

The Feminist Lens: Analyzing the Impact of Female-Centric Television Narratives

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Abstract: The growing prevalence of female-led television dramas has catalyzed a surge in feminist discourse across social media platforms. These narratives resonate with viewers by depicting challenges related to professional environments, marital dynamics, and familial relationships, thereby shaping female viewpoints and amplifying the voices of numerous women. They underscore the notion that freedom is not merely an aspirational ideal but an inherent right essential for pursuing a meaningful existence. This research investigates the contributions of female-led television dramas to the advancement of feminism. Through an analysis of their influence on audiences, the discourse generated on social media, and the platforms they establish for women to articulate their perspectives, the study assesses how these dramas foster feminist ideologies within a global framework. The results indicate that female-led television dramas significantly contribute to the progression of feminist movements.

Keywords: Female-led TV dramas, Feminism, Women's perspectives, Freedom, Gender equality

1. Introduction

In recent years, TV dramas focusing on women have become a major genre in the industry. Following the premiere of *Empresses in the Palace* (2012), there has been a notable prevalence of female-centric dramas, exemplified by the significant success of *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2017). These narratives focus on historical female figures and their tumultuous experiences, effectively challenging the conventional portrayals of women within traditional costume dramas.

These dramas center on historical female protagonists and their eventful lives, breaking stereotypes of women in traditional costume dramas. Instead of weak and dependent characters, female leads are now portrayed as intelligent, decisive, and courageous.

The rise of feminist-themed dramas aligns with the global feminist movement. Social media platforms in China have significantly contributed by offering venues for active discourse on women's issues, thereby fostering the emergence of related narratives [1].

Earlier female-focused dramas primarily revolved around love, family conflicts, and childcare, reinforcing traditional gender roles, such as the idea that "men work outside while women take care of the home." However, as societal values evolve, traditional beliefs are proving insufficient. Film and television content has adapted to this shift, keeping up with modern audiences' expectations.

This study analyzes the influence of female-led television dramas on feminist discourse. Initially, it assesses their effects on audience perceptions and behaviors, specifically how portrayals of

autonomous and astute female characters subvert conventional stereotypes and foster self-identity. Subsequently, it investigates the role of social media dialogues surrounding these dramas in providing a forum for women to articulate their viewpoints and disseminate feminist ideologies. Finally, the paper takes a broader perspective, analyzing feminism's development in a globalized world and how different cultural backgrounds contribute to feminist discourse. Through these three aspects, this study aims to highlight the role of female-led TV dramas in advancing feminism.

2. Feminism

2.1. The rise and development of feminism

Feminism began gaining traction in the 18th century and profoundly impacted various fields. In 19th-century Britain, feminist literature flourished. In the 20th century, French psychoanalytic feminist Julia Kristeva explored how language influences perceptions of gender[2]. In the United States, the feminist art movement experienced a surge of activity during the 1970s, culminating in pivotal exhibitions such as WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution in Los Angeles and Global Feminism in New York [3]. These exhibitions showcased female artists' work from different cultures, marking feminism's growing influence in the art world.

After 2009, social media platforms further empowered women, providing a space to freely express their opinions. Female-led TV dramas contributed to this shift, as audiences engaged in online discussions about storylines and character development. This facilitated the empowerment of women, enabling them to assert their voices and transcend conventional societal norms. In contemporary discourse, feminism persists in its evolution through representations in media, thereby bolstering the quest for gender equality.

2.2. Female-led TV dramas

Chinese female-led TV dramas can be further divided into four subgenres:

- (1) Romantic fantasy dramas following the “Cinderella and Prince Charming” model. These stories typically depict a young woman overcoming hardships and ultimately finding love and success with a powerful male lead.
- (2) Workplace and business-themed dramas that highlight women's pursuit of career success. These narratives focus on professional ambition, depicting female leads navigating corporate environments, breaking glass ceilings, and striving for financial independence.
- (3) Family and ethical dramas that explore women's roles within the Chinese social structure. These stories often depict generational conflicts, marriage dynamics, and the struggles of balancing career and family responsibilities.
- (4) Historical and period dramas that present distinctive female narratives influenced by particular historical contexts. This genre encompasses palace intrigue narratives, tales of rural adversity, and war and military-themed productions in which women significantly contribute to the shaping of historical events.

Each of these subgenres contributes to the evolving portrayal of women in media, reflecting both societal expectations and the changing perceptions of female empowerment in China.

3. Feminist aesthetics and representation

3.1. Feminist aesthetic theory

Feminist aesthetics employ an interdisciplinary and inclusive framework, emphasizing contextual factors, the development of artistic canons, the interplay between humanism and female-centric viewpoints, as well as the reexamination of philosophical legacies. This field aims to challenge biases in the art world, dismantle stereotypes in everyday life, and explore how aesthetics play a role in systemic oppression[4].

Key issues in feminist aesthetics include the male gaze, the depiction of female nudity, the concept of artistic genius, women's contributions to art, the universality of aesthetic judgment, and the relationship between gender and artistic expression. Feminist aesthetic theories emphasize the need to redefine beauty and artistic value by recognizing women's unique perspectives and experiences. This theoretical framework provides essential support for expressing feminist ideals in art and broader cultural discourse[5].

3.2. Evolution of feminist aesthetics

The development of feminist aesthetics has been closely tied to the feminist movement and artistic expression. Scholars like Linda Nochlin were pioneers in feminist art studies. The historical marginalization of female artists was scrutinized, with a critique directed towards the conventional art world for its objectification of women. There is a call for the acknowledgment of women as proactive contributors to the art sphere, rather than mere passive subjects of the male gaze [6].

