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On the Cultivation of Female Consciousness From the Movie *Mona Lisa Smile*

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ABSTRACT

Mona Lisa Smile is a movie that takes female growth as topic, the article will differentiate the role of young lady, daughter and female student to reveal the fact that today's female college students are fettered by gender development as those in the film. In the film, the feminist consciousness of these students heads for awakening step by step under the encouragement of Katherine. They change from passively accepting their fate to active selection, from the role of aesthetic objects shifting into aesthetic subjects, from the weak to the strong. This cultivation of female consciousness is still worth drawing on.

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1 Introduction

Mona Lisa Smile is a 2004 American drama film. The famous Wellesley College was the background for this film. It narrates the story that a teacher in history of art department Katherine edifies these female students thinking independently by her own original view and unique teaching style, starring Hollywood actress Julia Roberts. Although the film sets in post-war period, i.e., the recession period which was gone, the war changes American's former thinking, feminist consciousness arouses, coming out from family circle to society. The new value stream suffers from traditional obstruction. But today we can still benefit a lot from Katherine's teaching technique to these female students in Wellesley College in cultivating today's female students' feminine consciousness.

2 Three Kinds of Identity of Female Students: Young Girl, Daughter and Student

Although those students in the movie *Mona Lisa Smile* come from American upper-class society family of 1950s, they share the similar identity with today's female college students. Most are 16 to 23 years old, playing the role of daughter at home and being female students in school eager for learning. These three kinds of identities not only fix their position both in society and at home, but also set their future road in advance to a certain degree.

After experiencing development in secondary sex character, the young girls clearly feel the dissimilarity in outward appearance, physical strength, and intelligence and so forth with their male peers. Those girls that enjoy the original height advantage suddenly

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discover that the boys imperceptibly exceed themselves, and their own height seems to stop growing; they can tussle with boys before and come out even. But now these boys grow too strong to be pushed a little forward. They now have their own intimate female friends and often chat with each other, and “boys” is one of the popular topics among them, but they are distancing themselves from their childhood male playmate. These changes are natural, as the French feminist leading authority Simone de Beauvoir writes in her book *The Second Sex*: female is not an inborn sex, but rather the successive evolution of it.

The young girls undertake more duties than their brothers for the home: they need to look after their younger brother or sister, do laundry, cook meals, do cleaning, sometimes do the farms work. Compared with boys, the young girls are more confined to family field. Subjectively, sharing house duties will lighten the burden on their mothers; objectively, this can shape them into qualified housewives in the future. In school, the young girls show not less desire for learning and self-taught ability than boys. However, those leading-edge areas are still led by males. Female college students are stereotyped as deliberate in thinking yet lack of innovation, therefore the arts department and the like are filled mostly with female college students, whereas the high-tech science or engineering field beholds few shadows of them. The difference on picking majors causes by on the one hand the biological difference between male and female. On the other hand, female will put most energy into family life after graduation. Work is nothing but a small part of their daily life.

It's not difficult to conclude from the above analysis that the identity among young girl, daughter and student is not inborn, but rather given by the society. The female university students that we cultivate now are no fundamental difference with those upper-class females who study at American famous Ivy League half a century ago. The female college students are still cultivated in a traditional way by our family, school and society. That the scene of students getting married and raising their children in Wellesley College film will reappear in real life.

3 The Awakening of Female Consciousness: Passive Acceptance and Active Selection

The movie *Mona Lisa Smile* particularly made a show of two students' marriage, Betty and Joan. Betty is the daughter of the school's board director, a school newspaper commentator. Under the influence of traditional thought, Betty thinks that the girl of Wellesley should undertake “the role they are born to”, namely a good wife and a good mother. She walks into conjugal hall with a boy from an eminent family compliant with her parents' wishes. Their marriage seems to be well matched and happy, but in reality her husband conducts improper behavior and leaves her to suffer loneliness. Betty's marriage has all characteristics of perfect life in her ideal: Of equal status match, a prospect husband graduating from famous university, modernized furniture adornment, a fairy wedding except for the husband's love.

There isn't any cushion of the premarital love between these couples in the film. Only while they are getting married, her mother gives a piece of advice on how to deal with family relationship “a good wife lets her husband think that everything's his idea, even when it's not” and the teacher of wedding etiquette “teaching” a few years from now your sole responsibility, the will be taking care of your husband and children. You may all here for an easy A, but the grade that matters the most is one he gives you, not me. Here we see a husband's authority over his wife and the wife's smartly resistance with it. Betty, who respects for tradition, obeys her parents, submits to the will of Heaven, has plenty of fantasies about perfect marriage, but she neglects that all illusions will have no solid foundation without love.

