Charlie Kaufman. I'm Thinking of Ending Things (Her Şeyi Bitirmeyi Düşünüyorum). 2020, USA.

A Feminist Critique of "I'm Thinking of Ending Things": A Trapped Young Woman in the Dream of a Man[1]

Written and directed by Charlie Kaufman, *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* recently met with viewers of Netflix and brought the controversy. The film is in the focus of criticism as well as the likes, praise, and applause. The film is an adaptation from the Canadian writer Iain Reid's bestselling namesake novel. Neither the book nor the film is not intended to be a feminist study, although it argues to show the existential crisis and the inner-voices of a young woman character. Instead, this piece reflects the subjective interpretations of dreams, memories, and a man's life, Jake.

What makes this piece a subject of feminist critique is the promised story of the movie and the starting point of the movie. This movie promises the audience to hear the voice of a young woman going through an existential crisis, making her wonder about her story.The first scene of the movie starts with a young woman and her inner voice:

> ***Young woman:*** *[narrating] I'm thinking of ending things. Once this thought arrives, it stays. It sticks, it lingers, it dominates. There's not much I can do about it, trust me. It doesn't go away. It's there whether I like it or not. It's there when I eat, when I go to bed. It's there when I sleep. It's there when I wake up. It's always there. Always.*

Scene 1: A Young Woman Character Who Did Not Fail to Serve Him and His Family

The movie argues to tell a story about "full of misgivings, a young woman travels with her new boyfriend to his parents' secluded farm. Upon arriving, she comes to question everything she thought she knew about him, and herself" (IMDB, 2020). The audience hopes to hear and watch her as the movie promises this from the beginning. However, the movie tells the suffocating story of an uncle, named Jake.

During the movie, the audience suddenly faces the story of Jake, who has not realized his potential, which has seen maybe several million times. Jake's girlfriend, the multi-named/anonymous trapped young woman in his story, is a woman of all kinds, from a physicist (male-dominated branch as Jake's family argued) who did not fail to serve him and his family during the visit to Jake's childhood home she wanted to leave seen in *Scene 1*, to a dumb waitress who admires Jake's skill in Trivial Pursuit[2].

During the movie, as the identity of this young woman is trivialized and wondering about her becomes irrelevant, our reason for entering the film becomes meaningless and we begin to watch not what we want to watch, an existential crisis of a young woman and her voice, but what the director, Kaufman pushes to our throats.

Scene 2: A male character, Jake in front of a young woman

As *Scene 2*'s view shows, although the movie promised the thoughts and story of female subject, the focus turns into Jake seen over/in front of a young woman. Just as Jake deceives the trapped woman with promises to return home, Kaufman captivates his imaginary audience in a story in which he produces apologies to failed manhood, and invites introverted men with anger issues to understand and pity them. It is not enough; still, we are expected to forget this woman that Jake both had a nightmare and shared his nightmare

with her, and we are expected to ignore her feelings because she was a fantasy of Jake. However, this woman is a woman who thinks she wants to leave Jake at every opportunity, dreams of getting out of this captivity in which Jake did not let her go during the movie. Still, every time she thinks about leaving Jake,*"what do you think?"* question comes to us from Jake in the scenes.

Here, we close our eyes to the whole of the abduction, and take his attitude as good intentions that this poor woman suffers, and we continue to follow Jake's story in good faith. Of course, Jake's incompetence, loneliness, and anger are billed on his mother (another woman damaging his life).

Scene 3 (Dance Scene): during the movie, she continuously wants to leave him, but she is trapped in his dream and desires, symbolized by dance scene

The movie seems to start with hearing the voices of a woman and understanding her thoughts, but it deceives the audience although its name comes from the *thought of her "I'm thinking* of ending things". The movie not only deceives us, but also makes this young woman silenced, manipulated and trapped within a man's dream. It also makes her the object of Jake's desires and psychological trauma, which transforms the movie a psychological thriller for our female character. This trauma is shown the dance *by force* seen in *Scene 3*. This dance also transforms from forced ones to the romantic ones within the movie's dance scene, in which Kaufman again makes the audience sense Jake's miserable position.

Towards the end of the movie, there is a non-existent young woman who proudly applauded him in the audience as Jake grabbed his dream Nobel Prize, although she was depicted as everything Jake could not be (good painter, poet, physicist, critic...). One of the images of a young woman in the movie is a good physicist, which is male-dominated branch as Jake's family said, and is a good painter as Jake's family did not understand her pieces; however, the Nobel Prize

goes to Jake. Still, his most dedicated supporter is this young woman in which the movie shows her between the audiences in the event of the Nobel Prize. The part of the movie, which depicts Jake as a successful male scientist taking Nobel Prize, is intentional and shows male bias in art.

This part of the movie needs feminist critics from the point of Sandra Harding's *the Science Question in Feminism*. Harding argues our contemporary social theory reveals the Western masculine desires. According to Harding, there is an androcentric bias in (social) sciences (our critic adds art to this analysis) in which masculine identity favors rational thinking over feelings, the abstract over the concrete, and the separation of the subject from what is observed, the domination of the subject over the object, and objectivity over subjectivity (Harding, 1986: 229).

