

# *A Research on the Evolution of Gender Stereotypes of Women in American Films*

Kexin Li<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*International College of Culture and Communication, Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310000, China*

*a. wqy@zjnu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Since ancient times, women have lived under the shadow of patriarchal society, but with the development of the times and the germination of feminism, the social stereotypes of women have changed, this paper summarizes the four significant aspects of the change in the social stereotypes of women through the analysis of two American films. These include the transformation of the image of women being rescued, the transformation of the idea of the female competitor, the transformation of the image of being flattened into a sexual resource, and the transformation of the image of the submissive in a patriarchal society. In addition, the article also analyzes the reasons for the change of these four stereotypes of women, the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the countermeasures. In general, the change of the stereotypes of women in society is not only conducive to the long-term development of women but also conducive to the expected progress of women in the whole society. In addition to the social, economic, and cultural benefits of this change in stereotypes, there are also risks associated with the opportunities that arise, as well as the disputes between men and women that may arise as a result of this change. Therefore, we should adopt a positive attitude towards the development of feminism. Still, we should always maintain the ability to think objectively in order to cope with the risks of the change.

**Keywords:** feminism, stereotype of women, evolution, American films

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, women have struggled in a patriarchal society, where patriarchal power has slowly dismantled women's subjectivity. Women have always played the role of "watched over". In traditional Chinese society, unmarried women are under the command of their fathers, married women are under the command of their husbands, and widowed widows are under the command of their sons. Women's social status was stigmatized and exploited. Stereotypes of women were gradually formed in society, and women gradually became subordinate to men and tools for men's pleasure.

However, with the development of the times, the public has been paying more and more attention to the concept of "feminism", and "feminism" has increasingly become an eye-catching keyword in the world cultural trend. When it comes to female protagonists in movies, we tend to associate them with glamorous images or soft and innocent images, and with movie actresses who are both talented and beautiful. However, on the big screen, these beautiful women are often portrayed as "ornamental"

images, where women are subordinate to men, highlighting their social status like decorations, and attracting men's attention off-screen. As more and more eyes are attracted to women, and as filmmakers gain more and more profits, the signs of objectification of women become more and more serious. This phenomenon in the movie industry is actually a reflection of society's misconception of women. However, with the development of the times, society's stereotypes of women have changed, and more and more women have gained social status through hard study and other means, thus gaining the right to speak, so that the voice of women's equality is heard by the whole society, which also promotes the germination of feminism. Feminism refers to a social theory and political movement that uses women's experiences as a source and motivation for the pursuit of gender affirmation, including the elimination of gender stereotypes, the fight to create educational and professional opportunities for women equal to those of men, and so on. Feminist conceptualization holds that the society of the time was built on a patriarchal system in which men were given more privileges than women.

The media, as an important vehicle for feminism, can reflect the changing stereotypes of women in society. Film and television media are some of the most exposed media to the general public, and their importance in ideological studies exceeds that of literature and art; therefore, presenting a positive image of women through films has become one of the most important ways to give voice to feminism.

