

Aging, Gender and Self-construction: An Analysis of “Elderly-Women” Image in Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland*

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Abstract: The English-language film *Nomadland* is based on the documentary literature of American journalist Jessica Bruder. This movie tells the story of Fern, an elderly woman who becomes homeless and unemployed and wanders the highways. While most critics have concentrated on the film’s themes, camera language and narrative style, the protagonist’s image as an elderly woman has received less attention. Therefore, this thesis adopts the theory of the elderly “other” from Beauvoir’s *Old Age* as a pivot, and analyses the characterization of the protagonist Fern’s image from three aspects, namely, the physical and mental problems, sociability, and subject-identity construction of the elderly women. Fern becomes an elderly “other” in the face of the triple hardships of her own aging, husband’s death and unemployment. However, during the road trip, Fern finally reconstructs her own subjective identity and finds her own value. Through the analysis of the twilight female image created by the film, this paper hopes to draw the attention of researchers and art creators to the age difference of women and the condition of older women, and to provide new perspectives and possibilities for feminist research.

Keywords: *Nomadland*, elderly-women, Beauvoir

1. Chapter 1 Introduction

Chloé Zhao’s latest film *Nomadland* won the Golden Lion at the 77th Venice International Film Festival, not only making the director the first Asian female filmmaker of such achievement in the twenty-first century, but also drawing attention to her film’s representation of older-woman images.

Nomadland is based on Jessica Bruder’s non-fiction book with the same name. Fern, a old-aged woman who is left homeless on the roads, is the central character of the film. Due to the 2008 economic crisis, many older residents in America were unable to stay in towns. As an old woman who had lost her husband, Fern did not have the ability to afford to live on her own. In order to keep the cost of living to a minimum, she moved all her family belongings into a van and began a life on the road.

In 2020, Beauvoir’s *Old Age* was first translated into Chinese and published. In this book, Beauvoir proposes the “other” status of the old after the “woman”. She argues that age is not just a matter of personal history, but a biological phenomenon. Those specific physical changes of the elderly would also cause psychological changes. The identity of an older person is imposed by the society to which he or she belongs. Therefore, when referring to older women, the misconception of old age as a “hidden shame” should be abandoned, and the issues should be viewed from the physical, psychological, and social aspects of aging. Beauvoir emphasizes the need for older women to construct their own identities and awaken their sense of selves so as to escape the status of the “otherness”.

The World Health Organization’s definition of an older person as a person over the age of 60 is the generally accepted definition of an older person in today’s society. However, the term “elderly” itself is a vague and ambiguous term. Historically, the age at which a person is considered “elderly” can vary by at least 40 years. In primitive societies, the age of 30 could be defined as “old”, and in contemporary areas where health and economic development are relatively advanced, this age limit can be postponed to 70. In Beauvoir’s *Old Age*, a elderly woman is defined as a woman whose body is gradually aging and whose consciousness is moving towards rebirth and profound transformation in the face of death.

At a time when aging is becoming a prominent social issue, old age has a different meaning for women. This thesis is a three-part analysis of the portrayal of the elderly-woman image in *Nomadland*. The first section focuses upon the description and analysis of Fern’s outward appearance and physical and mental outlook. Before proceeding to the second section, this section summarizes the physical and mental dilemmas faced by older women. The second part then focuses on the current situation of elder

women in society, in which it is clear how elderly-women are confronted with both social and gender alienation. The last section is about the awakening of Fern's self-awareness, which will help the elderly women to construct their own perceptions and sense of subjectivity.

In recent years, with the development of the Western feminist movement, the physical and psychological plight of older women has received increasing attention. *Nomadland* depicts the social situation of elderly women in the United States. At present, studies on *Nomadland* have been mainly from the perspective of movie genre research such as "road" and "western", analyzing the style and social situation, and mainly concentrating on its multi-layered narrative and poetic shots, but less on the analysis of the elderly women issues in it.

The development of feminism today no longer rests on the issues like opposition to or confrontation with men but rather explores the inner balance and value of women themselves. This thesis, through a detailed analysis and exploration of discourse of the movie *Nomadland*, aims to reveal the habitual, fixed, and rigid imagination imposed on old women, to expose the audience's subconscious resistance and indifference to the topic of old age, and to interpret the director's answers to the ultimate questions as aging, death, and life. Through an individual, multifaceted, and connected perspective, this thesis aims to open up new opportunities for future research.

