

A Post-Feminist Reading of Female-Centric TV Dramas in China (2010–Present)

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Abstract. In recent years, with the awakening of women's consciousness and the increase of social attention, the Female-centric TV dramas with women's growth as the core content have gradually become an important trend in the development of Chinese film and television dramas. However, such works are often solidified by critical narrative patterns, and there are obvious contradictions in the expression of women's subjectivity. In order to better understand this phenomenon, this article selects several representative Female-centric TV dramas as samples under the framework of post-feminist theory, and critically discusses the shaping of female images in such works by analysing the experience and narrative structure of the characters. The study found that the so-called female autonomy and success rely more on physical management, consumer capital, and emotional relationships, which seems to emphasise women's subjectivity, but in fact solidifies gender stereotypes under the influence of patriarchal structure and the market. This article points out that the Female-centric TV dramas try to respond to the problems faced by women in reality, but their narrative is often presented in the form of self-supervision, dependence on men, and competition with women, falling into the dilemma of post-feminism. In the future, the creation of film and television dramas should get rid of this limitation and explore new female writing directions by improving the narrative style.

Keywords: Female-centric TV drama; post-feminism; female subjectivity; consumerism; gender power relations.

1. Introduction

Since 2010, a type of film and television drama called Female-centric TV dramas has emerged and continued to be popular in mainland China. The Female-centric TV dramas usually take female characters as the core of the narrative, telling how women grow up in adversity, break through difficulties, and then realise their self-worth, echoing the trend of the awakening of women's consciousness and the wide attention of women's issues in the background of socio-economic development. Driven by market demand and media publicity, such film and television works have achieved great commercial success. However, it should be noted that many works still cannot get rid of the values shaped by patriarchy and consumerism. This contradictory logic becomes easier to spread through visual culture, making the female image face the problems of simplification and Facebookization. Therefore, exploring how the Female-centric TV dramas present the subjectivity of women helps to explain the complexity of the contemporary gender rights structure and provides a direction for the improvement of the narrative style of film and television dramas.

In fact, there have been many studies in the Chinese academic community around the Female-centric TV dramas. These studies mostly focus on criticism of solidified models such as pseudo-independent narrative, revenge, and counterattack, as well as the analysis of relevant cultural industries and consumer markets. For example, Gao Xiang pointed out in the article *Cultural Paradox of the Construction of Women's Subjectivity - Female-centric TV dramas in the Contemporary Cultural Field*, although Female-centric TV dramas plays a certain role in constructing women's subjectivity under the influence of online media and consumerism, but at the same time, it is deeply immersed in the dilemma of historical themes, excessive idealisation of love and rationalisation of the male order, which limits the possibility of deeply describing women's experience [1]. Although these studies accurately reveal the problems of the Female-centric TV dramas, they lack the theory that can connect the phenomena of different works.

Based on this shortcoming, this article adopts the method of combining detailed reading of the text with theoretical analysis, and chooses *Nothing But Thirty*, *Empresses in the Palace*, *The First Half of My Life*, and *The Story of Minglan* as a sample, combined with the post-feminist theories of Western academic circles, such as Angela McRobbie's view of empowerment and discipline coexisting, and the concepts of self-supervision and consumption subjects, proposed by Rosalind Gill, to carry out research. By comparing the similarities and differences between the plot development and characterisation of these films and television dramas, the reasons for the contradictions in the narrative of the heroine are revealed.

2. Physical Discipline and Consumerism

French philosopher Michel Foucault believes that power does not always appear oppressively, but also subtly shapes individuals through daily practice [2]. Post-feminism cleverly used this point to concretize abstract concepts such as independence and empowerment into physical management and active consumption behaviour. Under the influence of this ideology, women seem to take the initiative to pursue a beautiful and better life, but in fact, they are re-controlled by the power structure.

The TV drama *Nothing but Thirty* is a typical Female-centric TV drama. There are three heroines, and they all reflect women's self-worth through self-management and consumption behaviour to varying degrees. Take Wang Manni as an example. As an ordinary salesperson working in Shanghai, her income is not rich, but she rents a high-priced house in the city centre, chooses to overdraw her credit card upgrade, and buys luxury goods when taking a cruise ship. These behaviours are all positive self-investment. She creates her own external image through luxury consumption, hoping to attract matching connections and partners to achieve a class leap. In order to achieve the goal of entering the class society, she refused the stable life provided by Zhang Zhi, a small-town civil servant, and dated Liang Zhengxian, who could provide her with excellent material conditions.

However, as the plot develops, this seemingly autonomous pursuit puts her at greater risk. She thought she was in love freely, but in fact, she had long fallen into the unequal power relationship caused by different economic levels. In the face of Liang Zhengxian's lack of specialisation in feelings and the so-called non-marriageism, she is powerless to change and can only rely on continuous luxury consumption to maintain her competitiveness in emotions and the workplace. Although Wang Manni has effectively exercised the right of choice advocated by post-feminism, her choice itself still serves the value system of objectifying women. As Angela McRobbie pointed out, although post-feminism emphasises women's choice and independence on the surface, it actually closely binds women with family and consumption, implicitly weakens the results of feminism, and tries to create a pattern of empowerment and discipline [3].

