

The Feminist Theories of Yoko Ogawa and Chizuko Ueno — Focusing on "The Pregnancy Diary"

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the connections and resonances between the literary works of Japanese female writer Yoko Ogawa and the feminist theory of Japanese sociologist Chizuko Ueno by analyzing Yoko Ogawa's "The Pregnancy Diary". The paper discusses three aspects: deconstructing the myth of motherhood, exhibiting bodily alienation, and confronting existential absurdity. This research aims to break the boundaries between literary creation and theory and explore a new path of intertextual criticism.

KEYWORDS

Chizuko ueno; Yoko ogawa; The pregnancy diary; Feminist criticism

1 Introduction: research origin

In contemporary Japanese society and culture, motherhood is sanctified and institutionalized. This maternal ideology is deeply implanted in the hearts of contemporary Japanese people through the invisible guidance of policies and the repeated narratives of the media. This system, on the one hand, pushes mothers onto a pedestal, praising their greatness and dedication, and on the other hand, confines mothers to the family, making them bear unpaid reproductive labor. This myth is reinforced through various aspects such as policy systems and media public opinion. In terms of policy, Japan's corporate system (lifetime employment) and tax and social security systems (such as spousal tax deductions) economically encourage women to become housewives and mothers after marriage. In terms of media public opinion, advertisements, variety shows, TV dramas, etc., present images of capable housewives and great mothers, normalizing absent father parenting. The deep-seated reasons behind these phenomena, besides the remnants of traditional concepts, include the needs of Japan's post-war economic reconstruction. During the period of rapid economic growth, men were required to devote themselves fully to work, and women were required to stabilize the rear of the family. Shaping women into housewives was the most efficient social model for guaranteeing labor and reproduction.

Chizuko Ueno, as a leading player in Japanese feminist theory, has one of her core theories being the critique of motherhood (refer to her works "Patriarchy and Capitalism" and "Misogyny"). Chizuko Ueno is a professor of sociology at the University of Tokyo, Japan, and has recently attracted much attention for her works on feminism, elderly care, and related topics. Chizuko Ueno has also received significant attention in China in recent years. Domestic related research mainly focuses on Ueno's feminist thoughts. For example, Lu Weiwei's "Patriarchy, Capitalism, Nation-State and Japanese Women——Chizuko Ueno's Feminist Theory Construction" ("Open Times" 2021). There is also research analyzing "The Pregnancy Diary" from a feminist criticism perspective, such as "A Tentative Analysis of Yoko Ogawa's 'The Pregnancy Diary' from the Perspective of Feminist Criticism" (Wan Bingran, "Literary Life · Sea of Art and Culture" 2020).

Yoko Ogawa is a Japanese female writer who has published many popular works such as "The Pregnancy Diary" (1991), "The Housekeeper and the Professor" (2004), "Mina's March" (2006), etc. In some of Yoko Ogawa's works, one can see certain feminist-related theories elaborated by Chizuko Ueno; the underlying thoughts of their works have some overlap. Why can a sociological theorist and a literary writer resonate on the topic of childbirth? This paper explores this using "The Pregnancy Diary" as an example. "The Pregnancy Diary" was published in Japan in 1991 and won the 104th Akutagawa Prize. The book records the sister's pregnancy process from the younger sister's perspective.

2 The paper mainly expands on these three points

Deconstructing the myth of motherhood, exhibiting bodily alienation, and confronting existential absurdity. This research aims to break the boundaries between literary creation and theory and explore a new path of intertextual criticism.

2.1 Deconstructing the "sacred domain": a common "anti-motherhood" myth stance

In contemporary Japan, the sanctified maternal ideology is deeply implanted in the hearts of contemporary Japanese people through the invisible guidance of policies and the repeated narratives of the media. It is precisely this myth of motherhood that Ueno objects to. Ueno's criticism is not directed at individual mothers or maternal love itself, but rather at the operational mechanism that utilizes and sanctifies motherhood as a social system.

