

Gender and Social Status in Zeami's Noh Plays

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Abstract

This paper aims to study about women power and negotiation illustrated in lovelorn heroines' roles in *Noh* plays, particularly composed by Zeami (1363?-1443?), the most famous playwright during fourteenth century. This article chooses his eight *Noh* plays: *Aoi no ue*, *Izutsu*, *Uneme*, *Kinuta*, *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae*, to analyze causes of separation and the heroine's sadness, as a theme reflecting gender power and social status of Japanese women during the time.

The study contends that representation of heroines is related to social construction of gender and social status. The lovelorn heroines in Zeami's *Noh* plays show the subordination of women in the medieval period (1185-1603). The causes of separation are classified into two types; male fickleness and man traveling to capital or to work. The theme about heroines is left because of male lovers traveling to the capital or to work is a new character that is composed by Zeami. For this theme, there are the heroines who still alive and also those who becomes ghost. For these two types of heroines, the living negotiates with male power by traveling to seek for her lovers, meanwhile the ghost heroine negotiate with man by expressing their deep feeling of love suffering. However, the heroine who suffers from love caused by male fickleness is a character compiled from literary works during earlier period of Zeami. This character is created that heroine becomes ghost in *Noh* play and talks about love suffering. In this way, Zeami has created a space of power, through *Noh* drama, in order that women can somewhat negotiate with male love behavior and male-dominated ideal.

Introduction

Noh drama is one of Japanese traditional performance. The beginning of *Noh* drama was originally performed for ordinary people who came to pay respect or to do worship to their gods in temples or *Shinto* shrines. *Noh* drama today has been developed by Zeami and his father named Kan'ami (1333-1384). Especially, Zeami was the foremost playwright and performer as well as a famous theorist of *Noh* drama from fourteen to fifteen century. For more than 600 years, *Noh* drama and his performance creation has been performed continuously until now. During that time, Zeami was patronized by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (the 3rd shogun of the Muromachi government). Zeami's *Noh* plays and his performance was created and performed to satisfy elite audiences, especially his patronage audiences.

Academically, research on *Noh* drama have been examined in many topics and issues, for example research on *Noh* mask, costumes, musical instrument, and performance as well as *Noh* plays. Zeami's *Noh* plays are one of the most popular issues that Japanese and foreigner scholars are interested in. However, it is entirely difficult to prove that how many *Noh* play are composed by Zeami and which one are the original *Noh* play composed by Zeami. Many Japanese scholars have attempted to collect Zeami's *Noh* plays. But their research findings are not relevant. Omote Akira, a Japanese scholar who specializes in *Noh* drama has classified *Noh* plays of Zeami into four groups. For example, the *Noh* play that has a high possibility composed by Zeami, and partial work composed by Zeami, and so on.

Noh plays' stories and themes composed by Zeami are various, for instance god or goddess story, samurai story, court lady, or story of townspeople. For this paper, I have been interested in the stories that main actress suffered from her love disappointment. The reason is that *Noh* drama is considered as a predominantly male performance. All actors are male-dominated and perform for male audience only. Moreover, all *Noh*'s playwrights including Zeami were all males. More interestingly, Zeami was a man who was patronized by the Shogun named Ashikaga Yoshimitsu by that time. His *Noh* drama was performed to satisfy elite and higher-class audiences, especially those who were his patrons. However, the *Noh* plays of Zeami, especially the story about lady who suffered from her love is in contrast. Particularly, the love suffering stories composed by Zeami somehow had criticized love behavior of Japanese males during that time. These stories probably not satisfy male patrons who were the audience of his *Noh* drama. But Zeami had just utilized *Noh* play as an opened space for Japanese women in order that these women could express their deep feelings about men's conducts and male-dominated ideology on love relationship and gender issues.

