

Study on Figures in Contemporary American Feminist Sitcom From the Perspective of "Androgyny" Theory

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ABSTRACT

Considering the third wave of feminism, the building of figures in American sitcoms has presented new features. This study selects three contemporary feminist sitcoms, "2 Broke Girls", "New Girl" and "Girls", as the research objects, and analyzes the language and character characteristics and their attitudes towards gender relations to deconstruct the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity, and fully reflects the influence of Woolf's androgyny theory on the construction of female images in sitcoms under the third wave of feminism.

Keywords: *Androgyny, Feminism, Sitcom.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As an important type of TV series with historical significance and commercial value, American feminist sitcom has been widely concerned since the 1970s, and its female image has been changing with the development of the times. Considering the third wave of feminism, many new features have emerged in the female images of sitcoms. This study selects three contemporary feminist sitcoms, "2 Broke Girls", "New Girl" and "Girls", as the research objects, and analyzes the language and character characteristics and their attitudes towards gender relations to deconstruct the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity, and fully reflects the influence of Woolf's androgyny theory on the construction of female images in sitcoms under the third wave of feminism.

2. ESTABLISHMENT OF WOOLF'S ANDROGYNY THEORY

As early as the 19th and early 20th centuries, some scientific researchers put forward the theory of "the third sex", which combined masculinity and femininity. This theory, especially in the field of psychology, has been further developed and interpreted as a balanced state of human mental health. This state is considered as a way of thinking

that breaks the polarization of traditional gender roles, and also reflects the ability of men and women to adjust their own psychological state. Based on the interpretation of gender roles in the field of psychology, Virginia Woolf introduced her androgyny theory in her paper "A Room of One's Own" published in 1929, and proposed that men and women could write without gender awareness and fully display their creativity without gender factors. The meaning of androgyny can be seen from the roots of ancient Greek andros (male) and gune (female). Woolf elaborated on the concept of androgyny in this article: "Everyone's soul have two forces, one is male, and the other is female. In men's minds, male forces suppress female forces, while in women's minds, female forces defeat male forces. When these two forces coexist harmoniously and mentally, people will be in a normal and comfortable state [1]." She also cited many cases of famous writers, such as Shakespeare, Keats, Stern, Lamb and Coleridge, whose works were not completely dominated by male perspectives, to prove the importance of maintaining androgynous thinking in the process of literary creation. Woolf believed that androgyny and bisexuality, bisexuality or homosexuality had different meanings. Androgyny represented "full human" [2]. It was an ideal state guided by spiritual power, "neutralizing the characteristics constructed by the inherent gender of the subject" [3]. The

androgynous way of thinking can help people better achieve divergent thinking, play the subjective initiative of creation, rather than be limited by biological determinism.

Although Woolf put forward this theory from the perspective of literary criticism to stimulate the creativity of writers in the process of literary writing and get rid of various prejudices and discrimination caused by gender stereotypes of writers, it inevitably caused many disputes, especially from feminist researchers. Some scholars expressed support. Wright believed that this was a way to "liberate women from the negative force of patriarchy on gender" [4]. However, some radical scholars pointed out the backward side of androgyny sharply. Elaine Shawart regarded androgyny as the expression of Woolf's compromise, "helping her escape the inconvenience caused by her femininity" [5]. Lisa Redo even believed that androgyny was a kind of "castration" of femininity and a manifestation of gender deficiency [6]. In fact, Woolf not only recognized the difference between masculinity and femininity, but also wanted to break the traditional concept of binary opposition between the sexes, show the tolerance and unity of individuals in an androgynous way, and deconstruct the absolute opposite of men and women to achieve a harmonious state.

3. THE CREATIVE BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST SITCOMS

After the 21st century, with the advance of the third wave of feminism, androgyny theory has been fully reflected in the female images of contemporary sitcoms.

Simone de Beauvoir said in her famous book "The Second Sex": "Women are not born, women are gradually formed." [7] Feminist theory accepts the concept of distinction between physical gender and social gender. The traditional feminine temperament features include passivity and obedience to patriarchy. Women's social identity is regarded as the second sex, that is, otherness, emphasizing that men dominate. In the third wave of feminism, feminist researchers prefer to shape their own image and transmit their ideas through the mass media. More young female screenwriters and producers have voiced through their own films and TV works to reveal women's imperfect but real life and show women's subjective consciousness.

