

# “You Can’ t Do Everything for Everyone”: Vulnerability, Female Desire, and Disobedient Gaze in *Her Story*

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**Abstract**—This article takes the Chinese film *Her Story* (directed by Shao Yihui) as a central case to explore how it constructs a new narrative path for women under the tension between postfeminist discourse and neoliberalism. By portraying the female protagonists, Wang Tiemei and Xiao Ye, in situations of emotional uncertainty, disrupted intimacy, and sexual autonomy, the film breaks away from traditional stable romantic narratives. It presents “vulnerability” and “messiness” as possible forms of female subjectivity. Using close reading as the main method and drawing on feminist film criticism, this paper analyzes how the film shifts its narrative strategies and viewing perspectives to challenge traditional gendered moral discipline and the postfeminist myth of success. As one of the important examples of recent Chinese women’s filmmaking, *Her Story* offers a new cultural path for women’s voices and opens up a space to rethink gender politics and emotional expression in today’s media environment.

**Keywords**—Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, female desire, Gaze, *Her story*

## I. INTRODUCTION

When asked about the scene that most resonate with her in the film *Her Story*, the lead actress Song Jia talked about the moment when her character Tiemei reveals rare vulnerability on the rooftop in the final scene: “Contemporary women can be vulnerable and confused, but they are still strong when facing life” (CCTV, 2025). This comment not only reveals a key moment in the character’s arc but also directly speaks to the core of the female narrative constructed in the film—that women can fail, mess up, and lose emotional control, and yet these are no longer seen as signs of weakness but as expressions of a new form of subjectivity. In the film, Tiemei wears a T-shirt with the slogan “You can’t do

everything for everyone”, which clearly echoes a broader cultural sentiment: women are no longer required to bear everything, stay emotionally stable, or always be right. Similar to global cultural texts such as Barbie, this film touches on a re-examination of female identity, modes of looking, emotional expression, and social expectations.

Released in 2024, *Her Story*, a film targeted primarily at young female audiences, inherits the tradition of women’s cinema and spontaneously offers a uniquely innovative perspective. Directed by female filmmaker Shao Yihui, the film centers on the friendship between single mother Wang Tiemei and her neighbor Xiao Ye, focusing on their mutual support and personal development. The story begins with Wang Tiemei moving into a new neighborhood with her daughter Wang Momo. Through the multi-dimensional portrayal of three female characters, the film depicts their independence and resilience in the face of emotional and social challenges: Wang Tiemei seeks balance between her entanglement with her ex-husband and a new romantic relationship; Momo grows through exploring her personal interests; and Xiao Ye struggles with anxiety in an open relationship and attempts to achieve self-acceptance.

Against this background, this paper asks: how does the film construct a new narrative path for women by responding to their predicaments within the context of postfeminism and neoliberal logic? Taking *Her Story* as a primary case, this paper explores a narrative practice that allows women to mess up and be vulnerable, through the representation of female desire and the female gaze. Adopting close textual reading as the primary method and drawing on feminist critical

theory, this paper aims to explore the film's cultural significance in women's film-making and gender politics.

## II. UNDER THE MYTH OF EMPOWERMENT

Under the neoliberal regime of affect and sexuality, individuals are encouraged to rationalize and manage their emotional lives in pursuit of an ideal future self (Illouz, 2007). As Baudrillard (1998) observes, “woman” has become a cultural signifier of consumption: women are urged to be beautiful for themselves, engage in self-care and self-construction, yet ultimately participate in their own commodification. This idealized subject is not only trained to govern her appearance but is also conditioned to treat her emotions as convertible capital in increasingly unstable intimate markets. However, such self-regulation does not represent authentic agency, but rather a structurally induced illusion. In traditional sexual dynamics, women often bear disproportionate social pressures to commodify sex — as a means not only of satisfying desire but of negotiating emotional investment, social judgment, and self-worth (Illouz, 2021). Thus, while neoliberal ideology promotes an image of the autonomous, emotionally self-managed woman, such autonomy often intensifies the instrumentalization of intimacy by embedding emotional relationships within a market-oriented logic of exchange.

