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Patriarchy and the Regulation of Feminity in Edo Japan: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Literary works serve as cultural instruments that reflect and perpetuate dominant social ideologies, including those related to gender and power. This study investigates the construction of women's discourse during the Edo period (1603–1868), a feudal era under Tokugawa rule, through a Foucauldian analysis of Shinjū Tenno Amijima, one of the most prominent plays of the time. Using Foucault's theory of discourse and a qualitative discourse-analytical approach, the research examines how female subjectivity is represented, regulated, and disciplined within the text. The findings reveal that portrayals of women's self-sacrifice, emotional restraint, and loyalty to men function as mechanisms of social control that reproduce patriarchal values. These depictions naturalize women's subordination and reinforce gendered hierarchies within Edo society. The study further argues that discourse in Shinjū Tenno Amijima operates as a form of power—one that shapes gender norms and legitimizes women's roles within the sociocultural structure of the period. By situating literary representation within the broader framework of Foucauldian discourse theory, this research contributes to understanding how literature not only mirrors but also sustains systems of power and patriarchy in premodern Japan.

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INTRODUCTION

Confucianism entered Japan in the 6th century alongside broader Chinese cultural influences, but it was during the Edo period (1603–1868), under the Tokugawa shogunate, that Neo-Confucianism became institutionalized as a governing ideology. The Tokugawa regime utilized Neo-Confucian principles to preserve social stability and hierarchical order, privileging men, elders, and political authorities. These moral values emphasized loyalty, obedience, and respect for hierarchy, ultimately shaping a social structure in which women were expected to be submissive to both familial and patriarchal authority (Ishii, 1989).

Despite such ideological constraints, the Edo period also marked a significant cultural and literary flourishing. The Tokugawa policy of sakoku (national seclusion) fostered domestic stability, enabling artistic and literary production to thrive, especially in urban centers such as Osaka and Edo. The expansion of commercial publishing allowed literary works to reach a broad audience, yet this cultural prosperity unfolded under strict state supervision. As a result, literary texts often reflected and reinforced the same Neo-Confucian ideals that underpinned Tokugawa social order.

Within this context, literature served not only as a medium of creative expression but also as a mechanism for transmitting and legitimizing dominant cultural norms, including those surrounding gender. This study examines Shinjū Tenno Amijima (1720) by Chikamatsu Monzaemon to analyze how women's roles and identities were constructed within Edo-period discourse. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power, this research investigates how the text both reflects and reproduces patriarchal ideology—demonstrating that literature operates as a powerful tool in the social regulation of gender and the maintenance of hierarchy.

Previous studies on Shinjū Tenno Amijima have often examined the representation of women through emotional and moral lenses. Keene (1996) highlights the recurring motif of female sacrifice, particularly among courtesans who die for love, while Takai (2015) emphasizes the idealized roles of virtuous courtesans, loyal wives, and obedient daughters in jōruri drama. These interpretations, however, tend to treat gender merely as a representational theme rather than as a discursive construct that reflects and reproduces social power relations.

Beyond literary analysis, broader scholarship on Edo-period gender relations has emerged across diverse cultural forms—including kabuki theater (Gabrovska, 2009), Gothic literature (Lovelace, 2008), ukiyo-e prints (D'Almeida, 2017), and women's participation in visual arts and personal writing (Yonemoto, 2010; Nagase, 2014; Nadehara & Suzuki, 2016). While these studies have expanded the understanding of women's roles in Edo Japan, few have investigated how such representations actively participate in maintaining patriarchal discourse through language and narrative form.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Shinjū Tenno Amijima constructs and circulates gender discourse as a mechanism of social regulation. Through a Foucauldian lens, the analysis focuses on how discourse operates as a vehicle of power—normalizing specific forms of femininity and reinforcing hierarchical gender relations within Edo society.

Foucault's Discourse Theory

Michel Foucault's theory of discourse provides the conceptual foundation for this analysis. Foucault (1972) defines discourse as a system of statements that produces and organizes knowledge, determining what can be said, thought, or known within a particular cultural and historical context. Discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive—it shapes subjects, identities, and social norms.

