

Gendered Oppression in the Film *Mai* (2024)

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Abstract

Historically, women have persistently encountered inequity within a patriarchal culture. This study examines gender oppression portrayed in the Vietnamese film *Mai* (2024), directed by Trần Thành. This research employs Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression theory (1990) to examine Mai's experiences of gender oppression as a woman in a patriarchal culture, particularly in her role as a widow, as shown in *Mai* (2024). This 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 show that women who experience gender oppression are not always passive and take things for granted. Through Mai's character, this research proves that oppressed women have the potential to voice resistance such as starting new love, breaking toxic family ties, and opening new chapter of life by pursuing her dreams as an independent woman.

Keywords: *Gendered Oppression, Marginalization, Violence, Resistance*

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, women have consistently faced inequity under a patriarchal society. Gender oppression typically manifests in environments characterized by a dominant-submissive dynamic about 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 persecution of women. Iris Marion Young does not expressly use the term "gender oppression" as a distinct concept; nonetheless, in her book *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 is a significant concern, as Yusuf (2020) asserts that media, including films, contributes to altering society perceptions of women. This word emerged because to the historical and contemporary oppression of women as the subordinate group (Susilawati et al., 2023).

Huỳnh Trần Thành is acknowledged as a Vietnamese actor, producer, and film director, who is making a substantial contribution to the creation of *Mai* (2024). He has previously made important contributions to the Vietnamese cinema industry, including notable works such as *Bố già* (Dad, I'm Sorry - 2021), *Nhà bà Nữ* (Mother Nữ's House - 2023), and the latest blockbuster *Mai* (2024), which set a record by exceeding 500 billion VND in just 20 days. *Mai* (2024) had an IMDb rating of almost 7, based on over 1,600 reviews, indicating a mostly positive reception from audiences worldwide. This rating signifies an acknowledgment of the societal concerns presented, including the issues of gendered oppression and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. The achievements of *Mai* (2024) in winning various honored awards are the strong evidence of women's oppression shown 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*, along with the Best Actress award for Phương Anh Đào, who portrayed the character of Mai. This honor points out the value placed by professionals on the struggles and complexities of female characters facing gender oppression and successfully resist it. The film received similar fame at the *Da Nang Asian Film Festival* and the *Green Star Awards*, indicating the film's resonance not only critically but also emotionally in the eyes of a wide audience. Therefore, these achievements strengthen the object of the study that Mai's film effectively presents a female figure who is not resigned to oppression, but is able to voice her struggle and self-liberation. A narrative that is worth analyzing in the context of gender discourse and the representation of women in the media.

The film *Mai* (2024) is a relevant example for this research because it provides a touching depiction of a woman's journey through these challenges. The film depicts Mai, whom Phương Anh Đào plays, as a 37 years old single mother who is responsible for raising her daughter alone. She is the breadwinner in the family, working as a massage therapist to provide for her child and repay the debts of her gambling-addicted father. Mai's character appears as calm and graceful from the outside, but her emotional trauma is deeply rooted in a past that includes human trafficking and sexual abuse, as well as being sold by her own father in the prostitution. She's also experienced being socially marginalized, gossiped about, and stereotyped upon for her job and her single status, despite her resilience and independence.

As previously stated, Mai's oppression is rooted in her past experiences. She was the victim of rape and human trafficking that having been sold by her own father to fund his gambling addiction. It is clearly implied in the film that Mai was raised without a father figure. She went on living independently of her father even after her mother's passing. Despite her resistance, her daughter named Bình Minh declined to live with her and decided to stay with her grandfather because she was worried that her mother could not pursue her happiness if they knew about her status as a single parent. The film also features a unique personality in Mai's daughter, who is depicted as lesbian. Moreover, despite her beautiful looks, Mai is consistently subjected to slut shaming by her surroundings. She even shares her feelings to Duong, a younger male who is attempting to get into a relationship with her. Mai said, "*Do I look like a hooker? Why does everyone think I'm a dirty girl?*" (33.20-33.27). She felt confused about the reason why she's being oppressed, all this time she considering herself by living her life like an ordinary person.

