

The Independent Female Image in *My Sister* and Its Construction Through Visual Rhetoric

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Abstract

As a multidisciplinary art form, films, particularly those centered on women, from a sociological standpoint, must boldly address the societal issues of gender discrimination. They should amplify the voices of women and advocate for their independence and enlightenment. *My Sister*, directed by Yin Ruoxin, presents a well-defined portrayal of an autonomous woman. The film endeavors to foster social evolution and transformation by depicting women in realistic, profound, and motivational roles. Through the narrative, visual rhetoric is adeptly utilized to convey enhanced emotional depth and awareness of female identity. It is important to recognize, however, that the aspirations voiced in such films represent more a tactical maneuver than an actual empowerment construct.

Keywords: *My Sister*, independent woman, visual rhetoric, female gaze

1. Introduction

Released in 2021, directed by Yin Ruoxin, penned by You Xiaoying, and featuring performances by Zhang Zifeng, Xiao Yuan, and Zhu Yuanyuan, *My Sister* courageously tackles the societal challenge of gender discrimination. It elevates the voices of women, fostering their autonomy and awareness while simultaneously highlighting the dilemmas and vulnerabilities inherent in the female experience. Amidst an increasing array of films, female characters have consistently been crucial. As the societal influence of women enhances, female characters are increasingly discarding the conventional stereotypes imposed by a patriarchal society to reconsider their societal roles and status. This shift has given rise to a significant number of

films with feminist themes, reflecting on and striving to dismantle the traditional labels attached to women. These films seek to address the contradictions borne out of conventional ethical stereotypes within the female community and explore viable strategies and approaches for the sustenance of independent women.

Since Roland Barthes introduced the concept of visual rhetoric in the 1960s, the scope and depth of related theoretical exploration have expanded significantly, driven by the diversification of subjects under study. The judicious employment of visual rhetoric can foster ideological resonance and consensus between a film and its audience, enhancing the communicative impact of cinematic narratives. In *My Sister*, the delineation of the independent female

protagonist, Anran, showcases the critical role of visual rhetoric in articulating the film's message. Moreover, this film marks a significant departure from traditional media portrayals of women, challenging and redefining stereotypical perceptions.

2. Characteristics of the Independent Female Image in *My Sister*

The portrayal of independent female characters has garnered considerable attention in recent discourse, particularly in the realm of cinematic arts. Such characterizations are not mere reflections of reality but are composite constructs imbued with diverse influences. Cinema, as the seventh art form, encapsulates and conveys the societal ideologies encompassing philosophy, religion, morality, and science, serving as a mirror to prevailing social currents and values. *My Sister* presents an archetype of female independence, characterized by self-sufficiency, resistance to conventional subjugation, and the quest for personal freedom, embodying the essence of spiritual, economic, and personal autonomy.

The quintessence of an independent woman lies in her sovereignty of choice, free from subjugation, domination, and reliance on external entities, capable of autonomous thought, work, and life. This independence is most fundamentally manifested at the ideological level, highlighting a woman's capacity for independent thought, judgment, and decision-making, unswayed by external influences. Drawing from literary rhetoric, visual rhetoric effectively conveys the notion of female independence. For instance, Ding Ling's literary oeuvre vividly portrays independent female characters who embody resilience and fortitude, challenging the constraints of feudal consciousness and advocating for self-reliance, proactivity, and creativity as pathways to realizing self-worth. (Zhou Shurong, 2005)

Liu Qing's interpretation of "independence" as a relational concept underscores that independence is meaningful only within the context of interpersonal relationships. It signifies a stance within a relationship that permits uninhibited decision-making, embodying the essence of autonomy. (Tencent News, 2021) Independence, therefore, is characterized by the freedom of choice, transcending selfishness and conventional norms, enabling women to make personal decisions regarding relationships,

parenthood, career, and familial roles. In *My Sister*, Anran epitomizes this model of independence, navigating familial and societal challenges with resilience and autonomy, thus illustrating that true independence encompasses the liberty to make life choices, whether they pertain to personal ambitions or familial responsibilities.

Screenwriter You Xiaoying articulates a core principle of the narrative in *My Sister*: "It is a disservice to dictate actions to women. Our emphasis lies on support, not control. We advocate for supporting all of Anran's choices without imposing any decisions upon her." This ethos underscores the film's perspective, suggesting that dictating Anran's choices would equate to the moral coercion that women in similar situations face. Director Yin Ruoxin echoes this sentiment, portraying Anran as a resilient character who seeks a path divergent from her aunt's, illustrating that individual paths need not conform to a predetermined mold.

The concept of an independent woman in *My Sister* encompasses spiritual, economic, and personal autonomy. Independence, at its core, transcends superficiality, aligning with a woman's intrinsic ideologies and values. Varied in its manifestations, the essence of independence is rooted in self-awareness, advocating for a diversity of expressions. Independence does not merely denote financial self-sufficiency or a lifestyle choice; it signifies a deeper, inherent self-reliance and individuality. Material success, while often a visible indicator of independence, does not encapsulate its entirety. True independence is internal, personalized, and extends beyond outward achievements. Anran's character embodies this philosophy, asserting her right to personal choices, be it in relationships or the pursuit of her ambitions, emphasizing that independence is meaningful only when it aligns with one's own convictions.

