

Re-envision of Female Relationships: Gender Interactions in the Adaptation of *The Story of Rose*

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Abstract

This work examines the portrayal of gender interactions in Yishu's novel "The Story of Rose" and its television adaptation, highlighting the evolution from the 1980s to the early 21st century. The novel, narrated from a male internal focalization, exposes the marginalization and objectification of women within a patriarchal society. In contrast, the television adaptation employs a shifting internal focalization, showcasing a more diverse and positive representation of gender dynamics. By applying Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender," the study reveals how gender roles are performed and renegotiated in different social contexts. The analysis underscores the shift from emphasizing gender disparities to fostering a vision of gender equality, reflecting societal progress in challenging and reconstructing traditional gender norms.

Keywords

The Story of Rose; Focalization; Gender Interaction; Doing Gender.

1. Introduction

Since 2017, Yishu's works have become popular subjects for film and television adaptations in mainland China. *The Story of Rose*[1], one of Yishu's distinctive novels, narrates the love stories of Rose from adolescence to middle age over two decades, as seen through the perspectives of four male characters. In June 2024, the television series[2] adapted from the novel was aired, capturing the spotlight during the summer season of mainland China's film and television market. The TV adaptation of *The Story of Rose* significantly reworked the narrative of the original novel, depicting the evolution of contemporary women's gender interactions and breathing new life into the novel within the context of contemporary society.

Feminist studies have long been a primary focus in the research of Yishu's works. In recent years, with the frequent adaptation of Yishu's works into film and television productions in mainland China, cross-media studies of these adaptations have emerged as a burgeoning research theme. On one hand, existing research tends to be imbalanced in its application of feminist theory, focusing primarily on the analysis of female media images. On the other hand, the scope of existing research is relatively narrow, centered on women and static analysis, while neglecting the dynamic relationships of social gender.

In light of this situation, this study will focus on the novel "The Story of Rose" and its television adaptation, aiming to construct a dynamic map of women's gender interaction relationships. It seeks to provide a unique perspective for the in-depth intersection of feminist and cross-media studies, as well as popular culture research.

2. Objectified and Alienated Gender Interactions in the Novel

The novel, based on the internal focalization narrative perspective of four men, uncovers the male "gaze" within patriarchal society. Under this "gaze," women are constructed as the other and objectified, trapped within the family and thus cut off from social interactions.

Consequently, in the novel, the gender interaction relationships among women are characterized by alienation.

2.1. Gaze in the Father's Name---The Male Internal Focalization Narrative Perspective

The novel is divided into four parts: "Rose," "Rose in Full Bloom," "The Last Rose," and "Farewell to Rose," each narrated from the perspective of four male characters: Rose's brother Huang Zhenhua, his subordinate Fu Jiaming, Rose's son-in-law Zhou Tanghua, and her stepson Luo Zhenzhong. The internal focalization narrative viewpoint immerses readers into the male characters, allowing them to experience firsthand the objectification of women through the male gaze.

As maintainers of the patriarchal social order, these men identify with the "gaze of the Father" and act as its emissaries, attempting to intervene in Rose's subjectivity to discipline her within patriarchal society. Lacan's concept of "the gaze of the Father" is based on "the pre-existence of a gaze," aligning with Merleau-Ponty's view [3]. The big Other in the symbolic order possesses dominant power a priori, and the viewer, endowed with the privilege of "seeing" by power, identifies with the big Other under castration anxiety and consciously assumes the responsibility of maintaining the patriarchal social order. The viewers are primarily male, and as the upper echelons of patriarchal power, they monitor women's actions with a strict gaze. Huang Zhenhua's care for his sister Rose is based on numerous prohibitions—no perming curly hair, no ice-skating indoors, etc., and even no making married men fall in love with you.

2.2. Objectified Women

Within the patriarchal social order, women in the novel are excluded from power, leading to a lack of subjectivity and their reduction to objects under the patriarchal gaze.

On one hand, the gaze of the male characters in the novel objectifies Rose from various perspectives. In the eyes of the men, Rose is beautiful and intelligent, but that is the extent of their expectations of her—her physical attractiveness complemented by excellent achievements. The characters in the novel frequently discuss Rose's beautiful appearance, her graceful figure, fair skin, and the charming blue mole at the corner of her eye. She is described as a vibrant painting, a handsome sculpture, or an exquisite piece of jade, possessing only a stunning exterior. However, what truly moves people about Rose is her relentless pursuit of love. In the patriarchal social order, her artistic accomplishments and intellectual depth are flattened. The excessive focus on her appearance conceals the deeper and richer inner self beneath her skin, leading to the objectification of women and the deprivation of their power to speak.

