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Analysis of Female Images in the Diary Literature of the Heian Period: Taking Tosa Nikki as an Example

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Abstract. This study takes the Tosa Nikki(The Tosa Diary) as the research object, analyzing the characteristics of the portrayal of female images in diary literature of the Heian period, exploring their epoch connotations and literary value. Through textual analysis, comparative research, and historical-cultural analysis, it reveals the three-dimensional image of the female protagonist in Tosa Nikki, the differences from the diary literature of the early and mid-to-late Heian period , as well as the unique status and value of Tosa Nikki within the diary literature of Heian period . The study shows that by adopting a female perspective, Tosa Nikki broke through the tradition of male diaries, endowing female literary with subjectivity and stimulating female creation in the mid-to-late periods, thus laying the foundation for the development of female literature. This study enriches the understanding of female literature in the Heian period and provides new perspectives and materials for the study of female literature during this period.

Keywords: Tosa Nikki, Heian period, aristocratic female image, female literature

1. Introduction

Tosa Nikki(The Tosa Diary) written by the outstanding scholar Ki no Tsurayuki in 935 during the mid-Heian period. This work records his 55-day journey back to Kyoto after leaving his post in Tosa in diary. As one of Japan's earliest diary literature, Tosa Nikki adoptes a female persona at the beginning, not only pioneering a new field of female kana diaries, but also paving the way for subsequent female literature in Japan and even influencing the development of private novels in the field of Japanese literature with delicate emotional expression and multidimensional female images. Therefore, taking Tosa Nikki as an example to analyze the female images and characteristics in Heian period literature holds significant research value in both the field of medieval Japanese literature and even female literature.

Currently, the academic circles have conducted extensive research on Tosa Nikki. Zhao Xiaobai pointed out that Tosa Nikki achieved a transition from practical diaries to literary creation. Through innovative techniques such as adopting a feminine tone and using third-person narration, it pioneered a new paradigm for Japanese female literature [1]. Wu Ying focuses on the gender contrast awareness in the book, arguing that this opposition not only reflects gender differences but also reflects deep-seated opposition between Japanese and Chinese literatures and even Chinese and Japanese cultures. She further explores the diverse motivations behind the author's writing by means

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of a female perspective [2]. Xu Chaoqun emphasizes that Tosa Nikki pushes female literature to break through tradition and enter a new stage with greater expressiveness and self-awareness. He also found that female images in female literature of the mid-to-late Heian period mostly exhibit sentimental traits and content was concentrated on the life scenes of the royal court nobility [3].

Although existing research has conducted in-depth explorations of Tosa Nikki from dimensions such as literary innovation and cultural connotations, there remains a gap in the detailed analysis of female characters [4]. Current studies have not fully delved into the deep connections between the female characters in the work and the social culture of the Heian period, nor have they systematically explored issues such as the cultural status of women and their group mentality reflected. In light of this, this paper takes Tosa Nikki as a starting point, meticulously analyzing the image characteristics of its female protagonist and comparing the differences in female images in this work with those in diary literature from the early (such as Kanpei Goki) and middle-to-late periods (such as Kagerō Nikki and Izumi Shikibu Nikki) to explore how the work breaks through gender boundaries through literary creation and pave new paths for female literature. The study adopts textual analysis, comparative research and historical-cultural analysis to reveal the contemporary significance and literary value of female images, and focuses on summarizing the image characteristics of the female protagonist, the social and cultural background reflected by these characteristics during the Heian period, and the status of Tosa Nikki in the development of female literature.

2. Diary literature and female social background in the Heian period

Tosa Nikki was emerged in the specific cultural and social context of the early Heian period (794-1185), a product of the rise of kana literature and Ki no Tsurayuki's personal experiences. During the Heian period, influenced by Tang culture, Chinese characters were long used as the primary tool for recording official documents and academic works by the nobility, and Chinese poetry became the mainstream of literary creation. Diaries written in Chinese characters by male nobles, such as Kanpei Goki and Ribu Ōki, focused on court affairs and ceremonies, laying the foundation for diary literature. However, the portrayal of female characters was monotonous, and emotional expression was restricted.