In previous Hollywood movies, the image of women is often a vase to be viewed, waiting for a hero to appear and then be redeemed, without the ability to rely on themselves to solve problems, fight against difficulties, and change their destiny. The history of the modern feminist movement can be roughly divided into four waves. The first wave of feminism took place between the 19th and early 20th centuries and was intended to help women gain the right to vote. The second wave of feminism was the women's liberation movement, which began in the 1960s and was meant to gain legal and social equality for women. The third wave of feminism took place in the 1990s and focused on individuality and diversity, including the cool kid theory. The fourth wave of feminism began in 2012 and is characterized by the use of social media to combat sexual harassment, violence against women, and rape culture, most notably the "Me Too" movement. The fourth wave of feminism also seeks to help men of all ages overcome gender norms in society, among other things. Gradually, with the emergence of feminism, feminist consciousness was expressed in films. For example, the American movie *Thelma & Louise*, released in 1991, as a representative movie of feminism, tells the story of the excellence between women, highlights the awakening of women's consciousness, and women instinctively sympathize with the girl's encounter and help each other in difficulties, and the whole movie completes the counterattack on the male-dominated society's objectification of women and flattening of women into sexual resources. Then there's *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, released in 2014, which documents the contributions of pioneers who fought for women's rights. The story takes place during the second feminist period in history when a women's liberation movement arose in Western society. Its main goal was to fight for gender equality and women's rights, but also against sexism and gender violence. The movie tells the story of the problems that preceded the women's liberation movement, ranging from unequal access to education and jobs to frequent domestic violence and sexual harassment, to the loss of women's reproductive freedom, which led to the second wave of women's movement in 1966-1971. The pioneers spoke out for women's self-awareness, equal rights, and future, fought for the triumph of feminism, and pushed for the unity of women around the globe. The reason I chose *Thelma & Louise* is that it was nominated for Best Picture in the Motion Picture and Drama categories at the 49th Golden Globe Awards, and even though it was released more than thirty years ago, it is still the best movie in the hearts of many viewers, and there are too many of us women who, like the protagonist of the film, still suffer from oppression and need to be awakened. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, a documentary focusing on the second wave of

the feminist movement, is a good example of how society and the media have changed their attitudes towards women, showing the problems encountered prior to the women's liberation movement, from unequal access to education and job discrimination to domestic violence and discrimination. The film shows the problems encountered before the women's liberation movement, from unequal access to education and job discrimination to domestic violence and sexual harassment, and that what we have now is the result of the efforts of the pioneers of feminism, and shows us that we are never alone in our fight for equal rights for women, but that thousands of women have utilized their beauty, intelligence, gentleness, and strength to fight for the freedom that their compatriots aspire to. Both movies are famous feminist movies and focus on the inequalities that women encounter in their lives and later portray how women use their wisdom and strength to gain equality and freedom. The portrayal of unfree and unprotected women in *Thelma & Louise* epitomized the American society at that time and resonated with the audience. *She's beautiful when she's angry*, on the other hand, is more universal, encompassing the rise of women's groups and women's movements of different races and sexual orientations, and depicting how feminism in all its genres has spoken out for women's rights, reflecting the efforts of women around the world to strive for equality for themselves. The movie is a great example of the efforts of women around the world to fight for their equality. These two films are chronologically related, and after the second feminist movement shown in *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, *Thelma & Louise* shows the true friendship between girls and their resistance to male oppression, and if not free, then rather be free. *Thelma & Louise* is a feminist work that shows the true friendship between girls and their resistance to male oppression, and the female spirit of "If not free, then I would rather die".

## 2. Literature Review

Aune & Holyoak refer to contemporary British feminist activists and the "third wave", a new set of feminist activities such as online activism, magazines, and media platforms such as blogs, which we call the "third wave" feminism [1]. "Third Wave" Feminism. This paper contrasts the similarities and differences between the second and third waves in positioning contemporary British feminism. The ambivalent and cynical portrayal of the third wave in the mass media also serves as a dilemma for third-wave feminism. Haines EL & Deaux K & Lofaro N made a comparison in response to societal perceptions of gender stereotypes from 1983 to 2014 and found that women's and men's perceptions of gender stereotypes have occurred [2]. Han also cited the prominent Chinese women's watchdog organization, Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), a prominent Chinese women's watchdog organization, as an example of how the women's group uses its social media platforms to respond to women's discrimination in the Chinese context [3]. Huang also analyzes the contradictions and conflicts behind the feminist debate among Chinese university students that appeared on Chinese social media in 2013, which is both a diverse and free platform and a tool for the proliferation of misogynistic sentiments online tool [4]. Wang further discusses the importance of social media for feminism in contemporary China and introduces two important groups: "Women's Voice" and "Women's Awakening" [5]. Over the past few years, these feminists have utilized social media to express a particular presence or voice that has been difficult to maintain within the traditional Chinese feminist paradigm. While social media has not overcome all of the obstacles to feminism's growing influence in China, these media groups have become major voices of feminism and youth activism in China today, and are instructive in how we understand contemporary feminism in an international context. Feminism is inextricably linked to society and politics, and the characteristics of the establishment of communicative relationships between feminist organizations, media outlets, and media consumers through interdisciplinary approaches, such as the use of sociological knowledge, as well as media studies methods. In addition, Li further examines the tripartite relationship between the state, the media, and the two generations of women's movements in China, and by comparing the

