



## Analysis of Female Figures in *Birdman*

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Received 18 September 2015; accepted 5 November 2015

Published online 26 December 2015

### Abstract

*Birdman*, directed by the Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, honored the Oscar prize in 2014. This paper attempts to analyze the four female images in the film from the perspective of feminism and finds that those female images are the reflection of patriarchal society. Those figures, the degenerate, the angel, the victim or the mighty, are substantially figures of consumption in dominated male world. At the same time, those female stereotypes in turn oppress women and restrict their development.

**Key words:** *Birdman*; Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu; Feminism; Patriarchal society

Liu, J. (2015). Analysis of Female Figures in *Birdman*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(6), 114-117. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7855>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7855>

### INTRODUCTION

Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, a Mexican director, is famous for his natural and profound style. Although he has a small quantity of works which are very similar, his talents have garnered him international renown. His famous works include *Babel* and *Birdman*, the latter of which won an Oscar in 2014. *Birdman* is about an actor, whose glory days of the leading heroic role have passed, that tries to make a comeback in Broadway. The way towards success is hard and his values are challenged by reality many times, but he stays true to his inner artist.

Though we live in a modern world and the status of women in society has improved greatly since past times, we still see the typical archetypes of female images created by men. In a patriarchal society, women are inferior to men, which can be seen often in literary works. Since ancient times, more often than not, men have been active in the field of politics and women have taken a backseat. "Men conquer women's desire for sex through politics, which are women's two contradictory roles of rebellion and conversion in human history." (Cai & Luo, 2003) Rebellion is the reflection of the mighty woman, who is cast aside by society. Conversion is the symbol of a "good" woman, who is deflowered by men. *Birdman*, written and directed by a male, is a film for males which portrays the female figures as those typical ones that exist in a patriarchal society.

### 1. THE DEGENERATED TYPE: SAM

In male-dominated culture, there is a traditional idea that women are inferior to men. In Western classic work the Holy Bible, it is Eva who enticed Adam and made him in a degenerated situation and thus human beings were excluded from Paradise. As a result, Eva becomes the ancestor of wicked female and the image has been repeated as degenerated type over and over. In Greek myth, Siren used to seduce sailors with her husky voice, leading to the disaster that boats struck the rocks and trapped into dangerous area or even sailors drown in the sea; the most typical "jailbait" in Greek myth is Pandora. The extreme type of degenerate is the whore and in male world, the attitude towards them is typical too. Simone de Beauvoir points out that in female myth, whores "have unique ideas" and they "are the most obedient and easiest to get rid of". It does not take much chance for men to admire them. Because whores live in the brink-of-male world, so the connected laws are inessential to them." (X. P. Wang & Y. P. Wang, 2005)

Although Sam is not depicted as a whore in the film, she is definitely a degenerated one. At the beginning of the film, we could see that Sam is a kind of 'rude' person. While consulting her father about flowers on Skype, Sam yelled at the flower man: "Shut up". Even when she talked to her father, she basically did not care about the words she used and said whatever she wanted to say, 'those flowers smell like fucking Sauerkraut'. Then she gnashed her teeth "I hate this job" with a stare at her father. We want to see how a father would react to a rude daughter only to find out that Sam had already turned off the video. Such a rude figure is created at the beginning of the film. She left bad impression on her father's co-workers too. From Lesley, we know she used to abuse drugs and with strange behaviors like "hanging around, watching everyone like Mrs. Creepy". The director tries to build a drug taken maid image.

Words, behaviors and judgments from others are insufficient to show that a female is a slut. Sexy part is always connected. If she is not a whore, she might be the one who seduces men. She volunteered the game Truth or Dare and asked Mike the first seductive question about her butts. While, Mike was decent here because he chose Dare and asked the girl to do something nothing to do with flirtation. Sam persisted in another round and asked another seductive question, "If you weren't afraid, what would you do to me?" Sam failed to seduce Mike the first time they met on the roof, but she didn't give up. The second time, she tried several times and finally succeeded in alluring Mike to kiss her or even have sex with her (we could not tell).

This kind of image gives us the allusion that the degenerated female is not a specific case but a social group. The phenomenon reflects not only women's inferior situation but also another identity "the other person" in old times. Those "the other persons", on the one hand, are consumption of the male and on the other hand should take the responsibility of men's degenerate.

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## 2. THE ANGEL TYPE: SYLVIA

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In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir uses the term 'female legend' to describe the female figures or their situation reflected in religion, philosophy, literature, historical narration and folk tales in the history of humankind.

