



## The Analysis of the Ethical Dimension of Yumiko Kurahashi's *The Woman with the Flying Head*

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### Abstract

Yumiko Kurahashi's short story *The Woman with the Flying Head* draws on the account of the "People with the Fallen Head" from the book *"In Search of the Supernatural"*, depicting the tale of the protagonist Rei whose body engages in adultery with her foster father at night while her head flying off to date another married man, and her daughter "I" decisively chooses to relinquish the right to love in order to break the curse of incest and immoral relationships between father and daughter. The narrative utilizes concepts such as ethical structure, ethical taboos, free will, irrational will, and ethical choices to reveal the novel's structure and ethical implications, elucidating that my choice falls under the ethical choices of ethical literary criticism. It also points out, through the existentialist female writer Yumiko Kurahashi's portrayal of the "me", that the choices made are also existentialist in nature. Ethical choices and free choices complement each other, giving the novel dual ethical implications and reflecting Yumiko Kurahashi's call for moral perfection and free independent feminist stance.

**Key words:** *"The Woman with the Flying Head"*; Ethical literary criticism; Existential ethics; Free choice; Ethical decisions

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### INTRODUCTION

Yumiko Kurahashi (1935-2005) is considered a representative of the new generation of writers following the "Third Generation of New Writers" in the history of modern Japanese literature, alongside authors like Kaiko Takeshi and Kenzaburō Ōe. She wrote her thesis on *"Being and Nothingness"* during her time studying French literature at Meiji University, which greatly influenced her fiction writing from the beginning, particularly by post-war Western ideologies, especially Sartrean existentialism. Yumiko Kurahashi's notable works include the novels *"The Long Road of Dreams"*, *"The Adventures of Sumiyagist Q"*, the novella *"The Travels to and from the Country of Amanon"*, and short story collections like *"Balta," "Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults,"* and *"Yumiko Kurahashi's Strange Short Stories"*. It is generally acknowledged that her novels bear a distinct imprint of Sartrean existentialist ideas. The narrative skills are skillful, the literary consciousness is prominent, and a wide range of materials are drawn from past and present, especially from ancient Chinese literature. Known for deconstructing the beauty under the old gender order, Kurahashi adeptly portrays themes such as modern individuals' spiritual and physical division, the collapse of consciousness, etc, so to criticize society, and express her fundamental feminist stance.

### 1. SYNOPSIS OF "THE WOMAN WITH THE FLYING HEAD"

The short story *"The Woman with the Flying Head"* unfolds in the form of the narrator recounting father's recounting of his conversation with K. As the story nears its end, the narrator is suddenly drawn into the events, creating a dramatic and compact narrative pace. Despite being a very short story, it has a rich narrative

structure. Here is a brief outline: K, a high school friend of the narrator's father, tells a story about himself and his adopted daughter, Rei. The prototype of Rei is a kind of grotesque people named "the people with the fallen head" mentioned in documents such as "In Search of the Supernatural". One night, K sneaks into Rei's room to watch her sleep, only to find her head has mysteriously flown off. Rei wakes up the next day as usual, unaware of her head leaving her body or K's voyeurism. After several nights of observation, K, emboldened by his curiosity, crosses a line and becomes intimate with Rei. Rei's body also enjoys the physical pleasure, harmonising with her father at night. Clearly, this constitutes incest between father and daughter, as K and Rei violate societal ethical taboos. Meanwhile, Rei's head flies off at night to have secret trysts with a married man. The separation of her head and body at night, followed by rejoining in the day, creates a dream-like perception for Rei's daytime self. As Rei's head and the married man's relationship deepens, daytime Rei eventually confesses the affair to K. Consumed by jealousy, K thinks Rei can marry but must leave her body behind. K witnesses Rei's head's blissful looking after another secret dating, leading him to a fit of jealousy and rage. He grabs a bed sheet, covers the neck with it, and after a brief struggle, tragically ending the head's life.

If the novel were to end here, it would merely be an accusation of male dominance symbolized by K, with Rei representing women as weak and powerless victims. Clearly, Yumiko Kurahashi aims to express more actively her thoughts on ethics and gender issues. Subsequently, the novel continues through "My" voice recounting the aftermath of the story. After Rei's death, her body remains alive for several days and gives birth to a lovely headless baby girl before passing away. The father confesses that he was Rei's lover before her death, and it is him who adopted the headless baby girl. Before his death due to illness, the father admitted to "me" that he lacked the courage to confirm whether "I" had inherited the disease that caused Rei's head to be separated from her body at night. As identities were revealed, "I" was forced to make an ethical choice. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the work mainly contains four ethical knots revolving around K, Rei, and "I", with ethical choices of "I" as the core and focal point of the short story.

