

Warm Realism in Modern Women-Centric Films: A Study on “Walking Through the Storm”

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Abstract:

In recent years, a trend has emerged in the creation of film and television works with themes centered around women, with an increasing number of productions reflecting the current state of life of the female demographic. The societal focus on women pursuing self-worth and social rights has intensified. The film “Walking Through the Storm” utilizes a warm and realistic expressive style to spotlight social realities such as female independence, secular labels, and natal families. While being critical, it simultaneously prompts viewers to contemplate and rethink social phenomena, offering inspiration and strength to the audience and conveying the correct value orientation.

Keywords:

Women-Centric Films, Warm Realism, New Age Cinema

1. Introduction

With the progression of time, women play increasingly significant roles in socio-economic spheres, and correspondingly, there has been a rise in film and television works focused on female themes. Examples include movies like “Lost, Her”, “Hi, Mom”, “Sister”, and TV series such as “Ode to Joy”, along with currently popular shows “Being Your Own Light” and “Her City”. Directors have turned their lenses towards the social realities faced by contemporary women, encompassing marriage, family, parenting, work, and secular ethics. This shift highlights that topics revolving around women are garnering heightened attention from both artistic creators and the general public. The 2023 released film “Walking Through the Storm” zooms in on the marital lives of new-age women, aiming to realistically depict the unfortunate marital experiences of women who are part of vulnerable groups. Through its warm and realistic expression, the film critiques reality while simultaneously providing inspiration and strength to viewers [1].

2. Development Status of New-Age Women-Centric Films

Since their inception, films with female-centric themes have been characterized by strong rebellious tones against a patriarchal society, feudal ethical codes, and conventional morality, often presenting poignant and tragic narratives of resistance. However, as society has progressed, films in this genre have developed new characteristics in the new era.

2.1. Shifting from Resistance against Patriarchy to Focusing on Women's Living Conditions

Traditionally, the concept of “male dominance and female subordination” has been a widely accepted ideology, where women were viewed as appendages to men, dependent both financially and emotionally, with no sense of self. Consequently, films strongly resisting the patriarchal society emerged, exemplified by director Zhang Yimou’s representative works like “Ju Dou” (1990) and “Raise the Red Lantern” (1992), focusing on women in traditional Chinese society. The latter film showcases the tragic fate of a woman consumed by feudal ethics, attempting to challenge and disrupt these oppressive structures. With steady societal development and significant advancements for women in economics, culture, and ideology, women’s social status and voices have been strengthened. Accordingly, the focus of women-centric films has shifted from resisting patriarchal society and feudal ethics to exploring workplace dynamics, family life, and marriage. Most of these films, such as “Go Lala Go” (2016), “Lost, Found” (2018), and “Hi, Mom” (2021), narrate stories of new-age women pursuing dreams, independence, and personal value in contemporary contexts, with a lens primarily focused on their living conditions [2].

2.2. Role Reversal from "Male Dominance and Female Subordination"

According to the National Bureau of Statistics’ report on the “Outline of China Women’s Development (2021-2030)”, the proportion of employed women in society has remained over forty percent. With economic independence, women’s consumption power has gradually increased, making the female demographic a coveted audience for the film and television market. A surge of women-centric productions, particularly those focusing on family, career, and emotions, have appeared, with urban women becoming popular subjects for creative works, leading to a homogenization in this genre. Films like “I Will Find You a Better Home” and “Being Your Own Light” primarily feature strong female leads in the workplace who effortlessly resolve professional crises and have fulfilling personal lives. These new-age women-centric films intentionally diminish male roles or use them to serve the construction of female characters, creating a dynamic of “strong women and weak men”. However, such works tend to offer a superficial treatment of their themes, lacking the depth required to truly resonate with audiences. For these films to benefit from the focus on women-centric themes, win the market, and gain audience approval, it’s imperative that they ground themselves in reality, serving as mirrors reflecting real life.