This contradiction is embodied in the emotional narrative of Xiao Ye, the young lead singer in this film. Self-described as a “love addict”, Xiao Ye enters a relationship with Dr. Hu, an ophthalmologist who champions non-commitment and open relationships. Drawn to his charm and emotional ambiguity, she seeks intimacy and stability despite the terms he sets. When confronted with his involvement with other women, Xiao Ye suppresses her insecurity and fabricates a new identity, posing as a single mother by borrowing Tiemei's persona in an effort to secure her position within the relationship. While her deception may seem strategic or self-protective, it reveals a deeper alienation produced by neoliberal affective structures, in which women's emotions are treated as managed resources, exchanged for fleeting validation and temporary emotional access. Her behavior reflects the paradox of

neoliberal desire: women are encouraged to express themselves “freely”, yet such expressions are often constrained by male expectations, leading them to perform autonomy while compromising their emotional sovereignty. This contradiction is laid bare in Xiao Ye's confession: “I didn't want him to think I would cling to him... I wanted people to think I was a cool, casual, and sexually liberated mom” (Shao 2024). The statement presents how postfeminist culture invites women to navigate intimacy through irony, ease, and supposed freedom — yet this very “freedom” is often re-scripted to satisfy male fantasy and sustain the cultural ideal of the “cool girl”.

The portrayal of Tiemei's emotional conflict and her evolving relationship with Xiao Ma illustrates how women in contemporary narrative frameworks struggle between cultural regulation and self-identity, particularly regarding the tension and shame surrounding sexual expression. From the outset, Tiemei exhibits a pronounced sense of shame and attempts to conceal her sexual involvement with Xiao Ma. She refuses to acknowledge the relationship openly and even expresses concern to Xiao Ma beforehand that “People would talk, it'd make me look desperate” (Shao, 2024). When asked about their relationship after some time, she states bluntly, “A messy one even I wouldn't post about”, while in the Chinese line of the film the adjective “dirty” is used (Shao, 2024). Such labeling of the relationship as messy and dirty stems not only from internalized social moral standards but also reflects the layered social scrutiny faced by single mothers. As Illouz (2021) notes, “Sexual promiscuity for men signifies sexual power, whereas for women, it is either ambiguous or a sign of moral degradation”. Within this cultural logic, a woman with a child who displays sexual desire or engages in non-traditional intimacy is often branded as “irresponsible” or “promiscuous”. Tiemei's feelings of shame and concealment are direct responses to these gendered social judgments.

This internalized shame exemplifies a central contradiction within postfeminist discourses of empowerment. While postfeminism promotes the idea that women have achieved equality and are free to choose and express their sexuality, such “freedom” is deeply embedded in consumerist logic. It simultaneously encourages

autonomy while reinforcing social norms of propriety and decorum that regulate women's bodily and emotional expressions. This paradox is widespread across global female experiences and resonates with the conflicting expectations depicted in *Barbie* (2023). The film incisively critiques how modern women are burdened by contradictory standards:

*You're supposed to love being a mother,  
but don't talk about your kids all the damn  
time.....*

*You're supposed to stay pretty for men but  
not so pretty that you tempt them too much  
or that you threaten other women,  
because you're supposed to be a part of the  
sisterhood (Gerwig, 2023).*

They get trapped in seemingly empowering ideals, yet still be blamed for inevitable failure. Tiemei's struggle encapsulates this double bind: she is "allowed" to be sexual but must remain discreet and restrained; she may express desire, but not at the cost of violating expectations of being a "good mother" or a "responsible woman". As one character poignantly states in *Barbie*: "I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us" (Gerwig, 2023). As McRobbie (2004) observes, the so-called "freedom" in postfeminist discourse is merely a token acknowledgment of feminism, in other words, a strategy that reconstructs patriarchal values under the guise of emancipation. The mechanisms of discipline seen in *Barbie* and *Her Story* correspond with McRobbie's concept of "double entanglement":

"This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life... with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations...It also encompasses the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated" (McRobbie, 2004: 256).

Women remain trapped in structural subjugation, yet this control becomes harder to detect, as it is masked by the illusion of freedom and progress. This contradictory discourse of sexuality and autonomy becomes internalized in Tiemei's shame—her labeling of the relationship as "dirty" reflects an attempt to restore emotional order through self-blame and moral punishment. It reveals the hollowness of postfeminist

"empowerment" rhetoric and how women are made to individually bear the consequences of failure and emotional distress behind the illusion of choice.

Beyond emotional and sexual dimensions, this logic of responsabilization extends into women's professional identities. Socially celebrated figures such as single women, DINKs, female entrepreneurs, and globetrotting women are idealized representations of "self-determined lifestyles". Superficially, these roles seem to break away from traditional gender constraints and reflect female agency. Yet when women encounter setbacks in these chosen paths, public discourse often attributes such failures to poor personal decisions, further intensifying women's individualized burdens in modern life. As Wilson and Yochim (2017) note, "the enterprising mamapreneur reaches her capacity primarily through retooling her habits and adopting an optimistic attitude" (p. 628). Within this framework, women are no longer merely passive objects of external surveillance, but active participants in self-monitoring, self-management, and self-regulation.

