



Feminist Perspectives and Critique of Gender Inequality in the Suspense Film *Lost in the Stars*

Yunning Wang

Seoul National University, Seoul 08826, South Korea.

How to cite this paper: Yunning Wang. (2024) Feminist Perspectives and Critique of Gender Inequality in the Suspense Film *Lost in the Stars*. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(11), 2465-2468. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.11.001

Received: October 8, 2024

Accepted: November 5, 2024

Published: December 2, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Yunning Wang, Seoul National University, Seoul 08826, South Korea.

Abstract

This paper explores how *Lost in the Stars* reflects gender inequality through its narrative and cinematographic aesthetics. The film challenges traditional gender roles by intertwining love, control, and societal expectations, exposing power imbalances and the erosion of female identity within marriage. It demonstrates how women, initially silenced and oppressed, are entrapped through emotional manipulation and social discipline, often reduced to instruments of male interests. Through narrative reversals, the film emphasizes the possibility of reclaiming agency, showing how resistance and collective action can subvert oppressive systems. Furthermore, the film critiques the constraints placed on women by societal norms, highlighting the need to reconstruct female agency and redefine their roles beyond subservience. It argues that cinema functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a powerful platform for addressing social gender issues, encouraging viewers to reflect on these dynamics. Ultimately, *Lost in the Stars* advocates for a reimagining of relationships and social structures toward equality and women's empowerment in contemporary society.

Keywords

Feminist theory; Othering; Patriarchy; Female agency; Cultural transformation

1. Introduction

Film, as a vital medium, serves not only as a platform for storytelling and artistic expression but also as a critical tool for reflecting and addressing social issues. *Lost in the Stars* transcends personal emotional entanglements, offering a metaphorical critique of gender power dynamics. It reveals the erosion of women's identity and agency in marriage, portraying the "love and terror" within modern relationships. While women seek fulfillment within families, they often encounter emotional manipulation, domestic violence, and social marginalization.

This research analyzes the film's cinematography and narrative techniques to explore how they depict the repression and silencing of women, reflecting gender inequality and power imbalances within marriage. Drawing on feminist and philosophical theories—including Laura Mulvey's "male gaze," Simone de Beauvoir's "Otherness," and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity—this research investigates the film's gender ethics and social critique. It aims to reveal the structural inequalities women face in marriage and family while examining how cultural narratives can foster public awareness of gender equality and women's rights.

2. Cinematic Aesthetics and Visual Language: Power, Silence, and the Dissolution of Identity

In *Lost in the Stars*, the film employs sophisticated cinematic language and narrative structure to explore themes of power dynamics, silence, and the dissolution of identity. Through close-up shots, symbolic imagery, spatial composition, and the interplay of light and shadow, the film portrays the protagonist Li Muzi's repression and struggle

within marriage, revealing how she becomes an object under the control of her husband, He Fei, leading to her ultimate destruction.

The underwater sequences, such as the “starry sky beneath the sea” and the diving cage, not only symbolize the couple’s past intimacy but also foreshadow the lurking terror within their relationship. Initially, diving serves as a shared passion and emotional connection between the two. However, it eventually becomes a tool for He Fei to imprison and drown Li Muzi. The stark contrast between the serene underwater beauty and Li Muzi’s despair highlights the underlying manipulation and betrayal concealed beneath the surface of their affection. This visual metaphor underscores how intimate relationships can be twisted into instruments of domination (Wang, Y. N., 2022). The film’s use of animal imagery—such as frogs, spiders, and snakes—further deepens its symbolic dimension. These creatures evoke primal fear and chaos, mirroring He Fei’s psychological breakdown and the web of deceit and manipulation he has spun. Fragmented imagery intensifies the film’s atmosphere of suspense, enhancing its critique of power, fear, and betrayal.

