

Political Struggles in the Suffragette (2015)

การต่อสู้ทางการเมืองในภาพยนตร์เรื่อง The Suffragette (2015)

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Abstract

The objectives of this article are twofold. First of all, it aims to illustrate the development of the political struggles in the Film called “The suffragette” by comparing the visual representation with the historical facts recorded in British History. Secondly, the article shows how ideologies have been constructed to convey the message to the audience. In this part, 5 major scenes were selected for the analysis. The study has shown that, (1) the narrative technique used for story-telling was done by traditional linear timeline which facilitated the audiences to follow the sequences easily. However, the film dramatizes the historical events by adding characters, and foregrounding the breaking-points of women movement such as the shift of tactics to violence and the motivations which encouraged them to take those actions, (2) albeit its attempts to depict the women struggle the right to vote, the film failed to render its promises. It also connotes that the suffragette movement was predominately led by Upper and Middle class women, (3) working-class women who are the main subject of the movement were shadowed. Their roles were merely reduced to helpers or followers.

Keywords: British film, women right, right to vote, British politics

บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้มีจุดประสงค์สองประการด้วยกันคือ (1) เพื่อศึกษาพัฒนาการ (development) ของการต่อสู้ทางการเมืองเพื่อให้ได้มาถึงสิทธิในการเลือกตั้งของสตรีในประเทศอังกฤษจากภาพยนตร์เรื่อง The suffragette โดยศึกษาภาพตัวแทนที่ปรากฏในภาพยนตร์ และเปรียบเทียบกับข้อเท็จจริงทางประวัติศาสตร์ในประเทศอังกฤษ และ (2) เพื่อศึกษาอุดมการณ์ (ideology) ใน 5 ฉากสำคัญของภาพยนตร์ (การโหมหินทำลายร้านค้า การให้สัตยาบัน การเลิกทำงานในโรงซักผ้า เวตต์เดินร่ากลางสายฝนในขณะที่ถูกขायอยู่ในบ้าน การตายของอมิเลียในสนามแข่งม้า) ว่าถูกประกอบสร้างขึ้นอย่างไร โดยผลการศึกษาจาก ทำฉากสำคัญในภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้ พบว่า (1) ภาพยนตร์มีการดำเนินเรื่องตามกรอบเวลาที่เป็นเส้นตรง แต่ได้ดัดแปลงเหตุการณ์และเพิ่มตัวละครลงไป นอกจากนี้ยังมีการขบขันเหตุการณ์สำคัญๆ ในขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวเพื่อเรียกร้องสิทธิสตรี เช่น การเปลี่ยนแปลงยุทธศาสตร์และแรงผลักดันในการมาใช้ความรุนแรงในการเคลื่อนไหว (2) แม้จะมีการพยายามบอกเล่าความยากลำบากในการได้มาถึงสิทธิในการเลือกตั้ง ภาพยนตร์ก็ยังไม่สามารถโน้มน้าวผู้ชมให้คล้อยตามอุดมการณ์หลักที่ได้วางไว้ เพราะแกนนำในการเคลื่อนไหวการเรียกร้องการต่อสู้ดังกล่าวเป็นสตรีที่อยู่ในชนชั้นสูงและชนชั้นกลาง (3) สตรีที่อยู่ในชนชั้นแรงงานจึงไม่มีบทบาทเด่น โดยบทบาทของสตรี

ชนชั้นแรงงานนั้นถูกลดทอนลงเป็นเพียงผู้ช่วยและผู้ติดตามในขบวนการต่อสู้เท่านั้น

คำสำคัญ: ภาพยนตร์อังกฤษ, สิทธิสตรี, สิทธิในการออกเสียงเลือกตั้ง, การเมืองอังกฤษ



Introduction

Not everybody in this planet enjoys the right to vote. From 166 countries in the world, only 24 countries have full democracy (eiu.com, 2016). With fewer sanctions from the international community, many countries were dragged back to flawed democracy, hybrid and dictatorial regimes. Film is one of the culture medium which portrays such a struggle. As quoted in “Best of British: cinema and society from 1930 to present” Aldgate and Richard suggested that popular film may serve as the vehicle by which a community expresses its beliefs about what is right or wrong, and it may be used as an instrument as a medium to repeat preferred behaviors to the society (1999, p. 3).

