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Space, Emotion, and Subjectivity: A Study of Pseudo-Feminist Narrative in "Hidden Face"

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Abstract:

The 2024 South Korean thriller "Hidden Face", adapted from the Spanish film "The Hidden Face(La Cara Oculta)" centers on the complex emotional entanglements between its two female protagonists, Xiu yan and Mei zhu secret lovers for a decade and the male protagonist, Cheng zhen. The director employs a "gender role reversal" tactic to create a superficial feminist appearance, ultimately trapping the two female leads in a pseudo-feminist dilemma characterized by "internalized female conflict" and the "instrumentalization of emotion". Utilizing film semiotics as a primary tool, and incorporating Michel Foucault's theory of "spatial power" and Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" this paper analyzes the narrative logic of the dual female protagonists' relationship across three dimensions: the alienation of power structures, the instrumentalization of emotional patterns, and the dependency of self-consciousness. The study finds that the film, through a cycle of "imprisonment in the secret room—power reversal—female mutual harm", dismantles the core tenets of feminism equality, mutual support, and subjective awakening. Its essence constitutes a symbolic consumption of feminism. This research aims to critique the phenomenon of "symbolic consumption of feminism" in cinematic creation, clarify the authentic boundaries of gender equality expression, and provide a reference for genuinely practicing feminist principles within the film and television field.

Keywords:

Hidden Face, Feminist Narrative, Power Structures, Emotional Alienation, Film Semiotics

"Hidden Face"directed by Kim Da-woo, was released in South Korea on November 20, 2024. Adapted from the Spanish film"The Hidden Face(La Cara Oculta)", it became the highest-grossing R-rated film in South Korea since 2019, attracting 1.01 million viewers, aided by its provocative plot and the portrayal of a lesbian relationship between its two female leads. The plot revolves around conductor Cheng zhen, whose fiancée Xiu yan mysteriously disappears. During his search, he uncovers the complex romantic entanglement between Xiu yan and Mei zhu, the orchestra's new cellist.

The most significant deviation from the original lies in the film's depiction of the two female characters as former lovers who had a secret relationship for over ten years. This alteration transforms the original's "female rivalry under the male gaze" into a narrative of "female revenge". This adaptation strategy aligns with the recent trend of "consuming feminist issues" in the film industry—exemplified by "The Handmaiden (2016)" which used a lesbian narrative to frame female intimacy as a tool for breaking colonial and gender oppression, and "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 (2020)" which sparked widespread societal reflection on gender oppression in

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Asia through the lens of a housewife's psychological struggles. Hidden Face, however, attempts to package erotic elements and love revenge within a thriller format, achieving box office success by "trading nudity for attention", thereby presenting a superficial pseudo-feminist narrative that consumes feminist symbols.

1. Feminism and Pseudo-Feminism

Feminism is a diverse collection of thought and social movements originating in the 19th century and continually evolving. Its core consensus is "opposing structural oppression based on gender and pursuing freedom, equality, and dignity for all individuals (regardless of gender)".

Feminism opposes the essentialist notion that "biology determines destiny"—i.e., that "men are inherently rational/dominant/public, while women are inherently emotional/submissive/private". Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, proposed that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", arguing that women have the right to choose careers over domestic roles and that individual value should not be limited by gender labels.

Feminism pursues "gender equality", emphasizing equal access to opportunities, resources, and dignity in society. This includes equal pay and promotion opportunities free from discrimination in the workplace, and shared participation in domestic labor and childcare within the family, rather than the expectation of unpaid labor falling solely on women.

The goal of feminism is the liberation of all; it recognizes the unity of female liberation and male liberation. It opposes not only the gender oppression women face (e.g., workplace discrimination, sexual violence, the motherhood penalty) but also the role constraints patriarchy imposes on men (e.g., the economic pressure to "be the breadwinner", the emotional repression of "not showing weakness/tears"). As Black feminist scholar Gloria Jean Watkins stated in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" ,which harms everyone. (i.e., Table 1)

Table 1. The difference between feminism and pseudo feminism.

