

**YOU SHOULD BE AT  
HOME INSTEAD! :**  
**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
VARDA'S *THE VAGABOND* (1985) AND  
ZHAO'S *NOMADLAND* (2020)**

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## **You Should Be At Home Instead! : A Comparative Analysis of Varda's *The Vagabond* (1985) and Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020)**

### **ABSTRACT**

*In 1985, Agnes Varda released *The Vagabond*, a film about a young woman who chooses to wander the country alone and is found dead in the winter. Thirty-five years later, Chloe Zhao released *Nomadland* (2020), a film about a middle-aged woman who had to live in an RV because her husband died and the company shut down and discontinued the workers' residence where she lived. These two films have similarity: a woman lives alone on the street without a house. By comparing two main characters from both films, this paper examines how women without a house are perceived and have more chance and risk to be failed by the patriarchal society.*

**Keywords:** *The Vagabond, Nomadland, gender role, patriarchal society*

### **ABSTRAK**

Pada tahun 1985, Agnes Varda merilis *The Vagabond*, sebuah film tentang seorang wanita yang memilih untuk hidup sendiri di jalanan, sampai pada akhirnya ditemukan tewas di tengah musim dingin. Tiga puluh lima tahun berselang, Chloe Zhao merilis *Nomadland* (2020), sebuah film tentang seorang wanita paruh baya yang tinggal sendirian di sebuah RV setelah kebangkrutan perusahaan tempat mendiang suaminya bekerja. Dua film ini memiliki kesamaan yang menonjol: seorang wanita yang hidup sendirian tanpa atap. Dengan membandingkan dua karakter utama pada kedua film, paper ini meninjau bagaimana wanita tanpa atap dicitrakan dan diperlakukan oleh masyarakat patriarkis.

**Kata Kunci:** *The Vagabond, Nomadland, peran gender, masyarakat patriarkis*

## TWO WOMEN ON THE STREET

Agnes Varda's *The Vagabond* (1985) is a film about Mona (played by Sandrine Bonnaire), a young woman who wanders the country alone in winter. She decided to change her name from Justine, left school, and lived on the road. The original French title, *Sans Toit Ni Loi*, means 'no shelter no law', which basically depicts the story of Mona as a vagabond. The film begins with the findings of Mona's dead body in a ditch by a local farmer. Police reports suggest she died because of the frost, because there is no sign of violence. Then, the shot moves to the last people who are in touch with her being interviewed by an unnamed and unseen interviewer. From these interviews, the story shows Mona being perceived by these people, and showing flashbacks of their last interactions.

Thirty-five years later, Chloe Zhao released *Nomadland* (2020), a story about a middle-aged woman who had to live alone in her RV. The woman, Fern, did not have any option but to hit the road because her husband was dead and the company where her late husband worked and provided them a house closed down. Fern lost her husband, her house, and her stable job and wanders the states from season to season for temporary jobs. Throughout the journey she met many people; most of them are the nomads who also live in an RV.

The film shows how Fern had to deal with her day to day events as a nomad; finding a parking lot where she can stay for the night, jumping from one seasonal job to another, staying with the nomads community and making friends with people she may not see again. However, Zhao also put an important remark on how workers like Fern are employed by big companies, since the film was based on a non-fiction book by Jessica

Bruder, *Nomadland: Surviving America in The Twenty-First Century* (2017). The book heavily emphasizes Bruder's criticism of big companies such as Amazon on how they hire and treat their employees, focusing on the working class and capitalism issue.

Zhao's *Nomadland* considerably reminds us of Varda's *The Vagabond*. Both have similarities as much as their differences. Both tell about a single woman who gets out of the house and throws herself to the road and has to deal with the harsh world just to survive for another day. Interestingly, both films are also directed by women, putting much insight and subjectivity on gender and female bodies experience. Johnston in "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" (1973) stated, "Within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man" (p. 349). This statement also linked with Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999) statement that the portrayal of a woman in visual narrative is built by phallogocentric ideas. That is why Varda and Zhao's perspective through their films about women on the street became something important, because they show how a female body resists and survives in the harsh male world.

