



# Contemporary Significance of Natsume Sōseki's "Theory of Literature" from the Perspective of Comparative Literature

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**Abstract.** In the present era of rapid economic and technological advancements, the progress in literary exchange and integration is accelerating. Overall literature, world literature, and related studies are increasingly appearing within the purview of literary researchers worldwide. Yet, faced with the current world where literature is gradually becoming integrated, there arises the question for developing nations: how to retain the contemplation of their native literature? How should the differences between traditional and modern literature be correctly understood? How can Eastern and Western literature strive for equality? Interestingly, answers to this array of questions can be found in Natsume Sōseki's classic literary theoretical work, "Theory of Literature," written a century ago.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Natsume Sōseki, "Theory of Literature"

## 1 Introduction

In the West, Natsume Sōseki's literary theory has not been given much attention, as Zhuang Yan points out in "An Overview of the Current State of Natsume Sōseki's Literary Theory Research in Japan, the UK, and the US," noting that Sōseki's literary theory has been "long neglected" and only began to gain significant development "after the new century." The same is true in China, where the engagement with Natsume Sōseki's "Theory of Literature" within the Chinese scholarly community has been notably protracted, with significant attention only manifesting approximately half a century after its inaugural translation in 1931[1]. It was not until He Shaoxian's seminal 1988 examination, "Master of Modern Japanese Literature: Natsume Sōseki," that a comprehensive understanding of Sōseki's contributions to Chinese literary discourse began to form. He's scholarly inquiry delved into Sōseki's life, his intellectual evolution, and his distinctive literary concepts, setting a precedent for future academic explorations.

Continuing this trajectory, scholars such as Wang Zhison, Lin Shaoyang, and Meng Qing have contributed to a nuanced expansion of Sōseki's theoretical framework, interrogating its intersections with contemporary Japanese literary thought and its challenge to Western-centric critical paradigms. This critical examination has greatly enhanced

the perception of Sòseki's endeavors to craft a literary theory that seamlessly integrates the East and West, transcending binary divisions.

The 2016 retranslation by Wang Xiangyuan proved instrumental in reinvigorating the Sòseki scholarship within China, rectifying prior translational deficiencies. Current academic discourse has further recognized the imprint of Sòseki's theories on the evolution of modern Chinese literature, underlining the ongoing relevance of his work.

In tandem with this scholarly pursuit, Sòseki's theories have increasingly intersected with interdisciplinary studies and have been assimilated into pedagogical resources. This integration underscores his pivotal role in subverting Eurocentric critical models and fostering a synthesis of Eastern and Western literary doctrines. The "Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings" encapsulate this sentiment by stating: "In short, 'Theory of Literature' is an astonishing and unprecedented work of literary theory, unmistakably modern yet also clearly (and self-consciously) non-Western even as it insists on its own universal applicability" (Sòseki, Natsume. "Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings[2]." Notwithstanding the depth of research conducted thus far, the discourse within comparative literature between China and Japan has primarily juxtaposed Sòseki's theoretical landscape with that of Chinese literary theories. Yet, the contemporary global milieu necessitates a reevaluation of Sòseki's "Theory of Literature" through the lens of comparative literature.

This paper endeavors to scrutinize how Sòseki's "Theory of Literature" grapples with the melding of Eastern and Western literary canons, the equilibrium between tradition and modernity, and the fortification of national literary identities in the face of pervasive foreign influences. By reassessing "Theory of Literature" in the context of modern comparative literature, this study aspires to illuminate its persistent significance in the fabric of today's global literary milieu.

## **2 The Formation of "Theory of Literature" under the Consciousness of Underdeveloped Countries and Its Discourse on the Essence of Literature.**

"Theory of Literature," a seminal work by Natsume Sòseki, marked a significant departure from previous Japanese literary theories, most notably Tsubouchi Shoyo's "The Essence of the Novel." Sòseki's work, emerging in the early 20th century, represents a critical juncture in Japanese literary thought, particularly in its response to Western influences.

Tsubouchi Shoyo's "The Essence of the Novel," written during the 18th year of the Meiji era, emphasized narrative as a core element of literature, advocating for realism and the depiction of human emotions. Despite its progressive stance in Japan's literary evolution, Shoyo's work exhibited a somewhat competitive outlook towards Western literature, reflecting a limited engagement with cross-cultural literary dynamics.