In this recent decade, there are many movies showing the aspects of democratic movements. To name a few, Iron Jawed Engels (2004), The Lady (2011). The British film called The Suffragette is one of the visualized attempts to represent Political struggles during transition period for the better coverage of women right in the United Kingdom in early 20th century. To look at this film from both class and gender dimensions, we can understand the underlined discourse which is beyond what the movie aims to convey.

The Suffragette is a film directed by Sarah Gavron (2015), a British director. The screenwriter of this film is Abi Morgan. The film is partially funded by Film 4 Productions and the British Film

institute (BFI). In the UK, this film was released on October 12th 2015, and it was shown in the cinema until February 25th 2016 (suffragettemovie.com, 2016). The main actresses of the movie are Carey Mulligan (as Maud Watts), Meryl Streep (as Emmeline Pankhurst), Anne Marie Duff (as Violet Miller), and Natalie Press (as Emily Davison).

Political struggles represented in The suffragette

The suffragette movement marked the outstanding page in the British History. In Britain, it is not until around 1850-1860s that an organized feminist movement took shape (Pugh, 1994, p.5). Therefore, it took at least half the century for the anger of the suffragette foot-soldiers to reach its peak. In British Genres: Cinema and society, 1930-1960, Marcia Lancy asserted that “The characters and the social conflicts were solved through a populist benefactor or through the efforts of an exceptional individual who overcame economic and social constraints in the interest of the community (1991, p. 433).” The main theme of this movie is political inequality between men and women. Men obstructed women’s right to vote lest they cannot maintain their superior status quo in political arena with the pretext to maintain the social order.

The setting of the movie was set in 1912. However, the movie was produced by present-time dominant ideology. At the end of the

movie, the movie shows the running ending text giving the list of the country will allow women to vote in the chronological order. It is unclear whether the film has a pro-liberal or pro-labor standpoint. Supposing that the movie is pro-labor, the initiation should be started by the members of the working-class themselves, not by the inspiration of the upper-class lady. This phenomenon can be explained further by Anne-Marie Motard's observation on the origin of the Labour party. In *Le parti travailliste britannique, des origines au XX^e siècle: La continuité sous le changement*, Motard used statics in her analysis to consolidate her argument that during 1900-1940, the British labour was, little by little, form its identity in the British political scene. Still, it did not gain tremendous popularity until after the First World War. By 1910, The labour party gained only 40 seats which is only 7.1% of the total seat in the parliament (Motard, 2009, p. 35).

As the film's objective is mainly to entertain the audience, it does not try to narrate the historical events. Therefore, the purpose of this article are not the verification on how realistic the film is. Supporting historical evidences on the suffragette movement, of course, were discussed along to give clearer picture of the British society in the given period. Instead, it will observe how the film constructs visual images and analyze its messages to the audiences. Firstly, it will explore the synopsis of the story to provide some background to readers who might have not seen this movie yet. After that, it will move on to the scenes analysis as the main subject of the film study is visualized image.

Etymologically speaking, Suffrage has its origin from FRACTION. As quoted in *Origin: A short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, Suffrage

has its origin from medieval Latin which means support. When converting this word to supporter, it becomes Suffragium. Before the women's right to vote in 1928, there were many political movements. Monica Charlot summarized the condition of the women who can vote according;

Pour avoir le droit de vote les femmes devaient donc avoir trente ans au moins, avoir déjà le droit de voter aux élections locales ou, ce qui était nouveau être diplômé des universités ou encore être mariées à un électeur disposant du droit de vote aux élections locales (Charlot, 1996, p. 88)

As shown in the introduction of the movie, the first scene on the screen depicted that the early state of demonstrations organized by women in the United Kingdom was quite peaceful. However, the women have faced the harsh struggle before acquiring the status of full-fledged democratic country. Amid the period when women were demanding the right to vote in 1912, Maud Watts, a head of laundress witnessed various events of the suffragette movements on the street. The very first occasion was when she delivered the laundry package to one of the infant accessories stores located in the West End Street. As she fell down, she noticed that her colleague (Violet Miller) was smashing windows and smiling back to her. Watts was shocked that her colleague was one of suffragette militants. Frightened, Watts escaped the scene, and came back to her husband. The following day, she found her employer molesting the young laundress in the supply room. Hurt by her employer's verbal harassment that the young girl's age is reminiscent of hers, Watts followed Miller to hear Miller's testimony at the parliament. Miller was asked by Mrs. Alice Haughton, the MP's wife. Unfortunately, she

arrived at the parliament with the wounds on her face. Mrs. Haughton had to ask Maud to read the written testimony on behalf of Miller. Optimistically, Maud thought that her testimony would enable women to the enfranchisement in the political system, therefore; she gathered with other women hoping that they would receive positive responses from the authorities.

