

On the Image Characteristics and Significance of the Times of the Empty Cicada in the Tale of Genji from the Perspective of Role Change

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Abstract: The Tale of Genji, written by the female author Murasaki Shikibu during the Heian period, is not only a masterpiece of Japanese classical literature but also the oldest surviving full-length novel in the history of world literature, possessing irreplaceable literary and historical value. The work centers on the life trajectory of its protagonist, Hikaru Genji, connecting the emotions and destinies of dozens of noblewomen. While delicately depicting love entanglements, it vividly recreates the political dynamics, class structure, marriage system, and aesthetic trends of the aristocratic society of the Heian period. This paper focuses on Utsusemi, a representative middle-ranking female character in the work, breaking through the traditional single-dimensional analytical framework centered on emotional relationships. Instead, it examines the critical junctures of her life—birth, marriage, emotional choices, and the social role transition of taking monastic vows—against the social backdrop of the survival struggles of mid-ranking nobles, the plight of women under patriarchy, and the status hierarchy system of the Heian period. Through an in-depth analysis of Utsusemi's complexity and typicality as a character, the paper reveals the era's defining features and the depth of human nature embodied in her image, offering a more holistic perspective for the study of female characters in The Tale of Genji.

Keywords: Utsusemi; The Tale of Genji; Heian period; Murasaki Shikibu

1. Introduction

The Tale of Genji was written in the middle of heian period (about the beginning of the 11th century) and was created by Murasaki shikibu based on his own court life experience. As a

master of Japanese "story-telling literature", his works take truth as the core of creation, and build a poetic and sad aristocratic world with delicate brushwork. In this masterpiece of nearly one million words, more than 400 people appeared, and the female image is always the core and soul of the work. Murasaki shikibu portrayed women of different classes and personalities from the unique perspective of women. Upper-class aristocratic women, like barnacles in the palace, are in the center of power but become tools of political marriage, struggling painfully in the moral dilemma of the glory of mother relying on child and incest; Women at the bottom, like the evening glow, have a pure and brilliant nature, but because of their humble status, they eventually died tragically in the gap between power and emotion; As a typical middle-stream aristocratic woman, the empty cicada has neither the noble status of barnacles in the palace nor the naive ignorance of the sunset. Her fate has always been closely linked to the decline of the middle-stream aristocrats, and in the hopeless upward and unwilling downward survival dilemma, it shows far more reason and resilience than other women [1].

Since the publication of Tale of Genji, the academic circles have never stopped studying it. The "source study" in Edo era mainly focused on text training and textual research of allusions; Since modern times, the research perspective has gradually expanded to the fields of image analysis, theme interpretation and social background restoration [2]. In the study of female images, the upper-class aristocratic women such as barnacle palace, purple sky and monarch of Ming stone have long occupied the research focus, while the empty cicada, although mentioned, is mostly simplified as a symbol of chaste women, and its image complexity and representation of the times have not been fully explored. In fact, the life track of the empty

cicada just reflects the general fate of the middle-class aristocratic women in heian period. They have received systematic aristocratic education and yearned for a higher class, but they were forced to bow to the lower class because of the decline of their families. It is bound by male chauvinism and hierarchy, but it also strives to maintain personal dignity in a limited space.

Based on this, this paper takes the life stage of the empty cicada as the context, and combines the social background of heian period to analyze it from three dimensions. First, starting from the identity of the daughter of the declining aristocrat, this paper explores the contradiction between the aristocratic upbringing of Empty Cicada and the decline of her family, and how this contradiction shapes her character background of interwoven self-esteem and inferiority; Secondly, focusing on the role of the wife of a local official, this paper analyzes the class nature of heian period's marriage system, and the responsibility persistence and psychological alienation of the empty cicada in loveless marriage; Thirdly, around the emotional entanglement between Empty Cicada and Genji, this paper analyzes their choice between temptation and reason, and reveals their cognition of identity boundary and their pursuit of personality independence. Through multi-dimensional analysis, this paper aims to restore a three-dimensional, real image of an empty cicada, and further deepen the understanding of the fate of women and the social structure of heian period in *The Tale of Genji*.

2. Empty Cicada's Life Track and Social Role Change

The life of the empty cicada is the ups and downs of the fate of the middle-class aristocratic women in heian period. From the aristocratic girl who carries the hope of family class, to the declining orphan girl who lost her dependence after her father's death, from the step-by-step wife who bowed down to marry a local official in order to survive, to the rational person who remained sober when faced with Genji's temptation, and finally to the independent individual who broke away from the dust and became a nun, every role change was engraved with the constraints of the times and personal struggle, and the complexity of her image also appeared layer by layer.

