

# Othering of Women under Trauma Theory: Taking the Image of Qiwen Wan in *Long Day's Journey into Night* as an Example

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**Abstract.** *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is a drama film directed by Gan Bi and released in 2018. This dream tells the dreamlike journey of a middle-aged man returning to his hometown to find his lover. Reviewers mostly focus on the film's cinematography and the construction of its artistic conception, rarely mentioning the feminist issues and trauma analysis presented in the film. In fact, the work fully reflects the process in which man's 'other' woman is based on psychological trauma. This study employs a feminist perspective and trauma theory to investigate the psychological mechanisms behind 'othering' in films. Through trauma interpretation, analysis of the 'othering' process, and dream interpretation, it examines the causal relationship between individual psychological trauma and 'othering' behavior. The trauma writing, combined with feminism, presented in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* helps to analyse the psychological state of specific social groups and provides insights into women's self-expression against othering.

**Keywords:** Trauma; other; dream.

## 1. Introduction

The feminist analysis of 'the Other' most directly begins with French existentialist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. After reflecting on the injustices women faced in public and family rights at the time, Beauvoir, drawing on the theories of philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre, proposed: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. The so-called 'woman' is a hierarchical identity confirmed and given by the male group, distinct from the subject as an external entity, that is, 'the other' [1]. With the development of the times, the status of women has gradually improved, and the continuous awakening of women's consciousness has prompted people to explore the deep culture phenomena behind women's status from the root. Creators present the theories revealed by phenomena in tangible forms through various artistic works such as novels and films to stimulate recipients' reflection on the phenomena, reshape cognition, and subsequently drive innovation at both academic and practical levels. The 'Other' is an indispensable concept within it.

From the perspective of feminism and trauma theory, a large number of existing studies focus on the differences in power hierarchies or analyze the psychological trauma of oppressed groups, such as Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler points out the attributes of gender identity that are constructed through repetitive performance in culture [2]. However, the psychological causes of the 'othering' phenomenon are not much discussed. In the film *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Qiwen Wan's female character embodies the typical 'othering' traits and, as the central figure throughout the work, the formation of her character is closely intertwined with the narrator's psychological mechanisms. This study will dissect the "otherization" phenomenon in this work in combination with the "trauma theory", and clarify the psychological causes of the narrator behind the phenomenon.

This study utilises the literature analysis method, searching for and reading relevant materials and literature such as Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The advantage of this method is that it can effectively integrate original theories with existing works. The ultimate goal of this study is to explore the trauma theoretical basis of

“otherization” behavior from a feminist perspective through the interpretation of trauma and the analysis of “otherization” in the film *Long Day’s Journey into Night* [3].

## 2. Trauma Interpretation

The word “trauma” originates from ancient Greek, initially referring to physical injury, and was later adopted into Latin and English. Its meaning expanded from physical injury to a metaphorical sense, referring to wounds of the mind. Sigmund Freud first shifted from external events themselves to focusing on the individual’s inner mind. In 1920, he proposed “compulsive repetition” in *Beyond the Principle of Pleasure*, referring to an individual’s unconscious repetition of traumatic events or environments [4]. In repetitive situations individuals desire to gain a sense of control through their own efforts, resist inner unease, and heal lingering traumas. As trauma theory further develops and becomes more standardized, Cathy Caruth, following Freud’s theory, proposed the trauma is a delayed experience, where individuals cannot clearly recall the context of traumatic events but are entangled in a series of fragmented memories. As survivors of such trauma, individuals cannot directly narrate the trauma, while literature and art become testimonies [5].

The film *Long Day’s Journey into Night* sets and resolves riddles around the emotional obsession of the male lead Hongwu Luo, aiming to depict the protagonist’s spiritual world and express his regrets and hopes [6]. Hongwu Luo is the narrator of the entire story, whose life experiences are full of twists and have been marked by multiple wounds in family, friendship and love. There are corresponding emotional deficiencies at different stages of life. During his childhood, Hongwu Luo’s mother abandoned him to elope with a beekeeper, which led to his deep longing for maternal love and a sense of insecurity in family relationships. After reaching adulthood, Hongwu Luo experienced the death of his childhood friend and a failed marriage with his death of his childhood friend and a failed marriage with his ex-wife. The film’s illusory visuals reflect the protagonist’s sense of emptiness in life, while a series of localised images create the familiar environment of his hometown. The connection between the little white cat and the apple, the statement made by Hongwu Luo that “people don’t have time to lie when eating apples” implies that the little white cat deceived him. He bet a wish on finding wild pomelos with Qiwen Wan, symbolizing his return to this land to search for the missing parts of his childhood. This familiar atmosphere is his reconstruction of the traumatic environment and manifestation of the delayed nature of childhood trauma. The suppressed trauma is truly perceived by him through a “delayed” process and emerges many years later [5]. Qiwen Wan, this “departed lover”, is the only breakthrough he can grasp, becoming a mark and evidence of his trauma, and finding Qiwen Wan would confirm the real existence of the trauma. His act of pursuit itself constitutes behavioral testimony, providing viewers with a materialized narrative beyond verbal expression.