In another scene, Tiemei, as a single mother who attempts to reconstruct her identity through personal narrative, writes an article encouraging other mothers to reject victimhood and reclaim life's value. However, her writing sparks collective backlash from female readers. When the editorial team reads the online comments, a male colleague remarks, "You tried to speak for women, and they're the ones attacking you". The Initium (2024) interprets this as symptomatic of feminism's dilemma in China: women like Tiemei cannot pursue institutional change and must rely on neoliberal self-struggle while silently enduring systemic pressure. Yet, this dilemma is not unique to China, but reflects the broader limitations of neoliberal discourse. The women who reject Tiemei's "non-normative" narrative are not resisting change per se but are themselves caught in structural entrapments: long constrained by domestic and financial burdens, they find it increasingly difficult to transcend systemic and material barriers. Their reactions highlight the deceptive nature of neoliberal freedom—it obscures structural inequality with the myth of individual choice, internalizing collective issues as personal failure and eroding the potential for systemic critique.

### III. NOT FOR EVERYONE'S EYES

*Male gaze* refers to the way mainstream cinema reinforces male subjectivity through both visual and narrative means, objectifying women as passive subjects to be viewed, thus perpetuating gender inequality. Laura Mulvey's theory of the *male gaze* reveals the gendered power dynamics inherent in film, profoundly influencing feminist film studies by offering a critical perspective on traditional gender structures. Mulvey (1990) argues that mainstream cinema reinforces male dominance and the objectification of women through narrative and visual mechanisms, constructing gender inequality. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly (Mulvey, 1990). The male spectator experiences both pleasure and anxiety when observing femininity, as the female body symbolizes lack and evokes castration anxiety from a psychoanalytic perspective. To alleviate this threat, films use strategies such as fetishistic scopophilia (exaggerated glamour of women) and sadistic voyeurism (subjecting women to scrutiny by male authority) (Columpar, 2002).

Many female directors have challenged this one-sided gaze, seeking to transform women from passive objects of observation into active subjects of viewing. Their creative choices are often driven by their own gendered experiences, making them more attuned to the historical symbolization of women's bodies and prompting reflection on conventional gender narratives. Many female directors have historically chosen to tell stories that explicitly or implicitly challenge, rather than conform to, dominant portrayals of female identity (Hankin, 2007). For example, through innovative narrative and visual strategies, female characters are empowered to become subjects, sometimes even depicting male nudity or female characters spying on men. In Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993), for instance, the traditionally voyeuristic hand-held point-of-view shot is used to show the full nudity of the male character, Baines (Bihlmeyer, 2005). In this scene, the male body is no longer merely a symbol of strength and authority, but becomes a

symbolized "other" through the female director's lens.

*Her Story* continues this feminist critique of the traditional *male gaze* by avoiding the objectification of the female body through cinematographic techniques. For instance, at the beginning of the film, when Tiemei and her daughter Momo move into their new home, Momo complains about the lack of an elevator, and Tiemei reassures her that climbing stairs is good for shaping her legs. When their neighbor Xiao Ye coincidentally passes by, she adds, "Right." In this scene, while the dialogue mentions "the shape of her legs is pretty", the director avoids the typical close-up shots of a woman's legs often seen in mainstream cinema. Instead, a medium shot is used, naturally and subtly presenting the interaction between the characters, avoiding sexualized representations of body parts and steering clear of presenting the female body as an object of visual consumption.

More significantly, the film also challenges the simple, symmetrical consumption of the male body and transcends the binary opposition between subject and object, exploring a more equitable and fluid viewing relationship. The film uses non-invasive shots throughout, not intended to punish any form of desire. One example of this breakthrough is in the scene where Tiemei observes Xiao Ma's bare torso. Xiao Ma is forced to remove his shirt due to it being soaked, and Xiao Ye deliberately teases, "Tiemei, look quickly". Despite the male nudity in this scene, the camera does not sexualize Xiao Ma's body. Instead, it quickly shifts focus to the conflict between Tiemei and her ex-husband. This approach is innovative because it guides the audience's attention toward the relational and emotional conflicts between characters, avoiding traditional cinematic portrayals of male bodies as symbols of gendered power. As Jeanne Labrune points out in *Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema*, male filmmakers often use guns, revolvers, weapons, knives, bombs to signify offensive male power, which never goes limp (Mandy, 2000). However, in *Her Story*, the camera shifts its focus from the objectification of the male body to a transformation of power relations. Xiao Ma's nudity symbolizes a change in the relationship, not male power. This de-objectified cinematography represents a "disobedience" to mainstream cinematic logic. It



is not for everyone's eyes but forces viewers to confront the characters' complex emotional experiences.