Gender and Social Status in Zeami's Noh Plays

Zeami was born in the medieval period. Therefore, there is no doubt that his *Noh* plays were influenced by social environment during that time. Gender relation and social status were general circumstance among other social environments which influenced Zeami to compose his *Noh* plays. Women, especially those who are in lower social status than men, suffered from love because of male fickleness and his playful behavior. Although *Noh* drama can be considered as male performance, some *Noh* plays concerning love composed by Zeami have woman as main protagonist. In this sense, Zeami has created a good chance for women to negotiate with males' fickleness by composing heroines' narration to convey the deep feelings of women.

The audiences of *Noh* drama were various in social statuses; meanwhile performers were from lower class. Zeami himself had paid much his attention to the higher-class audiences. In *Fushikaden*, one of his treatises, he advised *Noh* performers to start performing promptly when high-class audiences reached *Noh* theatre. Zeami also asked his *Noh* performers not to express mimetic characters of lower-class when performing in front of higher-class audiences.

Satisfying the audiences was an important factor for *Noh* performance. Many *Noh* troupes and other kinds of performances attempted to satisfy higher-class audiences by that time. This is because as much as any *Noh* troupes could satisfy higher-class audiences, *Noh* troupes would receive a reward and gift as well as extra money from higher-class audiences. Therefore, *Noh* troupes and performers usually attempted to please higher-class audiences so that they could simply survive their economic livelihood.

Zeami was patronized mainly by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. Besides Zeami, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu also patronized other *Noh* performers as well, for example Dou'ami. Such kind of competing situation probably caused Zeami to worry about his career in which the shogun probably changed his mind on him in the future. For a reason, social relationship among different social statuses had been unreliable. For instance, lower-class people could not expect anything from higher-class and elites. Difference in social status between Zeami and Ashikaga Yoshimitsu probably was a motive for Zeami to compose *Noh* plays in a way of illustrating love and relationship among people in different social statuses.

Refer to Omote Akira, a Japanese expert in *Noh* drama; there are Zeami's eight *Noh* plays that the main actress has love suffering and separation from her lover. There are *Aoi no ue*, *Izutsu*, *Uneme*, *Kinuta*, *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae*. The causes of separation are shown in table below.

Table 1: The causes of separation in Zeami's eight Noh plays.

Noh plays	Cause of separation
<i>Aoi no ue</i>	Man's fickleness
<i>Izutsu</i>	Man's fickleness
<i>Uneme</i>	Man's fickleness
<i>Kinuta</i>	Man travels to the capital (for a lawsuit)
<i>Hanagatami</i>	Man travels to the capital (become emperor)
<i>Hanjo</i>	Man travels to work
<i>Matsukaze</i>	Man travels to work
<i>Minazuki barae</i>	Man travels to work

The causes of separation of these eight plays can be classified into two groups; males fickleness (*Aoi no ue*, *Izutsu* and *Uneme*), male traveling to the capital or to work (*Kinuta*, *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae*). Here, we can raise some interesting questions why Zeami utilized male fickleness as a cause of separation. As mentioned above, *Noh* drama was performed to satisfy their patrons who were males. Therefore, blaming at male love behavior probably not satisfy male patrons which were the main audience of *Noh* by that time.

The main actresses of these three plays (*Aoi no ue*, *Izutsu* and *Uneme*) are the created characters shown in literary works written in earlier period of Zeami. These heroines were treated to subordinate under male power in those literary works.

For example, the main actress in *Aoi no ue* is Rokujou no miyasudokoro; one of Genji prince's lovers in Genji monogatari (Japanese tale is assumed that it is composed during the middle Heian (794-1185) period). She is Crown Prince's wife, but she loves the prince of Genji. Refer to Genji monogatari, *Aoi no ue* is a prince of Genji's lawful wife and dies after giving birth to a girl. The cause of her death is said that she was killed by the soul of Rokujou no miyasudokoro. Rokujou no miyasudokoro grudges against *Aoi no ue* for the vehicle strike matter.

Rokujou no miyasudokoro appears in the *Noh* plays as a soul attempting to kill *Aoi no*

ue. Certainly, the vehicle strike matter is one of the causes of Rokujou no miyasudokoro's grudge, but the prince of Genji's fickleness is also an important element of her grudge. Zeami composed the *Aoi no ue* by emphasizing on the vehicle strike matter as a cause of grudge. Here, there is no any sentences or phrases that blamed at the prince of Genji's fickleness.

