

Study on Female Role Image Construction in *A Dream of Splendor* and Its Positive Influence on Society Based on Postmodern Feminism and Femininity

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Abstract. In recent years, feminism is increasingly discussed in Chinese social media, which means that people become more aware of and interested in learning about feminist issues in China. In order to satisfy the audience's pursuit of feminist values, more and more TV plays tend to create "Strong Female Lead" themes. This paper will focus on the drama "A Dream of Splendor", which is also based on the same theme. In order to study the drama's image of female characters and its positive impact on society, the drama's plot and secondary data, such as media and audience reviews of this drama, will be analyzed in this paper. It is found that the female characters in this drama present diverse image characteristics when fighting against patriarchy, and the growth and transformation of women's awakening of consciousness are also demonstrated to the audience. In addition, the images and plot settings of the drama fit the reality and reflect the dilemmas of contemporary women. This not only arouses the audience's empathy but also promotes the audience's in-depth exploration and thinking about feminism. Meanwhile, the drama's innovation in the portrayal of women is a positive reference for the creation of subsequent ancient costume dramas with the theme of "strong female protagonist".

1. Introduction

In recent years, feminism has become one of the most important issues in contemporary society, and it is reflected in TV dramas [1]. With the continuous improvement of women's thinking level and knowledge structure, women's self-awareness has gradually awakened, and they are increasingly concerned about women's rights and values. There is also a wide range of discussions on women's issues on the Internet. At the same time, women are still the main consumers of film and television works. As a result, to attract more female viewers, TV drama producers will follow the changes in the women audience's thinking and favor creating the image of women [2]. During the creation, many TV dramas will also be connected with reality to arouse the audience's empathy [3]. Nowadays, the promotion of women's value and power, as well as the portrayal of the "strong female lead", are the creative choices of many TV dramas. This kind of female image is no longer rigid and traditional but with more positive resistance and independence [4]. While attracting audiences, these TV dramas have also further promoted the progress and development of the ideas of women's independence and the awakening of women's consciousness in society.

In addition, more and more TV dramas adapted from Internet literature have appeared in China's film and television industry. The audience of these Internet literature works hope that the adapted TV dramas can match their inner imagination of the original works [5]. Therefore, TV dramas tend to restore the characters and plots of the literary works in the production. However, *A Dream of Splendor* is adapted from the Yuan miscellaneous drama *Zhao Pan'er Saving a Prostitute from Danger* (later referred to as *Saving a Prostitute*), a literary work in which the female figure is based on the historical environment of the Yuan Dynasty. It mainly tells the story that despite living under social oppression, Zhao Pan'er still saves her friend Song Yinzhong bravely, which reflects the social environment in the era of the Yuan Dynasty. As a contemporary television production, *A Dream of Splendor* needs to adjust the characters and storyline on the basis of the original as well as fit the logic and values of contemporary society. Therefore, compared with other TV dramas adapted from Internet literature, the female characters' images in *A Dream of Splendor* have more social, historical and cultural research value and are worth exploring in depth. In the creation of *A Dream of Splendor*, the TV drama follows the original plot of Zhao Pan'er's rescuing Song

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Yinzhang in *Saving a Prostitute*, which shows the wisdom and courage of women at the bottom of society, as well as the female power of women helping each other. In addition, the drama also takes the story of the three main female characters starting a tea house together as one of the main threads, showing women's growth and transformation. The female characters of the drama are in a patriarchal society, but the scriptwriter gives them the values possessed by women in modern society. They are not willing to be oppressed by the feudal society, showing the audience the independent side of women.

In the current study on *A Dream of Splendor*, different scholars have different attitudes towards it. In the comparative study on *A Dream of Splendor* and *Saving a Prostitute*, different studies cut their analyses from different angles, but all of them tend to give positive recognition to the creation of *A Dream of Splendor*. In terms of plot, they believe that the adaptation of *A Dream of Splendor* demonstrates the contemporary television work's promotion and innovation of excellent traditional Chinese culture [1]. In terms of the presentation of women's images, they also believe that the women's images in *A Dream of Splendor* are more abundant and diversified than those in previous film and television works [6]. These studies have a positive attitude towards the creation of *A Dream of Splendor* and show confidence in the development of Chinese artworks. However, some scholars are skeptical about the feminist viewpoints promoted by *A Dream of Splendor*. They believe that the plot of *A Dream of Splendor* has not changed the core of Chinese TV dramas, which are still full of gender bias and stereotypes of women [7]. The show's popularity also stems from consumerism, and the feminism it promotes is actually used as a packaging shell for commodities to attract more viewers in order to maximize its profits [8].

