

# Pseudo-Feminist Rebellion in Tanizaki's Literature - Centered on An Idiot's Love

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## Abstract

Many domestic scholars often associate Junichiro Tanizaki with "female worship," and the apparent "worship" of women in Tanizaki's works seems to make him a "pioneer" in resisting male-dominated society. However, this perception is not entirely accurate. In Tanizaki's literary works, women still seem to gain respect only through "reproduction," and while men may appear submissive, their dominant status is not truly threatened. The idea of "female characters inflicting pain on male characters" is not a genuine representation of female awakening and rebellion.

## Keywords

Junichiro Tanizaki, An Idiot's Love, Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

Domestic scholars often link Junichiro Tanizaki with "female worship," and the way women are portrayed in Tanizaki's works seems to position him as a "pioneer" in resisting male-dominated society. However, is the perverse female rebellion depicted by Tanizaki truly a manifestation of feminist awakening and rebellion? In the following, this paper will discuss this question.

## 2. Double Standards of Sexuality

The plot of *An Idiot's Love* is not overly complicated: 28-year-old electrical engineer, Kenji Kawai, adopts the 15-year-old café waitress, Sonoko, due to her Westernized charms and intends to mold her into his ideal "excellent woman." However, Sonoko, raised in indulgence, not only fails to become exclusively Kenji's woman but also leads Kenji himself to willingly become her benefactor in her life of indulgence.

This is a typical novel guided by Tanizaki's "demonism." At first glance, Kenji, who willingly satisfies his unfaithful wife's unreasonable demands, appears to be a thoroughly deceived and betrayed "victim" in this marriage, while the female protagonist, Sonoko, achieves her "rebellion" within the household in an unconventional way. But is this really the case? Is Sonoko truly a "winner" in her resistance, and is *An Idiot's Love* genuinely a feminist work that surpasses misogyny?

To answer these questions, let's take a macroscopic view. In related studies, female characters in Tanizaki's works are often divided into two categories: the "prostitute-type" women who wield power over men with their "sensuous charm" and even take pleasure in inflicting sadistic acts, and the "Madonna-type" women with unparalleled beauty and classical elegance [1]. The former, such as Sonoko, Fumiko (*Fumiko's Feet*), Nanko (*The Kirin*), Mitsuko (*Youth*), etc., are often associated with carnal desires, while the latter, as seen in the Shikamori sisters (*The Makioka Sisters*), are emblematic of pure, classical beauty. In Lin Shaohua's view, the existence of the former is rooted in men willing to please women at any cost and women who revel in this,

while the latter is an integration of Tanizaki's maternal emotions and classical aesthetics. Japanese literary critic Ken'o Okuno believes that both types of female characters stem from Tanizaki's longing for his deceased mother, with the sensuous aspect giving birth to the "femme fatale" and the spiritual extension shaping the "Madonna." Some researchers, such as Peng Dequan and Qi Pei, attribute these differences to Tanizaki's further reflections on Western art and traditional culture after his move to Kansai. During this phase, Tanizaki's literature exhibits an inward turn, distinct from the previous "emulation of the West and liberation of desire."

While the expressions may differ, the viewpoints of researchers have an inherent connection. Women associated with "desire" and "pleasure" are viewed as lovers and objects, while those linked to "tradition" and "motherhood" are seen as pure and untouchable. Both types of women, whether they serve as "objects of pleasure" or "mothers," fundamentally share the same identity as "women." Their different treatment is due to the further development of "othering," eventually leading to the formation of "double standards of sexuality." In the discourse of Hegel and Sartre, the "other" is an opposing or negating factor outside the dominant subject, and its existence allows for the affirmation of the subject's authority [2]. The concept of "othering," according to Said, is the process by which certain individuals form alliances with each other and exclude non-alliance members. This exclusion often leads to discrimination and hatred and is considered one of the causes of misogyny in feminist studies. Men exclude women who are different from themselves, gaining affirmation by negating women. However, this also raises an unavoidable question: how do men perceive their mothers?

Insulting and demeaning mothers implies a spiritual crisis regarding one's origins [3]. According to Chizuko Ueno, this anxiety leads men to view women in a divided manner: some women earn respect through reproduction, while others, responsible for providing pleasure, can be scorned. This forms the basis for the "double standards of sexuality." Under this standard, men's promiscuity is often tolerated and forgiven, while women's knowledge of "sex" is seen as undesirable. Women who are solely responsible for "reproduction," such as mothers and wives, are inevitably associated with "contemptible women" and linked to "sex" or "pleasure," making it unbearable. Sonoko's "promiscuity" blurs the boundaries between wife and lover for Kenji, as previously mentioned. Kenji desires a loose marital relationship where he can "have a wife" without assuming the responsibilities of a husband, and Sonoko being perceived as a sexual object undoubtedly challenges his identity as a true husband – a sign of masculinity.

