

Feminist analysis of women's role in the film *Desperate Housewives*

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Abstract: *Desperate Housewives*, an American sitcom aired in 2004, takes American housewives as the theme, sets in the middle-class area of Wisteria Lane, and tracks the lives of four housewives with different personalities, Susan, Lynette, Bree and Gabrielle, following the plight they face: all kinds of pressures in life, and the contradiction between the shackles of tradition and the demands for independence and freedom of modern women, which make these housewives almost desperate. In this paper, the reasons for the female plight in the context of the times will be analyzed, and feminism in *Desperate Housewives* will be explored based on intersectionality theory, feminist media study theory, and post-feminism. Finally, the female plight hidden in the opening animation will be analyzed through multimodal theory.

Key words: feminism media study theory; intersectionality theory; post-feminism; *Desperate Housewives*

1 Introduction

This paper will analyze the reasons for the female plight in *Desperate Housewives* from three aspects: politics, economy, and society. After the 9/11 attacks and the resurgence of conservatism in the United States, American politics emphasized the importance of tradition and security instead of taking actions positively [1]. The role of territory, border security, and small families in the entire country was amplified. Both society and families urgently required women to contribute their efforts, economic globalization had widened the gap between the poor and the rich, and various policies in the United States were tilted towards the wealthy. "Compared to the ordinary people, the rich in the United States had an absolute advantage in social security and education resources [2]." Women were required to be more involved in the workforce to support their families, due to declined economic mobility, while the new economy led to a new trend on luxury in America. On the one hand, the US government's vigorous promotion on consumption and the booming of the advertising provided women with vent and spiritual compensation; on the other hand, consumer culture in America framed women's lives, and the female body itself had become one of the male pleasing commodities [3].

2 Feminist analysis from the perspective of intersectionality theory

Intersectionality refers to the interaction of gender, race and other categories of differences in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies, as well as the results of these interactions in terms of power [4]. Intersection indicates the unique status of women of color, who, as multiple marginalized individuals, could not always accurately point out how, why, and where discrimination occurred [5]. This theory could be traced back to the emergence of ethnic minority feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists spoke out to the world through the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), whose important content was to criticize the second wave feminist movement for only

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focusing on the demands and oppression of white women, and ignoring the needs of women of different races, thus leading to the hegemony of white feminist discourse. They argued that there were differences within female groups. Even if there were certain common characteristics among groups of the same gender, the group still lacked consistency due to internal differences in class, race and citizenship. Feminism called for the subversion of differences in gender, culture, race and class, and for the interests of women all over the world on the same starting point, so as to achieve the female equality at all levels. But in *Desperate Housewives*, the hierarchy of women of different races and classes was revealed everywhere. The African-American family in the play was full of darkness and tragedy. In the second season, Betty, the newly moved housewife, built a cell in person in the basement to imprison her son, because her son was falsely accused of murder. Although his struggling voice in the cell often aroused the curiosity and suspicion of her neighbors, she had to do this to prevent anyone from finding him. Her son always sneaked out in the dark and met Bree's daughter Daniel, deeply falling in love with her. However, Bree firmly opposed her daughter's association with black people, and later they moved away late at night without hearing from each other. In the show, people of color were always served as nannies, bartenders, gatekeepers, and other professions. Gabrielle, a main character in the show, once hired an Asian nanny named Xiao Mei, who came to the United States as an illegal immigrant and tried to please her hostess. Xiao Mei begged Gabrielle to help her stay in the United States, otherwise her uncle would sell her like a slave. Later, Xiao Mei gained the trust of the Gabrielles and acted as a surrogate mother for the couple, and she attempted to seduce Gabrielle's husband. However, the surrogacy failed and Xiao Mei disappeared. These plots indicated the discrimination and prejudice against Asian-Americans. Johnson Odum said that if feminism was to truly focus on and eliminate the oppression on women, then feminists in the first and third world must recognize a broad basis that racial discrimination and economic exploitation were the main forces of oppression for the majority of women in the world. However, from the situation around the world, the women themselves were involved in the oppression of other women, and feminists must respect different cultures and recognize that women everywhere were fully capable of making their voices heard [6]. Gabrielle was a Latin-American citizen, and her portrayal of this character was also filled with stereotypes of Latinos. Her distinctive features included an exotic atmosphere, strong sexual appetite, and being more easily driven by sexual pleasure compared to white women [7]. Stereotypes existed because they met the important identity demand of mainstream culture, thereby maintaining the status quo and hegemony [8]. When she was young, Gabrielle was a famous model. For others, she was beautiful and sexy, but ignorant and money-oriented. After marrying to Carlos, a rich merchant, she constantly changed her luxury cars and designer clothes. In terms of gender relations in traditional Latino families, men were often portrayed as actively practicing male chauvinism, namely the dominant role and authority of men in the family [9]. In the earlier marriage pattern, Gabrielle had no subjectivity of her own, but more like Carlos' private property, a tool to show off to other men. Carlos gave her diamonds and jewelries to meet her luxury life in return for giving him everything he wanted. Carol even hoped to please his clients with her good looks, and Gabrielle had to put up with these unreasonable demands. She attached to Carlos, both materially and spiritually, and Carlos relished the feeling of being depended on and needed. However, she had an affair with the gardener in vengeance. She enjoyed the temptation and excitement of the tryst with her lover, but she was still empty and lonely spiritually. Later, she decided to stay by her husband's side after knowing that he had lost his sight unexpectedly and his company had gone bankrupt. She shouldered the family burden, took care of her husband and children, and became a company manager through her excellent marketing capacity. Her husband also understood that material possessions could not replace love and companionship after he recovered physically, and helped her establish her own online marketing company, which undoubtedly overturned the stereotype on her.

