

A Comparative Study of the I-novel and Personalized Writing from the Perspective of Female Body Narrative: Centering on Private Life and Futon

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Abstract:

In recent years, female body narrative has emerged as a significant critical perspective for examining the relationship between gender and literary expression. Both personalized writing in Chinese literature and the Japanese I-novel emphasize realism and the depiction of individual inner experience, making them particularly suitable for comparative research on representations of the female body. This paper focuses on *Private Life* by Chen Ran and *Futon* by Tayama Katai, conducting a comparative textual analysis from the perspective of female body narrative. By examining narrative perspective, modes of bodily representation, and their cultural implications, this study explores both the divergences and convergences between personalized writing and the I-novel. The analysis demonstrates that personalized writing enables women to articulate bodily experience directly through first-person narration, foregrounding a critical awareness of patriarchal structures. In contrast, within the I-novel, the female body primarily functions as a symbolic projection of the male narrator's inner world. This study aims to contribute a new comparative perspective to research on female body narratives in Chinese and Japanese literature.

Keywords: I-novel; Personalized writing; Female body narrative; Chen Ran; Tayama Katai

1. Introduction

Female body narrative has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a crucial lens through which to examine the relationship between gender and literary expression. In both Chinese and Japanese literary tra-

ditions, personalized writing and the I-novel occupy central positions due to their emphasis on realism and the representation of individual inner experience[1]. Tayama Katai's *Futon* (1906) is widely regarded as a foundational text marking the establishment of the I-novel in modern Japanese literature[2]. Chen Ran's

Private Life, noted for its candid portrayal of female growth and interiority, has been recognized as a representative work of Chinese women's literature and personalized writing[3]. Despite their differing cultural contexts, both texts foreground personal experience, making them productive sites for examining how female bodily experience is narrated.

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of these two works from the perspective of female body narrative, focusing on how different narrative positions shape the representation of the female body.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The I-novel

The I-novel is commonly understood as a literary form that foregrounds the author's personal experience and inner life, emphasizing the expression of the "self"[4]. Early scholarship has explored the relationship between self-expression and self-recognition in the I-novel, while later critics have questioned its lack of objectivity and excessive inwardness.

At the same time, scholars such as Yanagisawa Takako argue that the I-novel's value lies in its affective power and its capacity to resonate with readers' inner experiences[5]. More recent studies have noted that the I-novel gradually negotiates the tension between autobiographical authenticity and fictional construction, complicating its supposedly transparent realism[6,7].

2.2 Personalized Writing

Research on personalized writing in China developed primarily in the late twentieth century, initially focusing on its literary legitimacy. Subsequent studies have emphasized its significance as a new mode of expression within the cultural context of the 1990s.

Female body narrative has emerged as a particularly important dimension of this research. Scholars have examined how bodily representation functions as a site of female self-awareness, desire, and resistance, highlighting the interconnection between the body, individuality, and literary subjectivity.

2.3 Comparative Perspectives

Comparative studies of the I-novel and Chinese personalized writing remain relatively limited. Existing research has addressed similarities in autobiographical strategies and realism, but studies that foreground female body narrative remain scarce. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on bodily representation as a comparative

lens.

3. Analysis of Female Body Narrative

3.1 Bodily Narrative in Chen Ran's Private Life

3.1.1 Self-Gaze: Female First-Person Narration

As Dai Jinhua points out, Chen Ran's works are characterized by a sustained introspective gaze directed toward the inner self, with female protagonists and first-person narration as defining features[8]. In *Private Life*, delicate bodily descriptions reveal a self-reflexive and even narcissistic mode of self-observation.

"Time seemed to have grown weary and stopped on my face, making it look as it had years before." [9]

"Time is a painter, and I am a rubbing... I saw that this image itself was a history, with the lives of all women drawn upon it." [9]

"...Even if she did not speak, a sense of safety, softness, and warmth would gather around me, like invisible light covering or radiating upon my skin... I thought this might be the difference between people and stones." [9]

Through these descriptions, the body ceases to be a mere object of observation and instead becomes the central site through which experience, emotion, and reflection are articulated.

