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Study on the Self-awakening of Feminist Consciousness from the Female Image Building in Modern Chinese TV Dramas

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Abstract

As one of the ways of cultural dissemination, TV dramas reflect the social outlook and values of an era. In terms of the female images in modern TV dramas, the image, temperament, quality, and spiritual connotation reflected in different eras are all with the print of the eras. These changes reflect that in social progress, female images constantly changes and feminist consciousness constantly awakens.

Keywords

TV Dramas; Female Image; Feminist Consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, women are playing increasingly important roles in various fields such as politics and economy of the world, outstanding representatives being Lagarde, Yellen, Murdoch, and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris. In China, many women are also active in public fields. The awakening of women's self-consciousness and the identification of their own values are increasingly manifested. This awakening and change are reflected in the female image created on the screen, and have become the epitome or reflection of the cultural outlook and values of the era.

Art comes from life. As a mass media, TV dramas have a wide audience and the themes are more related to hot topics in the contemporary society, with such characteristics as everyday life narration, temporal content and popular viewpoints. Therefore, this paper limits the research within the scope of TV dramas, and studies the self-awakening of feminist consciousness through the female images in TV dramas.

On the basis of the above considerations, in this paper, 20 widely discussed TV dramas between 1990 and 2021 with high audience rating, and with females as the protagonists have been selected as the research subjects (see Table 1 for details). It studies the changes of female images, the causes of such changes, as well as the significance. In the mean time, 15 American TV dramas of the same era have been selected for a comparative study of the female images in Chinese and American TV dramas, so as to explore things with reference value (see Table 2 for details).

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE WOMEN PROJECTED IN DOMESTIC TV DRAMAS

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese society entered an era of transformation. Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, as the reform of the market economy gradually deepened, economic development radiated various aspects, including politics, society and culture, which was reflected in the visual presentation of mass media. From the popular TV dramas shown in the table, great changes have taken place in female images in the last 30 years. They have experience the transformation from “weak” to “strong”, from “supporting” to

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"leading", from simple to rich and from prototypes to complex images, etc. Such changes in their images not only reflected the society's increased respect and recognition of them, but also manifested the constant awakening of women's self-consciousness.

Table 1. Popular TV dramas in China since 1990 and the main female images in them

Year	Title of the TV drama	Main female character(s)
1990	Longing	Liu Huifang
1991	Newcomer Girl	Zhao Xiaoyun
1994	A Native of Beijing in New York	A Chun
1998	Princess Pearl	Xiaoyanzi
2001	Romance in the Rain	Lu Yiping
2006	New Age of Marriage	Gu Xiaoxi
2007	Struggle	Xia Lin, Yang Xiaoyun, Milai
2007	Double-sided Adhesive Tape	Hu Lijuan
2009	Dwelling Narrowness	Guo Haizao
2010	Go Lala Go!	Du Lala
2011	Empresses in the Palace	Zhenhuan
2012	A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era	Mao Doudou
2013	Hot Mom	Qiao An
2015	Legend of Miyue	Miyue
2016	Ode to Joy	An Di, Qu Xiaoxiao, Fan Shengmei, etc.
2017	The First Half of My Life	Luo Zijun, Tang Jing
2018	Story of Yanxi Palace	Wei Yingluo
2019	All is Well	Su Mingyu
2020	Nothing but Thirty	Gu Jia, Wang Manni, Zhong Xiaoqin
2021	My Best Friends' Story	Jiang Nansun, Zhu Suosuo

Table 2. Popular TV dramas in America since the 1990s and the main female images in them

Year	Title	Main female character(s)
1994-2004	Friends	Rachel, Monica
1998-2003	Sex and the City	Kelly, Samantha , etc.
2005-	Grey's Anatomy	Grey, Yang, etc.
2004-2012	Desperate Housewives	Bree, Susan, etc.
2009-2015	The Good Wife	Alisa
2011-2017	2 Broke Girls	Max, Carolyn
2017-	Big Little Lies	Madeline, Celeste
2017-	The Handmaid's Tale	Offred
2013-2017	Devious Maids	Carmen, Rose, etc.
2013-2018	House of cards	Clare
2013-2020	Orange is the New Black	Pipa, Alex
2014-2020	Madam Secretary	Elizabeth McCord
2017-2019	The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel	Mickey Maisel
2019-	Why Women Kill	Simone, Ann
2020-	The Queen's Gambit	Beth Hammon

