

Female Images in Kobayashi Takiji's Proletarian Literature: Taking The Crab Cannery Ship, Yasuko, and Factory Cell as Case Studies

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Abstract. In the early twentieth century, Japan was the first country to come into contact with Western proletarian thought in Asia. Under this background, a large number of proletarian writers have emerged in the Japanese literary world, and Kobayashi Takiji is one of the representatives. His works have a distinct class consciousness and realism. These works expose the living conditions of Japanese laborers at the bottom and depict the awakening and resistance of the oppressed groups. Existing studies on the images in Kobayashi Takiji's works have largely focused on male laborers, while the female group has been ignored for a long time. In fact, Kobayashi consciously presents many female images in his works. They not only belong to the oppressed class, but also are deeply affected by gender inequality. Based on this, this study takes *The Crab Cannery Ship*, *Yasuko*, and *Factory Cell* as primary texts. Drawing on Culpeper's model of character construction, the study compares similarities and differences of the female images in the aspects of character types and molding techniques from different dimensions—including self-presentation, other-presentation, and implicit cues. It also discusses whether the female images in Kobayashi's works are typical and whether they can reflect the multiple dilemmas faced by Japanese women of that period.

Keywords: Kobayashi Takiji, Japanese Proletarian Literature, Female Images, Character Construction, Culpeper

1. Introduction

As one of the representatives of Japanese proletarian literature, Kobayashi Takiji's images of characters in his works have been discussed a lot. However, existing analyses are mostly carried out from the perspective of male proletariat. For example, Ran Maohao chose male workers as the object of analysis when analyzing the image of Japanese proletariat created by Kobayashi [1]. In fact, Kobayashi Takiji consciously depicts a number of vivid female images in his works. These female images are of great significance to reveal the dilemmas faced by women in that era and the author's view of women. This study selects three works of Kobayashi with distinctive characteristics of female images—*The Crab Cannery Ship*, *Yasuko*, and *Factory Cell*. Among them, female

characters have their own features and complement each other, which helps to establish a complete understanding of the types and characteristics of female images.

At present, there are only a few articles on the study of female images in Kobayashi's works, which treat female characters as independent objects of analysis. For example, Miyamoto Aki discusses the gender inequality faced by women in Kobayashi Takiji's works in her study [2]. Similarly, Li Xiaoyu selects six works such as *Yasuko* to analyze women's exploration of their own liberation path [3]. However, these studies are based on text analysis and the author's personal summary, which leads to strong subjectivity and lack of shared evaluation criteria. Moreover, the summaries of character types are not thorough enough, and marginalized female figures are not included in the discussion. Finally, these studies do not focus on the multiple dilemmas faced by women under the social and historical background reflected in the literary works. This study focuses on these aspects to make up for the shortcomings of the existing studies, and also provide a reference example for the future research of the same type.

In terms of research methodology, this study combines the text close reading with Culpeper's theory of character image construction. Firstly, *The Crab Cannery Ship*, *Yasuko*, and *Factory Cell* are selected as the research texts to systematically identify the female images appearing in these three works. On this basis, the types of female characters are summarized. Secondly, when analyzing the construction of female characters, this study introduces the method of character image construction discussed by Culpeper in *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts*. The analysis is carried out from several dimensions, including self-presentation, other-presentation, behavior, and context [4]. The goal is to comprehensively and objectively present Kobayashi's techniques and characteristics in shaping female images. In addition, this study also introduces some of Lukacs' realist theory and Marxist view of women to conduct a comprehensive discussion on the combination of text and social history.

2. Female images in different works

2.1. Female images in *The Crab Cannery Ship*

The Crab Cannery Ship tells the story of a fishing vessel named *Hakko Maru*, which fishes crabs in the waters of Kamchatka Peninsula. By describing the whole process of workers from being oppressed by supervisors to awakening and resistance, the novel focuses on the sharp class contradictions in Japanese society and the life of the people at the bottom, and has strong social and historical significance [5]. Although *The Crab Cannery Ship* is narrated from the perspective of male workers, female characters also have a place. However, female characters only exist in activities outside of labor and in the discourse of the male.

2.1.1. The recipients of male sexual fantasies

The female images in *The Crab Cannery Ship* appear more in the rude and flirtatious words of male workers. According to Culpeper's discussion, in the construction of character images, characterisation that stems from another character about a particular character constitutes the image of the character itself, and may be more decisive to some extent [4].

When Kobayashi Takiji portrays the female images in *The Crab Cannery Ship*, he makes more use of the perspective of this other-presentation. Present the evaluation of female characters through the words of male workers. For example, when the fishing vessel prepares to go to sea, a female peddler sells food and daily necessities to the workers on board. She is teased and evaluated by the

male workers. Some workers even ask her to sleep with them. For another example, some male workers suffer from sexual depression due to long-term work at sea. They recall their previous feelings of whoring, and show off the sexual skills of the prostitutes they met to others [6]. The behavior of workers is obviously vulgar and rude. Although the male workers in the novel have the aspect of class consciousness awakening, they also expose their vulgar side as the bottom group and uneducated when facing women.