The popular sitcoms in recent years, such as "2 Broke Girls", "Girls" and "New Girl", are deeply influenced by the third wave of feminism. The screenwriters of these three plays, such as Whitney Cummings of "2 Broke Girls", Lena Durham of "Girls", and Elizabeth Merriwether of "New Girl", are all representative feminists who have been active in the field of film and television creation in recent years. These young screenwriters, who were born in the 1980s, usually excavate materials and create based on their own experiences and those of friends around them. Therefore, they are good at telling stories about young girls working hard in big cities. Although there are still many flat and patterned narrations of women's roles in mainstream films and TV plays, these feminist creators insist on showing the real life style and inner world of young American women from the perspective of female narrative. They put aside the grand narrative tradition and skilfully demonstrate the realistic situation of young American women who are confused and looking for the direction of life through the creation of comedy. Females are no longer the objects of "being watched" and are hidden under the beautiful and illusory appearance. On the contrary, they are vividly portrayed as imperfect and complex human beings, and even the slovenly side of them is unreservedly presented to the audience. The real female images created by these feminist writers can more resonate with female audiences. The creative concept of these feminist sitcoms is just like Bonnie Tao's summary of the third feminist wave: "In today's era, it is the lifestyle and attitude of life that determine a feminist, not their political activities." [8]

4. EMBODIMENT OF "ANDROGYNY" THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY FEMALE IMAGES

Taking these three sitcoms as an example, first of all, the female characters are independent, uncompromising when encountering problems, and can give full play to their subjective initiatives. These female characters get rid of the stereotype of male gaze and otherness, and are more bold and frank in language style.

Max, the heroine of "2 Broke Girls", is the most typical in these plays. As a waitress in the restaurant, she was tempered by the cruel life, but she was of personality. She seemed to be inhuman and difficult to approach, but she was compassionate, and would bravely defend the rights

of the weak. For example, in the 13th episode of the first season, in face of the boss Han raising the retail price of the tampon vending automatically in the women's bathroom for no reason, Max took a series of strong countermeasures. For example, she put the tampon in the straw storage cup at the front desk of the restaurant, and distributed it to the female customers of the restaurant for free, and announced to the female customers of the restaurant that the boss Han raised the price of the tampon, which was the culprit for making female friends "expensive" every month. In the end, the boss had to restore the original price of the sanitary tampon in the restaurant due to his face. Max was praised by his colleagues as the "big sister of the trade union defending female hygiene products". This plot fully reflects that the female characters in the sitcom under the third wave of feminism are not bound by the traditional gender roles, and are bold in pursuing a fair attitude towards life. In face of unreasonable boss or customers at work, Max always uttered golden sentences frequently without thinking, and she would tell the jokes making the other persons speechless. In terms of making friends, her style of "being tough girl" also had no convergence. When Caroline, a former millionaire with a totally different experience and personality from that of Max, just shared a lease with Max, she went to a second-hand shop together. When she saw her expensive old high-heeled shoes being sold at a low price, she couldn't hold back her grief for a moment and was about to cry aloud, but Max turned around and left in an unusual way. Caroline pulled her to argue, but Max told her that she would know how to swallow tears after a long time. She even asked Caroline to regard her as a man without the ability to comfort others.

Although Max looked cold, she was actually a warm-hearted person. When she learned that Caroline was bankrupt overnight, all her friends alienated her, and the once rich daughter almost went to the streets, she took her in. Although they were completely different in personality, they continued to work together for the common goal. In addition, Max would occasionally show her sensitive and gentle side. In the first season, Max loved small animals, such as Caroline's love of Chestnut. She took it for a walk every morning instead of Caroline and talked with it. She believed that she was happier and more healing to communicate with Chestnut than her owner. When Chestnut was about to be sent away, Max even shed sad tears, although she once told Caroline that her lacrimal glands had long been sold. The female

characters are both strong and brave, and retain the tenderness and kindness in their nature. The role of Max fully reflects the integration of femininity and masculinity.

