

A Study of Trauma Narratives in *Borrowed Time*

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Abstract. Guangdong and Hong Kong share a common historical and cultural context. However, in modern times, the history of colonization and immigration in Hong Kong has caused an identity crisis among the people of both places. In 2023, director Cai Jie's film *Borrowed Time* starts from the family lives of the people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, focusing on the emotional trauma brought to the families of both places due to Hong Kong's unique colonial and immigration issues. In the film, the father's abandonment and departure caused psychological trauma to the mother and daughter. The absent father continuously affected their daily lives, bringing persistent distress to their lives. This article combines trauma theory and film narrative analysis to explore the portrayal and causes of the mother and daughter trauma narrative in this film. Meanwhile, this article discovers that the distress in the family is not only due to the father's departure but also significantly due to the sense of powerlessness of the mother and daughter. The powerlessness lies in cognitive biases, which have caused the women in the family to still be unable to escape the shadow of traditional patriarchy and achieve psychological healing from their trauma.

1 Introduction

The concept of trauma first appeared in the application of pathology. After Freud, trauma gradually moved into the field of psychoanalysis, referring to the "invisible wounds" that cause psychological and mental harm to individuals. These wounds are both invisible and repetitive. Freud focused on the subconscious manifestations of trauma and believed that repetitive trauma originates from repressed unconsciousness. According to Freud, trauma is the result of the self-protective layer being damaged due to external stimuli [1]. American scholar Cathy Caruth, building on Freud's interpretation of psychological trauma, further combined trauma theory with literature and proposed the concept of "delayed" in her theory. Caruth thinks: "Trauma is considered the response to an unexpected violent event or events that are not fully grasped when they occur, but return later in repeated nightmares or other repetitive phenomena [2]." The impact of trauma on a person is uncontrollable. Trauma can return at unpredictable times, causing pain that is both repetitive and persistent. Healing trauma is a process of "exploration" and "integration". Individuals may experience the stories that have happened to them in the past by running away or reminiscing. This is also the method of talk therapy emphasized by psychoanalysts. In the process of conversing with others, individuals gradually piece together fragments of their memories, thereby

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reconstructing the cognitive understanding of the trauma they have endured. Herman was also influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis, pointing out that trauma often invades the subject and renders them powerless. At the same time, Herman proposed three ways to heal trauma: establishing a sense of safety, restoring the truth of the traumatic event, and repairing the connection between the self and the community [3]. In the art community, many filmmakers have focused on the representation of trauma in their works, and later alleviated the pain caused by trauma. This article focuses on discussing the trauma narratives in Guangdong-produced films, which are scarce in academic research. *Borrowed Time* is a Cantonese film released in 2023, focusing on family life between Guangzhou and Hong Kong. In the film, the father, a Hong Kong resident, falls in love with the mother from Guangzhou, and they have a daughter named Ting. Due to the different political influences between the two places, the father eventually returns to Hong Kong to earn money and pay off debts. As Ting grows up, the daughter Ting faces an identity crisis and has always been confused about her family relationships because her father once had his own family in Hong Kong. Therefore, this article will focus on analyzing the trauma brought to the mother and daughter by the father's departure in the film. This trauma is characterized by its persistence and transmissibility, and it pervades daily life like a ghost. The article will analyze the manifestations of trauma in the film and the reasons behind the trauma narrative, thereby illustrating that the underlying cause of this pain is the value dilemma faced by women. Trauma has the characteristics of chronicity and intergenerational transmission. Through analyzing the manifestations of trauma, this article believes that the cause of this pain is due to the deviation in women's values, which results in women still being unable to free themselves from trauma through their actions.

2 Trauma manifestation

2.1 The concept and reasons for trauma

Trauma stems from a sense of powerlessness. When the self-defense system is shattered by an experienced event, people will experience varying degrees of physiological and emotional fluctuations. When faced with psychological trauma, the traumatized individuals become confused and unsettled. This trauma arises from fear of the unknown and the uncontrollable. This trauma tears apart the self-protective system, leading to intense emotional reactions. "What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known [4]." When people experience trauma, they are not only affected by the physical pain but also feel anxious and distressed since they do not understand the traumatic event. This type of trauma appears repeatedly in their minds like fragments, and since people do not fully heal from the trauma, the pain continues to affect their lives repeatedly. Psychological trauma in individuals mainly manifests as emotional instability, avoidance, and isolation from the outside world, as well as disordered memories and behaviors. Caruth, building on Freud's concept of psychological trauma, has deepened the understanding of trauma by combining it with literary and artistic works to analyze the traumatic allegories behind these works. Caruth focuses on the characteristics of repetition and latency in trauma studies, while Balavi, through the analysis of literary works, further proposes the shaping of trauma by landscapes. He emphasized the important role of historical context and landscape memory in the formation of trauma [5].