generational differences of first-generation women's NGOs in China, concludes that their main differences lie in the ways of mobilization and access to key political resources, and even depend on their relationship with the state [6]. In addition, changes in the relationship between the state and the feminist movement are also reflected in the differences in the relationship between the two generations of feminist movements and the media. Due to the differences between the two generations of feminists in terms of their organizational models, resource conditions, and status, they adopted different media strategies in promoting the feminist movement. The ultimate conclusion is that the relationship between the media and the women's movement is influenced and even determined by their respective relationships with the state. Similarly, Tan reveals the dynamic relationship between state surveillance and imputation, media activism, and feminist politics in China by examining feminist media practices before and after the March 2015 incident in which five young feminists were detained for spreading messages against sexual harassment on public transportation [7]. By exploring the practices of young feminist activists, the paper argues that the role of the media in the new wave of feminism can be better understood as a kind of "digital camouflage" in three ways. In addition, the paper incorporates Ellemers' definition of the nature as well as the content of gender stereotypes, which is mentioned in the paper as influencing the way people pay attention to, interpret, and remember information about themselves and others, and can help the paper to better explain the changing attitudes of social groups towards women and the rise of feminism [8]. This paper also cites the findings of Susan A, which in addition to gender, the nature and meaning of gender stereotypes, include how gender stereotypes are formed and the impact they have on individuals, relationships, and society, and most importantly, discusses the alternatives we have to traditional gender stereotypes and the ways in which they can be realized [9]. Rudman & Phelan further investigated the rebound effect of eliminating gender stereotypes in organizations as a social and economic retaliation for deviant behaviors and understanding this rebound mechanism will help us to better eliminate stereotypes [10].

### 3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research method to observe feminist films from the 1990s to the 1920s and analyze the budding trend of feminism shown in the films by analyzing the film plots, methods of characterization, and other forms of media expression, including the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*, the 2014 film *She's beautiful when she's angry* two movies. The principle of observation is to analyze the values that the film is trying to express through objective ways of characterization, such as styling and lighting, as well as objective factors, such as plot and lines, and synthesizing the direction of the story, rather than through subjective understanding.

### 4. Result

Within these two movies, we can find a shift in four stereotypes about women. Firstly, the stereotype of women originally being saved has been transformed, and women begin to become capable of bravely defending their legitimate rights and interests. In *Thelma & Louise*, Thelma almost suffers from rape because she accepts a man's request for a dance, but fortunately, Louise arrives in time to shoot the man and protect her friend's rights and interests. In the movie, Thelma goes from crying to calmly robbing a store and holding a traffic cop hostage, becoming Louise's strong backer from a weak person who is dragging her feet. In *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, the entire documentary portrays various genres of feminism speaking out in anger for women's rights. They speak out for women's self-knowledge, for the alleviation of discrimination against women in society, and for grasping women's future, and women protect themselves with their own wisdom and strength. Secondly, there is a shift in the stereotype of the old society where women were often female