## 3. The Trauma Healing Method of “Otherization”

### 3.1. The “Other” at the Narrative Level

The entire film unfolds with the recollections of the male protagonist, Hongwu Luo, who introduces Qiwen Wan through his oral accounts. This is an internal focal perspective, measuring the significance of narration through the character’s psychology. Horizontally, it can gauge the breadth of the narrative environment, and vertically, it can measure universal human emotions [7]. In this narrative mode, Hongwu Luo is the main character of the story. The others he described were all objects in the story, including Qiwen Wan. From a male perspective, men are the masters of society, defining everything by their own standards. Women are appendages of men, non-essential beings who have lost their self-awareness [8]. Everything in the story of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* revolves around Hongwu Luo’s descriptions. The content narrated is filtered through Hongwu Luo’s subjective memory or subconscious emphasis and does not represent the people or events themselves.

Therefore, Qiwen Wan's character traits in the story are the result of Hongwu Luo's subjective evaluations of her. With the passage of time, the memory becomes more and more blurred, and the fantasy elements in his description become more and more, and the tendency of narrative content continues to increase. At the beginning of the film, Hongwu Luo directly states that he finds it difficult to distinguish the truth of the story he is narrating. Her name can be Qiwen Wan or Kaizhen. Her identity may be a liar or a singer, and everything about her in the movie is vague. Through Hongwu Luo's narrative, the audience can clearly understand her life trajectory dependent on men and strongly perceive Qiwen Wan's inner thoughts [9]. Whether she kills her former lover by Hongwu Luo's hand or marries an innkeeper, she always uses her body as a means to achieve her goal. And the rest of her personal value has not been reflected. In this narrative system, Qiwen Wan is the "disempowered" in the narrative discourse, as well as the "Other".

Different from the linear narrative of a large number of movies, the fragmented narrative of this work is its bright spot, and the events have great jumps. From the protagonist's experience, this narrative style is a clever avoidance, when straightforward accounts of trauma exceed his psychological tolerance, the fragmented, non-continuous description can conceal the harm within seemingly calm narration, achieving self-numbing. At the same time, discontinuous fragment description can provide the narrator with great freedom, and the arrangement and combination order of events are not limited. From the content of the film, it can be seen that Hongwu Luo is accustomed to associating events complementarily, indicating that events marked by trauma are often followed by events marked by redemption, thus providing psychological support in the narrative. At the beginning of the film, he is divorced from his ex-wife, his childhood friend is murdered, his father dies, which leads to the past when he is abandoned by his mother. Through a series of clever connections, Qiwen Wan appears as a character and becomes a ray of light in his darkness. When Qiwen Wan disappeared again, he once more had a dream with Kaizhen on his path of pursuit, Kaizhen and Qiwen Wan having very different personalities but similar appearances, achieving an idealized substitution. The overall narrative process is also a kind of self-conviction of the protagonist, an escape from pain in the nested memory fragments.

### 3.2. The "Other" in the Gaze of Men

Laura Mulvey dissected the male gaze in cinema with her work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The men project their fantasies onto the women who are shown, and they control the fantasies in the film, becoming representatives of power. Women on screen serve both as objects of sexual desire for the characters in the story and for the audience [10]. In the language of the lens, Qiwen Wan's beauty and mystery is beyond doubt. Under the highly saturated primary tones of dark green and bright red, the camera repeatedly pans up and down over Qiwen Wan's body, like a pair of eyes scanning a woman. The camera frequently employs close-up shots of Qiwen Wan's body, focusing on specific features—particularly those widely regarded as symbols of feminine allure. These include her expressive, story-driven eyes and brows, shoulder-length curly hair, crimson-painted nails, a flowing green satin dress, and bare feet resting on brickwork. These symbolic elements repeatedly emphasize the stereotypical image of women. Too much conceptualization makes people doubt the authenticity of its existence, showing the narrator's psychological tendency to portray characters. The photo of Hongwu Luo's mother hidden behind the clock, and what he said when he first met Qiwen Wan: "You look a lot like a friend of mine", both reflect the fantasy of his mother that he places on Qiwen Wan. Qiwen Wan embodies Hongwu Luo's "Anima" (the feminine archetype), drawing from his mother's essence to reveal his subconscious feminine imagery [11]. Due to his lack of experience with his mother, all descriptions appear conceptual and symbolic, lacking the expression of personal individuality, and are only connected through the common act of "escaping".

