

# Beyond Binary Resistance: The Gradual Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity in *Like a Rolling Stone*

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This paper examines Yin Lichuan's 2024 film *Like a Rolling Stone*, which depicts housewife Li Hong's journey from enduring an oppressive marital life to pursuing self-liberation. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the Other, it explores how Chinese patriarchal marriage constructs gender inequality and women's marginalized status shaped by familial ethics and moral obligations. Through analyzing typical scenes, the essay interprets how cinematic techniques such as framing, lighting, crosscutting and sound design visually embody Li's spatial confinement and emotional repression. Different from Western overt individual resistance, Li's subjective awakening manifests as a gradual transformation of perception, space and desire within daily domesticity. The film's anti-urban visual imagery further implies a rejection of patriarchal spatial suppression and reflects the dilemma and spiritual reconstruction of contemporary Chinese women trapped in marriage.

*Keywords:* patriarchal marriage, female subjectivity, marital dilemma, family ethics

The film *Like a Rolling Stone*, directed by Yin Lichuan, was released in 2024, a cinematic adaptation inspired by Su Min's real-life cross-country road trip, tells the story of Li Hong, a housewife who moves from enduring the stressful and unbearable marriage to making the decision to leave and reassert control over her own life. Upon its release, this film generated widespread debate over women's positioning within contemporary Chinese marital structure, as film reviewer Dominic Morgan points out, this film is about a transnational value system that constructs women as lesser beings and confines them to the role of domestic caregivers. Through a close analysis of key sequences in the film that reveal Li's transformation, this essay first looks at how Chinese patriarchal marriage is represented as a structure of gendered inequality and oppression. Given that existing scholarship has largely overlooked the ways in which cinematic form actively participates in both the reproduction and the destabilization of women's subordinate positioning within everyday marital space, this essay then draws on Simone de Beauvoir's Other theory, further demonstrates how Li's subjective awakening emerges not as a sudden act of rebellion, but as a gradual reconfiguration of perception, space, and desire. In short, this essay argues that Li's awakening of subjectivity is not articulated through overt rebellion, but through a gradual cinematic construction within the patriarchal domestic sphere.

Simone de Beauvoir's formulation of woman as "the Other" in *The Second Sex* provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the gendered asymmetries at the core of patriarchal social organization. Her's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 353-414) dismantles biological determinism by locating women's subordinate status within historically produced systems of power

that deny women transcendence and confine them to immanence. As a foundational text of existentialist feminism, Beauvoir's theory exposes the ways in which patriarchal culture constructs masculinity as the normative subject while relegating femininity to a derivative and dependent position. However, Beauvoir's analysis is grounded in Western capitalist patriarchy and structured around a subject-object binary that privileges individual consciousness as the site of resistance; the production of female otherness in the Chinese context operates through a distinct yet no less coercive configuration. In the Chinese patriarchal family, women's "otherness" is not produced solely through overt male dominance, but more insidiously through moralized role obligations that naturalize endurance, sacrifice, and self-effacement as feminine virtues. Bound by ethical identities such as "wife", "mother", and "daughter", women's subordination is embedded within familial and social ethics, where deviation from prescribed roles is framed as moral failure rather than structural injustice. Within this context, patriarchal power is sustained not only by authority, but by the internalization of ethical norms that render women's suffering invisible and legitimate. Li Hong, the protagonist of this film, epitomizes this culturally specific formation of female otherness. Unlike Western feminist narratives that emphasize overt acts of individual resistance, Li's struggle unfolds against the dual constraints of patriarchal domination and moral obligation. This film presents her awakening as an abstract assertion of autonomy; instead, it locates the emergence of subjectivity within the material and sensory textures of domestic life. Hence, the following analysis examines how cinematic form articulates this process, constructing female otherness while simultaneously revealing its fractures.

In the selected sequence analyzed in this essay, the film presents the oppression and everyday forms of bullying that Li Hong experiences within her marriage. The sequence opens with Li entering the room carrying a meal and calling out to Sun to come and eat, and it is notable that the film shows Li and Sun from the different camera positions and compositions. While the film presents Sun's movements and expressions clearly through a medium close-up shot, the camera films Li from outside the room in a long-distance shot, making it difficult to see her face. In this scene, the use of a long focal length compresses the spatial relationship between the foreground, middle ground, and background, thus creating a crowded and oppressive visual effect. More importantly, the composition frames Li with the window railings as the foreground, causing Li is blocked by the window bars in some scenes, and these window railings confine Li's movements within a limited space. Since *mise-en-scène* serves to create a dynamic relation between foreground and background (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020, p. 148). The foreground elements—especially the window railings—not only obscure our view of Li, making her presence visually diminished, but also construct a rigid, cage-like frame around her. The exaggerate facial expressions and body movements of Sun can be clearly capture through the sidelight in the sequence. In contrast, Li responds humbly to her husband's dissatisfaction, surrounded by attached shadows. Since the lighting in films is not only for illumination, but also to guide the audience to pay attention to certain objects or body movements (Bordwell et al., 2020, pp. 124-126). The lighting effects direct the viewer's attention to Sun, thereby ignoring Li who contributes to the family. Under the patriarchal discourse system, women's subjectivity is often dissolved, and their labor value and subjectivity contributions in the social and family fields are often obscured by male dominated narrative frameworks (Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 353-414). And the sound also enhances such effect, in the subsequent argument, Li tries to refute Sun's complaints, but her utterances are accompanied by the crying and clamouring of the child. The child's crying drowns out Li's emotions and resistance, suggesting that Li lacks a voice in the marriage. The extremely intense argument ends with Li's

compromise, which profoundly presents her marginalized status and the dominant position of men in patriarchal marriages.