2.2 Traumatic experience

Borrowed Time depicts the psychological trauma experienced by the mother and daughter after the father leaves, and this trauma is reflected in their daily lives. Using the aforementioned trauma theory to explore the female experiences in the film, it can be found that Ting and her mother have been subjected to continuous and repetitive familial trauma. Moreover, due to the unique historical context and the special landscape of the separation between Guangdong and Hong Kong, the memories of the mother and daughter become disordered and blurred. This special situation exacerbates the impact of trauma on both of them.

Family trauma often has a lasting and transmissible nature, manifesting through daily life and impacting the lives of the next generation. In the film, the mother and father unexpectedly fell in love in Guangzhou and had Ting, but the father already had a family in Hong Kong and was only temporarily staying in Guangzhou. After Hong Kong's return and the Asian financial crisis, the father incurred a debt and abandoned the mother and daughter to return to Hong Kong. This family's breakdown due to the father's departure brought emotional pain to the mother and Ting. "The so-called forgetting caused by trauma is merely pretending to forget; it is transmitted vertically to several subsequent generations within families and society [6]." In this family, the mother's generation was influenced by the different political and historical contexts of Hong Kong and the mainland at the time, leading to the mother's family being shattered and leaving her with emotional scars. This familial trauma was passed down to her daughter Ting, resulting in a persistent lack of paternal identity and the presence of a third party in the family. Thus, it became an indelible wound for both mother and daughter.

The trauma brought by the absent father pervades the family life of the mother and Ting like a ghost. In the film, the virtual world game that the mother plays can be seen as her escape from psychological trauma. The mother attempts to turn to the virtual world, where she uses the names of the father and Ting for virtual characters, thereby imagining a perfect family. As the next generation, Ting would lose control of her emotions when dreaming about her father, who had once treated her well but later abandoned her. It can be said that Ting's self-defense system was traumatized after falling asleep at night. That caused her to recall the lingering pain brought by her father, who had abandoned her to return to his original family. Although the father did not appear in the mother-daughter scenes in Guangzhou, the influence of the father haunted their lives like a ghost. "Contextual factors sometimes determine the significance of traumatic experience, and place works to depict traumatic effects in both material and symbolic ways [7]." Besides the individual trauma, the film also depicts the fragmented memories of collective trauma experienced by the people of Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Before the opening of the Individual Visit Scheme, the limited interactions between the two places made the shared cultural memories between Hong Kong and Guangzhou increasingly unfamiliar. The father, who once left Guangzhou for Hong Kong, also met the mother under such historical circumstances and had Ting. Later, during the era of Hong Kong's return and the financial crisis, the father left Guangzhou and returned to his original family. This political and economic turmoil has given the previous generation traumatic memories of dispersion and mobility, and this memory has been passed on to the next generation, leaving them still in a state of identity confusion. Therefore, the unique historical landscapes and isolated conditions of the two places have brought Ting and her mother a sense of memory blur, thereby exacerbating their traumatic manifestations.

3 Struggle for women's thought

In the traditional family, women are trapped in an "invisible prison". "The prison of patriarchal stress disorder is built on a deep pit, which originates from the primal trauma inflicted on women by patriarchy--an injury of worthlessness [8]." In traditional patriarchal societies, women have formed unconscious self-discipline. They position their identity based on the relationships they establish with themselves and others. For example, they might say they are a wife or a mother to define their family identity in the eyes of others, while men often occupy the representative position of this family image. When the father in the family leaves, the absence of an authoritative figure leads to a loss of security for the entire family. In a patriarchal society, the significance of women's actions is primarily validated by men, which results in women being in a passive position. However, when external cages are absent, what confines women more is the deviation in their intrinsic self-worth, causing them to remain on the margins of society without achieving a self-identity as subjects.

In *Borrowed Time*, the film spends almost half of its runtime depicting the living conditions of a mother and daughter residing in Guangzhou and presenting the value dilemmas they face. Within the family space of the mother and daughter, the mother is portrayed as a typical figure of forbearance and kindness. She kept the keys at home for years in the hope that her husband would return. Additionally, when the mother squats in the cramped bathroom washing vegetables and managing the household chores, the scene depicts that the primary space for women is the home. The mother becomes the image of a "waiter" in the household, and this waiting lasts for over a decade. As the daughter, Ting felt neglected in her fiancé's family. When her fiancé's family went to a gathering, Ting stood alone in the lychee orchard, eating lychees in the woods. When her fiancé came over, she said, "Next time, can you not leave me alone at the gathering?" This shows that Ting had not properly integrated into this new family, leading to her feeling "voiceless" within the family. Moreover, during Ting's journey, she finds that the men she encounters all have a "savior" image, and Ting is also seeking her sense of purpose through these men. For example, in Hong Kong, Ting meets the anthropologist Yu Sheng, who is furthering his studies. Through Yu Sheng, Ting sees the possibility of ideals and freedom. It can be said that Ting finds the life values she yearns for through Yu Sheng's story. The existence of sashimi gives Ting a different kind of possibility in life. But trapped within the family, Ting ultimately cannot pursue her own value experience like Yusheng, which means she still cannot escape the value cage that confines women. Therefore, women in the film remain under the discipline of traditional patriarchy, facing dilemmas of identity and value.

