

Gendered Oppression in the Film Mai (2024): An Analysis of Resistance Strategies through Young's Five Faces of Oppression

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, women have persistently encountered inequity within patriarchal cultures. This study examines gender oppression portrayed in the Vietnamese film *Mai* (2024), directed by Trần Thành. Employing Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression theory (1990), this research analyzes Mai's experiences of gender oppression as a woman in a patriarchal culture, particularly in her role as a widow. The study identifies three of the five forms of oppression encountered by Mai: exploitation, marginalization, and violence, as outlined in Young's oppression theory. Through a visual narrative approach, the findings demonstrate that women who experience gender oppression do not remain passive. Through Mai's character, this research establishes that oppressed women possess the capacity to voice resistance through initiating new romantic relationships, severing toxic family ties, and opening new chapters in their lives by pursuing their aspirations as independent women.

Keywords: Film Analysis, Gendered Oppression, Marginalization, Resistance Strategies, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have consistently faced inequity under patriarchal societies. Gender oppression typically manifests in environments characterized by dominant-submissive dynamics regarding gender roles between men and women (Rahma et al., 2017). The 2024 Vietnamese film *Mai*, directed by Trần Thành, addresses the theme of gender-based oppression of women. While Iris Marion Young does not explicitly use the term "gender oppression" as a distinct concept, in her seminal work *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), she delineates and examines structural oppression, including the influence of gender in this context. Gender oppression, as articulated by Young, refers to the systematic subjugation that women experience due to social roles, cultural identities, and patriarchal power structures (Kristami et al., 2022). This constitutes a significant concern, as Yusuf (2020) asserts that media, including films, contributes to altering societal perceptions of women. This concept emerged due to the historical and contemporary oppression of women as the subordinate group (Susilawati et al., 2023).

Huỳnh Trần Thành is recognized as a Vietnamese actor, producer, and film director who has made substantial contributions to Vietnamese cinema. His notable works include *Bố già* (*Dad, I'm Sorry*, 2021), *Nhà bà Nữ* (*Mother Nữ's House*, 2023), and the recent blockbuster *Mai* (2024), which achieved remarkable commercial success by exceeding 500 billion VND in box office revenue within 20 days. *Mai* (2024) garnered an IMDb rating of approximately 7.0 based on over 1,600 reviews, indicating predominantly positive reception from global audiences. This

rating signifies recognition of the societal concerns presented, including issues of gendered oppression and challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies.

The achievements of *Mai* (2024) in winning various prestigious awards provide strong evidence that the portrayal of women's oppression in this film is not only thematically relevant but also artistically and socially recognized. The film received the Best Feature Film award at the 2024 Golden Kite Awards, alongside the Best Actress award for Phuong Anh Đào, who portrayed the character of Mai. This recognition underscores the value placed by industry professionals on the struggles and complexities of female characters facing and resisting gender oppression. The film received similar acclaim at the Da Nang Asian Film Festival and the Green Star Awards, indicating resonance both critically and emotionally with diverse audiences. Therefore, these achievements strengthen the rationale for studying *Mai*, as the film effectively presents a female figure who does not resign herself to oppression but demonstrates the capacity to voice her struggle and achieve self-liberation. This narrative merits analysis within the context of gender discourse and representation of women in media.

The film *Mai* (2024) serves as a relevant example for this research because it provides a compelling depiction of a woman's journey through these challenges. The film portrays Mai, played by Phuong Anh Đào, as a 37-year-old single mother responsible for raising her daughter independently. She serves as the breadwinner in the family, working as a massage therapist to provide for her child and repay the debts incurred by her gambling-addicted father. Mai's character appears calm and graceful externally, yet her emotional trauma is deeply rooted in a past that includes human trafficking and sexual abuse. She was sold by her own father into prostitution. She also experiences social marginalization, gossip, and stereotyping based on her occupation and single status, despite her resilience and independence.

As previously stated, Mai's oppression is rooted in her past experiences. She survived rape and human trafficking, having been sold by her own father to fund his gambling addiction. The film clearly implies that Mai was raised without an effective father figure. She lived independently of her father even after her mother's passing. Despite Mai's resistance, her daughter, BÌnh Minh, declined to live with her and chose to stay with her grandfather, concerned that her mother could not pursue happiness if others knew of her status as a single parent. The film also features a distinctive characterization in Mai's daughter, who is depicted as lesbian. Moreover, despite her attractive appearance, Mai is consistently subjected to slut-shaming by her surroundings. She shares her feelings with Duong, a younger man attempting to pursue a relationship with her, stating, "Do I look like a hooker? Why does everyone think I'm a dirty girl?" (33:20-33:27). She expresses confusion about the reasons for her oppression, as she considers herself to be living an ordinary life.