2. Chapter 2 Literature Review

Since its introduction, *Nomadland* has generated many discussions and researches. In terms of women films, the creation of female characters has gradually diversified and non-consolidated. With the development of feminism, the female characters in cinema have gradually transformed from objects of male-gaze to the identity of the viewing subjects. Young women are no longer the sole female protagonists on the screen.

As the protagonist of *Nomadland*, domestic and international research has focused on three aspects of road movie themes, narrative techniques and cinematic contexts, which will be elaborated below.

2.1. The Research on "Elderly-Women" Image in Films

As noted feminism pioneer Juliet Mitchell argued that "production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality are four important mechanisms of female oppression" (6). Juliet's concept stresses women's passive status in patriarchal societies, and the same issue can be seen in the film, where the male perspective is prominent and dominant.

Despite the cultural shift towards a new feminism promoted by the first International Female Film Festival, women were still marginalized in movies, reduced to quiet entities unable to express themselves. The cinematic camera, according to Mulvey, depicts the male gaze, and that the female figure remains the "other" in a patriarchal cultural system, still in a solidified "passive" position. The male can maintain his fantasies and compulsions in the film through the verbal commands imposed on the silent female figures, while the female remain bound to her position as the bearer of meaning rather than the maker (Waxman 379). Thus, in early films, the female characters still retained a flat, stereotypical image of being controlled.

With the gradual development of feminism and the emergence of female directors, the female character in films gradually shifted from being an object of objectification and gaze to the identity of the viewing subject. Influenced by the work of female directors such as Agnès Varda, female characters in films began to reject to obey the label of femininity or to develop symbols of women under the male gaze.

However, the portrayal of women in films was often limited to young women or women in specific professions, and was characterized by the portrayal of characters based on the female experience, and still lacks a cinematic image of women from a social perspective (Zhang 14). Similarly, these films often portray physically attractive adolescent women, while the number of films featuring women in their twilight years was small and homogeneous, being confined to the roles of housewives.

2.2. The Research on *Nomadland*

Jessica Bruder's documentary literature, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, describes the author's trek across the North American continent following a number of van-dwelling

nomads, as well as her experiences working on an Amazon factory line and in the sugar beet harvest. The book is a non-fictional account of the emergence of this new nomadic class and the deep social and economic changes, organized in the form of an investigative journalistic diary. *Nomadland* is based on the original work and follows Fern, a old woman who travels with a van as a nomad after almost losing everything in the 2008 economic crisis.

Current research on *Nomadland* has focused more on Chloé Zhao's cinematic techniques and visual expression. There are currently three main research perspectives in China. The first is a new expression of the road movie genre, arguing that the spirit of the Western pioneers can still be seen in the characters who travels the American West in current times. Similarly, in terms of gender issues, some scholars in China have defined the film as a "de-gendered" Western film, which offers a broader perspective on gender (Chen 21). The second category is the analysis of the film's narrative style, with researchers focusing on the multi-layered narrative presentation in the film. Song and Yuan argues that the fluid point of view is the highlight of *Nomadland*, and that the film's documentary function combines the characters' perceptions with the audience's, changing empathy for other people's tales into a perspective of equal participation with the story's characters (14). The third aspect of research, on the other hand, focuses on the current state of the American capitalist economic crisis as reflected in the film. Behind the camera, scholars look at the context of industrial society from a transcendentalist perspective, glimpsing the macro context of the times or pondering the value of life through the lives of the "little people" (Jeff 82). Joe Morgenstern argues that the film focuses on ordinary Americans who are aging and struggling to survive, and suggests that the film is a prophecy of economic recession and unemployment rather than a simple road movie (Feeney and Megan 44-46).

There are few national or international studies that have analyzed the "elderly-woman" image presented by Fern. Despite the actor's (Frances McDormand, acts Fern) own statement in an interview that "Fern is part of the American tradition image", there is not much detailed documentation or film criticism of the image and its profound meaning.

In conclusion, the previous research on *Nomadland* may reveal new areas of research and perspectives that need to be explored further. Therefore, an analysis of the characters portrayed in the film can provide a new focus on and perception of elder women and offer a new dimension of looking at feminist issues.

3. Chapter 3 The Aging and Women: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Review of "the Other" Status of Women

Since the second wave of feminism, the "gender" has become central concept in Western feminist theory. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir proposed that woman is not born, but rather is socially constructed gradually (*The Second Sex* 6). With the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949, Beauvoir raised the question of "why woman is the otherness" in a truly feminist sense, thus further revealing the social system and culture as major sources of female oppression (239).

