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Analysis of the Tragedy of Women's Fate under the Feudal Marriage System: A Case Study of Raise the Red Lantern

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Abstract. This paper uses the film Raise the Red Lantern (1991) directed by Zhang Yimou as an example to explore the tragic fate of women under China's feudal marriage system. TIn this study, I explore how cinematic techniques—specifically visual symbolism, color palettes, and framing—underscore the oppressive ambiance of feudal ethics. My analysis hones in on salient visual motifs, such as the recurring red lanterns, alongside ritualistic practices like foot massage and the concubine hierarchy, which collectively epitomize female subjugation and compliance. The characters in the film are interpreted as symbols of different social ideologies, with a particular focus on Songlian, Meishan, and Zhuoyun, who reflect different responses to systemic oppression. This study uses semiotics and feminist film analysis to interpret the narrative and stylistic strategies, highlighting institutionalized patriarchy in the film. The findings show that the film presents a harsh historical reality and exposes the internalized misogyny and self-destruction fostered by patriarchy. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of gender representation in the film and the lasting impact of feudal values on modern cultural memory.

Keywords: Women's plight, Fighting spirit, Feudal ethics, Women's rights, Raise the Red Lantern.

1. Introduction

The film Raise the Red Lantern, directed by Zhang Yimou and adapted from Su Tong's novel Wives and Concubines, is set in a Chinese feudal family in the 1920s. During this epoch, the patriarchal structure was rigid, the concept of male dominance and female subordination was deeply entrenched, and the worth of women was frequently inextricably tied to matrimony and procreation, thereby precluding autonomy and agency. This paper aims to explore the shaping of female characters in the film and their symbolic significance, and analyze how the film reveals the oppression of women by feudal ethics through plot settings and shooting techniques. Through the employment of detached cinematic language and semiotic elements—exemplified by the motifs of crimson lanterns and expansive estates—the film elucidates the encumbered status of women within the feudalistic paradigm. Furthermore, the female protagonists' endeavors to subsist within a patriarchal milieu are depicted, underscoring their inevitable and lamentable destiny. The research methods include text analysis, which conducts in-depth analysis from the perspectives of plot, character shaping and shooting techniques; cultural research, which explores the cultural

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background and contextual characteristics contained in the film; and comparative research, which compares the film with the original novel and analyzes the changes and significance in the adaptation process. Through these methods, this article will reveal the oppression and constraints of the old feudal ethics on women and the film's unique artistic expression and cultural connotation in presenting this theme.

2. Film language expressing feudal ethics

2.1. Visual composition and emotional atmosphere

The film language of Raise the Red Lantern is crucial to understanding the psychological oppression inherent in the feudal marriage system. Using static long shots, symmetrical compositions, and soft yet symbolic tones, the director creates a visual rhythm that reflects the family's repetitive and layered daily life. The extensive use of red and gray—red symbolizes power and privilege, and gray symbolizes emotional emptiness—reinforces the dissonance between external ritual and internal desolation.

The lanterns in the film are decorative and have a controlling function. Their light indicates the favor of their owners, transforming them into totems of domination and desire: The specific object represented by the row of lanterns symbolizes the courtyard where the lady who will serve the master tonight resides. As depicted in Figure 1, the courtyard's architecture, characterized by towering walls and constricted passageways, embodies a spatial metaphor of enclosure. Within the framework of film semiotics, these scenographic choices symbolize the corporeal restriction and the ingrained observation and self-regulation experienced by the female protagonists [1].



Figure 1. The screenshot of the courtyard with lines of lanterns

2.2. Ritualized oppression: symbolic scenes

Repetitive rituals such as foot massage, lantern lighting, and meal offerings form an oppressive routine that dominates the lives of the concubines. Each act is fraught with symbolic violence: foot massages. It embodies age-old customs designed to cultivate and indulge the female form, serving as a demonstration of sexual prowess rather than a personal emotional release. Within the film, these acts and vocalizations constitute a publicly sanctioned, institutionalized form of "indulgence," indicative of the power dynamics inherent in the power structure. Throughout the film, the wives fight over this because “hammering feet” means more resources, power, food, servant treatment, and even influence and status. The patriarchal system's inherent violence is symbolized by the subjugation of women, who relinquish their autonomy and individual identities in the competition

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for male favor, exemplified by foot binding. The film also depicts violence more directly through the conflicts among the wives.



Figure 2. Scene of spnglian is stripped of her lantern due to cheating

For example, as represented in Figure 2, the scene in which Songlian is stripped of her lantern after being accused of cheating illustrates the fragility of her position. The abrupt abolition of the ritual marks her transformation from favored concubine to dispensable property. This transition highlights the transactional essence of women's existence within the feudal structure, where male authority dictates the conferral or deprivation of their value [2].