Gender oppression depicted in this film is evident in the societal expectations, stigmatization, and moral judgments associated with Mai's identity as a widow. Besides being a woman, her status as a widow exposes her to intense scrutiny and discrimination, especially from a society that expects widows to live in sorrow, isolation, or shame. This reveals the deeply entrenched patriarchal belief that a woman's worth is linked to her marital status and conformity to traditional gender roles (Deshwal & Rao, 2021).

In this study, the researcher employs Young's Five Faces of Oppression as the fundamental theory to analyze gendered oppression in *Mai*. The analysis reveals that Mai experiences three kinds of oppression according to Young's theory: marginalization, violence, and exploitation. Consequently, the narrative demonstrates that Mai ultimately finds the strength to voice her resistance as a form of self-liberation.

Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of women's oppression within similar contexts. The research by Kristami et al. (2022) entitled "Oppression on Woman as Reflected in Lakshmi's Character of *Sold* Novel by Patricia McCormick" explores forms of oppression experienced by the female character Lakshmi in the novel *Sold* by Patricia McCormick. The research employs Iris Marion Young's framework of the "five faces of oppression," which encompasses exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The findings revealed that Lakshmi encountered all five types of oppression from different persons or groups. The oppression resulted from both male (Lakshmi's stepfather) and female characters (Mumtaz and Auntie Bimla), frequently grounded in social class and power dynamics.

Similarly, the study conducted by Teixeira et al. (2021) entitled "Women and Work: Film Analysis of *Most Beautiful Thing*" focused on how women challenge patriarchal dominance within workplace and social contexts in the Netflix series *Most Beautiful Thing*. The researchers examined challenges faced by women of various classes and ethnicities who suffer diverse types of oppression, and assessed how they develop cooperation and resistance against the patriarchal system. This study employs the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism, specifically drawing on theories of Bell Hooks, Angela Davis, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, to discuss the interconnections of race, class, and gender in the formation of oppressive structures. Pierre Bourdieu is also employed to examine dynamics of symbolic power and male control through cultural systems. The primary finding of the research indicates that women are not only shown as victims but also as agents for change.

The research conducted by Wardani et al. (2025) entitled "Empowering Narratives: Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Resistance in *Enola Holmes* Movie" focused on how resistance to patriarchal norms is portrayed through female characters in the film *Enola Holmes* (2020). The focus aims to examine how female characters defy traditional norms that restrict women regarding social duties, education, and freedom. This study uses Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to investigate how narrative, language, and story structure construct and challenge dominant patriarchal discourse. The findings reveal that Enola, as the main character, not only defies traditional norms through both physical and verbal acts but also asserts control over her own narrative as a form of agency.

To date, the researcher has not identified previous research examining the film *Mai* (2024) within this context. While previous studies address the topic of gendered oppression against women, this study aims to fill that gap by focusing on how women who experience gender oppression do not remain passive. Through Mai's character, this research demonstrates that oppressed women possess the potential to voice resistance as a form of self-liberation. The researcher seeks to analyze how gendered oppression is depicted through the widow character in this film, utilizing a visual narrative approach.

METHOD

The primary data for this study were obtained from the film *Mai* (2024). This research employs Young's Five Faces of Oppression theory to facilitate analysis of gendered oppression depicted in *Mai*. Data were collected through careful attention to dialogues, monologues, settings, expressions, reactions, actions, and storyline of the film. The researcher highlights specific incidents relevant to the issue of gendered oppression and its effects on Mai's personal life.

The research method is divided into three steps. First, the data source focuses on *Mai* (2024), specifically on Mai's character. Second, data collection involves in-depth analysis to capture relevant scenes depicting gendered oppression in Mai and her subsequent self-liberation. This stage ensures that the data acquired are thorough and relevant to the research objectives. Third, data analysis employs a visual narrative approach, examining how cinematic elements convey themes of oppression and resistance. The analysis utilizes the TEEL structure: each paragraph commences with a definitive topic sentence, followed by corroborative evidence from the text, an in-depth exposition of the evidence, and a concluding sentence that connects the analysis to the primary issue.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion is divided into two main sections: analyzing three forms of oppression (marginalization, exploitation, and violence) experienced by the main female character using Iris Marion Young's five faces of oppression theory, and exploring how these experiences lead to her resistance.

Marginalization

The first key characteristic of gendered oppression in Mai's character is marginalization. Young (1990) asserted in her theory that marginalization may represent the most pressing category of oppression, as individuals residing in marginalized positions lack opportunities for societal contribution, struggle to secure employment, and have limited access to services due to being ignored, potentially escalating to extermination. In *Mai* (2024), marginalization is depicted in both her social environment and workplace.