The concept of the otherness refers to female inherent marginalization and specialization in a male-dominated social environment. In a male-dominated social ideology, the woman is always a primitive "other", always an object rather than a subject.

Standpoint theory implies that female's capacity for understanding stems from their position as secondary members of society. The oppressed and powerless must learn to guess the minds of others. Prisoners in concentration camps learn to gauge the feelings and emotions of their guards. There is also a correlation between the sensitivity of female emotions and the sensitivity of prisoners, slaves, and other oppressed groups' feelings. The demands of motherhood led women to develop what was called "maternal thinking".

According to Sandra Behm, the so-called "mother nature" is actually the result of the role of caregiver that humans have given women (165). Society not only allocates duties but also sets values, and women must choose to be "what they are supposed to be" in this external context. The "other" status of women is marked by both physical and psychological alienation, as objectification in physical and psychological spheres.

For Beauvoir, women must emerge from male society and escape the other status in order to transcend their enslaved status in reality. Feminist emancipation, freedom and development were the three important parts of feminism's development. How to construct one's own subjectivity and welcome awakening have become one of the major concerns of the feminist movement.

3.2. *Beauvoir's Theory of Old Age*

In the second half of the twentieth century, the social problems posed by the phenomenon of old age gained increasing attention.

Thus writes Beauvoir at the beginning of her book, old age is overwhelming because we have always seen the elderly as foreign creatures. But the old is us, we are the old, and if we ignore what we are about to become, we will not know who we are (*Old age* 3).

In *Old Age*, Beauvoir argues that age is not just a matter of personal history but a biological phenomenon, with psychological consequences arising from the bodily functions of the elderly. Secondly, aging changes the individual's relationship to time and to his personal history. Finally, the elderly person does not live in a vacuum; the old's identity is imposed on himself or herself by the society to which one belongs.

Women are habitually placed in the domestic and community arena so that most women are forced to juggle family and professional responsibilities throughout their careers. Women experience more of the pain of not finding purpose, value, and a reason for being because for them, work and life are integrated. While women live longer due to their biological make-up, older women living alone constitute the most vulnerable segment of the population. They always have fewer economic resources than older men and are therefore often less well-off and less likely to lead very fulfilling lives.

By recording his own aging process and observing the life of the surrounding elderly, Beauvoir found that: gender, age, and old age appear as an externality. After "woman" status, Beauvoir discovers the position of the "other" status. An old person must find oneself within the inner other. The book *Old Age* aims to unravel the "conspiracy of silence" about old age, which Beauvoir argues is wrongly and universally regarded by contemporary capitalist society as "a secret of shame" (26). Themes such as age anxiety, body shame, social devaluation, gender shame, and disease make up the majority of analyses of old-age women.

"Aging as the unrealizable other" is the core topic of Beauvoir. She believes that the appearance of a person's age is first observed by others.

As Sartre argued, *Old age* is just such an "in-itself-for-others" and our aged body as "the body-for-us, but inapprehensible and alienated" (Gilleard, "Aging as Otherness" 3). The absence of intent and self-directedness is the key to denying the subjectivity of the elderly. Before getting old, one's ego can be challenged and contested, and as one grows older, such parts gradually become easier to oppose because people have many signs and evidence of aging.

While denial or rejection, struggles, and refusals continue, our being old for others gradually overwhelms the possibility of our being-old-for-ourselves. As our body becomes more a body for others than for ourselves, so our subjectivity, our being-for-ourselves, is slowly subsumed beneath our embodiment for others (Beauvoir, *Vague Morality* 316).

This is the process by which aging gradually turns people into the "others". By defining a person, a group or a system as the "other", people are placing them outside the system of norms or conventions to which one identifies oneself. The existence of the concept of the "other" affects the way people position themselves in relation to others and their culture, and thus tends to give rise to a sense of anxiety about escaping from the identity of the "other". In order to escape this anxiety, the marginalized collective or individual is always searching for its own identity through different media in order to achieve self and social recognition.

Therefore, when referring to elderly women, the misconception of old age as a "hidden shame" should be abandoned. Particular attention should be paid to the otherness of the elderly in society, where women in their twilight years are doubly alienated in terms of gender and age and are therefore more likely to become "marginalized".

