

THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE I-NOVEL GENRE IN MODERN JAPANESE LITERATURE

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Abstract

The emergence of an independent and clearly formed genre I-novel in the early 20th of the XX century in Japanese literature, seems to be not accidental at all. I-novel, which is based on confession, was developing from an unformed, vague literary phenomenon and by the middle of the XX century became one the most important, literary genre, and moreover, the main stream in the literary process of Japan. If the "essence" of I-novel works at first was concentrated only on the description of writers' truthful or quasi-truthful life events and situations, which was sharply criticized by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, then by the middle of the century the Japanese I-novel totally changed and characterized by deep psychologism, detailed author's introspection and self-esteem to the present day.

Keywords: I-novel, confession, self-esteem, psychologism, Tayama Katai, Akutagawa Ryunosuke, Dazai Osamu, Yukio Mishima, Oe Kenzaburo, Matayoshi Naoki

Introduction

The I-novel (《私小説》) is a literary genre that originated in Japan at the beginning of the XX century and used to describe a type of confessional literature where the events in the story correspond to events in the author's life.

This genre was founded based on the Japanese reception of naturalism during the Meiji period, and later influenced literature in other Asian countries as well. This genre of literature reflects greater individuality and a less constrained method of writing.

From its beginnings, the I-novel has been a genre that also is meant to expose aspects of society or of the author's life.

Objective

The aim of this article is to dissect the development and emergence of the I-novel genre in Japanese literature to this day.

Results and Discussion

The development and emergence of the I-novel genre in Japanese literature have its origins since the Heian period. During this period, a genre of diary-memoir literature called «nikki» (《日記》) was appeared, and became a great asset of classical Japanese literature. Famous writers of this period created a huge amount of outstanding works, such as «The Diary of Lady Murasaki» (《紫式部日記》), «The Tosa Diary» (《土佐日記

)), «The Mayfly Diary» (《蜻蛉日記》), «The Sarashina Diary» (《更級日記》) and others. The authors wrote, appealing only to their own experience, not mentioning what they did not see or hear themselves: «My thoughts were flowing like in a dream-somewhere far, far away, and I stopped noticing what was happening around me, finishing taking notes of a certain day by this way»¹.

Around 1304 – 1307 years was published a memoir of the writer Nijō, which is commonly translated into English as «The Confessions of Lady Nijō» (《とほずがたり》), the work for which she is known today, and which is also the only substantial source of information on her life. The memoir covers events of the period from 1271 to 1306. The novel is considered as one of the greatest works of Japanese literature, as well being a rare account of events not typically shown in premodern Japanese literature. It became famous due to the combination of the tradition of the story (monogatari), the diary genre (nikki bungaku) and an autobiographical composition in which the heroine's memories are interspersed with reflections, poems, quotations from various literary works.

Thus, we can observe the syncretism and transformation of the rudiments of autobiographical works in the Middle Ages, and then the appearance in the early 20s of the twentieth century of the original confessional genre which is called I-novel².

The authors who wrote in this genre sought to display their inner life and events from their biography as honestly and realistically as possible, but attributing them to a fictional hero. This genre is characterized by a scrupulous description of the protagonist's inner experiences, the narrative is built around the memories and reflections of the narrator. As a rule, the I-novel is fully or partially autobiographical and written in the first person. The earliest works in this genre includes: «The Broken Commandment» (《破戒》) by Shimazaki Toson, «The Quilt» by Tayama Katai (《蒲団》) and his trilogy «Life» (《生》) – «Wife» (《生》) – «Family Ties» (《路》), «A Dark Night's Passing» (《路路》) by Naoya Shiga, «No longer Human» (《人間失格》) by Osamu Dazai, «A Fool's Love» (《痴人の愛》) by Junichiro Tanizaki, «Confessions of a Mask» (《假面の告白》) by Yukio Mishima, «A Personal Matter» (《個人的な体験》) by Nobel Prize winner Oe Kenzaburo and many others³.

The first novel of this genre is considered to be «The Quilt» by Tayama Katai (1871-1930), published in 1907 and dedicated to describe the intimate experiences of the main characters of the story. This is mostly an autobiographical story about an already middle-aged writer who fell in love with a young girl, who came to him as an ardent admirer of his talent and entered his literary courses as a student. She is a girl of a new "emancipated" type for that time, she does not really take into account the old moral principles. However, the writer soon realises that it is not he, but another young man - who enjoys the love relationship with this girl and that she has been well acquainted with real life. Out of desperation, the main character sends the girl to her parents, but he remains with sadness and despair in his soul.