Close-up shots frequently capture Li Muzi’s facial expressions and physical details, exposing her inner anxiety and helplessness. In the pivotal underwater scene where He Fei abandons her in the diving cage, the camera focuses on her desperate gaze, silently conveying the profound emotional trauma she experiences. These close-ups allow viewers to connect with her pain on a visceral level, emphasizing her silent suffering (Wang, Y. N., 2023). Li Muzi’s silence is not merely an absence of speech; it reflects the internal resistance suppressed by the oppressive nature of her marriage. The film also employs point-of-view (POV) shots to briefly immerse the audience in Li Muzi’s subjective experience. However, these moments are often interrupted by He Fei’s narrative, underscoring the asymmetry of gendered power. Even when Li Muzi momentarily gains narrative control, it is swiftly overtaken by male authority. As Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze” suggests, mainstream cinema often objectifies women, reducing them to visual objects for male pleasure. *Lost in the Stars* uses these shifts in perspective to reveal the silencing and control of women’s voices within marriage.

The film’s narrative structure, marked by multiple perspectives and narrative reversals, plays a crucial role in exposing the complex dynamics of marital power (Lee, H. E., 2018). In the first half of the film, the audience views the events through He Fei’s perspective, relying on his account to piece together the story of Li Muzi’s disappearance. However, as the plot unfolds, the truth emerges: Li Muzi’s “disappearance” was not an act of helpless escape but a carefully orchestrated murder, driven by He Fei’s need to pay off his debts and claim life insurance. This narrative reversal not only challenges conventional portrayals of female characters but also unveils the hypocrisy of societal norms. While He Fei’s account frames Li Muzi as a helpless wife in need of rescue, the reality reveals that she was merely a means to serve his selfish interests. The involvement of Li Muzi’s best friend, Shen Man, infuses the narrative with themes of female solidarity and awakening. Shen Man’s revenge against He Fei is not only an act of justice but also a powerful symbol of how women can resist and dismantle oppressive systems through unity. Her actions embody the restoration of female agency, aligning with the film’s broader critique of gender inequality.

Through its combination of cinematic language and narrative structure, *Lost in the Stars* explores the intertwining of love and terror within marriage while exposing the objectification and control of women in a patriarchal society. The film’s use of underwater aesthetics, animal symbolism, and shifting perspectives illustrates the struggle and awakening of women under oppression. Li Muzi’s death and Shen Man’s pursuit of justice convey the determination of women to resist and reclaim their autonomy, urging viewers to reflect on the objectification of women and the systemic gender inequality embedded within marriage.

3. The “Starry Sky Beneath the Sea” and Philosophical Reflections: Freedom and Oppression in Aesthetic Symbols

The “starry sky beneath the sea” scene in *Lost in the Stars* captures the audience’s imagination not only through its stunning visuals but also as a core expression of the film’s aesthetics. Beyond its narrative function, this scene transforms into a philosophical symbol, representing the entanglement of emotional confinement, the pursuit of freedom, and existential despair. Through this sequence, the film explores how individuals become imprisoned and oppressed beneath the romantic veneer of marriage, where love coexists with terror.

The “starry sky beneath the sea” creates an ethereal beauty, with vibrant colors and a tranquil underwater atmosphere evoking a sense of transcendence. However, this beauty serves not as a symbol of freedom but as an implicit metaphor for oppression and death. When Li Muzi gazes at the starry sky beneath the sea, what seems to be a romantic memory quickly turns into a powerless struggle. Her life ends in this exquisite yet cold space, symbolizing her

complete loss of self within her marriage. The visual contrast between openness and tranquility and the harsh reality of confinement and despair exposes the false freedom women experience within social structures.

Although the “starry sky beneath the sea” initially symbolizes the couple’s shared passion, He Fei exploits this memory to carry out his meticulously planned murder, revealing the fusion of love and terror. Drawing from Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, where the “mirror stage” reflects an illusory self-identity, Li Muzi faces a similar deceptive mirror of love. He Fei disguises control and violence beneath the guise of affection, reducing Li Muzi to an object serving his personal gain. This transformation exposes how, under patriarchal systems, women’s identities are eroded, forcing them to become “the Other,” dependent on male authority.