competitors. In the past, women often fought for men's favor and lost their lives. In these two movies, women unite to protect each other and defend their legal rights, in addition to being strong backers of each other. In *Thelma & Louise*, the friendship between women is powerfully portrayed, they can go through fire for each other, Louise in order to protect Thelma in the desperate situation, the two together to start the road to escape, and on the way to escape, Thelma is also from naive and easy to be deceived girl into can protect Louise's backing. In "*She's Beautiful When She's Angry*", "Women of the world unite" appears as a slogan in all the major marches, and a participant once said, "I'll never be liberated unless all the women of the world are liberated. I can never be liberated until all women have been liberated". The film also emphasizes the beauty of all women, reflecting the image of solidarity and love among women. Thirdly, the stereotype that traditional society objectifies women as a kind of sexual resource is transformed. In *Thelma & Louise*, Louise shoots a strange man in order to help her best friend fight against the strange man's aggression, which impacts the male chauvinistic notion of traditional society that objectifies women, flattens them into a kind of sexual resource, and tramples on the legitimate rights and interests of women. In *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, there is an interview clip about this phenomenon, A woman said "In their eyes, you are a daughter, a wife, a mother, but not yourself!" Such words reflect the phenomenon that women are flattened into sexual resources under the oppression of traditional patriarchal society, and such opposition is a challenge to traditional stereotypes. Fourthly, there is a shift in the notion that women are naturally subservient to men in traditional society. In *Thelma & Louise*, Louise and Thelma go on a vacation. Thelma's husband is a controlling and bad-tempered man, and it is impossible for him to approve a vacation with his girlfriends, so Thelma decides to take the first step and then take the second step, which challenges the stereotype that women have to be submissive to men. In "*She's Beautiful When She's Angry*", the women bravely defy the rules of a patriarchal society by fighting for equal pay for men and women, challenging unequal rules, and fighting for their right to know and be equal, which is a way of breaking free from the control of a patriarchal society.

## 5. Discussion

There are a number of reasons, including military, economic, and cultural, for the shift away from the four stereotypes mentioned earlier, including the image of women as rescued, the image of the female participant, the image of the default sexual resource in traditional society, and the image of the submissive who is ordered by men. Militarily, as a result of the scarcity of male labor after World War I and II, more and more women had jobs and incomes as well as egos. From pilots to commanders, manipulators to astronauts, there were women everywhere there were soldiers. At the outbreak of war in 1914, there were only 175,000 women employed in the whole of Britain, but by 1917 this figure had soared to 750,000, and after the Second World War in 1945, women held 37% of all jobs in the world. Women proved that they weren't parasites living amongst men, and more and more women had the autonomy to marry. More and more women had the ability to marry and fall in love on their own and gained more and more social abilities, and the feminist movement became an important focus in countries around the world after World War II. Economically, with the increase of women's jobs, women gained financial independence, the ability to make decisions freely, and were treated more and more fairly by others, and more and more had the right to decide their own lifestyles. On the cultural level, with the continuous development of feminism and the rise of the four feminist movements, more and more women realize that they as women have the wisdom and character, as well as the ability to change the world, and thus there are more and more women who want to break free and become their own protagonists.

The transformation of the image of women being rescued brings many benefits. On the cultural level, it is conducive to the development of feminism, as more and more women realize the wrongness of the image of women needing to be rescued, and actively participate in attempts to fight for equal

rights for their fellow women, so that more and more women's voices and demands can be heard, which is conducive to the development of feminist culture. On the social level, after realizing that they have the ability to take charge of the situation, women can actively stand up to solve the social problems of inequality faced by women, such as fighting for equal pay for equal work between men and women, challenging unequal rules, fighting for their right to know and to vote, and fighting for the right to control the autonomy of their own bodies, and so on. Economically, the emergence of women's sense of autonomy may lead to the creation and development of a range of industries that please women themselves, and contribute to the economic development of society as a whole. In order to maintain these benefits, we can use the media to publicize the benefits of feminism at the cultural, social, and economic levels in order to motivate the public to try. In addition to the benefits, there are also downsides, as change is bound to bring about shocks, and there may be skepticism in society that feminists need to face objectively and address.

The change in the stereotype of women's femininity has also brought many benefits. First of all, at the social level, it is conducive to women's solidarity in the fight for equal rights for women, promoting the development of feminism, and better solving the existing social problems. On the cultural level, the united women can create a new female culture that is different from the culture of female rivalry, similar to the new culture of camaraderie in which women help women unconditionally. In order to maintain the benefits of this, we can start by doing small things in our lives, such as helping women in need, posting about women's solidarity on social media, and so on. Of course, there are some drawbacks to this shift, as some women may misuse the concept of "anti-female competition" to explain their irrational attacks on others, and there may even be a phenomenon of women organizing themselves in groups to exclude men, resulting in a confrontation between men and women. In the face of this phenomenon, we need to analyze it rationally, not to be dominated by public opinion, and to insist on the value of equality between men and women.

