

The Evolution and Reconstruction of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Feminist Films

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Abstract

As the most pivotal primary relationship in women's spiritual development and the formation of female subjectivity, the mother-daughter bond has become one of the most enduring narrative motifs in women's cinema. Rather than merely depicting family ethics or domestic conflicts, films centered on mother-daughter relationships reveal the complex psychological and emotional dynamics that exist between women, including intimacy, dependence, manipulation, trauma, attachment, resentment, and eventual estrangement. These narratives not only reflect the lived experiences of women under patriarchal social structures but also illuminate the continuous negotiation of identity across generations. This paper selects representative Chinese and international films as its primary research texts. Through a comparative analysis of four dimensions—melancholia and trauma, emotional alienation, intergenerational control, and women's self-liberation—it examines the diverse visual representations and underlying psychological structures of mother-daughter relationships in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, it explores how daughters achieve the construction of female subjectivity through emotional negotiation, psychological separation, and identity reconstruction in relation to their mothers, thereby enriching theoretical discussions and textual studies of mother-daughter narratives in contemporary women's cinema.

Keywords

mother-daughter relationships, feminist films, image theory

1. Introduction

The construction of female subjectivity is deeply rooted in the primordial mother-daughter kinship. This bond serves as the origin of women's self-perception, emotional patterns and gender identity, yet it may also evolve into a fetter that hinders women's pursuit of independence. This constitutes an inescapable structural paradox in women's growth. Unlike father-son relationships, which carry social discipline and power inheritance, mother-daughter ties feature profound physical and emotional bonds. As the first reflection and object in a daughter's life, a mother lays the foundation for her daughter's self-development. Meanwhile, she may easily suppress the emergence of her daughter's independent subjectivity through emotional bondage, imposition of will and experiential indoctrination. Such profound interdependence and emotional entrapment have become core research topics for psychoanalysis and feminist theories examining the predicament of female subjectivity [1-3]. In current film narratives, mothers and daughters are no longer simplified symbols of pure affection or sheer confrontation. Their relationships are defined by a complex mix of love and hatred,

attachment and resistance—an audiovisual reflection of the operational mechanisms of mother-daughter dynamics and the paradox of female subjectivity. Against this backdrop, this study centers on a core question: How do mother-daughter relationships follow a psychological trajectory of symbiosis, control, separation and ultimately subjectivity reconstruction in diverse cultural contexts?

2. Mother-Daughter Relationships in Contemporary Cinema: Theoretical Perspectives and Research Review

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva analyzes the intricate emotional bond between mothers and infants based on clinical observations of female patients with depression, and puts forward the concept of the “virgin mother”. A “virgin mother” longs for a reliable companion who is utterly dependent on her, and seeks to create such a companion through childbirth to alleviate her own depression [1]. *Passionate Detachment: An Introduction to Feminist Film Theory* by Thornham systematically reviews the development of Western feminist film theories from the 1970s to the 1990s. Breaking away from the early binary framework that merely focused on the male gaze and patriarchal oppression, it emphasizes the internal power struggles among women, the subjectivity of female audiences, and the fluid reconstruction of female subjectivity. It thus provides a critical framework and theoretical support for interpreting on-screen mother-daughter relationships and the construction of female subjectivity from a maternal and filial perspective [2]. Building on Freud's psychoanalytic theories, Klein developed the object relations theory. While classical psychoanalysis prioritized biological drives, object relations theorists regard the pursuit of relational objects as the primary human motivation. Klein argues that infants establish their internal and external object relations via introjection and projection, which shape the formation of the ego and superego, with unconscious fantasies acting as the medium for these psychological processes [3].

Regarding mother-daughter relationships in contemporary films, Zhang notes that films adopt female desire narratives and spatial narratives to explore the influence and implications of the “mother-daughter mirror image” on women's growth, and discuss ways to break free from this predicament. She also analyzes feminist aesthetic explorations in terms of resisting the male gaze, verbal expression and reflecting on the “other” [4]. Existing studies mostly focus on plot analysis of single or multiple films, confined to sociological or one-dimensional psychological interpretations. Comprehensive research integrating psychoanalysis and feminist film theories remains scarce. Accordingly, this paper adopts a multi-theoretical framework to systematically analyze how mother-daughter relationships influence the full process of women's self-reconstruction along the trajectory of symbiosis and control, resistance and separation, and final reconstruction.

3. The Evolution of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Film Narratives

3.1 Symbiosis and Control: Emotional Discipline under Mirror-like Attachment

In the construction of female subjectivity, women often take their mothers as a “mirror” for imaginative projection. Such projection distorts their self-perception through alienation and misrecognition, weaving intricate emotional fetters between mothers and daughters. In the film *The Old Town Girls* (2021), Li Miaomiao regards her long-absent mother Qu Zhicheng as an ideal spiritual mirror and projects her emotions onto the mother out of longing. Driven by a yearning for maternal love and a sense of belonging, the teenage girl deliberately imitates her mother's words and deeds, trying to define her own identity through attachment to this mirror. Yet clouded by cognitive bias, she fails to see her mother's selfishness and cowardice. The distorted mirroring warps her judgment, trapping mother and daughter in a tangled bond filled with craving for warmth and emotional estrangement, which ultimately derails the construction of the daughter's independent subjectivity [4].

