

Original Paper

The Construction of Female Images in *Zero Focus*

Yingjie He^{1*}

¹ Liberal Arts College, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, Nanjing, China

* Yingjie He, Liberal Arts College, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, Nanjing, China

Received: December 10, 2023 Accepted: December 20, 2023 Online Published: December 29, 2023

doi:10.22158/sll.v8n1p12

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v8n1p12>

Abstract

Seicho Matsumoto is a famous Japanese detective fiction writer, and one of the three masters of detective fiction in the world. The subject of investigation was not just the crime but also the society affected. By reading his works, readers can feel as if they are immersed in the social context of that era. In terms of character setting, the role of the detective is usually not a professional such as a police officer or a lawyer, but an ordinary woman. Secondly, female criminals often appear in Matsumoto's novels. Analyzing the construction of female images is of great significance for studying Matsumoto's novels.

This paper takes Zero Focus as the research object, focuses on the issue of female image construction, and makes a detailed interpretation of the three female images in Zero Focus, aiming to discover the light and shadow on them, and to summarize and analyze the causes of their female images.

Keywords

Zero Focus, seicho Matsumoto, portrayal of women, post war, social problem

1. Introduction

Zero Focus is a novel set in postwar Japan that portrays a murder case that occurred in Kanazawa, a city in the Hokuriku region. The protagonist, Teiko Itane, is married to Kenichi Uhara, a manager of a major advertising firm who is responsible for the Hokuriku region. She met him through a mutual friend. A few days after their honeymoon, her husband, who was supposed to be promoted and transferred to the Tokyo headquarters after their marriage, went on a final business trip to Kanazawa to hand over his work to his colleague, Yoshio Honda. However, he vanished without a trace at his destination. Teiko, who does not trust the police, decides to look for him on her own and travels to Hokuriku for the first time. Along the way, she encounters a series of deaths: Kenichi's brother, Sotaro Uhara, Kenichi's colleague, Yoshio Honda, and his common-law wife, Hisako Tanuma. Eventually,

Teiko unravels the mystery of the case by following various clues from interviews. The culprit, Sachiko, had been a prostitute during the war and killed anyone who knew her secret.

2. Portrayal of Women in *Zero Focus*

There are three main female characters in *Zero Focus*: Teiko Itane, Sachiko Murota, and Hisako Tanuma. Their lives were originally parallel lines that never intersected, but their fates became closely intertwined because of the appearance and disappearance of the male protagonist. The interplay of light and shadow on the three women reflects a huge tragedy of post-war women.

2.1 *Sachiko Murota*

Sachiko was born into a wealthy family of local ship owners and graduated from a prestigious women's college in Tokyo. However, the war ruined her family and forced her to become a prostitute. Later, she became an office lady and met Isaku Murota, the president of Murota Fireproof Brick Company, at work. After his wife's death, she married him and became a prominent lady in the society.

Sachiko was graceful, elegant, intelligent, and dignified, shining in the crowd. Unlike the wives who depended on their husbands' status, Sachiko used her talents and actively participated in various social and cultural activities. In the eyes of outsiders, Sachiko was both a good wife and an independent, capable woman, highly respected by the local people.

But behind her glamorous appearance, there was a secret that no one knew. That is, she had worked as a prostitute for a period of time after the war. She relied on her own ability to become a social celebrity and thought she could bury that experience forever, but she met Kenichi, who had been a morality police officer. Kenichi had no intention of blackmailing Sachiko, but his existence was like a sword hanging over her head, not knowing when it would fall. And when it fell, "dirty blood would spurt out of the wound". She compromised and clung to the happy marriage and upper-class identity, and tore herself apart in this gap, embarking on the path of murder, killing four people directly or indirectly. In the end, things fell apart and she chose to sail out to turbulent sea to kill herself.

2.2 *Teiko Itane*

Teiko was born into a middle-class family in Tokyo and received a higher education after the war. She worked in a company in Tokyo and married Kenichi through a blind date arranged by an acquaintance. Soon after their marriage, her husband disappeared in Kanazawa and she embarked on a journey to find him.

Teiko has both the characteristics of traditional Japanese women and the independence of the new era. As a woman who received a higher education after the war, she married a man who she knew nothing about except his "appearance characteristics" and quit her job. This reflects her female image influenced by the traditional Japanese view of marriage. Soon after the marriage, she developed a "wife" consciousness - not touching her husband's things, doing nothing but waiting for him to come home. After her husband disappeared, she regarded the process of finding him as the process of

“having a husband” and tried to solve various mysteries with the mentality of “wanting to know everything about him”. It can be seen that Teiko is still a traditional female image bound by gender norms.

But Teiko’s independent, decisive, and charismatic personality of the new era still shines. When her husband disappeared, she refused the request of her brother-in-law to go with him and set off alone to Kanazawa to find him. Whether it was the steep cliffs of the Noto Peninsula or the villages with inconvenient transportation and a vast area and few people, Teiko tirelessly collected clues. Despite the fact that the people involved in the incident were killed one after another, Teiko was not afraid and vowed to find the truth.

2.3 Hisako Tanuma

Hisako Tanuma was born in a rural area and never received any education. After the war, she became a prostitute to make a living. Later, she returned to her hometown and met Kenichi, who had been a morality police officer, and started living with him. Hisako was a woman who depended on others and was betrayed by them. As a prostitute after the war, she attracted local customers with her gentle and considerate traditional Japanese femininity, but she was only a fleeting partner for them. Later, she lived with Kenichi, leading a dull life, but never got married. Kenichi used a fake name to date her from the start, planning to leave her at any moment. Finally, after Kenichi's death, she sought refuge with Sachiko, but was thrown down the valley like a stone after Sachiko used her to commit murder.

