

Original Research Article

A feminist critical discourse analysis of woman image in Chinese and American reviews of waitress: The musical

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Abstract: Woman image has been studied thoroughly from news, poetry, song lyrics to posts, but reviews have not got enough attention. This study took the perspective of feminist critical discourse analysis to analyze twenty American reviews and fifty-five Chinese reviews of *Waitress: The Musical* from 2023 to 2025 and identify the main themes. The reviews were categorized into four aspects: 1. job and success; 2. marriage and relationship; 3. sexual freedom; 4. pregnancy and motherhood. The study found that woman image constructed in Chinese and American reviews are similar at the aspect of job and success, marriage but differ at the aspect of pregnancy and motherhood, and this study made an attempt to explain the phenomenon to provide insight on how to analyze perceptions of social inequality, power abuse and discrimination in reviews.

Keywords: feminist critical discourse analysis; woman image; musical reviews; Chinese and American comparison

1. Introduction

Woman image presents mental, spiritual, and daily behavior and expression of women in many aspects.^[2] China and America have different ideology and culture, forming a solid ground for this study to compare the reviews from the two countries. The data of twenty American reviews and fifty-five Chinese reviews were collected in a web-based search from 2023 to 2025 and analyzed in the perspective of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). The findings are the similarities and differences in the perception of job and success, marriage and relationship, sexual freedom and pregnancy and motherhood. Through investigation, the study tries to explain:

(1) What are the similarities and differences between the construction of woman image in Chinese and American reviews?

(2) Why is it constructed in such way?

2. Literature review

Waitress: The Musical is widely spread and viewed. Audiences resonate with the lines and lyrics of the show because they approve or disapprove of the ideas and ideologies it presents.^[23] The female characters in the musical are portraits of the female group in the realm of family and society.^[30] The reviews are not only the interpretation of the plot but also the manifestation of the mind of the audiences, provoking the ideas and ideologies and spreading them in a covert way.^[10, 32]

Language is not neutral but is imbued with ideologies that reflect and reproduce power relations in society.^[4] Fairclough's^[8] three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) operates on three levels of text, discourse and social context. Lazar^[11] noted that CDA should incorporate feminist theory into its analytical framework. FCDA takes cognizance of differences amongs women in various societies and recognizes that sexist attitudes will manifest differently in different contexts. Chinese and American feminism should deliver different woman image.

Many forms have been studied under the perspective of CDA, like drama,^[1] translation,^[27] news,^[6,17,24] poetry,^[18] song lyrics^[3] and online posts.^[5,13,16] Few studies are using reviews as sources for FCDA. And little research is done comparatively between America and China.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore and understand the interpretations that individuals provide for different social or human-related issues.^[7]

Any form of text, including "a piece of music", is enough to carry out CDA.^[9] And in terms of the specific research methods, FCDA has a very strong degree of openness.^[12]

3.2. Material

Posts on social media is a main source for CDA as well as FCDA.^[14,15,21] Twenty American online reviews were selected from BroadwayWorld, RogerEbert.com, Screen Rant, CNN, Slant Magazine, CBR, Chicago Sun-Times, Rachel Reviews Theatre, and Rotten Tomatoes. Fifty-five Chinese online reviews were selected from Douban. Themes of the reviews were carefully detected and reviews were categorized with same thematic meaning. Based on Shu's concept, there are four categories.^[20]

(1) Job and Success:

American critics mostly applaud Jenna's subjectivity, using words like accomplished, tremendous capacity, while some reviews see Jenna as a passive figure. Chinese comments try to fit the whole plot into a fixed type, like lower class, girl in a small town pursuing dream, New York flavor, and there are some comments aiming to figure out the external reasons of Jenna's success—Joe, the late shop owner, working as a golden finger, a "godmother", the "father" figure.

(2) Marriage and Relationship:

At the aspect of Marriage for American viewers, Earl, the husband, is described as abusive, abuser, domestic violence, evil, dangerous, narcissistic, the black cloud, a real cad, Jenna as unfortunate, damaged, trapped, stuck, caught, hide from pain, and their marriage is abusive, unfulfilling, terrible, unhappy. At the aspect of Relationship, on one hand, Dr. Pomatter is charming, sexy, lovably gawky, delightfully awkward, sympathetic, affectionate and respectful, helpful; on the other hand, he is an illicit lover, committing adultery or having an ill-advised, unwise affair. The relationship between the two can be a romance, enjoying good chemistry, or simply two wrongs don't make a right and provide no salvation but more trouble.

