

# The Logic of Imagination and Gender Paradox: On the Adaptation Research of Red Rose White Rose

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**Abstract.** Eileen Chang's novels are deeply loved by the big screen for their cinematic imaginative literary style, highly informative and intellectual literary charm, and desolate and colorful literary temperament. However, these characteristics also bring controversy to her adaptation of movies. This article does not focus on exploring the inevitable changes brought about by media transformation, but directly points to the narrative core of the text. Taking the adaptation film Red Rose White Rose directed by Stanley Kwan as an example, by comparing the core narrative themes of the novel and the film, this study explores the narrative adaptation strategies and underlying logic of the film.

**Keywords:** Film Narrative; Eileen Chang; Stanley Kwan.

## 1. Introduction

In 1995, the adaptation of the film Red Rose White Rose by Stanley Kwan with the same name caused controversy among the media, audience, and film critics since its release. However, most of the comments and research were based on film techniques and visual styles, with little involvement in its core narrative structure and logic. From the perspective of image presentation and style, Stanley Kwan seems to have made every effort to copy the original temperament, and even spared no effort in reproducing large sections of Eileen Chang's text directly on the screen. But does Stanley Kwan really want to follow Eileen Chang's novels in the film? Has there been any change in its core narrative theme? If so, why is there such a change?

## 2. Text Interpretation: Imagination of Details and "Game Text"

By interpreting the narcissistic relationship between women and objects in *Half a Lifelong Romance*, Rey Chow (2008) sees a repetitive feeling in Eileen Chang's text. "This repetitive joy is always accompanied by a sense of triviality" (p.261). She believes that in this repetition and triviality, there is an inherent female psychological reality that eliminates the limitations of 'public' understanding. In Eileen Chang's novels, there are a large number of material details and descriptions of trivial objects, which are often closely linked to the inner emotions of the characters, becoming an effective way to penetrate the hidden emotions of women in her text. For example, in the novel *Red Rose, White Rose*, there is a description of Yanli sitting in the bathroom due to constipation:

Yanli bent her head and stared at her own snow-white stomach, that stretch of pure gleaming white. Sometimes she stuck it out; sometimes she sucked it in. Her navel also changed its appearance: now it was the eye of a Greek statue—sweet, clean, expressionless while the next instant it protruded angrily, like the eye of a pagan god, an eye with an evil little smile but adorable even so, with crow's-feet tucked away in the corners. (Eileen Chang, 1994, p.44)

This description of the pathological condition of the navel shows Yanli's only 'gaze' and 'freedom' in the extremely oppressed social and family space. These women's 'eyes' not only focus on the one-sided material details of the objective existence, but also mean the confined and suppressed narrow female living space. In addition, Eileen Chang's extreme attention to detail

carries two other profound meanings: Women use material details to obtain the truth and sense of existence in their lives, as stated in Eileen Chang(2006)'s prose: "In order to prove their existence, grasp a bit of the real, most basic thing." (p.1). By using these objective material details to conceal the heavy and floating emotions of women, the disconnected and abrupt expression of material details creates an disharmonious tension with the indescribable inner emotions, extending an uneasy and strange temperament. In fact, the entire novel *Red Rose, White Rose* is embedded in a strange temperament created by material details.

In the text, Eileen Chang uses a narrative strategy of 'game text' to stagnate women into two types of symbols: red rose and white rose. Edward(2006) commented that: "the red rose and the white rose respectively refer to socially recognized women and 'illicit' women." (p.271). In the novel, Eileen Chang(1994) is based on the male perspective of gaze and fantasy, using highly 'intellectually' language to point out:

Marry a red rose, over time and eventually she'll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while the white one is "moonlight in front of my bed." Marry a white rose, and before long she'll be a grain of sticky rice that's gotten stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart. (p.1)

Eileen Chang imaginatively splices the details of red roses and mosquito blood, white roses and rice sticks, pointing directly to the historical and eternal collective emotional experience and desolate fate of women under the patriarchal symbolic system. However, in the text, Eileen Chang does not intend to emphasize the suffering and fate of women, but rather aims to deconstruct.

