader* from a feminist perspective. Through the analysis of female characters, it is explained that on the one hand, with the progress of the times, women are constantly awakening and their female consciousness is constantly increasing; on the other hand, women with conscious female consciousness are suppressed in a society with male discourse and are constantly looking for breakthroughs.

Keywords: feminism, *The Reader*, female image

1. Introduction

The movie *The Reader* is adapted from the novel *The Reader* by German writer Bernhard Schlink. The film uses Germany during and after the war as the narrative background. It tells the love story of a middle-aged woman Hanna and a young man Michael. It reflects on the pain caused by war under totalitarianism from a unique perspective. In their love, despite the age difference of 23 years, Michael was still able to appear as Hanna's "savior" and reached reconciliation with himself at the end of the film. The Hollywood film industry has always been dominated by men. As a standardized mainstream Hollywood movie, the film is undoubtedly branded with male dominance. Even so, a lot of content in the film can be

related to feminism, which is a creative trend caused by the widespread spread of feminist consciousness in culture. Therefore, in film creation, on the one hand, the director speaks for women by portraying female images; on the other hand, it is not difficult for the film to get rid of the profound influence of male culture.

2. Hanna Schmitz's "Seeing" and "Being Seen"

In terms of the visual presentation of the image, the film repeatedly shows Hanna's sexy body as a mature woman. When a woman's naked body appears in the picture, it can bring a strong visual impact to the audience. There is also a scene in the film where Michael peeks through a crack in the door to watch Hanna put on stockings. According to Laura Mulvey in her

article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the film lens represents the male gaze. At this time, Hanna is not only the object of Michael’s viewing, but also the object of the audience’s viewing. The pleasure of this visual “spectacle” is based on patriarchal aesthetics. Like traditional Hollywood movies, *The Reader* also has a male-centered narrative. The difference is that in the film, Hanna does not just exist as Michael’s foil. The audience can clearly see the rise of Hanna’s female consciousness and her growth.

Although the image of Hanna is a typical female image in mainstream Hollywood movies, she is not a female image in the traditional sense based on male-dominated social beauty standards. As Michael’s lover, she is mature, charming and maternal; as a Nazi, she is cruel and evil to the young girls in the concentration camp; as an ordinary German, she feels inferior because of her illiteracy. It is precisely because of the multi-faceted character of Hanna that the narrative structure of the film is more complete. The narrative of the film consciously “castrates” Hanna’s life scenes. She has no father or mother, and relies on her own labor to earn living space during the war. Because of her lack of knowledge, she believed that being a concentration camp guard was just an ordinary job. Facing the more than 300 Jewish girls who died in the fire because of her, she did not feel guilty and believed that she had to complete the task of her work. “Women have been expelled from the ranks of creators and alienated into cultural products”¹, it is obvious that the creation of Hanna’s image subverts traditional women’s values, and at the same time confirms Arendt’s view on the “banality of evil”.

When Hanna was illiterate, she vented her lust for young Michael. She and Michael are neither a traditional male-dominated relationship nor a normalized love in an equal relationship. Especially under the special historical background, this is a love destined to end in tragedy. The way of communication between Hanna and Michael also gradually changed as their relationship deepened: at first, the two only communicated sexually through the body. Later, Hanna listened to Michael read aloud, and showed Michael her inner rich emotions as the storyline in the book became sad or happy. While serving her final sentence in prison, Hanna continued to write letters to Michael, but Michael never replied. The change in the way

the two communicate also means that Hanna, as a woman, has more say. Even so, Hanna still did not get rid of her identity as the “other”. She worked hard to learn reading and writing skills in prison, reflected on the crimes she had committed, and gained more emotional sustenance for Michael. From a feminist perspective, this cell can be seen as what Woolf calls a “room” in a sense. “Room” means a mental space where women can think independently. Hanna had her own “room” at the expense of her freedom and dignity, but she fantasized that she could become the “angel in the room.” The only time Michael came to visit her in prison, she asked Michael, “You must not be married yet, right?” This shows that she still has illusions about the love between the two. And leaving the “room” means returning to a male-dominated society. By describing the emotional entanglement between Hanna and Michael and Hanna’s growth, the emotions conveyed in the film are more delicate and more touching to the audience.

Through the character creation of Hanna, the film shows the director’s humanistic care for women. There is a scene in the film where Hanna is being tried in court for the crimes she committed during World War II. It is a travesty that the ruling class would blame an ignorant woman for the war. In this male-dominated social environment, Hanna maintains her dignity and resists in her own way. As an ordinary German woman, Hanna is closely linked to the fate of the country. Both her tragic fate and the occurrence of the war are the products of capitalist alienation and male chauvinism. Hanna is a casualty of war. In the film, when the trial comes, several other women guarding the concentration camp with Hanna place all the blame on Hanna. So far, we can see that social environment and women’s status are inseparable. These women are both victims of war and perpetrators of violence against Hanna. They turn their helplessness onto those who are weaker than themselves. In order to maintain her self-esteem, Hanna takes responsibility for crimes that are not hers. At the end of the film, Hanna chooses death when she is about to be released from prison and regain her freedom. This is her silent resistance to society and fate.