At the aspect of Marriage, Chinese viewers focus on the same side as American viewers do, using adjectives such as trapped, bad family relationship, abusive, toxic, domestic violence, pain. However, some words and phrases used by Chinese people are intriguing: beautify domestic violence, fortunately men weren't made too bad, puritan doctrines and the male-dominated policies working together. At the aspect of Relationship, Chinese reviews mention "moral/value" several times. The comments are basically condemning the extramarital relationship, using words like committing adultery, illegal, infidelity, sinister constraints in a beautiful package and deceive yourself, thought the doctor was single ... a thunderous shock. And surprisingly, some viewers are objectifying male in their comments, calling Dr. Pomatter a tool and a beautiful shell.

(3) Sexual Freedom:

American reviews are candid and positive about the presentation of sex onstage. Chinese reviews aren't talking directly about sexual freedom, but from the expressions—She is pregnant, had sex again, without many moral constraints, sex onstage is funny—It is safe to infer that Chinese viewers are still confined by morals and trying to express their opinions toward sex in a less direct way.

(4) Pregnancy and Motherhood:

American viewers wrote negative expressions (like unwanted, unexpected, the byproduct of a drunken night) more than the positive ones (like perfect, heart-twisting moment of tenderness) to describe the baby. Chinese viewers have three opinions. Firstly, a mother may suffer inequality and oppression due to her change of identity. Secondly, some Chinese comments root for Jenna's choice of becoming a mother. And thirdly, some put feminism on the table and engage in a meaningful conversation.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. What are the similarities and differences?

Firstly, Chinese people and American people both accept baking her way out as Jenna's dream and success. However, Chinese and American perceptions differ in that in American reviews, her success

was viewed individually, contributed to her talent, her kind heart and her persistence but Chinese people are trying to find the external reasons for her success and mostly call it a fortune, even blaming her for accepting Joe's heritage.

Secondly, American viewers are talking about how Jenna gathers her strength to leave the terrible marriage from her co-workers, her unborn baby and her affair, calling the divorce an action of "take(ing) control back". The domestic power abuse suppresses her growth. But surprisingly, in Chinese reviews, the show was charged with "beautify(ing) domestic violence". And some reviews see the oppression coming not only from Earl but also from the society.

Then, Chinese people shy away from making direct comments on the sex presented onstage, some showing sudden discomfort when addressing to the sexual scenes.

Last, three layers of the pregnancy and motherhood are presented. Having a baby can't make a happy marriage; a woman should not be overshadowed by the "mother" identity; the baby's gender matters, reflecting reviewer's worries over the girl's fate.

Overall, Chinese people construct woman image of Jenna as a more self-reliant, high-moral mother; American people construct woman image of Jenna as a fortunate, loved, and loving woman.

4.2. Why the woman image is constructed in such way?

Contemporary Chinese culture consists of three components: Traditional culture, communist ideology and Western values, while the United States is a religiously significant country.^[22] In this case, it is understandable that both Chinese and American reviews have presented their loath toward the abusive husband. However, compared with the American feminist movement, China granted women extensive equal rights legally from the very beginning of its establishment.^[28] Therefore, Chinese women seek equality from legal perspective, which leads to the different attitude towards Jenna's divorce. Also, the American feminist movement emphasizes that the socially constructed gender differences are the root cause of gender inequality, while the Chinese women's liberation movement believes that the disadvantaged position of women in the division of labor leads to their economic dependence on men, and thereby gives rise to a wide range of gender inequalities. Thus, American reviews find Jenna's internal factors for her success while Chinese reviews find Jenna's external factors for her success. The monogamous system of Christianity has laid the foundation for women to defend their own personalities in their marital lives while in China's feudal society, the constraints of ethical norms and moral codes led to the dependence of Chinese women on men.^[31] That could explain why Chinese people want Jenna to strive for success completely by herself, get rid of Earl by herself and be strong for herself.

However, there is no man advocating for the restoration of traditional virtues of Chinese men.^[25] On the surface, the mothers are promoting traditional female virtues, but in reality, they are submitting to the psychology of certain men.^[26] In China's patriarchal society, men created and dominated women's beauty standards, imposing strict requirements on women's appearance that extended into their morality, behavior, and social roles.^[29] The moral ties are so intractable that Chinese viewers have adopted it to criticize a fabled character. Jenna also faced moral condemnation from American viewers. For example, Jenna's pregnancy is called "byproduct of a drunken night". In the West, drinking alcohol is generally regarded as a manifestation of masculinity, while prohibiting women from drinking symbolizes their submission.^[19] Unfortunately, women drinking is not optimistic in China either.^[33]

5. Conclusion

This study gathered data from online websites and analyzed the reviews in the frame of FCDA to categorize the themes of the reviews into four aspects to investigate the different construction of woman image presented in Chinese and American reviews on *Waitress: The Musical*. The study found that the different construction of woman image between China and America is different due to their specific cultural and political backgrounds.

Hopefully, this study can provide insight on how to understand the various woman image constructed by people from different countries.

About the author

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