

Narrative Deviance and Discursive Discipline: Structural Mechanisms of Audience Resistance to Female-Centric Storytelling

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Abstract. This study focuses on the structural misinterpretation of the "equal rights grammar" in female-dominated film and television works in the mainstream context, focusing on their expression strategies such as de-romanticized emotional writing, feminine narratives and decentralized male characters, as well as why they are frequently labeled with negative labels such as "overly emotional" and "politically correct" after entering the mainstream vision. Research shows that such misinterpretations are not accidental cognitive biases, but rather a systematic rejection of heterodox narrative forms and the right to gender expression within mainstream reception mechanisms. This article uses three representative female-led works on the Douban platform—Like A Rolling Stone, Her Story, and Barbie—as case studies. The study collected over 600 user reviews (including over 300 highly interactive and over 300 negative ones) and applied qualitative discourse analysis to identify and categorize offensive language directed at the "forms of expression" themselves. The study found that criticism often focuses on the denial of the "legitimacy" of expression rather than substantive disputes over content or subject matter, highlighting the "cognitive exclusion" mechanism inherent in the structure of gender discourse. This study calls for reflection on the boundaries of "effective expression" in the contemporary media context, questioning the gender biases in mainstream narrative evaluation criteria and expressibility, and exposing the structural repression that women's expression still faces in public cultural spaces.

Keywords: Structural Misreading, Equal Rights Grammar, Mainstream Narrative, Female Identity

1. Introduction

In recent years, female filmmakers have increasingly challenged male-centric narrative paradigms in film and television, moving beyond conventional romance and family ethics to engage with structural oppression, emotional politics, and alternative models of intimacy. However, these narratives often encounter structural misreadings: when works deviate from "sweet," "healing" storylines and instead portray anger, detachment, or critique of heteronormativity, they are

frequently dismissed as “overly ideological” or “emotionally excessive.” Such responses reflect not just taste-based disagreements but deeper gendered spectatorial logics and emotional norms.

Mainstream audiovisual culture, as Mulvey argues, has long served the “male gaze,” casting women as passive objects rather than narrative agents [1]. Essig [2] identifies romantic culture as a form of “privatized hope,” a way to displace structural anxieties into private emotional fulfillment. Within this framework, any disruption of normative happiness—what Ahmed [3] terms the politics of emotion—is often rejected as illegible or unwelcome.

This study conducts qualitative discourse analysis on Douban reviews of three female-led productions, examining how de-romanticized gender narratives are misinterpreted and delegitimized. Drawing on Butler’s performativity, Ahmed’s affective politics, and Mulvey’s visual theory, it explores how audience resistance is shaped by ideological and platform-driven norms. By interrogating how gendered expressions are policed through commentary culture, this research sheds light on structural constraints to women’s narrative legitimacy and raises critical questions about who gets to feel, speak, and be heard in contemporary media spaces.

2. Structural roots of misreading

In contemporary media culture, the “equal rights grammar” employed by female-led works—through decentering male protagonists, foregrounding female emotional expression, and challenging conventional narrative structures—is frequently met with critiques such as “overly ideological,” “too emotional,” or “lacking empathy.” These responses should not be reduced to individual taste or interpretive variance; rather, they exemplify the structural operations of gendered discursive power within cultural reception.

Female creators do not enter a neutral discursive arena. Their expressions are preconditioned by cultural and algorithmic logics that regulate who is authorized to speak and which narratives are legitimized. Works deviating from heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks are often read as “disruptive” or “manipulative,” revealing systemic resistance to gendered narrative shifts.

These evaluations reflect not subjective bias but entrenched emotional norms and platform-mediated reception filters that discipline feminist expression. Misreading, in this context, is not incidental—but a patterned outcome of structural power embedded in media systems.

2.1. Boundaries of mainstream expression

Mainstream expression has never been “the collection of all voices,” but the result of selective filtering driven by power. Alsheikh builds on Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse, emphasizing that in the digital age, power is no longer monopolized by a central authority but is dispersed through technological infrastructures such as networks, platforms, and algorithms. As Foucault argues, power operates not only through repression but through discourse that shapes what is knowable, sayable, and doable [4]. In this sense, mainstream expression is not a democratic aggregation of voices, but a product of institutional discourse power that determines who may speak and whose voices are platformed and circulated [4]. Today, this process is enacted through algorithmic curation, cultural norms, and dominant aesthetic expectations.