However, *The Vagabond and Nomadland* were produced 35 years apart and there should be some differences regarding cultural, social, or political aspects, as well as their difference in the settings. *The Vagabond* sets in Southern France, while *Nomadland* sets in some states in the USA. Another difference is in the main female protagonists' age: Mona is an unmarried young woman in her early-mid-twenties, meanwhile Fern is a widow—although she doesn't want to be considered as one—in her middle age.

Nonetheless, *The Vagabond* and

*Nomadland* note an important issue on women without shelter; women who leave the house. Questions then are raised: how do these women being perceived outside the house by other characters' point of views, as we know that the patriarchal society conditioning women to be inside the house? In addition, how do their surroundings treat them as they are not 'the ideal woman' which is defined by society: do they treat them well, or fail them instead?

These two questions could help us to understand about the idealization of women, the stigma, and the challenges women should face when they do not put themselves under the category of 'ideal women'. To answer these questions, I compare the two main female characters from both films. The comparison will be based on their encounters with other characters, and geo-cultural background, as well as the year they are lived in. This paper wants to highlight that both directors try to give their perspective and portray how women without a house have more chance and risk to be failed by the system, and how society will always try to put them back to their 'proper place'.

## BEING A WOMAN WITHOUT HOME

Since their early ages, women have been told and raised by society to be a 'good woman'. By being 'a good woman,' it means that they have to fulfill the standards of an ideal woman. This idealization has been long generated and supported by media, advertising, and culture. Women were taught that they have to be a good wife, good at raising children, cooking, and obedient to their husbands. Children were shown the history of the primordials; how the male hunts animals, while the female stays in their camp preparing food and watches

their offspring—which then developed into women's identity.

In modern society, Ranjitha and Unnithan in "Self and Identity of Being an Ideal Woman: An Exploratory Qualitative Study" (2017) made a clear point that the identity of being an ideal woman is also allegedly triggered by marketing. As if patriarchal hegemony is not enough to put a pressure on women, media and marketing encourage the values of identity standards, creating benchmarks on how and what women should do to meet the idealization.

In its relation to domestication, Beverly Gordon in "Woman's Domestic Body: The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age" (1996) notes an idea on the linkage between self and interior, how body and interior space were often seen and treated as they were the same thing and interchangeable, in the relation to the conceptual conflation between women's bodies and domestic interiors. In popular language and imagery, there is a structural metaphoric relationship expressed between house and body which could be traced in everything from fiction to advice literature. Gordon then gives an example on how the boys built an actual house, while the girls designed the interior. It shows that women are subjected to being in charge in the domestic department and became the standard. Thus, when a woman cannot fulfill or reject the determined standard, she will be identified with waywardness.

In *The Vagabond*, Varda highlights how women are being perceived by others and how they do not have the agency to speak and define themselves. Mona's case is a good example on how society perceives a woman who rejects idealization and wanders alone with waywardness. In *The Vagabond*,



**Figure 1.** A driver who had been rejected by Mona when he implies sexual encounter regards Mona as 'pain in the ass'



**Figure 2.** A mechanic who engaged a sexual activity with Mona being offended when Mona said he has a dirty mind.

Varda highlights how women are being perceived by others and how they do not have the agency to speak and define themselves. Mona's case is a good example on how society perceives a woman who rejects idealization and wanders alone with waywardness. Society gives her reputations and it is almost always related to her body and sexuality. After her death, several characters who encountered Mona in her past months were interviewed and gave information, as well as perceptions, about her. Here, the deceased Mona is built by the gaze of other characters, losing her own autonomy to define herself. Mona had sexual encounters with some of these characters in some circumstances. She was assertive, means that she never had sex without consent from both parties and she stands for herself against sexual harassment. However, these male characters give her a bad reputation as a pervert woman with a bad attitude. Below are the stills of the scene where two male characters are being interviewed.

