

The Survival of Women--Re-Reading The Complex Contamination from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: As a Japanese female writer, Sawako Ariyoshi enjoyed a worldwide reputation. She paid attention to social problems and cared about people's sufferings. Her works truly reflect many social problems in Japan after the war. *The Complex Contamination*, one of her representative works, has been hailed as the Silent Spring in Japanese. Based on the conscience of writer, and a long and extensive investigation, Sawako Ariyoshi had recorded the public hazards and food safety problems prevailing in Japan at that time in detail, accused the survival crisis faced by nature and people, and proposed simple and feasible solutions. By re-reading the *The Complex Contamination* from dual perspectives of nature and women and analyzing the two types of female characters in the work, this paper interprets Sawako Ariyoshi's concern for natural ecology, environmental pollution and recognition of the co-prosperity relationship between women and nature.

1. Introduction

Sawako Ariyoshi (1931-1984) was a famous contemporary Japanese female writer and one of the "Three Talented Women" in Japanese literature. Her works, focusing on the postwar Japanese social problems, are the true and exquisite reflection of major social issues in Japan from 1950s to 1970s, such as the environmental pollution, pension problems, "war brides", etc. Meanwhile, Sawako Ariyoshi was a world-renowned writer, with her works translated into English, Chinese, French and other languages and sold at a high volume. In particular, Sawako Ariyoshi was also one of the few Japanese writers who had always maintained friendly relationship with China. She visited China for many times and was warmly received by Premier Zhou. In addition, she established deep friendship with famous Chinese writers such as Lao She and Ba Jin, and specially created a number of literary works based on China, such as the novel *Ink* (1961), documentary literature *Study on Lady Mengjiang* (1969), *Sawako Ariyoshi's China Report* (1979), etc.

China began to pay attention to Sawako Ariyoshi and her works in the 1960s, and mainly focused on the translation and introduction of her works in the 1970s and 1980s. After the 21st century, it had gradually been diversified, and a large number of research papers on Sawako Ariyoshi regarding her female literature, social-issue-related novels and literary characteristics were released. Dr. Shuting Kou from Beijing Normal University has detailed China's studies on Sawako Ariyoshi [1], so the author will explain too much in this paper. From the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper has made textual analysis of *The Complex Contamination*, Sawako Ariyoshi's classic work,

attempting to interpret Sawako Ariyoshi's feminist spirit and ecological feelings from the dual perspectives of women and nature.

2. *The Complex Contamination: Silent Spring in Japanese*

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is a warning to modern humans from the professional standpoint of a Marine biologist, in which the author tells about the impact of pesticides represented by DDT on soil and water, and the serious harm to animals, plants and humans in this ecological chain. Based on a large number of facts and scientific basis, this paper focuses on the theme of DDT's damage to the environment, and warns people to give up such highly toxic pesticides. Undoubtedly, *Silent Spring* has made a huge effect on American ecological environment protection, contributed to the establishment of the first agricultural environmental organization and the comprehensive prohibition of DDT in the US, and spread the seeds of environmentalism to the general public. [2]

The *Complex Contamination* has been hailed as the *Silent Spring* in Japanese. Inspired by *Silent Spring*, Sawako Ariyoshi created such an ecological novel based on the serious environmental pollution in Japan at that time. The *Complex Contamination* was serialized in the morning novel column of *Asahi Shimbun* from Oct. 1974 to Jun. 1975, then a separate edition was published by SHINCHOSHA. However, compared with *Silent Spring*, *The Complex Contamination* seems to be less professional and rigorous, which was painstakingly written by Sawako Ariyoshi, under the pressure of being a "layman", through reading more than 300 books and meeting dozens of experts over the past decade. The book consists of 255 chapters, with the first 53 describing Sawako Ariyoshi's support and assistance to Fusae Ichikawa and two other female candidates in the election. The rest enumerates the hazards of pesticides, fertilizers, chemical cleaners and automobile exhaust to humans. It is clearly pointed out in the book that during the 30 years after the World War II, the Japanese government pursued rapid economic development at the expense of the natural environment and the health of people, by abusing pesticides, insecticides and food additives and arbitrarily discharging toxic chemical pollutants, thus causing serious environmental and social problems. The book also analyzes the damage of these chemical agents to humans and nature, especially the fatal damage to women and children, so as to call on the government and enterprises to give up destroying the ecological environment as soon as possible. Structurally, the former and latter parts in *The Complex Contamination* seem irrelevant. "As a novel, the interesting stories of Fusae Ichikawa and Teiko Kihira running for the councilor disappear midway, it is structurally imperfect", said Takeo Okuno in his interpretation on this book. However, "the opening election is not general political game, but the struggle of women's participation in political power with strong awakened consciousness. Moreover, the content of the election is closely related to the issue of public hazards, which implies Sawako Ariyoshi's thinking on the relationship between women and environment, and reflects the profound feminist thought." [4] Therefore, what distinguishes *The Complex Contamination* from *Silent Spring* is that it is not just an ecological work, but also an excellent novel full of female spirit and ecological plot, integrating science and literature. The author perfectly combines the former part of the female election campaign with the latter part of Japan's environmental problems with her exquisite writing skills, and expresses her worries about the destiny of women and the environmental ecology.