Although Li Muzi fails to escape her husband’s murderous plot, her friend Shen Man brings about her delayed redemption through the revelation of the truth and acts of revenge. This narrative twist symbolizes the reconstruction of female agency—indicating that, even in death, women can regain meaning through the actions of others. Shen Man’s intervention not only dismantles the monopoly of male power within the film but also conveys the importance of female solidarity and resistance (Jang, K., 2019). The “starry sky beneath the sea” raises questions about the essence of freedom: Is freedom merely an illusion? Through this scene, the film critiques the societal discipline imposed on gender, revealing how even seemingly romantic love can conceal deep-seated control and oppression. True freedom for women, the film suggests, cannot be achieved through superficial liberation but must be reconstructed through awakening and resistance. It calls on the audience to reflect on how genuine freedom requires breaking free from societal constraints and pursuing an independent existence (Kim, W. & Lee, J., 2020).

4. A Philosophical Analysis: The Struggle for Female Agency and Existence

Lost in the Stars examines how gendered discipline and the male gaze shape female identity, reducing women to objects of control and commodification. The protagonist, Li Muzi, embodies the imbalances of power within marriage and society. Entrapped by love-turned-terror, she is exploited even in death as a tool for financial gain. As Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory argues, traditional cinema presents women as objects of male desire, stripping them of agency. Li Muzi’s actions, choices, and identity are dictated by her husband, He Fei, and through side profiles and rear-view shots, she is visually depicted as a blurred, overlooked figure—symbolizing the erasure of her voice and autonomy.

Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of “Otherness” in *The Second Sex* explains how women are relegated to extensions of men, with their identities defined by male needs. In the film, Li Muzi is cast as the ideal wife—submissive, gentle, and unconditionally supportive of her husband, despite his gambling addiction. This role suppresses her personal needs, reducing her to a dependent “Other” within the marriage. Meanwhile, Michel Foucault’s theory of power reveals that societal control extends beyond violence, using disciplinary mechanisms to shape behavior and thought. In *Lost in the Stars*, marriage serves as such a disciplinary space, where Li Muzi is forced to embody the ideal wife, sacrificing her autonomy for her husband’s benefit. Her ability to express herself is systematically repressed, leaving her a silent symbol within their relationship.

The film’s cinematography uses low-saturation colors and confined compositions to portray Li Muzi’s psychological entrapment and loss of power. However, the narrative reversal disrupts this disciplinary system. Shen Man, Li Muzi’s best friend, meticulously exposes He Fei’s crimes, subjecting him to legal and social consequences. This shift in the narrative demonstrates the fluidity of power: He Fei, once in control, becomes the one controlled by the system he sought to exploit, ending up imprisoned. The film also reflects the real burdens women bear—household labor and emotional caregiving—tasks essential yet often overlooked by society (Kim, B. M., 2018). Li Muzi’s experience highlights how women are reduced to reproductive tools within marriage. He Fei’s reaction to her pregnancy—grieving the loss of their unborn child rather than Li Muzi—reveals his perception of her as primarily a reproductive instrument, with her intrinsic worth subordinated to her biological function.

Through its cinematography and narrative structure, *Lost in the Stars* critiques social norms and exposes how women are objectified, silenced, and controlled within marriage. The film’s narrative twists not only challenge traditional gender storytelling but also reveal the deconstruction of power dynamics. Li Muzi’s death and Shen Man’s revenge carry a powerful message: freedom and liberation for women cannot be passively awaited but must be actively pursued through resistance and action. The film urges viewers to reflect on gender inequality in marriage and society, advocating for legal and cultural transformations to foster genuine gender equality and the reconstruction of female agency (Kim, H., 2020).