In stark contrast, as Yan Shulan notes in her writing, "The 'Theory of Literature' was meticulously compiled by Natsume Sòseki, based on his lecture notes from the course on literary theory taught at the Department of English Literature, Tokyo Imperial Uni-

versity, during 1903-1905[3]. "In this endeavor, Sòseki recognized the inherent differences between Eastern and Western literary traditions, conscientiously avoiding simplistic hierarchies of literary value, thereby reflecting a nuanced and independent contemplation of literature. This approach is particularly evident in his perception of distinct paradigms in Eastern and Western literary research, highlighting his commitment to a balanced and inclusive literary perspective.

Sòseki's tenure in England, although mandated by the Japanese Ministry of Education, did not result in an uncritical embrace of Western literature. Despite Japan's comparative backwardness during this period, Sòseki maintained a critical distance, leveraging his profound grounding in Chinese and Japanese literary traditions. His dual approach towards English literature – earnest study coupled with independent critique – enabled him to assimilate advanced Western knowledge in psychology and sociology while preserving the integrity of Eastern literary traditions.

A pivotal aspect of Sòseki's theoretical contribution is his redefinition of literature through psychological and sociological lenses, moving beyond the confines of traditional literary categorizations. Liyue Jin summarizes in his work, "Sòseki creatively discussed the composition of literature using the formula 'F+f.' 'F' represents the focal impression or concept formed by the projection of human subjective consciousness onto external objects, while 'f' denotes the emotions or feelings attached to 'F.' The work primarily discusses the relationship between F and f, the specific content of F and f, their mutual influence, and how they are transformed from life materials into artistic structures[4]." His formula (F+f), encompassing the cognitive and emotional elements of literature, transcends regional and temporal boundaries, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding literature.

Sòseki's stance, particularly in facing cultural impacts from more advanced civilizations, offers valuable insights for contemporary literatures from less dominant countries. His balanced approach—grounded in earnest study, critical engagement, and independent thought—provides a model for maintaining literary independence and integrity in a globalized literary landscape.

In sum, Natsume Sòseki's "Theory of Literature" represents a foundational shift in Japanese literary theory, characterized by its inclusive and interdisciplinary approach. His work not only contributes to the understanding of Japanese literature in relation to Western influences but also offers a timeless framework for global literary studies.

### **3 The Determination of Traditional and Modern Literary Concepts Under the Consciousness of Equality**

In Natsume Sòseki's seminal work "Theory of Literature," he explores the nature of literary evolution, arguing against the traditionally held view that literature progresses linearly with societal development. Instead, Sòseki introduces the concept of the 'Theory of Literary Transition,' which posits that literature's evolution is not a mark of progress but a reflection of shifts in societal consciousness[5].

Sòseki's theory challenges the notion of traditional literature being inherently inferior to modern literature. He posits that literature, in essence, transitions rather than

develops, driven by the changing focus of consciousness in society and individuals. This perspective diverges from the prevalent historical materialism viewpoint, which suggests that literature evolves as a direct reflection of societal advancements.

The 'Theory of Literary Transition' examines literature through a psychological lens, suggesting that changes in literature are more indicative of a 'transition of taste' rather than an objective progression. Sòseki argues that as the collective focus of consciousness shifts, certain literary themes and styles fall out of favor, while others gain prominence. This fluidity, however, does not imply a hierarchy between traditional and modern literature[6].

Sòseki's approach encourages a reevaluation of how literature is understood in relation to social history. Rather than viewing literature as a mere byproduct of historical progress, Sòseki treats it as an independent cultural phenomenon. This perspective underscores the importance of recognizing both the unique value of modern literature and the enduring relevance of traditional literature.

In the contemporary context, Sòseki's 'Theory of Literary Transition' remains significant. It urges scholars to move beyond binary oppositions of traditional versus modern and to embrace the complexity of literature's evolution. This theory provides a nuanced framework for understanding the dynamic and diverse nature of literary expression, emphasizing that what is deemed modern will eventually become traditional as the focus of consciousness continues to shift.

In conclusion, Natsume Sòseki's 'Theory of Literature,' and particularly his 'Theory of Literary Transition,' offers a profound rethinking of the relationship between traditional and modern literature. It advocates for a more intricate and less deterministic approach to literary studies, one that recognizes the independent value and transformative nature of literature across different eras.

#### **4 Relative Nature of Regional Literature in the Context of Global Literary Consciousness**

The trajectory of modernization varies globally due to diverse factors such as historical context, cultural traditions, geographical settings, and political landscapes. This divergence has been particularly evident in the realm of literature, where Western-centric perspectives historically dominated, often overshadowing the merits of Eastern literary traditions. Natsume Sòseki's "Theory of Literature" emerges as a pivotal work that challenges this Western-centric paradigm.