Contrary to the tough Max, Jessie, the heroine in "New Girl", was an approachable girl next door. She often provided friends with advice on how to communicate with others and acted as a confidant. Although she was not good at dealing with emotional problems herself, she never had the heart to refuse her friends to talk to her about such problems. Because she looked simple and lovely, soft and docile, just like that kind of female role in traditional movies and TV plays, her temperament even aroused some female peers who did not know her well. In the eleventh episode of the first season, Jessie asked Nick's girlfriend Julie for help because of the ticket problem. When Julie arrived at Jessie's apartment, Jessie treated her with homemade snacks and put a comfortable blanket around her. However, Julie was not used to it, as she judged that Jessie was a thoughtless and pompous girl from her sweet and lovely appearance and homemade snacks. She told Jessie that as long as she looked at him with her innocent big eyes in front of the judge and told the story that she ran the red light to save a wounded bird lying in the middle of the road, she would get sympathy and would not be fined at all. Jessie recognized Julie's irony and decided not to accept Julie's court defences, but to take the initiative to hand in the ticket. She said: "I ran the red light for a wounded bird. I really like things with polka dots. There are always bright patterns on my clothes. I walk around a group of children every day. Also, I can't understand that you don't like sweets at all. I'm sorry I can't be as competent as Murphy Brown, and I hate your work clothes. I really want ribbons or other decorations on them to make your clothes look lovelier. But this does not mean that I am not smart, weak or independent. I will pay a fine of 800 yuan myself. There is also a picture of farm animals on my check. Hum!" Jessie dared to face the prejudice of others, speak out her own ideas honestly and boldly, and stuck to her favourite lifestyle. The outspokenness here reflects the independent personality of contemporary women, as well as the brave and confident side of women. Jessie seems to have a completely feminine character, but in fact, she is not. Her attitude towards life, which bravely breaks the prejudice, fully reflects the androgyny theory.

In American sitcoms, women's attitudes towards gender relations are open, especially in the third wave of feminism. However, compared with

previous works, the male roles in these works are more diversified, and the influence of gender relations on both sides is more obvious. Although "Sex and the City", the feminist benchmark in the 1990s, has eulogized women's independence and autonomy, it is not difficult to find that its theme still cannot escape women's fragile and emotional side in gender relations. What is different from this is that contemporary feminist sitcoms give more levels of portrayal of gender relations. In the second season of "2 Broke Girls", Caroline and her boyfriend Andy kept a stable relationship, but he often felt lost because Caroline was too focused on career and ignored himself. Finally, they broke up because of this reason. Caroline chose to recover her struggling state soon after breaking up, and Andy finally married a woman who was even more successful than Caroline in her career. There is a similar plot in "Girls". Facing the choice of love and future, Hanna chose to leave her boyfriend Adam and go to the Academy of Arts and Literature in Ohio for further study to open up more possibilities for life. After breaking up with Hanna, Adam learned to reflect on his immaturity when he was with Hanna, and chose to seriously start a new relationship. Such a plot fully reflects the characteristics of young women's high individualism under the third wave of feminism. Women in gender relations are no longer just in the vulnerable and emotional side. On the contrary, men's reflection on gender relations is even closely related to women's independence. This also indirectly reflects that the third wave of feminism breaks the traditional concept of male dominating gender relations, "eulogizing women's sexuality and encouraging women to explore various sexual choices". [9] This is women's recognition of themselves and the embodiment of women's increasing subjective consciousness.

Feminine temperament is socially constructive. In the process of constructing female images and roles, mass media culture will virtually contain the presupposition and expectation of gender roles. The female language expression under the third wave of feminism is different from the characteristics of gentleness, obedience and vulnerability in traditional femininity, and more shows the characteristics of courage, tenacity, enthusiasm and frankness. This transformation reflects the reconstruction of femininity to a certain extent. With the enhancement of more and more women's independent consciousness, the femininity of patriarchal society has been broken, and new experiences and explorations have been made in

emotion, social status, language expression, sex and other aspects. Women do not need to be forced to play a prescribed role. Their personality characteristics and way of thinking gradually dispel the deep cultural shackles hidden behind the public's thinking habits, and promote their own values covered by male power in terms of ideology and lifestyle. Women's subjective consciousness is fully displayed.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, under the third wave of feminism in the United States, Woolf's androgyny theory has a profound impact on the shaping of the characters in feminist sitcoms. First of all, women's subjective consciousness is fully displayed. Secondly, female characters have feminine and masculine temperament, thus showing multi-dimensional personality characteristics. Finally, the interaction between female and male roles illustrates the ultimate goal of androgyny — better understanding between men and women. The new characteristics of these female images show that the discussion of feminism in these sitcoms goes beyond the gender difference, pays more attention to the women's rights as full people, breaks the established cultural model to a certain extent, and opens up a new path of a generation of young women to constantly realize themselves.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

This paper is independently completed by Bingjie Qiu.

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