

The Alienation Caused by the Label of "Big Heroine"— Narrowing and Reconstructing Female Roles in Chinese and Foreign Dramas from Deconstructing Male Roles

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Abstract. Some common traits include independent and powerful lead actresses, often called "big heroines." Most of them achieve success through persistent effort. Although different types show various forms, they all share a common theme that impresses audiences with the growth and resilience of these female leads, providing a sense of satisfaction. However, attention should be given to the trend of labeling these characters as "big heroines." Such characters often serve as symbols that blindly pursue positive images while neglecting the complexity of human nature. Based on this phenomenon, the research will examine how male characters in these dramas contribute to the alienation of female characters and then compare the asymmetry of opposite-sex characters in female-led dramas and male-led dramas. Firstly, some screenwriters of female-led dramas highlight the female protagonist's shining moments by instrumentalizing and stigmatizing the male characters in the drama. This is a low-cost but unreasonable approach that will reinforce the audience's gender stereotypes in the opposite direction. Moreover, after comparing the opposite sex characters in female-oriented and male-oriented TV series, it is obvious that male-oriented TV series emphasize depicting the background and personalities of the female characters, which have a more mature narrative perspective. Modern dramas can focus not only on creating a perfect female image to attract viewers but also on promoting feminism. It is urgent to deepen the complexity of male characters to counteract the stereotypical label of "big heroine."

Keywords: Big heroines, Alienation, Feminism, Drama

1. Introduction

Arts originate from life, and an increasing number of dramas featuring "big heroines" have become popular around the world with the rise of feminism. These female protagonists showcase their impressive growth and development. As Zhu mentioned, these changes in their perceptions demonstrate the ongoing awakening of women's self-awareness, alongside society's growing respect [1]. However, some dramas appear to wear the guise of feminism, but essentially, they distort the concept of a "big heroine." Even by reducing male characters to symbolic forms, their simplistic roles weaken the critical impact on the whole social phenomenon. Some female protagonists aim to

attract attractive men and climb the social ladder [2]. This is a typical way to exaggerate the male role. Whether emphasizing or weakening overly the female character, it is clear that this kind of drama still reflects the oppression under patriarchal society, and they are fundamentally misrepresentations of the "big heroine." To break this vicious cycle, this paper will analyze the changing and rebuilding of female roles in Chinese and international dramas by dissecting male characters, especially examining the disparity between opposite-sex characters in plays with female leads and those with male leads.

2. Analysis of theory and concepts

2.1. Big heroine

The dramas of "big heroine" centered on women, showing their mature abilities, diverse backgrounds, and independent personalities. Because of the prevalence of feminism, it is an upward trend to develop this type of drama. Since the 1970s, maiden warriors—heroines who oppose traditional gender norms and the restrictions placed on them—have been more and more common in television and movies, and throughout the past 20 years, they have gained prominence [3]. As noted by Ying, the presentations tell the tales of strong women in imperial China and are authored by female authors [4]. In other words, this type of drama features a female character as the primary leading role and narrative core, showcasing her growth and transformation.

2.2. Alienation and label

As noted by Seeman, the issue of alienation is a recurring theme in sociological classics, and the idea is often used in modern works [5]. In the Marxist theory, alienation is reflected in the relationship between workers and entrepreneurs in capitalism, which means workers have degenerated into commodities. Labels are given to a person when the person is born. The purpose of labels is to provide a person, location, or object with context or clarity. They specify the category or container they belong to. Additionally, these labels carry with them specific meanings, presumptions, and beliefs [6].

2.3. The alienation caused by the label of "big heroine"

In the alienated "big heroine" dramas, roles are no longer the person. On the contrary, they become symbolic tools to represent some abstract concepts like "patriarchal oppression" and "female consciousness awakens." At first, if the feminine principle is strictly adhered to, then these dramas can look at how established gender norms are challenged by the representation of heroes who reflect the feminine principle and how these representations could influence public opinion. However, the problem of alienation caused by the label of "big heroine" is becoming more and more acute. If things go on like this, the "big heroine" drama will fall into the trap of patriarchal culture in the process of being reduced to a commodity. They should have challenged the traditional narrative and gender concepts. Instead, the conventional thinking system is gradually replicated and even strengthened.

