

# ***Anatomy of Anti-gaze Shaping from a Feminist Perspective: The Life of the Disliked Matsuko as an Example***

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**Abstract:** This paper comprehensively analyses contemporaneous feminist cinema works in East Asia, uses the relevant theories of feminist film criticism as support, and takes Tetsuya Nakashima's *The Life of the Disliked Matsuko* film as the object of study to explore the existential dilemmas faced by women in the film in the context of a traditionally patriarchal society, as well as their attitudes of dependence on, and resistance to, the patriarchal system. This paper seeks to analyze the manner in which Tetsuya Nakajima's groundbreaking cinematographic language and narrative strategies depict the protagonist Matsuko Kawajiri through an anti-gaze framework. It explores the juxtaposition of her external representation and the internalized transformation of her character, as well as the profound spiritual struggles and awakenings that Matsuko experiences throughout this process. It is concluded that Tetsuya Nakajima's use of the artistic technique of anti-gaze breaks out of the male-centred model of dichotomy in the narrative, and through the portrayal of the character of Matsuko, he rejects the single-mindedness of the outside world's gaze and objectification of the female body, and endows her with the dual independence and completeness of both the body and the spirit.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Anti-gaze, Matsuko figure, Patriarchal society

## **1. Introduction**

Directed by Tetsuya Nakajima, the film *The Life of Matsuko the Disliked* (hereinafter referred to as *Matsuko*) takes the fate of Matsuko Kawajiri as its central narrative thread, and delicately depicts a life journey full of tragedy. The film examines Matsuko's estrangement from her family and intricately depicts her tumultuous relationships with several men, culminating in abandonment and a tragic conclusion involving harm from a delinquent teenager. In terms of narrative art, *Matsuko* cleverly employs advanced narrative techniques such as flashbacks and interludes to break the boundaries of linear time, and more structurally echoes narrative classics in film history such as *Citizen Kane*. Through the intervention of other perspectives, such as nephew Asheng, the film presents the fragmented and suffering life of Songzi in a fragmented form in an objective yet warm way. By dissecting the miserable situation of female representatives in a patriarchal society, the work itself becomes a pioneering attempt to reject the female figure as an object of male gaze, a decoration of the male figure, and an object of patriarchal culture.

Feminist film criticism theory uses psychoanalysis and ideology theory to deconstruct and critique the concept and order of gender in films represented by Hollywood, aiming to expose and critique

screen sexism and reveal the anti-feminine nature of the film form under the unconscious of a patriarchal society. In her feminist film theory, Claire Johnston suggests that narratives can break with traditional gender narratives by reconstructing the agency of female characters. [1] This theory is partially represented through *Matsuko*, with Tetsuya Nakajima positioning *Matsuko* as the central subject of analysis. The focus is on *Matsuko*'s viewpoint, while also employing various character perspectives to enrich the narrative interpretation from multiple angles. This approach reveals a spectrum of *Matsuko*'s dynamic behaviors and her process of self-transformation amidst a harsh fate, thereby paving a new avenue for feminist narratives.

This paper aims to compare the classic feminist theories and works from a feminist perspective, gradually analyse the social core and anti-gaze shaping of *Matsuko*'s character image from the three levels of bodily representation, character and inner being, and spiritual awakening after being oppressed by the male-dominated society, and analyse the breakthroughs in the results of the modern feminist anti-gaze film and television from the point of view of by *Matsuko* by comparing them with each other.

