

Evolving Woman in Film

Ziyu (Fiona) Xia

Abstract:

Throughout the time, the film industry has always mirrored the troubling issues in the society. Especially on the evolving societal norms and the uprising feminist movements. This paper examines the change in female portrayal and social critique on both *Swept Away* (1975) and *Promising Young Woman* (2021). Both films closely examine the patriarchal constraints in an contrasting directions, creating a trend from submissible to resistance. Lina Wertmüller's *Swept Away* (1975) resides in the conservative 1970s, which criticizes how the social constraints enforce the submissiveness of woman. On the other hand, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2021) is more current and empower woman in their ability to reject patriarchal pressure in their own advocacy for justice. Through the comparative analysis, the paper highlights the transition from passive to active portrayals of woman in film and examines the evolving societal conflicts that shape and hinger woman empowerment at different times.

Keywords: film industry, female portrayal, patriarchal pressure, woman empowerment

Introduction

Films have always been used as a mirror to reflect societal issues through vivid images and hidden critiques. The portrayal of women in film has transformed over centuries, shaped by progressing societal norms. A key development is the expansion of liberal feminism, which argues that women's roles should be determined solely by themselves, free of societal expectations (Friedman 5). Society has come a long way from the old patriarchy-dominant world to the present liberal feminism. This transformation is depicted through the transition from Lina Wertmüller's *Swept Away* (1975) to Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2021), which highlights the evolution of film in the representation of women and reflects the dominant norm at those times. This analysis will examine how depictions of female characters have evolved from *Swept Away* and *Promising Young Woman*, highlighting the societal pressure and expectations through the responses of women in different eras.

Swept Away Overview

Swept Away is an Italian film by Lina Wertmüller in 1975, with a capitalistic setting, it depicts the interchanging relationship between Raffaella, a wealthy and arrogant woman, and Gennarino, a socialist male boater in a distinctive setting (*Swept Away*). At the beginning, Raffaella controls both the boat and Gennarino due to her high social standing (*Swept Away*). However, this power dynamic soon changes when they find themselves stranded on an island due to the malfunction of the boat (*Swept Away*). Gennarino was then the commander and Raffaella depended on

him for survival (*Swept Away*).

Swept Away portrayal of Woman & Societal background
To begin, Raffaella is initially portrayed as a strong opinion woman, who stands high in the social hierarchy and acts ruthlessly toward the lower class (*Swept Away*). However, this image quickly shifts as Raffaella becomes dependent on Gennarino for survival on the island, where she adopts a submissive and vulnerable role (*Swept Away*). This highlights the impact of social constraint has on a woman's development. Understanding the societal context of the 1970s is essential to analyze the social constraints. The memorable 1970s is a time of societal change, with feminism becoming the mainstream (Bergeron). Women are advocating for themselves and are no longer the 51% unrepresented "minority" (Bergeron). However, the film fails to align with the rise in women's empowerment, depicting the control conservative values has as the dominant part of society. Those conservative mindsets emphasize the value of women as housewives and undermine their possible potential outside of the home (Women & the American Story). This can be seen through Raffaella's symbolization of the feminist movement of the era, although progressing yet still overlooked by the old conservative values. Her initial arrogance represents the superficial power of women in society, creating this illusion of equality and a false sense of women's right. However, once this illusion is shattered on the island, societal pressure molds her into a submissive and subordinate housewife. Similarly, Gennarino mirrors the true norms of society through his aggressive conquering of Raffaella on the island. This island acted patriarchal society where so-

cietal norms were exposed to the very root, revealing the true nature of gender relations at the time.

Swept Away on dominance

Furthermore, the idea of dominance also takes its essence as part of the most prevalent part of the film. From Raffaella dominating over Gerrinaco at the boat, to Gennarino dominating over Raffaella at the island, depicting the constant power imbalance (*Swept Away*). This highlights the absence of mutual equality in their relationship. Equality is the state of being equal in status, rights, and opportunities (Martinez). On the other hand, dominance relates to taking up mutual spaces aggressively and overamplifies one's importance over the other (Zeng, Cheng, and Henrich 2). These two definitions do not correlate with each other, yet old traditional values link them together as synonyms. In the film, there is never a moment when Raffaella and Gennarico stand on the same level, which signifies the lack of understanding toward mutual equality in the film as well as a reflection on society. Equality for one does not mean the dominance of another. Therefore, this constant shift of power serves as a metaphor illustrating the hierarchical and patriarch norms of the 1970s.

