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An Analysis of Female Character Images Based on Feminism to Reveal Women's Predicaments: Taking East Asian TV Dramas as Examples

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Abstract. As an important carrier reflecting social ideology, the portrayal of female characters in TV dramas and films still cannot break free from the patriarchal narrative logic. This paper aims to comparatively analyze three types of female images, "pseudo-independent", "dominant-controlling" and "daily awakening", in East Asian TV dramas and films from a feminist perspective, revealing the hidden social gender predicaments and ideological contradictions behind them. This study draws on Laura Mulvey's Gaze Theory, Chizuko Ueno's critique of the ideology of romantic love, Angela McRobbie's post - feminist mystique, and Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory to conduct in - depth analyses of selected film and television drama cases. The analysis shows that the "Pseudo-Independent" female leads seemingly possess subjectivity, yet their value always needs to be confirmed by men; the "Dominant-Controlling" female leads fall into another patriarchal trap by imitating the male hegemony model to maintain power, that is, denying the possibility of the coexistence of female traits and power. Neither of them breaks away from the framework of gender binary opposition. In contrast, the "Daily Awakening" female leads show a more realistic path. The reconstruction of their subjectivity starts from the reflection on daily life and respect for self-feelings. At the same time, such characters also allow the existence of female traits and transform them into strength, rather than regarding them as weaknesses. The purpose of criticism is to recognize the root of the distortion and establish a richer narrative possibility for women that transcends gender binary opposition.

Keywords: Feminism, East Asian TV dramas and films, gender ideology, gender binary opposition.

1. Introduction

After the second wave of feminism, female character images in popular culture have always been criticized and examined. With the widespread awakening of women's consciousness, the traditional "pure and weak" female characters in East Asian TV dramas and films, characterized by weakness, docility and dependence, have been difficult to establish an emotional connection with contemporary female audiences due to their inherent male gaze and value dependence. In response, TV dramas featuring the so-called "Empowered Female Lead" have emerged, attempting to create

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"new female" images with stronger independent awareness and career abilities. However, a closer look reveals that their core logic still falls into a new narrative dilemma. These "Empowered Female Leads" often wear the cloak of independence, but their ultimate value and self-identity still need to be realized through the "love, recognition and redemption" of a powerful man. The contradiction in this internal logic exposes that the creation has not truly broken away from the constraints of the patriarchal narrative framework at a deep level.

East Asian society is deeply influenced by both traditional Confucian culture and modern capitalist ideas, so its gender concepts are contradictory and complex. As a product of popular culture, TV dramas and films not only reflect social concepts, but also participate in the construction and reconstruction of gender ideology. Therefore, the analysis of female images in East Asian TV dramas and films is not only a cultural criticism, but also related to the presentation of women's living conditions in real society.

This research focuses on the evolution and dilemmas of female image characteristics in popular culture since the second wave of feminism. Especially in East Asian societies, which are deeply influenced by both traditional Confucian culture and modern capital logic, the portrayal of female characters in their film and television dramas has not yet escaped the patriarchal narrative logic. This research is of great significance for deconstructing the gender ideology in popular culture, revealing the real survival dilemmas faced by contemporary women, and providing theoretical references for constructing a more equal gender narrative.

This research mainly starts from three types of female images: "Pseudo-Independent", "Dominant-Controlling", and "Daily Awakening". It specifically conducts a critical analysis of the representation methods of female characters in East Asian film and television dramas and the underlying social implications. Methodologically, it uses a qualitative research approach that combines text analysis and theoretical criticism. By selecting representative film and television texts for in-depth interpretation and integrating theoretical frameworks such as Laura Mulvey's Gaze Theory, Chizuko Ueno's critique of the ideology of romantic love, and Angela McRobbie's post-feminist mystique, the advantage of this method lies in its ability to systematically reveal the mutual construction relationship between visual narratives and gender power structures, which is conducive to deeply grasping the operating mechanism of the underlying ideology.