Marginalization of Mai begins when she chooses to limit herself from her new society. Her neighbors marginalize her because Mai hides her social status from them. They begin to develop unfounded speculations about her life, including her occupation and background. Mai receives mistreatment from her neighbors daily, such as having trash thrown at her property and dog feces left in front of her apartment. She is also accused of flirting with a neighbor's husband. All of these treatments are consequences of being marginalized from society. As Young (1990) stated in her theory, marginalized individuals or groups will experience unpleasant treatment after being selected as objects of marginalization.

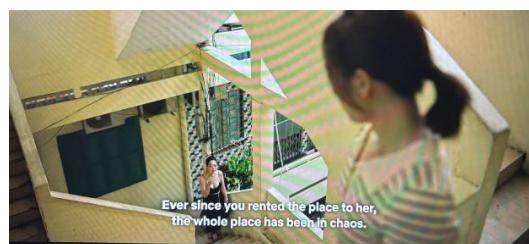


Figure 1. Marginalization

Mai works as a massage therapist. From her first day, she is called the "gold hand" in her workplace, not only because of her attractive appearance but also due to her massage skills. However, her coworkers begin to resent her because they believe their clients are being stolen by Mai. She is labeled as "sneaky" by colleagues who harbor resentment toward her. Mai is

assumed to offer sexual services to clients, which supposedly explains her popularity among clientele. The jealousy of her coworkers leads to her marginalization in the workplace.

Furthermore, the perpetrators of marginalization against Mai's character are predominantly shown through female characters in this film, including Mai's neighbors and workmates mentioned in the analysis above. This represents a powerful and tragic dimension of gendered oppression, wherein women participate in the marginalization of other women, particularly based on patriarchal norms. Although Young (1990) does not directly address women-to-women oppression, her theory of internalized oppression helps to explain this phenomenon. This illustrates how traditional gender roles influence female communities, transforming them into enforcers rather than sources of solidarity.



Figure 2. Marginalization

Exploitation

As stated in Young's theory, prostitution represents a form of exploitation and may constitute one of the most significant forms of exploitation of women globally (Kristami et al., 2022). Young asserted that "women experience distinct forms of gender exploitation wherein their energies and capabilities are used, frequently without respect or acknowledgment, typically to the benefit of men" (Young, 48).

In the past, Mai is depicted as a victim of human trafficking, sold by her own father in *Mai* (2024). In this case, she was exploited by her father to support the family economically. As the only daughter, she had no power but to sacrifice herself by being sent into prostitution. Her sexual exploitation is not merely an act of abuse but deeply systemic, illustrating the devaluation of women's bodies, which are frequently perceived as commodities within patriarchal and capitalist systems.

Not only in her past, she is also exploited for paying all of his gambling debts continuously. Mai hoped her father would no longer bother her after she decided to live independently. However, her father continues to exploit her through the patriarchal structure that demands a daughter must remain loyal to her parents regardless of their actions in her life.

In conclusion, all exploitation experienced by Mai is considered a form of oppression according to Young's theory. In this case, Mai felt she had no power to deny that she must sacrifice herself to exploitation. Mai's powerlessness is reinforced by oppression from her father as the breadwinner in the family. Her father states, "You ought to sacrifice for our family, you're my daughter. Your mom was dying, I was neck-deep in debt. We were so poor, and I have no choice" (clarifying to Mai why he sold her into prostitution) (01:50:21-01:51:00). As mentioned by Young (1990) in her theory, in patriarchal society, several women encounter powerlessness since they are perceived to lack authority while carrying significant responsibilities within the family or society (Young, 1990).



Figure 3. Exploitation

Violence

The sexual violence Mai faced was due to her exploitation described in the previous analysis. Evidence of sexual violence in Mai is supported by her victimization through human trafficking, having been sold by her own father into prostitution. In this case, Mai is affected by powerlessness regarding her rights as the only daughter in a poor family. She grew up in a patriarchal environment that compelled her to obey her parents regardless of their circumstances. In that condition, her father had no option but to send her into prostitution as long as it generated income to support the family economically. According to Young's (1990) theory, this kind of oppression constitutes a form of sexualized violence that is both deeply personal and structurally symbolic. Mai's body is considered expendable, and her pain is normalized within a patriarchal system that exploits women.



