

Research on Gender Power Relations in the Marriage System: Taking the Images of Wives and Concubines in "Raise the Red Lantern" as an Example

Boran Yang

Affiliation: Jinan New Channel -JUTES High School, Jinan, 250000, China

Email: 1785685944@qq.com

Abstract

This article takes the images of wives and concubines in the film "Raise the Red Lantern" as the entry point to deeply analyze the gender power relations in the marriage system. Through a detailed analysis of the status, behavioral manifestations and interactions between the wives and concubines in the film, it reveals that under the traditional marriage system, men hold dominant power by virtue of their economic and social status advantages, while women are in a subordinate position of being dominated and oppressed. This gender power relationship is not only reflected in the material aspect, but more profoundly in the spiritual aspect, causing serious constraints and harm to women's physical and mental health. Meanwhile, this article also explores the social and cultural roots of the formation of this gender power relationship and its implications for contemporary society.

Keywords: Institution of marriage; Gender power relations; Raise the Red Lantern High; Image of wives and concubines.

1. Introduction

As a key component of the social system, the institution of marriage profoundly reflects and shapes the gender structure and power distribution pattern of society ^[1]. Throughout the long evolution of human society, the marriage system has undergone multiple changes. However, the issue of gender power inequality has always been a constant companion, becoming an important factor restricting social equity and human development.

From a historical perspective, marriage institutions in different cultures and social forms exhibit diverse characteristics, but there is a widespread phenomenon of male dominance and female subordination ^[2]. In the traditional agricultural society, men dominated production activities by virtue of their physical strength, thereby controlling the economic resources and decision-making power of the family. Women, on the other hand, were confined within the family, shouldering responsibilities such as childbirth and household chores, and their social status and say were greatly restricted. With the advancement of industrialization and modernization, women's social participation has gradually increased, but the issue of gender power inequality in the marriage system has not been fundamentally resolved.

In contemporary society, although gender equality is explicitly advocated at the legal level, in real life, the gender power disparity in marriage remains significant. For instance, women often encounter more restrictions and challenges in aspects such as family decision-making, financial management, and career development ^[3]. This inequality not only affects individuals' sense of happiness and self-actualization, but also has a negative impact on the harmony, stability and sustainable development of society.

The film "Raise the Red Lantern" offers a vivid case for the study of gender power relations in the marriage system with its unique artistic perspective and profound social connotations. This film is adapted from Su Tong's novel "A Group of Wives and Concubines", directed by Zhang Yimou. It vividly depicts the tragic fate of women and the severe imbalance of gender power under the feudal marriage system after a young female college student, Song Lian, is forced to marry into the Chen family and become the fourth wife, and then engages in a fierce struggle with the other three wives over the favor of the master ^[4]. A thorough study of the images of wives and concubines in this film can help us gain a deeper understanding of the operational mechanism of gender power relations in traditional marriage systems and the profound impact such relations have on women's physical and mental health, thereby providing beneficial inspirations for promoting gender equality in contemporary society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on the Institution of Marriage and Gender Relations

Gender theory holds that gender is not solely determined by biological factors but is a product of social and cultural construction^[5]. Through a series of cultural norms, values and institutional arrangements, society has shaped different gender roles and behavioral patterns for men and women. In the institution of marriage, gender theory emphasizes that men are given a dominant and dominant role, while women are expected to play a submissive and dependent role. This stereotype of gender roles profoundly influences the distribution of power and interaction patterns in marriage, making men often have more decision-making and control power in marriage, while women are in a relatively disadvantaged position.

For instance, in traditional concepts, men are regarded as the breadwinners of the family, responsible for going out to work and earn money to support the family. Women, on the other hand, are believed to focus on family affairs and take care of their family members and children. This division of labor model not only restricts women's career development and economic independence, but also further strengthens men's dominant position in marriage. Gender theory provides an important theoretical framework for us to understand the formation and maintenance of gender power relations in the marriage system, helping us recognize that gender inequality does not exist naturally but is the result of social and cultural construction.

Power theory focuses on the distribution and operational mechanisms of power in social relations. In the institution of marriage, power is manifested in multiple aspects, including economic control, decision-making, emotional dominance, etc.^[7] According to the theory of power, power in marriage is not evenly distributed but rather shows obvious inequality. Men usually hold the dominant power in marriage by virtue of their advantageous position in the social structure, such as economic resources and social status, while women, due to the lack of corresponding resources and status, are often in a dominated position.

Power theory also emphasizes the dynamics and interactivity of power. In a marital relationship, power is not fixed but changes as the interaction between the two parties and the circumstances change. For instance, when women achieve economic independence or success in their career development, their power status in marriage may rise accordingly, thereby posing a challenge to the existing gender power relationship. Power theory provides us with a powerful tool to analyze the complexity and variability of gender power relations in the institution of marriage.