In the novel *Little Women* by American author Louisa May Alcott, the narrative vividly portrays four women of distinct individuality, elucidating the multifaceted nature of independence. This theme of independence is realized spiritually, complemented by economic self-sufficiency and personal autonomy. Despite their divergent destinies, each character strenuously strives for a life of self-defined independence. It is imperative to recognize that

adherence to traditional societal expectations as the sole validation of a woman's independence is fundamentally flawed. True independence for women implies the possession of one's economic means, enabling self-reliance free from external influences and temptations; the capacity for independent thought and judgment, underscored by a strong sense of agency; and the possession of personal values and the ability for self-exploration. In *My Sisters* Anran embodies the synthesis of spiritual, economic, and personal independence.

3. The Construct of Visual Rhetoric Through Color in *My Sisters*

Famed Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro posits that color constitutes an essential part of cinematic language, employing hues to evoke diverse emotions and sensations, similarly to the symbolic use of light and shadow to depict the struggle between life and death. Color stands as a crucial component within the film's audiovisual framework. The application of specific color schemes not only facilitates the conveyance of thematic intentions but also contributes to the establishment of the creator's aesthetic style, thereby affecting the audience's emotional and psychological journey. From a design perspective, color is the foundational element of visual communication in cinematic imagery, requiring its design and application to be in thorough alignment with the thematic message of the film's subject matter, ensuring accurate representation of the actors' overall appearance, emotional expressions, and bodily movements. The creator's precise control over the application of color language in films not only amplifies the atmosphere surrounding the characters' authentic emotions but also serves as a vital medium for conveying humanistic thoughts.

The metaphorical rhetoric of color communication is exemplified by Zhang Zifeng's portrayal of the elder sister, Anran, whose performance is imbued with a repressed sense of tearing, yet subtly interwoven with metaphors of hope within a life of despair, unfolding alongside the film's narrative. Anran, characterized by her short hair and dressed in simple, casual attire of shirts or T-shirts and pants with a dim and modest color palette, devoid of makeup, lacks the youthful radiance typical of a recent university graduate. Her initial presentation exudes a sense of stubborn desolation, aloof from the mundane. Yet, it is

this very conveyance of color that aptly reflects her indifference and estrangement towards the city, family, and relatives, engulfing the viewers' emotions with its cold visuals and sorrowful ambiance. In the first half of the film, Anran grapples with melancholy, having long avoided returning to the "home" that harbors her inner scars—a place both familiar and alien, where the cold tones of furniture and decor mirror her gloomy childhood years. However, in the film's latter stages, the lighting shifts noticeably towards warmer tones, signifying a transformation in Anran's emotional state. Two scenes stand out: one where divine light bathes Anran and her brother during a bath, and another playful scene of eating meat buns after she brings her brother back from their uncle's house, creating an ambiance so warm it suggests a hopeful conclusion. Clearly, the filmmakers utilize color artistry to highlight a compassionate sentiment. (Ji Xiaoting, 2021)

"The creators' proficiency in film language, the use of various new technologies, and the amalgamation of narrative techniques elevate color beyond a mere auxiliary element in film storytelling. Through the distinct connections formed between film color and audience emotion, color has become an indispensable element in narrative filmmaking." Human vision tends to perceive continuity rather than fragmentation, thus initially recognizing the overall color scheme of a scene, allowing viewers to grasp the general tone of the film. As the plot progresses, the colors of characters' costumes and settings accordingly evolve, linking the psychological experience of viewing with the real world and endowing the audience with the capacity to comprehend the film's underlying messages. (Cheng Wanting, 2022)

The Semiotics of Object Representation and Rhetorical Metaphor in Film Narrative In the narrative of the film, the appearance of the Matryoshka doll becomes a key object in the presentation of the theme, with Anran's aunt embodying the image of the traditional woman. In a conversation with Anran, she states, "I've been a sister since the day I was born, always have been." She dedicates herself selflessly to the societal role of womanhood, sacrificing her own dreams for her family. Despite gaining admission to the university's Russian department when her brother only made it into a vocational school, she relinquishes her educational opportunity to him due to financial

constraints. Later, she abandons her career to care for her brother's children. In middle age, she juggles running a small shop, caring for her paralyzed husband, and worrying over her unmarried adult children. Her life is wholly attached to the identities of "sister," "wife," and "mother," with no identity of her own.

