

# Discussion on the Narration of Co-Advancement of Both Sexes Led by Maternalism

## —Taking “My Sister” and “All about My Mother” as Examples

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### Abstract

The two films “My Sister” and “All about My Mother” focus on two kinds of family relations respectively, showing the female image as a mother in different family structures. The formation and development of “maternalism” as an idea were accompanied by the development and changes of feminism. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, maternalism was introduced into China from Europe, which set off a social trend of women’s liberation in China, and has deeply affected the development of gender society. This paper will summarize the theories related to maternalism and compare and analyze the two films by using case studies to show the struggles and confusion of contemporary women in family relationships and the transformation of their awareness, perception and identity of maternalism, which are revealed in two families and two relationships. On the other hand, it also shows the exploration and breakthrough of maternalism in contemporary narrative films, trying to reconcile the social repugnance and gender opposition brought about by excessive “feminism”, promoting the thinking and growth of men with women’s situation, starting from the demand of gender harmony, emancipating maternalism, and achieving the ethical harmony model of gender progress.

### Keywords

Maternal Narration, Gender Relations, Antimaternalism, Female Narration

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## 1. Introduction

“My Sister” is about two siblings who have lost both parents. When the sister faces the question of whether to pursue herself or raise her brother, her attitude changed from one of resistance to concern and acceptance. “All about My Mother” tells the story of Ji Peizhen, who daily takes care of everyone’s needs.

Suddenly, she was found to have four stages of malignant tumor with only four months of life left. The family was forced to accept the fact that her “mother” was going to leave. Finally, everyone gained growth and insight. Although one tells about her sister and the other about her mother, we can find that maternalism, a topic that is rooted in the process of women’s growth, shows a series of dilemmas that women will face around it: the elder sister will pay for the younger brother, and the mother will pay for the child, which is a slightly coercive ethical logic. In fact, the bloody fact behind this is that women must obtain the most glittering social status in the eyes of the world through marriage and birth, and complete a woman’s entire life. In the patriarchal society, women use maternalism to limit their own functions. Both her sister Anran and her mother Ji Peizhen are faced with the choice of children and the future. Her mother Ji Peizhen chose to give up her favorite geographical and meteorological career for the sake of her children. Although the end of *My Sister* is not explicitly stated, her sister took her brother from the adoptive family, and the result is self-evident. Although this deep-rooted idea is difficult to completely change, we can still find in the film the efforts made by the creators to change the dilemma in women’s narrative films, focusing on the liberation of maternal consciousness for women while also inspiring the male characters to recognize themselves, allowing us to see the joint growth of gender relations in family relationships and the formation of a maternal-led business model of gender co-progression, which is also the main point and goal of this study.

## 2. “Motherhood” and “Anti Maternalism” Narrative Writing

What is maternalism? Sonia Michel and Seth Cowen pointed out in the book “Women’s Women: The Origin of Politics and Welfare in France” that it is to celebrate women’s ability to become mothers, and to extend the quality of mothers, that is, careful care, nurturing and morality, as a whole, to the whole society. At the beginning of the emergence of maternalism as a kind of consciousness, it was a tool for women to compete for more political and welfare rights with the development of women’s rights movement (Zhang & Lv, 2003). The origin of maternal thoughts in China can be traced back to the large-scale introduction of Ellen Kay’s maternal thoughts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which formed a purposeful and selective dissemination among the intellectuals. The reformist intellectuals, represented by Liang Qichao, emphasized that women should be good wives and mothers, strengthen the country and protect the species, and finally become qualified mothers of the nation (Wang, 2019). Ji Pei Zhen in “All about My Mother” is a typical mother figure who possesses this quality of “perfection”. At the beginning of the film, she is busy. She prepares breakfast for her husband and mother-in-law in the kitchen, and she still keeps telling her husband things, but her husband immerses himself in reading the newspaper and ignores her. After finishing the meal, she feeds her mother-in-law with Alzheimer’s like a child. The leisure of her husband, the play

of her mother-in-law and her busy form a sharp contrast. The case of “My Sister” is relatively unique in that An Ran, as an older sister, does not escape the fate of becoming a “mother”. When her parents died, she should take care of her younger brother in the eyes of the elders in the family, which coincides traditional culture. When discussing the issue of raising his younger brother, Anran’s aunt said, “Your parents are the only son. In the future, they will still rely on him to set up a family.” Even after hearing her sister say, “If you want to go to Beijing to study for postgraduate entrance examination, who loves to raise him?” the family fought hard. This deep-rooted thought made women forced to have the “maternalism” of raising children.

