

Analysis on Beauty and Agony in *The Tattooer* Written by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

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Abstract

The *Tattooer* is widely acknowledged as a pioneer work in Tanbi new romanticism literature. The novel vividly depicts a story of a young tattooer and his interactions with the female protagonist, and presents the changes of her in terms of her looks, body and mentality. This novel discloses men's desire and to peep in female's body and men's suppress and dominating to women. Tanizaki Junichiro portrays the beauty of woman and stresses their "villainess" in order to show that the stereotypical Japanese culture of men in power should be transformed and monolithic aesthetic must be prohibited.

Keywords

Beauty and Power; Agony; Desire; Men's Gaze; Regulation on Figure; Aesthetic Standards.

1. Background of the Work

The Tattooer, published in 1910, is an early work by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro. The quote "everywhere beauty and strength were one" [1] at the beginning of this novel is believed as the theme and value *The Tattooer* intends to deliver to the public, and is regarded as a representative feature of Jun'ichiro's aesthetic standards. At a time when naturalistic literature was flourishing, *The Tattooer* represented the advent of a new literary form. While the mainstream naturalistic literature advocated the unadorned depiction of reality and human ugliness, *The Tattooer* embodies the idea of disregarding social morality and pursuing purely functional beauty, representing the rising Tanbi culture that opposes naturalistic literature. In his autobiographical work セツゴアン ヤワ (Setsugoan Yawa, Night Stories in my Hermitage) that adopted an informal essay style, he made a comparison between himself and Kafū Nagai, and stated that he is an egalitarianist and feminist. He regards himself as fetishist of love and believes that females are superior to him [2]. In the novel, the tattooed woman turns out to be a so beautiful and strong lady that all men are submissive to her, and even the tattoo artist Seikichi is not an exception. *The Tattooer* can be called as Junichiro's proclamation of his devotion in Tanbi culture. In that era when the whole society admired women to be understanding wives and loving mother due to the single aesthetic, moral and ethical value, Jun'ichiro offered a new type to praise the girls with his admiration for women with "villainess". Although in セツゴアン ヤワ (Setsugoan Yawa, Night Stories in my Hermitage), he reflected himself and stated that he was not as rebellious as Kafū Nagai who was engaged in social criticism [3], the times depicted by him which has been memorialized for a century still allows people of this age to observe and even reflect on the current era.

2. A World in Pursuit of Beauty

The Tattooer, even though it is set in the Edo period of Japan, did not strictly follow historical facts in Jun'ichiro's writing. Instead, he created a world in pursuit of beauty by modifying the original social environment around the theme through his rich imagination. "It was a leisurely

age, an age when professional wits could make an excellent livelihood by keeping rich or wellborn young gentlemen in a cloudless good humor and seeing to it that the laughter of Court ladies and geisha was never stilled. [1] " This quote indicates that people living in that age did not need to worry about their livelihood, which enables them to pursue the diversity of beauty. In the world this novel describes, people's pursuit of beauty is achieved by tattooing their bodies. Even though everyone's understanding of beauty can be different and there are many ways to pursue it, at that time, everyone wanted to get tattooed. "Visitors to the pleasure quarters of Edo preferred to hire palanquin bearers who were splendidly tattooed; courtesans of the Yoshiwara and the Tatsumi quarter fell in love with tattooed men. Among those so adorned were not only gamblers, firemen, and the like, but members of the merchant class and even samurai. Exhibitions were held from time to time; and the participants, stripped to show off their filigreed bodies, would pat themselves proudly, boast of their own novel designs, and criticize each other's merits [1]". The criteria in appreciating tattoos are equal to the criteria of beauty. People are keen to tattoo their bodies with beautiful patterns, obsessed with carving themselves into a work of art with a sense of beauty, and rival their beauty by comparing with others' tattoos. "Everywhere beauty and strength were one" can account for it. In a world pursuing good appearance, beauty is equivalent to power, and in a society pursuing visual enjoyment, tattooing on the skin of a person is like the social identity, which can not only serve as visual pleasure, but also can demonstrate status. People's appearance are given by their genes that cannot be changed using the technology of the time, so tattooing certainly provides a direction that ordinary people can strive for better looking. " People did all they could to beautify themselves, some even having pigments injected into their precious skins. Gaudy patterns of line and color danced over men's bodies. [1]" From top to bottom of the social hierarchy, especially for those in the lower and middle classes, such as small urban merchants and craftsmen, tattoos are more significant, and this may be directly related to their survival, as tattoos create the illusion that they can improve their social status.