With the evolution of the kana script, hiragana was simplified from cursive script. Due to its smoothness and simplicity, it gradually became the exclusive language of female literary creation. The popularization of kana script broke the male monopoly on Chinese characters, providing women with a tool to express their personal emotions, which promoted the prosperity of kana diaries and waka poetry. In society, Mukoiri-kon(son-in-law entering marriage) and matrilineal traditions granted noblewomen a core position in the family, responsible for managing household affairs and educating children, as offspring were crucial for the continuation of the family. However, the political and economic spheres were dominated by men, and women needed to gain recognition in the cultural field through talents such as waka poetry and music. At the same time, aristocratic culture emphasized the pleasure of life, and reciting poetry and singing became a common social activity, providing a stage for female literary creation.

In this background, the opportunity for Ki no Tsurayuki to create Tosa Nikki gradually matured. In April 931, at the age of 59, Ki no Tsurayuki was appointed by Emperor Suzaku to serve as the governor of Tosa Province (now Kochi Prefecture). During his three-year term, he fulfilled his duties with dedication. However, towards the end of his term in 934, he suffered the pain of losing his daughter - his daughter, who was less than eight years old, unfortunately passed away due to illness. With an grief that he could not let go, Ki no Tsurayuki stepped down and returned to Kyoto.

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During the 55-day journey back, the loneliness of the trip and the pain in his heart intertwined, prompting him to write Tosa Nikki in hiragana in 935. He adopted a female perspective, incorporating waka poetry and poetic theory to delicately express the joys and sorrows of his journey, and to convey his deep longing for his deceased daughter. This work showcases the emotional expression advantages of hiragana literature and the unique charm of a female perspective.

3. Female images in Tosa Nikki

Ki no Tsurayuki integrated his personal grief into the fictional female narrative, endowing the heroine with the identity of a local official and showing multiple roles and complex inner world. The following analyses of her image, complex inner world and multiple roles are conducted from four dimensions: family role, traveler traits, cultural temperament and life attitude.

3.1. A traveler of resilience and endurance

Faced with the natural challenges of the journey, the heroine transformed from vulnerability to resilience, demonstrating the adaptability of Heian women in adversity. In the "宇多の松原" section, confronted with the indistinguishable night scenery of mountains and sea, she "船底に頭を押し当てて声をあげて泣くばかり" vividly depicted her fear of the power of nature. During the stay at "大湊" , severe weather led to prolonged stay; she counted the days until "指が傷んでしまいそうだ"but endured it silently, demonstrating her endurance. In the "住吉" section, facing fierce winds and huge waves, she and others offered "鏡を海に投げ込ん" to calm the storm, showing proactive response in crisis. In the "阿波の海峡" section, while crossing the sea at night, "男も女も一心に神仏に祈って" , her prayer reflected her reliance on deities and resilient mindset. Natural disasters were frequent during the Heian period, and people held a deep sence of awe towards nature. The heroine's resilience broke through the stereotype of feminine weakness, reflecting the survival wisdom of women under social constraints.