3. Female characterization and symbolism

3.1. Analysis of major female characters

Each female character in Raise the Red Lantern embodies a unique response to the feudal hierarchy and symbolizes broader social status.

Songlian is the protagonist, a university-educated woman whose modernity conflicts with the ancient system in which she lives. At first, she is rational and suspicious, but gradually becomes consumed by the psychological warfare unfolding within the compound. Her ultimate descent into madness is a metaphor for the incompatibility between personal autonomy and feudal submission [3].

Meishan, the third wife, is a former Peking Opera actress who displays qualities of sensuality and rebellion. Her extramarital liaison and subsequent capital punishment for insubordination exemplify the lethal repercussions of defying patriarchal authority. She epitomizes the innovative impulse repressed by authoritarian cultural orthodoxy [4].

Zhuo Yun, the second wife, seems benevolent but manipulates others to maintain her status. She embodies the internalized misogyny that perpetuates the system. Her duality reveals how women, deprived of absolute power, seek control through covert means, thus maintaining a cycle of oppression [5].

3.2. Social reflection and ideological function

The characters in the film serve as an allegory for the role of women in a patriarchal society. Songlian represents the new intelligentsia striving for independence, Meishan symbolizes emotional authenticity, and Zhuo Yun embodies pragmatic submission. The conflict between the parties involved covert ideological machinations aimed at securing the hammer foot qualification exemplify

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Louis Althusser's theory of the state's ideological apparatus, wherein individuals are conditioned to perpetuate the prevailing dominant ideology, even within private domains [6].

Concubinage is like a micro-society governed by patriarchal norms. These regulations were implemented not solely by male authorities—the "masters"—but also by women themselves, who functioned as agents of self-perpetuated subjugation. This dynamic reflects a wider social structure in which patriarchal values are upheld by cultural norms rather than force.

4. Thematic dissection behind artistic techniques

4.1. Symbolism and psychological captivity

Zhang Yimou's artistic style is known for its layers of symbolic meaning. The red lanterns symbolize seduction and captivity. When illuminated, they signify transient affiliation; when extinguished, they denote repudiation and emotional disconnection. The courtyard's structure is symmetrical yet claustrophobic, visually reinforcing women's sense of powerlessness in escaping their cyclical suffering.

The use of silence and ambient sound is also crucial. Many scenes lack a traditional soundtrack, heightening the tension and highlighting the characters' loneliness. The eerie moments of silence in the film act like a psychological echo chamber, amplifying the sense of fear [7].

Table 1. The social status of female characters and the symbolism of lanterns in Raise the Red Lantern

Female Characters	Lanterns Lit or not	Status in the Household
Songlian	Yes	Favored
Meishan	No	Disgraced
Zhuoyun	Intermittent	Manipulative

4.2. Cultural memory and modern relevance

Although set in the 1920s, the film's themes remain resonant in discussions of gender inequality and the cultural inheritance of patriarchal norms. The systematic erasure of female agency and the internalization of control suggest that such mechanisms may persist in subtle forms within modern institutions, In modern times, the perpetuation of stereotypes reinforces the cultural narrative of "male dominance and female subordination." Without institutional change, cultural change is challenging to achieve. As Rey Chow argued, visual media can preserve and critique cultural memory, serving as a mirror and a megaphone for silenced voices [8,9].

The film ultimately critiques historical feudalism and its symbolic afterlife in contemporary society. By exposing the structures that render women into rivals rather than allies, Zhang Yimou calls attention to the need for collective awareness and reform [10].

5. Conclusion

Raise the Red Lantern is a film that explores the oppressive structures inherent in China's feudal marriage system. Through careful visual composition, symbolic rituals, and complex characters, the film illuminates the multiple dimensions of female subjugation and the psychological and ideological impact of the underlying patriarchal background. Red lanterns, reflexology, and hierarchical ceremonial practices function not merely as cultural symbols but as representations of a

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socio-economic apparatus that commodifies and exerts control over female identities and corporeal autonomy, thereby reinforcing systemic gendered oppression.

The characters Songlian, Meishan, and Zhuoyun embody different responses to systemic oppression, ranging from resistance and rebellion to manipulation and submission. Their accounts underscore the constrained socio-economic opportunities accessible to women within a rigidly stratified societal hierarchy and the resultant intrapersonal conflicts engendered by these structural limitations. The film's aesthetic choices (use of color, space, and sound) further enhance the themes of entrapment and despair, and provide a direct portrayal of the characters' inner turmoil.

By dissecting these elements, the film not only criticizes historical injustices, but also provokes reflection on contemporary gender dynamics. The presentation prompts viewers to examine the persistent influence of patriarchal structures and underscores the significance of individual agency and collective solidarity in advancing gender equality. In this way, Raise the Red Lantern transcends its historical context to offer lasting visions about the human condition and the social structures that shape it.

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