Joan similarly walks into the hall of marriage. But her way to marriage has more twists and turns than Betty. Joan is a top student in the school, has a series of important title, scores all as, and pursues the law degree in a preparatory school. She has deep affection with her boyfriend who studies in Harvard and will soon head for marriage. But the arrival of Katharine stirs Joan' calm inner part. After knowing that Joan has the intention to study law, Katharine helped Joan to apply for Yale law school. The Yale law school in 50s in 20th century recruits 5 girls only annually, while Joan received the admission notification. Joan aspires to study law and becomes a lawyer, meanwhile she hopes to getting married with her boyfriend. Although Katharine has been emphasizing she can balance the two, Joan still choose to cease study to be a housewife.

Though Betty and Joan have the similar well-matched marriage, Betty resigns herself to her fate and becomes a housewife, while Joan chooses to become a housewife as well after certain struggle. The difference lies in their consciousness. Mr. Betty never is a master of her own life. She has been being placed in an obedient position, obey her family, society, and the female's given future, but Joan realizes her subjectivity: she can choose what she wants to be. She can be her own master.

4 The Development of Female Consciousness

In the film, Joan shows straightly her appreciation for Katherine. Katherine has changed these arts of history majors in a similar way. We can draw lessons from Katharine's teaching method in cultivating the female consciousness of these female students.

4.1 From aesthetic object to aesthetic subject

Before Katharine comes to the Wellesley College, these God favored girls live a gracefully designed life. They study Italian, speech and poise to become perfect housewives. They have been living in the praise, of nobility, with grace manner, good scholarship. They

are appreciated object and dress themselves according to the traditional idea and the upper-class standard, beautiful but nothing further.

Katharine is a teacher from art of history department in the film, which is a skillful design. Art history, as the name implies, is to introduce the typical painter and painting in history. Painting needs appreciator. In the movie, those female students from Wellesley College are appreciators. The design aims at overturning the status of these female students. They change from aesthetic objects to aesthetic subjects. Certainly this position of subversion demands the ingenious guide of Katharine.

In her first class, the students prepared the lesson that Katherine will teach. They have been familiar with the text, the age, painting technique and characteristics of all paintings. But in the second lesson, the student's preview had not been rewarded accordingly, for what Katharine displayed is slaughter empress of animal, a bloody painting that has no pleasant impression, which brings about the heated discussion among teacher and students. Betty didn't think this painting is art. Katharine then asked the question "what is art?" "art isn't art until someone says it is. -It's art!" The debate urges these students to start thinking "who 'someone' is, and why they can decide what art is".

In her class, Katharine took her students to warehouse for a visit of Jackson Brock's oil painting to inspire these students, and introduced Van Gogh, a great painter who was not recognized during lifetime yet ranked high after death. Gradually, these students no longer copy the text or the original words of critics, but formed their own standpoint. The students have turned themselves from appreciated objects to aesthetic subjects, and their personal consciousness strengthens step by step.

4.2 From the weak to the strong

The attitude of Katharine about love and life also deeply influenced these students around her in the film. The United States got involved in the World War II, which profoundly affected the American's life, and Katharine is no exception. Her childhood sweetheart left for battlefield. When the war was over he married someone else, Katherine then chooses to continue her study. Katharine told her students about the past experience openly at the party of "AT" club. They felt sorry for her, whereas Katherine thought differently and told them love was not necessarily for marriage. Nancy (a teacher of the school) whose lover married another person similarly after war never comes out shadow. She even didn't dare to admit that her lover leaves her without getting drunk. Katherine's big-heartedness, independent and open-minded attitude toward love and marriage won respects of those students who despised her as old miss before.

Betty, who abides her destiny, made a plea for help from her mother when her marriage was on the rock, only received the words "don't wash dirty linen in public". She pointed at the portrait of Mona Lisa and queried her mother "You see, she has been being smiling, but is she really happy? She looks happy, however, a lot of affairs are not what we superficially see of it." In the coda of the film, Betty filed for divorce, deciding to come out of family affairs and continue study. Betty's departure from family life shows her rebelling towards her former life, announcing that females can leave families to walk more far!

5 Conclusion

Katharine didn't tell her student what is right and what is not in the film, or she will achieve nothing but setting up new authority after beating the old one. She just encouraged them to open new vista and provide them with more choice through her own course and own action, letting themselves choose the way they prefer to go in the future after thorough consideration. Katharine goes far before the times in developing female consciousness.

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