

Reflections on *Mona Lisa Smile* From an Intercultural Perspective

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Mona Lisa is regarded as an archetypal masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance by Leonardo da Vinci, which indicates the advent of liberation and humanism. The famous movie *Mona Lisa Smile* follows the same name and not only depicts women's pursuit of self-consciousness and self-value realization, but also portrays culture shock and cultural conflict in each specific plot filled with implications, providing some unique insights into intercultural learning. This thesis tries to interpret the movie from an intercultural perspective. The intercultural reflections will be presented in terms of four aspects, namely, general impressions of the movie, Katherine's growth and adaptation process, my reflections on the movie, and intercultural insights gained from the movie.

Keywords: *Mona Lisa Smile*, reflections, intercultural perspective, cultural shock

Introduction

This is a movie about Wellesley College in 1953 when the United States was in the process of change. In 1953, the "Ivy League without men" Wellesley College in Massachusetts had a new art history teacher named Katherine, a beautiful and mature woman who had just graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, where she had received liberal reform ideas and aimed to become a distinguished professor. However, Katherine, full of ideals and enthusiasm, unexpectedly encountered all kinds of difficulties and obstacles and boldly challenged the conventional education and teaching system. It was not just the education system she was fighting against, but the conventional rules, traditions, institution, and stereotype of that time that she was standing up against.

In the United States in the 1950s, although the idea of feminism had germinated and the status of women was gradually being valued, people's ideas were still very conservative (Walters, 2013). The country's ethos is to use public opinion to allow women who walked out of their homes and went to society during World War II to return to their families (Friedan, 1983). This traditional thinking is especially prevalent in the upper class. At women's college like Wellesley, women's education revolves around the business of marriage. Wellesley produces the wives of future celebrities who will marry and start their own small families after graduation (Friedan, 1998). For them, a marriage certificate is more important than a diploma; the purpose of their study is to marry a good husband. They have little independent thinking, and are not encouraged to think about their future and self-development. Having been stunned by the educational culture and rigid cultural mainstream of

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the girls, Katherine tried to change the situation and courageously acted as a cultural change agent for the girls stuck in the system of conventions and stereotypes imposed on them. She tries to take her students out of the institutional conventions and restrictions, gives the girls the possibility of another life, and offers them a broader perspective on how life could have been done differently.

General Impression of the Movie

As for me, *Mona Lisa Smile* is a film about American women's pursuit of self-awareness and value in the 1950s, which discusses the problems including marriage, divorce, and women's relationship with family and career and reflects the undercurrents of feminist thinking at that time. Women began to seek equality and strive to establish a harmonious coexistence with men. The movie portrays the condition of that time, points out the contradiction between the traditional views and new ideas, and touches upon the feminism and new outlook on society and life. The theme of the film must be the reason why a majority of the female audiences are touched by the film—women should not play a traditional housewife, but pursue their own values. In a word, the movie offers the audience some valuable insights into the intercultural awareness, adjustment, academic culture, and personal and cultural change stimulated by this movie.

Katherine's Growth and Adaptation Process

Katherine is an open-minded and independent teacher as well as a feminist with a provoking spirit in this movie. She came to Wellesley College because she wanted to change, to change herself, to change the college. Aiming at encouraging the female students to pursue their dreams boldly and courageously instead of being restricted by the traditional social values, Katherine was confronted with a succession of setbacks and challenges. However, she did not choose to run away from the reality when her students put her down, but responded positively and believed that students should be brave enough to pursue their dreams and not be tied down by their families. Katherine's awakening female self-awareness is that she is clearly aware of the significance of equal education and career of women. Her liberation is to get rid of the restrictions of traditional thought in the Wellesley College and to encourage more women to pursue their true independence, freedom, education, and career.

Firstly, as a teacher, Katherine embodies awakening self-awareness. She believes in the importance of equal and advanced education which can develop female students' talents. She helps the female students understand the importance of self-awareness, and encourages them to develop self-awareness (Duval, 2001). She wishes they can do what they want to do and realize their ideals and values. Therefore, in her teaching practice, she actively imparts these thoughts to her students, and actively struggles with conservative ethical thoughts. In the process of teaching, she gave up the rigid mode of teaching knowledge, but enlightened the awakening of female consciousness through independent thinking. In Katherine's first class, the well-prepared Wellesley women put her down, but in her second class she prepared a lot of drawings and advertising pictures, through instructions of "What is art?" and "How to tell the difference between good and bad art?"; these "extremely smart" students are inspired to think independently, which is completely different from a rigid teaching mode. The students were dumbfounded by the series of harsh questions. These outstanding and brilliant students began to learn to think independently for the first time. The thinking does not depend on any teaching materials or any traditions. These questions seem to be related to art, but in fact they question social values and value orientation. So, Katherine's female self-awareness has a great influence on the female students (Liu & Zhang, 2013). Her emotional education

achieves great success in that her students show great empathy with her in understanding the values of being independent.