Swept Away on Male Gaze

In addition, the topic of the male gaze was also critiqued through *Swept Away*. The male gaze is developed by depicting women as visual effects for men rather than characters with their own identities and narratives (Mulvey 6). An example of the male gaze is the dominance of Gerrinaco over Raffaella through his force of control mentally and physically, which is used as visual pleasure for the audience. *Swept Away* films through the lenses of male gaze which critique the objectification of women as trophies and items without a choice. Those topics are never exclusive to the 1700s and will emerge again during the analysis of *Promising Young Woman*.

Promising Young Woman Overview

The later film, *Promising Young Woman*, directed by Emerald Fennell in 2021, centers around Cassie, a young woman who is haunted by the tragic assault of her friend Nina and her subsequent suicide (*Promising Young Woman*). Instead of seeking mental therapies or remedies, Cassie sets forth a journey of revenge by setting up situations where men can take advantage of her under the false impression that she is intoxicated. (*Promising Young Woman*). Then, Cassie will return the favor to the men while revealing her sober state (*Promising Young Woman*). Cassie maintains this lifestyle and eventually targets the abuser responsible for Nina's suicide. (*Promising Young Woman*). Things turned when Cassie reconnects with her former classmate Ryan, only to realize after that he is also a part of the crime (*Promising Young Woman*). Then, the film shifts toward a darker end as Cassie takes it upon

herself to seek personal revenge toward the abuser and eventually ends her life in the process (*Promising Young Woman*). Although Cassie achieves her goal of putting the abuser in jail, her death serves as a social commentary, revealing the unequal norm of society at the time.

Promising Young Woman's Portrayal of Woman & Societal Background

To begin, Cassie, the main female protagonist, is a character of power and action. She begins the film in the position of revenger, who uses her way to get back at the men who do not respect the consent of women. This directly fits into the context of 2021, a time of more powerful women's uprisings along with more diverse organizations (Spivak 113-114). With progress comes opposition; people who still hold old patriarchy as their values persist as well. However, it appears that during this period, the persistence of those feminist organizations was more active in their fights against sexual assault as it is often overlooked by patriarchy as lacking importance (Spivak 113-114). This is portrayed through Cassie's initiative to take revenge upon her hand as an anti-passive model. Furthermore, the men who had wronged Nina and taken advantage of Cassie are all active presentations of the patriarchy norm. They are the symbol of the patriarchal system which makes excuses for their abuse of women both physically and mentally. This system constantly placed women as passive and underestimated their power. However, this is overturned by Cassie's powerful revenge and careful planning, depicting the endless potential a woman can possess. She is the portrayal of justice for all women who have endured sexual assault without help from society and the legal system. From the experience of Nina being forced into silence through the pressure of the surrounding environment and unfair legal treatment, Cassie refuses to be silent. This refusal highlights the powerful fightback women have set for this new era moving forward. This film shows women are no longer just victims who should be blamed for their victimization as in the case of Nina but can be active warriors to fight on their own like Cassie.

Promising Young Woman on Addressing Sexual Assault

Another recurring theme in this film is the failure of society to address sexual assault ethically. Ethics is defined as the system of beliefs that sets boundaries for behaviors for morality ("Ethics"). In the film, Nina's accusation in court against her abuser is not valued while being manipulated by the defense lawyer to close the case (*Promising Young Woman*). In addition, even the school Dean values the future of the abuser more than Nina because he is a young boy (*Promising Young Woman*). It is ironic how the School Dean is also a female but cannot acknowledge or empathize with the brutal treatment Nina has endured but rather places favors toward the abuser. This emphasizes

the lack of attention society places on providing ethical treatment to the victim of sexual assault. Nina not only did not receive enough comfort from the legal institution but rather was put to shame for victimization herself as a drinker (*Promising Young Woman*). Rather than protecting the victim, society is turning the fault toward the victim which eventually leads to the breakdown of Nina and her suicide. Another example is Amber, a girl who attended the same school as Nina and Cassie, she says that Nina cannot claim to be the victim when she has the “reputation” of a drinker (*Promising Young Woman*). However, it was clear that Nina was set up to be in a situation where she was intoxicated and brutally harmed.