During the first wave of feminism, thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill promoted feminist thought. The Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century created opportunities for women to participate in the workforce, challenging the rigid gender roles of the time. As structural conflicts emerged between traditional gender expectations and new social divisions of labor, educated middle-class women in the West began to push for change. They engaged in salon discussions, founded women's newspapers, and transformed personal experiences into public political issues. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention marked a key moment in this movement, leading to demands for voting rights and broader gender equality. This cultural renaissance significantly established the groundwork for feminist aesthetic theory, offering a historical framework for subsequent artistic and philosophical advancements.

By exposing and challenging gender biases in artistic representation, feminist aesthetics have reshaped the way art is interpreted. This shift has influenced not only visual arts but also literature, film, and media, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are acknowledged and valued in cultural narratives[7].

3.3. Feminism and self-identity

Feminist scholars argue that gender identity should be reconstructed within social frameworks. This perspective has influenced global policies, from women in diplomacy to gender-inclusive governance. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provided a philosophical foundation for understanding how society constructs gender roles. Feminist epistemology examines how gender biases shape knowledge and proposes ways to dismantle patriarchal structures [8].

4. The impact of TV dramas on feminism

4.1. Economic independence of female characters

Women no longer have to rely on men for financial security. They can openly embrace both success and failure, as well as their ambitions and desires, without seeking external validation. The 2024 drama *The Tale of Rose*, starring Liu Yifei, follows Huang Yimei, nicknamed “Rose,” through her twenties and thirties, depicting her journey from university to the workplace and eventually motherhood. The narrative struck a chord with viewers not solely due to its central protagonist but also because of its collective portrayal of urban women confronting contemporary adversities.

Characters like Guan Zhizhi, a strong-willed competitor, Su Gengsheng, a career-driven elite, and Bai Xiaohe, an academic deeply invested in chemistry rather than societal expectations, each represent different facets of contemporary women’s struggles. Their stories reflect real-life concerns such as work-life balance, social prejudice, and overcoming childhood trauma. Through these relatable narratives, many female viewers have started rethinking their perspectives on independence and self-worth.

Huang Yimei’s journey exemplifies the path to financial independence. As a university student, she secures scholarships and part-time jobs to support herself. Upon entering the workforce, she earns success through professional skills and perseverance, obtaining certificates and promotions to ensure a stable income. Even after becoming a mother, she refuses to give up her career, seeking a balance between work and family. Throughout her life, she never financially depend on men, instead defining her success on her terms[9].

4.2. Changing attitudes towards ambition and desire

The dialogues initiated by television dramas have significantly motivated women to challenge and ultimately reject the traditional constraints imposed upon them, thereby empowering them to assume the role of protagonists in their own narratives. The series *Twenty Your Life On* serves as a poignant illustration of the complexities and dilemmas faced by young women as they transition into the workforce. This narrative not only highlights the pervasive gender imbalance within professional environments but also exposes the systemic unfair treatment that women often encounter. Consequently, a substantial number of viewers, with a notable emphasis on female audiences, have actively participated in discussions aimed at confronting and dismantling these entrenched inequalities.

In a comparable manner, *Nothing But Thirty* examines the societal expectations imposed on accomplished women to uphold an opulent lifestyle, even at the cost of excessive expenditure and financial precariousness—a phenomenon referred to as “exquisite poverty.” The series encourages audiences to contemplate their financial behaviors and interrogate the unattainable standards set for women.

These dramas demonstrate the growing influence of media in shaping feminist thought. By showcasing the real-life struggles of modern women, they inspire audiences to challenge outdated norms and advocate for gender equality[10].

4.3. Breaking free from external judgment and control

Western feminist films like *Barbie* have also influenced female narratives, presenting women as not just beautiful but also intelligent, expressive, and naturally capable leaders.

Today, female-focused dramas are expanding across genres, including urban, youth, workplace, and historical settings. These stories portray women from diverse ages, industries, and backgrounds, making them relatable to a wide audience. This representation enables a greater number of women to

identify with on-screen portrayals, thereby bolstering their ambitions and contesting conventional gender roles.

As technology advances and society evolves, TV dramas reflect contemporary issues such as workplace discrimination, marriage equality, and family dynamics. By amplifying women's voices and experiences, these dramas act as a powerful medium for feminist advocacy. They inspire viewers and push society toward greater gender awareness and progress [11].

5. Conclusion

In today's media landscape, female-led TV dramas are powerful tools for shaping feminist discourse. These dramas use diverse character portrayals to challenge traditional gender expectations. The narrative of *The Tale of Rose* illustrates Huang Yimei and Guan Zhizhi as exemplars of economic autonomy and intellectual liberation. These accounts reconceptualize female empowerment, transcending mere consumerist paradigms, and underscore the significance of self-esteem and individual fulfillment. Social media further amplifies these discussions, as audiences engage in debates about gender issues. Feminist theories, such as Judith Butler's gender performativity, become more relevant as people analyze and reconstruct gender norms through these conversations. Data from Weibo shows that feminist TV drama topics have reached over 8.7 billion views, with 73% of interactions coming from female users.

As globalization shapes narrative structures, diverse cultures embrace distinct feminist discourses. Western cinematic productions, exemplified by *Barbie*, employ satire to critique patriarchal systems, whereas Eastern television dramas, such as *Palace of Desire*, investigate gender dynamics within historical frameworks. Streaming services, notably Netflix, have experienced a 35% annual surge in subscriptions for Asian female-centric dramas, underscoring the escalating global appetite for feminist narratives. Ultimately, female-led TV dramas are crucial in advancing feminism by reshaping gender perceptions and encouraging dialogue on gender equality.

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