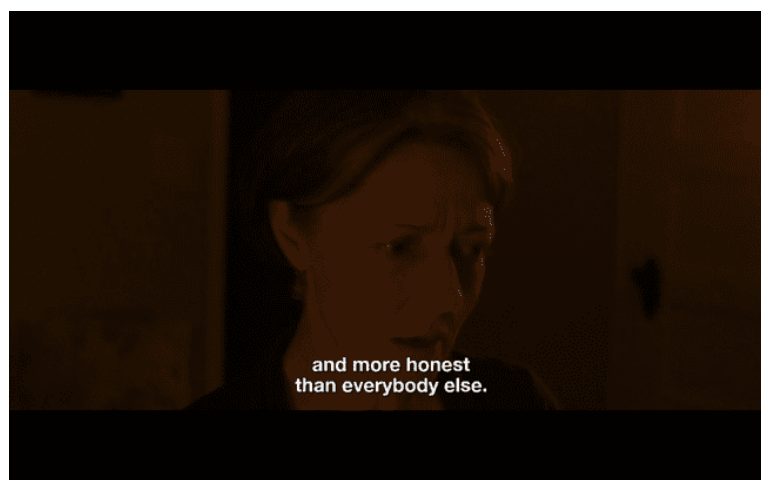
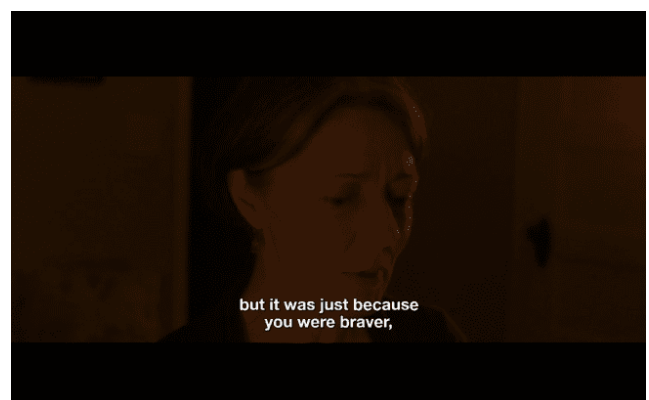
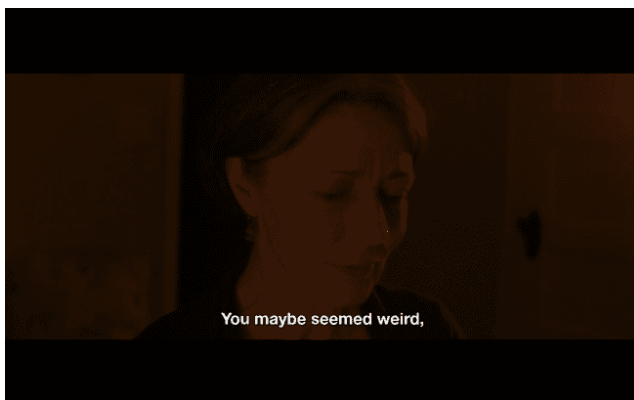
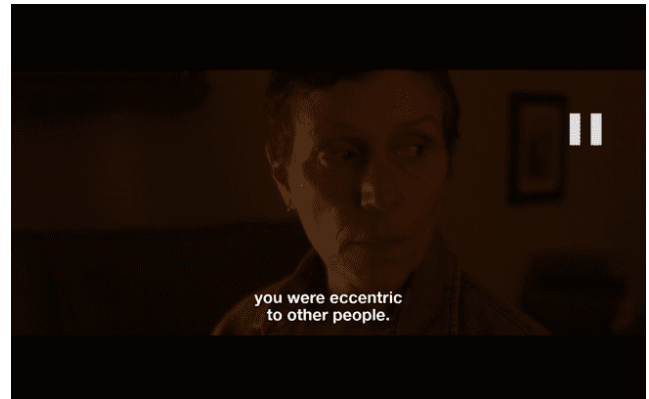
As Susan Hayward said in "Beyond the Gaze and into *Femme-Filmécriture: Agnès Varda's Sans Toit Ni Loi*", "The film is a series of gazes, of one-way exchanges from different specular positions. Each contributor fixes their gaze not on Mona but on their perception of Mona as a figure of their desire. As such, each portrait offered up by the spectator is revealing of the relator and not of the one related. The effect is to empty the mirror of ascribed meanings. Male discourses (whether uttered by men or women) cannot produce her identity. Mona's independence from a fixed identity is an assertion of her alterite (her otherness); her autonomy from male fetishization is an obligation to recognize her difference—woman as an authentic and not a second sex" (p. 270).