2.2 Research Related to "Raise the Red Lantern"

Since the release of "Raise the Red Lantern", it has received extensive attention from the academic community. Many scholars have analyzed and interpreted the film from different perspectives. Some scholars, from the perspective of film art, have explored the characteristics and artistic value of the narrative structure, picture composition, color application and other aspects of films. Some scholars, from the perspective of cultural studies, have analyzed issues such as feudal culture, traditional customs and the fate of women reflected in the film. Some scholars, from the perspective of gender studies, have pointed out the gender discrimination and gender power inequality existing in the film, but the in-depth analysis of gender power relations in the marriage system is still not comprehensive and systematic enough.

3. The Manifestation of Gender Power Relations in the Marriage System: Taking the Images of Wives and Concubines in "Raise the Red Lantern" as an Example

3.1 Power Imbalance Caused by Economic Dependence

In the traditional marriage system, economic factors are one of the important factors influencing gender power relations. In the Chen Mansion depicted in "Raise the Red Lantern", the male head of the household, Chen Zuoqian, holds the economic power of the family, while the four wives are completely dependent on his financial support. This economic dependence puts wives in a passive and subordinate position in marriage. To obtain financial security and preferential treatment in life, they have no choice but to vie for the favor of their husbands.

For instance, Songlian, as a young female college student, originally had her own ideals and pursuits. However, under the pressure of her family's financial difficulties, she had no choice but to marry Chen Zuoqian as her fourth wife. After entering the Chen Mansion, she found that her life was completely dependent on her master's preferences and favor. When she was favored by her master, she could enjoy sumptuous meals, comfortable accommodation and the service of servants. Once one loses favor, they will face the situation of being neglected and bullied. This economic dependence forced Songlian to get involved in the power struggle for favor with other wives, thus falling into the trap of gender power.

3.2 Physical Discipline and the Manipulation of Gender Power

In the film, the Chen family strictly disciplines the bodies of their wives through a series of rules and rituals, thereby strengthening men's gender rights. Among them, the most representative one is the "lighting the lamp - massaging the Feet" ceremony. Every night, the master would choose a lady's courtyard to light a lamp. The lady whose lamp was lit could enjoy the treatment of having her feet massaged. This was not only a symbol of status and position but also a sign of the master's favor.

This kind of ritual may seem like a blessing to the wives, but in fact, it is a form of male manipulation and dominance over the female body. By lighting lamps and massaging feet, the master materialized his power. In order to obtain this treatment symbolizing power, the wives had to strive to cater to the master's preferences and regulate their own behavior and bodies. For instance, the third wife, Mei Shan, in order to attract the master's attention, often dressed up gorgeously and performed operas in the courtyard. When Songlian first entered the Chen Mansion, she found this ritual novel and confusing. However, as her life in the mansion deepened, she gradually became assimilated by it and began to compete fiercely with other wives for the sake of lighting the lamps.

3.3 Emotional Repression and Deprivation of Gender Rights

In the traditional marriage system, women's emotional needs are often ignored and suppressed, while men, relying on their own power, freely control women's emotions. In "Raise the Red Lantern", although the four wives live under the same roof, they are filled with jealousy, suspicion and hatred towards each other. Their emotional world is extremely lacking and distorted.

As the male leader in the marriage, Master Chen Zuoqian has a cold and selfish attitude towards his wives' emotions. He favored or neglected a certain wife at will according to his own desires and preferences, completely disregarding their feelings. For instance, when Songlian pretended to be pregnant to win the master's favor, after learning the truth, the master not only failed to show understanding and comfort to her, but also severely punished her, sealing the lamp off her, leaving her in a desperate situation. This arbitrary domination and deprivation of women's emotions further highlights the absolute power of men in marriage and the helplessness and vulnerability of women emotionally.

3.4 Absence of Discourse and Suppression of Gender Power

In the film, men hold the absolute say, while women are in a state of lacking words. As the head of the family, Chen Zuoqian's words and decisions have unassailable authority, and his wives can only follow his arrangements and instructions. For instance, when dealing with household affairs, the master has absolute decision-making power, while the wives have no right to express their opinions. When interacting with the outside world, it was the master who represented the family, while the wives were confined within the high walls of the Chen Mansion and were unable to participate in social activities or express their voices.

In addition, the film also shows through some details the suppression of women's speech. For instance, when Songlian was communicating with her master and other wives, she was often interrupted or ignored, and her thoughts and feelings did not receive the respect and attention they deserved. The lack of such a right to speak makes it impossible for women to safeguard their rights and interests in marriage, further exacerbating the imbalance of gender power.

4. The Social and Cultural Roots of the Formation of Gender Power Relations in the Marriage System

4.1 The Influence of Feudal Ethics and Teachings

Feudal ethics and morality were one of the significant features of traditional Chinese society. They emphasized concepts such as male superiority and female inferiority, and the three obediences and four virtues, strictly regulating and restricting women's behaviors and thoughts. Against the backdrop of The Times reflected in "Raise the Red Lantern", feudal ethics and morality have been deeply rooted in people's hearts and have become an important ideological foundation for maintaining the gender power relationship in the marriage system.