On the other hand, women become accessories to power under the discipline of the patriarchal system, similarly placed in an objectified position. Rose's mother is the most prominent embodiment of this in the novel. As the head of a traditional family, she strongly resists Rose's unconventional behavior that breaks the patriarchal order, repeatedly scolding her daughter's unorthodox actions. Rose's mother is powerless to break the patriarchal suppression and is even unaware of being under it, thus merely an object under the gaze of the Big Other.

2.3. Alienated Gender Interactions

Gender interactions refer to the mutual actions and communications between individuals of different genders. In the novel, women, due to their objectification, are isolated within their respective families. The family, as a microcosm of the patriarchal system, imprisons women like a gilded cage, resulting in singular and alienated gender interaction relationships among the female characters.

The principle of men being the public face and women the domestic face of the family is one of the tenets of patriarchy. This requires women to be isolated within the family, thus obstructing their interactions with other gendered individuals. Guan Zhizhi, the newlywed wife of Huang Zhenhua's friend Zhou Shihui, is a typical virtuous wife and good mother, existing as an object attached to her husband, who is the subject of power, content with laughing and bustling about in the small living room to greet guests. Therefore, when Zhou falls in love with someone else, she has no choice but to plead desperately, reflecting that the gender interaction relationship between men and women is based on a hierarchical power structure.

Once this power relationship is subverted, it is met with strong resistance from the maintainers of patriarchal order. When Zhou insist to abandon his wife and children to pursue Rose, the latter is accused of being a homewrecker, essentially being condemned by the patriarchal system for disrupting the power structure. Rose's parents lock her in her room, cutting off her relationship with Zhou in an attempt to maintain the family structure that represents patriarchal order. Women are thus isolated within the family by patriarchy.

3. Diversified and Dynamic Gender Interactions in the TV series

The TV series is directed by Wang Jun, written by Li Xiao and Wang Si, and co-produced by CCTV, Shanghai Tencent Penguin Pictures Culture Communication Co., Ltd., New Classics Media (Beijing) Co., Ltd., and Beijing Tongchan Yongli Real Estate Trade Central Co., Ltd. It premiered on June 8, 2024, on CCTV-8's prime-time slot and was simultaneously broadcast on Tencent Video. The series broke viewing records across multiple platforms and topped the CVB rankings for the same time slot across all channels.

3.1. Fluid Perspective - Shifting Internal Focalization Narrative Perspective

Each part of the novel unfolds from the fixed internal focalization narrative perspective of a single character, with the reader's viewpoint coinciding with that of the protagonist. The TV series, however, adopts an indefinite internal focalization narrative perspective, allowing the viewpoint to flow among various characters and to witness events from the standpoint of a witness.

It can be noticed that films and TV series often use this shifting internal focalization narrative perspective, which aligns the audience's viewpoint with the camera's and positions the audience as an "absent presence" within the "double-stage system" of the performance and broadcast scenes, witnessing events without being noticed or involved by any character. The internal focalization narrative perspective provides the audience with the same information as the characters, but the fluid viewpoint also helps the audience understand the truth of events from multiple angles in the same or different times and spaces, thus constructing a narrative labyrinth. Similarly, the witness viewpoint, detached from the characters, maintains an appropriate aesthetic distance, "whether in the field of art appreciation or in art production, the most popular state is to minimize the distance without making it disappear"[4].

In the narrative of the TV series, the viewpoint often focuses on the characters, with the plot developing through their interactions, making the viewpoint a crucial factor in character portrayal. Unlike the novel, which focuses on the thoughts and experiences of several male characters, the TV series' viewpoint focuses on Rose's life, which is reflected in the camera images and event development centered on Rose, and emphasizes the portrayal of female characters such as Su Gengsheng. The fluid viewpoint vividly displays the character traits and inner pursuits of multiple female characters and highlights diverse gender interaction relationships.

3.2. Struggle for the Discourse of Power

The fluid viewpoint focuses on the portrayal of diverse female images. The current TV adaptation seeks to express the new era of women, endowing the original work with content that aligns more with contemporary social ideology, and portrays female characters with a more resolute and powerful stance against patriarchal social order suppression.

The TV series highlights the career development of women, focusing on the professional achievements of main female characters such as Rose, Su Gengsheng, and Jiang Xueqiong. The series shifts the setting from Hong Kong in the latter half of the 20th century to Beijing in the early 21st century, thus creating a new image of career women who dare to pursue love and are capable of building a career. They bravely resist the suppression of the patriarchy and struggle to seek the discourse of power. Guan Zhizhi resolutely breaks up and leaves after being betrayed by Zhou Shihui; Rose courageously leaves an unhappy marriage, continues to pursue her artistic career, and establishes a private art museum; and Su, who suffered sexual abuse by her stepfather in her childhood, searches for evidence for years and finally brings her stepfather to justice. The TV series portrays the oppression of women within the patriarchal family structure and shapes the efforts of many women to recognize this reality and strive for discursive power, thus forming vibrant interactive relationships among women.