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## 2. THE ANALYSIS OF "THE WOMAN WITH THE FLYING HEAD" FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

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Ethical literary criticism points out that ethical knot is the concentrated representation of contradictions and conflicts within the structure of literary works, forming ethical

dilemmas and revealing the basic ethical issues of literary texts. This article attempts to organize the main ethical structures in "*The Woman with the Flying Head*" around the characters Rei, K, and "I" into four ethical structures: incest between father and daughter, illicit affair, foster father killing daughter, and ethical choices of "I".

### 2.1 Incest Between K and Rei

During the Japanese invading forces' retreat from China, K took Rei to Japan and adopted her as his daughter. One night, while peeping at Rei sleeping, K noticed her head seemed to be absent, but her "hands were warm, sweating slightly when held, her slender legs delicate and slim, like a beautiful ivory sculpture." Upon realizing Reiko's obliviousness to her condition, K could no longer suppress his desire for her body, "beginning to have sexual intercourse with Rei every night," and Rei's body "responsive and yielding to me (K), though subtly, quickly experiencing pleasure, harmonising with me..." According to K's account, Rei's body enjoys sensory pleasure. On one hand, K's lust for Rei's body led to the violation of his foster daughter, breaking ethical taboos. On the other hand, the missing head symbolizes the absence of rational thinking and ethical judgment. Therefore, Rei could only allow her actions to be governed by free will, driven by instinct to pursue satisfaction of survival and pleasure cravings. Ethical literary criticism suggests that free will falls within the realm of animalistic instincts, devoid of distinctions between good and evil. Thus, although Rei and K both transgress the taboo of incestuous relations between father and daughter, for Rei, her affair with her father is a result of rational absence, driven by free will and instinctual impulses.

On the contrary, the lewd relationship with Rei's body is considered by K as wrongdoing driven by irrational will. In ethical literary criticism, irrational will mainly refers to the irrational driving force behind all emotions and actions, manifested as motives, desires, beliefs, faith, habits, instincts, and other spiritual factors beyond rational control and constraint. Irrational will carries value judgments, distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong, falling within the scope of ethics. K's long-standing sexual desires and attempts towards Rei's body are precisely driven by this irrational will mixed with instincts and desires, leading K to engage in physical relations with his foster daughter Rei, violating the taboo of incest. K's behaviour is based on erroneous perceptions and judgments, leading to wrongdoing.

### 2.2 An Illicit Affair Between Rei and a Married Man

According to K, Rei dreams of being in love with a man in her dreams and is reflected by Rei's head leaving her body at night to date the man. As their love deepens, one day Rei confesses to K about her affair with a married man, expressing the agony of unrequited love. Despite knowing

the man is married, Rei continues this unethical affair. From the perspective of literary ethics criticism, Rei's illicit love affair is an ethical evil caused by irrational will.

### 2.3 K's Killing of Rei

K, in jealousy and anger, kills the head of Rei, violating the ethical taboo of killing his foster daughter, forming another ethical dilemma in the novel. The pure-hearted Rei confides in her foster father K about the pain of unrequited love, triggering K's resentment as he attempts to possess her body. K coldly shouts at Rei, "Go marry someone! Just let your head go and leave your body with me." This starkly exposes K's true intentions of mere desire and control towards Rei. As expected, K becomes consumed with jealousy when he sees Rei's return from a tryst with a joyful face, using the method of "covering with a quilt" to prevent Rei's head from reattaching to her body, causing her great pain as a way to punish her and vent the hatred. However, despite seeing Rei's head "confusedly flying around," she does not plead for forgiveness. K, jealous of Rei's beloved, infuriated by Rei's indifference and betrayal, is filled with murderous intent, wanting Rei to "see your end", eventually leading to the death of Rei's head. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Rei is only pursuing independence and love, but it constitutes a serious betrayal of K's authority and lust, which makes K violate the ethical taboo under the drive of anger and jealousy.

### 2.4 "My" Ethical Choice

According to my father's account, after Rei was killed by K, Rei's body gradually weakened and died a few days later. Before her death, Rei gave birth to a lovely headless baby girl. My father adopted the baby, and I am that baby, while my father was Rei's lover before her death. At this point, the relationships between my father, K, Rei, and myself all came to light, revealing my true identity. K is my biological father, the girl Rei who suffered from "head-flying disease" is my mother and the man who adopted me and whom I call father is also Rei's lover. As the truth about my background emerged, I, as my father's listener, suddenly found myself entangled in the story and relationships. The sudden ethical identity and ethical dilemma thrust upon me became the focal point of the entire work. My father's concern before his death about whether I inherited my mother Rei's "head-flying disease" intensified the mental pressure on me when making ethical choices. If the disease were to manifest, it would mean that I would experience the same nightly separation of body and head as Rei did, violating dual ethical taboos. My father's worries directly relate to the difficulty of my choice: should I relive Rei's fate, half involved in an illicit affair with a man and half becoming an object of male desire, driven by irrational or free will to violate ethical taboos? Or should I make a decisive, resolute ethical choice, to be a complete, genuine person rather

than a half-human, half-monster; to be an independent, free, self-reliant woman rather than a dependent, weak woman, to bravely break free from the curse of violating ethical taboos? Undoubtedly, passively accepting the "inheritance" of one's fate is an ethical unawareness and laziness of the acting subject, leading not only to ethical literary critical but also to ethical existential self-deception or non-authentic existence.