Ironically, Mona's efforts to reclaim her freedom are beautifully crafted in every

scene, on how she interacted with people and events around them. But when Mona could not survive the winter without shelter, she no longer had the authority to claim herself. What is left are just the relics of memories of her from people around her—ironically they are the people who don't know Mona very well as she never made a deep relationship with anyone, and that is how they rewrite Mona's self as wayward.

Unlike Mona, Fern has never encountered sexual related incident from another male characters. It might be because of their age difference: Mona is in her youth with sexual appeal, while Fern is already in her middle age. However, it does not mean that Fern is free from other character's gaze regarding her 'waywardness'. Fern is surrounded by people who have a rather similar background with her: the nomads and the female workers. Throughout the film, it is not shown that there is any discrimination towards Fern or other female workers.

Mandy Boehnke in "Gender Role Attitudes around the Globe: Egalitarian vs. Traditional Views" (2011) made a point that employed women are more prone to be treated equally, rather than unemployed ones—as well as a more developed environment. Fern's surroundings highlight the community's togetherness, shared feelings, and experiences. What Bhoenke said might be true, since *Nomadland* also talks about the working class and the relation with growing capitalism. *Nomadland* highlights the shortcomings of the superpower country in more recent years, while Mona lived in a rural area a few decades behind. On the other hand, Fern got the reputation of being 'wayward' from her sister who became a middle-class family. Dolly, the sister, said that Fern already had the inclination to be a woman who is different from the standard as presented on the stills below.



**Figure 3.** Dolly said that Fern was eccentric, weird, yet braver than everybody else



From the stills above we could see that Dolly implies an alienation towards Fern. In the previous scene, Dolly said that since young, Fern had always wanted to leave the house sooner and made decisions which might not be done by the others. She also implies that she was questioning the decisions that Fern made. From this scene, we are informed that Fern has always been perceived as different, as she rejects herself to fit the 'ideal' that has been conditioned to her. The stills above, eventually, shows Dolly's perception about Fern. By picking the word 'eccentric' and 'weird', Dolly confirmed that Fern is the alien of the family since they were just kids and pretty much describes Fern's position, even though she said it with a passive-aggressive fashion, and put 'because you were braver and more honest than everyone else' to compensate her opinion.

On women who leave their house and family tradition, Francis and Calvin Goldscheider in "Gender Roles, Marriage, and Residential Independence" make an argument that they are heavily influenced by major changes in the family. As they said, "The choice to leave home for unmarried independence is associated with two major changes in family relationships: the shift in parent-child interaction from a traditional emphasis on children's obedience toward a greater stress on independence, and the shift toward more egalitarian definitions of gender roles in both work and family spheres" (1992). The disruptions in family relationships could trigger an individual to make an attempt on breaking the chain of tradition. In both films, we weren't shown of the disruption in Mona or Fern family which triggered them to leave the house and decide their own lifestyle, but somehow we could sense that there might be a problem. In this case, maybe Dolly became the only agency from both films who gives a hint of the family dynamics.

