

# Reflections on Female Consciousness and Reality Carried by Musical Stage Images From the Gender Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The female characters on the musical stage embody artistic creation concepts and also reflect the evolution of social gender concepts. From a gender research perspective, this article uses text analysis methods to examine works such as *Suffs*, *Hamilton*, and *Elizabeth*, focusing on the changes in the narrative positions and identity construction of female characters. The research finds that since the 21st century, musicals have gradually loosened the male-centered narrative tradition: *Suffs* gives women the opportunity to speak on the stage, but its narrative still revolves around Henry VIII; *Suffs* focuses on the political differences in the women's suffrage movement and realizes the construction of women as historical actors; the German *Elizabeth* provides a spiritual path of inward exploration through "I Belong to Me". In addition, Broadway data shows that female audiences accounted for approximately 65% of the performances in the 2022-2023 season. Chinese theaters also show a similar trend, but local all-female productions such as *The Butterfly on the Bund* and *Taibai: The Starry Poem* indicate the gap between the on-stage roles and the composition of the behind-the-scenes creative team. This article believes that the development of female consciousness in musicals not only depends on the transformation of narrative perspectives, but also requires the substantive participation of female creators in the aspects of scriptwriting, composition, etc.

## KEYWORDS

Gender perspective; Musical; Female image; Female consciousness; Female creators.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of music in the 20th century, it has gradually become a worldwide phenomenon of stage art. Drama, music, dance and visual design are combined to present changes in society and culture through characters. As a popular art form, the characters in musicals are often based on ideas about gender, culture and society. The depiction of women in the work shows how society views women at different times [1].

Therefore, in order to study the development of female characters in musicals, we first need to go back to the traditional narrative mode and analyze the long-term features of female characters' performances.

In the traditional narrative system of musical dramas, female characters are often presented through the male character's eyes, and some of their roles are confined to love stories, family life or serving men. For example, Maria in *West Side Story* and Christine Daaé in *The Phantom of the Opera*, although they have their own personalities and emotions, are still subject to the decisions of the men around them, and thus do not have much freedom for expression in the early days of musical dramas.

Due to changes in society and culture over time, creators of musicals have been giving new expressions to female roles in musicals as well. After the 21st century, musical drama creation has

gradually focused on women's lives, and some works have started to place women at the centre of the story. *Six* is one of the earlier works that attracted attention. However, when it comes to the fundamental breakthrough in narrative perspective, *Suffs*, which won the Tony Award for Best Play and Best Original Score in 2024, is more representative. This play was independently created by female writer Shaina Taub, including writing the script, composing the music and writing the lyrics. It has undergone refinement by both Off-Broadway and Broadway. The plot revolves around the differences, conflicts and sacrifices made by women with different positions during the American women's suffrage movement. Unlike in *Six* where the six queens still relied on Henry VIII as the narrative anchor, the female characters in *Suffs* focus on political ideological differences and alliance strategies. Women become the main subjects of historical judgment and political actions, rather than reactive existences to the male power structure.

At the same time, women have also joined the group of people interested in musical theatre. According to the report *Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2022-2023* published by the Broadway League, women made up about 65% of the audience at this show during the 2022-2023 performance season, so the female demographic is a major group for consuming and spreading musical theatre. Therefore, in studying the female image in musicals, attention should be paid to changes in stage presentation and, at the same time, analysis needs to be made about how the depiction of female characters relates to the creative environment.

## **2. FORMATION AND LIMITATIONS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN MUSICAL DRAMAS UNDER THE TRADITIONAL GENDER STRUCTURE**

Female characters in the musical drama are created in a particular social environment. As an all-encompassing stage art form, musical dramas build characters through drama, music, dance and visual design, and explore social issues. Identity, behaviour and emotions of female characters have also been shaped by cultural ideas at different times.

Development of female characters in classic musicals is often related to love, family and other male characters. Eliza in *My Fair Lady* is a typical case. Eliza is a woman from a humble background who has been improved in society through hard work. However, Higgins was also responsible for some of the alterations in language, behaviour and manners at that time. Therefore, the development of women in traditional musicals is still shaped by male characters.

The stage performances of musicals also present various types of women. Costumes, dances and other design elements of the performances help to develop the story and show off characters. Some commercial musicals also have additions for the appearance, clothes and movements of the female characters in their stage productions. Based on the theory of the "male gaze", it can be seen that... Laura Mulvey proposed in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film* that many traditional visual works place women in a position of being looked at. This View can also be used to explore gender expression in art.