The ultimate goal of this research is to reveal the narrative paradox hidden behind the myth of "independent women" in East Asian film and television dramas through the analysis of image typology and explore new possibilities for the writing of female subjectivity. To achieve this goal, this research conducts comparative analyses of multiple drama series, cross-interprets theoretical tools, and is committed to putting forward reflective and practical suggestions.

2. Analysis and criticism of feminist theories

The analysis of female characters in TV drama and film scripts cannot do without the support of feminist theories. First, British film theorist Laura Mulvey put forward the Gaze Theory in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, pointing out that "in traditional Hollywood film narratives, there exists a Male Gaze. That is, the camera defaults to presenting women from a male perspective, objectifying women as the objects to be watched, so as to satisfy the voyeurism of male audiences" [1]. Second, Japanese sociologist Chizuko Ueno deeply analyzed the systematic oppression and contempt of women under the East Asian patriarchal structure in Misogyny. She pointed out that "the traditional ideology of romantic love is a carefully designed trap of patriarchy, which makes women take the initiative to give up their right to self-determination and need to confirm their own value through men", which echoes Mulvey's theory [2].

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In addition, British cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie proposed the concept of post-feminist mystique. She believed that "while encouraging women to gain power, post-feminist culture deprives women of their feminist agency by re-emphasizing romantic love, beauty norms and other means, and finally returns women to the order of patriarchy" [3].

Finally, Stuart Hall put forward the Encoding/Decoding Theory in Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, pointing out that "popular culture is a field where multiple meanings compete. Audiences do not passively accept information, but interpret texts in dominant, negotiated or oppositional ways" [4]. This helps to analyze why female audiences consume and even love those narratives that seem to be "anti-feminist".

3. Analysis of “pseudo - independent” female images

Taking Xu Qin, the female lead in the Chinese TV drama Fireworks of My Heart as an example, she is a typical sample for the analysis of such "pseudo-independent" female images. Her occupation (emergency doctor), educational background and abilities all meet the setting of a modern "Empowered Female Lead", and she seems to have the subjectivity that traditional women did not have. However, the narrative script of this drama follows the old-fashioned ideology of romantic love.

As Chizuko Ueno said in Misogyny, the traditional ideology of romantic love is essentially women giving up their self-determination to men. The plots in the drama like "redemption", "forced romance", and "second-chance romance" are the concrete projections of this ideology. Beneath Xu Qin's "independent" appearance, there is a heart that longs to be conquered, protected, and to confirm her self-worth through the recognition of others, especially men. She seems to have the right to choose, but in fact, the arrow always points to emotional dependence on powerful men. The fundamental of its narrative logic is that the ultimate realization of women's value and self - breakthrough must be achieved by a man.

From the perspective of Mulvey’s Gaze Theory, Xu Qin is still an object being gazed at. Even though her career achievements put a layer of subjectivity on her, the core of the narrative always revolves around the emotional entanglement between her and the male lead. Her professional abilities often need the intervention of the male lead to be highlighted, making her a functional element serving the male hero’s narrative.

However, while criticizing Xu Qin’s character, Audiences should not only see her shortcomings, but also understand the predicament behind her. Xu Qin is a typical imperfect female image oppressed under the patriarchal social structure. She suffers from the structural oppression of money and power from her parents in the name of love and protection, and subconsciously seeks external redemption rather than complete self-liberation when encountering difficulties. However, on gender issues, the public habitually points the finger at individual women, rather than thinking about the structural predicament behind their behaviors, which itself is one of the problems of social gender opposition. In the drama, Xu Qin obviously lacks a self-led growth path; she is more like a "passive grower" driven by the male lead. Therefore, instead of simply blaming the characters in the drama, what should be noticed and reflected upon is: why are there so few growth paths for female characters in TV dramas? How should creators present and criticize this kind of social problem of structural oppression?