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

In this present study, the researcher uses Young's Five Face of Oppression as the fundamental theory to analyze gendered oppression in Mai. In her struggles, it shows that Mai depicted three kinds of oppression according to Young's theory, which is marginalization, violence, and exploitation. As a result, the plot shows that Mai finally found the strength to voices her resistance as a form of self-liberation. Several previous studies had conducted research on the phenomenon of women oppression related to this context. In the research by Kristami et al., (2022) entitled "Oppression on Woman as Reflected in Lakshmi's Character of *Sold* Novel by Patricia McCormick" explores the form of oppression 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 contains 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 classes and power dynamics.

Similarly, the article conducted by Teixeira et al. (2021) entitled *Women and work: film analysis of Most Beautiful Thing* focused on how women challenge patriarchal dominance within the contexts of workplaces and social environments in the Netflix series *Most Beautiful Thing*. The researchers examined the challenges faced by women of various classes and ethnicities who suffer diverse types of oppression, and assess how they develop cooperation and resistance against the patriarchal system. This study employs the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism, specifically drawing on the 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 the dynamics of symbolic power and male control through cultural systems. The primary finding of the research indicates that women are not just 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 kind of agency.

Currently, the researcher has not found previous research that has studied the film *Mai* (2024) within this context. Those previous studies have the same topic, which is gendered oppression against women. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by focusing on how women who experience gender oppression are not always passive and take things for granted. Through Mai's character, this research proves that oppressed women have the potential to voice resistance as a form of self-liberation. The researcher wants to dissect how the gendered oppression depicted by the widow's character in this film, through visual narrative approach of the film.

METHODOLOGY

The main data of this study are taken from the film *Mai* (2024). This research is using Young's Five Face of Oppression theory to help in further analysis through gendered oppression depicted in *Mai*. The data analysis is collected by careful attention to several dialogues, monologues, setting, expressions, reactions, actions, and storyline of the film. The researcher will also highlight some incidents that are relevant to the issue of gendered oppression and how it can affect her personal life. Furthermore, the research method is divided into three steps. The data source is using *Mai* (2024) film that focuses on Mai's character, data collection will discover a depth analysis to capture the relevant scenes of gendered oppression in *Mai* and reclaiming self-liberation as the impact of it. This stage ensures that the data acquired is thorough and relevant to the study objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

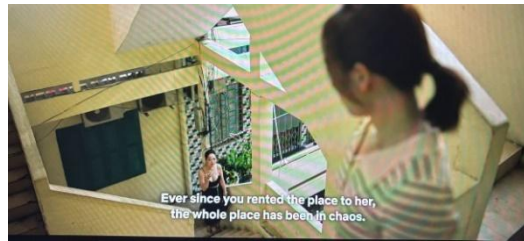
This discussion will be divided into two main part which are analyzing three kinds of oppression, such as marginalization, exploitation, and violence in the main female character using Iris Marion Young's five faces of oppression theory and exploring how it can lead to her resistance. The analysis employs the TEEL structure: each paragraph commences with a definitive subject phrase, succeeded by corroborative evidence from the text, an in-depth exposition of the evidence, and a conclusion sentence that connects the analysis to the primary issue.

Gendered Oppression in Mai's Character

1. Marginalization

The first key characteristics of gendered oppression in the *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 areas lack societal contributions, struggle to secure employment, and have no access to services due to being ignored, also potentially escalating to extermination. In *Mai* (2024), marginalization is depicted in her society and the workplace. Marginalization in *Mai* starts when she chose to limiting herself from her new society. Her neighbors marginalized her because Mai chose to hide her social status from them. They start to have wild speculations about her life, such as what she did in life and how her background is.

Mai is getting bad treatments from her neighbor in every day, such as throwing a trash and letting their dog poop in front of her apartment, also accusing her for flirting with her neighbor's husband. All of these treatments are the caused of being marginalized from the society. As Young (1990) stated in her theory, if a marginalized individual/groups will experience unpleasant treatment after being selected as an object of marginalization.



Picture 1. Marginalization

Mai works as a massage therapist, since her first day she's called being a "gold hand" in her workplace. It just not because of her beauty looks but also comes from her massage skills. However, her coworker starts to hates her because they think if their clients being stolen by Mai. She's called being "sneaky" by the coworker that hates her. Mai's being assumed of offering some sexual service to the client, that's why makes her being client's favorites. The jealousy feelings from her coworkers made her being marginalized in the workplace.

