

# Between Structure and Action: Sub-Imperial Subjectivity and the Silenced Other in *The Human Chair*

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## Abstract:

This paper, based on Edogawa Rampo's novel "*The Human Chair*", combined with the postcolonial theory and Foucault's disciplined society theory, discusses how the literary style of "ero Guro nansensu" participates in the construction of the ideology of the Japanese sub-imperial position. This paper points out that previous studies on this type of literature mostly focused on consumerism and body politics, ignoring its deep functions in the viewing mechanism and the construction of imperial power. Through the close reading of the text, the paper divides the main characters of the novel into protagonist A and protagonist B. It analyzes them as a symbolic structural subject and action subject, revealing that the state is not a single actor, but completes the maintenance of the ruling logic through the coordination between structure and action. The three key plot turns in the article -- the motivation of B turning into a chair, the rejection of foreign bodies, and the fictionalization of the letter -- are interpreted as metaphors for the construction of national legitimacy, anxiety and repair. Finally, the paper suggests that "*The Human Chair*" not only reveals the mechanism of cultural imitation and exclusion under Japan's sub-imperial position, It also demonstrates how the modern state achieves the structural exclusion of the other.

**Keywords:** Ero Guro Nansensu; postcolonialism; Edogawa Rampo; Japanese modernity

## 1. Introduction

The literary style of ero guro nansensu usually refers to the aesthetic expression characterized by "eroticism, grotesque and meaninglessness" in Japanese popular culture in the early 20th century, which rose

in the Taisho Period, reflecting the infatuation with physical abnormalities, sexual and violent fantasies in the context of urbanization. The academic circle mainly interprets it from the perspective of consumerism and body politics, emphasizing its capital-body-discipline structure in modern urban culture.

However, this paper argues that ero guro nansensu is not only the alienation product of modernity, but also deeply involved in the construction and reproduction of the ideology of the Japanese sub-imperial position at the structural level.

As the object of analysis, Edogawa's novel "*The Human Chair*" not only presents the complex entanglement between the other and the subject, but also metaphorically shows the structural mechanism of the external world in the process of colonial expansion of the Japanese Empire. Starting from the postcolonial theory and combining with Foucault's theoretical framework of discipline, this paper attempts to re-examine how the text constructs the power structure through body and gaze, and symbolically legitimizes the cultural governance logic of Japanese sub-imperial position towards the colonial other.

## 2. Literature Review

The academic research on ero guro nansensu has long focused on the intersection of modernity, capitalism, and body politics, forming an interpretative path with capital-body-discipline as the core. Representative studies such as Miriam Silverberg emphasized in *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense* and the *Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* that ero guro nansensu, as a popular cultural phenomenon, is closely related to the urbanization, sexual liberation and modern consumer culture in Japan from Taisho to Showa, showing the characteristics of the body being alienated by capital [1]. However, Miriam Silverberg did not further explore the potential functions of these body images in imperial ideology. Michael Driscoll analyzed the colonial history of the Japanese Empire in Taiwan and Korea in his book, *absolute erotic, Absolute Grotesque*. When it came to the ero guro nansensu, he analyzed it from the perspective of gender in combination with necropolitics theory [2]. Although it broadened Silverberg's analytical framework, it failed to understand erotic and grotesque culture in the imperialist discourse system. Other scholars try to cut in from the perspective of marginalized groups. For example, Genevieve emphasizes the alienation mechanism of the disabled body in *Ero Guro's* narrative, but her analysis is still based on the tension between body, capital, and modernity [3]. They failed to think about it in the colonial order and power structure.

Lisa Lackney pointed out in the text on the analysis of other cultural styles that it reflected the operation of imperial discourse, but when talking about ero guro nansensu, it is only regarded as the ethnographic writing function of describing the external other as a comparison with the civilized society [4]. It fails to specifically analyze how this

style organizes the "other" in the text.

In summary, while existing studies have revealed the complex relationship between ero guro nansensu and modernity, capitalism, and body politics, there is a general lack of systematic analyses of its involvement as a mechanism of imperial ideology. Especially in the aspects of gaze mechanism, subject construction, and colonial other disciplines, there are still theoretical and textual gaps. This paper will try to fill this gap, from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, put forward the structural perspective, and analyze the internal mechanism of imperial desire and the construction of the other in *The Human Chair* by means of close reading.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper focuses on the implicit operation mechanism of power discourse in literary texts, especially how the "other" is organized, tamed, and denied in narration, body, and viewing. Therefore, this paper chooses to start from postcolonial theory, combining Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power to construct a "structure-action" analytical framework. On this basis, this paper further adopts the methods of close reading and critical interpretation to analyze Edogawa's "*The Human Chair*".