3. Deconstruction of male characters under the label of "big heroine"

Drama is a recreation of real life, not merely a realistic or naturalistic account or discussion of real-life events [7]. In other words, action is the core element of drama from Aristotle's theory. It means

that dramas are an imitation of an action. However, some dramas portray male characters by using unconventional narrative techniques, which means that they lack a complete expression of actions. These male characters are overly simplified with negative traits. Essentially, this is reverse gender discrimination resulting from creative failure. Due to the limitation in the understanding of female power, the commercial logic taking precedence over the narrative thinking system, and the binary opposition of gender narratives, the male characters in the “big heroine” dramas are often weakened, distorted, and even twisted into characters with impaired personalities. These incorrect methods normally include stigmatization and toolization.

3.1. Stigmatization

As noted by Ayodele, some African writers minimize males to physical grotesqueness, irresponsibility, and worthlessness, as well as to evil dads and husbands, to create a new societal structure where women are in charge of their own lives [8].

3.1.1. China

In China, there are also several dramas that concentrate on undermining the male roles to achieve the goal of shaping the female roles. For example, the portrayal of male characters in *My Best Friend's Story* is a prime instance. Whether it's Wang Yongzheng, who is irresponsible for his relationships, or Zhang Anren, who still only wants to rely on the female lead, they are both typical examples of stigmatization.

3.1.2. West

In the West, there are also some typical examples to show the stigmatization of male characters. In *Maid*, all male roles are vicious, such as the abusive father, the indifferent landlord, and the hypocritical knight. This large group of evil men lacks a complete moral framework. The screenwriters simplified the female leading role's difficulty to being unlucky in love and avoided any discussion of the social system. There is no doubt that these defects certainly exist in real life, but it is inappropriate to add labels to them blindly. Essentially, this is a gender essentialist logic of patriarchal society. In the logic of essentialism, each individual's life depends on the species form, which is shared by all members of the species [9]. This explains the reason for simplification of the complex human nature of male roles of the screenwriters.

3.1.3. Result

Following such narrative logic, the success of the female protagonist would be interpreted as the weakness and incapability of the male characters, thereby undermining the value of her striving. Even when tying the value of women to men, it still acknowledges that men serve as the standard to measure women's value. At the level of the audience's perception, they tend to experience aesthetic fatigue, which in turn leads to a crisis of trust. Especially for male viewers, it is likely to trigger their resistance, thereby preventing them from actively participating in the development of the TV series. Once the audience sinks into criticizing men who deceive and manipulate women's emotions, the substantive issues of women will be overlooked. Further, the female leading roles will face new constraints, preventing them from exhibiting any human weaknesses. This is a trap of falsified independence.

3.2. Toolization

3.2.1. Ancient West

It is universally acknowledged that *A Doll's House* is a drama that embodies feminist themes. However, in *A Doll's House*, a dramatic defense of nineteenth-century capitalism with patriarchal roots is presented [10]. In other words, the characters in it are not perfectly shaped, which means that Ibsen overly simplified the portrayal of Nora's husband. Obviously, he is only a tool for attracting the audience's attention to criticize patriarchy and has become a stereotypical image of a violent husband. It is hasty to equate the husband with Nora's awakening by employing dualism, such as Descartes' dualism of mind and body.

3.2.2. China

In China, there are many dramas that show the toolization to us. Such as *Marvelous Women*, where the male protagonist is merely a nominal main character. Not only does he exist solely within the dialogue throughout the entire plot, but he also lacks any personal growth or motivation, which is barely a trigger for the plot. He is just an empty narrative symbol. In *Nothing But Thirty*, almost all male characters are depicted as a group of people with moral defects. Whether it is Huanshan Xu's infidelity or Zhengxian Liang's irresponsible attitude towards love, both are tools for the female leading roles to recognize reality or fulfill their character designs. Obviously, the characters lack deep motivation.

3.2.3. Modern West

In the modern West, there are also many dramas that reflect this problem. The male leading role in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a malicious bishop who combines hypocrisy, exploitation, and sexual oppression. He has already become a symbolic representation of evil, lacking the complexity of human nature and presenting an undeniable, instrumentalized character design. Another example is *Big Little Lies*. Although the male characters have their own distinct personalities, they lack an exploration of human nature. Ultimately, these male characters were reduced to being tools to promote the development of the plot for the female alliance, and the real relationship between the sexes is weakened in the discussion.

