

# The Path to Emotional Independence and Self-worth Realization for Contemporary Women from a Feminist Perspective--A Case Study of *The Tale of Rose*

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**Abstract.** Since its broadcast in June 2024, the TV series *The Tale of Rose* has gained immense popularity. The series taking a female perspective, narrates the spiritual growth journey of the lead character Huang Yimei. Through the baptism and precipitation of several romantic relationships, Huang Yimei undergoes a transformation from being the "other" to achieving "self." In terms of female character portrayal, the series creates multi-faceted and rounded female figures with distinct personalities and various charms, whose emotional ties are intricate yet sincere. With a unique perspective, the series shows women who are subjected to "gazes" and strive to counter them. Huang Yimei's extraordinary life experiences endow her with the drive to break constraints and counter the "gazes."

**Keywords:** *The Tale of Rose*; Female Image; Rounded Characters; Perspective of Gaze.

## 1. Introduction

The television series *The Tale of Rose*, adapted from the homonymous novel by Yi Shu and aired in June 2024, has garnered immense popularity since its debut, resonating deeply with audiences through its relevant themes. Particularly, the topic of female growth has struck a chord with the public. By June 26th, *The Tale of Rose* had garnered a total of 7,697 trending topics across all online platforms, including 6,130 on MicroBlog, with the main streaming figures on TikTok exceeding 31.11 billion views. The series not only retains the essence of the original novel but also delves deeper visually and emotionally, presenting viewers with a captivating spectacle of female growth, self-redemption, and defiance against fate. More than just a romantic drama, it serves as a microcosm of the awakening of female independence. This article aims to explore, through the lens of *The Tale of Rose*, how contemporary women, exemplified by Huang Yimei, pursue emotional independence and the realization of their self-worth.

### 1.1. Huang Yimei's Growth: From "The Other" to "The Self"

Due to the oppression of patriarchy, women have long existed as "The Other" in history. The famous French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir believes that "in the relationship between men and women, men are the subject, while women are the other." The "Other" loses their subjectivity and is dominated and controlled by the subject, being secondary, weak, and passive. Under the subtle influence of patriarchal culture, female images in film and television culture tend to be stereotyped and flat, thus becoming "The Other." Whether it is marginalized and functionalized women in mainstream films or women serving as "sexy vases" and visual symbols in commercial films, undoubtedly, they do not possess their own subjectivity. As objects, they often wait for others' help and lack the ability to act autonomously and transcend themselves.

With the vigorous development of feminist thought, more and more creators have begun to focus on creating female characters that attempt to break free from the identity of "The Other." In these works, women are no longer neglected visual symbols; their emotions and expressions, thoughts, and actions are placed in a position of subjectivity. The television series *The Tale of Rose* presents the spiritual growth journey of Huang Yimei from a unique female perspective. With the "evolution of female



love views" as its core, the series vividly shows the challenges and choices Huang Yimei faces at various stages of her life, including love, career, and overall existence, through the lens of its protagonist.

Huang Yimei, a woman from a family steeped in culture, experiences emotional entanglements with different men at different stages of her life. Her first love is the young and promising Zhuang Guodong, and the two of them instantly fall in love with each other after meeting. This seemingly perfect couple of "golden boy and jade girl" falls apart due to Zhuang Guodong's "sophisticated egoism." Without consulting Yimei, Zhuang Guodong accepts a job offer in the United States, causing Yimei's emotions to spiral out of control. Although they were young and full of aspirations and passion for love, they were also naive and ignorant. When faced with the choice between career and love, neither of them had enough maturity and rationality to handle it. The intensity of love ultimately succumbs to the realities of choice, and they eventually go their separate ways, leaving regrets in each other's hearts. After experiencing this passionate first love, Huang Yimei gradually matures and becomes more resolute in her life direction.

While pursuing her graduate studies at Fudan University, Rose encountered her second boyfriend, Fang Xiewen. As Rose's senior, Fang Xiewen initially took great care of her, and the two gradually fell in love and entered into marriage. However, after marriage, Fang Xiewen revealed his true colors. Knowing that he was not have good life condition, he maintained his psychological balance by suppressing and controlling Rose. To keep Rose under his control, he abruptly cut off all her social activities, turning her into a caged golden bird. He even summoned his mother to "take care" of Rose and strictly monitored her personal finances, to the extent that Rose couldn't even afford to buy a painting worth 50 yuan after marriage. This behavior not only deprived Rose of her personal freedom and choices but also degraded her status in their relationship.