Based on how Mona and Fern are perceived by other characters in both films, we could see that they received a quite negative reputation as they are not fitting the ideal standard for women as defined by society. Mona, being the younger character, is portrayed as a pervert woman who has no manners and good attitude towards others by other characters. Being a young woman without a house makes Mona have a bad reputation as she has no and does not make any boundaries towards her body. Meanwhile, Fern as the older character does not receive that kind of sexual related perception—it might be because the older a woman is, the less sexual they would be perceived; another fact that women are heavily valued based on their body's vitality. Instead, Fern is perceived as a weird and eccentric individual, implying that she does not meet the standard of the ideals.

## **WE ARE FALLING AND WE SHOULD GO BACK (BUT WE CAN'T)**

Pulling back to Varda, as *The Vagabond*, her work revolves around how the female characters struggle to gain their freedom and how they have to face the ideals which are determined by society. Another Varda's work, *One Sings, The Other Doesn't (L'une Chante, l'autre Pas)* (1977) also shows how women, in order to gain their freedom, constantly face hard options and make hard decisions such as family, child, husband, school, career, and her own idealism. Varda shows that Pauline a.k.a Pomme had to leave her school and family because she wanted to sing. At the end of the film, again, she had to leave her husband and her first child so she could keep singing.



**Figure 4.** Mona's choice

Mona also left school despite the fact that she might have a better future because she thinks the road would fit better to her idealism. To pay for that, she had to face the harsh society until her last breath. From these cases, Varda highlights that there is a big price a woman should sacrifice a lot of important things for freedom, as if their freedom and safety could not coexist: and this is how the male world conditioning the world for female, that if they want freedom, they have to give up safety, and if they want to keep themselves safe (or being caged/obedient to the patriarchal society) they should forget the dream of freedom.

Nevertheless, in *The Vagabond*, at the end Mona is failed by this patriarchal society. But it should be noted that Mona's failing is not because she could not bear the gender violence in her surroundings; she endures the world until her last breath. Instead, she fails when her struggle all this time seems meaningless when she just cannot defend herself anymore. After her death, she became another woman that is built by other's gaze and perspective, losing her voice and autonomy out of the trace. As Hayward also said, "Her rejection of social and sexual productivity, which her choice implies, erases the hegemonic image of women—she leaves no trace, as Varda's voice over comments: 'this death leaves no traces'" (p. 270). Her lost trace and voice, the,

putting her back in the box of male gaze and gender construction which she tried to break after all this time.

If Mona's struggle to be a free individual is being failed by the patriarchal society, Fern has a different case. In *Nomadland*, Fern became a nomad because she does not have any choice to stay inside the house; she does not have any place to stay. After the closing of her late husband's company, she had to live on the road with an RV. In a later scene, Dolly also implies that Fern is a person who would rather live on the road than going back to her family's house. From Dolly's statement, we are shown that Fern really did not have any choice.

Unlike Mona who was failed by society, Fern was killed by capitalism. Her downfall begins when the company shuts itself down and discontinues every operation in its area, including the workers' residential area where Fern lived. But then again, she still received judgement from her brother-in-law when she finally made a choice to make her own version of home.



**Figure 5.** George (Dolly’s husband) offends Fern by saying that [she] chucks everything to hit the road

In the stills above, George said that the life choice that Fern made is just not for everyone, when in fact Fern does not have any choice. George’s judgement is based on his idea that Fern should be just staying at home [like his wife] and stay safe, when in fact staying at home is not a choice for Fern. Here, she feels like being cornered by becoming a woman who chooses to stay outside.

