

Dual Othering of Female Supporting Characters in "Strong Female Protagonist" Narratives: A Case Study of the TV Series *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*

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Abstract. This study is situated within the cultural context of the 21st-century resurgence of global feminist thought and the proliferation of "strong female protagonist" narratives in the film and television market. Although works of this genre often champion "female independence" as their banner and garner widespread attention by depicting the female protagonist's journey of overcoming adversity, their genuine embodiment of feminist core values remains subject to considerable scrutiny. This study examines the characterization of female supporting roles in the "strong female protagonist" narrative through a feminist critical lens. Employing close textual analysis of *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, it investigates how the teleplay employs dual othering strategies—demonizing antagonists and instrumentalizing positive characters—to reduce female supporting roles to mere foils that accentuate the protagonist's prominence. The analysis reveals the underlying misogynistic logic and patriarchal constraints masked by the work's ostensibly progressive facade. This narrative shifts the essence of women's predicament from the oppression of patriarchy to an internal moral conflict among women, transforming the "strong female protagonist" into a compromise with the established power order. The conclusion posits that authentic feminist creation must be dedicated to portraying diverse female representations and centering on the critique of patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*; supporting female character; the narrative of strong female protagonist; feminist criticism.

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the 21st century, amid the global rise of feminist thought, a genre of television dramas centered on female empowerment and triumphant narratives—commonly termed "strong female protagonist" series—has emerged within the cultural and media landscape. By depicting the story of the female protagonist's continuous struggle from the bottom and her eventual ascent to the peak of power or life, they respond to the contemporary issue of women's pursuit of self-worth and subjectivity, thus resonating widely among the female audience [1]. Such works are labeled as "feminist" and are even regarded as the benchmarks for promoting feminism in the new era.

However, whether these "strong female protagonist" television dramas genuinely convey the authentic aspirations of contemporary women or inadvertently reinforce patriarchal narratives of femininity remains a subject of debate. In the contemporary entertainment market, a narrative paradox persists in most so-called "strong female protagonist" teleplays: while attempting to portray the independence and strength of the female protagonist, they simultaneously suppress and marginalize other female characters by resorting to stereotypical, instrumentalized, or even demonized portrayals of supporting roles. This process of shaping not only fails to challenge patriarchy but instead falls into the trap of misogyny.

This study focuses on the 2018 historical palace teleplay *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, which centers on a dominant female protagonist. Through case analysis integrated with theoretical frameworks, it identifies certain character portrayals in the teleplay that contradict feminist principles. The research holds significance for guiding film and television productions featuring dominant female leads in avoiding the trap of misogynistic narratives. This study broadly categorizes female supporting characters into two archetypes: the "villainess" and the "saintess." For instance, the

narrative deploys antagonistic female characters such as Jin Yuyan and Wei Yanwan, who consistently oppose the protagonist Ruyi, alongside stereotypical allies like Hailan and Ruixin. Through documentary analysis of relevant materials and literature, this study examines the narrative functions, character archetypes, and destinies assigned to these supporting roles. The analysis reveals how supporting female characters are othered in "Strong Female Protagonist" teleplays to construct the protagonist's image, and investigates the underlying causes of this narrative phenomenon. This study aims to provide insights and recommendations for future feminist film and television production, with the objective of promoting more artistic works that genuinely respect female subjectivity and transcend the narrative model of "otherness."

2. Literature Review

In his article *A Study on Female Archetypes and Character Portrayals in Chinese Costume Idol Dramas*, Hong Yanyu conducts a systematic examination of the evolving trends in female portrayals in recently popular costume idol dramas, with a focus on transformations in appearance, attire, character archetypes, and self-awareness [2]. The study indicates that contemporary historical idol dramas are witnessing a shift in female character portrayals, moving away from the stereotypical "pale, youthful, and slender" aesthetic toward a more diversified representation of beauty. Female roles are increasingly transitioning from the private to the public sphere, demonstrating a growing sense of autonomy. Furthermore, the relationships among women have shifted from traditional "female rivalry" to "sisterhood," reflecting an initial awareness of mutual support among women. However, the author also points out that beneath these superficial representations, the patriarchal gaze and disciplinary mechanisms persist. The archetypes of female characters remain confined within the framework of romantic narratives, and women in the series continue to occupy the "otherized" position of being observed and rescued.