2.1 Birth: A Noble Girl to be Placed in the Palace

The initial social role of the empty cicada is directly defined by his father's official position of Na Yan and Wei Men Du. In heian period's bureaucratic system, Zhong Nayan is the last seat of officials and ministers, whose main duty is to participate in state affairs, but has no core decision-making power; As a close minister of the Emperor, Wei Mentor was in charge of the palace guards. Although he had the name of serving as a gentleman, he had no consort background and manor economic support. Although the empty cicada family maintains aristocratic status, in fact, it can only maintain its appearance by serving the emperor, and it is a typical middle-class aristocrat.

For this kind of middle-class aristocrats who lack power foundation, sending women to the palace is the only way for the class to jump. The essence of heian period's court marriage is a tool of political alliance. For example, Fujiwara sent his daughter to the harem from generation to generation, and finally monopolized the post of taking charge of customs and became a family with power in the ruling and opposition. The father of the empty cicada also knew this well, and invited the emperor early, expecting the female to serve in the palace, and carved the empty cicada with complete aristocratic education such as chorus, calligraphy and etiquette. These educations are not only to cultivate a lady's temperament, but also to enable her to stand out in the harem competition and become a tool for the family to climb up [3]. Although the work does not directly describe the girlhood of the empty cicada, the observation of Genji in the Volume of the Empty Cicada can indirectly prove its upbringing. Her appearance is not beautiful in the traditional sense, her eyes are slightly swollen, and her nose has no clear outline. However, with her elegant posture, dignified manners, and concise and measured words, she shows the gentleness and restraint of aristocratic women and is fully qualified to become the emperor's concubine. If her father hadn't died suddenly, she could have gone along the track of entering the palace, vying for favor and seeking political interests for her family. However, the sudden death of her father completely broke this expectation and dragged her from the "aristocratic girl waiting to enter the palace" to the "daughter of a declining

aristocrat".

2.2 Marriage: a Local Official's Office for Survival

The death of his father was the first major turning point in Empty Cicada's life. In heian period dominated by patriarchy, men are the economic pillar and social bond of the family, and the death of father means the collapse of political backer and the cutting off of economic sources. Xiao Jun, the younger brother of Empty Cicada, is still young and unable to support the family. The family that was originally attached to his father quickly became a declining aristocrat from a lower-level official, and Empty Cicada instantly fell into the desperate situation of either being dependent on others or living in marriage. After weighing, she finally chose to marry Yi Yujie, a local official, and became her second wife [4].

This choice seems helpless, but in fact it is a rational trade-off of middle-class aristocratic women under the pressure of survival. From the perspective of identity matching, although the empty cicada family has declined, it still retains the background of aristocratic identity; As a "receiving" (local official), Yi Yujie is not a public official, but holds administrative power and economic strength in the local area. There is such a description of him in the "Evening Yan Juan", "The journey is windy and frosty, and you can't help but look a little dark and describe it as a bit haggard. It makes people unhappy. However, this person is not humble. Although he is old, he still has fine eyes and a clean appearance, which is not comparable to ordinary people." [5] This shows that Yi Yujie not only has a good family background, but also has a very outstanding personality. In the book "Close the House", Iyusuke has been promoted to Liu Chang, a great country, which shows that he is quite talented as a local official. Although there is an identity gap between Empty Cicada and Iyusuke, they have formed an acceptable match under the needs of the declining aristocrats for survival and the local aristocrats for dignity. From the point of view of survival needs, Iyusuke can provide the most urgently needed protection for Empty Cicada, such as a mansion to shelter from the wind and rain, a maid to take care of her daily life, and a basic decent source of income, and can also protect her and her brother from poverty or bullying by other nobles. At this time, marriage is no longer a tool for the

empty cicada to jump up, but a necessary choice to live.

However, this marriage based on survival was full of irreconcilable contradictions from the beginning. The first is the emotional barrier caused by the age gap. Yi Yujie is nearly 50 years old, and Empty Cicada is less than 20 years old. The age difference between them is comparable to that of father and daughter. Even Yi Yujie's daughter, Xuan Duandi, is similar to that of Empty Cicada. This combination of old husband and few wives is doomed to lack equal emotional communication foundation. The second is the psychological alienation caused by the dislocation of identity cognition. Empty cicada still retains the pride of middle-class aristocrats, and always has subconscious contempt for the habits of local officials in Yi Yujie. However, although Iyusuke loves Empty Cicada deeply, she can't understand her aristocratic complex and mistakenly thinks that her alienation is dissatisfaction with living conditions. This misplaced emotional expression further aggravates the estrangement between them.