This narrative mode subtly reconciles the anxieties and desires of modern women. On one hand, the female lead's success in the professional field satisfies contemporary women's desire for "independence"; on the other hand, her passiveness in the emotional field, her ignorance of her own desires until awakened by men, caters to the patriarchal discipline of pure and controllable female

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temperament. When the audience identifies with the female lead, they can feel the security of being strongly loved and don't need to feel guilty about their own desires, thus obtaining a sense of safe transgression.

And this is exactly the embodiment of the "post-feminist mystique" criticized by Angela McRobbie. She emphasized that "capital and patriarchy jointly create this illusion of 'independence'. Through such narratives, they seemingly appease the female audience's demand for pursuing career and self-value, but in fact, they pull their emotional destination back to the track of romantic love" [5].

4. Analysis of "dominant-controlling" female images

In contrast to the "pseudo-independent" characters, there is another type of "dominant-controlling" female characters that try to completely subvert traditions, such as Miranda in The Devil Wears Prada and Madam Tang in The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful. They have absolute autonomy and control, as if practicing the imagination of "transforming from a woman hugged by a man to a woman hugging a man".

However, the shaping of such "queen" or "vicious woman" characters often falls into another patriarchal trap. American feminist scholar bell hooks criticized in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center that "their success is often based on imitating the male hegemonic model: cold, rational, calculating, and sacrificing emotions and family life. The reason why they are 'powerful' is that they abandon the traditional 'female traits'" [6]. And this exposes another prejudice: power, rationality, leadership and other qualities are exclusive to men. If women want to enter this field, they must "de-feminize" themselves. This makes female audiences understand and even admire their abilities rationally, but it is difficult for them to emotionally identify with and relate to these characters. Because this kind of image denies the possibility of the coexistence of female traits and power. Miranda's workplace authority relies on the male-style management method of denying emotions and suppressing care, which is exactly a typical case of "proving women's value with patriarchal rules" criticized by hooks, and finally still fails to jump out of the framework of gender binary opposition.

5. Analysis of "daily awakening" female images

It is between the two seemingly opposite models of "pure and weak" and "strong woman"—which actually share the same patriarchal logic—that the Korean drama One Spring Night provides a more realistic "daily awakening" path. As an ordinary librarian, Li Jingren, the female lead, has no grand spectacle of an "Empowered Female Lead" in her life. Her growth path is not achieved overnight. Instead, it starts with doubting the existing emotional relationship that seems stable but is actually empty, with the awareness and honest confrontation of her true desires, and is a gradual breakaway from following social discipline to listening to her inner self.

Theorist Angela McRobbie once criticized post-feminist culture. She pointed out that "while encouraging women to gain power, post-feminist culture deprives women of their feminist agency through various means such as emphasizing romantic love and beauty norms, which is the 'post-feminist mystique'" [7]. One Spring Night breaks away from the post-feminist mystique mentioned by Angela McRobbie. Just as McRobbie's expectation for "non-deceptive" female narratives, "women's awakening should not rely on external forces, but originate from the active control of their own lives" [8]. Li Jingren's awakening is not achieved by becoming a strong woman or relying on a more powerful man, but by regaining the initiative in her own emotions and life. This also

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shows us the possibility of a more peaceful and realistic feminist practice. Coincidentally, Chen Jialing in the Taiwanese drama The Making of an Ordinary Woman shows how women can find their own ordinary and real happiness in the long process of reconciling with their original families, social expectations and themselves.

The value of such "daily awakening" characters lies in that they show that the reconstruction of women's subjectivity can start from ordinary daily life and from respecting their own feelings. It allows women to retain corresponding traits such as emotion, vulnerability and care, and transform them into new strength rather than weaknesses that need to be abandoned.

6. Audience reception and concluding reflections

Then, how to understand the audience's, especially female audience's, continuous preference for narrative modes that obviously contain unusual power relations, such as "domineering CEO" and "forced love"? Stuart Hall put forward the Encoding/Decoding Theory in Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, pointing out that "popular culture is a field where multiple meanings compete. The audience's interpretation of the text is not passive acceptance, but there are multiple interpretation positions such as dominant, negotiated and oppositional" [9].