In a pivotal scene about Xiao Ma's ripping of Tiemei's clothes, the film challenges long-neglected issues of sexual consent and women's agency in desire, offering a critical rebuttal to the traditional male gaze and sexual politics. After experiencing sexual provocation from a male character, Tiemei asks, "Why are you tearing my clothes? Why don't you tear your own... Porns are all made based on male fantasies, they never ask for women's opinions, just because it's in the film doesn't mean I like it" (Shao, 2024). This line exposes the covert logic behind pornography and mainstream narrative: women's bodies are rarely portrayed as active agents of desire but are constructed as objects for viewing. As Srinivasan (2021) argues in *The Right to Sex*, the key to anti-pornography feminism is that pornography does not merely lead to women's subordination: it is itself a means of placing women in a subordinate position. Tiemei's question critiques how "sexual" imagery has been constructed without female consent, highlighting how sexual consent is not just a post-facto technical issue but a political matter regarding women's right to control their own desires. This emphasis on sexual consent resonates with *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), where the female character not only explicitly requests sex ("I want to make love to you") but also masturbates afterward to complete the emotional experience (Teng, 2019). This representation challenges the traditional logic that female desire is dependent on men and reflects that when films place women's desire and sexuality at the core of the narrative, true female gaze can emerge (Coles, 2023).

*Her Story* rejects the traditional pleasure mechanisms designed to engage the audience's emotions and instead directs the camera toward the complex experience of the female subject. The resulting imagery is not a spectacle for anyone's eyes, but a form of viewing that calls for reflection on the viewer's position and the power structures in place. Here, the imagery is not for pleasure, but for resistance; it is not about presenting the body but presenting the subject.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the final scenes of the film, Xiao Ye confronts Tiemei with a series of pointed questions:

*But why do you have to get everything right?*

*Who decides what 'better' even is?*

*Who's the judge?*

*Why can't things get messed up?*

*How bad could it really be?* (Shao, 2024)

These inquiries not only resonate with the slogan on Tiemei's T-shirt — "you can't do everything for everyone" — but also pose a fundamental challenge to prevailing gender normativity in society. Within postfeminist discourse, women are often cast as hyper-competent subjects: poised, autonomous, emotionally stable, and endlessly self-optimizing. In this self-regulatory paradigm, traditionally "feminine" emotional vulnerability is marginalized or even stigmatized. Women are pressured to overcome fragility in favor of perpetual self-improvement. For Xiao Ye, it is the unconditional emotional support offered by Tiemei and her daughter that enables her to develop a more coherent sense of self and break free from the manipulative emotional dynamic with Dr. Hu. Her personal rebellion reflects not only an individual transformation but a broader shift—from internalized guilt and self-denial to emotional self-acceptance.

Later in the film, Tiemei's evolving relationship with Xiao Ma further illustrates her reconciliation with her own desires. Although she still describes their bond using the metaphor of "eating snakes together in the bathroom", a phrase that retains connotations of shame and marginality, her earlier dismissal of the relationship as simply "dirty" has given way to a more open, less judgmental acknowledgment. The film thus begins to destigmatize non-normative forms of intimacy. This revaluation of intimacy rejects the binary logic of "stability as good, chaos as bad". Instead, it embraces a mode of subjectivity that allows for emotional messiness and imperfection, yet persists in moving forward. Such a disposition aligns with broader global shifts in representations of female intimacy. As Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra (2016) observe, many contemporary female protagonists now prefer fleeting, non-romantic entanglements over the secure romantic closure typical of earlier narratives. Tiemei's attitude reflects this de-

idealized understanding of intimacy and offers an alternative, decentered path for articulating female desire within the Chinese cultural context.

In this light, *Her Story* portrays, through the intersection of Tiemei and Xiao Ye, a process in which women continuously “fall apart” and “reconstruct” themselves in relation to desire, relationships, and self-perception. The film advocates a new ethics of viewing and feeling—one that refuses perfectionism and instead affirms the power and truth embedded in vulnerability, disorder, and even emotional “dirtiness”. In the Chinese cultural setting, this refusal to “do everything for everyone” serves as a soft yet powerful resistance to the societal expectations placed upon women. Rather than relying on overt institutional critique, the film adopts a strategy of empathy and identification—inviting viewers to join its characters in deconstructing normative ideals and expanding the expressive possibilities of female identity and desire. This approach, anchored in everyday detail and cognitive dissonance, exemplifies the nuanced cinematic strategies and cultural insight of contemporary Chinese women filmmakers (Liu & Dahling, 2016).

As Patricia White (2015) suggests, women’s films perform not as a commercial genre marketed to women, but as a feminist framework for foregrounding the identity of the director. Whether through its embrace of emotional vulnerability or its critique of visual power relations, *Her Story* broadens the scope of female expression. Future women’s cinema should continue to pursue narrative and formal complexity—not only to amplify women’s voices but also to serve as a vital cultural force for advancing gender equity and social change.

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