3. Warm Realism in New Age Women-Centric Films

With societal development and changes in primary social conflicts, traditional realist narrative methods no longer satisfy the increasingly diverse emotional needs of the audience. Thus, a narrative style of warm realism that coexists with critique and compassion has emerged. Warm realism, discussed profoundly at a seminar organized

by the Beijing Film Academy on May 14, 2022, diverges from “fantasy realism” that detaches from reality and the gloomy and desperate “dark realism”. It confronts the difficulties and hardships of reality while also offering warm, positive, proactive, and constructive solutions and alternatives^[3], aligning with the timeless human emotional needs for promoting good over evil, pursuing truth and beauty, and longing for happy endings.

3.1. Awakening of Women’s Self-Consciousness

The term “women’s film” was first proposed by Molly Haskell, and film theorist Judith Mayne classified it into two major types, while domestically it is usually divided into three: films with women subjects or themes, feminist films, and films created by female directors. Defining “women’s film” precisely is challenging, but generally, films focusing on women’s real lives, reflecting their predicaments, and addressing issues concerning women can be regarded as such. Recent popular films and TV dramas emphasize the awakening of women’s consciousness, breaking through societal and secular constraints, and depicting modern women as independent, self-respecting, self-loving, pursuing self-worth, and resisting the oppression of traditional male-centered culture [4]. “Walking Through the Storm” is a typical film that explores women’s awakening and resistance against harsh reality and is the first film in China that addresses the issue of domestic violence. The movie tells a compelling story of awakening self-consciousness and empowerment in women, providing inspiration and confidence to those experiencing domestic violence.

3.2. Warm Character Setting

In “Walking Through the Storm”, the character Li Xiaomeng, a lawyer, is not only pivotal for the storyline but also embodies humanistic care and the warmth of legal support. She starts as an intern, and Xu Min’s case is the first she handles, albeit unsuccessfully at first. Witnessing Xu Min experiencing domestic violence changes her initial impression of Chen Jun, leading her to commit to assisting Xu Min in her divorce lawsuit [5]. Another warmly portrayed character is Xu Min’s son, whose subtle behaviors in the film hint at a tendency towards violence, reflecting the impact of the family environment on him. He is Xu Min’s last straw and her reason for endurance. In court, the son’s testimony plays a crucial role in securing a fair judgment for Xu Min, serving eight years in prison. Upon release, a grown-up son engages in a warm, intimate gesture with his mother, indicating he has grown up healthy and unaffected by his father’s influence. These character settings offer solace to Xu Min and satisfy the audience’s psychological need for justice.

3.3. Compassionate Critique

Critical realism, originated in Europe during the 19th century, is an art and literary movement and creative method that broadly and authentically showcases various aspects of social life, revealing social contradictions with significant depth. As a result, critique became a defining characteristic of realism. In artistic creation, to appeal to audience emotions, critiques that possess “warmth” or “compassion” have increasingly become popular among creators, as exemplified by the film “Walking Through the Storm”.

Chen Jun is undoubtedly a negative character in the film, being hypocritical, selfish, and extreme in ways that stir resentment. However, details inadvertently displayed in the film also evoke sympathy for his tragic life, with one prominent example being the

crude and simplistic parenting style of Chen Jun's mother. Audiences may unconsciously attribute Chen Jun's behavior to his mother's way of upbringing, introducing an element of sympathy into the critique of realism. Towards the end of the film, it is revealed that Chen's mother was also a victim of domestic violence, having been beaten by her husband while Chen Jun witnessed. Such exposure to violence became Chen Jun's default approach to handling marital relationships, further highlighted when Xu Min declares, "He wishes you never had him."

At this moment, it becomes clear that the victims of domestic violence are not limited to Xu Min; both Chen Jun and his mother have suffered too. The influence of Chen Jun's family of origin leads to his psychological distortion, ultimately resulting in tragedy. Chen Jun is both detestable for becoming a perpetrator after experiencing violence and pitiable. He is pitiable because, unlike Xu Min, his mother never resisted the domestic violence she experienced and still believed in enduring the abuse silently, which eventually contributed to the tragedy of the next generation. This restrained form of critique, while easily accepted by audiences, also prompts reflection and resonance, offering hope to every individual enduring domestic violence. The film's approach fosters a deeper understanding and sympathy among the audience, generating hope and reflection for those suffering from similar fates [6].