With the understanding and dissemination of the idea of maternalism, people gradually realized that Ellen Kay was the representative of the “maternalism” school among the “feminists”, who eulogized the respect of maternalism and advocated the maternalism of society. At the same time, the ideological trend of “anti maternalism” also appeared in the literary world. The intellectuals represented by female writers set off a strong subversion of the core idea of patriarchy in the literary field, stepped out of Xu Wei’s abstract thinking and embarked on the road of observing and judging the nature of maternalism, and the sublation and criticism of their traditional culture was in a leaping process. In the history of the development of maternal thoughts in China, a stage of maternal writing with profound implications has been formed. At the same time in Japan, traditional Japanese women issued a fierce voice of resistance to the patriarchal society. The ideological trend of “anti maternalism” has been emancipated unprecedentedly, and women have gradually realized that “maternalism” is only an effective means to imprison women’s thoughts in a patriarchal society (Lu, 2000). Japanese women have not hesitated to break the crown of the Virgin in the role choice of “Virgin” and “self”, trying to rebuild the dignity and value of women’s self and express their desire for self survival (Hou, 2013). This rebellion against maternalism is highlighted in the daughters of the two films. This “anti maternalism” behavior is reflected in the disapproval of mothers and the aversion to being “mothers”. Anran’s parents did not hesitate to let Anran forge the illusion of disability because they wanted to have a boy, which caused serious damage to her body and mind. So she firmly wanted to escape from her family, and tried to take the postgraduate examination and find a family for her younger brother; Li Xiaomei, Ji Peizhen’s daughter, is also a rebellious girl. In order to escape from her mother’s excessive love, she fled to Beijing to work. As a young woman, she enjoyed the fresh feeling of freedom. This rebellious joy led her astray. She talked about workplace love with her married boss. When she was found by her mother, she broke down and quarreled with her mother for many times. In the film, she repeatedly expressed her disgust at her mother’s excessive discipline and shouted that she didn’t want to be like her mother. This would show the “anti maternalism” vividly, and also reflect the negative impact of maternal consciousness.

### 3. Media Presentation of Gender Relations from Different Perspectives

Susan Lancer, an American feminist narrator, elaborated on the core idea of “speaking for women from the standpoint of women” in her representative work *Fictional Authority*, which has an important impact on the development of female narration. In this regard, Chinese scholar Shen Dan summarized the feminist narrative theory, starting from the feminist standpoint, constructing the narrative poetics based on the works of female writers, so as to make the narrative poetics gendered and contextualized, to express and present the awakening of women’s consciousness and women’s self-identity, as well as women’s gender authority (Shen, 2005). *My Sister* is directed by a female director. The female director’s perspective shows that maternalism is restrained and cruel. It is born in an unexpected situation. Therefore, the length of the film focuses on showing Anran’s resistance, pain and struggle. Even at the end of the film, the director gives a relatively open end, without specifying whether Anran lives with his brother. In the film, the director presents the audience with a kind of maternal desire for protection, which is expressed by family affection. She can’t bear to see her brother become a bad habit with his uncle; She could not sign the never-seeing clause on her brother’s adoption contract. This kind of blood was thicker than water or unbearable, which made Anran finally become a “mother”. On another level, the director does not let the film fall into a strong power struggle, with Anran’s gaze to see, it is more like a sense of bystander’s speech, it just silently presents all this to the audience, just like the beginning of the film, the air is filled with a depressing haze, the gray hue sets off the cruelty of reality, Anran quietly stands there, looking at the wreckage left behind by the car accident, all this seems to be related to her, but also seems to have nothing to do with her, she just quietly watches everything that happens, helpless. For example, she advised not to return to high-risk pregnant women who had to be transferred to hospital at the cost of blocking their lives in order to have a boy; For her parents’ car accident, although the driver involved in the accident was suspected of drunk driving, there was no evidence that she could do anything. Without the leading role halo, she is only one of the millions of Chinese women and sisters.