Moreover, the film constructs the dilemma of women in patriarchal marriages through crosscutting. Sun is seen playing table tennis in the living room. Through a medium close-up shot, the film clearly captures the joy on his face, accompanied by the sound of the ping pong ball falling to the floor—emphasizing his relaxed and cheerful state. In contrast, Li is quietly picking up the fallen ping pong ball, creating a stark visual and emotional contrast. As Bordwell et al. (2020, p. 244) point out that crosscutting can provide multiple information such as cause and effect, time, and space to the audience through the cross cutting of scenes from one scene to another. This crosscutting directly shows Li and Sun's extremely unequal status in marriage: Sun only focuses on his own entertainment at home every day, while Li must spend all her time and energy on household chores. Notably, a steady, rhythmic clock tick permeates the ambient soundscape throughout this sequence. As Balazs (1985) posits, the deliberate deployment of film sound serves to heighten audience sensory engagement, thereby facilitating a more nuanced grasp of narrative dynamics. In this case, the persistent clock tick not only functions as a metonym for the inexorable passage of time, but also underscores the inescapable permeation of domestic drudgery into Li's life—even during moments ostensibly reserved for rest. Women are confined to repetitive household labor fields, which not only squeeze their development space in participating in social production, but also dissolve their independent consciousness in daily trivial operations, ultimately leading to the collapse and alienation of female subjectivity (Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 419-453). As a result, this sequence shows that Li devotes all her time and energy to this family, even her inner desires.

Subsequently, at the end of the sequence, Li's subjective awakening reached its climax, indicating her reasons for escape and environmentalist (or anti urban). The last scenes begin with a handheld camera shot from a top-down and outside looking in perspective, filming Li hanging clothes. Handheld cinematography conveys real-world dynamism, bolsters narrative coherence, and fosters audience empathy (Pandža, 2018). After hanging up the last one, Li suddenly sits down. The film captures Li staring intently at the distance through the window bars, sitting motionless with a blank expression. The setting sun casts a faint glow on her eyes, revealing the glint of tears. And then, the next scene suddenly shifts to black and white, showing a view from inside the balcony looking outwards. During this process, as the camera slowly pans, the objects in the scenes even lose focus several times. We can read this shot here more closely simulates Li's first-person perspective, externalizing her inner feelings and perception of the world through cinematic language. The use of color, especially gray, mostly reflects the bleak direction of the plot or the desperate emotions of the characters (Tang, 2022, p. 71). The gray world, the constantly blurred images, and the amplified sounds express Li's inner despair and collapse. In the dead of night, with only a clock's ticking breaking the silence, Li scrolls through her phone in the dark; a close-up frames the expansive natural landscapes on her screen. A cut then reveals her tight-lipped expression of helplessness and pain—not a trace of joy—before a sharp crash cues a close-up of the phone clattering to the floor. Through the allegorical motif of Li's dropped mobile phone which embodies the futility of her desires confined by patriarchal marital bonds and foreshadows her crucial decisions in the ensuing plot this sequence articulates her fatigue with urban life and longing for the natural realm.

The sequence concludes with a wide-angle long shot of distant skyscrapers silhouetted against the sky, establishing a visual resonance with the film's final image of Li's solitary road journey. Importantly, this turns toward natural imagery which does not constitute an explicit ecological consciousness; rather, it operates as a

negative imagining of urban patriarchal space. The film's environmentalist—or more precisely, anti-urban—impulse emerges at the level of visual structure, laying the groundwork for interpreting Li's escape as a rejection of spatial regimes that sustain patriarchal domination.

In conclusion, by centering on scenes of domestic labor and spousal emotional abuse, this essay has demonstrated how *Like a Rolling Stone* presents the processes through which women are positioned as “Others” within the marital institution, their identities shaped by male authority, ethical obligation, repetitive labor, and emotional repression. Tracing Li's trajectory from spatial confinement behind window bars, through perceptual collapse signaled by the dropped phone, to the emergence of consciousness on the balcony, the analysis clarifies the formal logic underpinning her subjective awakening. Ultimately, the film's anti-urban visual imagination offers a critical entry point for understanding Chinese women's struggle against the dual constraints of patriarchal power and moralized domesticity, echoing this essay's central inquiry into the conditions under which female subjectivity can be reconstructed.

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