4. Chapter 4 Analysis of Fern's Image in *Nomadland*

4.1. *Sexuality and Spirituality of Elderly Women*

Fern originally worked at a gypsum board factory in a small town of Nevada, which closed during the Great Recession when demand for gypsum board dropped. After the death of her husband, Fern decided to leave the town and started wandering the country by driving an RV car. At the beginning of

the film, a very standard road film form is resented to the audience. The standard storytelling mode of road movies is mostly about a protagonist's choice of a completely different lifestyle after experiencing setbacks in life, and then the life changes slowly begin to happen. Fern's story fits into this road movie model, but the difference is that she is a 56-year-old woman who is rarely seen as the main character of a road movie.

When it comes to elderly-women, people's first thoughts are often that they no longer possess physical charm and health and are inevitably "spiritually weak". When it comes to the image of old age women, it is hard not to associate them with aging, wrinkles, and tiring faces. As Bartky claims in her work, "Styles of the female figure vary over time and across cultures: they reflect cultural obsessions and preoccupations in ways that are still poorly understood. Today, the fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation" (153).

Such physical characteristics seem irrelevant to the image of elderly women. Fern also confronts the problem that, her image subverts the traditional female image in movies, and her body shown in the film does not have much sexual attraction. Fern appears uneasy when showing her female identity. In front of the crowd, Fern always wears a handy mountaineering suit that is as gender-blurred as her short hair. Traditionally, as well as stereotypically, women are mothers and wives who preside over the household, and women's image like Fern who are sporty and independent, and even traveling in an RV, are rarely seen in movies.

As an elderly-woman, Fern cannot show her femininity because men believe that a woman who shows femininity should be beautiful, not as unattractive, tired, and aging as she is. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir saw old age as a "moral drama": when a woman loses her sexual capital, she is herself, neither a man nor a "woman". And she is faced with a new moral choice: to remain the double consciousness of "femininity", or to step into a new subject position and a different social status. The physical changes lead to and facilitate a change of consciousness, an "irrevocable loss" that survives only in memory, while she moves towards a rebirth and a profound metamorphosis in the face of aging. "On the day a woman agrees to grow old, her identity changes" (Stoller 312).

The film embodies Fern's shame about her own body, and because of this shame, she is afraid of being observed by others. The experience of shame begins with the gaze, at the heart of which lies the "self in the eyes of others", which makes one feel humiliated and scorned. Everyone at the RV campground advises her to use the campground's communal showers, but she repeatedly refuses. Only when driving past the pool, Fern strips off all clothes and takes a shower. Her aged, wrinkled skin and stacked neckline is uncovered in the clear pool of water. There is no way to hide aging away from nature. This openness to nature is also reflected in her calling out her name to the valley and walking barefoot through the mountains in a white nightgown. Such a dress appears for the first time in the film. Fern exposes her aging body unreservedly, basking in nature and finding in it a sense of confidence and security that cannot be found in society. Sartre argues that the body is like a sign providing an affordance to some action. Older women often see their grey hair, wrinkles and other signs of aging as a morbid disguise that obscures their essentially younger selves underneath, blurring their own faces, due to the collusion of the appearance culture and ageism that pervades society (Waxman 379).

In the process of aging, the "selfhood" of the body changes, acquiring the appearance of "age", which is not acquired by one's own intention, but by comparison with and realization from others. It is because of the different appearance from that of a young female body that makes the body of an aged woman become the "other". This experience shows precisely that people do not possess an ordinary aesthetic of aging, but are accustomed to seeing it as a mutilated body rather than as a normal, natural female body. Women have become accustomed to creating young, vibrant, and almost perfect images of their bodies, judging themselves almost harshly. The horizontal wrinkles in the mirror, the grey hair at the temples, and the withered body, signify a loss of social attractiveness, and for the aging woman, this horror inspires the first burst of shame. When self-love and self-worth are eroded, the result is the activation of shame: as if becoming/looking older means that there is something deeply and truly wrong with the individual (Gilleard, "Aging as Otherness" 3). The history of the perennial stigmatization of the older female body hinders individual acceptance, and shame and guilt are conjured up by historical cultural and political circumstances, and often used by power as its instruments of discipline and control. The fact that Fern can only find acceptance and confidence in her own body in solitude and nature is both an unavoidable catharsis and a criticism and irony of society's gaze on the female body.