All about *My Mother* is a film directed by Zhao Tianyu, a male director. This traditional way of looking at women from a male perspective involves the male gaze that has been discussed in the maternal narrative. The emergence and use of male gaze as a term can be traced back to Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Films” published in 1975. She believes that women are often stared at as objects in films. The main reason for this phenomenon is that the main audience of most film types is heterosexual men (Mulvey et al., 2022). Our entire social structure is largely based on the culture of women being seen. In the patriarchal society, women are the objects to be seen. Men pay attention to and enjoy the pleasure of staring at women through various channels and media. The image of Ji Pei Zhen is a typical portrayal of maternalism in a male-centered so-

ciety, and the lack of care from the father is used as a tear to show maternalism. From this mother's behavior, the gender relationship shown in the film is pessimistic. Li Wenfang is a man who can't even lift up the oil bottle when it falls down. Ji Peizhen takes care of his clothes, food, housing and transportation, including that he has not been able to return from the emergency department to the original department. Ji Peizhen has come forward to negotiate with the president, and she has also developed the plot of Li Wenfang's dependence on her. It can be said that Li Wenfang's collapse is unbearable without Ji Peizhen. This unbalanced family relationship is also a reflection of many Chinese families. Women are always on the side that pays more in the gender relationship. The traditional gender relationship is always dominated by men, and always eulogizes the self-sacrifice of women. All about *My Mother* presents a typical patriarchal perspective of "maternalism", which glorifies the greatness of maternalism. It uses excessive emotion, procedural pile-up, and imposes all the touching and cruel scenarios on Ji Pei Zhen's body, creating a "perfect complement" image of maternalism, which is touching but not agreeable.

Looking at "My Sister" by this standard, we can find that there are the same problems in the construction of gender relations here, whether it is aunt and uncle, Anran and uncle, Anran and boyfriend, or husband and wife who have fought their lives in the hospital to have a boy. These combinations show unequal gender relations, but they all have one thing in common: women tend to adapt to changes in their environment that men ignore, and women become a "mother" either actively or passively because of their children, which is the cruelty of maternalism. Sarah Radik, a professor of philosophy and social women's studies at the New York Institute of Social Studies in the United States, re-examined the subject of maternalism. She redefined "mother" in the sense of culture and practice. He first believed that the concept of mother is relative, and it depends on the concept of "child". Only when children are regarded as valuable and need to be protected can there be a mother to meet this need (Zhu, 2021). In short, there is no natural mother, but is constructed. Both Anran and aunt became "mothers" before they had children. The existence of the younger brother forced them to have children in need of care, exercise their mother's responsibility to protect the younger brother, and Anran finally found a way to get in touch with the younger brother and accepted the younger brother's existence through self-search and recognition. Men always need to go through a slow process in their self-cognition. In *My Sister*, uncle is an important role. He not only acts as a catalyst for Anran's change, but also an important representative of men's self-thinking and change. In fact, his uncle is still a child who hasn't grown up in his heart. He first relied on the care of Anran's mother, and then on his wife. But when these two backers fell, he had to rethink his position, he carefully cared for his daughter, and he was very understanding of Anran's situation, he clumsily took on the responsibility of taking care of his family, but at the same time this thinking is not complete, he still failed to face himself.

#### 4. Exploration of Male Self-Recognition and Gender Cooperation

To create a harmonious atmosphere of sexual harmony, we cannot limit ourselves to women or only inspire women's self-consciousness. A successful female narrative should not only focus on awakening women's self-consciousness and highlighting women's subject authority. "She" should also have the function of awakening men's "self recognition" (Yu, 2021). Similarly, the reflection on maternalism should also inspire men to recognize their self-identity and social responsibility. It is generally believed in psychology that men tend to develop later than women, and women can obtain psychological and physical precocity from society and the behavior of their elders. The late maturity of men is covered up by the strong position of male gender in society, and the superiority of male gender also covers up the fact that men may become "vulnerable groups" in life (Zhang, 2022). Women often take on the role of mother prematurely, so as to obtain the fullness of social identity. In fact, this prematurity also allows women to take more responsibilities consciously or unconsciously. The gradual appearance of this maternalism is also the result of the externalization of the imbalance between the physical and mental development of both sexes.

