

A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Utsusemi's Role in the Tale of Genji and the Living Landscape of Women in the Heian Period

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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 mid-Heian period (around the early 11th century) by Murasaki Shikibu, based on her own experiences of life in the imperial court. As the culmination of Japanese "monogatari literature" (narrative literature), the masterpiece takes authenticity as

its creative core and uses delicate brushwork to construct an aristocratic world filled with poetic charm and sorrow. This monumental work, with nearly one million characters, features over 400 characters, among whom female figures have always been the core and soul of the narrative. From a unique female perspective, Murasaki Shikibu portrays women of different social classes and personalities. Female figures from the upper aristocracy, such as Fujitsubo Chugu, stood at the center of power yet were reduced to tools of political marriage. They struggled painfully between the necessity of bearing a son to secure status and the moral dilemma of incest. Women from the lower classes, like Yuugao, possessed an innocent and artless nature, but due to their humble social status, they ultimately met a tragic end caught in the struggle between power and emotion. As a typical representative of women from the middle-ranking aristocracy, Utsusemi had neither the exalted status of Fujitsubo Chugu nor the innocence of Yuugao. Her fate was closely intertwined with the decline of the middle-ranking aristocracy. Caught in a survival dilemma: unable to rise to a higher class yet resisting descent to a lower one, she demonstrated far greater rationality and resilience than other female figures [1].

Since the advent of The Tale of Genji, academic research on it has never ceased. During the Edo period, "Genji studies" primarily focused on the textual exegesis and the verification of allusions. Since modern times, the research perspectives have gradually expanded to such fields as character image analysis, interpretation of thematic ideas, and restoration of social backgrounds [2].

In the study of female characters, upper-class aristocratic women such as Fujitsubo Chugu, Murasaki no Ue, and Akashi no Kimi have long been the focus of research. Although Utsusemi is mentioned, she is mostly simplified as a symbol of a chaste woman, and the complexity of her image and her representativeness of the era has not been fully explored. In fact, Utsusemi's life

trajectory exactly reflects the common fate of middle-ranking aristocratic women in the Heian period. They have received systematic aristocratic education and harbor aspirations for a higher social class, yet they are forced to condescend to a lower social stratum due to the decline of their families. While being doubly constrained by the patriarchal system and the hierarchical system, they still strive to maintain their personal dignity within the limited space available to them.

Based on this, this paper takes Utsusemi's life stages as the thread and combines the social background of the Heian Period to conduct an analysis from three dimensions. First, starting from her identity as the daughter of a declining aristocratic family, this paper explores the contradiction between Utsusemi's aristocratic upbringing and her family's decline, as well as how this contradiction shapes her character foundation intertwined with self-respect and inferiority. Second, focusing on her role as the wife of a Zurō (a local official dispatched by the central government in the Heian Period), this paper analyzes the class nature of the Heian Period's marriage system, along with Utsusemi's adherence to responsibilities and psychological alienation in a loveless marriage. Third, centering on the emotional entanglement between Utsusemi and Hikaru Genji, this paper examines her choices between temptation and rationality, and reveals her cognition of identity boundaries and her pursuit of personal independence.

Through multi-dimensional analysis, this paper aims to reconstruct a three-dimensional and authentic image of Utsusemi, thereby further deepening the understanding of the fate of female characters in *The Tale of Genji* and the social structure of the Heian Period.

2. Utsusemi's Life Trajectory and Transformation of Social Roles

Utsusemi's life is a record of the ups and downs in the fate of middle-ranking aristocratic women in the Heian Period. From an aristocratic young woman who carried her family's hope of ascending the social ladder, to a declining orphan who lost her support after her father's death; from a stepwife who humbled herself to marry a Zurō (a local official dispatched by the central government in the Heian Period) for survival, to a rational person who remained sober when facing Hikaru Genji's temptation;

and finally to an independent individual who cut off all worldly ties and became a Buddhist nun—every transformation of her role is marked by the constraints of the era and her personal struggles, and the complexity of her image gradually unfolds layer by layer along with these transformations.