3.2.4. Summary

By analyzing these typical cases, it is not difficult to find out the toolization of male characters and potential trends of creating this kind of drama. The blind pursuit of profits has led to the prevalence of such techniques to create theater and drama. Over time, such a crude gender narrative will lead to gender conflict, which makes the audience develop an extreme aversion towards the male character. It means that this is a narrative pattern that moves from one extreme to another and fundamentally remains unhealthy. This is a simplistic narrative of the conflict, which neglects the complexity of human nature and merely emphasizes female dominance. Using men as a means but devaluing the worth of women. Namely, this kind of drama is difficult to resonate with the audience. The female protagonist's growth scenes are regarded as a revenge plot that defeats the male characters, which hinders cultural communication.

4. Comparison of the differences between female leads and male leads

In recent years, the market for male-led dramas has remained active. There are remarkable differences between female leads and male leads in creating characters of the opposite sex. In male-led dramas, female characters are usually quite well-developed. It means that they have more profound expressions of emotions and a more complete background.

4.1. China

For example, the Nihuang Princess in *Nirvana in Fire* is a very successfully created female character. Although she has a deep affection for the male protagonist, she still treats protecting the country as her chief task. This affectionate and loyal female figure effectively embodies the essence of human nature, which is the lack of creating a male role in female-led drama.

Another typical example is Waner Lin, who is the female leading role in *Joy of Life*. She defied the conflict of the family affection and confronted her indifferent mother bravely. While demonstrating her awakening, Waner Lin didn't simply sink into love blindly. Her struggles in the drama reflect the current situation where love and family ties cannot both be fulfilled, which can embody the complexity of characters. She is not only the emotional support of the male leading role but also a female character with rich thoughts.

4.2. West

In the West, there are also many cases of female characters successfully molded in male-led dramas. In *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, the female lead, Midge, showed us her rich background and diverse personality. Like all common people, her spirit has been depressed for some time because of her husband's infidelity. After a drunken performance on a talk show, she finds the way out and rebuilds herself again. Midge's reaction was both common and unique; she presented the audience with the most genuine portrayal of a female character. It happens that there is a similar case; in *Why Women Kill*, Taylor uses legal thinking to calmly plan and respond to confront her own lover after her husband's infidelity. Although the plot is somewhat illogical, Taylor's calmness and rationality still taught a lesson to the woman, which overturns the image of women who were obsessed with love. It was precisely this distinctive female character that demonstrated an exemplary case of successful character portrayal to the audience.

4.3. Summary

According to the above discussion, despite facing the infidelity of husbands, the two female characters use their methods to revolt. Although the ways are somewhat different, they all tell the audience how to create qualified female characters in a male-led drama series. They are emotional characters, having a rich background and conforming to human nature. These female characters have fulfilled the need to personalize and achieved equal opportunity to have conversations with the male roles. Their existence already has the priceless narrative value and humanistic brilliance. Reflecting on the male characters in those "big heroine" dramas, they show audiences some specific features, such as stigmatization and toolization. In the gender narrative, the essence of creation lies in enabling the characters to jump out from the constraints of gender discrimination and go back to the thinking model dominated by their own consciousness. Whether it is the male characters in the female-led dramas or the female characters in the male-led dramas, the ultimate state they reach is not about gender opposition or symbolic effects. On the contrary, it is through the creation of deep

characters to reveal the plots are revealed and evoke the audience's empathy. This is the most central reason why the female characters in male-led dramas are better created than the male characters in female-led dramas. Many of the screenwriters of these excellent male-led dramas have explored the real human nature, thereby creating a diverse array of female characters.

5. Conclusion

According to the study above, the similar features in incomplete female-led drama include having male roles with straightforward personalities. However, these dramas still occupied a large market for the sake of blindly pursuing commercial value and catering to female audiences. The essence of creating characters deserves the most attention to remove the label of "big heroine," which makes the female-led dramas more realistic and well-developed.

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