3 Feminist analysis from the perspective of feminism media study theory

An important issue in feminist media research is how specific ideological constructions of female characteristics are generated in media content, and to whom they are useful [10]. Another early milestone in feminist research stemmed from Laura Mulvey's (1975) work on the cinematic display of women as objects of the male gaze [11]. She believes that the roles women play in movies are not important, and their role is to be gaze-upon, for the men's visual enjoyment [12]. Though the concept is questioned, she highlights patriarchal social structures and the multiple ways in which women's lives are unconsciously coded, which is reflected in *Desperate Housewives*. Sexy Eddie, as the dream lover of all men in Wisteria Town, stole the attention of lovers of four female protagonists, but in reality, no man really loved her, and they just lusted for her good looks. Gabrielle and Eddie competed in the bar to see who was sexier and could win more free drinks from men, which undoubtedly demonstrated their firm belief in aesthetic standards of the patriarchal society and their continuous efforts in that way. Throughout the show, women mostly wore sexy underwear to win the love of men, to maintain their beautiful looks, and to engage in intrigue to please their husbands to ensure that they would not pass their affection to another woman. In a word, this is the plight of women in a patriarchal society.

4 Feminist analysis from the perspective of post-feminism

The feminist movement of the 1960s left subsequent generations of women in an ambiguous position. They benefited from feminism's promotion of educational and professional opportunities, yet they still experienced external pressures and internal desires for romance and family. In short, they found themselves caught between being strong and independent, and preserving their feminine qualities. In 1982, an article titled "Voices from the Post-feminist Generation" published in *The New York Times* revealed the discontent of young American women towards feminism. They felt that feminism stripped them of their inherent femininity, and post-feminism was seen as a counterstrike against feminism [13]. *Desperate Housewives* embodies post-feminism in its knowing and self-reflexive examination of women in contemporary society, and re-identifies with traditional representations of women and femininity.

Post-feminism provides feasible solutions to women's predicaments. The inherent tensions at work in post-feminism are not only at play in *Desperate Housewives* but are announced by the title. The term 'housewife' was widely used in the 1950s. After the arrival of second-wave feminism, it acquired a negative connotation, being defined as the 'other'. Oldenburg believes that the airing of 'Desperate Housewives' has greatly changed our society's concept of the housewife. As Rosemary Neill noted, the term 'housewife' was almost derogatory before the emergence of this television series, which reeked of frozen vegetables and quiet subjugation. She believes that "with its glamour, intrigue and women who stand up to their men, this dysfunctional neighborhood has reclaimed the word housewife for generations of overlooked women" [14]. Therefore, the show acknowledges a cultural atmosphere in which women not only have the option to stay at home as housewives, but this choice is also accepted. Johnson and Lloyd argue that, rather than considering the housewife as a victim or a failed self, she needs to be regarded as the core of the history of feminist subjectivity, and it serves as a reminder of how feminism itself was established on the basis of traditional domestic life [15].

The title sequence of 'Desperate Housewives' depicts a series of iconic images of women in history, which are manipulated into pop-up mini illustrations, strengthening the title's loyalty to post-feminism and sense of gameplay. The images convey domesticity. The multimodal metaphor theory will be used to analyze the feminism hidden in these images in this paper [16]. From Season 1 to Season 8, every episode of *Desperate Housewives* features a designed intro and outro, utilizing the transition of sound and visual images in a multimodal form to express meaning, and fully capture the attention of the audience.