## 2. The Strategic Shift from the "Gaze" Paradigm to the "Counter-gaze"

The "gaze" on women is not uncommon in film and television. The gaze, as a form of film narrative, is often used as a means to show women's physical attractiveness as objects of desire in the traditional male-subjective film and television narrative system. The male as the first sex is the gazing subject and power dominant, while the female is portrayed as the swayed and gazed object [2]. Laura Mulvey, in her seminal feminist film theory work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, further develops the concept of the 'male gaze'. She points out that the male gaze, as an important part of patriarchal culture, covertly expresses men's intention to dominate women through the narrative structure and language of the film. [3] As the scholar Mary suggests in her book *Women's Cinema: Possession and Courtship*, "In traditional cinema, one or more female characters are usually designed to provide eroticism for the male character and the male viewer, and to rely on physical sexuality to achieve it. [4] For example, in classic Hollywood narrative cinema productions such as this one, female characters are often designed to serve as vehicles for the erotic projections of male characters and audiences, and their existence often relies on the sexualised presentation of the body and the narrative function of sexuality, thus reinforcing unequal structures of gendered power. In her theory, Claire explains that women's identity is a product of socio-cultural construction, and that their gender identity is shaped by male-dominated sexist notions, and that female iconography in Hollywood cinema, along with other socio-cultural forms, co-constructs women's gender perceptions. [1] These feminine representations generally admire and depend on the male protagonist, and their actions drive the plot without subjectivity. This matches Sedgwick's "male homosocial desire" subtly. According to Sedgwick's idea, men become men when they are acknowledged as full members of a group of men, not when women choose them. Women are just a qualification for membership or an afterthought reward. [5] Both subconsciously reinforce traditional notions of gender dichotomy and place women in a position where they are stigmatised.

However, *Matsuko* is a profound rebellion and transcendence of the traditional narrative model mentioned above. Julia Kristeva's theory of marginality argues that although women are often pushed to the margins of society, this situation also provides them with opportunities to re-express themselves and challenge power. [6] The director uses a female perspective to defy the typical gender observation position in the film, focussing on the ill-fated existence of disadvantaged women fallen and uncovering and showing *Matsuko*'s deep and complex inner world. This transformation frees *Matsuko* from the "instrumentalised" role and gives the audience a new perspective on women's lives and psychology. The film focusses on *Matsuko*'s struggle for survival and emotional struggles in a patriarchal culture, depicting the complexity of gender dynamics rather than simple oppositions.

From a deeper perspective, in order to satisfy the human need of "voyeurism" in Lacanian psychoanalysis theory, the "gaze" perspective was created [7]. The connotation of this perspective lies in the fact that female characters are often filmed from the male point of view, thus making them objects of sexual fantasy for male viewers to bring pleasure and visual pleasure. However, with the changing of the times and the emergence of women's consciousness, the concept of "gaze" has been undergoing a process of self-defeating evolution, and the first step of its deconstruction is its vulgarisation. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, femininity is actually a concept constructed by patriarchal society to satisfy men's aesthetic needs.[8] Tetsuya Nakajima subverts patriarchal narratives by depicting Matsuko in a flashback surrounded by waste in a confined space, challenging traditional notions of beauty and femininity. Her disheveled appearance contradicts aesthetic expectations, thereby questioning gender role standards of "beauty" under the male gaze. Nakajima employs Matsuko's perceived "ugliness" to critique the male gaze, advocating for a redefined representation of women as independent subjects with emotional depth. This work represents a significant feminist cinematic exploration and a robust critique of gendered visual dynamics.

### 3. Personality Metamorphosis and Reconstruction of Female Subjects Driven by Role Thrusts

Under the historical perspective of feminism, the iterative development of the portrayal of male and female supporting characters in cinema has also tended to be diverse. From the traditional male narrative film that emphasises the feedback of female supporting characters to the heroic male protagonist, to the pioneering feminist film *Matsuko* that mocks the deviation of male values through a series of male clowns, to the current women's cinema that rationally calls for equal rights between men and women through the wonderful presentation of male and female group portraits, the break-up and reshaping of the value system of the two sexes has shown a good development trajectory.

Beauvoir put forward in the theory of "othering" *second nature*, she pointed out that women are constructed as others in patriarchal societies, and their existential significance is often derived from the projection of the male subject [9], and this othering is even more pronounced in East Asian cultures where Confucianism reinforces the division of labour between the genders and familial responsibilities. Matsuko's character defects begin with the father's function as the normative representation of the patriarchal family in the social setting of the period and its lack of fatherly virtues. In Matsuko's family, the father is the sole elder and favours his ailing and feeble sister, while the mother has no voice or educated identity. Her father's love gap drives Matsuko's strong desire for male attention and recognition, which leads to her extreme desire for love and her habit of pleasing her partner as she matures, making her life tragic due to her character defects. Unfatherly masculine ideals also cause Matsuko's trademark face-making gesture to repeat, which becomes a bizarre habit of pleasing others when she's lost for words. As a symbol of Matsuko's aspirations to attract men, it becomes a peculiarity and a burden as she grows up.