3.3. Positive Interactive Relationships

Unlike the novel, where women are isolated within the family and form alienated relationships, the women in the TV series actively influence each other in contemporary society, and their main interactions are no longer restricted by men, forming positive interactive relationships.

The friendships between Rose and Su, Jiang significantly reflect the positive impact of women under the patriarchal social order.

The women in the TV series are endowed with a certain degree of freedom in their actions, the fluid viewpoint allows female characters to interact freely without being under the male gaze, thus gaining the opportunity to interact freely. The scenes of interaction are no longer limited to the family but extend into the broader society. Rose meets Su and Jiang in the workplace, and as Huang's superiors, they appreciate her work capabilities and provide her with abundant opportunities. Their shared pursuit of art and life goals form the main foundation for their interactions.

4. "Doing Gender" - The Interactive Construction of Gender

Based on the "doing gender" theory proposed by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, the different gender interaction relationships exhibited in the novel "The Story of Rose" and its adapted television series reflect the dynamic relationships of gender in the context of social situation development since the latter half of the 20th century.

In 1987, Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman published a milestone paper titled "Doing Gender" in the journal *Gender and Society*. They proposed that gender is not "something we are," but "something we do," emphasizing the impact of social interaction on gender[5]. Therefore, studying the evolution of gender interaction relationships in the novel and its adapted television series through this theory reveals the changes in gender with the development of social situations and the new changes in gender in the era — from highlighting the contradictions between the sexes to reveal the truth of patriarchal suppression to seeking reconciliation of gender differences, which is reflected in the following three aspects.

4.1. Selective Matching Practices

Selective matching practices in the interactions between different gender individuals reflect the social situation's setting of gender differences. Taking Rose's love matching practice as an

example, at the end of the novel, Rose's first love, Zhuang Guodong, has a change of heart and confesses his love to Rose, who is already married to Sir Luodeqing. After much deliberation, Rose ultimately chooses Luo, who, despite being fifty-nine years old, is in good health and holds a noble title and great wealth. Rose's final choice reflects the novel's emphasis on social gender differences, where in heterosexual couples, men often have a higher social status, are stronger, and are older than women. "Selective pairing ensures couples in which boys and men are visibly bigger, stronger, and older than the girls and women with whom they are paired. [6]"

However, in the television series, Rose is matched with a young captain. At this time, Rose already has a ten-year-old daughter, operates a private art gallery, and holds a higher social status and wealth. The "sister-brother love" pairing reflects the television series' more open social context, which is contemporary and aims to dissolve social gender disparities.

4.2. Social Situations

Social situations provide a stage for presenting "essential" gender natures. The novel aims to reveal the constraints that the family, as a representative of the patriarchal structure, imposes on women. Therefore, the situations in which women interact with other gender individuals are often within the family, such as with family members, or at home or family gatherings. In contrast, the television series places gender interaction in a richer social context, where women can enter banquets to discuss with high-status individuals or go to court to defend their rights. The differences in interactive situations between men and women are thus diminished, with both genders participating in the pursuit of career success in the workplace, leading to a reconciliation of social gender differences.

4.3. Social Identity

In the "doing gender" theory, gender is something that one does and does recurrently in interaction with others. Gender individuals need to maintain and manage their gender identity and behavior on a daily basis. Specific materials, symbols, and practices can be used to indicate gender attributes and demonstrate loyalty to the identity one identifies with. At the same time, members of society consciously monitor each other's behavior based on gender implications[7]. The novel satirizes the injustice of gender identity in patriarchal society through the stereotypical evaluations of men towards women, while the television series chooses to dissolve differences with common social gender symbols. Strength is one of the important gender characteristics of male social identity, while women are often labeled as weak. In the TV series, Su sells the dumbbells online, which are bought by Huang, then the two become acquainted. As a fitness equipment, the dumbbell symbolizes strength, and the transfer of it from Su to Huang shows the direction of strength from women to men, reversing the traditional social identity differences. Once exclusive to men, the social gender symbol has become a common identity symbol for both men and women in the current era, thus forming a certain degree of reconciliation between the sexes in social identity.

In summary, the novel "The Story of Rose" and its adapted television series present the evolution of gender interaction relationships over a span of more than thirty years from different narrative perspectives. At the same time, based on the "doing gender" theory, both engage in very different social practices in different social situations and eras. The former tries to reveal the plight of women under the patriarchal social order and emphasizes gender differences, while the latter attempts to dissolve gender contradictions by presenting a vision of an equal gender power structure.

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