The purpose of othering women in a male-dominated society is to establish and reinforce the dominant status of men. The "double standards of sexuality" that emerge from this othering further divide women. It grants some women a degree of respect due to "reproduction," but equating women solely with reproduction is a typical form of objectification. Women who are not responsible for reproduction but are closely associated with "sex" can be easily scorned, both by men and by women responsible for reproduction who view them as others. Women who serve reproductive roles, to avoid the potential loss of their status, tend to distance themselves from issues related to "sex." They may even join men in upholding the "double standards of sexuality." The subordinate status of women is thus firmly established, continuously deepening, and ultimately becomes "absolute." Kenji is so convinced that marriage will make Sonoko exclusively his woman, while Hamada, who pursued Sonoko, is so apprehensive when facing Kenji. Men applying makeup is deemed "effeminate," and making requests of women is seen as "shameless" behavior. In the eyes of the characters and readers in the book, all these perceptions appear reasonable and reflect the profound reality that "women occupy an absolute position as others."

Of course, the interpretation of the character "Sonoko" cannot stop here. While the "double standards of sexuality" explain the differences between mothers, wives, and lovers, there is another category of female members who play a significant role in the composition of the family. For these members, their "reproductive responsibilities" may not be as explicit, but the

possibility of being viewed as sexual objects by other men remains intolerable. Furthermore, the established male dominance sometimes even leads to concessions or "submission" towards these women. This is another layer of Sonoko's identity: she is the daughter of a father.

### 3. Actual Dominance of Men

At the beginning of their cohabitation, Sonoko, who often played on Kenji's back, was sometimes seen as the prototype of a sadist. However, in the relationships between men and women, apart from lovers with sadistic tendencies, "father's daughters" can also openly ride on a man's back. Sonoko is not only the loosely bound wife of Kenji but also the "daughter" he adopted. This fact is acknowledged and accepted by Kenji, Sonoko in the story, and Junichiro Tanizaki, the author himself. In the novel, Sonoko has called Kenji "little daddy" on several occasions, and this term is not only accepted but even encouraged by Kenji. He playfully says, "Whenever Sonoko coaxed me into doing something, she would teasingly call me 'little daddy.'" It is essential to note that in *An Idiot's Love*, the portrayal of sexual desire primarily stems from Kenji or, one could argue, from Junichiro Tanizaki himself, rather than being solely attributed to Sonoko. This reminds us that before attributing the emergence of a certain phenomenon in the text to "Sonoko's sexual desire," we should first consider cautiously: does it still originate from men? Is it merely an indirect reflection of male sexual desire?

In a family, "daughters" have the potential to be indulged. They can engage in actions that seem to challenge the dominance of the sexual subject in men-women relationships without raising eyebrows because they are "father's daughters." Men may tolerate the "challenges" posed by their daughters because, from the outset, these daughters do not have the potential to break free from their control. Sonoko is neither a pure "daughter" nor a traditional "wife." This unique status allows her to receive seemingly respectful but, in reality, pet-like indulgence, which ultimately points to the sexual desires of the dominant men. Kenji meticulously keeps a small notebook documenting Sonoko's growth, writing it like "a young mother" would, with the content consisting of naked pictures of Sonoko from various angles.

In this marital game, Kenji plays the role of a father for a significant period of time - he manages the household, provides for the members, and makes decisions about daily life. However, without the ethical boundaries of a familial relationship, Sonoko becomes aware that she possesses the "power of seduction," and she discovers that her seduction can indeed be effective.

The so-called "power of seduction" is not an actual right but rather a reference to a possibility. Sometimes, men attribute their own sexual interest in women to the seduction of women. Chizuko Ueno points out that "seduction" is not entirely controlled by women. Even if they do not intend to seduce, men as the judges may claim that they have been "seduced." Ultimately, the possession of the "power of seduction" is simply a fact that men grant women the qualification for "seduction." However, while women may not have effective control over this resource, they are allowed to take "clever" and "advantageous" actions depending on the circumstances. At these times, they choose to play the role of the "seducer" to achieve their goals. As "subordinates" within the family, sons have the potential to become competitors to their fathers, but daughters are even more vulnerable. They do not possess the power to "become fathers" but rather have the resource to "become seductive."

With this in mind, let's revisit the dominant women in Tanizaki's literature: if the so-called "contempt for women" is indeed a reality, then the ones who should be in the dominant position are men, not women. Since women are not considered significant objects, why would they willingly submit to men?