3. Marthe — The Awakening of Modern Women’s Consciousness

In the movie, Marthe’s role is also very representative. It fully reflects the various

contradictions and dilemmas of intellectual women on the road to gender equality in German society in the 1960s. As a college student, Marthe was the only female student in her class. She is young, beautiful and confident, with excellent intelligence and self-confidence, showing the independent personality and self-awareness of contemporary intellectual women. She has her own ideas and pursuits about learning and the future, instead of passively relying on men. Marthe simultaneously displays the desire and pursuit of gender equality, which is in sharp contrast to Hanna, who represents the traditional lack of self-awareness in the gender stereotypes of the old era and her maternal image. Even though Marthe is such a vivid character, the male professor ignored her in the first class. Facing the boy she loves, she pursues her passionately and proactively, showing her initiative and openness towards love, which challenges the traditional gender stereotype of women passively waiting. This is not unrelated to the sexual liberation movement that emerged in the 1960s. From this perspective, Marthe can also be regarded as a microcosm of the sexual liberation trend in German society. Michael accepted her and the two had sex. It can be seen from the sex scenes between the two that Michael is the dominant party in their relationship, which reflects the deeply rooted male-dominated thinking pattern in society at that time. This is in stark contrast to the love between Michael and Hanna.

Unfortunately, Michael's inner patriarchal thoughts made it difficult for him to truly achieve equality in their relationship, and instead suppressed Marthe. This may be influenced by the social environment and family. Michael subjectively uses patriarchal ideas to maintain his self-esteem. From this we can see that even well-educated intellectuals are still unable to completely escape the influence of the social environment on the concept of gender equality. As an independent intellectual woman, Marthe pursues equality and controls her own destiny. There is an unbridgeable gap between the two. Michael's suppression of Marthe shows from the side that the social environment has weakened the spirit of feminism. The character of Marthe vividly reflects the various contradictions and dilemmas that intellectual women faced in the pursuit of gender equality in German society in the 1960s. Although they

have independent personality and self-awareness, it is still difficult for them to gain true equal status with men in a patriarchal social environment. Through the portrayal of Marthe, the film caused the audience to think deeply about gender issues.

4. The Alienation of Women in a Patriarchal Society — An Analysis of Michael's Mother Image

In the opening scene of the film, Hanna and Michael meet for the first time because Michael has severe scarlet fever. In contrast to Hanna's concern for Michael, Michael's mother showed some indifference. Michael has many brothers and sisters. It can be seen from the scene of the family eating around the table that Michael's family is father-centered, and Michael's mother is a traditional female image who obeys her husband's words. Married life is one of the typical products of male-dominated social culture, and it is also the biggest constraint of male-dominated ideas on women. Hanna provided help and warmth to Michael during his illness, filling Michael's lack of maternal love to a certain extent. After Michael recovered, his mother specifically asked him to thank him. His mother's behavior acted as a push to push Michael into Hanna's arms.

As an adult, Michael returns home to visit his elderly mother. His mother blamed him and didn't even come back to attend his father's funeral. At this time, the mother has replaced the father's position in the family and has become patriarchal. She no longer had a maternal attitude towards Michael. This also illustrates Michael's mother's compromise to the patriarchal society. In the norms regulated by the patriarchal society, marriage and family are women's final destination. Once women enter marriage and family, their subordinate status relative to men becomes even more unchangeable.

5. Conclusion

Through the delicate portrayal of different female images, the film *The Reader* reflects the various constraints on women's development and self-realization imposed by the European social environment in the middle and late World War II, thus triggering the audience's in-depth thinking on the issue of gender equality. By shaping three distinct female images in the film, the director revealed the profound impact of the social environment on female characters at that

time. Through the clever juxtaposition of female images, the audience has a more intuitive understanding of the constraints of the social environment on women. It is worth noting that Michael's perspective plays a key role in the film. Through the eyes of his "other", the audience can get a glimpse of the various social pressures and vicissitudes of fate that Hanna has endured. As Beauvoir said: "If a woman wants to become a self, a subject, she must, like a man, transcend all the definitions, labels and essences that limit her existence."² Hanna eventually became a criminal and chose to commit suicide. It was also difficult for Marthe to achieve true equality in her relationship with Michael. This tragic ending can be attributed to the restrictions and oppression of women in the social environment at that time.

From this perspective, the director's focus on female characters is not only a reflection and transcendence of traditional male-dominated social values, but also adds new impetus to the development and growth of feminist film art. The film aroused more viewers' attention and thinking on the issue of gender equality. Therefore, it can be foreseen that feminist trends will be more widely reflected in future film creations. Not only will women play more important roles in movies, but their independent personalities, self-awareness and calls for equality will also receive more attention. Only by continuing to deeply explore the social dilemmas faced by female images can artistic creation truly guide society to understand the importance of gender equality and promote the realization of gender equity and justice.

Fund Project

This work was supported by 2022 Hebei Province Higher Education Humanities and Social Science Research Project "Research on Female Narratives in Left-Wing Films" (Project Number: SZ2022127).

References

- Simon de Beauvoir [France]. (1988). *The Second Sex*. Translated by Tao Tiezhu. Beijing: China Books Publishing House.
- Xu Ying, Li Zhongxia. (2016). "Sense and Emotion" from the perspective of ecofeminism. *Film Literature*, 19, 136-138.

¹ Xu Ying, Li Zhongxia, (2016). "Sense and Emotion" from the perspective of ecofeminism. *Film Literature*, 19, 136-138

² Simon de Beauvoir [France]. (1988). *The Second Sex*. Translated by Tao Tiezhu. Beijing: China Books Publishing House.