Many details in the work prove that the empty cicada is alienated from the role of the local official's successor. For example, when she lived with Iyusuke, she lived alone in another hospital and rarely met each other; When Yi Yujie went to work in a local office, although she followed her wife's obligations, she didn't care about housework, and often sat still and missed the aristocratic life in Beijing. Even before her death, Iyusuke's sadness was not due to the love between husband and wife, but to her responsibility as a husband and her fear of losing dependence again. These details clearly show that although the body of the empty cicada succumbed to the needs of survival, the heart always struggled between the pride of aristocratic status and the helplessness of realistic survival, and never really integrated into the role of local officials.

2.3 Emotion: Rational Women Who Refuse Temptation

The emotional entanglement between Empty Cicada and Genji is the most attractive and controversial part of her image, and it is also the key for her to change from a "passive compromise wife" to an "active choice individual". Genji, as the son of the Emperor, is a typical representative of the upper class

aristocrats in heian period. He has noble birth, handsome appearance and supreme power, surrounded by barnacles, palaces, purple and other distinguished women, but he is interested in the wife of a local official with a declining aristocratic background, which is rooted in the particularity of middle-class aristocratic women's identity. In the eyes of the nobles at that time, the upper-class aristocratic women were very important. It was necessary to marry such women to be a wife in order to maintain their status, but their pampered temperament was by no means the ideal object for these nobles to enjoy themselves. And the lower aristocratic women are humble, of course, they should not be provoked; Only middle-class aristocratic women, whose status is not too low, have their own personalities, talents and skills [6]. In addition, the characteristics of atypical aristocratic women in the empty cicada are full of freshness and conquest for Genji, who is used to obeying women.

In "The Empty Cicada Volume", Genji got lost by taking advantage of the rainy night clothing tasting meeting and strayed into the mansion of Ji Yijie, the stepson of Empty Cicada, just when Yi Yujie was not at home because of fasting and bathing, and Empty Cicada stayed here with her maid. That night, Genji used the privilege of the upper class to break through the defense of the empty cicada, and the two had an affair. This affair is not the result of empty cicada's active choice. Genji ignored the empty cicada's wishes by virtue of his own identity power, but although the empty cicada resisted internally, it could not resist effectively because of the class gap between nobles and local officials' wives and the lack of resistance support from women under patriarchy. But after the affair, the empty cicada's choice completely subverted Genji's expectations. She didn't indulge in Genji's charm and power like women like Xi Yan and Mei Picking Flowers, but refused her follow-up pursuit with a firm attitude. Genji sent love letters through Xiaojun many times, but the empty cicada either didn't reply or replied coldly and resolutely; Genji tried to meet her at home, but she avoided it.

The rejection of the empty cicada stems from a clear understanding of reality, identity and self-worth. First of all, she knows that the identity gap is an insurmountable gap. Genji is in the core of the upper class aristocrats, constantly pursuing all kinds of women, and his

understanding of love is constantly shifting and changing, and he wants to experience the beauty of all kinds of women in the world [7]. The empty cicada is only the wife of a local official, and it is destined to be a fresh plaything in Genji's emotional world. If it is pursued, it will probably be abandoned after a short period of pleasure, and then it will lose its existing marriage protection and fall into a more isolated situation. Secondly, she is aware of the risks of morality and public opinion. Under the condition of walking marriage in heian period, women are deprived of the right of sexual freedom, but men still keep the custom of group marriage [8]. Noble men try their best to have sexual intercourse with many women, but at the same time, they ask the women they own to be faithful to each other. Society is tolerant of men's romance, but strict with women's extramarital affairs. Limited by the status of "married woman", the empty cicada refused to associate with Genji many times [9].

Of course, the empty cicada's refusal is not without struggle. When she received Genji's love letter, she seemed indifferent, but she read it repeatedly in the middle of the night and lost her mind with tears. When I accidentally heard Genji's name, I felt inexplicable in my heart and my handsome appearance emerged. When I heard that Genji's exile had to be sharpened, I felt sorry. These details show that she was once confused and uncontrollable, and she didn't have no love for Genji. She just chose to protect the survival foundation and personal dignity on the balance of love and reality. This kind of reason overcame the emotional struggle and made her image get rid of the flat virgin label, which made it more stereoscopic [10].