3.2. A mother with delicate emotions

The heroine was deeply grieved by the death of her daughter in Tosa, reflecting the emotional dependence of women during the Heian period centered around family. In the "大津～浦戸" section, when facing the return to Kyoto, she prepared to "何も言わなかった" , reciting the waka "みやこへと…" ("都へ帰れると思うのは嬉しいけれど、悲しいのは死んでしまって帰れぬ人がいることであった"), and "あるものと…" ("今もいるものと…死んだあの子をどこにいるのかと尋ねてしまうのは、悲しいことだ"). These lines expressed her deep longing for her deceased daughter and highlighting the depth of maternal love and the heart-wrenching pain of losing a child. In the "渚の院" section, seeing others return to the Kyoto with their children, she lamented "なかりしも…" ("行くときは子供のなかった人たちも…我是亡くして帰ってくる"), contrasting the happiness of other′ s reunion with her own sorrow and loneliness. In the "家に到着" section, facing the dilapidated mansion, she recited "生まれしも…" ("ここで生まれた幼い人も帰らないのに…なんと悲しいことだ"), intertwining her grief for her deceased daughter with the sorrow of her home. Mukoiri-kon(son-in-law entering marriage) granted women a central position in the family, and the importance of offspring to mothers is self-evident. The heroine's grief reflected the emotional fragility and unpredictability of fate under the matrilineal tradition, showcasing the deep reliance of women in the face of family upheaval.

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3.3. A romantic and talented woman

The heroine demonstrated her literary talent and aesthetic pursuits through the interaction between waka and the scenery. In the "渚の院" section, she meticulously observed the "松の木などが植わっている" and "梅の花が咲いている" , reciting "千代経たる…" ("千年も経過した松ではあるが…松風の響きばかりは、変はらないでいることだ"), expressing reverence for historical culture. In the "桂川" section, she expressed her feelings about the moonlit night and showcased refined taste with "ひさかたの…" ("月に生えているという桂…月の影も変わることが無い"). In the "和泉の灘" section, she described "松の色は青く、磯の波は雪のように白い"and recited "たまくしげ箱の…" ("箱の浦の波の立たない日は…海を鏡のようだと見ないことがあろうか"), which revealed her keen perception of natural beauty. In the "二十日の夜" section, she recalled Abe no Nakamaro's waka and recited "みやこにて…" ("都で山の稜線に出たり入ったりしているのを見た月…波に入っていくのだよ"), which demonstrated the flexibility of historical association and emotional expression. The popularization of kana script provided women with creative tools. The heroine’s waka creation reflected the initiative of noble women in cultural inheritanceb and broke through the subordinate status of women as cultural embellishments in the early stage.

3.4. An optimistic and positive attitude towards life

Despite the arduous journey, the was able to discover beauty in the ordinary and actively participate in social activities, which demonstrated the mindset of women in the Heian period who pursued joy in life within a limited space. In the "鹿児の崎" section, she collaborated with the farewell party to compose a waka "惜（を）しと思ふ…" ("お立ちになるのが惜しいと思っている人たちが…私たちは来たのです"), showcasing enthusiastic interaction. When "淡路の婆さん" chanted "追風の吹きぬるときは…" ("追風が吹いてきたときは…私たちも手を叩いて嬉しがっていることよ”）, she celebrated with other women, displaying an optimistic attitude. In the "難波" section, upon arriving in Kyoto, she "額に手を当てて喜ぶこと、この上ない" and praised the waka of "淡路の婆さん", reflecting her love and tolerance for life. In the "羽根" section, she agreed with the young girl's waka "まことにて…" ("本当にその名の通り、この「羽根」という土地が鳥の羽根ならば…都にかえりたいものだ"), demonstrating her empathetic ability. During the Heian period, reciting poetry and singing was the common social norm among nobles, and the heroine's vitality reflected the psychological appeal of women for seeking recognition in cultural activities.

4. Compare female images in diary literature from the early Heian period

In the early Heian period, influenced by the culture of Tang Dynasty, the Chinese-language diaries were dominated by male nobles, focusing on court affairs and rituals, with female images portrayed in a monotonous manner, lacking individuality [5]. The Kanpei Goki records the politics and etiquette of the court in Chinese. Women such as Fujiwara Fumiko and Fujiwara Yinzi, were mostly female officials in the court, responsible for managing attire and etiquette. Their status was dependent on men, their activities were constrained by etiquette, and their emotional expressions were restrained. Literary creation was limited to the male framework. The Ribu Ōki records the political life of Fujiwara no Michinaga [6]. Women are mostly served as tools for marriage alliances, consolidating their family status through marriage, responsible for household and court affairs, with little political involvement and restricted emotional expression. The Kyūreki focuses on the emperor's affairs and court rituals, beginning to portray female emotions, depicting their gentleness,

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virtue and maintenance of family harmony, but emotional expression is relatively restrained, focusing on etiquette and politics.