3. *Female Characters in the Novel: Awakened Female Politicians and Numb Ordinary Women*

The Complex Contamination is a realistic social novel, in which most of the characters are real, and their real names are used. Sawako Ariyoshi shows us two kinds of images of women in the novel:

one is the awakened women, represented by Fusae Ichikawa and Teiko Kihira, who advocate integrity, fight for women's rights, care about food safety, pay attention to environmental pollution and the health of women and children, and strive to solve these problems, and the other is ordinary women who are indifferent to politics, pay no attention to environmental problems, and even act as accomplices to environmental pollution.

3.1. Awakened Female Politicians

Fusae Ichikawa (1893-1981), as a well-known woman's liberation movement leader and politician in Japan, had spared no efforts and enthusiastically fought for women's liberation in Japan during her lifetime. *The Complex Contamination* was created when Ichikawa ran for the National District Councillor at the age of 81 in 1974. Despite her age, Fusae Ichikawa was vigorous to carry out campaign in various constituencies in Japan without a stop, and she even stood in the storm to finish her speech. Due to the serious pollution caused by automobile exhaust on the streets, Sawako Ariyoshi, who came to root for the campaign, was bedridden with severe headache. Ichikawa, though 41 years older than Sawako, did not show any discomfort and remained committed to delivering enthusiastic speeches on the streets in various constituencies. She had proved the strong vitality and indomitable willpower of women through her own practical actions.

In the traditional dualism, women and nature are always depreciated and slandered, sometimes even regarded as the synonyms of ugliness, narrowness, selfishness, cowardice, betrayal, etc. Therefore, it's not hard to imagine the resistance encountered by Fusae Ichikawa and others during the campaign. For example, when Ichikawa made her first political speech, a man pulled her off the stage and shouted, "women are arrogant!" [3]51, which baldly expressed his contempt and hostility towards women. Meanwhile, the media also waved flags and leaned to male candidates, even wiping out the political achievements of Ichikawa over the years. However, the ecofeminism denies the dualism and the "other" status of women, criticizes the oppression of male authority on women and nature, points out that "it takes worshipping the mother goddess as the center, and this mother is the source of all life forms and enables regeneration" by analyzing the ubiquitous matriarchy and goddess worshipping in early human civilization [5], passionately eulogizes the great power of mothers in nurturing lives, and expresses the respect and love for women and nature. Ecofeminists often use the earth as the metaphor of mother, because the earth, as the mother of flowers, plants, birds, beasts, fish and insects, has the same function of nurturing lives as the mothers of humans. At the same time, since the earth owns a strong self-renewal and –restoration ability, this mother can remain young and vigorous eternally. In *The Complex Contamination*, Sawako Ariyoshi shows her trust and respect for her predecessor Fusae Ichikawa without any disguise. "Ms. Ichikawa is full of spirit... there is nothing better than the gray hair to symbolize her advanced age of 81, and the charm of her speeches is a sign of her strong vitality, which makes people even more fascinated", [3]19 said Sawako to express her worship of women's power.

Teiko Kihira was another female candidate who was fighting alongside Ichikawa in the campaign battlefield. Ms. Kihira had constantly spread food safety knowledge among people, publicized the hazards of food additives and chemical lotions, attempted to arouse women's political and environmental awareness, showing her great concern for women's health and environmental pollution. Therefore, she was also the promoter of the women's movements and environmental protection movements in Japan in the 20th century, and the representative of awakened women.

3.2. Numb Housewives

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to the two glorious and great female images of Ichikawa and Kihira, there were a large number of numb female audiences, who enjoyed the convenient life

brought about by industrial modernization, cared nothing about politics and had little environmental awareness. They were immersed in the joy of owning the 3 kinds of "magic machines" - washing machine, refrigerator and gas stove, but failed to realize that they were surrounded by "336 kinds of food additives and pesticides contained in tea, rice, fruits and vegetables" [3]303. Women, fetuses, infants and children are the biggest victims of environmental pollution. "Infants will be very dangerous to drink breast milk contaminated by AF2 in tofu and PCBs in fish." [3]47 If a mother eats too much mercury-containing food, it may be likely that "the mother is healthy, but the infant is born with cerebral palsy and severe dysfunction" [3]196. What's more terrible was that the housewives were playing the role of accomplices in environmental pollution while bearing the risks of environmental pollution. Following the advertisement, they chose neutral detergents and synthetic detergents over soap, but they didn't know that the alkylbenzene sulfonates contained in these detergents had the "properties of auxiliary carcinogenicity and causing fetal malformation." [3]304. Toxic substances discharged into nature would further pollute the water and soil, on which human beings survive. Therefore, they were not only the direct victims of environmental pollution, but also the perpetrators of environmental damages.