The idea of a "woman" in terms of gender studies is not fixed. The depiction of women also has new features in light of changes in society. Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex* that the concept of womanhood is shaped by society, and therefore, the images of women in art are also subject to change with shifts in social ideas [2].

Female characters in the traditional musicals are not passive either. Fantine in *Les Misérables* had to face life's difficulties for her daughter Cosette and was a devoted mother. Roxie and Velma in *Chicago* changed their lives by using the media and social conventions, and thus were able to live comfortably despite the difficulties. The above characters show that the female figures in musicals are varied.

Generally speaking, the female figures in the traditional musical are based on social ideas, but they also offer a basis for later expressions of female subjects. As women's experiences have drawn attention, the female characters in musicals are gradually showing more possibilities [3].

It is worth noting that even within the traditional narrative framework, some non-English musicals have begun to attempt more intrinsic expressions of female characters. The German musical *Elisabeth* (1992) is an early example of this. In the play, Empress *Elisabeth*, through the core song "I Belong to Me" (Ich gehör nur mir), accomplishes a spiritual self-separation in the midst of court regulations and male authority. This "inward-turning" subjectivity, although not directly challenging the gender order in the public domain, provided another path in terms of psychological depth for later musicals to reconstruct female consciousness.

### **3. CHANGES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NEW CENTURY MUSICAL DRAMAS**

After entering the 21st century, the creation of musical dramas has gradually paid more attention to female characters. Some works have begun to focus more on the lives and experiences of women, changing their positions and roles in the stories. They are not only means by which the story is told but also individuals with feelings, beliefs and choices. Changes can be seen in both the portrayal of characters and the way of narration [4].

A group of works, represented by *Six*, were the first to make innovations in the stage form, allowing the female characters in history to have the opportunity to speak through a popular concert-style structure. However, there is still an undeniable gap at the narrative bottom of this play-the identity definition of the six queens and the dramatic conflicts ultimately cannot be separated from the relational label of "wife of Henry VIII" [5]. Their rebellion always centers on the absent male figure. Although the so-called "sister reconciliation" broke the competition among females, it failed to completely break free from the narrative anchor centered on the male. This limitation was substantially overcome in *Suffs* in 2024: the primary identity of the female characters is no longer someone's wife or mother, but historical actors with different political positions and action strategies. From *Six* to *Suffs*, we can see that female narratives have evolved from "accusing men" to "internal dialogue among women".

What is even more noteworthy is that *Suffs* not only achieved a breakthrough at the narrative level, but also the creative source was completely controlled by women. Women's experiences directly entered the narrative without the need for translation by others.

At the same time, there are also changes in the expressions of the female characters. This musical centers on Alexander *Hamilton*, a Founding Father of the United States, but Elizabeth Schuyler does not merely serve as Hamilton's partner. She has her own emotions and values in the play, and expresses her disappointment and pain after being betrayed by her husband in the song "Burn", thus showing a more complete psychological state of the female characters.

*Mamma Mia!* is also about the life of women today, not just in the past. Different-aged women's thoughts on love, family and other life choices are shown through the relationship between mothers and daughters and among friends. The play first opened in the West End of London in 1999 and has been performed all over the world for a long time, showing that such female-themed works are popular in the market.

Overall, the female characters in modern musicals are no longer confined to the same sets, and the works have begun to focus on the growth of women, their emotions and social awareness. Many new ways have been introduced in recent years to present female characters on stage in contemporary musicals, but the old way of narration has not gone out of style either. Further studies are needed to

explore how female characters are depicted in performances and how their identities are constructed by narrative systems, artistic choices and other cultural and industrial environments of musical theatre.

#### **4. CHANGES IN STAGE LANGUAGE AND UPDATES IN FEMALE CHARACTER PORTRAYAL**

The change in representation of female characters in musicals can be seen both in alterations to character construction and in the evolution of forms for presenting these characters on stage that affect how they are perceived and interpreted. Musical shows collaboratively create characters through music, dance, costume, light and space design. Therefore, the depiction of female characters will also be done through sound, action and visual effects.

In the earlier works of music, songs for female characters often dealt with love, family and emotions [6]. Female solo performances often expressed the inner world of the characters but also advanced the plot and were closely linked to male characters or family relationships. Recently, some works have begun to change this way and make female songs more about exploring their own identities and lives [7].

*Six* uses pop music, dance and costume design to offer a more direct expression platform for historical female figures. Different music and stage design can be used together to give the characters more life and present historical figures in a new light. Catherine Aragon's song is about will and fighting back; Anne Boleyn's song is about self-assurance and freedom. Design changes historical figures from being narrated (or described) to active expressors.