Myth is so various and contradictory that similarities can't be found out in those female legends like Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena. Eva is a female and Virgin Mary is a female as well as. She is an idol, servant, the origin of life and the power of darkness and she is also the truth of dignified silence. (Beauvoir, 1998)

Men give all the good female characters to a specific female image as their wish. They create female figures according to their own love and hate, which are also a reflection of male-dominated value.

In *Birdman*, Sylvia is ex-wife of the hero Riggan. She is a loving, sweet and considerate woman. From their conversation, we can know that Riggan really treated her badly before the divorce, 'throw a chicken knife at me and an hour later, you told me how much you love me'. Though the unhappy experience with Riggan, she still cares about him a lot after divorce. Sylvia appeared in the two previews in the theater to support her ex-husband and went to backstage to check on him and encourage him. When Riggan was in the hospital, she was also beside him and she is always there for him.

Sylvia does not only cares about Riggan but also compromises. That's how men create female images, they have to compromise to men so that they could be tender and good women. Otherwise they are rebellious and vicious ones. Riggan hits a bottleneck in his career and he needs more money to support his theater. Though Sylvia refused the proposal to sell the house which they made a deal to give their daughter, she yields to her ex-husband eventually.

There are lots of good qualities on Sylvia, who exists in the film as an angel. More often than not, the angel type is men's expectation and men create it according to their own wishes, which is also a reflection of male-dominated society. Simone de Beauvoir points out: "Women are not born in a way but be created." (de Beauvoir, 1998) Simone de Beauvoir demonstrates a fact that women are taught to be in a way by the society that how to be a lady, how to be a woman and how to fulfill a woman's responsibility. This kind of standard type of women is taught from mothers to daughters, from generation to generation, which affects women just like culture to human beings.

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## 3. THE VICTIM TYPE: LAURA AND LESLEY

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While analyzing Thomas Hardy's work *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the famous critic points out that "As any other of his work, the female figures in the novel are idealistic and they are melancholy projections of oppressed men themselves" (X. P. Wang & Y. P. Wang, 2005) While depicting female images in patriarchal society, women need to be repressed to be pitied by readers, which are as common as the phenomenon of oppressing women in male. So more often than not, the victim type appears in literary work.

In the film, Laura is a pitiful woman. She does not care about her fame, that's why she could keep poised facing bad comments of their play on the newspaper. What she cares about is the love and care of her man and she wants to be a mum. Her man is always occupied with his dream and neglects her, that's why she wears a sad face often, "Two years he had never said that kind of thing to me". If a girl next to the door is unfortunate to fail to be cared, she is still lucky to have kids as company. While for Laura,

neither could realize, “I really wanted to be a mum, but my body seems not to agree”.

It is no doubt that Laura is an unlucky role in the film and a typical victim type. As a lover, she is the victim of men’s career. In patriarchal society, men are endowed with the right as a human being to get a foothold in the world. While as for women, after the carefree childhood, they learn the expectation from the society and parents that it is a big issue for them to marry men—her new master. When it comes to this point, women are given no right to realize their own values as a human being in the society and they are subordinated to men. What men care about is eternity and what women attach importance to is internality. That’s why more often than not, women pay attention to love more than men and they are easy to get hurt and become victims in love. It is exact the same case here that the hero Roggin pays more attention to his career than his lover, and Laura still wishes a lot of care and love from her lover thought she has a job as a modern woman. So she is the victim to love.

Another victim type in the film is Lesley. Lesley introduced Mike to the play team, while Mike humiliates Lesley a lot. First of all, Lesley tried to give Mike some advice and said something bad about Sam without being told. In a play, Mike humiliated her by trying to have real sex with her. Mike tries to be real in the play for he is chasing for real, while Lesley is struggling for success and dignity in the big modern city. She works hard for ten years to make her first play in Broadway happen, but Mike seemingly means to destroy the play. She always stays in the group and her boss Riggan no matter how bad the situation is. Laura and Lesley are victim types in the film, and are victims in patriarchal ideas.

In male-dominated world, men deal with women according to their mood, regarding women as objects and women have always been in an inferior situation. So the victim figure is also a reflection of patriarchal value.