From the review mentioned above, it can be seen that *A Dream of Splendor* is a television work of great social influence, the contents of which attract extensive comments from all walks of life. Some scholars analyze *A Dream of Splendor* from the perspectives of literature, drama, film and television, and communication, giving positive comments. However, studies from the sociological point of view criticized that *A Dream of Splendor* still has a male gaze and is merely a commodity under the packaging of consumerism [7, 8]. However, this paper argues that the portrayal of women in *A Dream of Splendor* is not constrained by the patriarchal system, nor is it catering to the tastes of female viewers merely for the sake of gaining a high level of popularity. In contrast, it takes the patriarchal society of ancient China as the basis for the creation of the work and gives the female characters modern ideology in the TV play, showing feminist values through the portrayal of diverse female figures, which is a perspective that has not yet been researched by previous researchers. Therefore, this paper will focus on the construction of women's image in *A Dream of Splendor*, applying the theories of postmodern feminism and femininity to explore the reasonableness of the construction of women's image in *A Dream of Splendor*, which is labelled as a feminist TV play, and to analyze

the positive impacts of women's image in the play on the society.

2. The process of constructing female characters in *A Dream of Splendor*

2.1 Women's image of self-discipline in ancient Chinese society

In ancient Chinese society, the role of women was defined as "the master of the home", which means that the social status and value of husbands and sons were used to measure and reflect the functions and roles of women as wives and mothers [9]. This value has deprived women's opportunity to develop their self-worth as individuals and denied them the right to realize their values.

Postmodern feminism, influenced by Foucault's power, believes that women are self-regulating, self-ruling, and self-conforming to social norms. They will inadvertently identify with the social norms that oppress them and internalize them as their own consciousness [10]. The first half of *A Dream of Splendor* takes this postmodern feminist perspective to show the audience how several female characters are influenced by the social norms of "women's morality" in ancient Chinese society and how females internalize social norms into their own consciousness and actions. They spend a lot of energy and time relying on the male characters in the hope of realizing their social value and achieving class transitions, but all of them fail in the end.

The main female character Zhao Pan'er, as a person at the bottom of the social ladder, is unable to let go of her past status as a courtesan. She hopes that her fiancé Ouyang Xu, with whom she is engaged to be married, can pass the examination for a scholar so that she can be married by her fiancé with the highest courtesy in order to realize her class transition. Song Yinzhang, on the other hand, wants to marry someone to help her "get rid of her lowly status". Even though she is an official courtesan with extraordinary skills, this status is still low and humble in her view. She believes that only by marrying someone to get rid of her status will she be able to make a rise in life and gain her freedom. Sun Sanniang has made it her lifelong dream to wear a phoenix crown and rosy cloak, which means that she is of a higher status. She places this dream on her son, believing that she can only realize her greatest value as a mother if her son works hard at his studies and achieves success in the examination. In the end, however, Zhao Pan'er is abandoned by her fiancé, who has passed the examination, because of her lowly background. Song Yinzhang is tricked twice because of her eagerness to marry and realize status rise. Likewise, Sun Sanniang is disliked by her son and husband because of her strict educational method.

The presentation of the above female figures can actually be seen as the result of their self-regulation, self-rule, and self-conformity to norms [10]. These three

female characters have been trapped in the discipline of patriarchy, they try to achieve their goals and realize their values, but their efforts are actually a further consolidation of the social norms. They inadvertently identified with the patriarchal discourse and identified themselves as the underclass of society at that time. They believe that they need to use men to get rid of what they perceive to be their "inferiority", and they are constantly trying to use men's power to raise their social class, realize their own value, and realize the meaning and goals they are supposedly pursuing in their lives. In this section, the images presented by these female characters are disciplined by the social norms of patriarchy in different ways. However, what is the same is that their sense of self is so bound by the social norms that everything they have ever worked for is in vain.

2.2 Presentation of non-traditional images of women

In the view of postmodern feminists, they are not in favor of the absolute categorization of women's characteristics as the traditional image of women, such as irrational, maternal, dependent, emotional, and lacking the ability to think abstractly [10]. The second half of the play, on the other hand, expresses the diverse image characteristics of women, who are either emotionally empathetic yet rational and objective; motherly with concern for her child yet still independent as an individual; or once effeminate and dependent but gradually growing up to be courageous and strong, which are all characteristics that distinguish them from the traditional single image of women. As a contemporary television work, *A Dream of Splendor* has set up female images in the second half of the movie, which are close to contemporary reality and have contemporary female thoughts.

