

Reconstructing Gender Narratives from the Perspective of Emotional Labor ——An Analysis of Female Characters in the TV Drama *Romance in the Alley*

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ABSTRACT

With the progress and development of social culture, feminist concepts have gradually strengthened, and gender equality, as a public issue, is increasingly attracting social attention. At the same time, calls for gender equality are growing. Many women have made significant efforts to strive for equal rights in the workplace and family, achieving a certain degree of status and recognition. However, women's contributions to emotional labor have not received adequate acknowledgment or attention. The TV drama *Romance in the Alley* contains numerous representative female characters whose emotional labor exhibits typical characteristics. This paper takes *Romance in the Alley* as the research subject, analyzing the emotional labor of female characters in familial, workplace, and generational conflicts to reveal its invisibility, gender inequality, and societal cognitive biases. The study finds that while female emotional labor maintains social bonds, its value has long been overlooked due to traditional gender roles. This value needs to be made visible and reconstructed through gender narrative equality.

KEYWORDS

emotional labor; female characteristics; invisibility; gender equality

1 Introduction

In recent years, gender equality has become a hot topic in society, and women's status in the workplace and family has indeed improved. However, one issue has long been neglected—emotional labor. For instance, women's efforts to care for family members' emotions at home, mediate workplace relationships, and act as "peacemakers" in generational conflicts are often seen as "natural duties" or even unrecognized as "labor." The popular drama *Romance in the Alley* vividly portrays several female characters, such as Huang Ling and Song Ying, who quietly shoulder significant emotional labor in familial and workplace settings. The series serves as a mirror, reflecting the invisible contributions of women in emotional labor.

Currently, emotional labor, as a form of labor deeply affecting women's lives and social roles, has garnered widespread attention. Scholars have provided valuable theoretical perspectives on the gendered distribution of emotional labor, its invisible nature, and the inequalities it manifests across professions.

Existing research on *Romance in the Alley* primarily focuses on warm realism and collective memory construction but has not systematically explored the multidimensional presentation of gendered emotional labor. This paper adopts Arlie Hochschild's emotional labor theory as a framework, focusing on the invisible contributions of female characters in non-commercialized domains (family, generational relations) to reveal the gendered distribution mechanisms. This approach offers new perspectives for promoting societal recognition of women's emotional labor and advancing gender equality, while also opening a new research angle for *Romance in the Alley* to shift focus toward its female characters.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research on Relevant Theories and Conceptual Clarification

"Emotional labor," as a significant social phenomenon, has attracted increasing scholarly attention in domestic and international research. Early studies focused on gender, labor distribution, and social roles. However, as the concept of emotional labor has deepened, scholars have begun exploring its complexity and multi-dimensionality.

With economic development, emotional labor has gradually become a new source of profit under capitalism. Most scholars initially believed it was suitable only for studying commercialized service industry labor. However, it can also apply to non-commercialized, value-oriented labor in socialist societies. Current research on emotional labor primarily concentrates on interactive work types that require interpersonal engagement. Based on different work types, the domains suitable for studying emotional labor can be divided into four categories: public-interest, public-value, private-interest, and private-value fields.

This paper applies emotional labor theory to family, generational, and workplace contexts, redefining the theory

through the lens of alienation to analyze the female characters in the drama. The study focuses on private-value and social-value fields. By connecting sociological theory with literary works, this paper constructs a framework for analyzing film and television literature through emotional labor theory. This approach innovates methods for appreciating film and television literary works and provides reference significance for research on *Romance in the Alley*.

2.2 Research on Romance in the Alley

Existing studies on this series primarily focus on its portrayal as a representative period drama. Through depictions of family, society, and history against the backdrop of China's reform and opening-up, the drama vividly illustrates the impact of social transformation on people's lives while showcasing warm realism, collective consciousness, and female perspectives. Some analyses also examine the emotional narratives and emotional communication within the drama.

Current research predominantly emphasizes the warm realistic narrative and collective memory construction in *Romance in the Alley* but lacks in-depth exploration of gendered emotional labor division. This paper breaks through the singular perspective of warm realism, applying emotional labor theory to the analysis of female characters for the first time, while reflecting on the absence and exceptions of male roles in emotional labor.

3 Emotional Labor of Female Characters in Romance in the Alley

By analyzing the emotional labor of female characters such as Huang Ling and Song Ying in *Romance in the Alley*, this study provides rich textual material. The portrayal of emotional labor in the drama reflects societal perceptions and attitudes toward this issue, holding significant cultural research value. To better illustrate the emotional labor of female characters in the drama, the discussion will proceed from the following aspects: emotional labor in familial relationships, emotional labor in the workplace and society, and emotional labor in generational conflicts.

3.1 Emotional Labor in Familial Relationships

Emotional labor in familial relationships is rooted in traditional family role divisions, manifesting as emotional care and sacrifices made by different roles (e.g. wives, mothers, children) toward family members. In the drama, this primarily appears as women's efforts to maintain harmony through forbearance.

Huang Ling, who embodies both the roles of wife and mother in her family, bears the responsibility of caring for the entire household. In her family, conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are particularly prominent, alongside tensions with her husband. However, Huang Ling chooses to endure and compromise amid disputes with her mother-in-law, misunderstandings from her husband, and the modern demands of her children to maintain superficial family stability. She acts as the "family glue"—silently tolerating her mother-in-law's criticism, proactively communicating with her husband, and patiently guiding her rebellious children. A typical scene in the drama shows Huang Ling smiling through her grievances when her mother-in-law accuses her of overspending: "You're right, Mom. I'll be more careful next time." Such "emotional suppression" epitomizes the invisible cost of emotional labor.

