

The Images of Women in the Films on Ethnic Minority Subjects in the New Period

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Abstract. Women in films are portrayed as the "Others", the victims of a patriarchal society and a vulnerable group, and since the 1970s, the image of women in Chinese films has shifted from the traditional "virtuous wife and mother" to the "Others". This paper analyses the images of women in minority films in the new period from three perspectives: ethnic consciousness, traditional and modern factors, and social transformation.

Keywords: The new period; minority films; female images.

1. Introduction

Since 2000, Chinese films have developed rapidly, especially in the field of ethnic minority-themed films. A large number of female characters have appeared in major film festivals, showing the existential situation of minority women under the interplay of ethnic consciousness and modern consciousness, as well as the changes in the gender roles of women. This article attempts to analyze the images of women in new-era minority-themed films and explore the reasons, significance, and dilemmas of the transmutation of the images of female protagonists in new-era minority-themed films.

2. The Consciousness of Nationalities: the Interweaving between Traditions and Moderns

Along with the cultural changes in modern China, ethnic consciousness, characterized by ethnicity, has emerged in ethnic minority films. In the course of historical evolution, the identification with the local cultures and a sense of national identity are the motivating force for the continuity and development of a nation's cultures. In recent years, a large number of films have focused on the plight of ethnic minority women in the process of modernization. Women are often portrayed as the victims of the ideals and desires of men. They have to bear the burden of bearing and raising children, running the household, taking care of their parents-in-law, and assuming family responsibilities, without getting anything in return. Under such strong stimuli, ethnic minority women have a certain degree of an identity crisis with traditional aesthetic concepts.

On the one hand, the national identification has transcended the pressure and discipline exerted on women's roles by the patriarchal system of patriarchal consciousness; on the other hand, their disadvantaged position as a result of being "gazed at" on screen has forced them to take the initiative to seek new elements to break out of this dilemma: firstly, to seek external forces to help them break free from traditional perceptions and realize their self-worth; secondly, to change their life situation by using external forces to break the restrictions of their original identity. The other is to use external forces to break free from the constraints of their old identities and then change their situation. Both strategies mean that they are beginning to re-examine the relationship between themselves and the groups to which they belong. As a result, we can see more young, energetic, and confident women with a passion and enthusiasm for modern life appearing in the films of ethnic minorities in the new era. And they are constantly pursuing self-fulfillment and eventually transforming their identities between their ideals and reality.

Under the traditional Chinese gender division of labor, the man is the leader of the family and the woman is the one who takes care of the offspring, and the woman is regarded as the "second mother" of the family. Therefore, under the traditional Chinese concept, the image of a woman is that of a "virtuous wife and mother". This is also reflected in the films of ethnic minorities in the new era. In the era of a male-dominated voice, women were not given the opportunity to speak for themselves, and their living conditions, contributions to society, and life experiences were always neglected. At the beginning of the new era, inspired by the ideas of feminism, the consciousness of ethnic minority women began to awaken, but their voices are too weak compared to the huge groups of ethnic minority mothers. The current situation of ethnic

minority mothers is not the same as it was in the past, and the creators of the films are looking forward to portraying enlightened mothers and awakening more mothers in ethnic areas.

Both "Eji" and "Grassland Mothers" are telling the stories of Mongolian mothers. In both films, the roles of mothers are special in that they are the adoptive mothers of their children, and their selfless devotion and dedication to their adopted sons over decades show the kindness of their nature. The dedication to their children after the adoption is not only a sign of motherly love but also a demonstration of reverence and respect for life. The film "Home on the Clouds", a Qiang ethnic film, is about the last days of an elderly Qiang mother's life. The film shows the calmness of an old Qiang mother, who never forgets to solve the problems of her two sons' lives until her death in peaceful narrative ways. This ordinary old mother radiates light from her thin body, giving us a heroic image of a courageous mother going to her death.

