

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter combines two major parts of findings and discussion. The results of the investigation are concluded and discussed in connection with the research questions.

#### 4.1 Findings

The first research question aims to find out if this film portrays the notions of female liberation or oppression. In *Chicago* (2002), the notions of female liberation and oppression exist. However, the two notions are portrayed at different levels. At a superficial level, the liberation of the female characters is obvious while the opposite image, which is the oppression, lurks in the film at a deeper level.

To answer the second question, it has been found that liberation and oppression of women are constructed through several literal and visual mechanisms.

For liberation, female characters achieve it in a basic sense through both verbal and visual techniques. Verbally, plot, lyrics and monologues are used as practical tools to portray women's liberation. Following the development of the protagonist through plot, we are allowed to witness Roxie's life from rags to riches. After going through a series of struggle, the story shows that her desires finally come true. The lyrics also help indicate liberation achievements for the female principals. For

example, the existence of the sexual liberation for women in the Roaring Twenties is introduced through the first musical number “And All That Jazz”. Then, the last song “Nowadays”, which also emphasizes such sexuality, is sung in the end with a reprise. In addition, once the women have voices to assert their inner feelings through monologues, they seem to be liberated. For instance, the six murderesses are given voices to express their self-determinations and to reveal their reasons to justify their murders individually in the “Cell Block Tango”. Visually, the use of signs makes the film viewer realize the liberation of those women at first glance. For example, in the tango scene, power of the six criminals is signified through their aggressive choreographies and low camera angles. And, in order to finish the film with a happy ending, Roxie and Velma are portrayed in white flappers performing together on a bright stage with red flowers, camera flashes, and cheering audience. Such visual signs connote those women’s liberation and success in their fames.

However, the oppression of women can be detected in deeper verbal and optical senses. In a verbal sense, some skeptical points, which can be taken as the oppression, are examined through the film story, lyrics, and dialogues. Based on the film story, the success of the women always comes with ironic remarks. Their fame achievement is an outstanding example. In order to achieve fame, Roxie and Velma prove themselves to tabloid stardoms as murderesses. This makes them become instant celebrities and rivals for the public spotlight. Moreover, it is interesting that the lyrics also imply female oppression. In a satirical way, there are songs that encourage the film viewers to recognize a sense of manipulation and ridicule. For instance, the protagonist is manipulated by Billy in the number “We Both Reach for the Gun” since

her voice is taken by him. Velma also expresses her loss of self-reliance in “I Can’t Do it Alone”. Besides, through the dialogues, oppression can readily be sensed. Female inferiority is perceived during formal talks such as the protagonist’s press conference and her own defense during the trial. Here, the protagonist is forced to portray herself as a woman who is under males’ control. In a visual sense, the female principals are also oppressed through the uses of expressionism, spaces, and the “gaze”. Regarding the expressionistic cinematography, distortion and exaggeration of normal perception are applied to reveal the inner reality of the female characters with irony. The emphases on chiaroscuro and several oblique-low angles create monstrous distorted figures of powerful women such as Mama Morton and the inmates. In addition, surrealistic settings deliberately change the verbal liberation into the opposite or emphasize the literal oppression. For example, the expressionistic musical scene “Funny Honey” illustrates Amos’s influence on Roxie with her smaller body than his even if she introduces herself through the song as a woman who can manipulate her husband. And, in line with the lyrics, the distorted courtroom in “Razzle Dazzle” also reveals a sense of injustice. The use of symbolic signs is primary in portraying the oppression as well. For instance, mirrors are a significant prop portraying Roxie’s stardom achievement as an illusion. For the other visual mechanisms, the restricted space conveys the oppressive atmosphere for the women in both fantasy and reality scenes. Throughout the film, those women are given spaces either on stage or in jail or in trial. Furthermore, the women are presented as the “male gaze”; they are oppressed as sexual objects. Secretly watched and enjoyed by the double audiences, the females are visually fixed to be sexually exploited.

In regard to the final research question, *Chicago* (2002) is constructed under patriarchal ideology. The film reflects a world in which women lived in the masculine shadow and presents female subordination and oppression in the predominately patriarchal film world.

## 4.2 Discussion

Before the musical *Chicago* (2002) goes from stage to screen, the story actually originates from real lives of two murderesses. During the roaring' 20s, Maurine Dallas Watkins, a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, turned the two murderesses, Belva Gaertner and Beulah May Annan, into celebrities. From her “feminine” perspective, Watkins spiced their stories up that make two inmates gained sympathy from the public and finally they were freed from jail. Though they were exonerated, they were exploited for the newspaper's rating in exchange for their freedom. Such historical event proves to be true that oppression of women existed in the Roaring Twenties. Afterwards, the freed murderesses become stage characters. A cabaret singer, Belva Gaertner, who said she was too drunk to remember what had happened when her husband was shot to death in her car with her gun, is the inspiration for Velma Kelly. Died in a sanatorium, Beulah May Anna, who shot her lover to death but claimed that they had both reached for the gun and she had killed him in self-defense, is the real Roxie Hart. The tale of the murderesses was transmuted into several stage satires. Finally, the director, Rob Marshall and the screenwriter, Bill Gordon agreed to adapt the vaudeville of Bob Fosse's stage play to the film version of *Chicago* (2002) through Roxie's distorted point of view. As Gordon (2002)

mentioned, “Our answer was to make the musical world of the film live in Roxie’s imagination. Roxie is someone who’s obsessed with being the stage - being noticed. She has an overly active fantasy life, and when things get too unpleasant, she projects herself out of reality and re-imagines the experience as a vaudeville number. (16)” In other words, the absurd musical numbers seen through Roxie’s eyes represent her escape from the tragic reality. Thus, at another level of interpretation, the female oppression in this film version is also perceived through the portrayal of the absurdity of the female protagonist. Although *Chicago* (2002) creates Roxie as a central character with the story based on her perspective, her view point is distorted and overwhelmed by patriarchy. Through the analysis of this film, visual and verbal mechanisms are well blended not only to show pseudo-liberation of female but also to hide oppression at a deeper level.

In spite of that, it is interesting to read Renee Zellweger’s retrospective interview regarding the film production. Zellweger (2002) revealed that she felt she had gained liberation since she had discovered her singing and dancing talents while she was playing the part of Roxie Hart. “It was fantastically liberating. It was one of those life-enchanting, life-changing experiences, learning to express myself in a different way, discovering a new way to emote. It was unbelievable. It was magical. (69)”, Zellweger noted about her exhilarating experience. In this sense, we can conclude that there are different dimensions of female liberation and oppression in this film. A film can be either approved or criticized based on varying approaches.

With or without consciousness, the film can affect the film watchers' attitudes and behaviors. To create awareness among the film viewers, media literacy is essential. They should always be aware that film is a kind of discourse. Whereas a story seems to exist in cinematic world, viewers should know that this story is constructed by the filmmakers. It is a portrayal of their beliefs, values, their perspectives, their experiences and their interpretations. Particularly, this research demonstrates that the film *Chicago* (2002) is created under patriarchal values. Since female identity is dictated by male film producers as a means of reflecting the sexual hierarchy, the female principals in this film are portrayed as subordinate to men through a deeper interpretation. Mostly in Hollywood films, such patriarchal approach is likely to continue as there are more male film makers than female. Hence, film watchers, should increase their media awareness of the portrayal of the femininity so that they cannot be influenced by the pseudo-liberation.