4. Crafting Path of Warm Realism in New Age Women-Centric Films

4.1. Grounded in Female Consciousness, Facing Life's Realities

Distinct female consciousness is essential in new age women-centric works. The creation of films in this genre should face societal realities, highlighting women's self-worth and psychological characteristics [7]. "Walking Through the Storm" is China's first film on the theme of domestic violence, and since its release, it has garnered extensive positive reviews and discussions, scoring 9.3 on Maoyan and 7.1 on Douban, even trending on Weibo, making women's issues the focus of attention. The film's success is inextricably linked to its candid portrayal of the societal realities of women's lives. Director Qin Haiyan mentioned in interviews that the protagonist Xu Min's predicament, traditional values, and the persecution she faces from family and friends were inspired by interviews conducted with hundreds of domestic violence cases. Only when creators truly immerse themselves in life to feel and understand it can they refuel their artistic creations with the essence of real life, gaining public recognition.

4.2. Respecting Female Independence, Disseminating Mainstream Values

Realist films initiated by a group of Italian filmmakers in the 1930s aimed to depict real social life and criticize negative social phenomena. With time and the elevation of audience aesthetics, realist films no longer merely reflect life or sharply attack societal issues. Instead, they analyze the essence of problems through social realities, leading audiences to reflect on the problems existing in real life [8]. Therefore, from the inception of creation, filmmakers need to accurately position the underlying themes and value propositions of their works. With the advancement of society and the increase in women's education levels, women play increasingly significant roles in society, pursuing independence, freedom, and self-realization. However, traditional views on women, such as "men outside, women inside" and "devotion to husband and children", still exist, hindering women's development. The film's portrayal of Xu

Min's difficulties in obtaining a divorce is a prime example. Traditional views act as shackles for those women who have experienced hardships. In contrast, the independence and proactiveness of modern women represent the mainstream consciousness and values in today's society. As an important medium for conveying mainstream social values, films should prioritize social responsibility, focusing on stories of women who struggle against traditional views and pursue self-worth and social value [9]. Through a female lens, filmmakers should depict both the external and internal worlds of women, showcasing their independence and social value, thereby communicating mainstream values to the audience.

4.3. Maintaining Narrative Logic, Focusing on Artistic Presentation of the Film

The eminent Russian revolutionary democrat and great proletarian revolutionary writer, Chernyshevsky, once stated: "Apart from representing life, art also serves to explain life." Realism-themed films are not simple reproductions of real life but employ artistic means to reflect societal issues, seek solutions, and promote social development and progress. New age films with a female realism theme often focus on romance, marriage, generational dynamics, the workplace, and parenting, with creators trying to align closely with the real lives of women through these aspects. However, if narrative logic is disregarded during the development of the plot, the creation of grounded works becomes impossible.

For instance, the TV series "Being Your Own Light" tells the emotional stories of three urban women with different identities who make remarkable comebacks when facing dilemmas in love, marriage, and career. In the end, all three characters achieve success, enjoying both love and career, but this perfect ending with the protagonists' "halo" might feel unreal to the audience. Therefore, films of warm realism in the new age focusing on female subjects should be based on real life while striving for depth, paying attention to the narrative logic and artistic quality of the film. They should deeply explore women's stories from different angles, themes, industries, and types of characters, thus promoting the spiritual demeanor of women in the new era.

5. Conclusions

In the new era, with the elevation of women's social status, the awakening of women's self-consciousness and value is gradually taking place and gaining increasing attention from society. When film and television creators depict the real lives of women, they should not focus solely on the elite minority to attract attention, thereby deviating from the actual lives of the majority. Instead, creators should concentrate on exploring the value and living conditions of women in contemporary society. The portrayal should also reflect, to a certain extent, the challenges and crises faced by women in the new era, voicing their concerns and emotions.

Creators should employ art to realistically represent life, bravely exposing the dark aspects faced by women in their daily lives while actively establishing and promoting correct values. Additionally, it's imperative for creators to enhance their awareness and capability for innovation to prevent blindly following trends, which may lead to presenting audiences with imitative works. By grounding their works in reality and daring to innovate while conveying warmth and empathy, creators can better showcase the spiritual demeanor of contemporary women.

Conflicts of Interest

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