The rude and judgmental words of the male worker are the other-presentation of Kobayashi's female images, and women become the recipients of male sexual fantasies at this time. Such words also lead Kobayashi to be criticized for not respecting women in some studies. However, according to Culpeper's discussion of the importance of the other-presentation, this kind of words in *The Crab Cannery Ship* play a role in strengthening the image of women as victims. In the comments of male workers who have been at the bottom of the society, the female image is still so humble. This reinforces the tragic situation of female characters, and shows Kobayashi's realistic voice for women.

2.1.2. Marginalized groups in production activities

In *The Crab Cannery Ship*, Kobayashi Takiji focuses on the labor scenes of male workers, while the female images in the book appear more as groups marginalized from such production activities. The marginalization is not only reflected in the fact that there are no female workers on the ship. Before the ship went to sea, Kobayashi uses some realistic hints to show that women have no right to work at sea.

For the character construction, Culpeper emphasizes the importance of non-verbal implicit cues, which refer to the appearance, posture and context features of characters. These elements also contain rich information that the author wants to convey [4]. Taking the female characters in *The Crab Cannery Ship* as an example, before the ship sets off, a mother peels apples for the child in the corner. She checks the little boy's package again and again, and is still muttering something [6]. It can be inferred from the details of the woman's behavior that she will not go to sea together. Therefore, she keeps giving instructions to her son and repeatedly checks whether any necessities have been left out. The author does not directly disclose the information of being unable to go to sea, but makes the reader feel it from the posture and behavior characteristics of the character.

Behind this implicit cue, it reflects that most women are excluded from the mainstream labor. Even underage boys are included in the crew, while female workers are not employed and cannot go to sea with ships. There are many similar labor scenes listed in *The Crab Cannery Ship*, such as coal mines and railways. However, these scenes are obviously also based on the narration of male workers. In contrast, women only undertake odd jobs, housekeeping and childcare, and are relatively marginalized in participating in social production activities.

2.2. Female images in *Yasuko*

Yasuko is a rare proletarian literary work by Kobayashi Takiji, which narrates with female as the protagonists. The novel mainly depicts *Yasuko*, a distinctive female image. The content mainly shows the dilemmas and struggle of rural women in Japan, and how young women like *Yasuko* embark on the path of awakening and resistance after contacting progressive thoughts. Kobayashi sets the protagonist *Yasuko* in sharp contrast with her sister *Omegumi* and their mother. From them, one can see the duality of female's ideological enlightenment and tradition at that time.

2.2.1. Progressive youth with ideological enlightenment

Yasuko is outgoing and open-minded, can accept new things, and has a struggle spirit. This enables her to complete the transformation from an ignorant girl to a progressive youth with awakening resistance consciousness when she works in a small restaurant in the workers' gathering area. During her work, Yasuko inadvertently contacts the participants of the workers' movement. When she reads books about the workers' movement, she does not feel repelled. Instead, she quickly accepts new things and combines what she saw with her own experience. This makes her gradually aware of the oppression faced by herself and thousands of people at the bottom, and gradually decides to take action to change this situation.

When portraying the image of Yasuko, Kobayashi likes to use self-presentation to let Yasuko do her monologue. According to Culpeper's theory, self-presentation occurs when a character or person provides explicit information about him or herself [4]. This method of character construction can more clearly highlight the role's personality, while allowing readers to feel the changes of the character's inner world more intuitively. As for Yasuko, it reflects the process of her struggle spirit from germination to firmness, and then to the combination with practice.

In a monologue, Yasuko mentions that only farmers can understand the pain of working hard for a year, and most of the harvest is taken by the landlords. In addition, she believes that although she is young, she hopes to do something else [7]. Through the monologue, it can be seen that after accepting the proletarian ideology, Yasuko gradually understands the essence of the landlord's exploitation of farmers. Moreover, she is not satisfied with just understanding the principle. "Do something else" refers to her desire to join the organization and carry out the workers' movement. These reflect the struggle spirit of this woman. Yasuko's self-presentation enables readers to witness the transformation process of her thoughts and also gradually enriches the image of a progressive youth with ideological enlightenment.

2.2.2. Traditional and conservative rural women

When depicting Yasuko's image, Kobayashi Takiji also sets a contrast for her, that is her sister Omegumi. The two sisters are born in a rural tenant family. Unlike Yasuko, Omegumi is timid and conservative in personality. Most of the time she chooses to submit to fate and accepts the solidification and differences of class. Using the self-presentation theory above, this acceptance of class differences can be found in Omegumi's monologue. When her brother's girlfriend cheats with the landlord's son, her inner monologue is that people from poor families like herself would not have good results in such a relationship [7]. In her eyes, it is taken for granted that her brother loses to the landlord's son. This is the fate they must accept. Although she sometimes vaguely realizes this injustice, she obviously does not have the ability to transform it into action as Yasuko.