However, the government belittled their testimonies as a weak evidence to change the bill so that their demands were rejected. Watts shouted “Liar” along with other women. Then, the police started to hit them, and they were arrested. Even Mrs. Haughton cannot bail them out. Watts was eventually imprisoned for 1 week, and she met Emily Davison, a member of Women Social and Political Union (WSPU) who knows Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst very well inside the prison.

Upon her return to work and family, Watts has promised to Sonny, her husband not to participate the suffragettes’ activities anymore. Watts came in secret to listen to Mrs. Pankhurst’s speech. During the speech, Mrs. Pankhurst eloquently said that “We do not want to be a lawbreakers. We want to be a lawmakers”. Her emphasis on deeds, not words echoed in her violent tactics. Before escaping the police by fooling them with several ladies wearing the similar clothes to appear like herself, Pankhurst told Maud in person to never surrender and never give up the fight. The police changed strategy by not arresting the women on this occasion. Instead, they sent the women back to their husbands. Sonny put her belongings on the door and did not allow her to come into the house. Maud was fired after her picture, as a suffragette, was shown in the newspaper. Before leaving, she took the iron machine to burn

her boss’s hand. After that, she was retained by Inspector Steed who later let her go with the hope that Maud would spy on other women activists in exchange of her freedom.

Maud secretly went to see her son at the playground but her husband has forbidden her to see the boy again. He mentioned that according to the law, George, their son is exclusively belongs to him. This fueled Maud to participate fully with the suffragette group so that the right to see her son is granted. On George’s birthday, in front of Maud’s eyes, his son was taken away for adoption. Maud, after that, had committed serial incidents including bombing the mailboxes, burning the empty seasonal house of the minister. During her imprisonment, Maud along with numerous comrades have undergone the hunger strike. To keep the prisoners alive, the force-fed methods were used. Terrified by such a cruel methods, Steed warned the Parliament that if a member the suffragette militants died, the women movement will achieve its goal of having a martyr. Consequently, it would bring more women to join the movement.

Eventually, Maud was freed again. In order to gain global and royal’s attention, Maud and Emily went the Derby’s horse racing to show their banners in front of the Media. Despite the successful sneak into the event, they were barricaded to give the letter to King George V. All alone, Emily jumped into the racing track, and was killed by the horse. The figures of Emily was photographed and shown in the newspaper. Thousands of people march on the street for Emily’s funeral procession.

To demonstrate the development of plot, there are at least 5 scenes extracted from this movie which is worth for discussion.

Scene 1: Smashing infant accessories stores: The departure of the domesticated terrain

The first scene is the manifestation of suffragette's cause; demanding the right to vote for women. Location selection to operate their "militant" actions at the infant accessories store to disrupt the normalcy of the patriarchal society was not coincident. In Greek language, Stone (pséphos) is synonymous to the word "vote". The use of stones as the weapons should not be naively perceived as a weapon which can be easily obtained. In Ancient Athens, voters received 2 pebbles or stones (White and Black) to exercise their rights during the election, the white stone was used to approve whereas the black stone was used to condemn the proposition. Therefore, the act of throwing stones is symbolic. Before the stores were damaged. Maud has come to appreciate the beauty of embroider and the mother models without realizing the underlined domestication connotation hidden in such accessories. The infant accessories and the rocks the suffragette militants have hidden inside the baby trolleys as a weapon also symbolize the motherhood's responsibility, and fixed assigned roles to women. The showroom looks like a cage where women cannot just walk away. To break the showroom is open the boundary for women to gain access to Public sphere. The rocks which have been kept inside the trolley is not only functioned to vent their discontentment, it means also to unload women's domestic responsibilities. Rushing to escape the scene, she witnessed the debris of embroider and the mother models inside the showroom which caused a moral conflict in her mind.