This feeling of exclusion and alienation is not only reflected physically but also psychologically. Bartky argues that shame is a "universal emotional adaptation of women to their social environment" (9). It is important in the formation of women's social identity. Fern is independent of the society in the film.

She does not stay and cannot come into other people's lives. In fact, this is true of most of the older people in the film. This alienation of the aged self as other involves not just a perceiving/ thinking otherness, but an affectively inflected otherness, an injurious agedness summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health (Beauvoir, *Old Age* 70).

After being told she could not continue working in the factory, Fern leaves the counseling desk. Before she leaves the office, she is told that a worker's dog had been left behind. When the officer asked her if she wanted to adopt the dog, Fern's face was full of expectation, but she then declined. After leaving, Fern petted the dog at the door and then walked away without looking back. On the question of whether to keep a pet, Fern obviously wants it very much, which means that she wants to continue to stay connected to the world. During the wandering, Fern is also looking at other people's pets when she is smoking, but she never goes ahead and adopts any dogs. Fern shows the psychological disorientation and uneasiness of the elderly woman, who tries to fit in but always remains outside the crowd. Only Fern did not know her good workmate left, because she excludes herself from the small circle of the party from time to time.

With age, people become hemmed in, both by the body's in-itself-ness and by its representation both as other within us and the other without. People may make themselves a third-person narrative, a "me-story" that is little more than a "they-story" (Gilleard, "Ageism and the Unrealizability" 105). Fern is the quintessential figure of a woman facing old age, experiencing a body that is no longer healthy and a mind that is full of contradictions.

In short, older women need to be physically and psychologically motivated in the face of aging. In the process of getting older, they are gradually excluded by the whole society, becoming the "other" and "unspeakable hidden pains".

4.2. Elderly Women in Social Changes

Women in their twilight years not only face the physical and mental problems of age, but also continue to seek their place in society. Despite living in society, the elderly seem to be in a "hidden corner". Aging is not only a sign of physical decline but is also closely related to social policies. The "old" becomes a double label, reflecting a manifestation of the old people's split selves. They want to be part of society, but away from social life. In the film, many people in *Rubber Tramp Rendezvous* are reaching retirement age, but they do not have the willingness to retire, choosing to be self-supporting. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, these people have become marginalized, even forgotten, and finally become the abandoned group in the midst of the rapid development of American society.

Fern is a victim of the economic crisis, but she refuses to show the mood of "beaten down by life". She struggles to find a job, leaving her resume at each booth at the RV exhibition, and even tearing down job postings in the corner of the laundry room to make a try. These "nomadic" middle-aged and older people, represented by Fern, no longer try to maintain what they have, because the cost of "maintenance" is so high. On the contrary, they choose to lower their demand. But this lifestyle comes with dangers, such as freezing to death in their cars and not being able to walk through the unmanned areas. This means by living on the road, they are not choosing an easier life nor intend to escape. Whether by choice or by necessity, these people have become numb to the temptations of career, possessions, and class, and instead, they choose to seek a "freedom" with a high-risk coefficient. But this "freedom" relies on packaging deliveries in Amazon warehouses, loading baskets of beets onto trucks, working as mild-mannered cleaners in RV parks, or hustling in a bunch of fries and burgers. There is no causal relationship between human value and work. A typical example is Fern because she has enough experience and ability to teach or be an administrator. She has also worked as a cashier and a teacher but is willing to work as a shop worker when seeking in the wandering journey.

Both Fern and the elderly are Americans "on the road". Different from the main characters in popular road movies, they are no longer young. In other words, the film focuses on older people who are marginalized and their voices are barely heard. Gradually, society finds that it can function without them. Thus, these elderly people were left to fend for themselves in their own small world, and they also seemed to feel good about it.

I see aging as limiting the opportunities for becoming. Aging rather risks sinking, contentedly or otherwise, into a position of bad faith, giving up on becoming and resting instead upon what one was and what, in others' eyes, one now is. This kind of person who succumbs to aging, abandons the freedom that comes from being "for oneself". They are simply a matter of conforming to the stereotypical influences of society, thus reinforcing the impression. (Beauvoir, *Old Age* 970)

Fern could not get social assistance in the movie, and with the death of her husband and no children, she is not in a good financial position so she only has to barter in RV camps to obtain some survival necessities. Fern's best friend, Swankie, who is also an older woman, chooses to wander because she has no medical insurance. Despite the hardships of life, Fern embodies rejection when confronted with the concerns of younger people and is reluctant to receive preferential treatment rights brought by her elderly female identity. Fern refuses to conform to the image of older women as "deserving of help" and "deserving of special care", and tries to repair her car and build a canopy on her own, all in an attempt to escape the "elderly-woman" label she is given.