Secondly, as a feminist, Katherine wishes these girls to pursue career in the society and realize their goals rather than just to be housewives in the family. She is aware of the importance of career which can enhance their confidence, identity, and status in the family and society. So, she supports her students to work outside to realize their value and pursue their liberation. Katherine's awakening female self-awareness also is manifested in her choice on marriage and career (Zhang, 2013). She has not gotten married because she has a clear understanding about marriage and women's role in the family in the patriarchal society. In fact, she thinks women should balance marriage and career and women are not men's substitution and should not depend upon men totally, which makes women lose their self-awareness and true self. She holds the view that women are also intelligent, brave, and reasonable enough to build a career which they are interested in.

Thirdly, as a cultural change agent, Katherine tries her best to make these female students recognize women's status in the family and society. Wellesley College is filled with traditional thoughts and dogma. Female students here cannot enjoy equal rights with men. They are encouraged to be docile housewives in the family, to which Katherine is strongly opposed. She cannot accept the strict conditions that she must teach students completely according to the traditional teaching syllabus. She is not willing to change her independent and advanced thought; she is determined to change the surrounding environment and people, which she thinks can help these female students realize their potential and pursue their true values. Because Katherine gave these students a unique perspective on the world, they were able to summon up the courage to challenge the new life. Eventually, she was understood by her students, changed their outlooks on society and life, and helped them perceive the world in a new light.

In conclusion, it is Katherine's responsibility as a teacher and her personal charm of inner strength that gradually influences her students' thoughts and motivates them to find the real charm and value of being a woman.

The Reflections of the Movie

This movie is inspirational and thought-provoking in that it offers me a new perspective on the society and life.

Firstly, the author admires Katherine's courage of challenging unreasonable authority and fixed stereotypes and thoughts. Sometimes, making a difference confronts us with authority and resistance, which needs considerable courage to face up to the traditions and norms. Katherine is an extraordinary woman who is a role model for us to see the world in a whole new way. Deep down, everyone wants to be as independent, smart, and wonderful as Katherine. Actually, individual freedom turns out to be a common theme of movies and human beings. In order to realize the freedom and self-fulfillment, we need to change our way of thinking; we should not let ourselves be restricted by conventions and dogma, just like Katherine did, in order to persist in her values, who learns to be adaptable to new environment and solve the problems with a growth mindset instead of fixed mode of thinking. The growth mindset believes that people's abilities can be cultivated with effort. When stereotyped thinking occurs, it represents our unwillingness to accept responsibility and consequences, and to break out of old traditions and beliefs. Instead, people with fixed mindsets believe that people's abilities remain the same, which is why they want to prove themselves all the time. They take what happens as a measure of competence, and that standard is immutable. The president, faculty, and students of Wellesley College are stereotyped people, and do not want to break the rules. Katherine is a growth-minded person who is always trying

to figure out how to live a better life, rather than completely losing herself in order to just get married and give up ideals, ambitions, and pursuits of their own. This movie illustrates the ideal that people with a growth mindset live in a world that is bright, inclusive, and positive. They believe in the potential of human development, whether in themselves or in others.

Secondly, the author do appreciate Katherine because of her desire for freshness. There are two kinds of life: keeping routine and tasting freshness. Keeping routine means a stable and regular life. However, what makes the matter worse is getting accustomed to it and ignoring the longing of an adventure life. She used to prefer keeping routine to tasting freshness. But this movie changed my perspective on life. Just like Katherine's students, Betty and Joan, the former is aware of her family crisis and identity crisis under the influence of Katherine, and finally she finds her awakening self-awareness and becomes strong and brave enough to face the difficulties in her marriage; the latter constructs a new identity as a new type of home-maker who represents women's independence, freedom, and liberation. As for us, we should bravely realize our self-awareness and embrace life's changes on the road to personal, psychological, social, and cultural growth.

Intercultural Insights Gained From the Movie

Firstly, I think this movie also reflects the learning and growth-facilitating nature of the adaptation process. In intercultural communication, adaptation can be defined as the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating an unfamiliar cultural environment, establish or reestablish and maintain a relatively stable reciprocal and functional relationship with the environment (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). Katherine's story well embodies the learning and growth-facilitating nature of the adaptation process. When confronting the rigid institutional culture and stereotypes on women, Katherine, with her independent thinking and yearning for freedom, used their own unique educational concepts to gradually awaken women's self-awareness and help them realize their self-worth. In this process, Katherine helps her students remove various functional roles stipulated by the patriarchal society for women, and motivates them to obtain an identity independent of functional roles (Whitebrook, 2014). Under the influence of such a traditional patriarchal social consciousness, the female students did not have much expectation from Katherine at the beginning. However, under the guidance of Katherine, they began to reposition their lives and rethink their own destiny and future. This awakening of female consciousness and construction of identity are represented by Betty and Joan.

Secondly, this movie also depicts Katherine's culture shock. Culture shock is the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply travel to another type of life (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Martin & Nakayama, 2018). Facing a new way of life at Wellesley College, Katherine feels frustrated at first, and then she learns to adjust to the new environment and tries to change the traditional value orientation for women. Her independent and growth-mindset also greatly influence her students, awakening their self-awareness to pursue dream and career. The element of culture shock is not vividly showed to the audience, but is indirectly reflected in the way of Katherine and her students change and grow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Mona Lisa Smile* is a worthwhile movie about educational culture, woman's self-awareness, adaptation, and personal and cultural change, which offers us numerous thought-provoking insights into education, culture, and society.

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