Promising Young Woman on Bystander Effect

This societal indifference reflects the concept of the bystander effect when people entrust on others to act first (Hortensius and de Gelder 250). The bystander effect is the psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to help when there is more than one person present (Hortensius and de Gelder 250). This is due to the assumption that someone else would be most likely to help, which leads to the inaction of an individual due to the diffusion of responsibility (Hortensius and de Gelder 250). This film is made up of all kinds of similar bystander effects. One of the examples is Ryan, Cassie’s boyfriend, later, and one of the witnesses to Nina’s rape (*Promising Young Woman*). Ryan witnessing the crime his friends have committed on Nina and not doing anything about it is an example of the Bystander effect. Ryan’s ignorance has led to an irreversible event in Nina’s life, and he still believes that it has nothing to do with him. Therefore, every single silencer only adds to the societal constraint rather than helping the victims. Ryan, Amber, and the School Deans all were bystanders in Nina’s case, they overlooked this gender-based violence, which led to the loss of a human life. Cassie, on the other hand, represents the critique of the film against this bystander effect by actively resisting the inaction in a society that is trying to silence her.

Comparative Analysis on Woman Portrayal

Now, I will compare the portrayal and roles of the female characters of *Swept Away* and *Promising Young Woman*. In *Swept Away*, the female lead Raffaella is a symbol of a powerful woman under a capitalistic time frame who has turned submissive, under the male-dominant environment, underlining the illusion of social equality (*Swept Away*). On the other hand, Cassie in *Promising Young Woman* is an empowered avenger who has promoted resistance since the beginning and has active control of writing her narrative (*Promising Young Woman*). From the period of 1975 to 2021, the portrayal of women in film shifted from a passive character who is easily molded by society to an

active agent who resistance against societal pressure in her ways. Woman became more active in defining their position in society by advocating for their right and finding justice through resistance. This could resemble a society where more women are rising for themselves to speak their voices against the abusers who try to silence them.

Comparative Analysis on Societal Critiques

In addition, both *Swept Away* and *Promising Young Woman* offer different kinds of societal critiques focusing on various perspectives in different eras. *Swept Away* critiques societal expectations through the illustration of the illusion of Raffaella’s power, which ultimately cracks under the influence of patriarchal dominance. Meanwhile, *Promising Young Woman* comments on modern societal expectations by modeling the continuous need for women to fight for themselves against the abuser for the goal of justice. These films highlight the shift from the sole presentation of societal constraints to a direct advocacy for a systemic change against the silence of injustice. The shift takes a significant form. In the case of Raffaella, her submissive state is accepted as a natural part of patriarchy in *Swept Away*. In contrast, Cassie challenges this natural order of patriarchy in direct action. Therefore, the woman’s role has become more active as time passes against the battle of gender-based violence and inequality.

Moreover, *Swept Away* and *Promising Young Woman* also present different societal attitudes of different eras and how those come to change. *Swept Away* underscores a hopeless tone toward the societal norm of 1975. However, Cassie, in the modern era, is seen more as a warrior who engages in the war for future justice. These two films represent the old societal attitude at their given time as well as depicting new values for the audience to understand gender equality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both films advocate for the progress of feminism idea, from lack of response or giving in like Raffaella, to active response and resistance like Cassie. Women are becoming more active and empowered in their fight to challenge the existing values. Different periods come with diversative issues on gender equality and cinema is clearly an illustration of those issue in the given time frame. It is important to understand the changes in the films to better conceptualize the progress women as made throughout history.

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