Scene 2: Giving Testimony: Putting a fighter on trial

Giving the testimony right after the aftermath of the window-smashing incident, one can easily predict the slim chance to win the cause. However, when we look at the historical context, year 1912, according to R.H. Tawney, was the peak period of citizens dissatisfaction for the British people towards their existing social order (Cannadine, 1998, p. 107). In short, the transition of the first scene to this scene is the political attempt to demolish of the private/domestic sphere. In preventing such a chance, the Men side employed discursive practices such as the use of accusation terms such as "Anarchist", "radicalized", "Agitate" to discredit the women aforementioned movements.

Twenty-four-year-old Maud did not plan to testify in this process. Her original plan was to witness the event with the hope that the Bill might bring some change to her life. This scene, the audience can see the transparent comparison between Mrs. Haughton from her outfits and that of Violet and Maud. Maud came to the event without having make-up on her face. Her hairs were not brushed. It reflected that among the women themselves, there are class-differences. This circumstance posts the question why there is no class conflicts among women? One might wonders if women from different class, at least from this constructed cultural artifact, aim to fight with the common enemy first, or they simply overlook the differences. Pierre Sorlin claims in the article entitle *From The third man to the Shakespeare in love: Fifty years of British success on Continental screens* that in order to maintain its glamor of Britishness, British films tend to retain the accurate depiction of a sharply class-divided

society in which the gentry completely dominates the public sphere, while ordinary people focus more on improving their welfare rather than changing such a social condition of the country (Ashby & Higson, 2000, p. 89). From this quote, it can be interpreted that the attempt of the MP's wife was to prevent wider social and economic gap which can lead unpredictable severe class uprising.

At first, she was asked to read her colleague's testimony which is actually prepared by Mrs. Haughton. At the time of the testimony, Maud was not allowed to read Violet's statement. David Lloyd George asked if she had something to say. She said she does not know what to talk about, and she never thought of having a right to vote. However, David Lloyd George has asked her about her life, and why she came to listen the testimony. Maud's story itself was a vivid testimony. It is an impromptu spoken statement which is not elaborately prepared by upper-class Feminist. Maud has told the committee that she was born in that Glasshouse laundry. She does not have a father, and she does not know who her father is. She had only her mother who died from the accident at work when she was four. When her mother was alive, she was attached to sleep on her mother's back while her mother was working. She started working part-time when she was seven, and became full-time staff when she was twelve. She became the head of the laundress when she was seven, and now she is twenty-four. One of the committees commented that she reached the supervisor level at a very young age. She responded that the work of laundress has a short life. One of her ladies get poisoned from vapors and her lung was totally ruined from the cancer. She said she came to hear the testimony

as she thought if the bill passes, there might be another life to live in this life.

From the testimony, she did not accuse anyone or complain that her pay was too low. But she has given the face that women receive lower pay compared to men. She simply compare the shorter working of hours of men can prolong their lifespan, and they have less chance to develop the sickness because Men have more time to get fresh air outside. Maud's statement seems to give facts, not opinion.

Dr. Michelle Smith (2016), an Alfred Deakin post-Doctoral research fellow at Deakin University has mentioned in the on-line article entitled "suffragette Remind Us Why It's Lie That Feminist need Men's Approval" that "The idea that Feminism needs to be appealing to men and that men should be central to its progress are anti-feminist idea in themselves. From this statement, it can be implied that the women movement should not seek the approval from men. This scene is actually the transition from peaceful protest to more violent tactics.

Scene 3: Leaving the laundry: The apostasy to male domination

Putting the burning iron machine on Mr. Tailor's hand is the first act of resistance Maud fought back to the abuse she has been endured. The anger Maud has for Tailor was dormant for years. It was evoked by Tailor's recent molest to Maggie, the young worker. The narration of the story hints that Maud herself was previously sexually harassed from her supervisor for years. Leaving the laundry scene reflects the first-hand of the women oppression .It seems that Maud does not want to witness more victims from this exploitation. When Maud was back at work, Mr.

Tailors eyed on the young girl and said to her that he has found someone who is willing to work for extra hours. After that, he has shown her the news on the newspaper. Mr. Tailors touched Maud from the back while saying that he would tell everybody what he has done to her.