2.1 Birth: An Aristocratic Maiden Destined for the Imperial Palace

Utsusemi's initial social role was directly defined by her father's official positions as Chunagon (Middle Counselor) and Emonnokami (Captain of the Palace Guards). Within the bureaucratic system of the Heian Period, a Chunagon belonged to the lowest rank among Kugyō (high-ranking nobles); their main responsibility was to convey imperial edicts and advise on state affairs, yet they held no core decision-making power. An Emonnokami, as a close retainer of the Emperor, was in charge of imperial palace security. Despite holding the title of "servant to the Emperor," this position lacked the support of the Sesshō/Kampaku clan's maternal ties to the imperial family and the shōen (manor) economy. Although Utsusemi's family retained their aristocratic status, they essentially could only maintain an outward appearance of dignity by serving the Emperor, making them a typical example of middle-ranking aristocrats.

For such middle-ranking aristocrats lacking a solid power foundation, sending their daughters to the imperial palace was the only path to social advancement. Court marriages in the Heian Period were essentially tools for political alliances. For instance, the Fujiwara clan, by sending their daughters to the imperial harem generation after generation, eventually monopolized the positions of Sesshō (Regent) and Kampaku (Chief Advisor to the Emperor), becoming a clan that held absolute power over the court. Utsusemi's father, well aware of this strategy, had long submitted a petition to the Emperor, hoping that his daughter would enter the palace to serve; he also refined Utsusemi through comprehensive aristocratic education, including waka (traditional Japanese poetry), calligraphy, and etiquette. Such education was not only intended to cultivate her ladylike demeanor but, more importantly, to equip her with the ability to stand out in the competition within the imperial harem, making her a tool for the family's upward social mobility [3].

Although the work does not directly depict Utsusemi's girlhood, Genji's observations in the "Utsusemi" chapter indirectly confirm her aristocratic upbringing. She was not conventionally stunning in appearance—her eyes were slightly puffy, and her nose lacked a distinct shape. However, with her elegant posture, dignified demeanor, and concise, well-measured speech that showed neither inferiority nor arrogance, she fully embodied the gentleness and restraint of an aristocratic woman, and was entirely qualified to become a concubine of the Emperor. If her father had not passed away suddenly, she could have followed the path of entering the imperial palace, competing for the Emperor's favor, and securing political interests for her family. Yet her father's abrupt death completely shattered this expectation, dragging her from the status of "an aristocratic maiden destined for the palace" into the survival dilemma of "a daughter of a declining aristocratic family."

2.2 Marriage: A Provincial Official's Wife Who Submitted to Survive

The death of Utsusemi's father marked the first major turning point in her life. In the Heian Period, a society dominated by patriarchy, men served as the family's economic backbone and social link. His death meant the collapse of the family's political patronage and the severance of its economic resources. Utsusemi's younger brother, Kimi, was still too young to support the family, so the clan—once dependent on her father—quickly fell from the rank of lower-ranking nobles to a declining aristocratic family. Utsusemi was instantly thrust into a desperate situation: either live under the roof of relatives or secure her survival through marriage. After careful consideration, she ultimately chose to marry Zuryo (a local official) Iyo no Suke, becoming his stepwife [4].

While this choice may seem helpless, it was actually a rational trade-off made by middle-ranking aristocratic women under the pressure of survival. From the perspective of status matching, although Utsusemi's family had declined, she still retained the essence of her aristocratic identity; as a "Zuryo" (a local official appointed by the central government in the Heian Period), Iyo no Suke did not belong to the Kugyo (high-ranking noble) class, yet he held administrative power and economic strength in the local area. There is a description