In Yasuko, the mother is also an important female image. Although she does not appear much, her feudal conservative traits are more obvious. When talking about Yasuko's entrance to school, the mother's response is that as a farmer, it's enough to do farm work well, and knowledge is useless [7]. It shows that she not only accepts the solidification of class, but also opposes women receiving education, regarding it as a behavior that violates women's role. Portraying such an image full of feudal color forms a sharp contrast with the young sisters Yasuko and Omegumi. Even the timid and conservative Omegumi tries to resist at the end of the novel. It can be seen that this is Kobayashi's call for young women to break the shackles of gender and class, and his hope for new things to replace the old.

Although Yasuko and Omegumi have very different personalities, sooner or later, both of them realize the social injustice and finally embark on the path of resistance. In Kobayashi's writing, these two female images conform to Lukács's theory of typicality, that is, art reflects reality through typicality [8]. These two young women are the microcosm of young women under the background of the rapid development of capitalism and the wide spread of proletarian ideology. On the one hand, they are bound by traditional ideas and have a conservative side. On the other hand, feminine consciousness and class consciousness are also gradually awakening. They are eager to take action to change the status quo, promote the development of production relations and women's liberation.

2.3. Female images in Factory Cell

Factory Cell was created based on the model of the Hokkaido canning factory in Japan at that time. Cells refer to scattered worker organizations that are active within major factories. In this work, women are written as a group of workers for the first time, no longer as characters previously marginalized from production activities. This injects new elements into the female images in Kobayashi's works.

The women in Factory Cell are represented as a group of workers under multiple oppression. These forms of oppression are first reflected in the working surroundings of female workers. According to Culpeper's theory of character construction, a person's context and surroundings also contain important information about that person. It is possible, assuming an absence of constraint, for a person or character to choose their surroundings. Readers associate certain choices with certain types of people [4]. However, for the female workers in Factory Cell, they have no opportunity to actively choose their working surroundings and can only endure it passively. But on the other hand, this passive choice also corresponds to the identity of the oppressed group. In the novel, their working surroundings are that all kinds of large machinery vibrate the floor reinforced with concrete while sending out harsh echoes on the iron ceiling. The lights in the factory are dim, and the female workers try to drown out the sound of the machine by singing [9]. Although no one is willing to work in such an environment, female workers have no choice for the reason of making a living. This contrast between the surroundings and the characters further deepens the devastation suffered by female workers in such harsh conditions.

In addition, female workers face the ruthless exploitation of the factory system. To reduce costs, unscrupulous factory owners dismiss skilled male workers who have high salaries and replace them with female workers. They are engaged in heavy physical labor beyond their endurance at extremely low salaries. Under this kind of intensity, the female workers struggle like being tied to the machine every day. The experience of women here is more consistent with the Marxist view of women. The inequality between men and women in labor is reflected in the disadvantage of female workers' intensity and salary when doing the same work [10]. On this premise, factory owners forcibly raise the female work intensity to the male level, while keeping salaries unchanged. This is an extremely inhuman behavior which violates the law of production.

Male workers, who belong to the same class and face the same tragic situation every day, also carry out endless harassment and sexual violence against female workers. Just like the analysis of The Crab Cannery Ship, female workers here, as a vulnerable group, still cannot escape the fate of becoming the recipients of male sexual fantasies and harassment. Due to the crude conditions, the men's and women's toilets are only separated by simple walls in the factory. Male workers' favorite activity is peeping at the female workers next door after work. This extremely rude behavior is what female workers have to endure every day, and verbal teasing at other times is more countless. In summary, even if women participate in factory labor and break away from the situation of being

marginalized by production activities, they still live in dilemmas because of multiple oppressions such as surroundings, system, salary and gender.

The female participation in social labor in *Factory Cell* is objectively progressive. However, this is largely intended to meet the social needs of Japanese capitalism to expand production and prepare for the expansion of militarism. Therefore, the treatment and discrimination of female workers are not significantly improved. Kobayashi Takiji's portrayal of female workers under multiple oppression in *Factory Cell* not only reflects social reality, but also reflects his understanding and practice of Marxist view of women.

3. Conclusion

This study takes the female images in Kobayashi Takiji's proletarian literary works as the research object. Through the text close reading and the introduction of Culpeper's theory of character construction, it systematically answers two major issues: the types and characteristics of female images in Kobayashi Takiji's works and the molding techniques used by the author. At the same time, it also discusses the typicality and social and historical value behind these images.

In summary, the female images in Kobayashi Takiji's works mainly include women marginalized in labor, rural women, female workers, and young women with ideological enlightenment. These images are by no means a single existence. They are all oppressed groups under the proletarian literature narrative, enduring multiple violations from feudal concepts, male, and the labor system. They constitute a microcosm of the survival dilemma of Japanese women at the bottom of the society at that time. On the other hand, with the changes of social development stage, women's identity is also changing. From housewives, to participants in social labor, to practitioners of gender and class consciousness awakening and struggling, female images' social participation and discourse power are constantly strengthened, which also shows Kobayashi Takiji's concern for women.

This study has a strong reference significance for similar research in the future, which mainly improves the problems of strong subjectivity and lack of theoretical depth in character image analysis. Future studies should continue to focus on strengthening the systematicity and comprehensiveness of character image analysis, and make efforts to combine proletarian literature with more established literary criticism theories. Finally, further exploration should focus on the significance of proletarian literature to social and historical analysis.

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