And in 1908-1910, three of Tayama Katai's largest works were published - the novels «Life», «Wife» and «Family Ties». These novels can be called completely autobiographical. In them, the writer tells the story of his life and the life of his entire family. The most significant work of this trilogy is the novel «Life». In it, the author tells how his mother was left alone after her husband's death with four children in her arms, managed to bring them up in a right way: one son became an official, another a writer, the third an officer; the daughter was successfully married. The novel shows a very interesting type of a domineering woman, despotically disposing the destinies of her children, a harsh picky mother-in-law, tormenting her daughters-in-law and at the same time a woman who knows how to deal with the difficulties of life. Images of her sons, their wives, and daughters are given around this central image of her, and thus we see a very vividly and truthfully painted picture, apparently, one of the typical families in Japan at that time. The other two parts of the trilogy tell us about the fate of the families, first of all, of course, about the fate of the author himself. In general, this trilogy, along with the famous novel called «Family» («家») by Shimazaki Toson, are the best depiction of a large Japanese families' fate in the context of an emerging capitalist society at that time.

«The writers of the I-novel genre, emphasizes a prominent critic Kurahara Korehito, from the very beginning were unable to find their place in society and could not be a part of it». I-novel writers also include Takei Kosaku, Kawasaki Chotaro, Ozaki Kazuo, Kume Masao, Kambayashi Akatsuki. Consciously getting rid from external social conditions, these authors analyzed psychological studies of the feelings and experiences of the personality and themselves acted as prototypes of the heroes of their novels. I-novel, points out the History of Modern Japanese Literature, is a kind of «closed» fiction, extremely focused on the experiences of a person escaped from the public environment. In the I-novel stories, the specific conditions of Japanese life were reflected in a peculiar way, where every manifestation of personality was suppressed⁴.

I-novel is a phenomenon widespread in Japanese literature. They have been arguing about it in Japan for a long time, since its inception to nowadays.

In the 20th, when I-novel was considered the main and the most crucial genre in the development of the Japanese literature, an acute discussion was held around it. Akutagawa Ryunosuke also took part in the discussion, whose creative ideas contradicted to this genre, although the writer has a lot of short stories that are considered by Japanese critics to be I-novel. This is precisely what makes it necessary to understand neatly the problem of «Akutagawa and I-novel», which will help to understand the essence of his works in which the author acts as the main character, as well as to find out what influence he had on the subsequent formation, development and transformation of the I-novel in Japan. Otherwise, it may seem that, without accepting "I-novel" from the standpoint of literary criticism, Akutagawa himself widely used it in his novels. We will try to show that there is no such gap.

One of the researchers of Akutagawa's works, The Hosei University's professor Komashaku Kimi, writes: «Shortly before Akutagawa's death, looking back at his life, he created a final work that can be considered as a literary testament, which is called «The Life of an Idiot»⁵. Every time I reread it, I have feeling that «The Life of an Idiot» is exactly the literary testament that Akutagawa imagined it to be. Among writers, it is rare to meet those ones who would sum up their life like this. Even if we talk about writers who have created a lot of I-novel stories, I think it will not be possible to meet anyone who would write about himself so objectively».

Komashaku is right – «The Life of an Idiot» is really a truthful, an honest work. But the question arises: is it possible to classify it as I-novel?

In the «Notes of Chokodo» («澄江堂主人») Akutagawa has a chapter «Confession» («告白»). «You often demand from me: «Write more about your life, don't be afraid to be frank»! But is it possible to say that I am not frank? My stories are about some extent to confession of what I have experienced. But that's not enough for you. You push me to something else: «Make yourself the hero of the story, write without hesitation about what happened to yourself». In addition, you say: «And at the end of the story, you write down real names to all of the characters next to the fictional ones. No, excuse me»⁶!

Firstly, Akutagawa writes, it is unpleasant for me to show you, curious people, the whole situation of my life. Secondly, it is unpleasant for me to earn extra money like that and get fame as a writer.

In conclusion, only the unwillingness to initiate strangers into the intimate and private aspects of personal life forced Akutagawa to abandon I-novel. But such a conclusion is possible only if one does not know what I-novel was in Japanese society. Having introduced ourselves to this problem and, in particular, with Akutagawa's articles about it, we can understand that, without accepting I-novel, Akutagawa had very clear position – he considered this genre as unacceptable, at least for himself.