As Matsuko resolutely leaves her family of origin and embarks on a long and tortuous journey in search of love, a series of male characters change and alternate, which objectively exacerbates the despair inherent in the core of her character. When analysed from the perspective of the film's narrative structure and subject, Tetsuya Nakajima cleverly abandons the traditional narrative mode of gazing at the other, and instead adopts the inward focusing technique, locking the camera on the central character of Matsuko, giving him the status of a dynamic subject of the narrative. In the language of film and television, through the (Computer Graphics (CG) compositing technology, the integration of children's stickers, dazzling light effects and other visual elements exaggerates and exemplifies Songzi's subjective feelings of love and her hope for a better future. In Matsuko's self-conception of her future with Ryuuyoichi, the director abruptly inserts a CG composite shot of

Matsuko's family as astronauts, a scene that intuitively maps Matsuko's inner depths of "becoming a housewife, dependent on men" as a traditional gender role positioning, and criticises the huge gap between this fantasy and the reality in an almost satirical way. In an almost ironic way, it criticises the great gap between this fantasy and reality, implying its unreality and the limitations of Matsuko's personal pursuit of values.

The film presents a contrasting female character, Keiko, who befriends Matsuko in prison. Inspired by Matsuko, Keiko, upon her release, established her own AV company, embodying independence and self-reliance. She advised Matsuko to avoid the yakuza Ryuuo Yoichi, but Matsuko ignored her counsel, leading to Keiko's distress. Unlike Matsuko, Keiko transcends traditional gender roles, strategically positioning herself as a "strong woman" and defying conventional femininity. [10] Matsuko's excessive inferiority complex drives her to seek validation as a "useful" figure to men. Despite her rejection of her true self and her efforts to conform to male societal expectations, she fails to gain recognition and well-being from male characters within the traditional narrative framework. This failure catalyzes a significant transformation in Matsuko's character, shifting from a patriarchal archetype of a gentle, virtuous, industrious, and family-oriented woman to an outspoken, apathetic, distrustful, and self-centered individual.

Matsuko's lifestyle devolves into passivity and avoidance, fixating on stargazing culture for self-affirmation, leading to a cluttered living space. She detaches from patriarchal constraints, adopting indifference to societal judgment, and constructs a self-centered existence that transcends heterosexual identity. This transformation signifies a pivotal shift in her life trajectory, culminating in a tragic deconstruction and reconstruction of her identity. In the film's conclusion, Matsuko ascends a wooden ladder to the sky, symbolizing her philosophical introspection. With profound insight, she identifies the root of her personal tragedy: it is not a lack of worth, talent, or beauty, but the inherent biases of a male-dominated society that objectifies her, rendering her ideals of love and freedom perpetually unattainable. Matsuko's journey illustrates a woman's evolution from objectification to subjectivity, with her outward behavior reflecting rebellious inquiries and a struggle against fate, contrasting her previous dependence on male validation.

Matsuko's narrative concludes abruptly with a violent assault by a street gangster. In her final moments, Keiko's business card symbolizes the connection between their fates, reflecting the contrasting inner qualities of Matsuko and Keiko. Matsuko embodies the constraints of societal gender norms, while Keiko represents a courageous challenge and active pursuit of self-transcendence. The contrast between Keiko's and Matsuko's experiences illustrates that in a patriarchal society, women can only survive by "moving up" or "moving down" in terms of their internal concepts, in order to circumvent the mechanism of discrimination against the weaker sex. [10] The stark contrast between the two fates becomes a bitter satire on the state of women's existence under the framework of traditional patriarchal narratives, highlighting their inherent emptiness and negativity, and thus triggering the audience's thoughts on gender equality and women's self-awakening.

#### **4. An Exploration of Subjectivity from Masculine Attachment to Self-Awakening**

During the Edo period (1603-1868) in post-World War II Japan, society was focused on reconstruction and economic development. The prevalence of triad culture and grey industry led to a neglect of quality education for both genders, with male supremacy imposing significant oppression on women. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, a harsh rule allowed for the sale of wives by those unable to pay tribute. Official prostitutes, known as "youma," became vital to the Shogunate's income, enduring harsh conditions in Yoshiwara [11]. The societal structure and traditional morals systematically suppressed women, resulting in a pervasive sense of tragedy in their lives. Consequently, women like Matsuko were largely unable to escape their confinement in pursuit of freedom and equal rights.