In *Song of Spring* (2022), an 85-year-old mother takes care of her daughter suffering from Alzheimer's disease, reversing the traditional role of motherhood time and again. In her youth, Feng Jizhen had long borne family responsibilities and suppressed her own emotions and desires. After losing her memory and ability to live independently in old age, she once again becomes emotionally dependent on her mother. Though seemingly warm and tender, the film reveals profound female trauma: women spend their lives engaged in caregiving and self-sacrifice, trapped in emotional labor, and neither mother nor daughter can achieve true independence from one another. Even in her later years, Feng Jizhen still craves her mother's comfort and

recognition like a child, while the mother reaffirms her own sense of worth through constant care. Their mutual reliance embodies deep affection, as well as the fragility and emptiness of female subjectivity depleted by long-term familial obligations [5].

Control and attachment within mother-daughter relationships reflect the continuation and distortion of female desires across generations. When mothers impose their unfulfilled aspirations on their daughters, it is essentially an imposition of personal will. In *It's OK* (2026), mother Hu Chunrong repeatedly mentions the great efforts she made to send Xuke to a choir in her childhood, while Xuke's true passion has always been painting. Gradually, the audience learns that it is Hu Chunrong herself who loved singing but never had the chance to pursue it in her youth. Convinced that singing is a promising path, she forces this choice on her daughter. Many mothers project their unaccomplished dreams onto their daughters, expecting them to fulfill the life they never had. As feminist film theories suggest, traditional maternal norms demand that women realize their self-worth through their children. Suppressed by social constraints, mothers transfer their unfulfilled desires to their daughters in the form of education and discipline. Xuke's love for painting is ignored, signifying that her individual desires as an independent subject are overshadowed by her mother's.

Xiao and Guo point out that director Yang Lina deconstructs the ethical norms of maternal duty embedded in traditional filial piety by dismantling the “myth of the mother”, depicting maternal resentment, portraying maternal illness and highlighting paternal absence. Her works reshape the asymmetric power dynamics within mother-daughter relationships and break the conventional “praise and sentimentality” paradigm of family ethics films, blazing a new trail for gender studies and film criticism [5]. Some mothers live in constant fear of abandonment within intimate relationships and even resort to hurtful behaviors to ensure their children stay attached to them. In *Spring Tide* (2019), the grandmother fears her daughter and granddaughter will leave her. Resentful of her adult daughter, she manipulates her young granddaughter—who is easier to control—and sows discord between mother and daughter to keep the girl by her side. Such mothers tie their sense of self-worth to their children's needs, demanding absolute devotion to ease their anxiety about separation. In *Hot Milk* (2025), having lost her husband, the mother lives in terror of her daughter leaving her someday. Psychologically, she feigns paralysis to bind her daughter to herself as a full-time caregiver. During medical treatment, she realizes she could recover physically, yet recovery would mean facing independence and her daughter's eventual departure—a prospect that fills her with agony, to the point where she even considers amputation. By fabricating physical ailments, she traps her daughter in a caregiving relationship, reducing the young woman to an emotional object for her own sense of security.

3.2 Separation and Reconstruction: Subjectivity Awakening and Renewal of Intergenerational Experience

As daughters grow up and engage more with the outside world, they gradually recognize that they are not extensions of their mothers. Mother-daughter relationships then enter a phase of separation, as daughters begin to form self-awareness and view the world from perspectives independent of their mothers. In *Lady Bird* (2017), adolescence drives Christine, who calls herself *Lady Bird*, to break away from the family sphere defined by her mother. She develops a distinct sense of self through school life, friendships, romance and life planning. At the beginning of the film, the two still share moments of reading and emotional communication, but conflicts soon emerge. *Lady Bird* rebels against her mother's disciplines in various ways: she adopts a new name, hides her applications for out-of-state universities, and pursues a lifestyle beyond her family's social class. Her actions mark her realization that she is not a vessel for her mother's will, but an individual with her own desires and independent subjectivity. Adolescence necessitates a transition from infantile symbiosis with the mother to psychological separation, a crucial step in establishing boundaries between self and others. *Lady Bird*'s mother holds a pragmatic outlook on life, seeking to guide her daughter's choices regarding finances, college admission and daily conduct, and hoping she will attend a local university for stability. In contrast, *Lady Bird* yearns to move to New York, seeing relocation as a path to self-reinvention. Their conflicts are not mere generational friction, but a daughter's struggle for subjectivity against maternal control. Her rebellion is both an affirmation of her independent self and a resistance to manipulation.