Body Language can also help to create a female image. Female characters in *Hamilton* show their relationships through movement, stage position and rhythm of performance. *Six*, on the other hand, is a new form of female group performance that combines dance and costume. Actors' bodies are also used to show the emotions and attitudes of characters on stage through movement.

The contribution of *Six* lies more in the contemporary transformation of stage vocabulary-the arrangement of pop music, the highly entertaining dance choreography, and the costume design that combines Tudor dynasty elements with modern fashion sensibilities (the play thus won the 2022 Tony Award for Best Costume Design). This allows the historical figures to have a visceral medium for direct dialogue with contemporary audiences. However, the success of this form does not equate to the completion of narrative depth.

From the above stage practices, we can see that the way musicals depict female characters is changing. Female characters are gradually showing their own values through actions and choices. Changes in the forms of drama do not mean that the problem of gender expression has been solved. Further development of the female image needs to be based on character logic and creative ideas.

#### **5. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EXPRESSION OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT OF MUSICAL DRAMAS**

Although the female characters in the musical have been continuously added to, this change has not yet been fully reflected in the production process of the work. Although the female characters have more opportunities to speak out, this does not mean that female creators have equal space for creativity [8]. In fact, the identity and perspective of the creators will affect how the works portray women's lives, and thus determine whether these women's lives can be genuinely included in artistic creation.

*Six* was jointly created by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. The joint participation of the male and female creators contributed to the play's market response to a certain extent. However, the identity

definitions of the six queens in the play still cannot be entirely disentangled from the relational framework of "Henry VIII's wife". Their narrative starting points and dramatic conflicts still revolve around the absent male. In an interesting contrast, the 2024 Tony Award winner *Suffs*-which was led entirely by female creators, with the script, music, lyrics, and the entire cast being completed by women-focuses on the tension between different political positions and action strategies in the American women's suffrage movement. The female characters in this play are no longer someone's wife or mother; instead, they are historical participants with their own political judgments and action choices. If *Six* marks the initial attempt of "female characters gaining the opportunity to speak", then *Suffs* takes it a step further, advancing female experience from "being represented" to "being produced". Specifically, *Suffs* from 2022's Off-Broadway to 2024's Broadway, has consistently focused on the differences, conflicts, and sacrifices among women from different backgrounds. When the creators and the characters share the same gender identity and historical concerns, the female experience no longer requires translation by others.

In terms of the process of creation, whether women's lives are included in the script, music and other productions will affect how they are presented in the work. If women are only in the stage presentation phase and do not participate in the creation of the work, their own experiences will not be expressed. Therefore, the research on the female image in musicals should not only focus on changes in characters on stage but also consider behind-the-scenes creative methods and the production environment [9].

Changes in the market have also altered the direction of changes for women. As shown in the 2022-2023 report on the demographics of Broadway audiences published by the Broadway League, women accounted for approximately 65% of the audience at that time. According to the above data, women have been driving the demand for musicals in recent years. With changes in the structure of the audience, more diverse stories and characters are also attracting the attention of people in the industry.

In the field of Chinese musicals, a similar "discrepancy between on-stage representation and behind-the-scenes creation" is also worthy of attention. In recent years, musicals such as *The Butterfly on the Bund* (featuring two female leads) and *Taibai: The Starry Poem* (with an all-female cast) have achieved a stage presentation of female ensembles in terms of characters. However, even in these works with female protagonists, the proportion of women in the core creative teams-including screenwriters, composers, and directors-remains limited. For instance, the composition team of *The Butterfly on the Bund* includes male members, and although *Taibai: The Starry Poem* is an all-female production, such practices are still rare in the current market. The musical *She's Sick of It*, adapted from a well-known feminist novel, has a female director and writer, but the composing team remains predominantly male. The collective presence of female characters does not automatically equate to the deep involvement of female experiences-this is the core judgment that this article repeatedly emphasizes. Whether a character can convincingly embody real-life situations ultimately depends on whether the creative source is genuinely open to a female perspective.

The number of female characters in a musical does not determine whether a change in narrative perspective has been achieved for them. Only when the lives of women are included in the creation and narration can these characters be liberated from functional and symbolic representation to present specific circumstances, emotions and choices. Such treatment can also reveal the contradictions in the relationships among the characters and the various emotions and values that women experience in actual life more clearly.