5 Feminist analysis from the perspective of multimodal theory

5.1 Analysis on the opening animation

(1) Adam and Eve

The opening animation of the show refers to a story from the *Bible*. It's adapted from the famous painting *Adam and Eve* by Lucas Cranach, a renowned German painter from the 16th-century European Renaissance period (1526). Eve was created by God from a rib taken from Adam, thus she is subordinate to man. Due to Eve's weak will, she couldn't resist the temptation of the devil, Satan, who used a snake to lure her, leading her to eat the forbidden fruit. She then tempted Adam, who also ate the forbidden fruit. As a punishment, God inflicted pain upon her during childbirth and decreed that she should obey her husband. Subsequently, the two were expelled from the Garden of Eden, becoming the ancestors of mankind. Therefore, Eve, as an obedient, weak, sinful yet seductive mother and wife, set the social status of women. The Puritan's original sin concept holds that women are the root of all evil and disaster. In the show's intro, Adam is knocked down by a giant apple inscribed with 'Desperate Housewives,' symbolizing desire. Eve catches the apple spat out from the snake's mouth, her captivating smile symbolizing life and desire. This demonstrates that the TV series is female-centric, with women more actively and assertively facing and controlling desire.

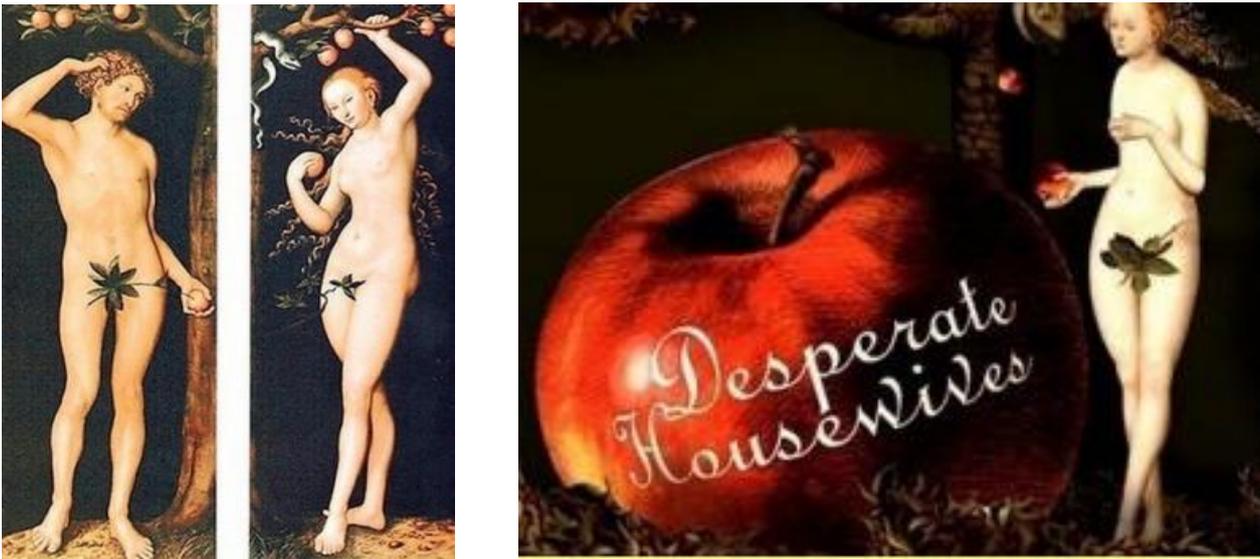


Fig. 1. Adam and Eve (1526).

(2) Egyptian wall painting

The transition is made from Adam and Eve to the stage of Egyptian wall paintings. The ancient Egyptian woman surrounded by a group of children is Nefertari, the first wife of Ramses II. She gave birth to many children for Ramses II. She rises with a clap of her hands but immediately falls silent with the commotion of the children, implying that women are overstretched in their return to the family due to the need to care for their husbands and teach their children. Also, the name Nefertari implies a 'beautiful companion', indicating that in that era, women existed only as appendages to a patriarchal society, and their status and prestige entirely relied on their husbands.

