

On Japanese Naturalism through “The Quilt”

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Abstract: Japanese naturalist literature emerged in the early 20th century and occupies a significant position in the history of modern Japanese literature, exerting a profound influence on the development of later literature. “The Quilt”, written by Tayama Katai, is a representative work of naturalist literature and has played a crucial role in advancing Japanese naturalist literature. This paper aims to explore the impact of “The Quilt” on Japanese naturalist literature through a study of the novel, thereby promoting a deeper understanding of Japanese naturalist literature.

Keywords: Naturalism; “The Quilt”; Tayama Katai

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1. Tayama Katai and “The Quilt”

Tayama Katai was a representative figure of naturalist literature in the history of modern Japanese literature and a pioneer of the Japanese “I-novel” (shi-shōsetsu). In his early years, he revered sensibility and ideals, producing works with romantic overtones. Later, influenced by European naturalism, his writing style underwent a drastic transformation, and he subsequently created the sensational literary work “The Quilt”, which established his status in the literary world. Drawing on his own experiences, Tayama Katai depicted the story of Takehata Tokio, a frustrated middle-aged male writer in “The Quilt.” Trapped in the monotony of daily life with his wife, Takehata Tokio gradually grew weary. Upon meeting his female apprentice, Yoshiko, his inner desires were aroused, and he developed a love for her. However, constrained by his status, social norms, and morality, Tokio suppressed his emotions for Yoshiko and lacked the courage to confess his love. On one hand, he fantasized about interacting with Yoshiko and sought to possess her; on the other hand, upon learning that Yoshiko had a boyfriend, he was consumed by jealousy and anxiety, enduring immense inner torment. Eventually, he contacted Yoshiko’s father and had her sent back to her hometown, separating the couple. After Yoshiko’s departure, Tokio entered the room she once lived in, hugged her quilt, and burst into tears while smelling its scent^[1].

Published in 1907, “The Quilt” is regarded as a representative work of Tayama Katai and even Japanese naturalist literature. It solidified Tayama Katai’s position in the literary circle, exerted a far-reaching influence on the development of Japanese literature, and also shaped subsequent literary creation and critical theories.

2. The Creative Philosophy Reflected in “The Quilt”

Tayama Katai practiced the philosophy of naturalist literature in “The Quilt.” Firstly, he advocated the principle of “no

ideals, no solutions.” “No ideals” does not mean that the writer himself lacks ideals or artistic pursuits, but rather that in creation, he abandons preconceived ideals, concepts, moral judgments, and utilitarian purposes. It opposes writing to promote certain social ideals (such as political propositions or moral education) or philosophical concepts, advocating that literature should be liberated from all constraints of “ideals” and become a pure, objective tool for reproduction. “No solutions” means that literature only undertakes to truthfully expose and depict reality, life, and troubles without providing any solutions. Writers should act as calm observers, recording the original appearance of life without assuming the social responsibility of “solving problems” or “guiding the way forward”. This theory also became the core of Japanese naturalist literary theory. Additionally, Tayama Katai advocated the theory of “flat description” in his creation, focusing on the writer’s own daily life or that of those around him, especially the mundane, trivial, and dark aspects. He rejected the common inner monologue rhetoric in traditional novels, avoiding modification and analysis, writing exactly what he observed—even objectively recording the dark sides of human nature, emphasizing the creative philosophy of “truth above all else.” In terms of creative methods, he pursued “elimination of techniques” and “objective realism,” minimizing artificial fabrication and plot arrangement to make literature as close to reality as possible ^[2]. This intense pursuit of truth, on the one hand, led him to describe things in a straightforward manner, allowing the text to unfold like a scroll and presenting a quiet beauty; on the other hand, the superposition of trivial matters combined with descriptions of dark psychological states permeated the work with an oppressive, gloomy atmosphere with no way out, conveying a sense of despair and suffocation through the protagonist.