## **6. THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE DIRECTION OF CONSTRUCTING FEMALE IMAGES IN MUSICAL DRAMAS**

Changes in the depiction of female characters at the musical theatre level have led to alterations in both performance and scenery. They have also shown how the ideas of society about the identity and

role of women have changed. Musicals present women's lives in families, at work, and in society through specific characters and stories. Therefore, in the study of female characters, one should look beyond what is presented in the text and consider the cultural environment of the creation of that work, as well as the social values at that time.

*The Color Purple* is a representative work of musical theatre that examines the lives and changes of women. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name provides the basis for this musical, and it will tell of Celie's life under the oppression of family and society, as well as her search for self-worth. Celie's life is not only marked by oppression; she gradually finds her own voice and self-worth [10], so this work also explores that development.

Over time, the depictions of women in musicals have gradually moved away from the earlier, more restricted types. At present, more musicals have been produced that focus on the inner lives and choices of women in their daily lives. These works present the female characters not only as objects of observation but also as subjects who actively create their own stories and negotiate their identities through choices [11].

In the domestic Chinese market, although there is no systematic annual report comparable to that of the Broadway League, data from a report jointly released by the China Performing Arts Association and the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center show that female audiences accounted for 77.4% of musical theatergoers from January to October 2024, and remained at a high level of 75.5% in 2025. Women have become the predominant consumers of musical theater. However, a sample survey from the production side indicates that male-led musicals significantly outnumber female-led ones. Despite being the primary consumers, women remain relatively marginalized in both creative development and leading stage roles. This gender disparity between consumption and production constitutes a notable structural feature of the current Chinese musical theater industry.

Recently, Chinese musicals have also begun to explore subjects such as women's careers, family life and self-cultivation. These themes are close to the lives of women and offer more opportunities for in-depth character depiction. Although foreign works have provided a model, Chinese musicals should ultimately be rooted in the social and cultural reality of Chinese women's lives. Through the integration of local life, these works can be less about symbols and more about creating real and three-dimensional women.

Furthermore, the practical application of female consciousness should not be limited to the redefinition of female characters. When female creators gain control of narrative power, "the observed" male characters also undergo aesthetic reconfiguration. Taking the adapted work "Off Campus", which is highly favored by female audiences, as an example, its success largely stems from the female screenwriter's meticulous encoding of the emotional logic and emotional value of male characters—this transforms male characters from the traditional "conquerors" into "objects of examination" for emotions. This phenomenon marks that female audiences have shifted from passive recipients to aesthetic leaders, and "female-oriented" narratives are reconfiguring the gender power relations on the stage. For Chinese original musicals, this suggests a broader creative dimension: a female perspective not only can depict the female situation but also can, by reshaping male images, reverse and expand the expression space of female desires and aesthetics.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article examines the changes in female characters on the musical stage from a gender perspective. It can be seen that in traditional musicals, the female roles were mostly placed in love, family, and male-dominated narratives. Their own life experiences, inner feelings, and choices were often not fully explored. Since the 21st century, from the initial exploration in *Six* to the fundamental breakthrough in the narrative subject of *Suffs*, to the exploration of the inner nature of women's spirit in the German *Elisabeth*, and the female experiences explored from the dual dimensions of daily life

and race in works such as *Mamma Mia!* and *The Color Purple*, the female characters on the musical stage are gradually moving from "relational existence" to "self-sufficient subjects". The emergence of all-female works like *The Butterfly on the Bund* and *Taibai: The Starry Poem* in China also confirms this trend.

Research has also found that alterations in the depiction of women do not occur solely at the level of the play but are closely linked to the creative process of musicals. Although there are many women on the stage, it is not guaranteed that the creative environment backstage is also balanced. Whether the experiences of women are included in the script, music and production will directly affect the representation of female identity and social circumstances in the work. Therefore, in the development of expressions for female subjects in musicals, attention should be paid to both the content of the work and the production system.

The deficiencies of this paper are that it has used only representative musical works as the analysis objects and lacks more systematic data comparisons of the changes in the creative structure of the musical industry around the world. In the future, audience surveys, industry data and creator interviews can also be combined to explore the process of forming female consciousness in musicals from multiple angles.

With the creation of Chinese musicals, the expansion of the female audience group and the development of the market have created a new space for female-themed works. In the future, local productions can be based on women's daily lives and explore topics such as career selection, family relationships and self-cultivation. Rather than having women's lives added to the story at the end, they can be included in the creation process from the beginning. An increase in the participation of female writers, composers and producers will also offer new ideas and help create richer, more realistic depictions of women in music.

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