### 3.1 The Other in the Postcolonial Perspective

First of all, with the help of the classic interpretation of the concept of the other by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, this paper analyzes how the imperial subject in the text constructs the identity logic of the other and self through gaze and narrative. Bhabha proposed that the other is not an absolute external existence opposed to the subject, but a liminal being that imitates, threatens, and entangles the subject's identity boundary [5]. However, in the face of the dual structure of being under the western imperial gaze and projecting imperial gaze on the colonial other, it embodies a "sub-imperial" position of Japan - a contradictory identity structure between the Empire and the colony, which is both disciplined and trying to discipline the other [6,7]. Bhabha's model, based on the binary opposition between Empire and colony, is difficult to fully explain this mixed structure. Therefore, this paper introduces Spivak's concept of subaltern not to analyze the subaltern as a social class, but rather to draw on its analytical utility in revealing how imperial discourse constructs structures of silence and substitution.

Riaz and Noor pointed out that in sorting out the theory of subaltern that Spivak believed that the colonized or the other at the bottom could not speak directly, and their

voices were often translated, replaced, or even cancelled in the mainstream discourse structure. However, the term subaltern was first proposed by Gramsci to describe those marginal classes who cannot enter the dominant power structure, emphasizing their historical situation of long-term exclusion in the social structure and lack of a collective voice mechanism [8]. This state of being excluded from the structure is not only an extreme exception, but also widely exists in any system of mainstream self-centered identity construction. Therefore, the other in this paper is viewed and narrated, but it cannot claim the existence of its subjectivity. Based on this theory, this paper will explore how the other in “*The Human Chair*” is constructed in the gaze and discourse.

### 3.2 The State as a Composite Apparatus of Gaze and Discipline

Foucault’s concept of disciplinary society points out that modern power is internalized in the subject’s cognitive structure, not through external coercion. Through knowledge, discourse, and gaze mechanisms, it forms a decentralized power network. It is also gaze on the norms of behavior is never from a center, but throughout the actions of daily life, the subject is also constructed in this process. Although Foucault rarely mentions the concept of the other directly, the core function of hospitals, prisons, schools, and other institutions is to manage and discipline individuals who deviate from the imagination of the mainstream subject [9].

This mechanism of subject construction and exclusion of the other through gaze and discipline exists not only in the institutional space but also in the cultural text. In this context, the description of body distortion, excess eroticism, and grotesque spectacles in the text of *ero guro nansensu* is a cultural dramatic representation of disciplinary logic. By transforming the body into the object of aesthetic and moral judgment, such texts encode the power structure of society in a sensory way. The described body does not simply mean deviance. On the contrary, it strengthens the mainstream order by being gazed at and regulated.

Accordingly, this paper conceptualizes the state as a disciplinary apparatus encompassing two core dimensions: First, a structural mechanism that governs discourse and identity formation. Second, an operational agency that enforces these normative structures through embodied practices and behavioral regulation. It is in the coordinated operation of these two dimensions that the state power continues to complete the construction of its subjectivity. In the context of sub-imperial Japan, such disciplinary mechanisms symbolically realize the legitimation and extension of imperial authority.

This perspective not only extends Foucault’s theoretical framework, but also establishes a “structure-action” two-level theoretical basis for the text analysis later.

### 3.3 Research Methodology and Textual Analysis Framework

This paper also uses the methods of close reading and critical interpretation to deconstruct Edogawa’s “*The Human Chair*”. In order to carry out the text analysis more clearly, this paper theoretically abstracts the two main characters in *The Human Chair* in the narrative structure and power logic, symbolically names the anonymous narrator protagonist B (action subject), while the receiver of the letter is named protagonist A (structure subject). It also focuses on three plot turning points: the motivation of protagonist B to turn into a chair, the experience of contacting foreign bodies, and the symbolic meaning of the final “fictitious” behavior to protagonist A’s structural response. Through the analysis of plot, discourse position, and desire structure, this paper attempts to reveal the hidden imperial psychological mechanism in the text and how to reflect cultural discipline, subject construction, and other exclusions through *ero guro nansensu*.

## 4. Analysis: Sub-Imperial Identity Structures in Characters and Plot

“*The Human Chair*” is often regarded as a typical erotic thriller novel in the style of *ero guro nansensu*. Its setting focuses on the themes of peeping, desire, and alienated body. However, it is the heterogeneous description of the male body, and the dislocation structure of the role of the offender/victim, that makes it have a unique analytical value beyond the general *ero guro nansensu* text.

