Candidate 3 evidence

To what extent are women liberated from patriarchal oppression in Raise the Red Lantern and Stories of the Sahara?

Patriarchy has been a core social system in ancient Chinese society for thousands of years, where men are entitled to dominant positions of authority according to feudal ethics and Confucian philosophy within occasions from household to society. As soon as the Zhou dynasty, patriarchal marriage and family were established. Men were superior to women (男尊女卑), and they were obligated to obey and follow men in stages of their lives. However, as ages and generations change, more women strive to break the restrictions. Undeniably, radical improvements have been made since the republican era (1912-1949), women in this period are not truly liberated.

The film "大紅燈籠高高掛" or Raise the Red Lantern is set during the 1920s. As the Qing government was overthrown, it symbolises a new time with drastic changes in the ideology of women, where the consciousness of gender equality and independence within women grows, colliding with the feudal value system.

The main character of the film,頌蓮, Songlian, a university student is forced to get married because her father dies and her stepmother cannot support her anymore. Her stepmother asks her what kind of man she wants to marry.

「嫁給甚麼人，能由得了我嗎？」

"Married to what sort of man, is it even up to me?"

「當小老婆，就當小老婆。女人不就這麼回事嗎？」

"Be a concubine, isn't that the fate of women?"

These rhetorical questions reflected her disdain to an arranged marriage as a university student who is greatly influenced by modern education and views. Songlian's identity as a university student symbolises her independence and rationality, however her qualities as a modern educated person effectively expose the gender inequality in marriage in 1920s where consciousness without actual power only deepens oppression.

As the jubilant background music starts, two lines of tears gradually run down her face, forming an extreme comparison. This reinforces the idea that patriarchy glamorizes forced marriage and subsequent suffering, concealing the coercion under joyful celebration, highlighting the helplessness in Songlian.

On the day of Songlian's wedding day, she walks to the Chen's mansion against the direction of the bridal sedan wearing her plain student outfit. This implies that she did not conform to the

society norms for a marriage from the beginning, foreshadowing the distorted life of Songlian as she enters the mansion.

The housekeeper 陳百順 Chen Baishun welcomes and guides Songlian to her house with many red lanterns, which only the mistress who the master has chosen to spend a night with is entitled to. However, the third mistress,梅珊, Meishan, demands to see the master at midnight, the lanterns in Songlian's house are extinguished as the master leaves.

Red lanterns are a symbol of power, privilege, and discourse power within *the mansion*. Lanterns show how the authority of females is conditional and solely rely on the desire of the master. With the absence of the master, lanterns are extinguished. This effectively indicates the power that women possess within the household is only temporary and can be taken away instantly.

The power given to the mistress fades quickly, prompting mistresses to fight for the master's attention even in extreme ways. This effectively reveals that patriarchy in the household is partially maintained by encouraging competition among the mistresses.

Throughout the whole film, the director intentionally hides the face of the master in all scenes, this strongly represents the impersonal patriarchal system, the oppression is not just caused by the master, but the patriarchal system as a whole. People who possess higher status in the hierarchy e.g. the first wife, act as agents who can reinforce oppression with the excuse of maintaining rules of the household. The master is mostly not involved in the conflicts and competition of the mistresses, but uses the system to manipulate them, obliquely sustain his status as the master of the household.

The next day, Chen Baishun brings Songlian to visit the ancestors and introduces her to the traditions of the family.

「四太太，老規矩往後都馬虎不得。」

"Fourth mistress, the old rules cannot be taken lightly from now on" The housekeeper says to Songlian. As Songlian marries into the family, she will need to obey the rules and the master's will.

In Broader context, women in the Chinese society used to be significantly influenced by the "three obedience" and "four virtues" (「三從四德」). These Confucian concepts establish total submission for marriage as a moral standard for women, which further oppresses Songlian by controlling her subtlety, transforming her necessary resistance into unethical disobedience.

Songlian goes to meet the other mistresses,she chats with the friendly second mistress, 卓雲, Zhouyun asks her if she enjoyed the foot massage last night.

「還不是老爺身上的一件衣裳，想穿就穿，想脫就脫唄。」

"I'm just one of the master's robes, he can wear it or take it off"

The metaphor compares songlian herself with robes of the master, she can be chosen or ignored. This clearly demonstrates the change in Songlian's self-esteem that her value is reduced to an object.

「你要是不級陳家添個兒子，苦日子就在後頭了。」

"If you don't give the Chen family a son, your hard times are just around the corner."

Meishan who has a son earnestly tells Songlian that a son is necessary to consolidate her position in the Chen's family.