This deconstruction is similar to the strategy proposed by Luce Irigaray(1985): "Although there is no shortcut to break away from the patriarchal symbolic system, women can consciously reread and retell the core text of patriarchy, turning passive into active. She can play with the text, and in this game like imitation, she can maintain some independence from the male category." (p.67). In *Red Rose, White Rose*, Eileen Chang symbolizes symbolic meaning through a 'game like imitation', using the language of a patriarchal symbolic system, and deconstructing the authority of this symbolic system through the symbolic object of sexual desire imagination under patriarchal culture. In the novel, as a 'passionate mistress', Jiaorui holds the initiative of sexual desire from the beginning, while as a powerful male (Zhenbao), she retreats after the female's intention to act. Afterwards, Jiaorui voluntarily escapes the symbolic identity of the 'red rose' and chooses to become a mother recognized by social morality. As a white rose/'pure wife', Yanli went from being portrayed as a 'blank' woman who lacked subjectivity at the beginning to gradually awakening her subjectivity, using sex (infidelity) as a means of retaliating against male authority. Therefore, through the replacement and transformation of female archetypal characters, Eileen Chang failed to present the male's power control over the female object (red rose and white rose) of her desire imagination, aiming to demonstrate that the will and desire of women do not become empty symbols under male gaze, but rather complex symbols full of human nature and desire, and thus deconstruct the long-standing male's sexual imagination of the female object, which is holy/slut.

Based on the two narrative methods of detail imagination and 'game text', the novel text presents two levels of themes. One is the surface layer of the text, with men as the narrators, exploring the eternal sexual desire proposition of men and the diverse spiritual fissures of human nature. The other is the deep layer of the text, based on the female self, outlining the true psychological oppression, resistance, and free will of women in social reality. Based on this conclusion, the author continues to study the presentation and changes of these two core themes in film adaptation?

### 3. Adaptation Strategy: Identification and Variations of the Double Layer Narrative Theme

In the novel *Red Rose, White Rose*, Eileen Chang uses material details to express the characters' inner emotions and the strange and desolate feeling atmosphere. Director Stanley Kwan, who is known as the best at shooting women, also focuses on portraying the characters' spiritual landscapes

and the tension of sexual love in his adaptations, striving to restore the delicacy and desolation, ambiguity and alertness that permeate the novel.