During the period when Sòseki composed his "Theory of Literature," English literature was widely regarded as the epitome of modern literary expression, a benchmark for universal literary values[7]. This pervasive Western-centrism subtly influenced scholars to align with Western theoretical frameworks, often at the expense of indigenous literary perspectives. Sòseki's work, however, confronts this bias by offering a nuanced understanding of literature's relationship with civilization and culture.

In "Theory of Literature," Sòseki draws upon his knowledge of Western psychology and sociology, as reflected in his "Natsume Materials - Notes on the Theory of Litera-

ture." He posits that while literature and civilization evolve, the pathways of this evolution differ markedly between the East and West. He attributes this divergence to fundamental differences in the perception of the external material world and the realm of the mind[8]. In the West, the focus is on transforming the material world, leading to reforms in social and political systems, while in the East, the emphasis is on the malleability of the mind, enriching philosophical and spiritual traditions.

Challenging Western-centrism, Sòseki introduces the concept of "regional literature," advocating for the recognition of English literature as one among many regional literatures, each with its own unique attributes, devoid of inherent superiority or inferiority. This perspective disrupts the then-dominant literary world view, emphasizing the complexity of intercultural exchanges and the challenges inherent in embracing foreign cultures[9].

Sòseki's "Theory of Literature" does not solely focus on the differences between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Instead, he seeks to establish a systematic and scientific literary framework that accommodates both. He emphasizes the similarities between Eastern and Western literature, particularly in their use of nature as a harmonizing element. For Sòseki, there is no binary of superiority or inferiority; he envisions a unified literary landscape that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

As a seminal figure in modern Japanese literature, Sòseki navigated the intersection of Eastern and Western literary influences without showing explicit favoritism. He acknowledged the distinctiveness of Japanese literature as a regional literature while also recognizing the shared attributes among diverse literary traditions. This approach offers valuable insights for contemporary literary scholars and practitioners, advocating for a balance between national literary independence and global literary integration.

## 5 Conclusion

The "Representative of Egalitarianism in the Literary World" that Natsume Sòseki once published constitutes his response to a series of issues in contemporary literary development. The article examines Walt Whitman's egalitarian spirit in poetry. The writing illustrates that Whitman's egalitarianism encompasses equality in time, space, among people, and in the natural world. Equality in time refers to not blindly revering classical literature; equality in space means "African deserts and the vibrancy of London both have an equal right to enter poetry," and all nations and countries are equal; while, although there exist differences in body and spirit among people, there should be no external caste or wealth distinction, as everyone is equal; and all elements in the natural world are equal[10]. Natsume's concept of equality similarly influenced the writing of "Theory of Literature," suggesting that literature from developing countries should strive for equality, traditional and modern literature should maintain equality, and Eastern and Western literature should pursue equality.

Today, nearly a century after the publication of "Theory of Literature," its theories continue to possess profound insights and inspiration. Literary development still faces numerous complex challenges, such as conflicts between nations and countries, East and West, cultural advancement and lagging, reflecting the diversity of literature and

emphasizing its importance in the era of globalization[11]. Solutions to these problems can be found in "Theory of Literature." Firstly, the relationship between nations and countries has always been a crucial issue in the literary field. Literature, as a form of cultural expression, often bears the identity of a nation and ethnicity. However, under the wave of globalization, the fusion of cultures and cross-border literary transmission presents new challenges and opportunities. "Theory of Literature" provides a theoretical framework to deeply contemplate how literature, in a transnational, transcultural context, can maintain and enrich the cultural characteristics of nations and countries. To sustain the overall development of world literature, it's vital, as Natsume did, to independently and thoughtfully consider, to neither fall behind in the development of world literature nor sacrifice the unique traits of national literature. Secondly, the dialogue between Eastern and Western literature has been a focal topic in literary studies. The development of literary theory and practice in different cultural contexts has generated diversity, highlighting the importance of understanding and comparing various literary traditions. Through its remarkable comparative literary perspective, "Theory of Literature" not only deepens the understanding of the similarities between Eastern and Western literature but also aids scholars in better comprehending the interaction between the two and promoting cross-cultural dialogue to drive intercultural studies in literature. Lastly, there exist differences in the development of literature among different countries and regions, which provoke discussions about literary advancement and lagging. "Theory of Literature," centered on the concept of literary transference, offers an alternative possibility to explore the essence and value of literature. It encourages attention to the social function and cultural significance of literature to assess its development from a more comprehensive standpoint.

In conclusion, despite the complex challenges and unknown directions in world and overall literature, "Theory of Literature" remains a profoundly impactful theoretical work that helps address many issues in the literary field. Thus, revisiting "Theory of Literature" continues to hold important theoretical and practical significance.

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