In the third emotional chapter of Huang Yimei's life, she fortuitously encountered Fu Jiaming, an artist whose soul is deeply enthralled with music and who walks at the cutting edge of musical innovation. Their initial encounter seemed like a profound convergence of two spiritual realms. With his acute perception, Fu Jiaming discovered the hidden melancholy and latent vitality in Huang Yimei's paintings at the art gallery, deciphering clues left by her brushstrokes. He evoked the emotions within the paintings with his passionate rock music, revitalizing them and bringing them to life. This creative interaction not only sparked fresh inspiration in Huang Yimei's artistic endeavors but also evoked an unprecedented spiritual resonance within her, driving her to yearn for a deeper understanding of this companion who could touch her soul.

Fu Jiaming's presence taught her how to find a harmonious balance between love and self, allowing her to savor genuine spiritual freedom. Although their relationship ultimately came to a tragic end due to Fu Jiaming's passing, Rose did not succumb to despair. Instead, everything she experienced in this relationship – the laughter, tears, growth, and enlightenment – became invaluable treasures in her life. From then on, Rose's outlook on life and values underwent a fundamental shift. She transcended the confines of petty personal affections, turning her attention towards pursuits that filled her heart with fulfillment and satisfaction, be it professional success, the enrichment of her spiritual world, or her contributions and influence on society. In this journey, Rose gradually evolved into a resilient and courageous woman. In the process, she exemplified what true independence and freedom truly mean.

The 40-year-old Rose met a younger boy named He Xi. In this relationship, she was no longer defined by others. Guided by He Xi, Rose mastered the new skill of flying, which also symbolized her spiritual leap. Flying, as the most direct symbol of freedom, allowed Rose to experience an unprecedented sense of control and liberation. In this process, she not only challenged her own limits but also proved that age was not an obstacle to pursuing dreams and trying new things. Through self-actualization, she found inner peace and satisfaction that could not be given by any external relationship.

The nearly 20-year time span of the drama shows the spiritual growth process of a woman. The process of female growth is like the blooming of a flower, which needs to go through wind and rain before reaching the moment of full bloom. Every setback makes Huang Yimei clearer about what she

truly wants. She has emerged from the fantasy of love supremacy, gradually learned to find herself in marriage, and no longer pinned her happiness on others, but achieved inner peace and joy through self-growth and the pursuit of dreams. This self-happiness beyond love also made her the master of her own destiny.

In the TV series *The Tale of Rose*, the screenwriter and director, with their profound understanding of the original work and keen insight into contemporary society, have made bold and innovative adaptations to the drama, cleverly grasping the new core of female growth and self-discovery. Through meticulously constructed plots and visual language, they breathe new life into the story on screen. The female protagonist Huang Yimei, portrayed by Liu Yifei, is endowed with a more independent and self-reliant spiritual core. She is no longer merely a victim of love but a modern woman with her own life pursuits and value judgments.

## **2. Comparison of Female Images: Multi-faceted and Three-dimensional Rounded Characters**

*The Tale of Rose* is a series that deeply explores and innovatively adapts the original work. In this adaptation process, the director and screenwriter avoided flattening and stereotyping the characters, discarding the "gazed" female images of "angels" and "demons". Instead, they strived to uncover and display the multifacetedness, complexity, and growth changes of the characters, successfully portraying a series of rounded characters. This approach greatly enriched the connotation of the series and enhanced the viewing experience for audiences.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster mentions, "Round characters are unpredictable, just like life, which is hard to foresee." The portrayal of round characters breaks the simplistic categorization of being entirely good or entirely bad, depicting characters according to the true nature of life, revealing the complexity and richness of human nature in a more authentic and profound manner, thereby possessing higher aesthetic value. In *The Tale of Rose*, every major character is endowed with vivid vitality, complexity, and a distinct "character arc." Forster defines round characters with flat characters as a reference, stating, "If a character's words and deeds exhibit more than one concept or quality, their image is the starting point of a curve evolving towards roundness." *The Tale of Rose* shows the complexity of the main characters' personalities, the richness of their inner worlds, and their growth and transformation as the plot progresses, all of which are crucial in attracting audiences and enriching the connotation of the work.