However, housewives were unaware of their predicament, and their lives were occupied by children, husband and daily routines such as cooking and laundry. Ms. Ichikawa once delivered a speech in the auditorium of a primary school, during which female figures were rarely seen in the audience, and "men were taking the overwhelming majority" [3]80. Even if the housewives came across campaign vehicles on the street, they hardly stopped to listen, but gave "a distant look of no interest" [3]30, and they only took the purchase of groceries as their top priority. "It is through work that a woman shortens the most distance from a man, and only work can guarantee her specific freedom", written in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, "once she is no longer a parasite, the system based on dependence collapses; there is no more need for male intermediaries between her and the world." [6] Because most of the women in Japan were full-time housewives at that time, they did not have independent work and stable income sources, so that they were significantly dependent on men, which affected their family status and personal freedom to a certain extent. Although Japan amended its Constitution after World War II to acknowledge equality between men and women in law, large differences still existed between men and women in employment opportunities, salary treatment, promotion opportunities and other aspects. In addition, the family burden of nurturing young children and supporting the elderly was heavy, so most women still chose to stay at home to assist their husbands and bring up children. Over time, all the family burden inevitably fell on the shoulders of housewives, resulting in their much less energy and interest in caring about and participating in politics. Through the description of the numb housewives, Sawako Ariyoshi expressed her understanding of and sympathy for the female compatriots and her concern about the current social status of women, and appealed to women to care about politics and their own destiny and improve environmental protection awareness.

4. Enlightenment to Contemporary Women: Protecting the Natural Ecology is to Protect Women Themselves

The Complex Contamination is not only about ecologism, but also about feminism. It perfectly integrates the ecological perspectives with the female point of view, which can be regarded as the revelation of ecofeminism. People can still be benefited a lot from many of the perspectives in this book.

Women and nature are the community of destiny, and cherishing nature is to cherish women themselves. Therefore, women must improve their ecological protection awareness and protect our homes. "We are the nature. We are the nature that understands nature. We are the nature with the

perspective of nature, the crying nature, the nature talks about the nature with nature”, written by Susan Griffin, the leader of ecofeminism, in *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her*. [7] The reproductive function of women is similar to the reproduction of female animals in nature, both of which embody the nurturing, tolerance and care of motherhood. In the traditional patriarchal society, however, women and nature, regarded as the "other" of the male society, are trampled and exploited arbitrarily. Therefore, only women can deeply understand the suffering of nature, and only nature is the best listener for women. Based on such understanding, Sawako Ariyoshi appealed to people: 1. to have a heart of reverence for nature, and to realize that “the ‘human’s understanding’ of nature is next to nothing” [3]262; 2. to respect the laws of nature and every link in the food chain, as humus and animal manure make the soil full of vitality, while pesticides and fertilizers only destroy the balance, defeating "the restoration ability of nature" [3]153; 3. to stay vigilant against the lies of industrialization and try not to get too contented with the convenience brought about by industrial modernization, but to recognize the hidden ecological crisis behind it, as the waste gas and water discharged by factories "will pollute the land or sea water, and enter into the human bodies through crops and livestock products." [3]353 In a word, all human actions that destroy the natural environment will ultimately be paid for by human beings themselves, and the most direct victims are undoubtedly women and children. Consequently, protecting the environment is to protect women and protect reproduction of human beings.

In the traditional gender society, men often hold the strongest power, while women are generally bound to their families like caged birds and act as the objects to be supported and protected. Therefore, the objective of ecofeminism is to “eliminate all hierarchical ruling represented by patriarchy, abolish all forms of oppression and exploitation embodied in gender relations, which means women's liberation for women and nature’s liberation for nature.[8] Ecofeminism enumerates many sins of men, and points out that the constraint and oppression of patriarchy on women is the root of women's low social status and deficient social activity. In *The Complex Contamination*, Sawako Ariyoshi also criticizes men and the modern industries dominated by them, points out their lack of parenting and housework, and criticizes their foolish behaviors of taking the "terrible pragmatism" as criterion for everything. [3]. Meanwhile, for the encounter of female compatriots, she can only be "frustrated for their obedience and sorrow for their misfortune". They were indifferent to politics and resigned to environmental pollution.....Such numbness and indifference also led to women's tragic and pathetic destiny. Therefore, it’s expected by Sawako Ariyoshi that the female compatriots improve their environmental protection awareness and political sensitivity, pay more attention to their own destiny, participate in social life more actively, and realize the real liberation of women and nature as soon as possible. This is also a way pointed out by Sawako Ariyoshi for women to live freely and healthily.

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