Hong Yanyu's research makes a significant contribution to uncovering the superficial transformations and underlying patriarchal structures in female portrayals within historical idol dramas, offering substantial case studies and theoretical underpinnings, particularly in analyzing the modern transition of women's external image and self-consciousness. However, this study lacks targeted analysis on the portrayal of female supporting characters, particularly within the female-centric narrative framework. It has yet to delve into how these characters are marginalized not only by patriarchal norms in terms of gender but also excluded within the female community due to the dominant narrative focus on the protagonist.

Therefore, this study takes *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* as a case study to conduct an in-depth analysis of the characterization mechanisms of female supporting roles in the "strong female protagonist" narrative from the dual perspectives of demonization and instrumentalization. It explores how these characters are marginalized under the dual pressures of the protagonist's halo and patriarchal discipline, and how they consequently lose their autonomy. By addressing the existing research gap regarding the lived experiences of female supporting characters, this analysis aims to further reveal the limitations and potential of feminist narratives within audiovisual texts.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. The "Demonized" Villainess

When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use. Within the narrative framework of female-centric teleplays, antagonistic female supporting characters are systematically constructed as "villainesses" that serve the advancement of the plot. Their "villainy" does not serve to portray nuanced dimensions of human nature, but rather, through the archetype of evil for evil's sake, accentuates the heroine's moral and existential superiority [3]. Chizuko Ueno, in her seminal work *The Misogyny*, elucidated the pervasive phenomenon of misogyny within societal structures [4]. She pointed out that among women, "misogyny" more

frequently manifests as a form of self-loathing. Women internalize society's denigration and prejudice against the female gender, leading them to reject their own feminine identity, worth, or physicality, and fostering feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, or contempt toward other women.

In *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, this phenomenon is notably exemplified in what is termed a "Strong Female Protagonist" teleplay. Jin Yuyan and Wei Yanwan represent the two most prominent antagonistic female characters in the early and late phases of the teleplay respectively, bearing substantial narrative significance. Their "evil" is portrayed as an almost innate quality or stemming from an extremely simplistic emotional motivation. To establish Jin Yuyan's motivation for antagonizing the female protagonist, the screenwriters imposed upon her a pathological obsession with the Jade Clan Crown Prince. This fixation drives her to harm others and even jeopardize her own future and biological child in scheming for the prince's interests. Ultimately, under the righteous judgment of the protagonist Ruyi, she met a tragic demise alongside her child. Under such simplistic characterization, Jin Yuyan's downfall appears profoundly unconvincing. The screenwriter employs "emotional attachment" as a simplified motivation for a woman's struggles within the imperial harem, thereby reinforcing the stereotype of "love-obsessed females" prevalent in traditional character portrayals. The purpose of this narrative device is to accentuate the female protagonist's wisdom and courage in palace intrigues, yet it inadvertently reinforces stereotypes of secondary female characters while elevating the central heroine.

Moreover, at the beginning, Wei Yanyan, who was a minor palace maid, had her future ruined by the rumor that the protagonist team was "seducing the emperor". From then on, she was plunged into a life of suffering and eventually turned into a major villain. From a logical perspective, Wei Yanwan's descent into villainy constitutes a legitimate appeal for justice in response to the trauma she endured during her humble origins. Persecuted by the protagonist group, she ultimately triumphed after enduring prolonged bullying, establishing herself in the eyes of the audience as a woman of remarkable courage and strategic acumen. However, the screenwriter deliberately distorted her motivations into mere avarice. Her act of self-vindication was misinterpreted as persecution against the female protagonist, ultimately serving as a catalyst for the heroine's awakening. The design of this plot element exhibits a pronounced misogynistic undertone, as it prioritizes the protagonist's female empowerment narrative at the expense of trivializing the struggles of supporting female characters, dismissing their agency and efforts with contempt.

Furthermore, the behavioral logic of female antagonists often appears inconsistent as it is primarily designed to serve the narrative progression. For instance, Jin Yuyan, who was meticulously established as an antagonist in the early stages, saw her schemes become increasingly overt and crude later on. Similarly, despite having already attained a secure position, Wei Yanwan remained obsessively fixated on pursuing illusory power. These narrative breaks are essentially designed to highlight the victory of the female protagonist, Ruyi, and thus lack logical coherence. The narrative objectifies female supporting characters by conflating their moral transgressions with their physical and sexual appeal. The exotic allure and captivating dance movements of Jin Yuyan, along with the seductive physique and deliberate enticement of Wei Yanwan, are meticulously constructed through close-up shots and strategic lighting design as external manifestations intrinsically linked to their malevolent inner nature. This approach reflects Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze," wherein the female body is transformed into a spectacle for visual consumption, with its sexual allure equated to moral flaws and peril—thereby fulfilling patriarchal narratives that imagine and discipline the "fallen woman." [5]. Their ultimate tragic demise, lacking adequate causal justification, serves merely as a crude emotional catharsis for the audience. This narrative strategy inherently mitigates the critique of imperial authority by redirecting it into a framework of female rivalry. By irrationally demonizing villainesses to accentuate the protagonist's virtues, this narrative approach exacerbates conflicts among women.