2.4 Becoming a Monk: A Buddhist Monk who Sticks to Himself.

The death of Iyusuke pushed the empty cicada to complete the last role change. From the widow of a local official to a monk. After the death of Iyusuke, Ji Yishou, the stepson, immediately exposed his bad heart. In desperation, the empty cicada resolutely chose to become a monk and cut off the dust. From the background of heian period, becoming a monk is often a convenient way for both men and women to get rid of their life difficulties, and it is an institutionalized way to quit the officialdom. On the other hand, becoming a monk is the logic of predestination and pure land Sect, and it is believed that the

cause of past life becomes the fruit of reality, and the trip to reality will also be rewarded in the afterlife. Therefore, in the Tale of Genji, many important figures have seen through the world of mortals and fled into an empty door to seek peace, or to show their world-weariness by repairing the afterlife [11]. For example, after her affair with Cedar was exposed, Yincui gorge had to give up her job as a nun. Otokoyo became a monk after being alienated by Genji, and once became a monk after picking flowers at the end. But the empty cicada's becoming a monk is not an escape, but a deliberate and active choice. After family decline, loveless marriage and emotional entanglements, she was completely disappointed with the secular world and hoped to stick to her personality independence and spiritual freedom by becoming a monk. She knows that in the patriarchal and hierarchical era, the fate of women is always controlled by others, and becoming a monk is for Nicole to get rid of the shackles of "daughter", "wife" and "stepmother" and live as an independent individual.

From the perspective of image-building, the becoming a monk of empty cicada is the sublimation of its image. From a woman who passively bears fate to an independent individual who actively chooses life. This becoming a monk is not only a farewell to the past life, but also a denial of the logic of the times that women's fate is defined by men. In the tranquility of religion, she realized the integrity and independence of her personality. This change from passive to active makes her image transcend the limitations of the times and has eternal value.

3. The Social and Cultural Connotation of the Image of Empty Cicada

The image of the empty cicada is not an individual tragedy, but a microcosm of the fate of the aristocratic women in heian period, which contains profound social and cultural connotations. By analyzing her relationship with the time structure and cultural concept, we can more clearly grasp the time value and human theme of Tale of Genji.

3.1 The Decline of Middle-class Aristocrats and the Plight of Women

The family background of the empty cicada is the epitome of the survival dilemma of the middle-class aristocrats in heian period. At that

time, the aristocratic class formed a strict hierarchy with "Shegwanjia (Fujiwara)" as the core. Photographers monopolize political power by virtue of their status as consorts, and control a large number of manors and wealth; While the middle-class aristocrats (such as the empty cicada family) have the name of aristocrats, but they are gradually marginalized because they have no consort background and no manor support. Politically, they have no right to speak, but depend on the upper class aristocrats or local forces economically, and eventually become the adherents of the upper class aristocrats and the collaborators of local forces [12].

This decline has a more cruel impact on women. Under the patriarchal system, the value of women is completely tied to marriage and childbirth, and it is a tool for family political marriage. Empty cicada was the hope that the family would jump into the palace. After her father died, the family declined, and she became a burden from tools, so she could only survive by marrying a local official. Similar to her fate, Tanegawa, who was also born in a declining aristocracy, married Genji for dignity, but was left out in the cold because of her ugly appearance and dull personality, and was lonely all her life. Their experiences exposed the common dilemma of middle-class aristocratic women. They have received aristocratic education and yearned for a decent life, but they lost their ability to survive independently because of the decline of their families. They can only regard marriage as a lifeline, endure loneliness and humiliation in unequal marriages, and become victims of the solidification of the times.

3.2 Women's Self-awareness and Resistance under the Patriarchal System

In Heian period, the custom of visiting wives and getting married was mainly prevalent in the aristocratic class, which provided freedom and convenience for aristocratic sons like Genji, and made women fall into the bottomless abyss after suffering from their husbands' empathy or even abandonment. Heian period's custom of visiting a wife's marriage is like a heavy patriarchal chain bound to women's spirit, which is an unreasonable marriage under the norms of male power [13].