Secondly, Tayama Katai shifted the focus of literary creation in “The Quilt.” Traditional Western European naturalist literature mainly focused on the lower classes and dark sides of society, boldly depicting the lives of marginalized groups such as peasants, geishas, and servants without shying away from ugliness or darkness. However, when naturalist literature was introduced to Japan, Tayama Katai, integrating the social context of Japan at that time with his own experiences, turned his attention inward to himself, shifting to describing trivial daily life and focusing the narrative on personal privacy and the inner world, thus realizing the “inward turn” of naturalism. Replacing “social experimentation” with “self-confession,” “The Quilt” reveals the eternal conflict between desire and morality among intellectuals through the spiritual dissection of the protagonist. This shift transformed the narrative perspective of naturalist literature, making it contract inward ^[3].

3. The impact of “The Quilt” on naturalism

As a representative work of Japanese naturalist literature, Tayama Katai’s “The Quilt” promoted the transformation of this school during its process of localization. Moreover, Tayama Katai’s ideas exerted a profound influence on later naturalist writers, establishing the basic creative concepts, attitudes, and methods in the field of naturalist literature.

Tayama Katai advocated adhering to the objectivity of nature, restoring real scenes without adding emotions or any subjective evaluations. To lay bare one’s true self, one must engage in documentation from an objective perspective and in a nearly masochistic manner. “The Quilt” is also directly based on the author’s real experiences with his female disciple. This pursuit of truth pointed the way for later writers to balance self-examination and realistic description ^[4]. Writers influenced by Tayama Katai inherited the techniques of in-depth exploration of the inner self and delicate depiction of realistic details, expanding the diversity of Japanese naturalist literature. Meanwhile, Tayama Katai’s theory of “flat description” provided a complete theoretical framework for the maturity and development of Japanese naturalist literature and enriched its theoretical system.

In addition, Tayama Katai’s “The Quilt” pioneered the new thematic form of “I-novel” (shi-shōsetsu). “Shi” (private) refers to “I”, meaning that the author takes himself as the protagonist, uses his own life as the subject matter, and fictitiously depicts his own experiences and life. Through the narrative technique of self-exposure, unadorned realistic description, and extreme analysis of the inner self, it not only established the core aesthetics of “self-exposure” and “truth above all else” for the “I-novel” but also broke away from traditional literature’s reliance on public morality and grand narratives, exerting a far-reaching influence on the development of Japanese naturalist literature.

However, the influence brought by “The Quilt” is not entirely positive. Firstly, the novel is permeated with a gloomy and apathetic atmosphere, which sets the overall tone, and the ending is particularly pessimistic and negative. This creates a sense of disordered oppression, leaving readers feeling suffocated. Secondly, by focusing on the individual, the novel merely describes personal trivialities and psychological states, artificially severing connections with society. Lacking depth and breadth, it results in a narrow perspective and overall vision. Finally, “The Quilt” contains numerous descriptions of carnal desires, mostly depicting the animalistic side of humans while ignoring their social nature. Furthermore, the exposure of the private lives of real people has sparked controversy over “profiting from others’ suffering through creation.” Tayama Katai’s revelation of his own private relationship with his female disciple blurred the boundaries of privacy, causing distress to himself and others while challenging the moral limits of ethical relationships.

4. Conclusion

As a representative work of naturalist writer Tayama Katai, “The Quilt” has exerted a profound influence on naturalist literature and even Japanese literature. Based on the author’s own experiences, the novel depicts the story of Takehata Tokio, a middle-aged writer who develops romantic feelings for his female disciple Yoshiko but suppresses his emotions due to moral constraints, ultimately falling into pain and emptiness after her departure. In his creation, Tayama Katai implemented the concept of “no ideals, no solutions,” depicting the entire incident from a completely objective and independent perspective, and adopted the technique of “flat description” to focus on daily trivialities and the dark sides of human nature, striving to truthfully present the characters’ psychology and lives ^[5].

“The Quilt” not only promoted the “inward turn” of Japanese naturalist literature, shifting the narrative focus from social issues to personal psychology and privacy, but also pioneered the literary form of “I-novel”, providing a new thematic template for literary creation. More than a literary revolution, “The Quilt” contributed to a deeper human understanding of oneself and expanded the breadth and possibilities of literary development. However, the negative impacts of “The Quilt” cannot be ignored; both its gloomy style and the shift in focus have inherent limitations. Nevertheless, as a representative work of Japan’s unique naturalist literature, “The Quilt” played a significant role in promoting the further improvement and development of naturalist literature and the establishment of modern Japanese literature.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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