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#### 4. THE MIGHTY TYPE: THE CRITIC

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In patriarchal society, women must be tender and resign to men in everything. On the contrary, the disobedient mighty women are not welcomed and even become the “opponent” in the male world. Simone de Beauvoir describes in her famous work of *The Second Sex* that

Ever since when women have freed, they have just one fate—to create freely for themselves. Thus two sexes become in a conflict relationship. Women are men’s competitors, so they seem to be as formidable as their mysterious fertility. (de Beauvoir, 1998)

However, this kind of seeming hostile is as unreal as appearance. On the contrary, good and evil, the two contradicted conception are led in women’s world.

In *Birdman*, the critic is a mighty figure, which could be seen by her words and manners. We can see

the wrinkles around her mouth as if she spoke too much mean words. The critic determines the fate of a film or a play, more specifically the fate of actors, actresses, directors and etc.. She showed up twice in the film. In the first showing time, she threatened Mike, “doesn’t you worry about I give you a bad review”. She poses challenge and hostility towards Mike. The critic has some power and authority to an extent, but she tends to be mean and unreasonable one. She abuses her right and makes comments on films and dramas according to her wish. In her second time, she gritted her teeth and showed her disgust, ‘whatever the opening tomorrow, I am gonna turn in the worst review that readers have ever read’. She is an authority here but she is an abused and self-willed one. More often than not, the mean and mighty woman type is middle-aged one because she is experiencing menopause.

Mary Wollstonecraft points out that “Reason is, ultimately, a pure power for progress, or we put it like this, reason is exactly the power to distinguish truth from false.” So there should be no difference on sex when it comes to reason. “Everyone has his own reason...If reason is the power from God and the link of human beings and the creator, then the property of all people’s reason must be the exact same.” (Wollstonecraft, 1996)

The morality of the two sexes should be of no difference, and so is reason...A woman should not be only treated as someone who is moral, but also reasonable. They should take the same measure as men to gain virtue as a human being. (Ibid.)

Angelina Grimke also declares that “there is no difference of reason when it comes to reason... A sound of mind has nothing to do with the gender.” (Donovan, 2003)

The female reporter is also a typical type of mighty in the film. No matter from the reporter’s dress, manner or words, we can see she is a typical archetype of mighty woman. She interrupted another male reporter with rude questions, “is it true that you ejaculate yourself sperm form baby pigs”. She is a vicious and ignorant image here and she is trying to create some ugly rumor. In old times, only men led explorations and activities which consume their energy. While women are limited to domestic and quiet activities, which consume less energy they have. They kill time by losing themselves in the reverie and chatting. There is a stereotype that women are good at rumors. So it is no wonder that a female reporter is arranged as a role starting a rumor in the film.

In a patriarchal society, the mighty type could be seen as a rebellion towards oppression. However, more often than not, this type is not welcomed in male-dominated culture.

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#### CONCLUSION

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The four female figures above are typical figures created by men according to their expectations, love and hate.

They are female legends, reflecting men's values. Why are female legends created? The whole world exists for some reason and the created female images can help men to realize their existence and value. This film is typical and traditional, which to some extent supports men's values.

French female writer Helene Cixous once pointed out that in the history of western literature, "the activity of writing is conducted in the name of reason. Writing could be the result of reason, nevertheless it could be an exercise in thought directing. It is related to phallogocentrism and it is truly male's self-admiration, self-stimulation and self-intoxication (Ibid.). Thus the history of western writing is the history of reason, that is the history of oppressing women by building up the power of discourse. However, the appearance of female's literary works and their artistic derivative changed the writing strategy of western literature. That's why after a long period of struggle, women's situation has improved a lot. The film *Birdman* is basically another work of modern male. It is written, directed, produced, art directed and edited by men. From the analysis above, we can understand female figures from the angle of modern men, who are affected by traditional stereotypes.

Though we live in a modern world and the status of women in society has improved greatly since past times, we still see the typical archetypes of female images created by men in a film or a literary work and the female images in *Birdman* is the typical case. Then how should a woman realize those and become a modern independent woman? That women should get rid of being subordinate

to men and meanwhile cultivate an independent character stays surface of the problem, nowadays we should prompt it to a higher gear that how women should face their own gender to pursue comprehensive personality development. First of all, women should realize themselves, accept themselves and improve themselves to adapt to higher requirements from modern society. There is unnecessary for every woman to be the same style; however every one of them has the potential to be better. Secondly, success of women's liberation cannot be deviated from men's sympathy and approval, just like male's authority cannot be apart from female's understanding and support. So we should not only pay attention to women and their development, but also harmonious development of the two sexes. Only in this way, women can ultimately overthrow the traditional unfortunate fate and realize their values as a human being in modern society.

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