The unattainability of age provides the conditions under which this selective othering can occur. The more negatively people view the behavior, feelings, and suffering of older people, the more distant they become from society. Rather than seeking a home in a common, collective identity where signs of ageing might be actively displayed and privileged, resisting and rejecting age as a common identity instead privileges the subject self. It is the reason why those middle-aged people refuse to be considered as special group. As Fern did when she had to stop several times to try to fix the car herself, a male driver came over to help, and his attitude of "this is what a old woman on her own deserves" made Fern angrily refuse him.

Sartre seems to suggest that it is being free to be old in a way of one's own choosing, of realizing oneself becoming older in the light of oneself, but not as subject to, the other. This perhaps is the most one can strive for in achieving "one's own factual particularity". It is the willingness to "grow old with dignity" that makes elderly people reluctant to show their agedness in society. It is such a general idea that makes the voice of older people progressively absent from society, and older people, middle-aged and older women are becoming the "other" in society.

4.3. Construction of Self-subjective Identity of Elderly Women

In *Nomadland*, Fern goes through the process of distorting her identity, transforming her identity and finding her identity. Fern's main identity dilemmas include the "fracture" of her identity due to the death of her husband, the anxiety of being an elderly woman with a "double alienation" identity, and the emptiness of losing her social identity. Fern's self-identity construction consists of psychological and behavioral searches. The behavioral search for identity gives the character proof that she is alive, and the psychological search of identity gives her a complete perception of her own identity, which together help her construct the subjective identity.

Nomadland opens with Fern pulling her belongings out of the locker, stuffing her daily necessities into the car, and crying bitterly as she hugs her late husband's work clothes. Her life continues on the road, but Fern's heart remains stuck in the past. After the death of her husband, the meaning of home has disappeared and life has lost its most important fulcrum. Fern's inner flame extinguished as her husband passed away, and her life entered the darkest and most confusing moment. What is the meaning of life? How can one go on without the beloved by one's side? She loses her identity as a "wife" and is no longer a member of a complete family, but an "other" in contrast to those with happy families.

Likewise, as a old woman, Fern has to deal with the changes in her body, accepting her aging, while unemployment and the economic crisis make her anxious and lost in grief. She is reluctant to accept relief from others. Actually, Fern has many opportunities to stop wandering. Her sister has kept a room for her. As long as she wants, she could find a place to live. But even with a permanent place to live, Fern considers herself an "outsider" in her sister's home and remains outside the group. She made the choice to try to find proof of her existence in her behaviors. In this period of having to become a nomad, Fern gradually finds something to prove herself.

Fern actively proves her ability. She is not the kind of person who starts giving herself up to escape from reality, but is looking for a job, to prove her worth. She sits in a van practicing the flute and reciting Shakespearean sonnets for young vagrants. During the whole film, Fern does not cry once. Even when she is working as a guide at the camp and cleaning up the rubbish, she is trying to fit in with workers. Nomads had to be on the road at first because of material things, and gradually later because of her inner voice. Through her conversations with Swankie, Fern is also gradually opening her heart. After hearing the stories shared by the 75-year-old friend, Fern gradually came to terms with the loss of her husband and was able to talk openly to the young man about her marriage vows. Fern started out driving the RV because she had no one to turn to, and after experiencing the illnesses and deaths of others on the road, Fern gradually settled into the group of nomads and found the true direction.

In the end, Fern returns to the empty town and the home she had lived in for decades. In this space

she confronts the trauma in her heart, draws strength from her pain and moves on. During this arduous journey, she gets accustomed to loneliness and gains friendship. Fern finally realizes that she no longer needs a house as a home in the wide world. She was always with her home. Being on the road with her car was the most complete freedom in life.

According to this conversation, Fern has grown inside and is looking forward to life:

LINDA. What did you name your van?

FERN. Vanguard.

LINDA. Oh, that is very strong.

FERN. She is. (00: 03: 21 - 00: 03: 29)

As Fern said, the flames in her heart rekindle and she no longer considers herself as the “other”. She sees herself as an autonomous person, just as she had named her van - Vanguard.