Ueno's critique of maternal ideology is one of the cornerstones of her feminist theoretical system, mainly running through her core works such as "Patriarchy and Capitalism" and "Misogyny". Her discussion mainly includes the following points.

First, motherhood is not instinct, it is ideology. Ueno first de-naturalizes motherhood. She criticizes the theory of maternal instinct, believing that motherhood is an ideology constructed by patriarchy. Its function is to describe specific social arrangements (such as women being responsible for child-rearing) as natural, in line with female nature, thereby concealing the underlying power structures and inequality.

Second, the concealment and exploitation of unpaid labor. Household labor is crowned with the name of love; its essence is unpaid labor. Ueno points out that in patriarchal families, labor such as childcare, housework, and elderly care is a form of "reproduction". This reproduction includes the biological process of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as raising children, all of which are undertaken by women. This labor, however, is crowned with the names of love and romance; its essence is the exploitation of women.

The above two points in Ueno's work are intertwined, with maternal ideology playing a key role. It makes women themselves believe that engaging in this labor without social recognition is out of love and nature, and should not seek remuneration.

Unlike Ueno's theoretical demonstration, Yoko Ogawa describes this individual experience of women in "The Pregnancy Diary". Unlike a typical pregnancy, the sister's pregnancy process is extremely calm, even devoid of joy or emotion. On the contrary, there is a sense of unease, fear, and even disgust towards the primitive physiological phenomenon of pregnancy. "I have no experience of pregnancy and have no particular joy or hatred towards my sister's pregnancy; I am just an observer. On the other hand, the sister herself feels increasingly strongly the sense of a foreign object inside her body, which can also be seen from the sister's words: 'I have no freedom to choose [my own child]', 'What's scary is that I have to meet my own baby'."

Yoko Ogawa's narrative here is "de-romanticized". The pregnancy process recorded in this book lacks the emotions of joy and anticipation found in traditional narratives. Instead, it is replaced by measurement, recording, and observation, such as measuring weight, waist circumference, and the number of fetal movements. This completely removes emotional and romanticized factors, turning a "sacred" matter into something thoroughly datafied and transactional. The elder sister lacks even a feeling of love for the fetus inside her; it is more like a person observing something parasitic inside her own body. This indifferent narrative itself is a powerful rebuttal to the myth of motherhood.

In fact, Yoko Ogawa has also stated that she wanted to write about character expressions different from conventional notions. The emotions and love that people take for granted are absent in her writing. What Yoko Ogawa wanted to express is what lies beyond the framework of what people consider a matter of course. Thus, Yoko Ogawa uses literary truth to show the real effects that the system criticized by Ueno imposes on individual women. Together, they tear off the veil of so-called motherhood, exposing the institutional oppression and power control beneath it, completing a dual deconstruction of the myth of motherhood.

2.2 The othering of the body

In Ueno's view, under patriarchy, the female body never belongs to the woman herself; it is an object to be disciplined and managed. From aesthetic standards to reproductive functions, the female body is always an object serving the Other (men, family, state).

The concept of the "Other" comes from Beauvoir's "The Second Sex". Its essence is that in a binary power structure, such as male/female, one side defines itself as the subject, the essence, and defines the other side as the object, the non-essence. The existence of the Other is not for itself, but to set off and highlight the superiority and central status of the subject. Othering is not innate; it is constructed by society and culture.

Ueno inherited and developed this theory. It is society that creates woman as the Other. The othering of women is the foundation of Ueno's analysis of patriarchy. Ueno points out that the core operational mechanism of patriarchy is the holistic othering of women. Its specific manifestations include deprivation of the right to define, being treated as trophies, etc. Women are daughters, wives, mothers, but these identities are all relative to men, lacking independent subjectivity. Women are often treated as trophies after male competition victories; women's personal feelings and will are ignored.