Although the male protagonist in the novel is an offender in the plot, he is a low-level and marginal figure in the social structure. Through his materialization and voluntary invisibility, he has completed a complex role transformation of disciplinary control as a victim. Compared with the typical scenes in the text of the style of *ero guro nansensu*, where women’s bodies are gazed at and materialized, the reverse logic presented in “*The Human Chair*” just reveals Japan’s sub-imperial identity.

Furthermore, through the first-person perspective of confession letters, the novel forces readers to be involved in the dual identity between the viewer and the audience, forming a typical sub-imperial discourse. Therefore, this paper selects *The Human Chair* as the case text, not only because it conforms to the characteristics of *ero guro nansensu* in subject matter, but also because it fully embodies the complex interweaving of Japanese sub-imperial posi-

tion and body in structure and narrative mechanism.

#### 4.1 Character Allegory of the State: Embodying Structural and Active Power

The two main characters in *The Human Chair*, the protagonist A and the protagonist B, assume the symbolic functions of the state structure mechanism and the action agency, respectively, in the text. At the beginning of the novel, the third-person omniscient narrative is used to introduce the social status and honorary image of the protagonist A. She is in a stable cultural order and has decisive discourse power and normative judgment. Therefore, she can be regarded as the symbolic carrier of national legitimacy and identity construction, that is, a structural subject.

Although the protagonist B appears as a deviant heterogeneous existence in the narrative setting, he is the only character with discourse organization ability in the text. The narrative structure of the whole novel is based on his confession letter - he took the initiative in narration, shaped the viewing relationship, and penetrated the ordered life through desire, peeping, and narration. In this sense, protagonist B is not the object of the national discipline, but the actor who symbolically constructs the discipline's logic in the text: he repeats how the state constructs the other through discourse, spatial control, and body technology in a personalized tone. Therefore, what he symbolizes is the action subject in the national apparatus - to complete the implementation, touch, governance, and invasion through institutions.

This group of characters constitutes a composite device relationship between structure and action. As pointed out above, structure provides a normative framework for the actions of institutions, while action implements the structure at the practical level.

#### 4.2 Plot as Symbolic Process: The Generation and Disturbance of Sub-imperial Legitimacy

The plot development of the novel presents three key turning points, which successively show how to construct the identity of Japan's sub-imperial, reject the other, and maintain its structural legitimacy.

##### 4.2.1 The origin of desire: fetishism and imitation

The first turning point in the plot occurs when protagonist B decides to inhabit a hollowed-out leather chair [10]. This fetishistic behavior, as Katarina cites from Kocela, originates from an emotional attachment to objects that compensates for the absence or fragmentation of the subject [11]. B's transformation into a chair symbolizes not only a fragmentation in individual identity but also Japan's national crisis of subjectivity after the Meiji Restoration. In the face of the Western colonial system, Japan's

traditional identity structure had been dismantled, while a new one had yet to be constructed. Lacking a stable sense of subjectivity, the nation could only assert its presence by mimicking and embedding itself within Western institutional frameworks. At this point in the story, B has not yet encountered A and can only be placed in an international hotel designed for foreign guests, where his physical contact is limited to the bodies of Western others [10]. At the time, international hotels in Japan--such as the one in which B is placed--primarily catered to Western, especially white European and American, guests. This spatial arrangement was emblematic of Japan's attempts at civilized modernity during the Meiji period, shaping a visual and corporeal order centered on the imperial gaze.

##### 4.2.2 The shift of desire: exclusive recognition of the „My People's“ body

The second turning point in the novel deserves more in-depth discussion. B was sent to an international hotel, where he had only physical contact with foreigners for a long time. Although he described these bodies as beautiful and worthy of desire, he always felt empty. The novel also wrote: "Maybe only the Japanese can make me have real desire [10]." This shift in desire occurs precisely after the appearance of protagonist A. As a Japanese, the body of A reawakens in B the longing to "return to this world". It was in this turning point that the novel revealed: those beautiful foreigners who should represent "Enlightenment", although they are highly identified visually, are completely unable to speak in the narrative structure, and can only exist in the description of the protagonist B, unable to become the real subject, nor as valid objects of his desire. This reflects a broader structural mechanism: the other is not excluded for barbarism, but because it does not belong to one's kind--even if they embody beauty, reason, and civilization, they remain unrecognizable as legitimate subjects. Such a structure is mirrored in Japan's historical trajectory of identity construction during the Meiji period, where external imitation was gradually replaced by internal essentialism. At the beginning of the Meiji reform, the state promoted *bunmei kaika*, a national Enlightenment campaign aimed at adopting Western institutions and cultural values. But since the 1880s, the sense of national Nativity has been on the rise, and concepts such as folk and Japanese spirit have risen rapidly, forming a set of Cultural Self-identity logic of Japanese nature. The symbolic position of the protagonist A is just summoned within the national discourse that shifts from external imitation to internal construction.