3.1.2 Emotional Ties to the Father: Intuitive Resistance to Patriarchy

Chen Ran's works frequently feature incomplete families and absent father figures, often interpreted as reflections of childhood trauma. The female protagonist's feelings toward male figures—particularly the father—are marked by a complex interplay of affection and resentment[8].

"It was entirely Mr. T's scheme, a trap. All at once I recalled his arrogance, his cunning, his oppression, and the unfairness he had shown me... Why was I always placed in a position of obedience? Like a fool to be manipulated at will?"[9]

"I remained silent, staring at him intensely, as if my gaze were sharp teeth capable of tearing apart his hypocrisy and false righteousness... 'Where is the so-called private part? It's here, and there!' I 'returned' his earlier touch at the very places where he had once touched me." [9]

"Like the intense sexual desire of a failed man... it serves both to prove his own ability and value to himself, and to demonstrate his power to others. Through sexual performance, he seeks to overpower others and place himself in a position of superiority." [9]

This mode of writing reveals an underlying resistance to patriarchal structures while exposing the structural con-

straints women face in lived reality.

3.2 Bodily Narrative in Tayama Katai's Futon

3.2.1 The Silent Body: Representation through the Male Gaze

Futon employs third-person narration, yet the narrative focalization is almost entirely confined to the inner world of the male protagonist, Takenaka Tokio.

"...When he leaned his face close to the volume, there arose an indescribable scent-of perfume, of flesh, of womanhood... Once again, he tugged violently at his hair." [10]
 "Yoshiko's attire was rather too flamboyant for a female student. Wearing a golden ring and a fashionable, beautifully patterned sash, her neat and upright posture was enough to attract the attention of passersby. Rather than simply being beautiful, her face was expressive-at times strikingly attractive, at other times somehow plain." [10]
 "Sweet, lover-like words filled every corner. Yet Tokiyo struggled to uncover some deeper secret beyond them. Were there traces of kisses, traces of sexual desire hidden somewhere? Had the relationship progressed beyond pure and sacred love? Still, even from the letters, the true state of their love remained unknowable." [10]

In the text, Yoshiko's body primarily functions as a projection of the male protagonist's desire and moral conflict. Her own voice is largely absent, rendering her bodily presence an object of the male gaze and significantly diminishing her subjectivity.

3.2.2 The Female Figure as Symbol

Although Futon is also based on the author's personal experience, scholars have noted that Yoshiko's portrayal involves considerable exaggeration and fictionalization [11]. "A woman must possess physical beauty; no matter how talented she may be, a woman lacking beauty will not attract men. Tokiyo secretly assumed that since she aspired to pursue literature, she must surely be unattractive." [10]
 "For lovers—especially for the man—such separation was exceedingly painful." [10]
 "...Your father would not condemn your guilt, nor reproach your shame. If there were a destined connection in the future, he would not withhold his consent to this love. You are still young, and Yoshiko is still in training. That is why it would be better to leave this romantic matter unresolved for the time being and observe how it eventually unfolds—don't you understand?" [10]

Through such representations, Yoshiko is gradually transformed into a symbolic figure embodying the male intellectual's inner contradictions, further erasing her existence

as a concrete individual.

4. Conclusion

This paper has conducted a comparative analysis of female body narratives in Chen Ran's *Private Life* and Tayama Katai's *Futon*, examining the differences between personalized writing and the I-novel.

In personalized writing, female authors articulate bodily experience directly through first-person narration, foregrounding a critical interrogation of gender order. In contrast, within the I-novel, the female body functions primarily as a medium for male self-expression, carrying a stronger symbolic charge.

Despite their distinct cultural contexts, both literary forms position the female body as a crucial site of critical narration, offering valuable insights for comparative studies of Chinese and Japanese literature.

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