5. Conclusion

Lost in the Stars explores the dynamics of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression through its suspenseful narrative, raising questions about the true meaning of marriage: Is it based on love, or merely a tool for reproduction and societal control? The film reveals how He Fei manipulates his marriage with Li Muzi to gain her wealth, treating her life as a commodified asset. Her tragic death symbolizes the erasure of women's value within patriarchal structures, where their reproductive roles outweigh their existence. He Fei's grief upon learning of her pregnancy highlights his regret for losing the unborn child, rather than remorse for her death, exposing the objectification of women as reproductive tools.

The film critiques the suppression of women's agency within marriage and the consequences of marrying into oppressive systems. Despite financially supporting her husband and offering forgiveness, Li Muzi's generosity is met with betrayal, reflecting patriarchal expectations for women to be endlessly self-sacrificing. Her tragic end demonstrates the societal devaluation of women's autonomy, as marriage becomes the cause of her demise rather than a source of fulfillment. Even with her wealth and independence, Li Muzi is constrained by societal norms that compel her to seek validation through marriage, illustrating how women's worth is often tied to traditional roles as wives and mothers.

Shen Man, Li Muzi's childhood friend, ultimately avenges her death, symbolizing the awakening and strength of female solidarity. Through Shen Man's character, the film shows how women can unite to resist oppressive systems. Her revenge serves as both an emotional release and a challenge to patriarchal power. By uncovering He Fei's crimes and ensuring his imprisonment, Shen Man's actions embody justice and female empowerment, demonstrating how women can reclaim control over their destinies through resistance and collective action.

The film raises a crucial question: How should women be treated equally in society? Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as the "Other," the narrative illustrates how Li Muzi is shaped by both He Fei and societal expectations, depriving her of autonomy. The film's multi-perspective narrative and cinematographic language reflect the struggle for liberation within marriage and societal oppression. While Li Muzi's tragic death evokes sorrow, Shen Man's revenge symbolizes the potential for women's self-reinvention through awareness and action.

Ultimately, *Lost in the Stars* offers more than a suspenseful narrative; it serves as a social critique of gender power dynamics and the awakening of female agency. Through Li Muzi's tragedy and Shen Man's revenge, the film explores how love and terror coexist within marriage, revealing how women are objectified and exploited under patriarchy. It emphasizes that women's values should extend beyond reproductive roles, advocating for independence and equality.

The film calls for legal and cultural reforms to promote gender equality, urging society to rethink the institution of marriage. A genuine marriage, the film suggests, should be built on love and equality rather than economic interests or societal norms. It reminds viewers that women deserve recognition as independent individuals, not merely as caretakers or reproductive agents. In delivering a powerful message, *Lost in the Stars* highlights that women's freedom and happiness can only be achieved through awakening and solidarity, urging everyone to contribute to building a more just and equal society.

References

- Jang, K. (2019). Feminism and human dignity. *Theological Perspective*, 207(207), 2-33.
- Kim, B. M. (2018). Between radical-cultural feminism and trans-queer politics: The case of U.S. feminist history. *Issues in Feminism*, 18(1), 229-265.
- Kim, H. (2020). Historiography of feminist studies in Korean contemporary art history. *Art History Forum*, 50(50), 57-79.
- Kim, W., & Lee, J. (2020). New trends in US feminism: With a focus on corporeal feminism. *The Journal of Political Science & Communication*, 23(1), 33-52.
- Lee, H. E. (2018). Feminist activism and media ethics: Exploring the relationship between the #MeToo movement and media. *Journal of Communication Research*, 55(3), 120-157.
- Wang, Y. N. (2022). The significance of art aesthetic value in art aesthetics. *Overseas Digest*, 21, 19-21.
- Wang, Y. N. (2023). Research on modern Chinese aesthetics. *New Education Era Electronic Magazine (Student Edition)*, 21, 160-162.