The awakened mothers in ethnic minority films have changed from the silent, crying, the weak image of the past to a new generation of strong, independent ethnic minority mothers. These awakened mothers were not born with intelligent minds and strong characters, but the times have also given them a difficult life situation and a declining social status. Whether it is Yingji Dema in *Horses in the Monsoon*, the two Mongolian mothers who complete their mission of adoption in *Eji* and *Grassland Mothers*, or the Hui ethnic mother Fatumai and the Qiang mother Wu Suzi in *Ili River*, there are so many moments in their lives when they shine brightly, and while they showcase their motherly style, they are also true ethnic minority women.

3. The Modern Consciousness: Marginal Others

The national consciousness is a symbol of a country and a nation and has an impact on all peoples of the world. In the course of their development, ethnic minority films have reflected the changes in the living conditions of ethnic minorities through changes in narrative themes and narrative methods. On the one hand, during the period of social transformation, the images of women in ethnic minority films gradually emerged as the "others". Since the new era, many films have reflected issues that are closely related to social, political, and economic realities. At the same time, a male-centered narrative mode has emerged in many films. These films mainly reflect the neglected and marginalised position of women in the social transformation since the new era. On the other hand, the portrayal of women's sense of individuality and the "othering" of their identities has emerged in minority films, and since the 1990s, many minority films have portrayed women with distinctive personalities, independent behavior, and cultural independence. Most of them are "strong women" with outstanding achievements or high social status in ethnic minority regions or certain fields. However, these "strong women" are individuals who exist in a mirror image, using men as the standard of measurement, and do not place women on the same level

as men in terms of their state of existence and space for development.

3.1 The Male-centric Narrative Model

In a patriarchal society, women's voices are gradually lost, and women lose the opportunity to write about themselves. They are in a situation of being watched, and their voices are replaced by those of the other race or the opposite sex. The problem of writing about the other is even more complex in Chinese minority films. In reality, minority women are marginalized and squeezed, and the increase in the number of minority women in all areas of society shows that they still want to escape from a life of bondage. In ethnic minority films, the creators have created an artistic world for women where they begin to transcend men, take on the responsibilities that men in reality take on, live fearlessly and express their own ideals in life. Although this imaginary world differs from reality, it reflects these women's expectations of a new gender world and their desire to write about themselves.

Minority-themed films take their inspiration from real minority women groups for their creation, and on the basis of artistic exploitation, whether they are radiant female archetypes or ordinary peasant women, maintaining a sense of artistry and authenticity in the images of minority women is a direction that should continue to be maintained in the current creation of minority-themed films.

3.2 The Self-identity of Women

The self-identification of women in ethnic films is mainly accomplished through the portrayal of women's spiritual and cultural aspects, while the male-centered narrative mode is more often reflected in the construction of male cultures and gender ideologies in ethnic films. The films featuring women from ethnic minority regions construct a new era of female consciousness through the game between women and traditional gender concepts and male narrative models.

In *The Bride with the Flower Waist*, the flower waist is wrapped around the waist and becomes another invisible shed lock, and the women begin to abide by the absurd regulations from the moment they wear it. Although the ethnic minorities do not have the same rituals as the Han Chinese, they do have the same dogmatic rules of etiquette, and the flower waist shackles the women's desire for freedom and their natural instincts and bodies. The film's portrayal of Fengmei is a vivid portrayal of the Yi ethnic girl as a passionate and spirited woman who dares to love and hate, but it also shows in detail the low status of the Yi ethnic woman, as "men do not bow down to women" is the rule of the Yi family, which reflects the traditional concept of male superiority over women. But Fengmei is a warrior woman who challenges traditions, who is not bound by them, and who breaks with them all the time. This is a sign that modern Yi ethnic women are becoming more and more free and independent, daring to challenge tradition, defend their rights, fight for equality, and to have a stronger sense of self-identity.