Furthermore, the perpetrators of the marginalization of Mai's character are mostly shown through female characters in this film, such as Mai's neighbors and workmates mentioned in the analysis above. This is a powerful and tragic layer of gendered oppression, when women participate in the marginalization of other women, especially based on the patriarchal norms. Even Young's (1990) does not directly explain about women-to-women oppression, but her theory of internalized oppression help to explain this. This illustrates how traditional gender roles influence female communities, transforming them into enforcers rather than sources of solidarity.



Picture 2. Marginalization

2. Exploitation

As stated in Young's theory, prostitution represents a sort of exploitation, it may be one of the biggest kinds of exploitation of women in the world (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 acknowledgement, typically to the benefit of men" (Young, 48).

In the past, Mai depicted as the victims of human trafficking sold by her own father in *Mai* (2024). In this case, she was being exploited by her father to support the family economic. As the only daughter she had no power despite for sacrificing herself as being send to the prostitution. Her sexual exploitation is not just an act of abuse, it is 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 also being exploited for paying all his gambling debts continuously. Mai hoped her father wouldn't bother her anymore after she decided to live alone. However, her father still exploiting her as a daughter in a patriarchal structure, that as a daughter she must be loyal to her parents no matter what they do in her life.

In conclusion, all the exploitation experienced by Mai is consider as kind of oppression according to Young's theory. In this case, Mai felt she had no power to deny that she had to sacrifice herself for being exploited. Mai's powerlessness supported by the oppression from her father as the breadwinner in the family. Her father even said, "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" (He clarified to Mai why he sells her into prostitute) (01:50:21-01:51:00). As well as mentioned by Young (1990) in her theory, if in a patriarchal society, several women encounter powerlessness since they

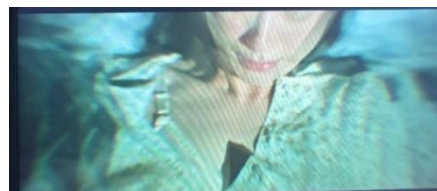
are seen to lose authority, while carrying significant responsibilities within the family or society (Young, 1990).



Picture 3. Exploitation

3. Violence

The sexual violence Mai's faced was due to her exploitation that described in the previous analysis. The example of sexual violence in Mai is supported by the evidence that puts her as the victims of human trafficking sold by her own father in the prostitution. In this case, Mai is affected by the powerlessness in her right as the only daughter in the poor family. She grew in the patriarchal environment that push her to obey with her parent whatever their condition is. In that condition, her father have no option to send her to the prostitution as long as it makes money for supporting their economic family. According to Young's (1990) theory this kind of oppression consider to the form of sexualized violence that is both deeply personal and structurally symbolic. While Mai's body is considered as expendable, and her pain is normalized inside a patriarchal system that exploits women.



Picture 4. Violence

Mai also experienced sexual harassment by men in her surroundings. She's always being an object of slut shaming because of her beauty appearances. This kind of oppression also coming from her job who is being stigmatized by the society. As a massage therapist, she's also being stigmatized for offering any sexual service for men. In some scene, Mai was described as being sexually abused by her neighbor's husband. The perpetrator knew Mai's occupation and considered her as a "whore" that can used by him. It aligned with Young's (1990) idea 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, decrease, or destroy the individual" (Young, 56). This is in line with Mai's daily life which is vulnerable to violence, both in verbal and sexual.

Mai's Form of Resistance

1. Pursuing Love

Through pursuing love with Duong, Mai ignores the social stigma that a widow likes her cannot have a new relationship and should remain in sorrow and alone. In Karupiah (2020) study, examines how widows decide on their options for the future is still tied to traditional societal norms. By choosing to fall in love with Duong, Mai rejects these stereotypes and reclaim her rights to pursue her agency which have been consistently denied to her due to gendered oppression. Mai's desire for love is subtle but directly confronts the patriarchal mindset that views widows as undesirable or shameful. Her quiet and persistent decision to embrace feelings, express desire, and imagine a life beyond grief is an important turn in her character's development from silent suffering to emotional freedom. Although Mai's romantic relationship always receives rejection from her boyfriend's family who adheres to the patriarchal system, Mai resists by ignoring them.