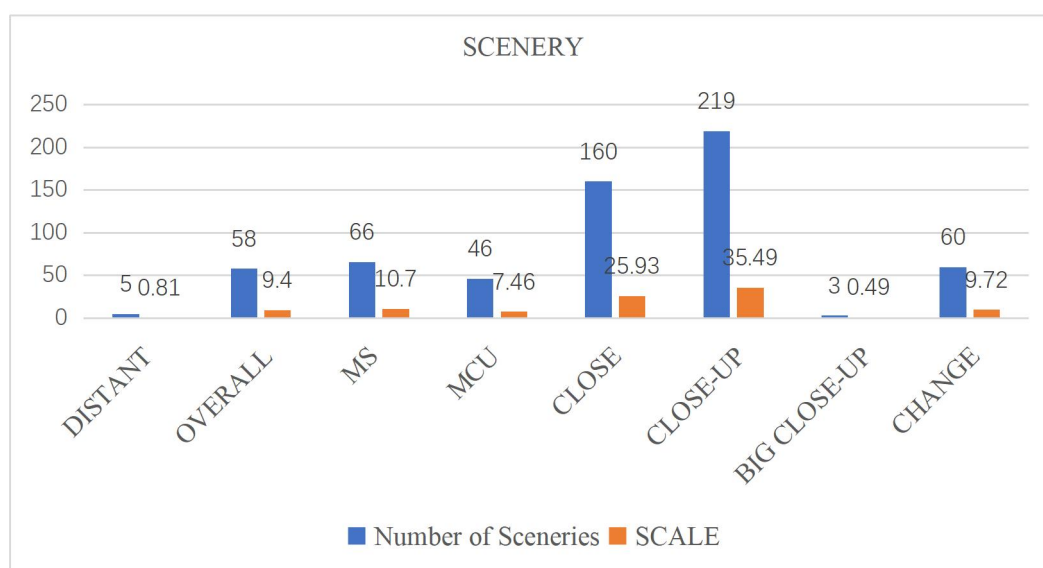


Fig. 1 Film shot count statistics

To avoid presenting the effect that Edward Murray(1989) referred to as "static, chaotic, and dull non cinematic"(p.46), Director Stanley Kwan has found a cinematic technique that delves deeply into the subjective world of characters to interpret flowing love relationships, that is, controlling scenery and spatial settings. Through film data statistics, it was found that the film has a total of 621 shots, of which 379 shots (Figure 1) are close-up and close-up scenes. The director's control over the scene not only confirms the prominent subject in the content of the film, but also guides the emotional relationship and distance between the characters and the audience in the film. The foam after Zhenbao shakes hands with Jiaorui in the film; Jiaorui played with Zhenbao's cigarettes and smelled clothes, The filming of close-up shots of Yanli rubbing her navel and other objects magnifies the details of the novel text, attracting the audience's attention to the hidden emotional space of men and women in the film. In terms of spatial settings, the movie rewrites the linear development in the novel, using the expressive function of the movie's 'continuous tense' to confuse the past, present, and future as the same time and space. In the love scene between Zhenbao and Jiaorui, the director places the forward-looking content related to Zhenbao and Yanli at the front of the movie, and places three different time and space in parallel: 'Zhenbao and Jiaorui Love', 'Zhenbao Marries the Yanli Holding a White Rose', 'Zhenbao and Yanli's Bored Life After Marriage', and 'Zhenbao Expects to Meet Jiaorui When Riding an Electric Car'. With the aid of the props of red roses and white roses as symbolic symbols of temporal and spatial changes, a formalism aesthetic sense of cause and effect inversion is generated. Among them, the director uses spatial modeling to visualize the core of the novel: the rose, which represents the ambiguous, desire but dangerous red rose space represented by Jiaorui, and the pure but blank, boring white rose space represented by the Yanli. Intuitively allowing the audience to feel the complex and contradictory sexual tension in the original text, while also strengthening the romantic relationship between men and symbolic women under male gaze/imagination. Realized the narrative theme on the surface of the text in the novel.

However, when expressing the inner thoughts and emotions of the characters, Director Stanley Kwan adopted a 'direct giving' strategy, reproducing certain monologues and satirical words in the novel directly on the screen. Is this strategy to retain the strange and desolate atmosphere in Eileen Chang's text, or is it separated by a kind of image, resulting in the alienation effect of 'unfamiliar' of the audience? This issue is still worth discussing. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand

people's eyes. However, there is no doubt that the film replaces the deep narrative theme of the novel text.

In the adaptation process, Stanley Kwan adopted a simplified adaptation strategy, omitting the 'sacrificial spirit' and 'good person' images in Zhenbao's personality, as well as his first humiliating experience of visit prostitutes. The hypocrisy in Zhenbao's character and the reason for his determination to build a right world will be weakened, the moral standards and hypocritical human nature of Zhenbao individuals will be elevated to the general state of society, and the erotic tension of separating spirit and flesh, which is common in the deep psychology of men, will be highlighted. However, in the second half, the director adjusted a certain narrative structure and formed a new logic system, which reflects the director's intention to replace the 'logic of imagination' in the process of adaptation.

Yang Liu(2017) pointed out Logic:

Narrative logic at least includes the logic of feeling, the logic of reflection and the logic of imagination, belonging to the unity of the three, in which the logic of feeling is 'the objective development of the story itself promised by the author when he enters and tells the specific story', is a kind of 'presence feeling' with 'rationality', as the basis of the author and the audience's entry feeling. This logic contributes to the smooth and reasonable logic of the text. Reflective logic refers to 'the author implicitly or explicitly imparts the logic of the story told' so that the text can acquire a 'subjective meaning', and revises and reflects on the 'blind spot on the scene' after leaving the scene. Imaginative logic refers to 'the logic formed by the author using imagination to creatively coordinate, balance and connect the entry feeling and exit reflection. Avoid a split between the logic of feeling and the logic of reflection.(pp.67-87,96-105)