In *My Sister*, the younger brother said, "I have, only you", expressing his dependence on his sister. Anran's boyfriend grew up under his mother's wing and enjoyed everything his mother had prepared for him. Facing Anran's question whether he never thought of going to Beijing with her, he also had no courage to resist and defend. The driver who caused the accident did not bravely shoulder his responsibilities until the end. He dared not face Anran and his brother. When Anran questioned him in the kindergarten, he could not argue. Finally, his wife, as a kindergarten teacher, helped her out. In *All about My Mother*, because of the appearance of Ji Peizhen, a woman who takes care of everything, the image of men as "vulnerable groups" in life is more obvious. The change in the relationship between Ji Peizhen and Li Wenfang in the film can also be seen as the collapse and reconstruction of Li Wenfang's spiritual world. When he learned that Ji Pei Zhen's test results were faulty, his spiritual roots began to shake little by little. In the hospital he watched Ji Pei Zhen's CT results with his own eyes, and at this point he was in the first section of the faith collapse stage, not believing that. Immediately after he chose to go north to find the last ray of hope, when his doctor friend told her that Ji Pei Zhen still had 4 months to go, he entered the second stage, had to accept, at this stage he began to really pay attention to his wife, observing her every move, which is also the last attachment before parting. The last straw that crushed his spiritual world was the failure of Ji Pei Zhen's surgery. He saw the appearance of Ji Pei Zhen's body during the surgery and chose to go to the rooftop to smoke in silence, at which time the camera gave a large telephoto, making the lonely Li Wenfang look more lost. A friend tells him that the targeted drugs are not working for Ji Pei Zhen and it is time to stop the treatment. They sat in the hotel, while Li Wenfang quietly ac-

cepted the trial. The steaming dumplings on the table set off the cold and cruel reality. Li Wenfang sobbed and said, “Our family can’t die without Peizhen. I can’t die without Peizhen.” At this moment, he could no longer deceive himself, and his originally vague hopes were completely destroyed at this moment. He cried with a headache.

This “weakness” makes them appear to be “weak”, and the re-framing of gender relations should be based on confronting the “weakness” in men’s roles and the right of men to show weakness and be allowed to fail. Men who have occupied the gender highland for a long time seem to be deprived of weakness and cowardice, and they are suppressed and forced to move forward (Shen, 2019). Especially after the rise of feminism and maternalism, men’s anxiety is increasing day by day. This is not only the suspicion of their own values and abilities, but also the confusion and loss after the weakening of gender strength. Therefore, a successful feminist narrative film should contain the “femininity” of men (Yu, 2022), and enable men to complete the “re-cognition” of their own personality through the observation of women and the understanding of maternalism, which will also ease the situation of gender antagonism in society and help men’s spiritual growth.

## **5. Maternalism Liberation: Ethical Harmony Model of Gender Progress**

As mentioned earlier, in the 1970s, Japan set off a social wave of “anti maternalism”. Japanese female writer Yuko Tsujima is a representative figure of Japan’s “anti maternalism” wave. Just as men only regard women as tools for pregnancy and fertility, she also regards men as tools for women to conceive and conceive the next generation. In the book “Silent City”, she showed that she denied the need for men to exist in the family by letting the male cat be the father of the child, and tried to establish a family model in which men were absent and maternalism was the main body (Wang, 2015). This extreme view could not liberate maternalism, on the contrary, mother was more tightly bound by the family. In fact, contemporary film and television creators have gradually realized that no single force can make the “person” or “family” develop comprehensively, whether it is maternal dominance or the continuation of patriarchal society. Similarly, a good gender film will never rely on the way of “stepping on one and holding one” to narrate, but should focus on how the two sexes coordinate and make the relationship between the two sexes more harmonious, So as to solve the gender preference in this society.