Amid scenes filled with contradiction and oppression, a harmonious moment arises when the aunt articulates a pivotal statement reflecting the film's core theme: "Matryoshka dolls don't have to fit into the same casing." With a resigned yet decisive expression, she, as a woman, fully displays the submission and discontent experienced throughout her life. Clearly a being of contradiction, she does not wish Anran to follow in her footsteps. She permits Anran to pursue her own life, leaving her brother behind. Picking up a Matryoshka doll, she utters in Russian, "Hello, thank you, goodbye." These simple words encapsulate the regret of missing an independent life and self-fulfillment, bridging the gap between two generations of women and offering the audience space for imagination and reflection. The symbolic meaning of the Matryoshka doll, with its clear allegorical directionality, represents not just Anran or her aunt, but millions of "sisters" and the traditional conventions imposed upon them. Breaking free from "the same casing" to follow one's path, Anran is undeniably independent.

Regarding the viewing experience, many audience members perceive Anran as indifferent, noting a rift and fissures between her and her father. Faced with the sudden death of her parents, she watches emotionlessly as the ambulance takes their bodies away. She hides her feelings, her years of resentment not allowing her to grieve. When faced with the decision of whether to care for her brother, relatives fail to consider her perspective, instead planning her life for her. Is Anran truly a cold, refined egoist? Clearly not. Faced with a choice, Anran is lucid; she declines the refuge offered by her boyfriend and his family, savoring the scent of her father's leather jacket and recalling happy moments from her childhood in dreams. Ultimately, Anran bids farewell at her parents' grave, reminiscing about the meat buns with Sichuan pepper her mother used to make, her words turning into tears that flow unimpeded down her face. She seeks recognition from her parents through her efforts, not desiring

property but their acknowledgment and warm love. Unquestionably, her father's leather jacket and her mother's pepper-spiced meat buns serve as symbolic representations of Anran's memories of her parents. These symbols bear deeper semantic meanings, reflecting the oppression of female rights by patriarchy and highlighting Anran's developing sense of independence and individuality throughout her growth.

The Semiotics of the Feminine Gaze: Intertextual Rhetoric and the Critique of Male Privilege — the theory of the "gaze," as articulated by Foucault, serves as a critical theoretical tool employed by feminism to critique male privilege and foster female empowerment. The "gaze" extends beyond mere "looking" to embody a concrete act wherein the subject, through a power dynamic, imposes upon the object of observation, encapsulating the relationship between subject and object, oppressor and oppressed. Moreover, as an expression of power, the "gaze" not only displays but also generates power. With the liberation of women's rights, cinema has witnessed the emergence of the "feminine gaze," transitioning from women being observed to observing themselves. In recent years, the collective consciousness of women has gradually evolved into a unique social force. The feminine gaze is not a variation or assimilation of the male gaze; it possesses its own distinct characteristics. The feminine gaze emphasizes the expression of its own desires, analyzed in *My Sister* from two dimensions: the perspective of the camera led by female directors and screenwriters, and the narrative's portrayal of women's observation of themselves and others.

In *My Sister*, the use of motion shots—tracking, panning, and shaky shots—illustrates Anran's inner turmoil and direct confrontation when faced with changes in her passive life. For instance, the camera adopts an inverted view during the accident involving her parents, and a shaking motion during intense conversations with relatives. The film employs montage extensively to depict Anran working from home, using a combination of shots from various distances and angles to express the brother's incessant interruptions, amplifying Anran's frustration. Especially when confronting her uncle's moral coercion, the female creators utilize a shaky perspective to portray Anran's resolute and brave feminine gaze, challenging

and mocking the traditional male gaze.

In the narrative, Anran, a nurse, encounters an older pregnant woman suffering from eclampsia. Anran desperately pleads, “Your body is your own, without you, there is nothing. What’s the use of having a son!” However, the pregnant woman, risking her life to give birth, and her family, choosing the child over her, evidently disagree with Anran. Anran’s physical altercation and outcry, “This is murder!” represent an independent woman’s plea to another conditioned woman and a contestation against the “male gaze,” revealing the control of women’s bodies and spirits by patriarchy.

As times change, with the rise of diverse value systems and collective consciousness, society’s gender culture has also shifted, reflecting changes in gender status and living spaces. Women’s groups have begun to recognize this unequal oppression and attempt to resist. *My Sister* reflects these changes in societal gender roles, illustrating the transformation in the construction of social identities.

4. Conclusion

As the distribution of social resources becomes more rational, women’s status in society has seen a significant uplift, equipping them with considerable competitive capabilities and self-confidence. The construction of the image of the independent woman is also gradually being refined. A film can be categorized as a women’s film based on three elements: narrative from a female perspective, women as the subject matter, and a distinct feminist consciousness. From this standpoint, *My Sister* is a quintessential women’s film, with Anran embodying an image of a woman who possesses independence, resists traditional oppression, and strives for a free life. The creators of the film skillfully utilize color language, visual symbols, and the visual rhetoric of the female gaze to strengthen and perfect the image of the independent woman. However, facing the cruel hierarchy of China’s patriarchal society and women’s status over millennia, how to better convey the values of independent women in women’s films, and how to reverse the public’s attitude towards women’s rights and social value in social ethical issues, remain topics for continuous research and reflection for every filmmaker and critic.

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