It is because people in the beauty-eagering society desire to turn their bodies into works of art through tattoos that tattoo artists who can create these creative and ingenious patterns become so popular. *The Tattooer* tells a story from the perspective of a young, skillful tattooer named Seikichi. "No one whose skin or whose physique failed to interest him could buy his services. The clients he did accept had to leave the design and cost entirely to his discretion [4]," His pickiness leaves an impression of a tattooist who is an extreme beauty seeker and has great power to others' eyes. Such power he gains benefits from both his ability and the society he lives in.

3. Physical Agony Brought by Tattooing

Tattooing in this novel is by no means a simple and easy task. For those who are to be tattooed, they need to endure the pain of needles piercing their skin for a month or two. As the tattooer drives his needles into them, they suffer a lot from torture of their swollen, blood-red flesh, and most of them may groan with pain. Even worse. They have to soak themselves in a hot bath to bring out the colors, and they will collapse half dead, without the strength of moving their body for long. However, pain and the body structure are closely related. That is, pain can be offset by other physical or mental sensations. For those who are tattooed, the agony of tattooing can be described as both painful and satisfyingly hedonistic, because the society makes them believe that after the suffering is over, they will have the opportunity to be in possession of beauty and power.

The agony of those being tattooed can also influence to something outside their body: For those people imaging their pain, they will be mentally satisfied. For Seikichi, his pleasure lies in the agony men felt, and the louder they groaned, the keener is his strange delight. For his ordinary

customers, Seikichi looks down at them coolly and just says, " I dare say that hurts". He tends to remark with an air of satisfaction. However, for the girl he desires to create a masterpiece on and has been looking for first years, he wholly devoted himself in shading and vermilioning. "Even to insert a single drop of color was no easy task. At every thrust of his needle Seikichi gave a heavy sigh and felt as if he had stabbed his own heart." [5] He pours his soul into this tattoo. His spirit is integrated with the shades and driven into her skin. "Each drop of Ryukyu cinnabar that he mixed with alcohol and thrust in was a drop of his lifeblood. He saw in his pigments the hues of his own passions [6]". It is fair to say that with the whole of his soul, he completes an elaborate sculpted work of art that can only be completed once in a life time. "This work of art had been the supreme effort of his life. Now that he had finished it his heart was drained of emotion. [5]" He finally turns the girl a so beautiful lady that no woman in Japan can compare with, and accomplishes the woman's ambition, or rather, his ambition. Even though he becomes the first victim of her, he does not regret what he has done to finish his task. "Let me see your tattoo once more," Seikichi begged [7]. His act of confirming the tattoo actually is a reaffirmation of his own existence.