3.3 The Dissolution of Female Subjectivity

In the 1990s, the consciousness of female subjectivity began to awaken. In *Daji and Her Father*, Daji takes on the role of an independent female figure. The film tells the story of Daji, a young girl from an ethnic minority, who runs away from home after a conflict with her Han Chinese father and eventually returns to her hometown to reunite with her mother. In *The Chase*, Ayesha, as a modern woman, is first and foremost an independent and assertive woman. When dealing with conflicts with her own family members, she takes a step back in the hope of resolving the family's internal conflicts by herself; when her father beats her sister to death, she takes the side of justice and condemns him. However, the powerful "fathers", who are so many male figures in the film, stand against Aisha, believing that she has destroyed her family by killing her sister before. Yet in the end, the film ends with a reconciliation between Daji and Ayesha. The Tibetan girl in *Dream Chaser* gradually changes from an independent, strong, brave, and kind-hearted woman to a woman who is confused and in pain after being hurt but does not know how to cope with it, who chooses to set out again to find her dream after self-exiling and finally achieves self-redemption, allowing the audience to see the gradual awakening of women's sense of independence.

The portrayal of women in ethnic minority films since the new era has been characterized by a parallel between subject consciousness and changes in social status. On the one hand, the women portrayed in the films of the new era are becoming more and more independent and no longer dependent on men; on the other hand, the awakening of women's sense of subjectivity has gradually dissolved their sense of self-subjectivity and they have begun to pay more attention to other groups or things around them.

4. The Social Transformation: Coexistence of the Diversity and Divergence

Since the new era, Chinese society has undergone tremendous changes. From reform and opening up to the present, significant achievements have been achieved in the process of reforming the economic system, the political system, and the cultural system. As society continues to develop, various interest groups have begun to differentiate and social classes have begun to divide. Since the new era, China has become the second-largest economy in the world. In the context of the new era, people are beginning to realize that the coexistence of multiple cultures is a development trend for the whole of China. Especially after China's entrance into the World Trade Organization, a large number of foreign companies have entered the Chinese market. In the face of increasingly fierce competition and challenges from abroad, as well as the opportunities and challenges brought about by the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries in China, China's economic development has shown a diversified development trend. Since the new era, there has been a dramatic change in the ways in which minority women are portrayed in films of various ethnic minority themes in China. In *Ruoma's*

Seventeenth Year, we see *Ruoma* dressed in her ethnic costume again, smiling brightly, and the director expresses the hope for the vitality and sustainability of minority cultures by constructing the images of *Ruoma*. These images of women reflect both the ethnic minority director's persistent pursuit of women-themed films and highlight a sense of national identity and modern awareness. It can be said that the appearance of these images in Chinese ethnic films since the new era is an exploration and an experiment in diverse forms of expression under the coexistence of multiple cultures.

5. The Dilemma of Female Roles: The Coexist between the Edge and Center

Although the images of women in ethnic minority films have undergone transmutation from traditional to modern times, this transformation is difficult and slow. The role of women in new minority films continues to exist at both the periphery and the center. In traditional Chinese cultures, females, as weak and subordinate, have been oppressed and subjugated by a male-dominated society. These images of women are imagined by men in a patriarchal society as to how a woman's gender role is portrayed. However, since the new era, as films have explored the traditional culture of ethnic minorities in-depth, women have begun to appear in many films as forceful figures in the films. In the film *A Beautiful Gerbera*, the female protagonist, *Dorji*, runs away from home because she is not well treated by her father, and eventually finds herself under the influence of a foreigner; in *Dawa and Naqin*, *Dawa* is a Kazakh ethnic girl who leaves her hometown in order to help her sister *Naqin* to integrate into city life. They are the "others" that men expect and construct for the image, status, and discourse of women under male centrism.

The problems that exist in the portrayal of women in new-era minority films are due to two factors: on the one hand, ethnic consciousness and the interweaving of traditional and modern factors that affect the portrayal of female characters in films; and on the other hand, the objective factor of social transformation that leads to deficiencies in narrative techniques and storyline designs in films. When ethnic consciousness and modern consciousness are intertwined in women's bodies, the new-era films on ethnic minorities present an appearance of both ethnic and modern consciousness intertwined in one. In such a situation, the characters' emotions are expressed more richly and delicately. In such a period of transition, it is inevitable that tradition and modernity coexist, and that ethnicity and the development of the times coexist. Therefore, for ethnic minority-themed films, it is necessary to preserve the original ethnic characteristics while adapting them to the development of modern society; it is necessary to enrich diversity while making them contemporary, ethnic, and regional.