In the article *A New Path for Narrative in Feminist Films: Deconstructing Visual Pleasure through Female Images*, Cheng and He state that the similarities between mothers and daughters exacerbate their conflicts. A woman's growth is a constant process of clashing with her mother: daughters forge independent consciousness amid conflicts and achieve self-identity after reconciling differences [6]. The process of separation is often

accompanied by fierce clashes. During adolescence or when stepping into the wider society, daughters may fluctuate in their attitudes toward their mothers, or blame all life setbacks on maternal control, deliberately choosing life paths, academic pursuits and values opposed to their mothers'. This is a defense mechanism to shield themselves from conflicting emotions. Just as an infant may perceive its mother as a "bad breast" and harbor aggressive fantasies when hungry, yet idealize her as a perfect figure when comforted, teenage daughters exaggerate differences and confrontation to assert their individuality, reducing the mother-daughter bond to a simple power struggle. At this stage, they fail to acknowledge the emotions and generational limitations behind their mothers' behaviors. As daughters leave their original families, integrate into society and mature, their perspectives become more diversified. Intense confrontation fades, and extreme antagonism subsides. They no longer equate independence with denying their mothers, and start to re-examine the mother-daughter bond rationally, laying the groundwork for empathy, reconciliation and the establishment of an equal, mutually respectful new relationship.

In *Lady Bird*, the protagonist initially rejects her given name Christine and insists on being called *Lady Bird*. After leaving home for college, however, she comes to understand and appreciate her mother's devotion, and reverts to her original name—a true symbol of full personal independence. Similarly, in *It's OK*, Xuke once scoffs at her mother's frugal lifestyle, but later chooses to take the bus to save money after gaining a new understanding of her mother.

While embracing their independence, daughters also develop feelings of guilt and a sense of responsibility toward their mothers, and gradually learn to empathize with them. Meanwhile, enlightened by feminist ideas amid social progress, they engage in cultural feedback across generations. Individual awakening and the reconstruction of subjectivity jointly drive the transformation of mother-daughter relationships. In *It's OK*, as an adult, Xuke reflects on her relationship with Hu Chunrong. She realizes that her mother's control and emotional reliance stem not from malice, but from the hardships women endured under the constraints of gender and social norms in her era. Denied the chance to pursue her artistic and emotional dreams when young, Hu Chunrong pinned all her unfulfilled hopes on her daughter. Xuke felt suppressed and resistant during her youth, yet after stepping into society and undergoing identity changes, she came to comprehend the dilemmas women like her mother faced caught between family and society.

Nevertheless, this understanding does not mean she fully endorses the traditional logic of maternal duty. Anthropologist Mead categorized intergenerational cultural relationships into three types: pre-figurative culture, co-figurative culture and post-figurative culture. The post-figurative culture refers to reverse socialization, in which the older generation learns new knowledge and ideas from the younger one. Influenced by contemporary feminist thoughts, Xuke recognizes the harm of mothers projecting their own desires onto daughters, and rethinks the boundaries of female subjectivity. She moves beyond mere attachment or resentment, and strives to build a new equal mother-daughter bond. This cultural feedback enables her mother to re-examine womanhood, self-identity and intimate relationships. Transcending conventional intergenerational reconciliation, the film depicts the flow and renewal of female experiences across generations: while understanding their mothers' traumas, daughters break the old maternal norms with new subjective awareness, guiding mother-daughter relationships away from attachment and control toward mutual recognition.

4. Conclusion

As women's most primordial and profound emotional bond, the mother-daughter relationship shapes their early self-awareness and emotional structure, and exerts a far-reaching influence on the construction of their subjectivity. Drawing on Kristeva's feminist psychoanalysis, Klein's object relations theory and Thornham's feminist film theories, this paper analyzes films including *Spring Tide*, *Song of Spring*, *Lady Bird* and *It's OK*. It finds that on-screen mother-daughter dynamics are far more complex than the warm sacrifice and reconciliation depicted in traditional ethical narratives. These relationships exist in a constant state of flux, rupture and reconstruction. The growth of female subjectivity inevitably follows a psychological journey: from symbiosis and control, to separation, and finally to reconstruction, accompanied by trauma, guilt, attachment, resistance and renewed understanding. Therefore, mother-daughter narratives in contemporary women's films reveal the deepest spiritual structures and emotional predicaments behind the construction of female subjectivity. Beyond family ethics, the mother-daughter bond has become a core theme for women's cinema

to explore female identity, desire, trauma and subjectivity. By portraying such relationships, women's films dismantle the myth of the ideal mother, expose oppression and attachment within female interpersonal relationships, and demonstrate women's potential to achieve spiritual awakening and reconstruction after painful separation. These films tell not only personal growth stories of individual women, but also reflect the shared struggles and self-liberation of women across generations under the influence of social and gender structures.

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