	Feminism	Pseudo-feminism
Goal	Break structural gender oppression; achieve freedom and equality for all	Appropriate feminist symbols to serve commercial interests / personal desires / foster antagonism
Gender Relations	Dissolve the bind of "gender = power / role"; pursue non-discriminatory, diverse relationships	Reverse power dynamics (female supremacy) or manufacture opposition (men bad, women good)
Content Reflected	Structural issues (e.g., institutional discrimination, implicit oppression, diverse dilemmas)	Superficial symbols (e.g., character tropes, cathartic pleasure, formal equality)
Practice Logic	From individual awakening to social change (promoting institutional, cultural, conceptual shifts)	From symbolic appropriation to unchanged underlying logic (does not challenge power structures)
Approach to Men	Liberate men from stereotypes (oppose "men must be strong")	View men as the "antagonistic other" or "tools" (suppress or exploit)

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2. Overview of Character Relationships in Hidden Face

The character Xiu yan, a chaebol heiress from an orchestra family, is the only daughter and holds absolute advantage in terms of material wealth and social status. In her heterosexual relationship with the conductor Cheng zhen, whom she is set to marry, Xiu yan occupies the dominant position. Cheng zhen, coming from an ordinary background without connections, relies on Xiu yan for his career advancement in the orchestra, consistently occupying a passive, subordinate role in their interactions.

Mei zhu, an orphan since childhood, was Xiu yan's lover. Their lesbian relationship is portrayed through the hidden space of the "secret room". Having been cared for by Xiu yan since youth, Mei zhu is also dependent on her, devoting herself entirely to their relationship and tasks like renovating Xiu yan's house, exhibiting extreme dependency.

In the film, Xiu yan, unable to publicly acknowledge her relationship with Mei zhu due to the latter's lower status, decides to marry Cheng zhen. On the eve of the wedding, to test Cheng zhen's loyalty, Xiu yan enlists Mei zhu's help to record a farewell video before hiding in the secret room, only to become trapped when the key is replaced. Mei zhu subsequently develops a relationship with Cheng zhen, partly motivated by revenge for Xiu yan's abandonment. Their relationship becomes complex and volatile. Ultimately, when Mei zhu attempts a rescue, she is instead imprisoned by Xiu yan and remains confined in the secret room, reverting to a state of peculiar emotional dependency on Xiu yan. The relationship between Xiu yan and Mei zhu is marked by both a deep historical emotional bond and conflicts arising from betrayal and desire, a complexity that drives the plot and shapes the characters' destinies.

3. Alienation of Power Structures

3.1 Xiu yan's Power Dominance and Oppression

From their childhood interactions, Xiu yan held the dominant position. Her family's wealth and social status granted her more resources and power within the relationship. Dialogues illustrate this: when Mei zhu picks her up at the airport, Xiu yan says, "The only thing not to my liking is you showing up at the airport". When needing Mei zhu's help to test Cheng zhen, she states, "But he can't not like me. Even if I don't like him, he has to like me". In their youth, inside the secret room, Xiu yan tells Mei zhu, "You're my subordinate, and my slave". These instances reveal Xiu yan's strong oppressive and dominant nature.

Once their past relationship is revealed, it becomes clear that Mei zhu was obedient and devoted (e.g., to renovating the house), while Xiu yan could effortlessly end the relationship to pursue marriage with Cheng zhen. This casual disposal of Mei zhu's emotions exemplifies power oppression.

The core setting, the "secret room", holds a dual metaphorical significance. From the perspective of spatial politics, it is both a material symbol of Xiu yan's (the orchestra heiress) class power (funded by her father) and a projection of the collective unconsciousness of female imprisonment within a patriarchal society. Xiu yan's voluntary entry into the room to test her fiancé parodies traditional gender tests. However, the test goes awry (due to Mei zhu swapping the key). Narratively, this constitutes Mei zhu's revenge against Xiu yan,

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effecting the first power reversal. The second reversal occurs when Xiu yan escapes and locks Mei zhu inside, reasserting absolute power over Mei zhu's life and death. The film's end reveals Xiu yan has renovated the room, providing Mei zhu with a "small world"—not out of pity, but to perpetuate a controlling relationship, mirroring her past dominance. This power structure violates the feminist principle of equality, which emphasizes mutual support among women, not oppression and control. Spatial power ultimately devolves into mutual female imprisonment.

The cycle of "imprisonment—rebellion—re-imprisonment" differs from the existential metaphors of confinement found in works like Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Avventura. It strips away philosophical contemplation, becoming a mere tool for visualizing, desire, contest. In a genuine feminist context, women should not leverage their advantageous positions to oppress other women but should unite against external gender-based oppression. The film, however, portrays Xiu yan treating Mei zhu more as a possession, attempting control both emotionally and physically, embodying pseudo-feminism.