If Varda emphasizes how women struggle to get their freedom and had to choose between hard options, Zhao emphasizes how women should struggle to stay alive outside the house, with the world that is not women-friendly, not to mention the growing capitalism that became a latent killer to the working class like Fern. Fern, with the other woman workers, had to jump from one temporary job to another just to survive the day alone. Here Zhao perfectly captures how when a woman decides to live outside and be independent

with her own feet, she has to deal with the cruel world—when the patriarchal world offers an “easier” option by becoming a dependent woman; encouraging and perpetuating the patriarchal system. In the end, Zhao shows that the world just cannot provide a safe space for women if she does not have a shelter to stay.

Both Varda and Zhao, through Mona and Fern in *The Vagabond and Nomadland*, successfully capture how the world keeps failing women if they step their feet outside the house. Mona and Fern’s case amplifies the fact that the world is built by male’s perspective and interest. It also shows that the world is an unsafe place for them. This became an issue, blocking women’s movement because their apparatus could be simply dismissed, like what the world has done to Mona. Connell in “Change among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global

Arena” said that the very gender inequalities in economic assets, political power, and cultural authority, as well as the means of coercion—most of the resources required to implement women’s claim for justice, that gender reforms to change, currently being controlled by men. It is also encouraged by the cultural and media images on the construction of gender identities and practices, so that the patriarchal system always has its way to be perpetuated.

On another aspects, Mona and Fern’s age difference also determines how the world regards women as a sexual object. Mona, young and energetic, constantly being sexualized even after her death, all the gaze used to revive her characters is sexual-related and how her demeanor is not fit for a nice woman. While Fern, in her middle age, as already mentioned before, is not being sexualized. She encounters one male-female relationship situation with Dave when he asks her to stay because he likes her a lot. But there is no sexual tendency; instead, Dave affection showed a sympathy and solidarity, despite Fern then rejects it by leaving Dave’s son’s house. Thus, we are being informed implicitly that Fern, aside from not wanting to leave her late husband, she also does not want to stay in a house and become someone’s property.

Another aspect that is also important to note is the time gap. We should not overlook how the films were produced 35 years apart. *The Vagabond* was released in 1985, while *Nomadland* released in 2020. From this time difference, there are some points that should be highlighted. First, capitalism became more threatening; Mona could live, but Fern didn’t. Mona is unemployed. The film shows that Mona was being employed several times, but basically, she doesn’t really care if she did not get the job. She asked for a job several times as well, but sometimes she just wandered and stayed with people for another day before

she went back to the road again. It feels like money has not become the biggest factor that could bother Mona, or at least she is never shown that she struggles to get one. It is very different from Fern. Although she still has her RV to put herself under the roof, she struggles to find a job: carefully looking up to the next opening and being shown that she is being employed in various kinds of jobs.

Second, the idealization of women is still happening. Despite the fact that society developed to be more egalitarian, as Mona received stigmas because she cannot fit the standard of an ideal woman, Fern, who lives in more modern society, still got the stigma of being ‘eccentric and weird’ from her own sister. Based on Mona’s and Fern’s case, we could pull the red string that the patriarchal society does not hold a space for women who are not willing to fit the standards.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

To conclude this paper, we shall go back to the questions proposed in the beginning: (1) how do these women being perceived outside the house by other characters’ point of views, as we know that the patriarchal society conditioning women to be inside the house?; and, (2) how do their surroundings treat them as they are not ‘the ideal woman’ which is defined by society: do they treat them well, or fail them instead?

Based on the analysis, women who took the choice to leave the house, like Mona and Fern, were considered as ‘wayward’ by the society because they do not want to make themselves fit the standard of an ‘ideal woman’. Mona, after her death, is portrayed as a perverted woman with a bad attitude by other characters. Meanwhile, Fern is regarded

as an eccentric and weird woman by her sister who stays in the house with her husband. The negative images surely are not a good indicator as well to the second question. The patriarchal society treats them unwell, and in the end these two characters are failed by the system: Mona is being failed by the male gaze, and Fern by the capitalism that does not give some room for her. All in all, these two films directed by female directors packed the issue of a woman-ness outside the house and how their body had to deal with the patriarchal conditioning.

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