For another example, the main actress in *Uneme* is a character that can be found in any other literary works. One of them is Yamato monogatari (Japanese tale is assumed that it is composed in the middle 10th century). *Uneme* is not a name of woman, but rather it is a position of court lady. *Uneme* in the Yamato monogatari has love affair with emperor. After that, the emperor changes his mind. *Uneme* feels so sad. She decides to commit suicide by throwing herself into a pond. The emperor composes a poetry regretting for her death. *Uneme* in the Yamato monogatari shows the subordination of woman toward man. The emperor has many wives; such as the empress, and court ladies. This practice compels woman to endure male love behavior. *Uneme* dies finally without having any narration on her great sorrow and love suffering.

Then, *Uneme* appears in Zeami's plays as a ghost since after the cause of her suicide. The story about her love with the emperor is mentioned only around one fourths in the *Noh* play. The other part remains are the history of *Shinto* shrine, the party that she attended and so on. This is probably such kind of tactic writing which Zeami attempted to avoid talking much about male love behavior and relationship.

However, Zeami could not change themes of separation cause for the case of main actress and her character created from literary works. But in his plays, he avoided to criticize man's fickleness directly. What Zeami did is that he created the world after death of lovelorn women in the play. These dead women become ghosts and talk about their love sufferings which they could not stop loving, rather than talking about male fickleness. In someway, Zeami had created an opened space for woman who suffered from love in order to reveal their deep feelings about love suffering through his plays. The feelings of these women are not certainly appeared in literary works in comparing with the plays composed by Zeami.

The other cause of separation is the theme about male traveling to capital or to work. The main actresses of these five plays (*Kinuta*, *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae*) are not the characters from literary works. Zeami himself composed a new heroine, and cause of separation is freely designated by Zeami. The man's work and his duty is probably a good reason to leave his wife at home, because male is expected by society to more prioritize his work or vocation than housework. Within this social expectation toward males, the main actresses were deserted unintentionally by their male lovers. This cause of separation could be interpreted as an expectation of Zeami to avoid blaming at males who leave their wives or lovers. Zeami probably did not want to hurt feelings of elite audiences, especially the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu who was his main patronage audience.

Many cases has shown cause of separation by male traveling; for example, man of the *Kinuta* travels to the capital for a lawsuit, man of the *Hanagatami* leave his lover to become an emperor, and men of the *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae* travel to work. For this reason, women are left in the house and keep waiting for their husband's return. This situation reflects social situation and social status between male and female by that time.

During the past centuries, Japanese women were discriminated by male-dominated ideology in many ways. They were treated by society to subordinate under male power and control. For example, liquor was made by women but most of the registered names of sellers were males. This situation was also found in fabrics production and liquor containers.

Another example is living style after marriage in the medieval period which differed from the Heian period (794-1185). Polygamy system (a system allow one husband to have many wives) was widely accepted during the Heian period. Men could marry with many women. But woman who was married in correct way could be treated properly as lawful wife. In a sense of marriage in correct way means a marriage announcement after the man's third consecutive night visiting at the woman's house. The husband probably only visits wife at her own house or move into his wife's house. The wife whose husband moved into her house would be called 'first wife'. Cohabitation would come to an end if the husband stopped visiting the wife's house. Later in the medieval period, wife could move into her husband's house and would be a 'principal wife'; meanwhile the other wives would be automatically minor wives. This is considered that one husband and one principal wife system was established formally.

In this way, women's status was specified and fixed by society to subordinate then to men. Principal wife is considered to have more power than the other wives. But somehow there was no guarantee that her husband would come back home everyday. The wife was compelled to wait for her husband. But husband had his own right to choose to visit any wife. Moreover, social status of minor wives is probably the worst one. In the Heian period, lawful wife was raised as the first wife, if husband came to live in her house. But minor wife in the medieval period could never become principal wife.