3.2 Mei zhu's Power Resistance and Distortion

Facing Xiu yan's oppression, Mei zhu attempts active resistance (swapping the key), resulting in Xiu yan's entrapment. She then builds a relationship with Cheng zhen, retaliating against Xiu yan through physical intimacy and desire. While the act of "swapping the key" might be superficially read as "female awakening", Mei zhu does not seek to dismantle the power structure the secret room represents. Instead, she pursues revenge for abandonment by establishing an emotional connection with Cheng zhen, essentially substituting "male power against female power" to regain psychological balance and a sense of agency. This strategy remains trapped within patriarchal logic—as Judith Butler argues, "gender is a performance", and Mei zhu's resistance merely switches from one performance to another, lacking a true awakening of self-consciousness aimed at claiming equal power. Feminist resistance should be based on a correct recognition of self-worth and the pursuit of equal rights, not achieved by harming other women or becoming entangled with men. Mei zhu's actions reflect a extreme retaliatory impulse stemming from hurt. She fails to break free from traditional gender notions of using men and patterns of emotional dependency in female relationships. Her rapid regression into dependency upon imprisonment further exposes the lack of intrinsic value underpinning her actions; they are stress responses to trauma, not conscious assertions of power. This indicates she never truly grasps her own agency; her resistance is transient and distorted, not rooted in feminist demands for equality, further revealing the film's failure to embody genuine feminist connotations in its character relationships.

4. Instrumentalization of Emotional Patterns

4.1 Possessiveness and Selfishness in Emotion

The emotional dynamic between Xiu yan and Mei zhu is saturated with possessiveness and selfishness. Xiu yan's feelings for Mei zhu, from past intimacy to subsequent imprisonment, consistently revolve around her desire to possess. This is starkly illustrated in their conversations: when Xiu yan announces her breakup with Mei zhu over the phone after starting a relationship with Cheng zhen, she says "I'm going to start a real life now. You were just a tool for me to find my sensitive spots" Later, meeting Mei zhu at a café, she states "I've never liked anyone but you. You're the same, right?" and adds "Even though I'm betraying you now, I would

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never betray the memories." These dialogues fully reveal Xiu yan's selfish possessiveness over emotions. After choosing to marry Cheng zhen and end the relationship with Mei zhu, she nonetheless expects Mei zhu to remain emotionally anchored to her, unable to accept Mei zhu moving out of her orbit. Discovering Mei zhu's involvement with Cheng zhen triggers intense jealousy, leading her to extreme measures of confinement. This emotion is not founded on respect and equality but on selfish possession, an attempt to fully incorporate Mei zhu into her sphere of control. Mei zhu's emotions are equally complex, mingling past affection with resentment born from abandonment. Her retaliatory actions are also fundamentally a reaction to unmet possessive desires—she believes her total devotion should preclude abandonment, so she seeks to reclaim Xiu yan's attention and emotion through sexual involvement with Cheng zhen. Feminist principles advocate healthy female relationships based on mutual respect, understanding, and support, emphasizing equal emotional exchange and sharing, not this possessive and selfish mode. The film's portrayal of such emotional patterns deviates from the positive, healthy emotional connotations advocated by feminism, reflecting a lack of genuine feminist value in the characters' relational dynamics.

4.2 Lack of Mutual Aid and Support Between Women

Genuine feminism encourages women to build emotional bonds of mutual aid and support, facing life's difficulties and challenges together, and breaking traditional gender constraints. However, Hidden Face scarcely exhibits such mutual support between Xiu yan and Mei zhu. For instance, when Xiu yan decides to test Cheng zhen, she says to Mei zhu: "I'm the one who saved him, I saved a man with no money and no proper job. He shows no gratitude, I need to keep him in check before marriage." While this statement ostensibly mocks Cheng zhen, it metaphorically reflects both Mei zhu and Cheng zhen's subordinate status relative to Xiu yan and her attitude towards them.Mei zhu replies "I hate that phrase the most" but Xiu yan reacts dismissively, as she takes Mei zhu's compliance for granted.Thus, by enlisting Mei zhu's help to test Cheng zhen, Xiu yan not only disregards Mei zhu's feelings but also drags her into this complex emotional entanglement. Similarly, when faced with Xiu yan's predicament, Mei zhu's initial inaction stems from a desire for revenge. Her subsequent attempt at rescue is not motivated by female solidarity or empathy but is a struggling act born from her own emotional conflicts, which ultimately leads to her own imprisonment. Throughout the film, they primarily view each other as rivals or objects for emotional venting, not as reliable partners. The emotional world constructed by the film is one filled with suspicion, betrayal, and harm between women, devoid of the unifying, supportive strength feminism hopes to foster. This shaping of emotional patterns further demonstrates the film's deviation from the feminist track towards pseudo-feminist characteristics.