Within popular culture, McRobbie [5] critiques the rise of “post-feminism,” arguing that mainstream feminism often depoliticizes and marginalizes more radical feminist discourses. Through symbolic gestures that appear to celebrate women’s freedom and success, post-feminist narratives obscure structural inequality, reframing feminism as a personalized, market-driven lifestyle. McRobbie identifies four domains—beauty/fashion, education/employment, fertility, and

globalization—where women’s empowerment is promoted but primarily within neoliberal, individualistic frameworks [5]. This illusion of equality fosters the belief that feminism has already succeeded and is thus obsolete [6].

Gill [7] further conceptualizes contemporary social media as governed by a moralized aesthetic consensus. Young women’s public expression is expected to be polite, restrained, and emotionally neutral to be deemed legitimate. This “structural acceptability filter” excludes expressions deemed excessive or irrational, disproportionately impacting feminist and marginalized voices. As a result, self-censorship becomes pervasive, as individuals package their speech to conform to acceptable norms in order to be heard and circulated.

2.2. “Female” identity and relational labor

When analyzing Douban’s misreadings of female-led film and television works, a recurring pattern emerges: critiques often question whether the creators provide a “qualified” representation of women, offer “sufficient authenticity,” or reflect a “universal female experience.” Female directors and screenwriters are expected to embody an idealized “female perspective,” with any deviation dismissed as “selfish” or “unrepresentative.” This audience-imposed “representational anxiety” is not coincidental but rooted in the historical construction of gender discourse.

Judith Butler [8] interrogates the stability of “female” as a political and discursive category, arguing that feminist theory often assumes a coherent female identity to justify its representational claims. Yet this presumption ignores the term’s unstable and contested nature, especially in post-structural and multicultural contexts, where the concept of universal patriarchy fails to explain localized mechanisms of oppression. Thus, feminism faces the dilemma of avoiding essentialism while seeking political visibility. Structural misreadings arise not from textual ambiguity, but from the persistent instability of women’s legitimacy as expressive subjects. When female creators explore identity, emotion, or gender politics, their work is often read as “personal” or “performative” rather than representative.

Baym [9] notes that digital creators, particularly women, must engage in ongoing “relational labor” to sustain audience connection—balancing authenticity with emotional restraint. For female creators, expression must appear sincere yet not overly radical or emotional. This “legitimacy filter” helps explain why critiques often target not the text itself, but the perceived qualifications of its speaker—a key mechanism sustaining structural misinterpretation.

2.3. Audience power

Audiences are never neutral recipients of content. In online spaces, comments function not only as feedback but as “expressions of cultural stance.” As Andrejevic notes, viewers reclaim interpretive authority through strategies like “pickiness,” “teasing,” and “resistant reading” [10]. Such critiques are often less about aesthetics and more about structural defense: when content challenges mainstream audiences’ gender identities, emotional comfort zones, or cultural authority, their resistance reflects an affective defense mechanism. Female-dominated works are especially susceptible, as they disrupt assumptions about who is entitled to speak and what aesthetics are considered legitimate.

Pitcan, Marwick, and Boyd describe the “vanilla self” as the preferred mode of digital expression—gentle, neutral, and emotionally contained. This is not neutral but a morally and aesthetically coded filter. Expressions that deviate from this norm are frequently labeled “irrational,” “extreme,” or “excessive,” facing delegitimization by both users and algorithms. As the authors emphasize,

young people recognize the risks of voicing strong opinions, particularly those tied to marginalized identities, in an online environment where clarity and conformity are rewarded over nuance [11].

3. Challenges to the narrative order

In recent years, the "equal rights grammar" of female-led works has challenged the male-centered narrative paradigm. By rejecting structures such as the "hero's journey," heterosexual attachments, and singular male perspectives, these works reconstruct meaning through deromanticized emotions, female bonds, and multi-centered storytelling. This shift innovates content and subverts dominant cultural standards. The "equal rights grammar" is not merely a "female theme," but a structural critique of who holds narrative authority. Yet, once these expressions enter mainstream platforms, they are frequently dismissed as "ideological," "scattered," or "too emotional," revealing entrenched gendered reception logics and identity defense mechanisms.

3.1. Deromanticization of female characters

Romance in media is more than a personal theme—it operates as structural ideology. Laurie Essig argues that romance offers a privatized response to global threats and systemic dysfunction [2]. Amid crises such as climate change and political instability, romantic fantasies serve as emotional escapes, promoting the illusion that "true love can save us" [2]. This "privatization of hope" shapes emotional norms and audience expectations.