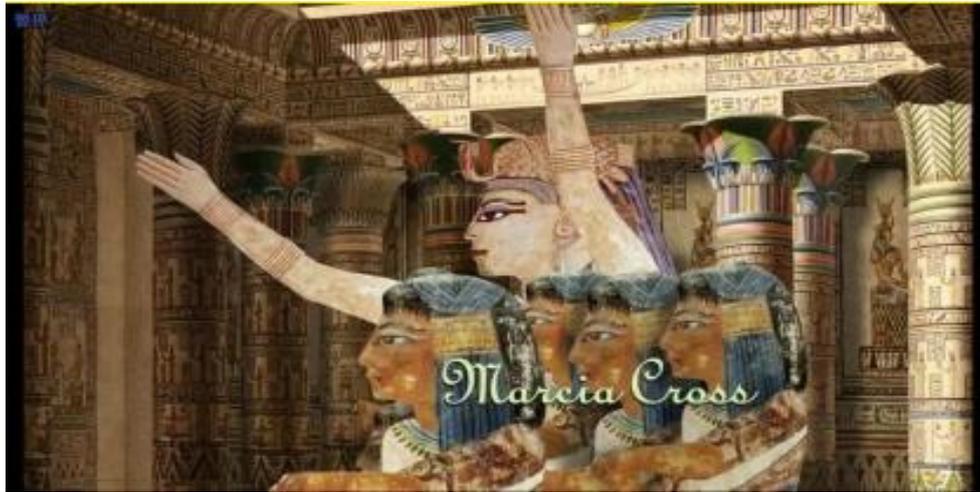


Fig. 2. Egyptian wall painting.

5.2 Analysis on the following series of scenes each describe the four women in the series

(1) *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*

It depicts their sincere love by using realistic and symbolic techniques: his left hand gently holds his wife's right hand, signifying a husband's commitment to provide for his wife forever. Her palm faces upward, implying her eternal loyalty to her husband; his right hand is in a prayer position, seemingly expressing gratitude to God and vowing unchanging love; she gently places her left hand on her swelling belly and slightly lowers her head as if silently swearing to be a dutiful wife and mother. Her white headdress symbolizes purity; her green gown and protruding belly represent vigorous life and the responsibility of childbearing; the small dog on the floor symbolizes their mutual loyalty. The artist, like a photographer, takes a wedding photo for the couple, placing each viewer in the position of a witness to this oath of love. The opening animation adds comedic elements to this painting. Mr. Arnolfini casually tosses a banana peel on the floor, and his wife, with her large belly, sweeps up the peel, along with the pile of trash behind her. This scene metaphorically represents male chauvinism, while showing two characteristics of women at that time: managing household chores and giving birth to children. In addition, it reflects traditional beliefs: that men are the sole creators of wealth and being a good housewife is a woman's duty. American feminist Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, pointed out that society imposes duties of being a good wife and mother on women, including endless housework, childbirth, and education of children [17]. In the series, Lynette, a rare elite in the advertising industry, is smarter and more competent than her husband, Tom. However, she chose to leave her career at its peak to return home for her husband and their unborn child. Upon discovering that Tom only needed to take responsibility for an illegitimate daughter because of a fling in his youth, Lynette forgave him. Facing the extortion of Tom's ex-girlfriend, she showed the greatest courage to save their marriage, much like Mrs. Arnolfini in the painting, standing tall with a large belly, cleaning up the mess left by her husband. She is forever loyal to her husband, continually giving birth and raising children, even if her husband causes trouble outside, it's the wife who has to clean up.



Fig. 3. *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* (1434).



Fig. 4. The adding comedic elements to *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* (1434).

(2) *Of course I can*

This is a famous poster from World War II. At the time, it undoubtedly promoted female empowerment and elevated women's status. *Desperate Housewives* carries on this spirit, but with a twist: the woman in the poster overlooks a very famous can - a can of Campbell's Soup.



Fig. 3. *Of course I can*.



Fig. 4. Campbell's Soup Can (1962).

The painting reflects the consumer culture of the United States in the 1960s, demonstrating the severe materialism of society at the time, which has become a symbol of American consumerism. The author of this painting, Andy, is a pioneering figure in pop art. In *Desperate Housewives*, we see a transition from the symbols of traditional American culture to modern avant-garde art, alluding to the changes in women's social status. Speaking of material girls, one might easily think of Gabrielle. Born into poverty, she became a famous model through her own efforts and married a businessman at the peak of her career. Although she has everything that people envy - a wealthy husband, a luxurious villa - her life after marriage is empty. She spends her time shopping, grooming, doing yoga, and ultimately succumbs to temptation, having an affair with the 18-year-old gardener, John. Gabrielle is very self-centered and a thorough hedonist, but she also has a melancholic side. As Mary said, "Gabrielle is like a drowning person, struggling on the edge of pain." She yearns for love and care, and to escape emptiness. Her affair is just a temporary means to fill the void. Between her husband and her lover, she firmly chooses the husband who can satisfy her material desires, unwilling to ruin her unfortunate marriage. She is a true reflection of women's social status under the false pretenses of glamour.