On the other hand, in the background of ancient film and television works, although there is no obvious existence of consumerism in the modern sense, the binding between the female body and the value is still the main logic of the plot development. In *Empresses in the Palace*, Zhen Huan's initial favour came from her appearance like Empress Chunyuan, and her body became the starting point for her to enter the power structure. Since then, her status has experienced several ups and downs, which are closely related to fertility. Pregnancy rises in status, and abortion falls into crisis. Even if she grew up to be a powerful Consort Xi in the later stage, Zhen Huan still couldn't get rid of the path of gaining power through her body [4].

In contrast to the positive image of Zhen Huan is Consort Hua. In addition to highlighting her arrogant character, there are also many plots describing her anxiety because of her inability to have children. Ultimately, this anxiety is caused by the fact that she is excluded from the physical competition in the harem. She didn't know that it was the emperor who secretly used contraception because he was afraid of the forces of his relatives, and projected his resentment on other pregnant concubines, reflecting the plight of women after losing their physical capital. The role of An Lingrong is the same. She mainly attracted the emperor with her beautiful singing voice, but lost this capital after her voice was broken. Therefore, she does not hesitate to take medicine at the expense of her

health to reshape the value of her body. All her efforts revolve around how to regain male favour to keep a place in the harem.

In *Nothing but Thirty* and *Empresses in the Palace*, the former shows the independent choice of disillusionment under the influence of consumerism, while the latter reasonably manifests the body as the capital to maintain its status in the power structure of the court. Although the background of the story is completely different from the development of the plot, both reflect the postfeminist sensibility proposed by Rosalind Gill. That is, women are constructed as the subject of self-supervision in media culture. They are encouraged to reflect autonomy through self-discipline, self-investment, and self-sexualisation, and internalise external requirements into active pursuits [5].

3. Emotion and patriarchy between men and women

Post-feminism encourages women's independence and self-realisation, but at the same time shapes romantic love into the final destination of women's lives [3]. On the surface, women have gained subjectivity and freedom of choice, but their social status and emotional life are still deeply influenced by male roles and patriarchal structures. This obvious dual logic is also reflected in the plot arrangement of TV dramas.

In the urban drama *The First Half of My Life*, the heroine Luo Zijun is portrayed as a full-time wife who has no independent life and work experience, but after her husband cheated and divorced, she had to think about survival because she needed to raise her son alone. She began to enter the workplace, gradually adapted to the working environment through learning professional skills, showed her tough side, and finally lived a new life. The play aims to shape the image of a woman who is free from the attachment to marriage and men and is self-reliant, and tries to encourage women in reality to realise material and spiritual independence with Luo Zijun's success [6].

However, several key twists after Luo Zijun's difficulties are still inseparable from the support of the male character, He Han. He Han is the boyfriend of Luo Zijun's good friend Tang Jing, a typical workplace elite. He guided Luo Zijun out of the shadow of divorce, established confidence in her work, provided professional guidance for her work, and even used his network resources to help her find a job again when she was unemployed. This is actually a change from relying on the husband to relying on another man. Her independence seems to come from her own efforts, but she always takes the assistance of male power as a necessary condition. In the later stage of the plot, Luo Zijun and He Han are arranged to have emotions, which further implies that women's emotional needs are indispensable, and still depend on men to complete.

Costume drama *The Story of Minglan* also embodies the paradox in the narrative of the heroine. The heroine Sheng Minglan is intelligent and tolerant. Although she comes from a humble background, she gradually grows up in a complicated family relationship and a male-dominated society. The early stage of the plot is mainly about the power struggle, highlighting Sheng Minglan's survival wisdom in the household, and the emotional line is weakened. However, in the later stage, when Sheng Minglan completed the promotion from an illegitimate daughter to a mother-in-law, the description of the relationship with her husband Gu Tingye, gradually became the core of the plot, providing an undertaking for her life.

Even if it shows autonomy and dynamism, the female values shaped in the play still need to find rationality within the patriarchal structure [7]. Their fate is closely related to gender power. For example, Princess Pingning, as a higher-class woman, acts as a defender in the patriarchal order, obstructing the union of Qi Heng and Sheng Minglan; Lin Qinshuang can only gain a certain amount of power by pleasing the lord of the Sheng family; other unfavoured women in the backyard have a low status and a difficult life. Women of different classes are in different situations, but they are deeply immersed in the rules formulated by patriarchy.

The female narratives of these two TV dramas reflect the preconditional independence. Women's active efforts are still limited to men's help or the guarantee of marriage at the critical turning point or final point of the plot. Women seem to have achieved the goal of self-realisation, but their own

ability is strong and inseparable from emotional attachment, and they are not separated from the stereotypes of social norms.

4. Female Alliances

In the context of post-feminism, women are disciplined to deal with class and social pressure in an individualised way [8]. In the Female-centric TV dramas, the contradiction between women's subjectivity and collective sex is presented through the formation and disintegration of alliances.