In the social context of the time, women's employment opportunities were extremely narrow, and most of the prostitutes represented by Matsuko essentially became prostitutes under the thrust of patriarchy, unconsciously pushed down by hidden social factors that forced them to temporarily transfer the sexual use of their bodies to men for the sake of money. After Matsuko breaks with her family, she follows the conventional female choices of the society of the time and follows the windy path of becoming a prostitute in order to gain money quickly, which is frowned upon by decent members of the society - the father mentions this with extreme disgust in his relay to his nephew, Sho. Shifting the cause onto the victim is the usual *modus operandi* of most of the silent vested interests in society (the unconscious victimisers), who are blissfully unaware of the preferential treatment they enjoy, but direct their condemnation at these women who have no choice but to do what they want to do. [12]

Chizuko Ueno mentions in *Misogyny: Feminine Dislike in Japan* that sex in a patriarchal society has a double standard, and that the value of sex is judged very differently for men and women. Male lust is tacitly approved and even praised by society, while women are expected to remain ignorant and pure about sex as a symbol of virtue. This double standard constructs an asymmetrical relationship between the sexes, dividing women into two groups: "holy women" (e.g., mothers, wives) and "prostitutes" (e.g., lovers, prostitutes), which is essentially an extreme simplification and alienation of women's identities and functions. This is essentially an extreme simplification and alienation of women's identities and functions [10]. Matsuko suffers gender discipline and moral tyranny. She is always seeking or breaking away from these two extreme tendencies, but the patriarchal society's evaluation system pulls her into a cycle of self-worth loss and pursuit. Matsuko's spiritual awakening grew during this process, and she realised that being expected to be a selfless "holy woman" or a "prostitute" to satisfy men's desires were extreme repression and deprivation of female subjectivity. She gradually learns that being forced to be a "holy woman" or a "prostitute" to please male cravings is excessive repression and deprivation of female subjectivity.

Tetsuya Nakajima studied Matsuko's individuality and the spirituality of women in a patriarchal culture. Although Matsuko's existence is shaped by the traditional view of males as superior to women, she continually expresses her underlying dissatisfaction with the gender hierarchy and her desire to change herself throughout the film. The film's emotional climaxes—from Matsuko's escape from her family to her heartbreaking questioning after the emotional betrayal to the decisive killing of her treacherous partner to her soul's banishment when she becomes a marginalised member of society—represent her spiritual awakening.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory divides the complex spiritual world of human beings into three levels: the ego, the ego and the superego, in which the ego represents the individual's most primitive, purest desires and nature that follow the laws of nature; the ego serves as an intermediary that balances the impulses of the ego with the constraints of the external environment (including social norms, moral codes, etc.), and plays the role of a rein to restrict the ego's inordinate release [13]. . In the social context of *The Life of the Disliked Matsuko*, Matsuko's experience exemplifies the condition of women's existence and cognitive transformation within this theoretical framework. Throughout her life, she has been constrained by patriarchal norms that dictate a submissive, sacrificial, and stoic identity, effectively shackling her authentic self. As she seeks love, Matsuko's latent self-protective instincts and independence emerge, culminating in her spiritual evolution from egotism to a true sense of self.

## 5. Conclusion

In *The Life of the Disliked Matsuko*, Matsuko lives in a typical male-dominated society, where the remnants of feudalism and the distortion of gender relations together weave a complex picture of Matsuko's tragic destiny, and her individual image has gradually become a figurative epitome of the

tragic destiny of the traditional Japanese women's group. Tetsuya Nakajima, with his unique artistic perspective, places the character of Matsuko in the framework of a black fairy tale, in which she longs for love, but constantly encounters frustration and disappointment, and presents the human dilemma and existential significance of women's roles in the male-dominated Japanese society.

Matsuko defies the stereotype of women as subordinates or companions. She has endured much discrimination, but her every emotional struggle challenges male-centrism. The male characters Matsuko met did not change or advance owing to her presence, defying the narrative assumption of women as catalysts for male growth. While portraying Matsuko, the director uses anti-gaze to reject the outer world's single gaze and objectification of the female body and give her physical and spiritual freedom and integrity. The film breaks away from the male-centered duality in the story and highlights the rich meaning and aesthetic value of the female image from a more three-dimensional and diverse perspective, extending and innovating its aesthetic portrayal. As an influential feminist film, Matsuko challenges us to rethink women's social status and the anti-gaze narrative mode in film and TV.

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