When female creators reject tropes like "marriage as redemption" or "love conquers all" and instead depict singleness, non-marriage, or gendered asymmetry, they often face emotional resistance. Comments such as "too depressing" or "not real love" reflect discomfort with narratives that disrupt romance as a stabilizing fantasy. These narratives reposition women not as "objects of love" but as agents of desire and critique.

Sara Ahmed, in *The Promise of Happiness*, analyzes the "happy housewife" as a politically constructed ideal that masks structural inequalities [3]. This emotional template excludes those who do not conform, reinforcing who is "allowed" to be happy. Ahmed suggests that feminist dissent—the figure of the "feminist killjoy"—reveals suppressed emotions and breaks the illusion of normative happiness [3]. When women express anger, reject intimacy scripts, or deny romantic closure, they are criticized as "too extreme" or "uncomfortable." These responses stem not from individual bias, but from a culturally conditioned discomfort with feminist disruption.

3.2. Male narrative

Mainstream cinema has long structured viewing through a male-centered logic. Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory illustrates how traditional narrative film positions viewers as implicitly male, casting women as passive objects of visual pleasure [1]. Women are rarely narrative agents; instead, their presence is designed to serve male protagonists' emotional arcs.

Mulvey links this to a gendered structure of visual pleasure, in which the male subject is active and controlling, while the female is coded for display. Through camera angles, editing, and narrative function, women are visually eroticized and symbolically subordinated [1]. As Bud Boetticher puts it, what matters is not what the heroine does, but what emotions she evokes in the hero—love, fear, protectiveness, or possessiveness—that motivate him to act [1].

Thus, the "male narrative" is not simply a reproduction of gender power inequality, but a structural problem rooted in the cultural unconscious and constructed by the symbolic order and

viewing mechanism. In this mechanism, film not only produces stories but also produces gender relations, viewing ethics, and symbolic politics.

4. Case studies

4.1. Sample and selection criteria

This study uses Douban, a culturally influential Chinese film and television review platform, as the primary data source due to its structured, non-anonymous reviews and systematic discourse environment. Three female-led works featuring prominent “equal rights grammar” were selected based on: (1) female creators in key roles (director, screenwriter, producer); (2) narratives with deromanticized emotions or gender critiques; and (3) active Douban discussion. Two sets of reviews were analyzed: the top 100 most-liked reviews and 100 representative short reviews (1–3 stars). Using qualitative discourse analysis, reviews were coded based on keywords, likes, and associated tags.

4.2. Like a Rolling Stone

Like a Rolling Stone follows Su Min, a Chinese blogger who travelled alone after her marriage broke down. Directed by a female filmmaker, the work adopts a non-romanticized, non-attached narrative structure, highlighting emotional fluctuation, solitude, and female subjectivity. Despite its high Douban rating (8.8, 387,000 ratings), the film sparked controversy over its emotional tone.

Comments reveal structural resistance to female emotional expression. Pejorative terms such as “deliberate,” “showmanship,” and “emotional consumption” frequently appear, framing Su Min’s narrative as performative. This reflects a gendered standard: acceptable emotion must align with male-coded traits—restraint, neutrality, rationality. When women deviate, their expressions are dismissed as “fragile” or “manipulative.” A short comment reads, “She can cry even when she sees a dog; this is not a documentary, it’s a self-motivated serial” [12], discrediting emotional authenticity as irrational and unworthy of public discourse.

A top comment with 16,500+ likes states, “Some men still don’t see the problem with Su Min’s husband—this film’s value is especially clear” [12], revealing empathy asymmetry and selective understanding. Another viewer writes, “I was disappointed—I wanted to see her transformation, not just suffering” [12]. Such expectations reflect a narrative demand for female trauma to end in redemption or triumph. When works resist this arc, they are criticized as incomplete or negative.

These reactions expose how mainstream audiences judge not just the content, but the expressive legitimacy of female creators. Emotional discomfort is projected onto the narrative, narrowing space for women to voice trauma without being delegitimized.

4.3. Her Story

Her Story is a female-directed, written, and performed drama centering on the mutual support of three urban women in their 30s, navigating careers, emotions, and family. Upholding female creators’ narrative styles—such as de-romanticization, sisterhood, and emotional transparency—the show adopts light comedy to address everyday dilemmas. Its humor draws on shared female experience and life’s absurdities, differing from patriarchal comedies that derive laughter through belittling women or aggressive tones.