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2.1. Changes Reflected in the "Character Setting" of Female Protagonists

2.1.1 More diversified female images

Females images in TV dramas are no longer dominated by "family images" (such as daughters, mothers, wives), but they are rather having more diversified "social images" (such as professional women, friends, lovers, mistresses, etc.). In terms of the age of female images, young girls in the 20s are no longer the only group shown in the dramas. Instead, "mature" women in their 30s begin to draw attention. In addition, such themes as marriage or housewife lives are no longer the main theme for women above 30. Images of single, independent and professional women in such works as Nothing but Thirty, The First Half of My Life and All is Well are depicted and expressed in a richer manner. They accept their age with no misgivings, and liberally show the charm of mature women, and are rather popular in the market. Women are having a wider range of possibilities.

2.1.2 More alive personalities

Liu Huifang in Longing is portrayed as a moral model who is soft on the outside, strong on the inside, who dedicates selflessly with forbearance and kindness. Her facial expressions are mostly sad and solemn, and her dress is frugal, reflecting the traditional cognition of women as "good wives and mothers" in society at that time; Zhao Xiaoyun in Newcomer Girl is a new type of modern woman who emerged during the reform and opening up. Her self-improving and tenacious "strong woman" image was the first wave of impact on the female image of "good wives and loving mothers"; In A Native of Beijing in New York, Ah Chun is independent, free, and decisive, mixing the wisdom of Chinese women and the openness of Western women. These mature and tense "women in the workplace" roles have become idols for many female audiences. Later, Xiaoyanzi in Princess Pearl was arrogant but not domineering. She was pure and enthusiastic, with a chivalrous heart, and became synonymous with the image of "rebellious" women at that time; Lu Yiping in Romance in the Rain was independent, daring to love and hate, and dedicated herself to love; Struggle made the post-80s the protagonist in TV dramas for the first time. It presented diversified modern female images, showing self-respected, independent, casual and rebellious women. The consciousness of being loyal to the heart, understanding and self-knowledge permeates their entire process of struggle; Guo Haizao, the heroine in Dwelling Narrowness is the famous mistress image on the screen. Her anti-moral posture made her a typical example of rebellious females, which triggered a heated debate in the real society about the traditional ethical norms and the values of women in the new era. From good wives and mothers to independent women, from "good girls" to "character women", from "soft" to "sassy"...women began to show more full and varied personalities.

2.1.3 More obvious "big heroine" halo

Such works as Empresses in the Palace, Legend of Miyue and Story of Yanxi Palace all have the label of "big heroine", breaking the stereotype female image of "being stared at" and "being rescued". They no longer stressed the miserable female images being suppressed so as to gain the sympathy and attention of the audience (like famous TV dramas written by Qiongyao such as Meihualuo and Princess Xinyue). "Big heroines" have thoughts, goals, they love and hate, they have tricks and plans. They refuse to accept traditional men's fixed understanding towards women. This not only reflects the improvement of women's social and cultural status, but also reflects women's challenge to the patriarchal society and their desire for a voice. On the contrary, the "silly sweet girls", "white lotus girls" and "Mrs. Virgin" heroines who regard weakness as beauty are no longer the mainstream of the market, nor are they recognized by the audience any more.

On the one hand, the changes in female roles reflect TV drama directors' grasp of the current mainstream values, and on the other hand, they also reflect the changes in contemporary society's perception of women. The mass media portrays more comprehensive and rich

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personalities of women as independent individuals in reality by shaping the appearance and character of female characters in TV dramas. Modern women gradually tore off the traditional labels attached to them. The display of feminine charm shifted from following traditional virtues to characters, spiritual independence, and intellectual development, which is the external representation of the awakening of feminist consciousness.