My Sister seems to record the growth and redemption of my sister Anran, but in fact, it also has a unique description of the management of gender relations. For his younger brother, Anran is both sister and mother, the unreliable uncle also acts as the role of the father, the growth of the uncle is also one of the important clues of the film, at the beginning he is a very unreliable image, divorced and not a good father. In this period, Anran is psychologically resistant to him,

he sits on the sofa and encourages Anran to go to the driver for a lawsuit to share the money, Anran's back is to him to dry her clothes, at this time Anran's camera is up, uncle's camera is slightly down, the unequal camera language expresses the disdain for him in Anran's heart at this time. The turning point of their relationship is that after Anran attended his uncle's daughter's wedding, they sat opposite each other, and the uncle began to repent of not being a good father. At this time, the camera turned into a horizontal perspective, indicating that in Anran's mind, the image of the uncle has changed. During the third conversation between the two people in the cemetery, the two people were already standing opposite each other on an equal footing. At this time, the image of the uncle became taller in Anran's heart, so Anran said: "Sometimes I think you are my father, no, I hope you are my father". At this time, the uncle has become more responsible and responsible after the death of his sister and the marriage of his daughter, and more able to take care of the growing up of his brother with Anran, It also shows the co-progression of gender relations under the influence of female behavior.

In *All about My Mother*, we can still see that Li Wenfang also has this kind of gratifying change. Unlike his uncle in *My Sister*, Li Wenfang's starting point is much higher than him, but he is still a "late mature patient" in family life. Li Wenfang's growth is the reconstruction after the collapse of his spiritual world. He has thoroughly accepted the reality that Ji Peizhen is about to leave, On the other hand, the co-progress of the two sexes began when Pei Zhen was ill. After the comfort circle was broken, he began to reflect and change. He began to regret why he didn't care about her earlier, and then he accepted the truth that she was about to leave. At the end, he said to Peizhen, "Thank you, Peizhen, this life". After Peizhen left, he began to take care of his mother with Alzheimer's disease, and finally stood on the operating table again and picked up the scalpel. This kind of constant influence of the two sexes, finding the way of harmony between the two sexes, and finally realizing the mutual progress of the two sexes, is the ideal state of family management, and is also an important way to promote social stability. From the early "matriarchal clan" to the "patriarchal" society that has ruled for thousands of years, we can find that we can't make a significant development by blindly relying on one side of the gender to manage the family and guide the relationship between the sexes. So the tendency of gender cooperation shown in the film shows us the possibility of the healthy development of gender relations. The liberation of maternalism is the prerequisite for promoting the progress of both sexes, and also the prerequisite for ethical harmony.

## 6. Research Summary and Concluding Remarks

The development of maternalism from the beginning of its emergence in the West to its introduction into China in modern times and the development of localized maternalist thought can be seen through the combing of maternalism, which had its own unique historical background and social conditions. In this



sense, all the ideas about women's liberation, including maternalism, virtuous wife and mother, and Ibsenism, together constructed the image of the new woman in modern China (Wang, 2019). This paper provides the topic and introduces the background for the narrative of gender coexistence by sorting out the relevant theories of maternalism and anti-maternalism, incorporating anti-maternalism into the writing to trigger the thinking of inequality in gender relations, and paving the way for the next positioning of male roles. Then, through case studies, we compare and analyze the maternalism shown in "My Sister" and "All about My Mother", and conclude that women in the films are more or less pressured by the outside world to choose the identity of "mother". This case study is used as a sample to draw out the role and view of men in gender relations under maternalism narratives, to bring out men's recognition of self and exploration of gender cooperation and co-progression, and to call for the liberation of maternity to achieve the ethical co-progression model of gender co-progression, and to testify the tendency of maternalism-led gender co-progression narratives and the possibility of gender co-progression in ethical relations through the case study. The case also testifies to the tendency of maternalism-driven gender coexistence narratives and the possibility of gender coexistence in ethical relationships.

In fact, with the increasing development of the means of production and the continuous promotion of the women's movement, the maternal consciousness has now entered a new stage, abandoning the previous writing of "maternal absence" in the literary field, and focusing more on the dimension of "human". On the one hand, they have broken the concept that women are equal to maternalism, and reorganized the expression of maternal consciousness; on the other hand, it is more inclined to make up for the differences between men and women in form and explore the possibility of mutual progress between the two sexes. From the two films, we can see that today's new generation of female or maternal narratives begin to think in the direction of how the relationship between men and women is compatible and how to advance together, instead of blindly advocating the slogans of "women's independence" and "against maternalism", they have a more rational perspective, showing that women pursue self-value, but not only pursue a new realm of self-value.

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