5. Dependency of Self-Consciousness

5.1 The Limitations of Xiu yan's Self-Consciousness

Xiu yan's actions in the film—such as announcing her breakup with Mei zhu by stating, "I'm going to live with a man, to live a real life acknowledged by others"; deciding to test Cheng zhen while remarking "He shows no gratitude, how dare he play hard to get with me?"; and ultimately imprisoning Mei zhu—might appear autonomous on the surface. However, a deeper analysis reveals severe limitations in her self-

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consciousness. She treats love as an object to be controlled and tested, employing extreme methods to verify Cheng zhen's loyalty. These behaviors ultimately reflect a perception of self-worth that is entirely dependent on male validation. In Feminist self-consciousness awakening signifies women can independently define their own value, without attaching it to men. Yet, Xiu yan's actions, both in her relationship with Cheng zhen and her behavior towards Mei zhu, revolve around her need for male approval and control over her emotional world, not genuine self-growth or self-realization. Her anger and revenge upon witnessing Cheng zhen and Mei zhu's betrayal stem more from challenged emotions than from a defense of her value as a woman. Her self-consciousness remains confined within the framework set by traditional gender notions, pursuing male loyalty and control over the women around her. This limited self-consciousness runs counter to the feminist ideal of awakening, indicating the film's failure to portray genuine feminist self-consciousness in her character portrayal.

5.2 Mei zhu's Bewildered Self-Consciousness

Mei zhu's self-consciousness is similarly bewildered throughout the film. From her initial total dependency on Xiu yan—exemplified in their student years when Mei zhu allowed Xiu yan to fasten a shackle around her ankle in the secret room, throwing away the key while saying "You'll definitely unlock it for me, unnie. I trust you"—to her repeated questioning "What about me?" twice upon hearing of Xiu yan's impending marriage, and further to her post-abandonment revenge and eventual return to dependency after imprisonment, she never exhibits a clear, defined sense of self. Within her relationship with Xiu yan, she long occupied a subordinate position, failing to develop independent judgment of her own worth. Her retaliatory actions after being abandoned are not based on recognition of her intrinsic value or a desire for equal rights but are instinctive reactions to hurt. In developing feelings for Cheng zhen, she doesn't genuinely contemplate her own emotional needs or life goals, using him merely as a tool for revenge. Once imprisoned by Xiu yan, she quickly reverts to a state of dependency, seemingly losing all self-awareness and resistance capability. From a feminist perspective, self-consciousness awakening requires women to recognize their own needs, value, and rights, and strive for them. Mei zhu's journey lacks this clear process of awakening; her actions are predominantly influenced by external factors and emotional impulses, leaving her in a perpetually bewildered and passive state. This further confirms that her character portrayal lacks the elements of self-consciousness awakening emphasized by feminism, manifesting as pseudo-feminism.

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Xiu yan and Mei zhu in Hidden Face across the dimensions of power structures, emotional patterns, and self-consciousness awakening, it is evident that the film presents significant issues in its representation of feminism, constituting a typical pseudo-feminist work. Xiu yan's power oppression over Mei zhu, the possessive and selfish nature of their emotional dynamic, the absence of mutual support, and the limitations and confusion surrounding their self-consciousness all deviate from the core feminist values of equality, respect, mutual aid, and awakened self-awareness. Contemporary film and television creation should avoid such superficial and false representations of feminism. Instead, it should strive to deeply understand feminist substance, using character relationships and plot development to authentically portray women's genuine states and positive strengths in their pursuit of equality and self-

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realization, thereby contributing more profound and valuable works to the development of feminism in visual media.

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