2.2. Changes Reflected in the Main Story Line

2.2.1 Relation between men and women became more equal

Love remains the main theme of most TV dramas, but there is an obvious change in the relation between men and women from “loving him” to “pleasing myself”. For example, in such “big heroine” dramas like Empresses in the Palace, Story of Yanxi Palace and Go Lala Go!, male characters became the supporting ones, whose main purpose was to drive the plot forward and enhance the female images and help with the personal growth of the heroines. In TV dramas about family lives, the modern marriage model of "democracy and equality" began to appear. The relationship between Gu Xiaoxi and He Jianguo in A New Era of Marriage and Hu Lijuan and Li Yaping in Double-sided Adhesive Tape are typical of the modern family model in which both spouses share rights and obligations; In urban TV dramas, women in the new era have more diverse choices: in The First Half of My Life, Luo Zijun returns to the workplace to become independent after a divorce, while the calm and sensible Tang Jing insists that "you can find another one if you have lost your love, but you can't lose your job"; An Di in Ode to Joy and Su Mingyu in All is Well both made their own choice to become "leftover women". Between love and career, they tend to choose the latter. Whether it is in costume dramas or a modern urban dramas, having a happy family and lovely children is no longer the capital and self-satisfaction conditions for women to show off, nor is it the only value for them to realize their ideals in life. In the screenwriter's pen, the setting of the relationship between "strong men and weak women" has suddenly decreased. Men no longer blindly "stare at" women, but begin to appreciate women, respect and admire their talents.

2.2.2 The contradiction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law gradually faded

The contradiction between the petty bourgeois daughter-in-law and the traditional mother-in-law in Double-sided Adhesive Tape or the conflict between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law caused by the urban and rural differences in A New Era of Marriage are the main narrative content of family lives in romance dramas. As the times change, the conflicts between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws are no longer the main narrative direction. A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era and Hot Mom no longer highlighted the conflicts between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. The “hereditary enemy” relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law has been broken and harmonious and magnanimous family relationship are frequently seen. Reconciling, respecting and identifying between women of different generations has been a new trend of the relationship between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws.

2.2.3 Constant manifestation of friendships between women

Although intrigues and jealousy between women widely exist in TV dramas of harem fight, workplace and family stories, there are more and more descriptions of friendships between women. Such TV dramas as Ode to Joy, Nothing but Thirty, My Best Friends’ Story and The First Half of My Life began to praise the appreciation of the same sex and the friendship of mutual help. The director and screenwriter have expressed the renewed view of love and marriage of women, and the female consciousness has become more prominent. The role of friend has changed from the original branch line in narration to the main line. Friendship between women has departed from simple "pastime for each other" and has become an emotional bond,

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connecting each other and becoming a place where women can trust in the single era in addition to family relationships, and turned into a more realistic relationship of "mutual achievement".

The main body of the structure of TV dramas is the relationship between people. As the inner tension of female characters continues to increase, the story structure has become more diverse and multidimensional. Female characters in TV dramas are no longer materialized, subordinate and instrumental roles, but are more fully interpreted as social people. The complexity and changes in interpersonal relationships reflect changes in women's outlook on life and values. Their self-worth and social value as human beings have been better embodied.

3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN TV DRAMAS IN THE BUILDING OF FEMALE IMAGES

Most of the typical American dramas listed in Table 2 have gained good reputation, reflecting the awakening and progress of contemporary American women's consciousness. In today's world of global integration, the liberation and rise of women born from economic development is a trend. However, in contrast, there are still many differences in the depiction of women in American and Chinese TV dramas. Not only are the images of women in American TV dramas more three-dimensional and richer than the images of housewives and professional women in domestic dramas, but women in American TV dramas are also more independent in the ways and means to realize their self-worth. More importantly, the new trend of female identity in American TV dramas not only comes from the projection of reality, but also provides a variety of ways for women in reality to seek emotional resonance, and has obvious practical thinking and social critical significance. In this sense, domestic dramas lack expression and depth.

3.1. Female Images in American TV Dramas Are More Diverse and Three-dimensional

American dramas with rich themes and types are showing increasingly diverse female images, with not only housewives like those in Desperate Housewives and Big Little Lies, single women in Friends and Sex and the City, but also state-level senior professional women like those in Madam Secretary, The Good Wife and House of Cards. In a certain way, women in American TV dramas increasingly play multiple roles and have multiple identities. The diversified identity reconstruction allows the audience to see women of different classes and groups, and understand the living conditions and emotional world of different groups of women.

3.2. The Depiction of Women in American TV Dramas Is with More Practical Significance

The Handmaid's Tale creatively incorporates science fiction into a feminist perspective, showing the audience how women resist the patriarchal society and their own destiny, and contains in-depth thinking about the value of women's existence. In such TV dramas as Grey’s Anatomy, The Good Wife, House of Cards and Madam Secretary, in addition to the depiction of women from such perspectives as family and love, they also demonstrate professionally the social trend of workplace being a new battlefield for women. Many Latino or Asian faces are seen in such dramas as Devious Maids and Orange is the New Black, providing a certain discourse space for female images from the third world. They broadened the extension of feminist discussion, and incorporated sharp issues such as class, race, and religion into the shaping of female images, involving the living conditions of women on a global scale.