Figure 4. Violence

Mai also experienced sexual harassment by men in her surroundings. She is consistently objectified through slut-shaming because of her attractive appearance. This form of oppression also stems from her occupation, which is stigmatized by society. As a massage therapist, she is stigmatized as offering sexual services for men. In several scenes, Mai is depicted as being sexually harassed by her neighbor's husband. The perpetrator, aware of Mai's occupation, considers her a prostitute who can be used by him. This aligns with Young's (1990) assertion that "individuals belonging to certain groups are highly aware that they may be subjected to random, unprovoked assaults on themselves or their property, motivated solely by the intent to harm, diminish, or destroy the individual" (Young, 56). This corresponds with Mai's daily life, which is vulnerable to violence, both verbal and sexual.

Pursuing Love

Through pursuing love with Duong, Mai ignores the social stigma that widows like herself cannot have new relationships and should remain in sorrow and solitude. In Karupiah's (2020) study, which examines how widows decide their options for the future, findings demonstrate that decisions remain tied to traditional societal norms. By choosing to fall in love with Duong, Mai rejects these stereotypes and reclaims her agency, which has been consistently denied to her due to gendered oppression. Mai's desire for love subtly yet directly confronts the patriarchal mindset that views widows as undesirable or shameful. Her quiet yet persistent

decision to embrace feelings, express desire, and imagine a life beyond grief represents an important development in her character's trajectory from silent suffering to emotional freedom. Although Mai's romantic relationship receives rejection from her boyfriend's family, who adheres to the patriarchal system, Mai resists by disregarding their disapproval.

Breaking Toxic Family Ties

Mai's father represents deeply entrenched patriarchal systems that perpetuate harmful behaviors through men in society, such as gambling. Mai, as a daughter in the family, bears the impact of his addiction. As previously described in the research, her earnings consistently finance her father's gambling debts, perpetuating an endless cycle. Mai becomes frustrated, as she has consistently been disadvantaged. As the only daughter, she is expected to obey her father regardless of his actions throughout her life. Through Mai's character, the film reveals that she can break toxic family ties with her father as a form of resistance against the oppression she experiences. This decision is deeply rooted in Mai's past trauma, including verbal abuse from her father. Mai's father is a gambling addict willing to do anything to fulfill his addiction, including selling Mai into prostitution and demanding she pay all his gambling debts. Rather than being a supportive father, he becomes another burden to Mai. Mai has given her father second chances repeatedly, but all opportunities were wasted. Furthermore, the final plot shows Mai severing ties with her father as her ultimate emotional decision.

Opening a New Chapter in Life

In the film *Mai* (2024), economic independence becomes a crucial aspect of the main character's journey toward resistance against economic oppression. *Mai* (2024) depicts Mai facing economic challenges in her daily life. In this context, economic marginalization can become a tool of gendered oppression, reinforcing the notion that women cannot survive independently without male provision. Rather than accepting this structure, Mai chooses to work and support herself as a massage therapist. By earning her own income, Mai challenges the patriarchal notion that women, especially widows, must be passive recipients of male protection. Her work enables her to reclaim control over her choices, including where to live and whom to love, transforming economic independence into a foundation for individual freedom. Mai's choice to pursue her dreams and enhance her financial status as an independent woman is closely linked to the oppression she experienced throughout her life. In conclusion, through analysis of Mai's character, this research demonstrates that not all women who experience gender oppression remain silent and resigned to their situations; they also possess the potential to voice resistance, as demonstrated by the character Mai in the film *Mai* (2024).

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, women have consistently faced inequity under patriarchal societies. The study demonstrates that the main character of the film *Mai* (2024), Mai herself, depicts how she resists gendered oppression as a woman within patriarchal norms. The film reflects the reality of women who are often subjected to social stigma, gendered moral judgment, and surveillance. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression theory facilitates understanding of oppression experienced by Mai and how this oppression leads to her resistance strategies.

Three forms of oppression are identified in Mai's experiences, both in her past and daily life: marginalization, exploitation, and violence, including verbal and sexual assault. Furthermore, to overcome the gendered oppression occurring in her daily life, she does not passively accept this oppression. Through analysis of oppression using Young's (1990) theory, the research reveals impacts that motivate her to take action in resistance. Mai's resistance strategies are reflected in how she demonstrates her desire to have a new romantic relationship with Duong during her widowhood phase. Similarly, she breaks the toxic relationship with her father and opens a new chapter in life by pursuing her dream as an independent woman.

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on gender oppression in film by analyzing a Vietnamese film within the framework of Western feminist theory, thereby expanding cross-cultural understanding of gendered oppression and resistance. Future research may explore other forms of oppression identified in Young's theory, such as powerlessness and cultural imperialism, in similar cinematic contexts, or examine how different cultural contexts influence the representation and resistance of gender oppression in films.

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