3.2. The "Instrumentalized" Saintess

In narratives centered on "strong female protagonists," the vilification of "villainesses" is often juxtaposed with the instrumentalization of morally upright female supporting characters. Such characters are typically endowed with an aura of moral impeccability and an unwavering sense of absolute loyalty. However, this seemingly positive framing strategy in fact constitutes a more covert form of "othering." In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir posits the seminal argument that the social construction of femininity relegates women to an "Otherized" status, thereby depriving them of an autonomous selfhood [6]. By sanctifying them as self-sacrificing "saintess," their subjectivity and complexity as autonomous individuals were systematically negated. In the series *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, Hailan and Suoxin exemplify the archetypal representation of such "instrumentalized" character portrayals. Their presence does not serve to reflect the diversity of female values but functions solely to cater to the emotional needs and moral contrast of the protagonist, Ruyi, thereby acting as instruments to facilitate her character development.

Hailan is portrayed as Ruyi's most steadfast ally, with all her actions fundamentally driven by unconditional loyalty and devotion to Ruyi. Hailan received Ruyi's patronage and consequently became her devoted follower. Initially, she approached the emperor—who had assaulted her—to secure Ruyi's favor, and later, she meticulously orchestrated schemes to avenge Ruyi, even at the cost of exploiting her own son, Yongqi. Her life trajectory was entirely centered around Ruyi. The narrative deliberately downplays her independent desires and internal conflicts as both a mother and a royal consort, rendering her a nearly saintly symbol of devotion. Furthermore, to eliminate potential obstacles for Ruyi's advancement, she orchestrated schemes to harm the male offspring of other women within the imperial court. Her virtues and vices revolve entirely around the female protagonist. This narrative approach ostensibly celebrates female camaraderie, yet in reality, it confines women within the rigid confines of the "perfect auxiliary" archetype. Lacking both narrative coherence and character depth, it aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "the Other." This essentially reinforces the subordinate "otherness" of virtuous female supporting characters, whose subjectivity is entirely dissolved into their submission to the protagonist, such as Empress Ulanara.

Similarly, the loyalty of the maidservant Suoxin represents another extreme. As Ruyi's bondservant, she appeared innately devoid of personal desires when compared to Ruo, another maidservant who had betrayed her mistress. She endured torture without betraying Ruyi, believing herself unworthy of her beloved yet harboring no resentment, and ultimately attained a "fulfilling" resolution upon Ruyi's persuasion. This appears to be a reward for her virtues, but in reality, it constitutes an exploitation of female supporting characters. Her suffering and happiness serve as instruments to accentuate Ruyi's charismatic personality and moral integrity. Her unwavering fidelity substantiates Ruyi's worthiness, while her felicitous denouement symbolically represents the karmic rewards of steadfast allegiance to Ruyi. This results in the complete omission of the female supporting characters' inner emotional worlds and personal agency within the protagonist-centric narrative. Such a simplistic and stereotypical portrayal renders a morally upright female supporting character utterly pitiable.

3.3. A Comparative Analysis of the Two Visual Representations

In *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, the characterization of female supporting roles as either "demonized" or "instrumentalized" ostensibly represents two diametrically opposed archetypes. However, a deeper analysis reveals that these two modes of portrayal ultimately serve the same narrative function. A comparative analysis of these two narrative frameworks elucidates the paradoxical nature of the "strong female protagonist" trope with greater clarity.