3.3. More Prominent Thoughts of Feminism in American TV Dramas

TV dramas with high audience rating, reputation and have been recognized by mainstream awards such as Friends, Sex and the City, Grey’s Anatomy, Desperate Housewives, Big and Little Lies, Why Women Kill, The Queen’s Gambit and 2 Broke Girls were all constructed with women as the absolute protagonists. These female characters are not “ideal” or “perfect”, they are even with moral defects or weaknesses, yet this fact doesn’t influence their protagonist position in

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the dramas. Most directors or scriptwriters have abandoned the thought of putting women in subordinating and attaching positions. The consciousness of being equal to men has become more obvious and stronger, enabling us to see the attitude of different races, social groups or classes towards "feminism", which can better arouse our resonance and reflection. In contrast, the depiction of "feminism" in domestic dramas is often vague or even shallow. Taking The First Half of My Life as an example, although the scriptwriters wanted to present the inspiring struggle of women through the character of Luo Zijun, in its essence, they still put women in a position to be rescued. The promotion of Luo Zijun in her career relied on the resources possessed by He Han. Such a logic structure of a woman "relying on herself" is obviously not convincing.

4. REFLECTION ON FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC TV DRAMAS WITH FEMINIST THEMES

After decades of development and transformation, domestic TV dramas are marching towards a wider scope, and the female images they depict are becoming freer, more confident, and with more vitality. While the living conditions of women in the new era are shown, women's self-growth in their spiritual world, the realization of their self-worth and the awakening of their self-consciousness are drawing wide attention. To a certain extent, the transformation in the audience's aesthetic taste also reflect the change in the social status of women, the increase of women's social participation and voice, as well as the changes in the society's attitude towards women. This is a precious, rare and huge progress.

However, we must see that in domestic TV dramas, female characters are dominating half the works, but there is a trend that the characters are becoming similar to one another, which exposes the lack of imagination in TV drama making. The interpretation of "feminism" in TV dramas with "big heroins" is still thin and narrow. They are not even accurate female images, let alone the equality between men and women. The thinking model of putting women in a subordinate and attaching position has not yet been thoroughly changed. Simple copying and repeating is not conducive to the benign development of the TV drama industry, nor does it have reference values for the individual growth of common women. Their contribution to truly advocating and promoting equality between men and women and social progress is minimal. At the same time, many TV dramas painstakingly stress the wilful characters of women and their outlook on money, without breaking the partial logic of relying on the appearance of women in building their images: the leading female character must have a beautiful face and a sexy figure, fair skin and a delicate "sense of a young girl"... the practice of going to vulgar and pleasing the popular consumption culture still widely exists, and women still have not got rid of the position of "being stared at" and "being consumed".

TV dramas are the window of social culture and the mirror of ideals. The deficiency in the expression of female images in Chinese TV dramas reflects the fact that there is still a space of improvement in the cognition of the society about the development and progress of women, and the women's own consciousness of self-development and self-improvement. As the women's subjectivity and independent consciousness constantly awakens, women nowadays are no longer the weak, attaching and supporting images in people's stereotyped impression. They are existing in a more confident, independent and self-relying social images, and more reflection and self-breakthrough of the female images in TV dramas are also required in this era.

It's the responsibility and duty of domestic TV dramas to pay attention to the lives and mentality of women in this age, look squarely at the changes of women's status in the contemporary society and in their families, and project Chinese women's desire and need for self-development. In response of the prejudice and constraints existing in the society, they should strive to construct female images in line with temporal characteristics in TV dramas,

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promoting the development of TV drama creation towards the direction of more comprehensively and fully interpreting Chinese women and manifesting social values.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Whether it is in TV dramas or in reality, women's self-consciousness is constantly awakening. Independent and modern women who do not attach to men and women with the same capacities as men constantly appear in reality and in TV dramas. In TV dramas, there is the perfect setting that women can grow, succeed or change their fate. In reality, there might be the cruel truth that struggle may not be followed by success. TV dramas may be misleading; equality between men and women and social identification can not exist only in TV dramas, but they should be more realized through specific measures in the reality.

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