By combing through the juxtaposition between the novel and the second half of the film, we can find: The logical structure of the novel is as follows: Zhenbao and Dubao see Jiaorui -- Yanli's constipation and complain to others -- Yanli has an affair -- Zhenbao go to visit prostitutes -- Yanli has social status and sympathy -- Zhenbao gives vent and breaks things -- Zhenbao becomes a good person. In the movie, it becomes: Dubao see Jiaorui -- Yanli's constipation and complain to others -- Yanli has an affair -- Zhenbao go to visit prostitutes -- Zhenbao gives vent and breaks things -- Zhenbao see Jiaorui -- Zhenbao becomes a good person. Among them, the narrative structure position of the scene where Zhenbao meets Jiaorui becomes the entry point to understand the adaptation logic. In the novel, the reason why Zhenbao becomes a good man again is that he gives vent to smashing things. After waking up in the middle of the night, he sees the shoes of the bird in a slinky shape, just like a 'ghost who dares not to walk towards him', he sighs a sigh and changes his mind again the next day. This seemingly vague and broken causal connection is actually the result of Eileen Chang diluting the reasonable 'logic of feeling' that the story itself should have with her unique 'logic of reflection'. Ziping Huang(2019) pointed out that shoes are one of Eileen Chang's images, "The ghost of two embroidered shoes, Tong Zhenbao for the sake of loving mother, status, responsibility and sacrifice of the love of the red rose, but also to marry a chaste skilled and formal white rose ideal irony." (p.1). In the novel, the reason for Zhenbao's reform lies in the fact that the world he lives in is the world he has created step by step. As the metaphor/epitome of this world, shoes cannot be destroyed under the circumstance of so much effort, so he can only stick to the concept of 'right' and continue to live. So, although this causal narrative is somewhat disjointed, at the level of imaginary logic, "It can still be naturally accepted and full of muddy and rounded narrative effect." (Yang Liu.2017.p.226). In the movie, director Stanley Kwan advanced these embroidered shoes to 35 '54s and changed them into modern white cotton slippers, which were usually ignored by the audience in the actual movie. Instead, the scene where Zhen Bao meets Jiao Rui is moved back to the front where Zhen Bao becomes a good person. A new narrative logic is formed: the logic that the director recreates by imagination based on the entry and exit of the novel itself.

Through logical adaptation, the film dispels the departure reflection existing in the original novel

and builds a logical direction of the story that can be fully perceived by the audience in the film, that is, Jiaorui's transformation from 'slutty woman' to 'good woman' brings the shock and impact of refreshing the soul. The red rose is only an imaginary warm, and the image of the red rose in male imagination disintegrates. It also promoted the return of Zhenbao to social moral standards. It is obvious that in this adaptation, women are victims and awakeners of the moral code that the male social order has broken down. This change in narrative logic makes the emotional core intended to be displayed in the novel text: the freedom that women desire. From 'slut' to 'mother', from the brave pursuit of love to the realization of the irony of men's moral code, the most crucial point is that this transformation is free and independent of the logical relationship of the text, a kind of social reality writing that has nothing to do with men. However, the film integrates this state of freedom into a brand-new logic, making women, as 'others', forced to become the awakening of men's 'return to the right path', and truly dispelling the deep narrative theme of the text.

In the Hong Kong film environment at that time, Stanley Kwan was a rare male director who focused on female groups and shot women's emotions in such a delicate way. In *Red Rose White Rose*, it can also be found that Kwan's awareness of female consciousness was strengthened. For example, after Yanli had an affair with the tailor, she did not pay careful attention to Zhen Bao's emotions as in the novel. Bravely broached the idea of divorce. However, by combing its narrative logic, the author finds that there is still a male-centered discourse field of traditional power network in the films directed by Stanley Kwan. In his films, this kind of female consciousness and male discourse form a kind of gender identity split and paradox. Then, why does this kind of paradoxical discourse exist? What is the generative logic behind it?

#### 4. Expression beyond identity and gender: Paradox and identity

Narrative logic actually deals with the logic of human activities including emotional factors and will factors. Understanding narrative logic is the premise of understanding narrative, but also understanding the meaning of the story and the will of the director. There are obvious differences between the narrative logic and the subjective emotion of the creator in the two texts. The core of the emotional structure reflected in the novel is the affirmation of women's self-desire and free life will. In the film, a kind of awakening/redemption power of women is explored under the male thinking. The generative logic of this paradox and fissure can be penetrated into Stanley Kwan's personal life experience and the social, political and cultural context at that time.