In the final paragraph of the novel, "I" carefully confirmed certain important facts about myself: I have no lover, no dreams yet of rendezvous with a lover, and my head has not yet started flying around— in short, the flying head disease inherited from Rei has not yet struck. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, "I" am well aware of the animalistic elements and irrational will within myself, while also acknowledging that they are still dormant. Ethically, "I" remain intact. These confirmed facts constitute the personal conditions for "me" to make ethical choices.

The novel ends with the statement "I think, as long as I don't love, my head won't fly," indicating that in order to avoid repeating the female tragedy of her mother, Rei, "I" choose not to love, sacrificing the right to love and suppressing the instinct of love. Ethical literary criticism suggests that ethical choices have two meanings. On one hand, it refers to a person's moral choices, achieving moral maturity and perfection through selection. On the other hand, ethical choices refer to the selection of two or more moral options, where different choices lead to different outcomes and different ethical values. It is not difficult to see that the above choices of "me" have positive ethical value, which leads to the moral maturity and perfection of "me" and the women represented by "me". It also contributes to the promotion of an independent, free, and resolute ideal female image in social consciousness, and the construction of a more gender-equal society.

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## 3. THE CHOICE OF "I" -- DUET OF FREE CHOICE AND ETHICAL CHOICE

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### 3.1 Free Choice in the Ethical Sense of Existentialism

The novel concludes with a powerful and highly literary statement of "I think, as long as I don't love someone, my head won't fly about," making the protagonist's choice remarkably strong. This ethical decision declared unconditionally by the protagonist, independent of any external factors related to the protagonist such as politics, economics, society, family, etc. It is the protagonist's own subjectivity, the self, the female self that makes the ethical choice.

Existentialism argues that each individual is an absolute self, where one's thoughts and soul remain beyond the control of others under any circumstances,

allowing for free resistance against one's master. While others may manipulate the body, they cannot dictate the true inner self. "My" ethical choice places the emphasis on women's subjectivity, promoting women's self-realization, autonomy, and self-improvement for achieving their self-governing independence and individuality.

Existentialist ethics hold that the prerequisite for authentic existence lies in living within freedom and responsibility. Avoiding freedom and responsibility can lead to inauthentic existence or self-deception (bad faith). Therefore, existentialists believe that human existence must adhere to the ethical standards of authenticity. The guiding principle of moral behavior is to avoid self-deception, to take one's own responsibility, and to create one's own essence and value.

In conclusion, "My" choice reveals the absolute individuality of existentialism and embodies the pinnacle of freedom in choice. "I" take authentic human existence as the sole ethical standard, achieving its true existence through free choice, thus attaining goodness. This endows the novel with existential ethical value, reflecting Yumiko Kurahashi's true nature as a female existentialist writer.

### 3.2 Dual Implications of Ethical Choice and Ethical Existential Free Choice

As previously mentioned, existentialism emphasizes freedom of choice, considering the true existence of individuals as the sole ethical standard. However, literary ethics criticism places greater emphasis on ethical choices made by individuals, advocating people to identify with and uphold ethical norms already present in the public domain. It stresses that ethical decisions should consider the consequences of good as the primary guide and measure of human behavior. These two approaches have significant differences in their measurement standards.

The choice of "I" is an ethical choice from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. In the end of

the novel, "I" suddenly faces a specific ethical dilemma and chooses among different moral options that lead to a more perfect morality, more beneficial to gender equality and the advancement of society. On the other hand, "I" advocates for women to use absolute individuality and ultimate freedom to reject gender inequality, break free from past inauthentic existence, stop self-deception, and fulfill their own and women's essential existence. Therefore, "My" choice is also a typical act of free will.

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## CONCLUSION

In summary, the choice of "I" in "*The Woman with the Flying Head*" is both an ethical choice and a free choice. The two are both distinct and complementary. The free choice of "I", with its absolute individuality and freedom, highlights the strong spiritual power contained in the ethical choice. At the same time, the ethical choice also constrains the free choice, demanding that it must be a good choice that realizes the perfection of women's morality and social progress. The choice of "I", as a unity of ethical choice and free choice, has the dual implications of ethical literary criticism and existentialistic ethics, which is also an important characteristic of the ethical dimension of "*The Woman with the Flying Head*".

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