The background of the harem of *Empresses in the Palace* is a typical case, and women's alliances are more unstable under the influence of the male power structure. When Zhen Huan first entered the palace, she allied with Shen Meizhuang and An Lingrong to fight against the forces of the Empress, Consort Qi, Consort Hua, and Lady Cao. However, after Zhen Huan's miscarriage was out of favour, An Lingrong immediately betrayed and joined the Empress's camp. Consort Hua used Princess Wenyi to compete for favour. After Lady Cao witnessed that her daughter was hurt, she turned to support Zhen Huan's camp. Even Consort Jing, who was originally supported Zhen Huan's camp, exposed the private affairs of Zhen Huan's most trusted palace maids and eunuchs to protect her custody of Princess Longyue. Furthermore, although Lady Qi and An Lingrong both belong to the Empress's camp, Lady Qi will also be jealous of An Lingrong and drug to make her lose her voice.

These plots reflect women's attempts to form alliances to deal with crises together. However, because the root of the crisis lies in individual desires and the struggle for male favour and survival resources, this alliance has always been difficult to transcend personal interests and has failed to form a stable collective force. On the surface, women show strategic and cooperative ability, but under the influence of patriarchy and social norms, their collective actions are often difficult to maintain [9].

The aforementioned *Nothing but Thirty* also depicts how the friendship of the three heroines is challenged by the class gap and value conflict. First of all, the friendship between Wang Manni and Gu Jia began with material interests. Wang Manni's annual income can't even afford a luxury product for Gu Jia. She entered Gu Jia's social circle through Zhong Xiaoqin's introduction, but the inequality of resources and cognition between the two makes friendship always lack an equal basis. Wang Manni's attempt to cross the class only made her bear higher consumption pressure. Finally, when she fell into an unhealthy relationship with Liang Zhengxian, Gu Jia's criticism cracked their friendship.

Secondly, Zhong Xiaoqin is relatively weak in the relationship between the three people. Compared with Gu Jia's exquisite middle-class life and Wang Manni's social circle of luxury goods sales, she had limited economic income before she achieved great success through writing books. The lack of emotional support in a widowed marriage has also led to the gradual weakening of her right to speak in friendship.

Through the utilitarianity of Wang Manni's friendship with Gu Jia, and the marginalisation of Zhong Xiaoqin, it can be seen that women's alliances in modern society are fragile. The class anxiety and implicit competition among the three people make it difficult for friendship to form a stable collective force in the end. This narrative shows that the individual independence emphasised by post-feminism may weaken the cooperation between women and strengthen the competitive relationship [10].

5. Conclusion

This article is based on several Female-centric TV dramas, including *Nothing But Thirty*, *Empresses in the Palace*, *The First Half of My Life*, and *The Story of Minglan* were analysed, and it was found that the female narratives in these works showed obvious post-feminist characteristics. Although these TV dramas are all based on women's growth and independence, the expression of women's subjectivity still stays at the surface empowerment level. Whether urban women maintain friendship and love in a high-consumption environment, or court women compete for status and

favour in the power structure, their actions are limited by personal interests, class gap, and a male-dominated power structure.

The results of this study show that the narrative of the heroine in the current popular TV dramas is a kind of packaged female independence, which strengthens self-supervision and emotional attachment while promoting women's strength and free choice, reflecting dual logic. As a cultural work that reflects social phenomena, the Female-centric TV dramas have not effectively expanded the space for women's expression. On the contrary, the setting of some plots has strengthened class anxiety and stereotypes, making the female image fall into the narrative dilemma of different characters but a single essence.

The creation of future film and television works should break out of the limitations of post-feminist narrative when showing the power of women. First of all, women's freedom and independence should not be narrowly equated with self-investment, body management, and the ability to buy famous brands. Instead, it is necessary to restore the details of life and the real situation, so that women's subjectivity can be reflected in daily choices. Secondly, women's growth and final destination should not be presupposed to rely on male roles, but should pay attention to how they explore equal marriage and emotional relationships. Finally, rather than describing the competition between women, describe their union and mutual assistance more, and show the possibility of the continuation of women's alliance while maintaining their respective subjectivity. The future development potential of big heroine dramas may lie in breaking through the shackles of post-feminism through innovative narrative methods and opening up new space for expression.

This study reveals the current challenges faced by female character representation, which has certain reference value for the improvement of the narrative mode of film and television dramas in the future. At the theoretical level, this study helps to understand the localisation of post-feminist theory in the Chinese context. At the practical level, this study aims to remind relevant researchers and film and television industry practitioners to be wary of the symbolic independence of women, and emphasise the importance of retaining the complexity and multidimensionality of female portrayal in the fragmented content of a fast-paced society.

Future research should focus more on the different carriers and audiences of women's narratives. On the one hand, the scope of the sample can be further expanded, and through the image of women in short videos, variety shows, and games, we can analyse how platform algorithms and media propaganda shape the public's perception of women's image. On the other hand, it is also necessary to pay attention to the acceptance of male audiences and other gender identity groups, and examine the differences in different groups' understanding of the narrative of the heroine. In addition, we should pay attention to the study of examples of successfully shaping the image of women, and explore how women's writing can break through the limitations of consumerism and traditional gender concepts, so as to promote the development of film and television culture in a more realistic direction.

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