3. The Causes of the Female Images in *Zero Focus*

The female characters in Matsumoto’s novel reflect the situation of women in the postwar era. They possess the strength and intelligence of the new generation of women, but they are also constrained by the traditional stereotypes of the postwar and even prewar periods. They try to create a new life for themselves, but they are tormented by the past that was overshadowed by the war. This is not only influenced by the historical context that the author lived in, but also intimately related to his own experiences.

3.1 *The Changes of Women’s Education*

Before the war, Japanese women received the “good wife and wise mother” education, which taught women how to be better wives and mothers, showing that women still existed as appendages of men at that time. After the war, Japan began to undergo democratization, and influenced by the Western feminism, Japan started to reform the higher education system for women. But Japan did not abandon the “good wife and wise mother” education, instead it replaced it with the “new good wife and wise mother” education. In middle schools, the “technology and home economics” courses were divided into two series for boys and girls, according to the *curriculum guideline 1958* (implemented in 1962). It was found that the postwar education was still always giving privileges to men and creating an order that put many women in a disadvantageous position.

It is obvious that Matsumoto was also unconsciously influenced by the cultural construction of traditional male-centered society. He himself once said, "I don't know women well. So I inevitably make them stereotypical". All the women in *Zero Focus* are married. For example, Hisako, who resigned herself to be Kenichi's common-law wife, Sachiko, who married a local celebrity and achieved success, and Sadako, who quit her job after getting married while receiving higher education after the war, have the common point of being women related to marriage.

3.2 *The Shadow of War*

In 1956, the Economic Planning Agency announced in the *Economic White Paper* that "Japan is no longer in the postwar period", which strengthened the social tendency to ignore the things that happened in the postwar period. In the era of "no longer postwar", people's living standards gradually improved, but for the women who had been prostitutes, it was still postwar. People had no interest in this problem, and the government did not compensate them either. The postwar had a bad impact on their personalities, and repeated a series of tragedies, which was not their fault, but the fault of the war that was superficially forgotten, but actually cast a shadow on people's hearts. Matsumoto, as a detective fiction writer, valued the analysis of social reality. He once said, "I want to argue that the motive should have more sociality. Then, the detective novel can have more width, depth, and sometimes present problems". Although the people of the society at that time tried to treat everything that happened after the war as nonexistent "0", Matsumoto focused on the "0", gave them infinite sympathy, and criticized the society's avoidance attitude.

3.3 *The Impact of his Own Mother*

Matsumoto's mother had a great influence on him. She became the prototype for the independent and resilient female characters in his works. Matsumoto's mother was born in a farming family, and was illiterate, but she had the ability and strength that matched men, and was an independent woman. When she ran a stall, she once bit a yakuza who was in charge of the allocation of the place, and scared him away. Moreover, her husband had an affair with a prostitute and ran away from home. She took the young Matsumoto and searched every brothel for him. She had no more strength to support the family after her husband left, so she moved in with the next-door family. She worked like a servant, and was always looked down upon, but she never complained. This is somewhat similar to the behavior of Teiko, who diligently searched for her husband's whereabouts. They both displayed the personality of being strong and independent, but their actions seemed to be for the sake of men, and they were deeply influenced by the complex issues of time and gender. Matsumoto did not think about the tragedy that resulted from Teiko's marriage, nor did he criticize the male protagonist. It can be seen that Matsumoto appreciated the beautiful quality of women's independence and strength, but was subtly influenced by the unconscious gender norms of the society at that time, so his female characters had a sense of disharmony and contradiction.

5. Conclusion

Sachiko is a rare female character in Matsumoto's novels who is not a crime accomplice, but a woman who commits crimes alone for the sake of "making a name for herself". The fact that she finally sailed alone in a small boat into the vast sea to kill herself also shows her independence of "controlling her own destiny". Teiko's ability to solve the case independently is also amazing, but the tragedy of her "personal fate" seems to be overshadowed by the specificity of that era. Hisako is a stereotypical character in Matsumoto's novels, who has no opinion of her own, has worked in the sex industry and does not want to expose herself to the sun, and accepts herself as a shadow. She finally entered the new era after the war, but she lived in the past because she lost her husband. After the war, Japan underwent democratic reforms and women's education also made progress, but in the male-dominated society, women were still influenced by gender norms. The people's choice to forget everything that happened after the war also brought tragedy to these women. Everything that happened after the war was like a cloud that never dispersed, hovering over these women's heads. Matsumoto focused on these women and showed his concern for the postwar women's issues. They are all people who are closely intertwined with that era, and their fate is like snowflakes falling from the sky, originally pure and flawless, but falling under the cliffs of the Noto Peninsula where the wind is raging, gradually becoming bleak.

References

- Konan, J. (2017). On Seicho Matsumoto's view of women: Collaborators who do not assert themselves. *Japanese Language and Culture*, 44(2), 31-52.
- Li, J. (2020). *The attitude of resistance of women in Seicho Matsumoto's works* (Master's thesis). Jilin University.
- Yamamoto, Y. (2013). A Note on Reading Seicho Matsumoto: On Hokuriku in *Zero Focus*. *Nishogakusha University Thesis*, 56(2), 51-70.
- Zhou, Y. (2021). Crime motivation: Death nurse and "social school" detective novels. *Foreign Literature Trends Research*, 22(1), 67-77.