Under the influence of feudal ethics and morality, women were instilled with the idea of obedience, patience and dependence on men from a young age. They placed their entire destiny in marriage, believing that it was a matter of course to marry a chicken or a dog. This kind of mindset makes women lack autonomy and the spirit of resistance in marriage, and they are willing to accept the domination and oppression of men.

4.2 The Need for the Family System

In traditional Chinese society, the family system was the basic organizational form of society, and the interests of the family were above all else. Marriage, as an important means for the continuation and development of a family, is often regarded as an alliance and transaction among families. Against this backdrop, women's marriages are often not based on personal feelings and wills, but rather are subject to the interests and arrangements of the family.

In the Chen Mansion, the existence of the four wives was not merely to satisfy the personal desires of the master, but more importantly, to carry on the family line and expand the family's influence. Therefore, their roles and status in marriage are strictly limited, and they must abide by the family's rules and arrangements and serve the family's interests. The need for this family system further strengthened the gender power relationship in the marriage system, making women the victims of family interests.

4.3 Inheritance of Male Chauvinistic Culture

Male chauvinistic culture refers to a cultural concept centered on men, emphasizing their superiority and dominant position. In Chinese history, the culture of male chauvinism has a long history. After thousands of years of inheritance and development, it has been deeply rooted in all aspects of society. In the marriage system, male chauvinistic culture is manifested as men's dominance over marriage and their control over women.

The Chen family in the film "Raise the Red Lantern" is a typical microcosm of a patriarchal society. Master Chen Zuoqian holds absolute authority in the family. He can freely decide the fates of his wives, while they can only submit passively and dare not resist in the slightest. The inheritance of this patriarchal culture has enabled the gender power relationship in the marriage system to be maintained and consolidated for a long time.

5. Implications for Contemporary Society

5.1 Promote Gender Equality Education

The issue of gender power inequality in the marriage system revealed in "Raise the Red Lantern" has been greatly improved in contemporary society, but it still exists to a certain extent. Therefore, it is of vital importance to strengthen gender equality education. By carrying out gender equality education in schools, families and society, popularizing the concept of gender equality, eliminating the awareness of gender discrimination, cultivating people's sense of equality and values of respecting others, the occurrence of gender power inequality can be prevented from the ideological root.

5.2 Improve Legal and Regulatory Guarantees

Laws and regulations are important means to maintain social fairness and justice and safeguard citizens' rights and interests. To promote gender equality in the marriage system, it is necessary to further improve relevant laws and regulations, explicitly prohibit gender discrimination and gender-based violence, and increase the punishment for acts that infringe upon women's rights and interests. At the same time, it is necessary to enhance the publicity and popularization of laws and regulations, raise women's legal awareness and self-protection ability, so that they can safeguard their legitimate rights and interests in accordance with the law when facing issues of gender power inequality.

5.3 Promote Women's Economic Independence

Economic independence is the foundation for women to achieve autonomy and equality. In contemporary society, it is necessary to encourage and support women to actively participate in social and economic activities, provide more employment opportunities and career development platforms, eliminate employment discrimination, and ensure that women enjoy equal rights with men in terms of employment, promotion and other aspects. By promoting women's economic independence and reducing their economic dependence on men, we can enhance women's say and decision-making power in marriage and achieve true gender equality.

6. Conclusion

The film "Raise the Red Lantern" vividly portrays the tragic fate of women and the serious imbalance of gender power in the traditional marriage system with its profound connotations and unique artistic techniques. Through the analysis of the images of wives and concubines in the film, we can see that under the traditional marriage system, men held dominant power by virtue of their economic and social status advantages, while women were in a subordinate position of being dominated and oppressed. This gender power relationship is not only reflected in the material aspect, but more profoundly in the spiritual aspect, causing serious constraints and harm to women's physical and mental health.

The formation of gender power relations in the marriage system has profound social and cultural roots. Factors such as feudal ethics, family systems, and male chauvinistic culture are intertwined, jointly maintaining and strengthening this unequal gender power structure. However, with the development of The Times and the progress of society, gender equality has become a consensus and pursuit in today's society.

The issues revealed in "Raise the Red Lantern" have significant implications for contemporary society. We should start from promoting gender equality education, improving laws and regulations to ensure and promote women's economic independence, and strive to eliminate gender power inequality in the marriage system, and build a fairer, more harmonious and equal marital and family relationship and social environment. Let every woman enjoy equal rights and dignity in marriage and realize her own life value.

Through the study of "Raise the Red Lantern", we can not only better understand the gender power relations in the traditional marriage system, but also draw lessons from it, providing useful references and inspirations for promoting the process of gender equality in contemporary society. It is hoped that in the future society, gender equality can truly become a reality, and everyone can pursue a happy life in a free and equal environment.

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