### **2.1. The new image of independent and self-reliant women--Huang Yimei**

Huang Yimei, born into a scholarly family in Beijing, possesses extraordinary beauty, intelligence, and a cheerful disposition. In her early twenties, she fell deeply in love with Zhuang Guodong at first sight and their relationship quickly blossomed into a passionate romance. However, Rose found herself trapped in the vortex of love, unable to escape. Ultimately, their undaunted love proved no match for the realities of being separated by distance and culture, as well as Zhuang Guodong's indifference towards the long-distance relationship. At this young age, Rose inadvertently placed herself in a passive role, with her emotions and actions revolving around Zhuang Guodong. When he decided to work abroad without consulting her, she lost her temper and became emotionally unhinged. Rose's encounter with her senior schoolmate Fang Xiewen, from their initial meeting on campus to a gradual deepening of understanding, and eventually marriage, was supposed to be a beautiful tale. Yet, their relationship deteriorated from mutual appreciation to an irreparable rupture. Within the confines of marriage, Rose suffered injustice, hardship, and a loss of freedom. Once radiant, she was forced to change under the shackles of family ethics. After divorcing Fang Xiewen, Rose returned to the workplace and encountered her soulmate, Fu Jiaming. Their souls resonated and attracted each other frequently. Unfortunately, fate intervened, and Fu Jiaming passed away prematurely due to illness, leaving Rose heartbroken. Despite the ups and downs in her romantic life, Rose continued to grow and evolve, boldly pursuing what she loved without regret.

In her professional development, Huang Yimei also demonstrated her versatility and unwavering spirit. Having majored in Art History at a prestigious university for her undergraduate degree, she laid a solid foundation for her artistic sensibility and aesthetic abilities. Upon graduation, she directly entered the field of curating, utilizing her expertise and passion for art to plan and organize various art exhibitions. Later, after a period of marriage, Huang Yimei became a housewife. However, with the breakdown of her marriage and the need for personal growth, she made the decision to return to the workplace. She embarked on creating her own gallery, aspiring to integrate her artistic passion with her business acumen. Throughout her entrepreneurial journey, she received support from various quarters. For instance, her former supervisor Tina proactively extended an invitation for collaboration, the artist Fu Jiaming provided her with artistic resources and networking opportunities, and her older brother Huang Zhenhua assisted in designing the gallery's blueprints. Despite encountering numerous challenges and difficulties along the way, Huang Yimei relied on her intelligence and perseverance to successfully flourish her gallery. This process not only fulfilled her entrepreneurial dreams but also propelled her career to new heights.

At the end of the series, Rose rides her motorcycle swiftly down a road lined with golden leaves, appearing poised, confident, and determined. She says, "From now on, the world lies before me, pointing to wherever I desire to go, and I am in complete and absolute control." Huang Yimei, who embodies autonomy and self-reliance, stands out as a unique and exceptional image of the modern woman.

## **2.2. A paradigm of wisdom and modern consciousness--Su Gengsheng**

In *The Tale of Rose*, Su Gengsheng's character is multifaceted. On one hand, she is independent, intelligent, elegant, and empathetic. She dedicates herself entirely to her career, demonstrating remarkable work ethic and determination. However, Su Gengsheng harbors a painful past. At the age of 16, she was sexually assaulted by her stepfather, an experience that inflicted profound trauma. When she disclosed this to her mother, instead of offering protection, her mother slapped her, accusing her of seducing her stepfather and justifying not reporting the incident for her daughter's reputation, saying, "It was just once" and "Every woman goes through it." Her mother's inaction and victim-blaming attitude left Su Gengsheng even more heartbroken. The misfortune of her family of origin made her wary of outsiders, fearing re-victimization and being looked down upon. After graduating from college, she hastily entered into a marriage to obtain a Beijing residency permit, only to end it quickly in divorce. This brief marriage, coupled with her childhood trauma, made Su Gengsheng believe that a happy marriage was a parallel line that would never intersect with her life. Struggling alone in Beijing without a way back, she persevered, carrying the burden of her "bad hand" and fearing a lonely old age. Yet, fate is mysterious, and Su Gengsheng's life began to change after meeting Huang Zhenhua. She gradually opened up her heart and decided to accept him. As their relationship deepened, Su Gengsheng confided in Huang Zhenhua about her past marriage and family struggles. Upon learning of her past, Huang Zhenhua did not recoil or disdain her. Instead, he felt even more compassion for her ordeal and vowed to face future challenges together. Huang Zhenhua's acceptance and understanding deeply moved Su Gengsheng, and they officially established a romantic relationship. Su Gengsheng's journey has been fraught with challenges and pain, but she has never been defeated by these difficulties. With unwavering determination and bravery, she strives to live and pursue her happiness. She understands that life is not always smooth sailing, but as long as she doesn't give up, she will find her path to the light. Her attitude not only preserves her dignity and independence in marriage but also empowers her with poise and confidence in life.