Huang Ling's daughter, Zhuang Xiaoting, similarly suppresses her emotions in the face of her grandparents' favoritism, choosing obedience to protect family harmony. After Wu Shanshan's mother passes away and her father remarries, she, as the eldest daughter, is repeatedly sacrificed. Despite her desire to pursue her ideals through education, her father alters her college application, forcing her into a teaching career deemed respectable by elders. She sacrifices significant time to tutor her brother for college entrance exams and ultimately marries the son of Deputy Director Liu for familial and personal interests. Wu Shanshan's endurance, grievances, and helplessness become key factors in maintaining superficial family stability.

Song Ying offers another perspective. Her own family relationships appear enviable to outsiders, allowing her to frequently mediate conflicts in other families as an empathetic outsider. Through understanding and effective communication, she resolves familial disputes, embodying the role of a non-blood-related emotional mediator.

3.2 Emotional Labor in the Workplace and Society

Building on the analysis of familial contexts, this section further explores the characteristics of emotional labor in the workplace. Women's emotional management to maintain relational networks in professional or social activities—such as workplace empathy, team cohesion-building, and interpersonal maintenance—also constitutes emotional labor.

Huang Ling, working in a cotton mill, maintains harmonious relationships with colleagues due to her gentle and kind nature. When Song Ying causes a scene to compete for housing allocation, Huang Ling offers understanding and support.

Song Ying, with her compassionate personality, advocates for colleagues who lose job opportunities due to policy

changes and layoffs during the cotton mill crisis. She uses empathy to resolve conflicts and comfort others. This "emotional management," while seemingly effortless, consumes significant energy.

3.3 Emotional Labor in generational Conflicts

Beyond familial, workplace, and societal contexts, emotional labor in generational conflicts also plays a considerable role. Amid clashes between traditional values and modern consciousness, women bear the responsibility of mediating generational contradictions and transmitting new ideas. For detailed analysis, female characters are divided into younger and older generations.

Younger female characters like Zhuang Xiaoting carry dual burdens, balancing traditional filial piety with modern independence. After higher education, she faces pressure to return home for work, satisfying elders' expectations of a "dutiful daughter" while tactfully expressing her own values and pursuing an ideal life and relationships. She gradually changes her parents' biases toward new policies and ideas through dialogue, exemplifying "ideological transmission" as emotional labor.

Older female characters, such as Huang Ling, demonstrate emotional labor through awakening and resistance. After enduring prolonged unhealthy mother-in-law relationships, Huang Ling rebels. Influenced by societal changes and younger characters like Zhuang Tu'nan, Xiang Pengfei, and Lin Dongzhe, she embraces new ideologies, offering spiritual and material support. After unemployment, guided by her daughter, she adapts to the new economic system by starting a small home-based cafeteria, reclaiming her self-worth.

4 Conclusion

Through the above analysis of the emotional labor performed by female characters in the drama, we observe its diversity across familial, workplace, societal, and generational contexts. These efforts highlight the invisibility of emotional labor, further revealing gender inequality in its distribution.

A poignant line in the drama encapsulates this invisibility: "Aren't you just cooking and taking care of kids at home all day?" Huang Ling's contributions are dismissed by her husband as "worthless," yet her endurance sustains family harmony. This contradiction—demanding women's labor while devaluing it—reflects societal attitudes toward emotional labor.

Traditional gender roles in emotional labor are evident in male characters like Zhuang Chaoying, whose emotional labor is nearly absent. For example, Huang Ling's husband responds to family conflicts with "You handle it," leaving her to manage mother-in-law tensions and children's education alone. This contrast underscores the "women handle domesticity, men remain absent" paradigm.

However, it is undeniable that men's emotional labor is not universally lesser than women's. For instance, Song Ying's husband contrasts sharply with Zhuang Chaoying. He is considerate toward his wife and children, providing emotional support, and acts as a mediator like Song Ying, offering advice and comfort. Even their son, Lin Dongzhe, contributes high-energy emotional labor. Thus, men's emotional labor should also be acknowledged. However, the drama emphasizes the disparity between male and female emotional labor to critique gender inequality and advocate for the recognition of women's contributions.

Nevertheless, women's emotional labor is not merely sacrificial; it can also foster personal growth. Huang Ling eventually awakens: she stops compromising and starts a small business to regain self-worth. Similarly, Li Jia, an educated youth, transitions from submission to self-realization, securing a stable and respectable job in Shanghai. This demonstrates that emotional labor can serve as a springboard for women to break traditional constraints.

Emotional labor should not be an "invisible shackle" for women. Through analyzing *Romance in the Alley*, this paper hopes to raise awareness that "natural duties" are actually social bonds woven by women's emotions and energy. Only by acknowledging its value can true gender equality be achieved.

In summary, this paper reveals the invisibility and contradictions of female emotional labor in *Romance in the Alley*: it is both devalued as "natural duty" and serves as a catalyst for women's liberation. By affirming the value of women's emotional labor, it critiques societal gender inequality. Future research should explore quantitative methods to transition emotional labor from "private sacrifice" to "public recognition."

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