(3) Susan - Strike

Susan is a single mother, inherently kind, filled with naive fantasies, and devoted to finding faithful and lasting love. As a result, Susan's emotional life is the most complicated among the four women. She is extremely insecure in love and marriage; she craves a man's love but keeps getting hurt. Her ex-husband left her and their daughter to seek new pleasures without being condemned by society or restrained by law. The woman left behind, however, is the one who has to shoulder the responsibilities of raising children. After divorcing, Susan, who isn't financially affluent, is expected to emotionally comfort her children at home, but as a mother, she also has to work to make ends meet. This long-term emotional and physical torment almost constitutes her entire life, whether it's her ex-husband Karl or the mysterious plumber Mike, they both broke her heart. Through her on-again, off-again relationship with Mike, she gradually becomes stronger, independently raising and protecting their child. She is no longer emotionally or financially dependent on men, just as depicted in the opening cartoon: a woman holding household items, weeping and raising her fist to strike the man. They are constantly struggling against traditional family concepts, groping for growth in difficult circumstances to realize their self-worth and spiritual independence.

The illustrations in the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* appear in chronological order: first, the mythical era of Adam and Eve, followed by ancient Egypt, the Middle Ages, the early 20th century, and finally the end of the 20th century. It's akin to a chronicle of the status of women, showcasing the evolution of gender roles throughout human history. The multimodal metaphors in *Desperate Housewives* allow us to study the evolution of modern American female consciousness from multiple perspectives.



Fig. 5. Susan - Strike.

(4) Scene of four housewives catching a "forbidden fruit" and smiling

The final scene shows each of the four housewives catching a "forbidden fruit" and smiling. Lynette holds an apple close to her chest, symbolizing her as the Mother Earth; Bree holds an apple in a savvy way, suggesting her meticulous homemaking; Gaby holds the apple in a seductive way, implying she embodies temptation; Susan holds the apple in a vulnerable position, representing the sorrowful and fragile woman [18].

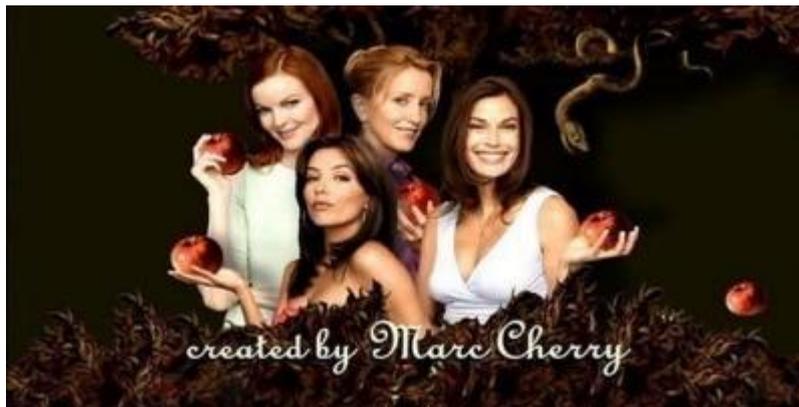


Fig. 6. Four housewives catching a "forbidden fruit"

6 Conclusion

In summary, *Desperate Housewives* reflects some post-feminist thoughts, including the acceptance of femininity; regaining strength in desperate situations, and courageously making one's own decisions. The ways women handle problems in this series offer some reference for resolving real-life challenges faced by women. Meanwhile, the vast male presence in the show merely serves as attractive supporting roles to enhance the four female leads. On the surface, this show seems to be entirely a feminist piece, but it can't completely mask the various predicaments that traditional patriarchal thinking in America brings to women of different social classes. Lynette, after returning home from overtime work at the company every day, has to endure her husband's so-called healthy law of insisting on sex 30 days a month. Despite her reluctance, she still complies with her husband's request; when Gaby requests her husband for normal sexual life, he ties her to the bed and leaves, leaving her helpless no matter how she cries for help; to maintain her marriage, Bree has to accept her husband's abnormal sexual abuse. The protagonist is always facing conflicting choices: career or family? Independence or dependence?

The show offers a rare reflection on the living conditions and social values of women, scrutinizing the traditional marriage system and prescribed roles faced by middle-class housewives in America, as well as their constant struggle against the pressures and constraints brought by a patriarchal society, to secure their own survival space.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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