The logic of the other not only exists in the confrontation between the Empire and the colony, but also widely exists in the establishment of state subjects. On this basis, the

paper raises a critique of Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory: mimicry seems to be a generative mechanism of cultural hybridity and new subjectivity [5]. But in the practical context of sub-imperial formations, mimicry is predicated on the protection of the self, absorbing only those elements of the Other that can be converted into the self. Beneath this lies a structural denial of the Other's genuine subjectivity. In other words, the "Third Space" does not always allow for true intercultural negotiation; rather, it is a process of self-centered imagination.

Therefore, this shift in desire is not merely a narrative development, but a structural revelation of Japan's sub-imperial logic of self-other differentiation. Even during its pursuit of modernization and Westernization, Japan has consistently sustained the purity of its cultural subjectivity by symbolically rejecting genuine heterogeneity. This dual mechanism of mimicry and exclusion shapes not only the process of modern nation-building but also reveals the global tension inherent in the construction of state subjectivity. The narrative turning point in the novel, therefore, functions as a literary dramatization of this logic.

#### 4.2.3 The fictional letter: the tremor and restoration of structural legitimacy

The third turning point is the panic response of the protagonist A to the first "confession letter" of the protagonist B. After the first letter was read, A could choose to verify its authenticity, but the second letter immediately appeared, announcing that the confession letter was a novel, and the novel stopped suddenly here [10]. On the surface, this narrative device stopped panic, but more deeply, it revealed the instinctive response of structure to the impact of action: shielding, denial, and translation.

In this plot, the protagonist A is not completely ignorant. When A was in close contact with the chair and gradually felt that life had become more comfortable, A had already partially perceived the presence of protagonist B. What truly scares A is not the fact of being watched, but the hidden mechanism revealed by this behavior--a comfort that A relies on, which is established through violent possession of other people's bodies. This means that the structural position of A, its legitimacy and stability, is based on an invisible and unspeakable action foundation.

Therefore, the fictionalization of the first letter is not only a turning point in the plot, but also a discourse defense operation carried out by the structure itself: it preserves the legitimacy of the structure itself by canceling the authenticity of the action. This precisely indicates that true violence does not lie in the occurrence of actions, but in how the structure stabilizes the authorization mechanism for violence through shielding, denial, and translation. Structure not only gives legitimacy to violence, but also

creates a mechanism through its logic of existence that can never identify the source of violence. Just as colonial discourse consistently avoids the word invasion, substituting it with terms like "civilization", "enlightenment", or "guidance", the language of the state apparatus veils violence in ethical rhetoric--making it unidentifiable and beyond interrogation.

In *The Human Chair*, the turn to fictionalization is not merely a narrative twist, but a symbolic strategy through which the state neutralizes threats to its structure. By erasing the authenticity of action, the narrative re-encodes violence as unidentifiable and unaccountable. Protagonist A's denial of truth thus mirrors the cultural logic of modern states facing legitimacy crises--where violence is masked not as domination, but as care, order, and normalcy. This reflects how sub-imperial Japan sought to reassert control over sovereignty and morality through symbolic discourse, echoing broader mechanisms of colonial and nationalist narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines the deep structural functions of *Ero Guro Nansensu* based on postcolonial theory and Foucault's disciplinary society. By carefully reading Edogawa Rampo's "*The Human Chair*," this paper points out that the novel not only carries the visual pleasure of eroticism and grotesque, but also deeply reflects the disciplinary logic of Japanese sub-imperial position and cultural legitimacy of reproducing the colonial other.

The protagonists A and B in the novel are not only character settings, but also constitute a symbolic relationship between the country's structural mechanisms and operational institutions. Their viewing, discourse, and physical relationships reveal a desirable but unrecognized logic of the other. This desire mechanism reflects the identity anxiety and sovereignty construction strategy in Japan's modernization process, as well as how the sub-imperial position establishes its boundaries through imitation and exclusion.

In addition, the novel ultimately achieves a strategic shift towards structural self-repair through a fictionalized narrative, translating originally threatening actions into a part of stability and order. This discourse masking mechanism not only manifests as a re-encoding of violence in colonial ideology but also reveals the deep operational logic of modern states maintaining legitimacy through symbolic strategies.

This paper not only expands the understanding of *Ero Guro Nansensu* from the perspective of imperial structure, but also provides theoretical inspiration for exploring the relationship between the state, body, and others in the

East Asian context. Future research can extend to other sub-imperial texts in order to deepen cross-cultural understanding of cultural power structures in Asian modernity.

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