4 Trauma healing journey

4.1 Tropical rainforest's narrative

The emergence of trauma allows people to step out of the world they have taken for granted. Traumatic events are sudden and random, making them unpredictable and bringing an invisible sense of rupture to people. This causes the old world to face collapse, while a new world gradually forms in people's consciousness, shaping their new values and ways of life. Trauma theory holds significant importance for understanding the current existential predicaments. Through the analysis of textual trauma, one can uncover and deconstruct the cages of oppression imposed on people. And then find alternative pathways to life. The city is filled with rules and order, which causes people to suppress their own emotions and desires. Within the high walls of the city, people become increasingly rational. Those who live here do not wish to show the traumas they have suffered. However, when people step out of these

high walls and return to nature, they gain the freedom of desire and discover the value of their true selves.

The rainforest possesses primal vitality, where irrationality and disorder dominate this space [9]. When external social order and the father's departure traumatize Ting, returning to the primal rainforest is a rethinking of the essence of existence. Ting entered a strange rainforest to search for a tapir. In this rainforest, Ting was at the center. When everything from the outside world was isolated by the rainforest, Ting only needed to focus on herself to contemplate the value of her existence. After entering the tropical rainforest, Ting found herself at the center of the entire rainforest. At this moment, Ting could let go of external traumas and truly return to her existence. In the face of primal irrationality, Ting could express her repressed emotions. Therefore, the surrealistic rainforest narrative in the film serves to heal Ting's inner trauma and seek the essence of existence.

4.2 Unhealed family trauma

Herman proposed that the complex of trauma needs to go through three stages: establishing a sense of safety, restoring the truth of the traumatic event, and repairing the connection with oneself and the community. In the film, Ting and her mother, after experiencing the trauma caused by her father's departure, Ting chooses to leave to find her father and inquire about the truth of that time. On this journey, Ting attempts to reconstruct her father's and mother's experiences to gradually piece together the fragments of memories. Herman emphasizes, "Trauma patients feel that their bodies are unsafe, their emotions and thoughts are out of control, and they have no sense of security in their relationships with others [10]." Ting once said, 'Don't abandon me,' and her mother's tears over a stained white dress, which stems from the father's abandonment, both illustrate two women traumatized and lacking a sense of security. However, they have not succeeded in establishing a safe family environment. The mother was absent from Ting's wedding due to the father's abandonment, and Ting and her mother's home were also robbed, all of which demonstrate that the impact of the father's departure is ongoing. In the third stage of repairing the relationship between oneself and others, when Ting sees her father at the end of the film, there are no loud complaints, but rather a sense of estrangement and silence. The father-daughter relationship is not repaired at this moment; Ting's life will still be in a state of confusion after finding her father. So in the end, when Ting finally met her father, the family trauma was still not healed by this "searching journey". The ideological differences and lack of security left Ting and her mother constantly in the pain caused by the trauma of family and marriage". In the past, women have always been excluded from the market and outside of public domains like the government; they were confined to the private sphere to fulfill their primary duties of raising children and providing refuge for men under social pressure [11]. The women in the film are trapped in unresolved family trauma. From this film, it can be seen that the family and marital traumas experienced by women in contemporary society are still the result of the traditional patriarchal values. Although legally, men and women enjoy equal rights and status, the traditional value of "be a good wife and good mother" still affects women's work and life in today's society. Therefore, for women to overcome familial trauma, the most important thing is self-identity and exercising subjective initiative. By finding the root causes of their value, they can discover their true developmental direction, thereby healing the psychological trauma brought about by patriarchy.

5 Conclusion

The family trauma in *Borrowed Time* is characterized by continuity and transgenerational transmission. In the film, the family trauma is primarily manifested in the shadow cast by the

father's absence, with the mother and Ting constantly haunted by the father's unexpected appearances and departures. The whole film not only tells the story of the family pain caused by the unique historical background, but also illustrates how the value divergence in the self-identity of the mother and daughter prevents the women in the film from breaking the predicament of traditional patriarchal identity. Although Ting in the film chooses to present her journey of self-discovery like a road movie, it still seems that both her father and Yusheng take on the role of saviors. The father provides direction for Ting's search for identity, and Yusheng shows her a different life trajectory. In this deviation from values, Ting still fails to establish her own subjective identity. In conclusion, this article analyzes the manifestations of the mother and Ting's trauma in daily life as depicted in the film. Through the traumatic situations of the mother and daughter, the audience will see the underlying value dilemma of women. The women in the film, when faced with the harm of trauma, do not exercise their subjective initiative to seek self-healing methods after achieving consciousness awakening. As a result, the women in the film will face ongoing psychological trauma.

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