4. Reality under the Beauty: Complicity of Society

After Seikichi completes his work, the woman gradually awakens. The narration of the novel shifts to a new perspective. Time and again, the novel reminds us that it is not easy to achieve beauty by tattooing, and that one must go through unbearable pain. "... she said, speaking as if in a dream but with an edge of authority to her voice ... 'I can bear anything for the sake of beauty.' Despite the pain that was coursing through her body, she smiled. [8]" As mentioned in the previous section, pain is something that everyone tries to avoid physiologically, but the motive of changing their body for beauty gives a completely different significance to pain. Instead of fearing pain, the subject actively pursues pain, which is no longer a source of danger that the subject would actively avoid, but rather a necessary way for the subject to confirm his or her existence and obtain pleasure. In this physical transformation, there are no passive victims; Seikichi and the woman are in agreement with each other: they take pain as a sign to confirm their existence and pursue the pleasure. The piercing agony, instead of being painful and punishing in the usual sense, is a source of pleasure for the woman and Seikichi. After the tattooing is completed, leaning on the veranda rail, she looked up into the faintly hazy sky. Her eyes were brilliant; there was not a trace of pain in them. " All my old fears have been swept away — and you are my first victim!" She darted a glance at him as bright as a sword. A song of triumph was ringing in her ears [7]. To become her victim is exactly what Seikichi expects, which proves that as a tattooer, he succeeds in shaping women's desires, and as a powerful party he dominates the social construction and regulation of the body. At the very beginning, the woman comes to see him because her mistress asks her to deliver a cloak to him for decoration. But after that, no matter how hard she pleads with Seikichi to let her go home, he just talks to her with his malicious smile as if nothing goes wrong. " Under his kimono was a vial of anesthetic which he had obtained some time ago from a Dutch physician [6]". The lady fast asleep is captured by Seikichi's will, and she unconsciously accepts Seikichi's shaping according to his male desires. Yet from her fear and resistance at the beginning, she accepts it and actively shows her beauty and power with impatience to confirm her beauty and utters " Let me see the tattoo ... "Giving me your soul must have made me very beautiful [5]". She makes Seikichi her victim. "Indeed, her feet are to be nourished by men's blood, and to trample on their bodies [9]. The tattooer and his followers who come for his ingenious tattoo patterns, and even the lady and her victims, are obeying and reinforcing the society's value and regulation of body.

5. Profound Implication of Beauty: People Being Gazed and the Explicit Desire

The lady becomes the most beautiful woman that no one can compare with, but it truly what she desires to be? The woman shapes herself step by step according to the painting provided by Seikichi's will and becomes an object to be gazed at by others. The painting displayed by Seikichi is the product of men's appreciation: It was a painting of a Chinese princess, the favorite of the cruel Emperor Chou of the Shang Dynasty. She was leaning on a balustrade in a languorous pose, the long skirt of her figured brocade robe trailing halfway down a flight of stairs, her slender body barely able to support the weight of her gold crown studded with coral and lapis lazuli. In her right hand she held a large wine cup, tilting it to her lips as she gazed down at a man who was about to be tortured in the garden below [10]. Although the princess gazed at the man, she was appreciated by more men, and it was through the men's gaze that her beauty, slender and languid is captured. The golden crown with glazed coral on her head and the hem of her damask dress, rather than presenting her poise, adds to the burden and indolence of her body, making it fixed there, powerless to escape the gaze. "As the girl stared at this bizarre picture her lips trembled and her eyes began to sparkle. Gradually her face took on a curious resemblance to that of the princess. In the picture she discovered her secret self [10]". When Seikichi shows the second picture called "The Victims" to her, " ... the girl felt that she had found something long hidden in the darkness of her own heart. 'This painting shows your future,' Seikichi said, pointing to the woman under the cherry tree — the very image of the young girl. 'All these men will ruin their lives for you.' 'Please, I beg of you to put it away!' She turned her back as if to escape its tantalizing lure and prostrated herself before him, trembling [11]. Seikichi's desire and the woman's desire become more and more inseparable, just as the woman becomes more and more similar to the person in the painting, and even becomes the same. Step by step, the woman explores her "self" and falls into the trap of gazing and being gazed at. The woman internalizes Seikichi's desire and reshapes herself accordingly. Moreover, she accepts and even more actively constructs the other's identity, showing her passion and desire to the "fertilizer". Apparently, the woman's active display of her body's beauty and tattoos, expressing her desire to use men as fertilizer, shows her positive role as a subject. However, she puts her body in the position of being gazed at, making it an object in the meanwhile. In that sense, the woman expresses her desires not as a subject, but as the ideal body through dressing up herself to fit the male fantasy and satisfy the male desire. The woman becomes the beautiful object of male fantasy, and the transformation of her body through tattooing cannot complete the construction of her own subjectivity, but degrades herself into a tool of male desire domination instead.