Although heian period is a patriarchal society, women are not completely passive victims, and the choice of empty cicadas reveals women's

self-awareness and rebellious spirit. In the face of Genji's temptation, she didn't obey like traditional women, but drew a clear line with the class gap and insisted on the dignity of not being a plaything. This kind of cognition of independent personality is especially precious in the era when women rely on men. In marriage, although she fulfilled her wife's responsibilities, she did not blindly follow the feelings of Yi Yujie, always maintained spiritual independence and refused to be defined by the identity of the wife of a local official. When her stepson Ji Yishou was forced to get married, she completely refused to become a male accessory by becoming a monk. The essence of these choices is to resist that the fate of women is controlled by men under the patriarchal system.

The consciousness of empty cicada is not a case, and other women in the works have similar performances. Otokoyo is Genji's aunt, and the proper relationship they maintained made Otokoyo suffer from moral torture. After being alienated by Genji, she expressed her dissatisfaction with unequal feelings by questioning and condemning [14]; After Genji married Yincui gorge in her later years, Ziji, though forbearing on the surface, conveyed her concern for her self-status with silence and pain in her heart. Although these women resisted in different ways, empty cicadas used reason, Otokoyo used resentment, and Sharla Cheung used forbearance, but they all showed the awakening of heian period women's consciousness that they didn't want to become emotional or marriage tools, which injected human brilliance into their works.

3.3 The Suppression and Distortion of Human Nature by the Status Hierarchy

The status hierarchy is the core of heian period society, which runs through the political, economic and cultural fields, and deeply suppresses and distorts human nature. The experience of the empty cicada is a typical example. In the relationship with Genji, the hierarchy makes the interaction between them completely unbalanced. Genji regards the empty cicada as a low-ranking woman who can be conquered at will because of her status as an upper-class aristocrat, and her pursuit essence is the desire to conquer under the inertia of power; Because of the humble status of the wife of the local official, even if she is moved by Genji, the empty cicada can only suppress her love into

fear of not crossing the line. This inequality, which is caused by rank, makes the emotion that could have been equal a game of power and obedience. The empty cicada's dare to love and Genji's contempt for love are all the results of the system distorting human nature.

Similarly, the marriage between the empty cicada and Iyusuke is also bound by the hierarchy. Although Iyusuke is talented and deeply loves the empty cicada, he has never been able to enter the empty cicada's heart because of his status as a local official. The hierarchical system allows the empty cicada to look down on the love of Iyusuke from the aristocratic perspective, and regards its thoughtfulness as an attachment to aristocratic status. This kind of cognitive dislocation caused by rank makes marriage completely lose its emotional temperature and become the confrontation of identity symbols. The indifference of empty cicadas and the humility of Yi Yujie are all products of the suppression of human nature by the system.

The suppression and distortion of human nature by the status hierarchy is also reflected in other characters in the works. For example, as a concubine of the Emperor, the barnacle palace is bound by royal status, and after falling in love with Genji, it can only struggle in moral remorse and cannot pursue true feelings; Due to her declining aristocratic status, Mei Tiaohua always remained excessively humble in front of Genji and dared not express her real needs. The tragedy of these characters is essentially the destruction of human nature by hierarchy. It makes emotions succumb to identity, dignity gives way to rank, and finally distorts fresh human nature into a "puppet that conforms to institutional norms."

4. Conclusion

As a typical aristocratic woman in heian period in Tale of Genji, the empty cicada's life track condenses the fate struggle of women in heian period. From the aristocratic girl who carries the family's expectation of entering the palace, to the daughter of a declining aristocrat after her father's death, and then to bending down to marry a local official, Yi Yujie, she has always been looking for a fulcrum of survival in the face of class decline and practical difficulties. In the face of Genji's temptation, the empty cicada resists emotional impulse with sober reason, knowing that accepting love will only lead to

destruction under the identity gap and secular rules; After Yi Yujie's death, in order to refuse the entanglement of her stepson, she resolutely became a monk and took the initiative to choose to break away from the shackles of male chauvinism and hierarchy, completing the transformation from passive acceptance to self-persistence. The contradiction and tenacity of the empty cicada is not only the embodiment of personal character, but also the epitome of the times. Her struggle reveals the survival dilemma of women under the patriarchal system, and her persistence shines with the glimmer of human awakening. Through this image, we can not only get a glimpse of the class ecology and moral ethics of heian period aristocratic society, but also feel the profound insight into the complexity of human nature in Tale of Genji. The value of the image of empty cicada lies in that it can still resonate for thousands of years. In the embrace of fate, sticking to oneself and staying rational is always the most precious strength of human nature in the face of difficulties.

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