The glasshouse laundry's function, designed by concept of the Panopticon, is the prison where every workers are closely inspected. The period which The Suffragette took place was early 20th century. The surveillance of the civilian was already there. The police has secret captured the photo of the suffragette members. Although Maud did not participate with the Suffragette yet at the beginning, the police mistaken her as one of the militant after they captured the picture of Maud when she went to buy the medication for her son when the chemist who runs that drugstore.

The Panopticon structure gives the total power to the person who can see the behaviors of the people under his control. The nature of the laundry works which Maud has to perform is iron the linen to make it smooth. Iron machine is placed as a sign for social apparatus to maintain the social order. In reality, there is exploitation behind the surface of smoothness.

Scene 4: Watts was dancing in the rain when her son was inside in the house: Struggling in the Darkness

From the previous scene, the territory which Maud was familiar with was home and the glasshouse laundry. Leaving alone without career or family brought tremendous degree of solitude to Maud. The darkness and the wetness of the rains are the sign of such an isolation. When Sonny, her husband, was away. Maud came to George,

her only son. George was looking at Maud from inside the warm and lighted house. By contrast, Maud is dancing in the dark and perhaps it might cold outside as well. Before the exclusion from her employer and husband, Maud was a working wife and also a mother. Maud was bitterly forced to leave work, rejected from her husband. But she did not accept when her role as a mother was denied. The dance and the smile on her face cheered up her son's spirit. Obviously, Maud embraces her motherly roles and responsibility of child-raising. Forbidden from seeing her child, in this case, was the symbol of the domestic violence. Rain signifies the incurring problem. However, Maud tried to be brave in front of her son. By law at that period of time, if divorced, a woman was not allowed to see her own child. She contemplated within her inner self that if the law does not allow her to see her child, she will fight to change the law as taking her child away is the last straw for Maud.

Scene 5: The death of Emily at the house racing: When the penetratee penetrates

Emily Wilding Davison is the real historical figures in Suffragette movement. From 1900 until 1906, Davison was a governess in Berkshire. She obtained the first-class degree from Oxford (Crawford, 1999, p. 159).

"We burn things because war is the only language men listen to" Maud proclaimed this statement during her second arrest. This statement leads to the primary dilemma of the movie that "Does the film legitimize the violence?" as it valorizes the sacrifice of the death Emily. From the early stage of the story, there are serial of violence committed by the women-smashing window, burning letter, bombing the house which did not attempt the human casualties.

Eventually, the movie foreground death as a sacrifice. From the historical evidences, there was a consensus that Emily Davison did not plan to die for her cause but she accepted her risk from her actions. There was no scene showing that Mrs. Pankhurst was re-arrested on her way to Davison's funeral (Crawford, 1999, p. 162). Another point to be considered is the question of where the funding for the advocacy came from. The film portrayed that Maud was living in the church while engaging with the suffragette militancy. But the film failed to mention how she could survive during those years.

There are two cultural signs to be considered. First sign is the House racing where the upper-class gather for sport. The latter is the King who holds the highest position in the British society. Crossing the threshold to this event, Maud and Emily have to dress up so that they can blend it with people from higher class. Maud intentionally trespassed into this space to make her cause heard. But it was not as stronger as the intention of Emily. The movie intend to stagnate Maud's role to be just a witness in this last scene. The audiences can see that Maud was running after Emily who is actually ahead of her. The film-noir showing the funeral procession, put in the movie, is taken from the March in

1913. Emily's death is the rebirth to the stronger movement. The use of soft lighting in the morning gave the feeling of the beginning.

To conclude, the movie does, at least, attempted to show how difficult for women to gain the right to vote. In the first scene, it was an attempt of the women to get access to the public sphere. In order to do that, they have to break into it. For the second scene, it was the depiction of how women have been endured. The third scene summarized the rejection of the status quo of the male dominance society while the forth scene delineated maternal aspects of women in early 19th century. The last scene which is the death of Emily was actually the renewal of the feminism. Her death was a rebirth symbolically. In short, the movie dramatizes the historical events by adding characters, and foregrounding the breaking-points of women movement such as the shift of tactics to violence and the motivations which encouraged those actions. The story-telling was done by traditional linear timeline. However, it still connotes that the suffragette movement was predominately led by Upper and Middle class women. Working-class women were shadowed. Their roles were merely reduced to helpers or followers.



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