Su Gengsheng's role as a "Trouble Solver" symbolizes her profound insight into life and understanding of human complexity. She can discern others' dilemmas not only because of her rich experiences and keen observation but also because of her open and inclusive heart, willing to listen and comprehend others' stories. Simultaneously, she adeptly handles her own problems, embodying her independent spirit. In her marriage with Huang Zhenhua, she does not rely on his lifestyle to

dictate hers but instead prioritizes her own interests and needs, showing a self-actualizing attitude that should inspire modern women.

### **2.3. A Modern Woman Breaking Traditional Concepts and Shackles--Jiang Xueqiong**

In the series, Jiang Xueqiong is a typical strong and successful woman, exuding great determination and ambition. Whether in her career or love life, she holds the reins. In the workplace, Jiang Xueqiong is the helmsperson of her company, meticulous and stringent in her approach to work. She possesses a keen eye for market fluctuations, crafting effective strategies that showcase her exceptional business acumen and leadership skills. However, her life outside of work is marred by marital and familial troubles. She and her husband, Lao Gu, have been living apart for years, leading to a gradual erosion of their affection, ultimately resulting in divorce. This contrast between her professional and personal life lends her character more depth and authenticity. Jiang Xueqiong refuses to be merely a housewife; she aspires to have her own career and an independent life. Her marriage to her ex-husband, though nominally intact, lacked substance, yet she chose divorce over maintaining an empty union. As she eloquently put it, "Marriage and having children are like assigned writing prompts for me. I loved him deeply, but I didn't want to spend my life solely as Mrs. Gu. I want to be myself, so I chose to write my own story freely." When she realized that her marriage could no longer fulfill her needs, she boldly chose to leave, seeking her own happiness.

### **3. The Gaze and Counter-Gaze: A Perspective on Observation and Resistance**

In *The Tale of Rose*, the creator showcases a distinct gender perspective, where the struggles and confusions of love, as well as the individual's wrestle between family ethics and liberal ethics, are all "gazes" that women inevitably face. The term "gaze" refers to a method of observation that carries with it power dynamics or entangled desires. Women are subjected to this "gaze" within the constraints of sociocultural norms, and in cinematic culture, an increasing number of creators seek to portray both women who are subjected to the "gaze" and those who strive to break free from it. *The Tale of Rose* ingeniously showcases the intricate relationship between the "gaze" and the "gazed" through a dual narrative perspective. This narrative technique not only enriches the story's layers but also profoundly reveals the emotional entanglements and fluctuations within the characters' inner worlds.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book "The Second Sex," initially explored the application of gaze theory in the expression of female consciousness. She argued that in a patriarchal society, men are the subjects of observation, while women, who are often disadvantaged, become the objects of this gaze. Men, who hold the initiative, habitually discipline women to conform to the standards and requirements set by patriarchal society, projecting their fantasies and constructions onto female bodies through the gaze, thereby seeking visual pleasure and forming a "male gaze." In the drama, Huang Yimei's exceptional beauty attracts numerous suitors from her youth, but this overly dazzling beauty subjects her to stigmatizing "gazes." When Zhou Shihui unilaterally breaks his engagement for Rose, his fiancée Guan Zhizhi confronts Huang Yimei at her home. Upon learning of this, Huang Yimei's parents do not choose to believe her but instead insist that Huang Yimei's behavior with Zhou Shihui is ambiguous. Even when Rose explicitly rejects male advances, she is still scrutinized and criticized. Onlookers tend to focus their gaze on Rose, strictly defining whether her actions meet the standards of a "pure and virtuous" woman. John Berger, a British art historian, proposed in "Ways of Seeing" that "inequality is deeply rooted in our culture." Men, in their social roles, seem to implicitly possess a latent authority to observe women, while women are often placed in a position akin to "beings within the observer's field of vision." In this context, women's living spaces are simultaneously limited and open, requiring constant self-examination to conform to external "models of femininity." Thus, men's gazes act as invisible shackles, isolating women—the "gazed"—within a panoramic, seemingly open yet enclosed living space, making them the sole objects of scrutiny and forcing them to endure external surveillance and judgment.