Hirano Ken sees the difference between I-novel and an ordinary autobiographical novel in that an autobiographical novel, as a rule, creates an objective picture of life - events unfold in it against the background of the writer's personal life. I-novel is the opposite phenomenon. It contains not so many objective scenes and situations as the attitude of the author-character to it. The plot of the stories in I-novel shows the perception of their authors. Later, Kume Masao began to consider I-novel as a psychological prose, thereby changing the origin definition and opinion of the genre.

A detailed description of I-novel is given by Fukuda Tsuneari. I-novel, he writes, is a confessional prose. It is not limited to Japanese I-novel, but represents the essence of modern European prose. However, no matter how much you confess, the guilt will not disappear from this. Admitting to one's own ugliness does not in itself get rid of ugliness. . . Taking the first step in the real world, taking up something, inevitably get dirty... They confess that they got dirty. The secret intent of confession: to show off

their own sincerity, which allowed them to confess, or to justify the inevitability of the fact that they had to get dirty – this is what lies behind the confession. Is it possible in this case to call their squeamishness true?

«I am not the only one who adheres to this view of I-novel. Akutagawa began his career in literature with a prejudice against I-novel. And at that time, he was often reproached for avoiding confession»⁷.

A similar thought is expressed by B. B. Tomashevsky in the article «Literature and Biography»: «In the XX century, a special type of writers with a biography appeared demonstratively shouting: Look how bad and shameless I am. Look and don't turn away, because all of you are just as bad as I am, but only you are cowardly and hiding»⁸. It was this approach to the «literature of self-reveal», and it is entirely applicable to the Japanese literature, that repelled Akutagawa from I-novel.

What was Akutagawa's point of view on I-novel? In the «Aphorisms by a pygmy» («侏儒の言葉»), as in the «Notes of Chokodo», there is a chapter «Confession»: «No one can confess everything to the end. At the same time, without confessing, it is impossible to express yourself. Rousseau⁹ loved confession. But it is completely impossible to detect it in the «Confession». Merime¹⁰ did not like confessions. But isn't «Columba» in a hidden form telling about himself? The boundary between confessional literature and all the rest is extremely difficult to discern».

At a first glance, it may seem that this «confession» of Akutagawa contradicts the one given earlier. But this is not the case. Putting yourself on public display? Akutagawa strongly objected to this. But to show the reader his inner world, his perception in different situations, in order to reveal their essence in this way, Akutagawa never denied the need for this. In other words, the whole question is what for to talk about yourself, about your feelings, about your experiences.

If introspection is done in order to show that there is also such a personality – not a generalized, typical image of a person, then Akutagawa did not accept such literature of personal experience, such I-novel. If the author merges himself with a character of the story, even on the basis of his own biography not in order to tell the world about himself as a personality, but to personify a typical phenomenon, in this case it is wrong to say that the work belongs to I-novel.

Akutagawa correlates I-novel with lyric poetry, considering lyric poetry to be «personal literature» as opposite to epic, which he calls «objective». In the same way, he sees the difference between the works of I-novel and the so-called genuine novel. The term was presented in the late 20th to the contrary of the psychological novel. Akutagawa gives this definition to I-novel: «I-novel is a work of fiction containing evidence of the absence of fiction». He explains his thought: «to be honest, not to deceive people – this is the law of morality, but it does not coincide with the laws of literature. There is no author who can write anything except what exists in himself. For instance, a writer creating an I-novel work has endowed his hero with virtues that he

does not possess himself. In this case, from the point of view of morality, it is perhaps appropriate to call this writer a liar. But in fact, he is not a liar at all – what he endowed his hero with was in him even before he expressed it»¹¹.

Rejecting the approach to the idea of falsity and truthfulness of the work proposed by the supporters of I-novel, and at the same time the idea that only I-novel is the most important genre in literature, Akutagawa denies the idea of Kume Masao and Uno Koji, that I-novel is the best way of the Japanese prose development.

So, Akutagawa did not believe that I-novel as «a prose of confession» had no rights to exist at all. He objected only to turning this genre into the main genre of the development of Japanese literature. And first of all because in the works of I-novel the author brings to the reader's judgment not only his thoughts and experiences, his attitude to reality, which is natural and necessary, but also his life. But in some cases, the writer's personal life in all its details does not interest the reader. Moreover, it can affect to the reader's attitude to the writer. In order for an I-novel work to become a phenomenon, an author writing in this genre must be a large and interesting person both intellectually and socially. Only in this case I-novel can be a part of public interests and really have the rights to exist. But in this case, it will cease to be I-novel in the form in which it is presented by its initiators.