Zhao Pan'er presents more of a non-traditional female image. After being abandoned by her fiancé Ouyang Xu, she does not fall into a long period of sadness but rationally puts forward three conditions for a peaceful separation from Ouyang Xu and decides to stay in the capital city to run a tea store. She relies on her excellent ability to run the tea store business with great success. In these plots, Zhao Pan'er's image is rational, objective, shrewd and business-minded. She is able to rationally and objectively face the injustices and failures she encounters and apply reasonable countermeasures to deal with them. In the process of running the tea store and the restaurant, the reason why she is able to attract the rich merchant to contribute money to finance the operation of a bigger restaurant is not because she is the protagonist but because of her own ability - courageous and resourceful in doing business outside the home, able to objectively analyze the problems she faces and deal with them calmly without being emotionally attached. These qualities of a non-traditional woman, which are contrary to the traditional social discipline of "never outside the house but staying at home all day", allow her to be recognized and appreciated by others and allow her to realize the true value of her life through her own efforts.

Sun Sanniang presents the image of both traditional and non-traditional women. After Sun Sanniang's divorce and arrival in the capital city, she gradually falls in love with Du Changfeng. However, when Fu Zifang, the son of Sun Sanniang and her ex-husband, learns of the affair, he accuses his mother of being ungodly and claims that he will not allow her to do so. However, Sun Sanniang bravely speaks up for herself, stating that she "does not need to get anyone's approval to remarry from the heart after divorce." Sun Sanniang breaks through the boundaries of social norms in patriarchy and shows an independent-minded personality. After Fu Zifang admits his mistake, Sanniang also continues to show her concern and love for him, a trait she possesses as a mother. However, before Fu Zifang admits his fault, she is clear that she is, first of all, an independent individual. When she reacts against her son, it is also a process of confronting the social norms in the feudal system. She realizes that she has the right to choose her own marriage freely. Therefore, when her son asks her to "follow the three obediences and the four virtues," she does not comply but chooses to listen to her own heart.

Song Yinzhang is the youngest of the three and a woman who has been cheated the most. The audience can see more of the traditional image of women from her, such as irrationality in the face of love, weakness, dependence, and always pinning hopes of getting out of the country on men. However, this does not mean that she is a faulty part of the play. On the contrary, her metamorphosis process is slow and more gradual. When Zhao Pan'er is ill and unable to take charge of the business, Song Yinzhang takes on the important task of managing the restaurant. When faced with the trap of peers, she goes from not knowing what to do to not be afraid of danger and ultimately turns the situation around with skillful methods. At this point, Song Yinzhang gradually becomes capable of taking charge of the restaurant business, becoming stronger and more resilient. The contrast between the before and after images of Song Yinzhang shows how a weak and dependent traditional woman grows and transforms.

In the actual situation of ancient society, the ruling class used a series of means, such as the indoctrination of Confucian culture and the punishment of criminal law as social norms patriarchy, to discipline women as weak and lowly subordinates who obeyed social norms, thus confining women within the high wall of gender order [11]. Ancient women internalized these social norms and took their oppression for granted, so no matter how hard they tried, they could not realize their true personal values. However, the women in this play break through the constraints of social norms and display non-traditional female characteristics. This not only conforms to the lives of the contemporary female audience but also more resonant with the audience. For those oppressed women in ancient times, instead of representing their tragic plight, this presentation of a non-traditional female image is more like giving them the opportunity to choose a new path in life.

3. Positive social impacts brought about

by *A Dream of Splendor*

3.1 Prompting viewers to think deeply about feminism

As a favorite cultural product of the public, TV play is a good carrier and tool to convey the mainstream values of society [12]. In recent years, the emergence of female plays has had a subtle impact on the awakening of women's subjective consciousness, the reacquisition of gender power, and the "self-confirmation" of social roles [13]. However, most of the "strong female lead" plays are based on modern urban backgrounds. There are few ancient costume dramas that can truly show feminist values. *A Dream of Splendor* has been a breakthrough in recent years. It is easy to see that the mainstream values that *A Dream of Splendor* hopes to convey to the audience are relevant to the values of women's self-awareness, self-reliance, and female power.