According to Lacan's Gaze Theory, once the Gaze is in place, the gaze can be invisible but ubiquitous. The subject's entire design of her physical and mental image is based on the gaze, who takes care of her skin tone, hair style, and dress, striving to make her every movement and facial expression conform to the gaze, even at the cost of her own life. In the imaginary gaze, the woman actively puts herself in the position of being gazed at to become the perfect object of male desire. As mentioned above, it is a silent complicity. But as long as male power remains, women's actions other than those touching the subversion of that power are more or less compromises. What would have happened without Seikichi's push, what would have been the ending if the woman could have truly escaped such push, and what would have been the female subject's desire without the former male desire, are not known. These are the questions left by Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Tattooer* which are applicable to both then and now.

6. Breakthroughs and Dilemmas in Male Writers' Work

In an era when only women who were considered as "good wives and mothers" deserved praise, Junichiro Tanizaki's aesthetic deviation from morality and the pursuit of sheer physical beauty was certainly a shock. Tanizaki wrote in his 雪後庵夜話, "Beauty does not lie in the face, but in the neck, shoulders, back, arms, wrists, hips, legs, and feet, all of which are elastic, plump, beautiful, and powerful. [12]" The novel reflects part of its aesthetic: the key of the woman's attraction to Seikichi is her feet. "To his sharp eye, a human foot was as expressive as a face. This one was sheer perfection. Exquisitely chiseled toes, nails like the iridescent shells along the shore at Enoshima, a pearl-like rounded heel, skin so lustrous that it seemed bathed in the limpid waters of a mountain spring—this, indeed, was a foot to be nourished by men's blood, a foot to trample on their bodies. [9]" Tanizaki gives his own aesthetic view that is different from the times.

The Tattooer also implies Junichiro Tanizaki's sympathy for the oppressed women of his time. The novel opens in a male-dominated world. In a society where beauty and power are cherished, everyone pursues tattoos. However, only men take the initiative to get tattoos, whereas women do not have the right to choose. This is why Seikichi, a master tattoo artist, desires a beautiful female body to fulfill his long-held wish. That is also illustrated by the fact that Seikichi later forcibly tattoos the woman regardless of her feelings. In the whole novel, the only person with a specific name is the tattoo artist Seikichi, while the woman as the heroine is only referred to as a girl or a woman. If the backgrounds of the women scattered in the story are slightly organized, it can be concluded that she is a girl of sixteen or seventeen years old, who once lived a prosperous life and then her family fell into poverty so that she became a geisha living on beauty. In the novel, only Seikichi is clearly aware of his desires all the time. Having a name makes his image more full and real, while the woman seems more like a tool or a puppet to satisfy Seikichi's desires. It is because of the social injustice encountered that the woman finally starts a rebellion. When Seikichi tells the woman that he decides to make her the most beautiful woman in Japan, using men as fertilizer, she is shocked by this bold idea. The woman begs and tries to escape. But when the woman finds out that her back has been tattooed with the design of a giant *Nephila* spider, she becomes proactive, unlike before. She accepts Seikichi's original expectation and decides to make all the men of Japan the fertilizer to nourish her beauty. The tattoo pattern on her back, a *Nephila* spider, is a demon in Japanese folklore, which is often disguised as a beautiful woman to seduce men, cut their heads, and hang them on the cobweb. The tattoo represents Tanizaki's aesthetics just as the two paintings displayed by him. The girl who is tattooed with that image will also take the souls of men by virtue of her extraordinary beauty and make them prostrate at her feet, devoting their lives. The skulls stacked up are the throne that the women get after rebelling. In Junichiro Tanizaki's writing, beauty becomes a tool of resistance, a weapon of killing, providing a possibility for women to escape from the miserable world.