A perfect example is the Akutagawa's work. His novel «A Day at the End of the Year» («年末の一日») is completely autobiographical. It tells how the main character – Akutagawa, having finished another novel for the New Year's issue of the magazine, decided to fulfill his promise and take his friend to Natsume's grave. But this novel was written not in order to tell readers about the difficulty it cost him to find the teacher's grave. The bleak, joyless life of the man – is the theme of the novel. Not lack of respect for Natsume's memory led to the fact that the main character forgot where the teacher was buried. A miserable, impoverished existence, when a person loses his internal sensitivity just to survive, has led to the fact that the writer has lost something very dear, and without it became increasingly difficult for him to live. The character turns to be a collective image of a man who was broken by a hard life.

That is why we can attribute «Day at the End of the Year» not just to confessional prose, but to a deeply psychological one, painting a picture of the mental state of a person crushed by life, and a generalized picture; not capturing a particular case that happened to the protagonist-author.

In the last years of his life, the main thing in Akutagawa's works is a philosophical understanding of reality. The embodiment of personal experience into his works is the direction of his creative search. The words he said in one of the interviews are connected to it: «Am I gradually approaching to I-novel? In any case, lately I don't want to write such works as «In a Grove»».

Indeed, in many Akutagawa's novels, Horikawa Yasukichi — Akutagawa himself - acts as the main character. And yet it would be wrong to refer them to I-novel and that is the reason.

Any work of art anyway is somehow I-novel. It reflects the reality passed through the consciousness, its experience, its attitude. Without the presence of the author's personality, a work of fiction is unthinkable. Apparently, the problem is only in the extent, in the breadth of generalizations, in the understanding of the typical.

The «I» as the only object of cognition and display, or the «I» as an instrument for cognition and display of objective reality - this is where the boundaries between I-novel and a work in which the protagonist is the author himself. This is exactly how Akutagawa Ryunosuke understood this problem.

Thus, we can conclude that Akutagawa greatly influenced the rethinking of essence of the I-novel to his contemporaries.

Dazai Osamu (1909-1948) is considered to be the most talented I-novel writer of the XX century — a man whose life was full of tragedies. He, like some other writers at that time, in particular Kasai Zengo (1887-1928), consciously and on purpose destroyed his life and himself in order to find himself at the bottom of society, turn his mental traumas into art, and completely devoted his life to the creation of the true literature.

In the last period (1946-1948) of his work, Dazai Osamu was already a well-known and recognized writer, his stories were full of decadence, lack of faith and hopelessness. One of them is «No longer Human». Despite too many controversial opinions and literary criticism about this Dazai Osamu's story, the work has become a huge event and made a crucial difference in the literary world.

The development of I-novel does not end there. In 1949, the debut novel «Confessions of a Mask» which was written by the young Japanese writer Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) was published. The protagonist - Mishima, talks about the inner experiences that accompany the process of self-acceptance. The novel sobers the naive soul, who does not doubt the identity of the hero, and reminds that everything around is a «mask». This irony found a response in the broken soul of the young generation who survived in the difficult war and post-war years, and «Confessions of a Mask» gained many readers.

And in 1964, the most award-winning writer in Japan Oe Kenzaburo (1935) wrote an I-novel story called «A Personal Matter», which reflected his mental trauma caused by the birth in 1963 of his child, with lesions of the brain. And although Oe later had a healthy son and a daughter, the experience sharpened his ability to empathize with others.

In 2015, the famous Japanese comedian, screenwriter and writer Matayoshi Naoki (1980) made his debut with his I-novel «Sparkle» («火花»), published in the magazine «Literary World» («文学界»). The novel was awarded by the Akutagawa Prize and by January 2016 had sold 2.5 million copies. Based on this novel, a TV adaptation was

filmed by Netflix. The narrative of the novel focuses on two comedians struggling with difficulties, the prototypes for which were Matayoshi himself and his fellow comedic duo Yuji Oribe. This is the work of a highly recognized author who explores the life of a creative person and the essence of humor, and therefore it is both philosophical and entertaining.

Conclusion. Many researchers of the work and life of Japanese writers, whose I-novel works belong to, believe that the authors of these novels write not only for their readers, but also for themselves. There may be many reasons for this. By imprinting their confession in the word, publicly, perhaps the writers are trying to sublimate, heal their inner wounds, and the writing of the text itself may be an attempt to «self-rehabilitation» of the authors.

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