After the audience identifies with the values shown in the play, they will show their approval in their own value judgment or communicate their ideas with others; thus, the values will be reinforced in their minds [12]. After broadcasting, the feminist values conveyed by *A Dream of Splendor* are able to be accepted and recognized by many viewers, and it succeeds in conveying the values about feminism to society, causing communication and collision of ideas in all walks of life. Douban, China's most referential book and audio-visual rating platform, as of August 2023, a total of 850,000 people have participated in the evaluation of *A Dream of Splendor* in Douban. In the 5-point rating scale, the number of people who have given 5 points and 4-point high scores accounted for about 70% of the total number of people. In the opinions of these viewers, Zhao Pan'er is a financially independent woman who is brave and smart and dares to rebel against patriarchal power and bureaucratic class. At the same time, they also think that the plot of Zhao Pan'er receiving financial support from other men when she started her business is reasonable because she only received financial support, but she is still responsible for the operation of the store, which is a kind of self-reliance of women.

In the most popular reviews, the critics have given recognition to *A Dream of Splendor*; they have received the values conveyed by *A Dream of Splendor*. At the same time, they have their own understanding of feminism, so they have internalized and processed the female characters portrayed in *A Dream of Splendor* through their own value judgments and then expressed their own views on women's self-reliance, women's power after watching *A Dream of Splendor*. This clash of ideas has further promoted the development of feminism in China.

3.2 Positive influence on subsequent television works

Undeniably, there are still some questionable points in *A*

Dream of Splendor. The female characters in the play are excellent, they always seem to have the aura of protagonists, and they always have the ability to solve the difficulties they face. As a result, some media think that some of the plots in the play are not close to reality and cannot be realized in the real world. At the same time, there are also illogicalities in the portrayal of Zhao Pan'er, whose naive image of being helpless in the face of power when saving Song Yin Zhang is not consistent with her basic image of being at the bottom of the social ladder.

Overall, however, the creation of *A Dream of Splendor* is still progressive, and there is still much to learn from and refer to in the creation of future Chinese costume dramas. In the past, men in "strong female lead" costume dramas hid their domination of the discourse and gave women a fictionalized feminist world, which was completely divorced from the real world structured on patriarchal culture [13]. Even though they are set in a patriarchal society, some of the "strong female lead" dramas focus on the conflicts within the female group as they compete for men. The scriptwriters use single and plane images of female supporting roles to compete with the female lead in order to emphasize the superiority of the female lead [14]. Whereas *A Dream of Splendor* does not completely detach itself from the context of patriarchy in ancient Chinese society, it does not set plots of the conflict among women either. In the early part of the episode, the problems that women may encounter in a patriarchal society are presented. However, in the later part of the episode, the female characters in the drama are endowed with the ideas and abilities to solve the problems so that the audience can see their growth and transformation in the later part of the play. It is not constructed in isolation from real society but even maps out the plight of contemporary women through the experiences of the female characters in the play. This way of portrayal is more acceptable to the contemporary audience. In addition, there are three main female characters in *A Dream of Splendor*, but the portrayal of each female character is not one-dimensional and is more fleshed out and realistic than in previous costume dramas.

4. Conclusion

Combining the ancient patriarchal system with contemporary feminist concepts, *A Dream of Splendor* shows that female characters grow up to be rational and objective, self-reliant and self-sufficient, and tough and bold, which are different from the traditional image of a woman. In ancient China, it was obviously very difficult and even impossible for a woman to break free from the constraints of social norms. However, as a contemporary TV drama, *A Dream of Splendor* needs to show the process of women fighting against patriarchy in a way that is more acceptable to contemporary viewers, so the scriptwriter gives the characters the thought and ability to fight against patriarchy. This not only shows the challenges faced by ancient women who chose to fight against patriarchy but also maps out the dilemmas and

hopes faced by contemporary women in their quests for equality and freedom, such as the invisible sexism and promotion dilemmas in the workplace, the punishment of motherhood encountered by mothers, and even the problems encountered by women starting their own businesses. The close-to-reality plots make the audience empathize with the female characters in *A Dream of Splendor*, which has also led to much recognition for the drama.

In addition, the broadcast of *A Dream of Splendor* further deepened people's understanding of feminism, and feminism was able to progress and develop in Chinese society through the audience's discussion. At the same time, the close-to-reality plot and the rich characterization provide a reference for future TV dramas. In order to attract more viewers, it is necessary for TV play producers to make more efforts in characterization and make the characters fuller and more three-dimensional based on social and historical realities.

However, this paper has not yet comprehensively analyzed different angles of evaluations given by different audiences, lacking the understanding of the personal background of these audiences. Focusing on analyzing the audience's attitudes towards the creation of *A Dream of Splendor* will make TV drama producers better understand the development of feminism in Chinese society and provide a more comprehensive reference for the direction of the creation of subsequent television works.

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