According to the Mencius「不孝有三，無後為大。」"Of the three unfilial acts, the greatest is to have no descendants," it emphasises the role of women in feudal times, which is continuing the family line and serving the master. This belief further constrains women like Songlian and reduce them to reproduction, reinforcing that their value depends on childbirth instead of their capabilities in life.

Soonly, Songlian is pregnant, but Yan'er (Songlian's servant) found out that she was faking her pregnancy.The master is furious and covers her lanterns in bleach cloth. This not only symbolises loss of power in the long term, it is performed as a punishment to fortify the authority of the master through social death.

「人就是鬼，鬼就是人。」"

People are ghosts, and ghosts are people."

「像狗、像貓、像耗子，什麼都像，就是不像人。」

" They are like dogs, cats or rats, like anything, but certainly not people.

These lines show that Songlian's psychological state is gradually weakened by oppression of patriarchy, where individuality and freedom are stripped away. The rules that ensure the stability of the patriarchal system, oppresses Songlian from expressing herself, the longer she lives in the mansion, she is more immersed into the system to gain the master's attention with disdain for more rights to live with dignity like a human.

Later, Songlian inadvertently tells of Meishan's affair when she got drunk on her birthday. As a result, Meishan was hanged.

The death of Meishan traumatised Songlian with guilt. All the stress caused by isolation, competition for the master's favour and loss of identity from an independent student to a summative concubine, gradually drives Songlian to insanity, demonstrating the destructive power of patriarchy.

Conversely, the prose collection "撒哈拉的故事" or Stories of the Sahara recounts the author's experience living in the desert during 1970s with her partner, describing their encounters and struggles under a different culture, representing the independence and adventurous spirit of modern female individuals.

三毛, Sanmao, the author is discussing about getting married with her partner Jose. Because of cultural and personality differences, Sanmao clearly acknowledges that they would have less common ground in marriage.

Unlike Songlian who get married because of economic constraints, Sanmao's marriage is her own choice and not forced. This distinct difference shows the autonomy in modern women to make decisions about relationships.

「我極不願在婚後失去獨立的人格和內心的自由自在化，所以我一再強調，婚後我還是「我行我素」，要不然不結婚。」

"I am extremely unwilling to lose my independent personality and inner freedom after marriage, so I have repeatedly emphasized that I will still 'do my own thing' after marriage, otherwise I will not get married."

Sanmao has a strong sense of autonomy, as she is extremely unwilling to lose her independent personality and her internal freedom. The phrase「我行我素」shows that Sanmao see her freedom as something more important than other people's opinion. It is also her condition for marriage, or she would not get married. She sees independence as a non-negotiable character, emphasising the cruciality of autonomy in her mind, where she prioritises internal freedom over marriage.

「我的半生，飄流過很多國家。高度文明的社會，我住過，看透，也嘗夠了，我的感動不是沒有，我的生活方式，多多少少也受到它們的影響。但是我始終沒有在一個固定的地方，將我的心也留下來給我居住的城市。」

"I have spent half my life wandering through many countries. I have lived in highly civilized societies, seen through them, and tasted them to my heart's content. I have been moved by them, and my lifestyle has been influenced by them to some extent. But I have never settled in one place and left my heart in the city where I live."

Sanmao reflects on her experiences living in various countries, but she does not have a place where she has truly left her heart. It suggests that she does not feel belonging anywhere, yet it also reflects her autonomous and mobile mindset, not letting different environments or cultures define her identity.

「想不到此地婦女全是我的同好，生病決不看醫生，她們的理由跟我倒不相同，因為醫生是男的，所以這些終日藏在面紗下的婦女情願病死也不能給男醫生看的。」

"I never expected that all the women here would be like me. They would never see a doctor when they are sick. Their reason is different from mine. Because doctors are men, these women who hide behind veils all day would rather die than be seen by a male doctor."

While Sanmao does not like to see a doctor as she gets minor ailments all the time, female locals in the Sahara never go to the hospital even when the conditions are more serious, showing the social and patriarchal restrictions women face in less developed countries even in 1970s.

Although " Raise the Red Lantern" and " Stories of the Sahara" are two very opposite stories, where one describes the oppression women face in feudal society, the other mainly shows the freedom in mindset of women in modern society, yet, it still mentioned the patriarchal restrictions women can still face in different cultures. In the 1920s, Songlian was severely oppressed by the patriarchal system, fast forward to the 1970s, where Sanmao has a powerful sense of internal freedom that is fulfilled by exploring the world. These stories indicate the drastic change in mindset of women. Still, liberation does not only require education, but changes in fundamental social structures, where gender does not affect how individuals are treated in society.

1500 words

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