of him in the "Yuugao" chapter: "The hardships of the journey had left his face somewhat dark and his appearance a little haggard, which was unpleasant to look at. However, he was not of humble birth, and even though he was old, he still had delicate features and a neat appearance, far superior to that of ordinary people." [5] This indicates that Iyo no Suke not only came from a good family but also had an outstanding character. Moreover, in the "Sekiya" chapter, Iyo no Suke had been promoted to the position of Hitachi no Suke (Governor of Hitachi Province, a major province), which shows that he was quite capable as a local official. Although there was a status gap between Utsusemi and Iyo no Suke, their union formed an acceptable match driven by the needs of the declining aristocracy (seeking survival) and the local aristocracy (seeking dignity). From the perspective of survival needs, Iyo no Suke could provide Utsusemi with the most urgent guarantees: a house to shelter her from wind and rain, maids to take care of her daily life, and an economic source to maintain basic dignity. Furthermore, he could protect her and her younger brother from poverty or bullying by other nobles. For Utsusemi at this time, marriage was no longer a tool for her family to climb the social ladder, but a necessary choice to survive.

However, this survival-based marriage was fraught with irreconcilable contradictions from the very beginning. The first was the emotional estrangement caused by the age gap. Iyo no Suke was nearly fifty years old, while Utsusemi was not yet twenty—their age difference was comparable to that between a father and daughter. Even Iyo no Suke's daughter, Nokibaogi, was around the same age as Utsusemi. This combination of an elderly husband and a young wife was destined to lack a foundation for equal emotional communication. The second was the psychological alienation stemming from misaligned identity perceptions. Utsusemi still retained the pride of a middle-ranking aristocrat in her heart and subconsciously looked down on the local official's habits that Iyo no Suke embodied. Although Iyo no Suke deeply loved Utsusemi, he could not understand her aristocratic sentiments and mistakenly attributed her alienation to dissatisfaction with their living conditions. This misaligned expression of affection further exacerbated the estrangement between them.

Numerous details in the work confirm

Utsusemi's alienation from her role as the local official's stepwife. For instance, when she lived with Iyo no Suke, she resided alone in a separate villa and rarely met with him. When Iyo no Suke was assigned to a local post, she followed him out of wifely duty but had no interest in managing household affairs, often sitting quietly and longing for her aristocratic life in the capital. Even when Iyo no Suke was on his deathbed, her sorrow did not stem from conjugal love, but from a sense of responsibility toward her role as a wife and fear of losing her support once again. These details clearly show that while Utsusemi's body submitted to the demands of survival, her heart was always torn between the pride of her aristocratic identity and the helplessness of her real-life circumstances—she never truly embraced her role as the local official's stepwife.

2.3 Emotions: A Rational Woman Who Resists Temptation

The emotional entanglement between Utsusemi and Genji is the most charming and controversial aspect of her character, and also the key to her transformation from a "passively compromising wife" to an "independently decisive individual." As the son of the Emperor, Genji is a typical representative of the upper aristocracy in the Heian Period. He possesses a noble lineage, handsome appearance, and supreme power, and is surrounded by noble women such as Fujitsubo Chugu and Murasaki no Ue. Yet he takes an interest in Utsusemi, a wife of a local official from a declining aristocratic family. The root cause lies in the uniqueness of the status of middle-ranking aristocratic women. In the eyes of noble young men at that time, "marrying a woman from the upper aristocracy as one's official wife was indispensable for maintaining social status and family prestige, but these women were pampered and arrogant, by no means ideal objects for the noble young men to seek pleasure from; women from the lower aristocracy, on the other hand, had too humble a status and were certainly not to be trifled with; only middle-ranking aristocratic women, with neither excessively low status nor uniform docility, each had their own personalities, talents, and unique skills in arts and crafts" [6]. Furthermore, Utsusemi's traits as a non-typical aristocratic woman filled Genji—who was accustomed to submissive women—with a sense of novelty and a desire to conquer.