However, the main actresses in Zeami's *Noh* plays can negotiate with male power in many ways. The five plays (*Kinuta*, *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo*, *Matsukaze* and *Minazuki barae*) that the cause of separation relating to male traveling to the capital or to work can be divided into two groups according to the living condition or dead condition of the main actress. The main actresses in *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo* and *Minazuki barae* are alive, while the rest of *Noh* play are dead. The condition to live or to be dead is concerned with the way of female negotiation toward males' power control. In some sense, the main actresses who are alive are negotiating with male by traveling to meet their lovers in order that women probably have a chance to live with their husbands again. In contrary, the main actresses who become ghosts can reveal their

deep feeling for their love suffering.

The main actresses in *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo* and *Minazuki barae* wait for their husbands to come back home. But they cannot keep waiting forever for their lovers. They decided to search for their husband then. Zeami composed these stories to emphasize the courage of women. Even though the main actresses do not know whether they can meet their lovers, they still travel to seek for their husbands. Moreover, it is possible that their husbands cannot remember women. Finally, the main actresses of these three plays can meet their lovers and live together again. Zeami probably wanted to show a good result of loyalty to one's husband and comfort those wives who waited for their husband's return. Furthermore, it can be possible to assume that Zeami wanted to teach women to have only one husband.

The main actress in *Kinuta* is alive at first. She also waits for her husband. But finally she does not travel to seek for her husband. She suffered very much from what she heard that her husband would stay longer in the capital. She finally dies because of sadness and love suffering and become a ghost coming to meet her husband.

The Zeami's *Noh* plays that main actresses become ghosts are probably considered as a way of woman's negotiation toward man and male ideology on love relationship. The main actress can express her feeling by narration about her love suffering.

All of the main actresses' social status in Zeami's plays, except in *Aoi no ue*, is lower than men's. But all of them suffer from love. Zeami depicts sadness of the lower-class women after separation from their lover. Even if there are some main actresses (*Hanagatami*, *Hanjo* and *Minazuki barae*) who can meet their lovers again in the end, most of such plays portray unhappiness and anxiety of the main actress while waiting for the lover's return. The social status of main actresses and men in Zeami's eight *Noh* plays are shown in the table below

Table 2: The social status of the main actresses and men in Zeami's eight Noh plays.

Noh plays	Main actress	Man
<i>Aoi no ue</i>	Crown prince's wife	Prince
<i>Izutsu</i>	Official's daughter	Famous poet
<i>Uneme</i>	Court lady	Emperor
<i>Kinuta</i>	Hometown woman	Samurai
<i>Hanagatami</i>	Hometown woman	Emperor
<i>Hanjo</i>	Prostitute	Government official
<i>Matsukaze</i>	Woman diver	Famous poet
<i>Minazuki barae</i>	Prostitute	Man from the capital

Love sufferings of lower-class women had been concealed probably in the real situation during the medieval period because males were gone without any commitment. But instead in Zeami's *Noh* plays, lower social status person become heroine who can reveal their deep feelings of love suffering and disappointment shown through Zeami's plays.

Conclusion

Noh drama is considered generally as male performance. Zeami was born in social environment of male chauvinism. But his *Noh* plays concerning lovelorn women can be seen as an opened space for women to show their reactions toward male fickleness. Zeami was successful in composing *Noh* plays that both satisfied shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu by not blaming male love behavior and gave a chance for women to reveal their feelings at the same time. In this way, we probably consider Zeami as an artist and play composer who utilize his skill and genius to help shifting women's social status and arguing on the issue about gender inequality during his period of time.

Zeami's plays were influenced by gender relation and social status in the medieval period. Women were treated by society to subordinate toward male power control and male-dominated ideology. But some of the main actresses in his plays show their courage by traveling to look for their beloved ones, meanwhile some of them become ghost and convey their deep feelings. This is probably considered as a way that Zeami attempted to create a space for women in order to negotiate with male love behavior and male-dominated ideals on gender relation. The Zeami's *Noh* plays in this research depict unhappiness of the main actresses who always wait for their lovers. One factor causing failure in their love relationships may be diverse in different social status among lovers.

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