Wan Qiwen, a stereotypical woman, was used to fill the void in Hongwu Luo's life, becoming an object that should exist in a male subject's life. In contrast, the film rarely shows scanning shots of Hongwu Luo, mostly featuring full-body shots. This part of the shot focuses on what the character is doing, not on highlighting the character's facial features and has a strong sense of subjectivity. In

comparison, the slow-motion scanning shots of Qiwen Wan's body and the repeated focus on certain parts carry obvious sexual connotations. Qiwen Wan became the "other" under the male gaze, filling the sense of satisfaction brought by the patriarchal lens, and became a symbolic psychological model to accommodate the emotional absence of the male protagonist. Such a self-object existence extends the narrator, indirectly reflecting the narrator's own emotional experience [12]. On the surface, the film appears to be a man narrating a woman's story, but in reality, it is a man expressing himself through the narrative of a woman.

### 3.3. Dreams and the "Other"

Hongwu Luo yearned to transform his fate by finding Qiwen Wan, a dream he liked to "Zhuangzi's butterfly dream". Through this fleeting materialized phenomenon of "dreaming", individuals dissolve the boundaries of right and wrong in reality, thereby achieving spiritual liberation [13]. No matter how absurd a continuous thought is, there is a coherent and unconscious thought behind it, and the dream is a hint of these suppressed thoughts [14]. The movie poses a philosophical question: "When the boundaries between memory and imagination blur, what is true redemption". Qiwen Wan became the catalyst for Hongwu Luo's tragic life, and ultimately, even this last shred of hope vanished. Left with no other recourse, Hongwu Luo turned to fiction for solace. His fantasies about his idealized lover Kaizhen were essentially his reconstruction of the Qiwen Wan he envisioned, serving as a therapeutic simulation to heal his emotional wounds. The 3D long-shot dream sequence at the end of the film lasts nearly an hour, showing everything Hongwu Luo failed to pursue in reality, as well as his helplessness towards reality, while the philosophical premise of the film is also revealed through the dream. Freud established the concept of the unconscious in the concept of mental energy. Mental energy tends to reach a state of satisfaction forever, and becomes the focus of "desire". The realization of desire is the driving force of dreams [15]. Hongwu Luo's dream is divided into three emotional layers: friendship, family love, and romantic love, corresponding to the childhood friend who died, the mother who left, and the lover who disappeared. When he meets his childhood friend again, he imagines a scene to say goodbye to him. A woman with red hair who looks exactly like her mother set fire to her lover, and Hongwu Luo faced the scene of leaving. The room symbolizing the family is burned down, and the shocking images stand in stark contrast to the blurred, fragmented narrative of the first half of the film, serving as a psychological ritual for the protagonist. The climax of the dream is his extraordinary encounter with his ideal lover, Kaizhen, who looks similar to Qiwen Wan but has a very different personality. In the rotating room, Hongwu Luo deeply kisses Kaizhen before the fireworks go out. When the previously heard spell "the house will rotate" became a reality, Hongwu Luo also received a spiritual cleansing in the very last moment of the dream. This dream, driven by healing, vividly illustrates the recovery model described by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*. The reproduction of familiar scenes and characters in the dream established a foundation of security. By the end of the dream, he completed reflection and mourning, but did not further demonstrate a reconnection with interpersonal relationships [16].

In Freud's view, dreams are a means of fulfilling wishes, and in this sense, they help heal trauma [15]. But from Judith Herman's theory, trauma cannot be absolutely cured, and this dream is the subconscious confirmation of the trauma [16]. Therefore, the abrupt ending of the film leaves infinite space for the viewers to imagine, and also leaves a space for thinking at the intersection of the two theories, which itself is also a kind of tribute.

## 4. Conclusion

As a general concept, "the other" is not limited to the relations between genders. Such films are only a microcosm, conveying the importance of the psychological roots of the issue of "othering". Different types of agents of "othering" in society target different groups, with commonalities within groups and differences between groups being the main sources of "othering" behaviour. For example, the male protagonist in the film is a representative of people who lack maternal love and carry

childhood trauma. This kind of “otherization” presents the maternalization of the other. For women’s self-expression, when faced with “othering”, one should use the psychological origins of the perpetrator as a breakthrough point, highlighting the mutually exclusive aspects between the self and the perpetrator’s psychological demands, thereby rendering the “othering” behaviour meaningless. For example, in the film, if Qiwen Wan wants to fight against “othering”, she can strengthen her expression of self, especially the part that is different from the mother characteristics that Hongwu Luo wants to shape, so as to get rid of the hierarchical identity assigned by the outside.

This study illustrates how the protagonist Hongwu Luo in the film *Long Day’s Journey into Night* compensates for his psychological trauma through the creation of Qiwen Wan as “the other”. Thus, it can be further concluded that from the perspective of feminism, the phenomenon of “othering” in films and other literary works is closely related to the psychological state of “subject”, and the expression form of “othering” presents the psychological tendency of “subject”. At the same time, how one’s own intentions are implemented through seemingly objective means to shape the “Other” is an important method. The use of “the other” as an external object to isolate the development of the event from itself makes the plot appear more objective and real, and improves the persuasiveness of the “subject” psychology. This study provides a reference for future research in this direction, mainly affecting the analysis of the causal relationship between psychological trauma and “othering”. Future research should focus more on the differences in the forms of “othering” of different identity subjects for in-depth exploration.

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