In the "Utsusemi" chapter, Genji gets lost during a rainy-night clothing appreciation gathering and accidentally enters the residence of Kii no Suke, Utsusemi's stepson. It happened that Iyo no Suke was absent due to fasting and bathing, so Utsusemi was staying there temporarily with her maids. That night, Genji used the privileges of an upper aristocrat to break through Utsusemi's defenses, and the two had an illicit affair. This affair was not the result of Utsusemi's active choice. Genji, relying on his status and power, disregarded Utsusemi's will; although Utsusemi resisted inwardly, she could not resist effectively due to the class gap between an aristocrat and a local official's wife, as well as the lack of support for women to resist under the patriarchal system. However, after the affair, Utsusemi's choice completely overturned Genji's expectations. Unlike women such as Yuugao and Suetsumuhana, who indulged in Genji's charm and power, Utsusemi refused his subsequent advances with a firm attitude. Genji repeatedly sent love letters through Kimi (Utsusemi's younger brother), but Utsusemi either did not reply or replied in a cold and resolute manner; when Genji tried to visit her in person, she avoided meeting him.

Utsusemi's refusal stemmed from her clear understanding of reality, identity, and self-worth. First, she was well aware that the identity gap was an insurmountable chasm. Genji stood at the core of the upper aristocracy and constantly pursued various women; the love he understood was constantly shifting, as he "intended to experience the beauty of all kinds of women in the world" [7]. Utsusemi, however, was merely the wife of a local official—doomed to be no more than a temporary novelty in Genji's emotional world. If she had accepted his advances, she would most likely have been abandoned after a moment of pleasure, losing the protection of her current marriage and falling into a more isolated situation. Second, she clearly recognized the risks of morality and public opinion. Under the "visiting marriage" system of the Heian Period, women were deprived of the right to sexual freedom, while men still retained the group marriage custom of sexual freedom [8]. "Aristocratic men went to great lengths to have sexual relations with numerous women, yet demanded that the women they had possession of remain faithful to them for life." Society was tolerant of men's promiscuity but harsh on women's extramarital

affairs. The restriction of her identity as a "married woman" led Utsusemi to refuse to associate with Genji on multiple occasions [9]. Of course, Utsusemi's refusal was not without struggle. When receiving Genji's love letters, she appeared cold on the surface, but would read them repeatedly late at night, lost in thought with tears in her eyes; when accidentally hearing Genji's name, her heart would skip a beat inexplicably, and his handsome appearance would come to mind. When she heard that Genji was exiled to Suma, she could not help but feel regret. These details show that she had also been confused and indecisive, and was not completely without affection for Genji. However, on the scale of love and reality, she ultimately chose to protect her basis for survival and her personal dignity. This struggle, in which reason triumphed over emotion, freed her image from the one-dimensional label of a "chaste woman" and made it more three-dimensional and authentic [10].

2.4 Becoming a Nun: A Buddhist Nun Who Stayed True to Herself

The death of Iyo no Suke propelled Utsusemi to complete her final role transformation: from the widow of a local official to a Buddhist nun. After Iyo no Suke's passing, his stepson Kii no Kami immediately revealed his malicious intentions. Helpless, Utsusemi resolutely chose to renounce secular life and become a nun, cutting off all worldly ties. From the perspective of the Heian Period context, renunciation was often a convenient way for both men and women to escape life's predicaments—it was an institutionalized means of retiring from officialdom; on the other hand, renunciation was rooted in the logic of "predestined karma" and Jōdo Shū (Pure Land Buddhism), which held that the causes of past lives shape the fruits of the present, and actions in the present would bring karmic rewards in future lives. Thus, in *The Tale of Genji*, many important characters, after seeing through the vanity of the world, retreated to monastic life—some seeking peace, others cultivating for a better afterlife—to express their world-weary thoughts [11]. For example, Onna San no Miya had to shave her head and become a nun after her illicit affair with Kashiwagi was exposed; Rokujō no Miyasudokoro chose renunciation to seek liberation after being alienated by Genji; Suetsumuhana even considered becoming a nun

for a time after being abandoned. However, Utsusemi's renunciation was not an escape, but a well-considered, proactive choice. Having endured the decline of her family, a loveless marriage, and emotional entanglements, she was completely disillusioned with the secular world and hoped to uphold her personal independence and spiritual freedom through renunciation. She was well aware that in an era dominated by patriarchy and rigid hierarchies, women's fates were always controlled by others; by becoming a nun, she could break free from the identity constraints of "daughter," "wife," and "stepmother" and live as an independent individual.