Among these, the othering of the body is what Ueno emphasizes most. So-called bodily othering means that the female body does not belong to itself, but is an object commandeered, disciplined, and defined by patriarchy. Its main

manifestations are the othering of sexuality, the othering of reproduction, the othering of beauty, and the othering of health rights. 1. The othering of sexuality. The female body is seen as a sexual object, its value lies in its "sexual attractiveness" and "reproductive ability", not in itself. 2. The othering of reproduction. The uterus is regarded as public property. Social public opinion praises the great mother, but it praises her selfless dedication in her object role. Ueno sharply points out that the role of mother is bestowed with too much symbolic meaning under patriarchy; the female body becomes a reproductive machine, and its sacrifices are easily dismissed with the word "great". 3. The othering of beauty. In multiple interviews, Ueno has commented on beauty. She mentioned that beauty has become something like an obligation for women. 4. The othering of health rights. In medical fields and others, women's bodily experiences and pain are often ignored. For example, the pain of many gynecological diseases is diagnosed as psychological. Because the standard for defining "normal" is often male-centered. Thus, Ueno exposes the "emperor's new clothes" of patriarchy; the so-called natural female role is nothing but a carefully orchestrated scam of othering.

"The Pregnancy Diary" is filled with descriptions of this bodily othering. First is sensory disgust. The blunt descriptions of morning sickness, body odor, secretions, and other details break the illusion of sacred pregnancy, emphasizing physicality and uncomfortable biological nature. At the same time, the body deforms and loses control. The body is like fermenting dough, constantly expanding, becoming uncontrollable. The sister's blunt feelings about pregnancy also indicate the objectification of the body, that is, from a self-controlled body to a disciplined container. In other words, the pregnant body is in an alienated state that no longer belongs to the "self". This fetus is more like an invader; descriptions of it are "another existence", "foreign object", "parasite". Its growth comes at the cost of devouring the mother's nutrients and altering the mother's form. In short, under the author's cool/detached objectifying perspective, the woman herself seems to become a bystander. At this time, the body is alienated, which is also what Ueno calls "the body being gazed upon and controlled from the perspective of the Other". This bodily alienation is precisely the literary expression of the body being othered. Others and society only care about whether this woman can successfully conceive and give birth function, but do not care about the woman's feelings (such as pain, fear, etc.).

Yoko Ogawa transforms the abstract theory of "bodily othering" into the sister's pregnancy experience in "The Pregnancy Diary". Together, they reveal that the female body is first not a subject of self-feeling, but a functional, passive container.

2.3 "Resonance of meaninglessness" — existential absurdity

The "Nihilism" and "Egoism" in Ueno's Theory. Ueno does not offer cheap salvation or hope; she admits that after deconstructing everything, the essence of life is meaningless. Ueno advocates a kind of "living for oneself" egoism. Ueno's "nihilism" and "egoism" cannot be understood from a everyday derogatory perspective. This is not moral decay, but rather a survival strategy and philosophical stance proposed by Ueno after deconstructing patriarchy. It is also a response to the absurdity exposed after traditional "grand narratives" such as family and motherhood are deconstructed. The "nihilism" here is not the decadence commonly spoken of, but a critical nihilism, a nihilism that destroys beautiful illusions. Its purpose is not to make people fall into despair, but to break the hypnosis, to allow women to see the traps under their feet, thereby gaining the freedom not to be deceived. Ueno's nihilism is the first step in smashing the shackles. This seemingly destroys the existing order, but actually clears space for women, allowing women to re-examine themselves and live from their own perspective, rather than being imposed with some meaning.

Ueno does not directly declare the world to be absurd, but her analysis of patriarchy deeply reveals the "existential absurdity" under a specific gender, that is, women are thrown into a pre-set system that is disadvantageous to them. They are forced to fight a difficult battle in an absurd world. The philosophical concept of the absurd originates from Camus, referring to the rupture and contradiction between human rational pursuit and the irrational world.