Fern has found her true self and the meaning of life, and about her life choice and scenarios, there is obviously a lot of things to be considered. Why is Fern, an elderly woman, so difficult to find herself? Low income and job-hunting difficulties make elder women gradually become the “others” in society. Why cannot women find a subjective position in society? How does Fern cope with the problems of aging? Is the autonomy that Fern finds in her travels real, or is it an idealized dream? Is Fern’s experience replicable?

The film brings out the possibility of an elderly-woman finding herself again in the face of unemployment and widowhood. However, more realistically, it seems that society does not pay enough attention to the aging and agedness issues of life. People generally believe that entering middle-aged life means a stereotyped life and the loss of possibilities for growth, thus neglecting the psychological growth needs of middle-aged people. At the same time, society’s understanding of the older people is rather homogeneous, as they are not the mainstay of society and are often ignored and marginalized. The aged become the neglected “other”.

The construction of an independent subjective identity is often shaped by the expression of self-worth, the identification of self-social status and the perception of self-worth in social interactions. The “other” status which is defined by social cognition deflects the autonomy of the elderly. In a society of seemingly infinite possibilities, the possibilities for marginalized people are slim to none. In the process of being marginalized, Fern chooses to drive on the road as a nomad. Not out of poverty, illness or any other reason, but as a way of life that, as she says, is “houseless” rather than “homeless”. But it is the “life” she has chosen after weighing everything. Fern chooses to be the subject of her own life, and although her body is on the road and she seems to be the forgotten “other” of society, she is always the center of her life.

Fern, as an elderly woman under the dual alienation of “femininity” and “old age”, gradually constructs her own subjectivity during the caravan trip. She learns to face her advancing age and female identity properly and honestly by building her self-cognition. She is “genderless”, but never more profound and complete. She can do her best to maintain her attractiveness through exercise, beauty, etc., thus delaying the onset of the “genderless” phase, or she can look at her body in a new way, out of these ruts, appreciating its strengths and capabilities, seeing it as a vehicle for personal goals and objectives, and achieving a “different, freer relationship with her physical self”. Fern’s transformation is in line with the intention of aging—becoming old—is capable of sustaining authentic “for-itself”. It is also a process in line with Sartre’s account of the possibilities of being, of being both free to become and at the same time retaining what one has already possessed, suggesting that we can own the characteristics that otherwise entangle us. These characteristics through people’s own choice construct a particular way of living a “for itself” later life instead of an “other” life.

Thus, it follows that a true understanding of aged and aging may only be possible if one is truly detached from the idea of the “other”. This will not only contribute to the self-fulfillment and self-affirmation of older women, but also to their better social participation and integration, thereby improving their quality of life in later life.

5. Chapter 5 Conclusion

This thesis analyzes Fern’s characterization from three parts, namely, the social “other”, the elderly “other” and the female “other”, and interprets the film’s illuminating reflections on the real American

society. The thesis uses the theory of the “other” in Beauvoir’s phenomenology of old age to explain Fern’s process of finding “herself” in the face of aging.

Firstly, the thesis discusses the physiological and psychological problems that elderly women face in the process of aging. When aging, old women tend to objectify themselves and are reluctant to show their aging in front of others. Therefore, their plight is not easily perceived, which leads to the gradual departure of women from society at this age and gradually becoming a neglected group.

Secondly, the issue of aging is also reflected in the social economy. Older women often prefer to self-reliance rather than increase the burden on their spouses, children, or others. It is the main reason why they try to find their place in society through their own efforts. Since they do not want to be treated in a special way because of their old age, they need to obtain more affirmation of themselves.

In the end, Fern gradually comes to recognize her “autonomy” in her wanderings. In this process, she has realized that people neither deny nor embrace aging, but fashion it to our ending. It is only by not rejecting aging and not considering it as the “other” that people can truly take control of their aging body and mind.

In conclusion, this thesis analyses characterization of Fern’s image from the three aspects above, so that the audience can not only gain a deeper understanding of Fern’s image but also improve their understanding and cognition of elderly women. In short, the characterization of old women should not be limited to a single and one-sided image, but more new and distinctive images of elderly-women should be discovered and understood.

Limited by the length of the thesis and the scale of literature collection, this thesis is only a small project.

It is suggested that further research can focus on different elderly female characters in other films and make a comparative study to improve the perception of their diversity and profundity.

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