In contrast, Tosa Nikki broke through the tradition of recording official affairs in male diaries by adopting a female perspective. The female protagonist appeared as a local official and portrayed multiple roles such as mother, traveler, and talented woman in travel scenes. Her emotions are delicate, resilient, and passionate, and her literary creation highlighted subjectivity. The life scenes in this work are diverse, breaking through the constraints of the court, delving deep into her inner world to reveal complex emotions, which forms a sharp contrast with the subordinate and singular female images in earlier diaries and demonstrates the expressive space granted to women by kana literature.

5. Compare the female images in the literature of the middle and late Heian period

In the middle and late Heian period, the national style culture rose up, and the kana literature flourished. Under the economic prosperity and the Sekkan Politics, the nobility cultivated the cultural attainment of women, and social inequality provided materials for creation. Women expressed themselves through kana diaries, making the image of noble women more complex and diversified [7].

Fujiwara no Michitsuna no Haha in the Kagerō Nikki [8]came from a prominent family and was both talented and beautiful, known as one of the "Three Beauties of this Dynasty". She was skilled in waka poetry but was trapped in marital pain due to her husband, Fujiwara Kaneie's infidelity. Her resentment and helplessness intertwined, and she expressed her anger through waka poems like "如何に思ふらむ…" (How does he think of me...), reflecting the passivity of noblewomen in Family marriage alliance. As a mother, she deeply cared for her son Fujiwara Michitsuna, Maternal love became a comfort in life, showcasing the depth of her role in the family.

Izumi Shikibu in the Izumi Shikibu Nikki [9], from a Middle and lower-level nobility, rose to prominence through her literary talent. Her love for Fujiwara no Michinaga was passionate yet tangled, with longing and jealousy coexisting. Her waka poems, such as "もの思ふと…" ("The pain of longing..."), expressed her emotional turmoil. In the face of polygamy and a society where men are superior to women, she demonstrated independence, using her writing to reflect on social hypocrisy and inequality and defend emotional dignity. However, the predicament of marriage still left her helpless.

Sugawara no Takasue no Musume in the Sarashina Nikki [10], the daughter of a noble family, was obsessed with tales and dreamed of romantic love in her childhood., expressing her yearnings through waka poems like "いかでか…" ("How could it be..."). After growing up, she struggled with a mundane marriage and the death of her husband, becoming sensitive and superstitious. Ultimately, she turned to religion, illustrating her inner transformation from a dreamy girl to an ordinary mother.

Tosa Nikki is narrated from the perspective of a fictional woman, whose female protagonist embodies multiple roles. In the scenes of travel, she expressed the pain of losing her daughter, tenacity and endurance, literary talent, and optimistic vitality. Her recitation of waka poetry, such as "みやこへと…" ("都へ帰れると思うのは嬉しいけれど…") expressed her sorrow. The scenes were diverse but did not delve deeply into specific female predicaments, such as marital predicaments. The diaries of the mid-to-late Heian period were based on real people, meticulously depicting complex emotions in marriage, family, and society, such as, the resentment of Fujiwara no Michitsuna no Haha, the independence of Izumi Shikibu, and the real struggles of Sugawara no Takasue no Musume. These themes are deeper, and the characters are more vivid. The three diaries continue the delicate expression of female emotions in Tosa Nikki, showing the longing for beautiful

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emotions and spiritual solace in difficult situations. The innovation lies in authenticity and detail, comprehensively presenting the ups and downs of noblewomen's fates in social relationships and expanding the emotional depth and thematic breadth of Tosa Nikki.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Reflecting social and cultural connotations