In Ueno's context, this absurdity is specifically manifested in the following aspects. 1. The absurdity of rules. This is a game with rules designed in advance, but it is disadvantageous to women. From a social perspective, the rules by which the whole society operates appear neutral on the surface, but actually hide patriarchal logic everywhere. Ueno breaks the myths that "romance", "love", and "family" are the natural destinations for women, pointing out that their essence is the exploitation of women's labor and emotions. 2. The absurdity of effort. Ueno sharply points out that although many women have worked very hard on a personal level, they still cannot escape predicaments because this is a structural problem of the whole society. The system makes women prone to internal consumption; failures believe they did not try hard enough, and structural inequality is concealed. This rupture between effort and result is also like Sisyphus pushing a stone up a mountain, creating a deep sense of powerlessness and absurdity. Finally, there is the absurdity of meaning. Ueno deconstructs the grand narratives of "romance", "love", "motherhood", and "family" that tradition bestows upon women's life meaning. These false traditional beliefs are destroyed, but new meaning has not yet been established. In this transitional period of gap between old and new, how should women live on? This state of value vacuum is also a kind of absurdity. In response to this, Ueno's response is to rise up in resistance amidst the absurdity. First, puncture the lies, then

make free choices. She encourages women to live for themselves; the meaning of life is no longer determined by a few fixed identity roles. This constitutes an important part of Ueno's feminist theory.

The Existential Predicament in "The Pregnancy Diary". The elder sister's pregnancy experience is not about love, nor does it show much anticipation; it is more like a great absurdity—a life growing programmatically inside the body. "The Pregnancy Diary" here reveals an existential predicament: when the self is invaded and replaced by an irresistible, internal "Other", how does one confirm one's own existence? This predicament directly echoes the philosophical concept of alienation. The existence of the self is first perceived through the body. But when the body becomes strange and uncontrollable, the person is split from the most fundamental "Dasein". This also involves the issue of identity disintegration and reconstruction. When a woman has a fetus inside her body, her original identity as an independent woman disintegrates, replaced by titles like "pregnant woman" and "future mother". This new identity has a powerful devouring nature, forcing the original independent female identity to go offline. While being bestowed this new identity, the pregnant woman faces a whole set of pre-set traits society has for "mothers", such as selfless dedication and love. At this time, this woman's choice space is compressed, falling into the dilemma of choosing between becoming the "Other" (the identity of mother) or adhering to the "self" (the original self). The tug-of-war between self and motherhood begins here. The greatness of "The Pregnancy Diary" lies in its refusal to wrap this existential cruelty with the sugarcoat of "maternal love".

Both resolutely refuse to provide false and meaningless solutions. They reach the cold core of modern female existence in different ways—one through theoretical deduction, the other through literary narrative—that life itself may be meaningless and needs to be painfully constructed amidst a field of nothingness).

3 Conclusion

Although Chizuko Ueno and Yoko Ogawa are in different fields, "The Pregnancy Diary" forms intertextuality and resonance with Ueno's theory in three aspects: deconstructing the myth of motherhood, exhibiting bodily alienation, and confronting existential absurdity. Ueno's feminist thought is actually distinct from traditional feminism. She incorporates her own interpretation, arguing that feminism is not about making women become like men, nor is it about turning the weak into the strong. Instead, it is about ensuring that the weak are respected, that women are treated as women, and that women possess the right to freely choose. This represents a localized Japanese interpretation. Discussing this localized feminist theory in combination with Yoko Ogawa, who writes novels about Japanese women, can yield new perspectives. Literary works, with their individualized narratives, provide flesh and blood and concrete cases for theory. Theory, with its refinement and systematicity, provides depth and framework for interpreting literary works. This research combines the theory of the popular sociologist Chizuko Ueno to provide a feminist criticism perspective for interpreting Yoko Ogawa's works.

About the Author

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