From the perspective of character construction, Utsusemi's renunciation marked the sublimation of her image. She evolved from a woman passively enduring fate to an independent individual proactively choosing her own life. This renunciation was not only a farewell to her past life, but also a rejection of the era's logic that women's fates were defined by men. In the tranquility of religion, she achieved the integrity and independence of her personality. This transformation from passivity to proactivity transcends the limitations of her era, endowing her image with eternal value.

3. The Socio-Cultural Connotations of Utsusemi's Image

Utsusemi's image is not merely an individual tragedy, but an epitome of the collective fate of middle-ranking aristocratic women in the Heian Period, embodying profound socio-cultural connotations beneath its surface. By analyzing her connections to the era's social structure and cultural concepts, we can more clearly grasp the temporal value and humanistic themes of *The Tale of Genji*.

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

Utsusemi's family background epitomizes the survival dilemma of middle-ranking aristocrats in the Heian Period. At that time, the aristocratic class formed a rigid hierarchy centered on the "Sesshō/Kampaku clan (the Fujiwara clan)". The Sesshō/Kampaku clan, leveraging their status as maternal relatives of the imperial family, monopolized political power and controlled vast manors and wealth; in contrast, middle-ranking aristocrats (such as Utsusemi's family), despite holding the title of "aristocrat", gradually

became marginalized due to the lack of maternal ties to the imperial family and manor support. Politically voiceless and economically dependent on upper aristocrats or local forces, they eventually became either dependents of the upper aristocracy or collaborators with local powers [12].

The impact of this decline was even harsher for women. Under patriarchy, women's value was entirely tied to marriage and childbirth, reducing them to tools for their families' political alliances. Utsusemi was originally her family's hope for social advancement through entering the imperial palace; after her father's death and the family's decline, she went from being a "tool" to a "burden", forced to humble herself and marry a local official to survive. Suetsumuhana, who shared a similar fate, also came from a declining aristocratic family. In pursuit of dignity, she married Genji, yet was neglected due to her plain appearance and rigid personality, living a life of loneliness. The experiences of these two women expose the common predicament of middle-ranking aristocratic women: they received aristocratic education and cherished aspirations for a decent life, but lost the ability to survive independently as their families declined. Forced to treat marriage as a lifeline, they endured loneliness and humiliation in unequal marriages, becoming victims of the era's rigid class stratification.

3.2 Women's Self-Awareness and Resistance under Patriarchy

During the Heian Period, the "visiting marriage" custom was prevalent mainly among the aristocracy. It provided noble gentlemen like Genji with the freedom and convenience to indulge in promiscuity, leaving women trapped in an abyss of suffering after enduring their husbands' infidelity or even abandonment. For women, the visiting marriage custom of the Heian Period was like a heavy patriarchal chain binding their spirits—a unreasonable marriage model governed by patriarchal norms [13].

Although the Heian Period was a patriarchal society, women were not entirely passive victims; Utsusemi's choices reveal women's self-awareness and spirit of resistance. Faced with Genji's temptation, she did not submit like a "traditional woman" but drew a clear line based on class differences, upholding her dignity as someone who refused to be a plaything. This recognition of independent personality was

particularly precious in an era where women relied on men for survival. In her marriage, while fulfilling her duties as a wife, she did not blindly follow Iyo no Suke's emotional expectations, maintaining spiritual independence and refusing to be defined solely by her identity as a local official's wife. When her stepson Kii no Kami pressured her to remarry, she chose to become a nun, completely rejecting the fate of being a man's accessory. Essentially, these choices were acts of resistance against the patriarchal norm that women's fates should be controlled by men.