In narrative terms, the archetypes of the "villainess" and the "saintess" collectively form a coherent narrative framework. The former must be punished to manifest "justice," while the latter deserves reward to exemplify "virtue"—all serving to substantiate the inevitability and legitimacy of Ruyi's ultimate success. Examined through Foucault's lens of disciplinary power, this comprehensive system of rewards and punishments constitutes an intricate mechanism of power discipline [7]. It disciplines

both the conduct of female characters within the narrative and the perceptual reception of the audience. The narrative structure, wherein antagonists such as Jin Yuyan and Wei Yanwan are punished for their "transgression of norms," while protagonists like Hailan and Suoxin are rewarded for their "compliance," subtly reinforces the patriarchal logic that disciplines female identity.

Employing the analytical framework of structuralist narratology reveals that both the "villainess" and the "saintess" function narratively as auxiliary characters, whose existence is entirely subordinated to the protagonist's developmental arc [8]. The "villainy" of antagonistic characters such as Jin Yuyan and Wei Yanwan is depicted as an innate trait or stemming from irrational jealousy, lacking complex social and psychological motivations, whereas the "goodness" of virtuous characters like Hailan and Suoxin is elevated to an extreme, rendering them instruments of selfless devotion. The practice of reducing characters to mere narrative functions reveals a fundamental flaw in the characterization of "strong female protagonist" teleplays—despite innovations in female-oriented themes, they remain constrained by the conventional storytelling tropes of genre television.

Finally, from the perspective of Althusser's theory of ideology, this dual othering narrative facilitates the ideological permeation of patriarchal thought among the audience, thereby impeding societal intellectual progress [9]. It reduces the complex issue of gender oppression to a matter of individual morality. The audience's emotions are channeled into hatred towards the "villainess" and admiration for the "saintess" sacrifices. This cathartic engagement with female supporting characters inadvertently reinforces the preservation of traditional gender norms, while obscuring systemic critiques of the institutional causes underlying such tragedies. Ruyi's "success" did not challenge the existing gender order; instead, it reinforced the legitimacy of this structure by demonstrating "how to prevail within established conventions." This aptly elucidates why *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, despite its ostensibly progressive "strong female protagonist" narrative, ultimately diverges from feminist emancipation. While attempting to portray a woman's growth and advancement under patriarchal oppression, the series inadvertently diminishes other female supporting characters, thereby reverting to the patriarchal disciplining of women. Superficial progress may in fact conceal a latent regression, as women's worth continues to be measured by their adherence to and triumph within traditional power structures—a trajectory fundamentally at odds with feminism's original objective of deconstructing and transcending patriarchal systems [10].

4. Conclusion

This study analyzes the teleplay *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* to elucidate the deeper contradictions within the cultural production sector, as reflected by the creative missteps prevalent in contemporary "strong female protagonist" television series. Amidst the intersection of market demands and rising gender consciousness, production entities have opted for the most conservative approach from a commercial standpoint. By symbolizing and commodifying feminism, they fabricate an illusion of progress while abandoning authentic portrayals of women's lived experiences. This strategy ostensibly adheres to political correctness while preserving the existing gender power structure intact, ultimately diluting the critical edge and authenticity inherent to works addressing women's issues.

This study, however, has certain limitations. Firstly, as a representative work of the palace intrigue genre, *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* may not fully encapsulate the narrative characteristics of other types of "strong female protagonist" teleplays, thus limiting the breadth of case-based support. Secondly, the study predominantly employs an analytical methodology combining textual and theoretical approaches, lacking an examination of audience reception. Further investigation is warranted to examine how audiences of varying genders, age groups, and educational backgrounds interpret these character portrayals.

In summary, this paper proposes several recommendations for future creative works focusing on female-centric narratives, such as the "strong female protagonist" genre. Firstly, it is imperative to transcend the conventional themes of harem intrigue and domestic conflicts, shifting towards a

multidimensional portrayal of women's daily lives, professional advancement, and societal engagement. Furthermore, in character development, it is imperative to abandon the instrumental treatment of female characters as mere plot devices for advancing narratives or facilitating others' growth. Instead, emphasis should be placed on portraying women as autonomous individuals with inherent subjectivity and multidimensional complexity, thereby crafting vivid and authentic female portrayals and narratives. Finally, there needs to be a shift from the individualistic narrative of "female protagonists achieving personal success" toward a collective narrative that focuses on building a community of shared destiny for women. Truly progressive gender-conscious artistic creation should strive to unveil the essence of gender oppression, showcase the diversity of women's lived experiences, and advance the evolution of societal gender perceptions. It is anticipated that future portrayals of female protagonists will transcend current limitations and genuinely evolve into a cultural force advancing gender equality, rather than serving as a refined replication of patriarchal norms.

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