Stanley Kwan's female consciousness and female acumen are inseparable from his family members, especially his mother. From Stanley Kwan's personal interview, it can be learned that since his father passed away at the age of 14, his mother has taken on the heavy responsibility of the family alone, raising the five young children in the family. Under the pressure of survival, mother has changed from a traditional housewife to a pillar of support. Kwan sees the tenacity and explosive power of women from her mother. Such strong power of women makes Kwan unconsciously observe women with an equal and generous eye. This is also the potential reason why Stanley Kwan, in his later film creation, did not "intend to make female films, but always unconsciously look at things from a female perspective" (Jianhong Liu. 1996. p.90). After middle school, Stanley Kwan's discovery and contradiction of his own gender orientation also made him more truly feel the plight of social survival and inner feelings of marginalized groups, and in the film, he "takes care of and writes about women as a group close to himself" (Jianhong Liu. 1996. p.93). This feeling of empathy is the key to Stanley Kwan's early tendency to represent female groups and to express this feeling with great delicacy. At the same time, looking at the social and political environment at that time, it is not difficult to find that during the shooting of *Red Rose White Rose* (1994) by Stanley Kwan, it was in the social and cultural context of the "return of Hong Kong". On September 26, 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration announced that Hong Kong would officially return on July 1, 1997. According to Xing Zhou (2005), "With the imminent return of '97', the whole Hong Kong society has been greatly impacted, and the shadow of political

affiliation has brought heavy mental pressure to Hong Kong people"(p.365).The confusion and anxiety caused by marginal gender and identity crisis prompted Kwan to unconsciously approach male gender identity and mainstream social discourse in the film, so as to gain recognition from mainstream culture at the time of Hong Kong's return. Therefore, the gender gap and paradox between Stanley Kwan's female consciousness and the unconsciously deviated male ideology are hidden in the film, which ultimately leads to the core replacement of the film from the affirmation of female free will to return to male moral order.

If the film adaptation of *Red Rose White Rose* is further analyzed in the context of Stanley Kwan's complete creative career, it can be found that as an important turning point for the change of his creative subject matter, the adaptation has a deeper meaning: In other words, by virtue of the paradox and game between female consciousness and male position, the director realizes the final identity of the director's personal gender. Before *Red Rose White Rose*, Stanley Kwan focused on women and made a series of female-themed films such as *Women*(1985), *Rouge* (1988), *Full moon in New York* (1989) and *Center Stage*(1991). After *Red Rose White Rose* (1995), Stanley Kwan began to face up to his own gender orientation and the topic of homosexuality, and transmitted himself to different degrees in different roles, such as *Yang±Yin* (1996), *Hold You Tight* (1997), and *Lan Yu* (2002).

It can be said that *Red Rose White Rose* bears Stanley Kwan's ambivalence in affirming his own gender identity in the process of transition and change, and gives women in the film a unique power of redemption that is different from the text of the novel. Women have a powerful power that will come into play at the right time. This powerful force awakens the inner moral order and may also be an effective way for director Kwan to establish his personal gender identity. This powerful force awakens the inner moral order and may also be an effective way for director Kwan to establish his personal gender identity. From Stanley Kwan's early intention to obtain his own marginal gender identity through the marginal fate of female groups, to his paradoxical attitude towards female and male gender positions in *Red Rose White Rose*, to his disclosure of his homosexual sexual orientation in the documentary *Yang±Yin*, and finally to his self-identification in the public performance of *Hold You Tight*.

## 5. Summary

In the novel, Eileen Chang presents a double-layer narrative theme based on male and female by using two narrative methods of detail imagination and 'game text'. In the film adaptation, on the one hand, Director Stanley Kwan Outlines the swing of male in two erotic illusions and the emotional resonance of different human nature with the help of landscape and space Settings, which strengthens the shallow narrative theme in the novel text. On the other hand, Through the replacement of narrative logic, the director dispels the free life will of female self in the novel text, and further sutures the paradox and split of self on gender identity, in order to realize the pursuit of self-gender identity.

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