Because in these relationships, the actual dominant position is still held by men. In Junichiro Tanizaki's works, women with characteristics of sadism and debauchery often require the

support of men or another external force. "Rather than simply exchanging labor and money, their work is more closely associated with social status and identity. This determines how they act and how they will be treated" [4]. The lack of financial independence makes it impossible for them to leave or completely reject men. "Economic dependence is the most effective and deep-rooted means of establishing an imbalance in male-female relationships. This is the ideal basis for men to control and regulate women" [4]. Fumiko is a concubine of a reclusive elderly man, the women in *Tattoo* come from geisha families, and Lady Nanko is essentially a vassal to Lord Asaji. In *An Idiot's Love*, Sonoko, who playfully calls her husband "little daddy," has no personal job, and all her living expenses are covered by Kenji and later by her lovers. Even though she is flattered as "Chief Lady Sonoko," she is never involved in any significant business. So-called Sonoko is just a derogatory nickname, a plaything for amusement.

#### 4. The Essence of "Aberrant Female Rebellion"

Including women with demonic traits like Sonoko, it would be more accurate to describe them as "men who cannot gain recognition." They are often initially granted privileges within the family, but the source of these privileges is often linked to the physical and sexual aspects. The entrance to the world of men—or the world of "powerful" and "dominant" individuals—remains closed for these women. They find themselves continually trapped in the role of sexual objects. When they discover that this inequality can be reversed through seduction, their pent-up frustration, born out of suppression and the inability to assimilate as true men, is released through manipulation and dominance. This is what we call "aberrant female rebellion." In this scenario, women mistakenly consider "dominating men" as the endpoint of their struggle. They fail to realize that the root of women being labeled as "others" and "sexual objects" lies in men's control of societal discourse. They often disregard the importance of full female independence and only view "no longer being controlled" or even "controlling others" as victory criteria. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this "manipulation and dominance," despite its peculiar form, signifies the awakening of female consciousness. In the case of Sonoko, her arrogance, debauchery, and chilling allure are undoubtedly her most common labels. However, before leaving her family or during the early stages of cohabitation with Kenji, this woman appeared innocent, eager to learn, and genuinely naive. Kenji attributes this contrast to Sonoko's inherent nature: "No, it wasn't something that developed recently; she's been like this since she was fifteen or sixteen... to the point where it's driving me mad."

This is a somewhat hasty and subjective conclusion. Kenji simplistically attributes the current situation, which he cannot control or understand, to "this woman's inherent nature." Kenji's confusion mirrors the author's perplexity. Junichiro Tanizaki created Sonoko to illustrate a beautiful woman who tramples upon conventional norms and morals, as mentioned earlier. *An Idiot's Love* can indeed be regarded as a successful practice of aestheticism. However, the women in this narrative are mere vessels for the "beauty" to reappear in the world, rather than equal individuals on par with men or those defined as such. Women as biological beings are not valued by Tanizaki. For instance, in this work, he does not even acknowledge publicly the reason behind Sonoko's transformation and downfall: Kenji simultaneously demands that Sonoko grows in the direction he desires while "treasuring her like a doll"—and when he says "treasure," he makes no effort to hide his sexual interest and desire for Sonoko's body. Whenever Sonoko uses her body to seduce, Kenji readily provides positive feedback. This applies to ordinary card games, financial matters, and even when he eventually drives Sonoko away and then welcomes her back. Under patriarchy, a daughter, as her father's vassal, remains unable to break free from her father's control. However, once the "father" succumbs to the "daughter's" seduction, the "daughter" finds a reason to scorn him—because at this point, the father becomes nothing more than a common violator. Is he truly an immaculate, all-powerful

figure when she is the object of his desire? Certainly not. He has accepted the seduction, making him no different from a base and contemptible libertine. Within the confines of the family, the dynamics of dominance between men and women are thus completely reversed.

## 5. Conclusion

"Literary works constructed through language, due to their artistry, can 'confuse' existing symbolic orders, thus allowing for 'facts and justice not yet seen to evolve into reality in the future'". Even though Tanizaki's literature contains a plethora of overt worship and submission to women, the collective memory of "women being nothing extraordinary" is equally deeply rooted within it. Interpreting it blindly as evidence of female liberation and improved social status, while numbing women's sense of resistance, would be a mistake.

Perhaps certain feminist statements may cause discomfort, but "male existence" is by no means the target of feminist criticism. It is the concept of "male sexuality" that has been accumulated through societal conditioning over the years and is worth abandoning. This oversimplified binary definition of gender not only influences the generation and transmission of misogyny but also constrains the integration and reconciliation of men with their own bodies. Feminism not only points to the history, experiences, and future of women but also guides all of humanity in its contemplation of "here and now." This is a journey of self-discovery, one that should lead to a broader future for humanity, rather than exacerbating existing anxieties. Only when we understand ourselves can we build a foundation for thinking about the road ahead. In the context of Tanizaki's literature, the study of female characters undoubtedly represents a direct intellectual confrontation between the dominant discourse in society and those who have been silenced for a long time—namely, men and women in relation to women's issues. The deeper meaning behind the female images in Tanizaki's literature requires interpretations from women themselves. Therefore, compared to literary works with explicit female perspectives, the misogyny imprinted on authors who seem "impossible to despise women" is even more deserving of our continued reflection.

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