6. Reflections on the Development Trend of Female Images in Films with Ethnic Minority Themes

6.1 Maintaining Their Ethnic Characteristics

As an important vehicle for reflecting ethnic cultures, ethnic minority films should, on the one hand, express the local customs and social customs of ethnic minority regions and, on the other hand, show the unique ethnic cultures of ethnic minorities through the languages of the camera. In order to better portray the characters and express their emotions, the plot should be designed with more lifelike episodes, so that the character's behavior and actions have a certain authenticity. In *The Shambhala Pigeon*, Zhuo Ga comes to Shambhala in pursuit of love. The film does not directly arrange this plot as a meeting between the male and female protagonists and falling in love, but sets up a plot in which Zhuo Ga is attacked by a big black bear while hunting on the grassland and the male protagonist fights to save her. The story in the film is about the daily life of the herders on the grassland and not the myths and legends of Shambhala. There are no scenes in which the Tibetans express their gratitude to the hero for saving their lives, nor is there a love story between the hero and the heroine, which reflects the unique flavor and connotation of Tibetan cultures. On the other hand, in order to show the richness and delicacy of the characters' emotions, some very lifelike scenes can be added to increase the authenticity and realism of the characters in the film, and such lifelike scenes reflect the simplicity and warmth of the Tibetan people and their humors.

6.2 Finding the Own Artistic Charms

The creation and development of ethnic-themed films has a historical evolution. Since the new era, films no longer only attract audiences by means of action and images, but have incorporated more narrative perspectives and narrative techniques into their narrative strategies. Ethnic minority-themed films should also find their own unique artistic charms on the basis of richness and diversity. When creating films with ethnic minority themes, we should insist on combining ethnicity and internationality; we should make full use of our own regional characteristics and ethnic and cultural advantages, seize the current market demand for film and television, and develop more meaningful and excellent works that suit the market demand and have the ability of independent innovation. Only in this way can ethnic minority films be developed and enriched by the blending of ethnicity and the times.

6.3 Showing the own Cultural Characteristics

Films with ethnic minority themes, due to their regional, ethnic, and cultural characteristics, are created to show more of the living and cultural customs of their own ethnic groups. At present, ethnic minority films are still mainly created in ethnic minority regions. However, in modern society, the degree of development and economic development of ethnic minority areas is limited, so most films are still mainly for the Han Chinese. The question

of how to present the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities in minority films is also particularly important. While retaining the characteristics of the original ethnic group, the film should also strengthen the use and integration of other ethnic and cultural elements, respecting the local ethnic beliefs and customs while appropriately integrating modern elements to better suit modern society. By portraying women in films, the unique cultural heritages and inner spirits of ethnic minorities can be expressed in a way that facilitates cultural exchanges and integration between different ethnic groups. The use of cultural elements from the Tibetan, Yi, Miao, and Naxi ethnic groups in films, such as *Yunnan Story* and *Court on Horseback*, not only shows the unique cultural connotations of different ethnic groups but also facilitates mutual understanding and exchange between different regions.

7. Conclusion

The transmutation of the female images is a microcosm of the transformation of female consciousness in the new period of ethnic minority films. In this process, ethnic consciousness, traditional and modern consciousness, and social transformation are all at play, which has become the most significant feature of minority films in the new period. Since the new period, with economic development and social progress, minority-themed films have begun to change from a mere carrier of ethnic culture to a cultural industry, with more and more people joining in the development of ethnic culture. At the same time, due to the impact of feminist thinking on traditional gender concepts and culture in the new period, women's discourse began to be valued and developed, and many directors began to recreate and rethink the image of ethnic minority women.

Although a number of minority films have achieved considerable success since the new era, there are still many issues that we should explore and reflect upon. At the same time, ethnic minority films still need to enhance their national self-confidence and sense of responsibility; and the market as a whole should develop in a more healthy and orderly manner. In the future, we will continue to present works with ethnic themes in new artistic forms and methods, pay attention to social realities, contribute to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and promote the prosperity and development of minority cultures!

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