However, the time when the women in Junichiro Tanizaki's novel gain the ability to resist signals the beginning of their demonization. As the novel comes to an abrupt end, it does not answer whether the woman, who nourishes her beauty with men as fertilizer, actually gains a higher social status. However, the answer in the real world is: no. Tanizaki's female worship, or the real-world "big woman" drama, is more of a fantasy than reality for women under patriarchy. A woman's opportunity for rebellion comes with a dark side: she can never avoid being gazed. "'How the water stings! Leave me alone—wait in the other room! I hate to have a man see me suffer like this.' As she left the tub, too weak to dry herself, the girl pushed aside the sympathetic hand Seikichi offered her, and sank to the floor in agony, moaning as if in a nightmare." [7] "You must be suffering. The spider has you in its clutches. [5]" Once she embraces the spider tattoo and begins to exhibit her beauty with the purpose of gaining power,

the fear of being exposed to others and the lure of maintaining beauty and power will together bring the woman's anxiety of self-presentation to the extreme. As she gazes at the corpses of men under her feet, the male desire is projected on her. She no longer has to beg for male gaze and gains her own rights and power, but that does not mean she can ignore the male gaze and turn her eyes away.

According to Foucault's Power Theory, the surveillance and control of power over the body operates firstly by establishing standards of beauty-ugliness divide. Men set aesthetic standards for women based on their own desires. Rather than breaking such standards, the pursuit of beauty over them is a recognition of physical regulation discipline and physical discourse power. People who pursue tattoos undoubtedly accept the social discipline of their own bodies. The woman who accepts the tattoo and actively proposes to make all men her fertilizer doubtlessly accepts the male shaping of her body and desires. Although she gains the power to survive because of her beyond-standard beauty, that power is limited, operating under the superficial recognition of male aesthetic standards. Conversely, because of gaining such power, it becomes more difficult for women to truly resist. They have to pay the price of giving up the benefits gained by conspiring with men. Junichiro Tanizaki grants beauty to the women in his writings, allowing them to defend themselves through being female demons, totems, and myths that are no longer bound by worldly morality. That shows his literary ideas of aestheticism and demonism, seemingly absurd and bizarre, but free from the one-dimensional moral aesthetics. He seeks beauty in ugliness, affirms goodness in the praise of evil, and contemplates the meaning of existence in death, which is the place where he transcends the times. However, in a society of ubiquitous male gaze, Junichiro Tanizaki cannot completely deconstruct the aesthetic expectations of women in the mainstream discourse, but merely reconstructs them on the basis of male gaze. His emphasis on the beauty of women embodied as demons and their power is similar to the era's admiration for good wives and mothers, both of which evade the essence of the problem: the aesthetics for the female subject is still constructed under the male gaze; any monolithic aesthetic standard is worthy of caution.

7. Conclusion and Reflection

Perhaps it is a feasible interpretation approach to focus on the content of *The Tattooer*, rather than speculating on what Junichiro Tanizaki wants to convey through it. Fredric Jameson once said, "All literature, no matter how feeble, must be imbued with a so-called political unconscious, and can be interpreted as a symbolic contemplation of the group fate." [13] From the interpretation, we can see that beauty is linked to power. But the power given to women actually imprisons the female identity, narrowing the freedom of their growth. Women who are empowered by beauty must constantly strive to reach the top level to reveal their uniqueness, as they themselves are becoming the core driving force of self-regulation. The involvement of social media in today's world is illuminating and eroding people's backstage areas, pushing the frontstage to expand, and extending the scope of people's self-performance. Do modern women really have more freedom of choice? The modern society that is freer and more advanced than the past may be constructed on the basis of the imagination from our current perspective, trying to convince ourselves that we have progressed enough to be free.

Different eras have pursued different kinds of beauty. Some worship small feet, and some pursue but also fancy tattoos. The means to seek beauty are not the same, nor the only thing worthy of attention. Are there really beauty standards that transcend race, culture and history? How should we deal with the socio-cultural perceptions of "appearance anxiety"? Aesthetics, like bodies, are socially constructed, and the pursuit of a uniform beauty is the enemy of beauty, not the standard of beauty. But nowadays there are more and more rules for beauty, with the trend of aesthetic homogenization intensifying. One is easily to fall into the ranks of being

sloppy, outdated and mediocre. Just as the stereotypical association of "squinting" with "insulting China", it neglects the social construction process behind while reducing it to a simple and inflammable national emotion. What we should think about is how stereotypical associations around beauty are constructed and what we can do to break them, instead of trying to construct another aesthetic standard and stereotype.

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