The pleasure that female audiences get from "forced love" may be a kind of Negotiated Decoding. Hall mentioned that Negotiated Decoding is "while acknowledging its unequal power structure, extracting content that meets one's own emotional needs through negotiation", such as the romantic fantasy of unconditional exclusive care and the substitute satisfaction of idealized Emotional Care [10]. In a culture where men's gentle care is often stigmatized as "weakness", this kind of narrative spectacle just provides women with an emotional outlet without self-shame, allowing their repressed emotional needs to be temporarily released.

The "interpellation" theory proposed by French philosopher Louis Althusser explains that "the audience is 'interpellated' as the subject of the narrative by the plot when watching, and then temporarily identifies with the position of the characters in the drama" [8]. Through the plot of "the domineering CEO falls in love with me", female audiences can experience an emotional feeling of being extremely desired and fully affirmed in their imagination, which can make up for the emotional neglect or value loss they may suffer in real society to a certain extent. Therefore, it is useless to simply criticize the audience for "bad taste" or "being brainwashed". The key is to recognize that the popularity of this narrative mode reflects the scarcity of healthy, equal and sincere intimate relationships in society.

Popular culture is a distorted but real mirror. What it reflects is the struggle between women's real desires and social discipline in the real world. The ultimate purpose of criticism is not to smash the mirror, but to recognize the root cause of the distortion in the mirror and strive to create an environment where more narratives are possible.

First of all, more female creators such as screenwriters, directors and producers should be encouraged to enter the core layer of the film and television industry. Only by letting them integrate women's real life experiences into narrative creation can the long-term male-dominated narrative tradition be broken. Secondly, the critical discourse should analyze the narrative structure and logic behind the story, rather than conducting moral trials on individual characters, so as to promote deeper reflection among the audience and creators. Finally, look forward to seeing more diverse female characters and their relationship models. The relationship between women should not only be competition because of men, but also include alliance, mutual assistance and empathy. Women's success should not only have two paths: "becoming a man" or "marrying a man", but more possibilities defined by women themselves. At that time, the stories on the screen will not only be

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about "being hugged" or "hugging others", but also rich narratives of women as complete subjects to love, choose and experience.

7. Conclusion

When people reflect on female narratives in popular culture, they'll find that the core issue never lies in "what female characters should be like". Instead, it centers on three key entities: who is writing these characters, who is dominating these stories, and who is defining the standards of "being qualified". "Telling stories" is, in itself, a manifestation of power. Even if women have a thousand images and countless skills, as long as they aren't in control of the story's dominant power, they remain in a position of being arranged. Therefore, the key to breaking this deadlock doesn't lie in "whether there can be a female protagonist". Rather, it's about whether women can become the ones who create protagonists and master the narrative. Once they reclaim this position, women won't just be the ones being narrated. They'll be better able to actively narrate the entire world.

Scriptwriters must be cautious. If emphasizing "the particularity of women" goes to an extreme—for example, using individual emotions to dismantle grand narratives related to the nation/human destiny—on the contrary, it will make it difficult for women to integrate into the mainstream narrative structure. In fact, female creation doesn't need to completely reject "male narratives". A wiser approach is to take back the narrative power. Those rights, such as the right to humanity, the right to suffer, the right to revenge, and the right to sacrifice, which were once monopolized by men, never belonged to a specific gender in the first place. They've just been occupied by men for a long time. What creator need to do is break the zero - sum game of "either follow male standards or completely withdraw from the mainstream narrative".

Creators can portray female characters as strong or weak, likable or dislikable. But the prerequisite is to recognize her status as the protagonist and let her have the right to drive the plot, rather than just passively bearing the weight of public opinion. The real goal isn't to shape an ideal female character. Instead, it's to endow women with a complete, complex, and unpredictable protagonist subjectivity. After all, the significance of a protagonist never lies in perfection. Instead, it lies in having the power to become the core proposition of the narrative. And this is the ultimate direction for female narratives to break through.

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