There are also many benefits to be gained from a shift in the image of women as sexual resources and of men as commanders and obeyers. At the personal level, this change can make some women rethink their own value, and discover the attractive parts of women besides beauty, such as wisdom, perseverance, execution, and other aspects of ability, which is conducive to the long-term development of the individual, so that the individual has the hard power to pry the social resources for the value of the exchange, and even help other people to realize the value of the inheritance. At the social level, when women realize that they have abilities beyond the value of sexual resources, more and more women will awaken to the fact that they are striving to acquire knowledge to enhance their personal strengths, obtaining a degree so that they can enter the field of law or the media, so that the voices representing women's needs can be heard by the general public, helping to solve the social problems faced by women. In order to maintain these benefits, it would be good to utilize public opinion to promote equality in the workplace for women in the legal and media fields.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of two American films, this paper summarizes the transformation of social stereotypes of women with the development of feminism. Through the comparison and analysis of the plots and lines of the two films, four major changes are summarized: firstly, the stereotype of the image of women as rescued has changed, then the stereotype of women competing for men's favor has changed, secondly, the stereotype of objectifying women as a kind of sexual resource has changed, and lastly, the stereotype of women as the submissive to men's commands has changed. The last is the stereotype of women as subservient to men's commands. There are three main reasons for these shifts in stereotypes, including the improvement of women's status in the military due to the increase in women's employment due to the shortage of men in the labor force after World War I and World War II, the liberation of women due to the increase in women's employment in the economy, and the

impact of the feminist movement on the cultural level. Each of these shifts has its own value and drawbacks. For example, the shift in the image of women as rescuers has brought the benefits of culturally promoting feminism, socially solving the social problem of women's inequality, and economically promoting women's economic development, while at the same time posing the risk of social unrest. The change in the stereotype of women participating in female competitions for male favor has brought social and cultural benefits, such as the promotion of feminism and the creation of a culture of female solidarity, etc., but at the same time, it also brings the potential risk of creating a confrontation between men and women. Changing the stereotype of women as sexual resources and submissive to men's commands brings both individual and societal benefits, such as the development of women's personal values, and societal benefits such as the development of feminism and equal rights for all women. In addition, the article proposes ways to maintain these positive effects and measures to address the negative ones.

## References

- [1] Aune, K., Holyoak R. (2017) *Navigating the third wave: Contemporary UK feminist activists and "third-wave feminism."* *Feminist Theory*. 19(2), 183-203.
- [2] Haines, E.L., Deaux, K., Lofaro, N. (2016) *The Times They Are a-Changing ... or Are They Not? A Comparison of Gender Stereotypes, 1983–2014.* *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 40(3), 353-363.
- [3] Han, X. (2018) *Searching for an online space for feminism? The Chinese feminist group Gender Watch Women's Voice and its changing approaches to online misogyny.* *Feminist Media Studies*. 18(4), 734-749.
- [4] Huang, Y. (2016) *War on women: interlocking conflicts within The Vagina Monologues in China.* *Asian Journal of Communication*. 26(5), 466-484.
- [5] Wang B, Driscoll C. (2019) *Chinese feminists on social media: articulating different voices, building strategic alliances.* *Continuum*. 33(1), 1-15.
- [6] Li, J., Li, X. (2017) *Media as a core political resource: the young feminist movements in China.* *Chinese Journal of Communication*. 10(1), 54-71.
- [7] Tan, J. (2017) *Digital masquerading: Feminist media activism in China.* *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*. 13(2), 171-186.
- [8] Ellemers, N. (2018) *Gender Stereotypes.* *Annual Review of Psychology*. 69(1), 275-298.
- [9] Basow, S. A. (1992). *Gender: Stereotypes and roles (3rd ed.)*. Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.
- [10] Rudman, L.A., Phelan, J.E. (2008) *Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations.* *Research in Organizational Behavior*. 28, 61-79.