A top-liked negative comment reads: “Although I support women’s rights, now I support affirmative action more... some things feel boring if mentioned too often...” [13]. While not overtly

anti-feminist, the comment reflects “discourse fatigue” toward feminist narratives. It frames repeated feminist themes as “unnecessary” and implies that their legitimacy declines once they exceed a “reasonable frequency.” Women’s expression is thus redefined not as a right but as “content surplus,” losing both novelty and universality. Expressions that depart from a “comfortable universal narrative” are quickly labeled as “tiresome,” “pretentious,” or “overdone.”

This aesthetic resistance also manifests in critiques of “pandering.” One reviewer writes: “It’s just a bombardment of jingoistic slogans to excite the audience, especially female viewers... I’d rather watch a talk show” [13]. Here, expressive clarity and emotional appeal are dismissed as indoctrination. The resistance is not to the values expressed but to the narrative form and delivery—revealing discomfort with affirmative, affective, and female-centered humour. Ultimately, this rejection signals mainstream aesthetics’ unease with self-assured and stylistically distinct forms of women’s self-expression.

4.4. Barbie

By constructing the fictional matriarchal Barbieland and juxtaposing it with real-world patriarchy, Barbie employs ironic inversion to critique gender power structures. When Ken replicates patriarchal norms upon returning to Barbieland, the female characters’ collective resistance highlights systemic gender critique. However, this satirical reversal triggered discomfort in some viewers. For instance, one review questions the value of “a bunch of dolls without genitals” addressing feminism [14], expressing not only dissatisfaction with the film’s stylized format but deeper concern about the commodification of feminist politics in mainstream culture. Within this “de-bodied” narrative frame, Barbie’s affirmative grammar is perceived as detached from real institutional injustice and physical violence.

Audience resistance often takes the form of ideological rejection. One comment argues, “Women’s plight doesn’t only come from male control but from women themselves” [14], shifting the critique away from patriarchal systems and toward individual blame. This “anti-structural” misreading weakens feminist critique by reframing oppression as personal failure, reflecting a broader bias: feminist texts must be more “authentic,” “mature,” and “effective” to be legitimized.

Additionally, Barbie’s reversal of male roles is misinterpreted as “mocking men” or “demeaning male intelligence.” Comments lamenting the film’s “topic consumption” and “routine narrative” accuse it of shallow feminism and slogan-driven storytelling [14]. Yet such critiques ignore Barbie’s strategic use of irony, stylization, and symbolism. Its “pink” aesthetic and doll motifs are not dismissive but deliberate tools for critiquing entrenched gender norms. Irony is not mockery, nor is inversion hostility—it is a method of exposing structural absurdities. Misreading the film through the lens of individual fairness ultimately obscures its critique of systemic inequality.

5. Conclusion

This paper argues that audience misinterpretation of female-led works is not accidental but a “structural misinterpretation” rooted in mainstream media culture and gendered power structures. Through an analysis of Douban user comments on three selected works, the study reveals a widespread viewing inertia: de-romanticized expressions of women’s emotions are often seen as “negative” or “extreme”; challenges to traditional gender orders are dismissed as “ideological”; and female characters who deviate from emotional norms of “being loved,” “pitiful,” or “tender” are labelled “hard to empathize with.”

This misreading reflects deeper cultural mechanisms, including the “male gaze” (Mulvey), romantic narratives as social consolation (Essig), and Sara Ahmed’s concept of “emotional norms.” Platform logics—especially algorithmic systems built on emotional feedback—reinforce this affective regulation, hindering the visibility of affirmative, non-mainstream narratives.

However, the resistance inherent in female-created works is significant: by dismantling romantic myths, visualizing women’s anger and desire, and representing diverse intimacies, these works challenge discursive boundaries around what—and who—is allowed to speak.

Theoretically, this study contributes to feminist cultural studies and digital platform research by reframing “misreading” as a structural response. Limitations include the single-platform focus and qualitative approach. Future studies could adopt cross-platform comparisons, algorithmic analysis, or quantitative tools such as emotion recognition to enrich the data. Ultimately, the paper calls for structural power to be central in critical media reception analysis—not only asking who is speaking, but also who is allowed to understand.

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