The female protagonist of Tosa Nikki embodies the roles of mother, a traveler, and a talented woman, reflecting the complex roles and social-cultural connotations of noblewomen in the Heian period. Her grief over the loss of her daughter, as shown in the waka "都へ帰れると思うのは嬉しいけれど、悲しいのは死んでしまって帰れぬ人がいることであった" from the "大津～浦戸" section, which revealed the significance of offspring to a woman's status under Mukoiri-kon(son-in-law entering marriage) and the matrilineal traditon, highlighting their emotional fragility in the face of the unpredictability of fate. Her resilience and endurance, as demonstrated in the passage "住吉" where she throwed mirror into the waves and prayed to god and buddha in "阿波の海峡" , reflected the reliance on deities and the survival wisdom in the context of frequent natural disasters, breaking the stereotype of women as weak. Her literary talent, as demonstrated in the waka "千年も経過した松ではあるが、松風の響きばかりは、変はらないでいることだ" in "渚の院" is attributed to the popularization of the kana script, showcasing the initiative of noblewomen in cultural inheritance. Her optimistic social interactions, as reflected in the waka "お立ちになるのが惜しいと思っている人たちが、私たちは来たのです" from the "鹿児の崎" section, demonstrates the vitality of women seeking emotional connections within the aristocratic culture of poetry and song. These traits not only reflected the core position of women in family and cultural spheres but also revealed their struggles and self-expression under political and economic constraints, highlighting the awakening of gender consciousness in the Heian period.

6.2. Pioneering a new path for women's literature

Tosa Nikki broke through the tradition of male Chinese-style diaries focusing on official records. By adopting a female perspective, it endowed women with narrative agency, thus pioneering a new path for female literature. The heroine's creation of waka poetry and emotional expression, such as the "桂川" section with lines like "月に生えているという桂、月の影も変わることが無い", transcended gender boundaries, endowing women with initiative to express themselves and participate in cultural inheritance. Its fictional perspective balanced emotional depth and life's breadth, offering a freer space for expression compared to the subordinate and restrained court women depicted in earlier works like "Kanpei Goki" and "Ribu Ōki" Compared to the marital grievances in later "Kagerō Nikki", the independent love in " Izumi Shikibu Nikki" and the struggles of reality in "Sarashina Nikki ", the travel scenes in Tosa Nikki were more universal, inspiring a wave of female diary writing. Later diaries inherited its form of kana diary, delving deeper into the complex emotions of women in marriage and society. The success of Tosa Nikki encouraged women to express their thoughts and insights through literature, enhancing their status in the cultural sphere and laying the foundation for Japanese women's literature. Its influence even extended to later private novels, demonstrating the enduring vitality of literary forms.

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6.3. Implications for modern research

The diverse images of the female protagonist in Tosa Nikki offers an important perspective for understanding female culture during the Heian period, revealing their struggles and pursuits under social constraints, which has profound implications for modern female literature research. Her resilience and talent, such as her composure in the face of pirate threats and her keenness in waka poetry creation, provide historical references for contemporary women facing difficulties, showcasing creativity and tenacity in adversity. Her literary creation that transcended gender boundaries inspires modern women to express themselves through literature, and promotes research on gender equality. Compared to the single female image in earlier diaries and the realistic portrayal of struggles in later diaries, the fictional nature of Tosa Nikki granted a broader imaginative space for women, inspiring modern literature to explore the integration of fiction and reality. The limitation of this study lies in the limited number of comparative works and the exclusion of genres such as waka collections and monogatari. Future research could expand to different social strata of female images, comparing female literature in the East Asian cultural sphere during the same period to explore the global uniqueness and commonality of Heian female culture. This study not only enriches our understanding of Heian female literature but also provides a historical reference for modern female literary creation and gender equality, highlighting the eternal value of women's pursuit of self-expression through literature.

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