Utsusemi's consciousness was not an exception—other women in the work also showed similar tendencies. Rokujou no Miyasudokoro, Genji's aunt, suffered intense moral torment from her improper relationship with Genji; after being alienated by Genji, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the unequal relationship through accusations [14]. When Genji married Onna San no Miya in his later years, Murasaki no Ue, though seemingly forbearing on the surface, silently conveyed her concern for her own status through inner suffering. These women adopted different forms of resistance: Utsusemi with rationality, Rokujou no Miyasudokoro with resentment, and Murasaki no Ue with forbearance. Yet together, they demonstrated the awakening of consciousness among Heian women who refused to be reduced to tools of emotion or marriage, infusing the work with the brilliance of humanity.

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

The status hierarchy system was the core of Heian society, permeating politics, economy, and culture, and exerting a profound suppression and distortion on human nature. Utsusemi's experiences serve as a typical example. In her emotional entanglement with Genji, the hierarchy system completely unbalanced their interaction. Due to his status as an upper aristocrat, Genji viewed Utsusemi as a low-ranking woman he could conquer at will; his pursuit was essentially a manifestation of the desire to conquer, a byproduct of his habitual exercise of power. For Utsusemi, trapped in the humble identity of a local official's wife, even if she felt a spark of affection for Genji, she could only suppress her love into fear of overstepping her bounds. This inequality arising from status turned what could have been an equal emotional

connection into a contest between power and submission. Utsusemi's "daring not to love" and Genji's "disdainful love" were both consequences of human nature distorted by the system.

Similarly, Utsusemi's marriage to Iyo no Suke was also trapped by the hierarchy system. Despite Iyo no Suke's talent and deep love for Utsusemi, his identity as a local official prevented him from ever truly entering her heart. The hierarchy system led Utsusemi to look down on Iyo no Suke's affection from an aristocratic perspective, dismissing his thoughtfulness and care as an attempt to curry favor with her aristocratic status. This cognitive dissonance caused by status stripped the marriage of all emotional warmth, reducing it to a confrontation between status symbols. Utsusemi's coldness and Iyo no Suke's humility were both products of human nature suppressed by the system.

The suppression and distortion of human nature by the status hierarchy system are also evident in other characters in the work. For instance, Fujitsubo Chugu, as the Emperor's consort, was bound by her imperial status; after falling in love with Genji, she could only struggle in moral self-reproach, unable to pursue her true feelings. Suetsumuhana, due to her status as a declining aristocrat, maintained excessive humility in front of Genji, daring not to express her true needs. The tragedies of these characters are essentially the destruction of human nature by the hierarchy system. It forces emotions to submit to status and dignity to give way to hierarchy, ultimately distorting vibrant human nature into "puppets that conform to systemic norms".

4. Conclusion

As a typical representative of middle-ranking aristocratic women in the Heian Period depicted in *The Tale of Genji*, Utsusemi's life trajectory encapsulates the struggles of women during that era. From an aristocratic maiden entrusted with her family's hope of entering the imperial palace, to a daughter of a declining aristocracy after her father's death, and finally to humbling herself to marry the local official Iyo no Suke for survival, she constantly sought a foothold amid class decline and real-life predicaments. Faced with Genji's temptation, Utsusemi resisted emotional impulses with sober rationality, fully aware that accepting his affection would only lead to ruin given the insurmountable status gap and secular norms. After Iyo no Suke's death, to reject the

harassment from her stepson, she resolutely chose to become a nun—breaking free from the constraints of patriarchy and the status hierarchy through a proactive decision, and completing her transformation from passive endurance to self-assertion.

Utsusemi's contradictions and resilience are not only a reflection of her personal character, but also an epitome of her era. Her struggles expose the survival predicament of women under patriarchy, while her perseverance shines with the faint light of human awakening. Through this character, we can not only glimpse the class dynamics and moral ethics of the aristocratic society in the Heian Period, but also feel *The Tale of Genji*'s profound insight into the complexity of human nature. The value of Utsusemi's image lies in its ability to resonate across millennia—amid the constraints of fate, upholding one's self and maintaining rationality has always been the most precious strength/quality of human nature in the face of adversity.

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