From the perspective of the gazers, the multiple male characters' gazes on Huang Yimei in the work constitute an external, strongly desirous, and evaluative viewpoint. In the male gazer's camp of the story, each character resembles a moth drawn to the irresistible charm of Huang Yimei, their gazes filled with longing and possession for beauty. Zhou Shihui, as a representative among them, his love at first sight for Huang Yimei is not merely an admiration of her external beauty but also a projection of certain idealized feminine qualities he sees in her. However, this gaze is like looking through a veil, both hazy and biased, overlooking the complexity of Huang Yimei's emotions and intellectual depth as an independent individual, reducing her to an object for appreciation and judgment. In the drama, Zhou Shihui's pursuit of Huang Yimei despite his existing engagement, his gift-giving of valuable presents, and his misunderstanding of Huang Yimei's rejections are all products of subjective assumptions and emotional biases from the gazer's perspective. He fails to genuinely comprehend Huang Yimei's inner rejection, instead interpreting it as an ambiguous "playing hard to get" attitude, which precisely exposes the blind spots and limitations of gazers in emotional communication.

As a modern woman, Huang Yimei in *The Tale of the Rose* also counters Zhou Shihui's male gaze. When Zhou Shihui buys flowers and formally confesses his love to Rose at school, Rose responds very directly and resolutely, decisively rejecting Zhou Shihui. This clear stance is not only a direct response to Zhou Shihui's feelings but also a steadfast adherence to her own position and principles. In rejecting Zhou Shihui, she emphasizes moral and ethical boundaries, pointing out that he already has a fiancée and she is unwilling to be the one who destroys another family. Faced with Zhou Shihui's persistence and pursuit, Rose remains calm and rational rather than succumbing to emotional turmoil. She analyzes the potential harm his actions may cause to herself and others, making a wise decision based on this analysis and proactively communicating with his fiancée, Guan Zhizhi. While rejecting Zhou Shihui, Rose also sensibly manages their relationship, avoiding further entanglements and misunderstandings. She does not lose herself amidst his pursuit but continues to focus on her studies and work, constantly enriching and upgrading herself.

The predicament of being "gazed at" ignites Huang Yimei's pursuit of self-worth and individual freedom. After marrying Fang Xiewen, Huang Yimei faces societal scrutiny over her role as a housewife, a burden that weighs heavily on her both physically and mentally. Though she attempts to work after marriage, Fang Xiewen obstructs her in various ways, including secretly deleting her work emails. Rather than succumbing to this control, Huang Yimei strengthens her resolve to pursue a career. She realizes that only by possessing independent economic power and social status can she truly realize her self-worth. When Huang Yimei discovers that communication cannot resolve the issues in her marriage, she resolutely resorts to legal means. She files for divorce and vigorously fights for custody of her daughter. This action is not only a direct response to Fang Xiewen's domineering control but also a crucial step in safeguarding her and her daughter's rights. Despite the emotional and psychological oppression she experiences within the marriage, Huang Yimei does not succumb to despair or inferiority. Instead, through self-reflection and growth, she gradually achieves psychological and emotional independence. She realizes that her happiness should not depend on others' control but rather be in her own hands. Rose's pursuit of a fulfilling life represents a pivotal shift that transcends ideological illusions, overthrowing the gaze of others and transforming her from an object of scrutiny into a master of her own destiny. This also serves as a powerful counter to those who adhere rigidly to conventions and confine women to domestic chores.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*The Tale of Rose* narrates the spiritual growth journey of a woman. Huang Yimei is not a flawless "saintly mother" figure; throughout the progression of the plot, she reveals her limitations and growth, evolving from an innocent and curious young girl about love into a more mature and charismatic woman. The emotional transformations of women are meticulously portrayed in the series. Whether it's Huang Yimei, the embodiment of the independent and self-reliant new woman, Su Gengsheng, the epitome of wisdom and modern consciousness, or Jiang Xueqiong, the modern woman who breaks through traditional notions and constraints, they all shine brightly in their respective lives. The

female characters in *The Tale of Rose* are no longer stereotypical and rigid; they are vibrant "human beings" filled with life, no longer "others" alienated and excluded. The delicate emotions and bonds between women are particularly touching. They appreciate, compete with, or are spiritually drawn to each other, telling unique "her" stories from a distinctive female perspective.

*The Tale of Rose* is not just a film or television work reflecting contemporary women's lives; it is also a masterpiece that explores female beauty and value, outlining an ideal blueprint for feminist culture and harmonious gender relations. The series showcases diverse and multi-faceted female images, presenting viewers with a rich world of female emotional independence and self-actualization. It also makes a positive contribution to the dissemination and development of feminist thought.

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