2. Breaking Toxic Family Ties

Mai's father depicted deep-rooted patriarchal systems that perpetuate bad habit through men in the society, such as gambling. Mai as a daughter in the family, get the impact of his addiction. As previously described in the research, her money consistently financed her father's gambling debts, perpetuating an endless cycle for that. Mai was frustrated since she had consistently been at a disadvantage this time. As the only daughter, she was obeyed to her father. No matter what he did through her life. Through Mai's character, it reveals that she can breaks the toxic family ties with her father as the form of her resistance through the oppression she got. In this decision, deep-rooted from Mai's past trauma which is insulted by her father. Mai's father is a gambling addict who is willing to do anything to fulfill his gambling needs. Rather than being a supportive father, he becomes another Mai's burden. Including selling Mai into prostitution and demanding Mai to pay off all his gambling debts. Mai had given her father second choices over and over again, but all the opportunities were wasted. Furthermore, the final plot shows Mai cutting her ties with her father as her final emotion.

3. Opening New Chapter of Life

In the film *Mai* (2024), economic independence becomes a crucial purpose of the main character's journey toward her resistance through the economic oppression. In *Mai* (2024), Mai depicted with the economic challenges during her everyday lives. In this context, economic marginalization can become a tool of gendered oppression, reinforcing the idea that women cannot survive alone without male provision. Rather than doing self-acceptance to this structure, Mai chooses to work and support herself as a massage therapist. By earning her own income, Mai challenges the patriarchal idea that women, especially widows, must be passive receivers of male protection. Her work helps her to reclaim control over her choices, including where to live and whom she loves, then transforming economic independence into a starting point 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 the analysis of Mai's character, this research proved that not all women who experience gender oppression will be silent and resigned to their situation, but they also have the potential to voice resistance like what the character Mai did in the movie *Mai* (2024).

CONCLUSION

Historically, women have consistently faced inequity under a patriarchal society. The study showed that the main character of the film *Mai* (2024), which is Mai herself, depicted how she resists gendered oppression as a woman in a patriarchal norm. The film reflects the reality of women who are often objected to the social stigma, gendered moral judgment, and surveillance. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's Five Face of Oppression is use to help in understanding the oppression that occurs in Mai and how the oppression leads to her resistance strategies. Additionally, there are several reasons attributed to Mai resistance strategies she has experienced. There are three kinds of oppression found in Mai's both past experiences or her daily life, which is marginalization, exploitation, and violence both in verbal or sexual assault.

Furthermore, to overcome the gendered oppression that occurs to her daily life, she does not passively accept all of this oppression. Through the analysis of oppression by using Young (1990) theory, gives her an impact to took the action of resistance. Mai resistance strategy is reflected on the way she shows her desire to have a new romantic relationship with Duong during her widowhood phase. Similarly, it also shown in the way she breaks the toxic relationship with his father, also opening new chapter in life by pursuing her dream as an independent woman.

Limitations and future direction

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledge. First, the analysis only focused on the film *Mai* (2024) as a single case study. As a result, the findings may not be applicable to other film or larger cultural settings, as each cinematic text has its own distinct representations and narratives. Second, while using Young's idea of the five faces of oppression, the research only identifies three dimensions: marginalization, exploitation, and violence, ignoring powerlessness and cultural imperialism. This limitation restricts the theoretical scope and might disguise other important aspects of gender oppression in the film. Third, the study depends only on qualitative interpretation, which is

useful for identifying meanings and representations. However, it may be subjective and influenced by the researcher's perspective. Finally, this study focuses solely on Mai's resistance as an individual character, rather than investigating larger societal, cultural, or audience-based responses, which might give a more complete understanding of how gender oppression and resistance are formed and perceived.

To expand on the topic of "Gendered Oppression in the Film Mai (2024)" it is advised to examine more into the intersection of Iris Marion Young's (1990) five faces of oppression theory. Young's book "Justice and the Politics of Difference" (1990) describes and explores systemic oppression, including the role of gender in this process. Young defines gender oppression as the systemic oppression of women caused by societal roles, cultural identities, and patriarchal power systems. Help to provide a thorough examination of women's oppression. This might include looking into themes that influence how people read and understand writings on oppression. It may also help us understand how oppression influences the development of literary narratives and perspectives.

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Declarations

The author states that this study is the result of her personal work and has not been submitted for a degree or published elsewhere. The author is fully responsible for all elements of the research, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. All data and resources used in this research are made available upon reasonable request. The author affirms that there is no conflict of interest regarding the study and its publication.

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