Harding's point helps us realize the effort of the movie, which tries to separate the subject from the story. Instead, the film puts the male subject over the inner-voices of a young woman subject. As the scientists framed the conceptual structure of science to fit the understandings and needs of masculine identity, which reflects the male ego in society (Harding, 1986), the movie intentionally pushes the audience to ignore a young woman's status and identity, which is even non-exist. When a young woman character seems to threaten the sense of masculine identity, the movie turns our attention towards the desire of men to achieve dominance over women. For Harding, gender metaphors are key indicators of the androcentric bias in science (1986), so the movie reflects androcentric bias in art/cinema.

The movie depicts a young woman successful physicist, painter, poet, and an intellectual university student, but the audience realized that this image is Jake in fact. That is, these titles belong to Jake while a young woman suddenly turns into a waitress, who admires a successful boyfriend good at Trivia and even taking a Nobel Prize at the end of the movie. This trapped young woman has to applaud him as she has no option in his circle, making the movie thriller for her. That is, this attitude of Kaufman, changing the story in the middle of the movie, reveals how gender metaphors, and gender roles are constructed within societies and how people/audiences are bounded/pushed to be bounded by these norms, and the images colored by male bias in cinema. Kaufman clearly asks the audience for showing sympathy for Jake's psychological manipulation and anger towards her.

Kaufman shows this attitude on his former movie, *the Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind*. In his famous movie, he asked us to sympathize with a scientist man who was trying to erase the memory of the woman from a relationship with a young employee who may be his daughter (IMDB,2004). Women's voices, selves, and bodies are silenced in androcentric bias. As Harding focuses, the manner in which art is used, and their social/political effects, will become more important than abstract conceptions of knowledge for its own sake or just for watching any movie for the audience. Thus, this feminist critic of *I'm Thinking of Ending Thing*s argues the movie isolates the audience from what is expected/promised; woman subject's story. The audience wants to hear

woman subject and want to understand woman's subjectivity as promised; however, the male bias in the movie change our way to understand the toxic desire of a poor man. To eliminate the male bias in art/cinema, we need more woman directors and movie producers having a feminist perspective. The art will benefit from the unique experiences and understandings that women bring to the presentation of the problem as well as the depiction of woman subject, and women's life in general.

The movie's attitude to a young woman character refers to debates about the persistence of gender inequalities, and ongoing patriarchal structures where women have either no or minimal voice over their lives and their role within society. The movie makes a more radical point; that is, during the continuation of the movie, the audience even realizes this young woman does not exist at all. The movie promises the audience to hear a young woman's story and inner-voice; however, the style of Kaufman changes the perception of audience and make them understand toxic masculinity practices and mindset in which Jake ignores, suppress her request for returning home and manipulate her even she served him and his family in an expected manner. Still, the movie asks the audience to pity Jake, and his unrealized potential during the his toxic masculinity story.

Art can produce a broad impact, making women subject, and women's experience visible. Art can help make women's untold stories heard, challenge patriarchy, and overcome the male bias that prescribes the norms for how women and men should behave, think, and talk. Alternately, media representations from feminist perspectives may have the power to further engender toxic masculinity, androcentric bias within the practices that suppress not only women but general gender diversity. On this scope, the movie did the very opposite. That is, it shows us the reverse corner, pushing us to hear toxic masculinity, and to understand a man with an anger problem and pity them.

The movie's genre is given as both drama and thriller (IMDB, 2020). This is crucial to evaluate the movie from a feminist perspective in which this movie is a psychological thriller for a young woman character which is non-exist, a fantasy of Jake. At the same time, it is given as a drama for a male character, Jake, who is the real owner of the story. Towards the end of the movie, a young woman is clearly depicted as trapped in the dream of Jake. As the movie started with woman's voices and then it makes her silenced, it continues by asking the audiences for more understanding and commitment on Jake's toxic masculinity. With Jake's dream about his different mothers and his different girlfriends as different images of the same woman character, we can see that Kaufman makes us understand Jake's sorrow story and his fragile manhood. Although Kaufman makes a young woman character speak in this manner,

> **Young woman:** *That's misogynistic claptrap! Freudian bullshit! A person, an adult, has to, at one point or another, take responsibility for who they are.*

The movie does not recommend the same manner (*take responsibility for who they are*) for a male character, Jake, whose sorrow comes from the any kind of women. It is a reflection from the heart of the male bias seen in Kaufman's movie and within our societies.

Notes

[1] Producer: Netflix; Release: 4 September 2020 (USA); Duration: 2h 14 min; Director and Scenario:Charlie Kauman, Book: Ian Reid; Genres: Drama, Horror, Thriller.

[2] Trivial Pursuit is a board game in which winning is determined by a player's ability to answer general knowledge and popular culture questions.

References

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