Central to Foucault's framework is the interdependence of power and knowledge. Power, in his view, is not confined to institutions or individuals; it is diffuse,

relational, and exercised through everyday practices and discursive formations (Foucault, 1980). Through processes of normalization, discourse delineates acceptable behavior and marginalizes deviation, thereby maintaining social order. Applying this framework to literary analysis enables the exploration of how texts such as Shinjū Tenno Amijima both reflect and perpetuate the power structures that define women's roles in Edo-period Japan.

Gender discourse, in particular, serves as a powerful mechanism through which social roles are constructed and regulated. It delineates the boundaries of what it means to be a man or a woman, prescribing behaviors, values, and expectations that sustain social order. Literature plays a crucial role in this process—not merely as a mirror of existing norms, but as a cultural apparatus that reproduces and legitimizes them through narrative and aesthetic form.

Drawing on this theoretical perspective, the present study examines Shinjū Tenno Amijima as a discursive site where gendered subjectivities are produced and maintained. It investigates how the play reinforces patriarchal power through its language, narrative structure, and characterization, thereby participating in the broader mechanisms of social regulation in Edo-period Japan.

Previous studies on gender representation in Edo literature have primarily focused on thematic portrayals of women's virtue, sacrifice, and emotional expression, situating their analyses within historical or sociological frameworks (Keene, 1996; Takai, 2015). While such works have enriched our understanding of women's social positions and constraints under Tokugawa rule, they often conceptualize literary texts as passive reflections of social reality rather than as active agents in shaping ideological constructs. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how literature itself functions as a site of discursive power—producing, normalizing, and sustaining patriarchal ideology.

This research addresses that gap by applying Michel Foucault's discourse theory to explore the mechanisms through which Shinjū Tenno Amijima constructs and circulates gender ideology. Rather than asking how women are represented, this study asks how those representations work discursively—how power operates through language, narrative, and affect to regulate and internalize gender norms.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Shinjū Tenno Amijima construct and regulate women's subjectivities through discourse?
2. In what ways does the play reproduce or challenge the patriarchal power structures embedded in Edo-period society?
3. How can a Foucauldian analysis of discourse reveal the mechanisms through which literature functions as an instrument of social control?

By reframing Shinjū Tenno Amijima as a site of ideological production, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Edo-period literature intersected with broader regimes of power. It emphasizes that literary texts should not be read merely as reflections of social order, but as technologies of gender—narrative forms through which patriarchy is both represented and enacted.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis grounded in Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power. The purpose is not to interpret Shinjū Tenno Amijima merely as a literary artifact or thematic text, but as a discursive formation that reveals how power operates through gender norms in Edo-period Japan. By examining language, narrative structures, and character interactions, the analysis seeks to uncover how the text participates in the production and regulation of gendered subjectivities.

The methodological process consists of three primary stages:

1. Textual Identification
   Relevant scenes, dialogues, and narrative passages were selected based on their representation of femininity, obedience,

sacrifice, and hierarchy. This process involved identifying statements and interactions that reflect mechanisms of moral and social control.

2. Discursive Interpretation
   These textual elements were analyzed through Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge, normalization, and discipline. The aim was to trace how discourse constructs "truths" about women's roles—defining what is considered natural, virtuous, or deviant within the moral framework of Edo society.
3. Ideological Evaluation
   The analysis then examined how the play contributes to the normalization of patriarchal power by valorizing specific forms of femininity—such as the self-sacrificing courtesan or the loyal wife—and framing them as moral ideals. This stage also assessed how the text internalizes patriarchal discourse through affective and moral persuasion.

Rather than treating the characters as psychological individuals, this study regards them as discursive subjects—textual embodiments of the social and ideological codes that governed women's lives. The play is thus approached as a cultural instrument that both reflects and enacts power relations, embedding patriarchal ideology within the aesthetic and emotional texture of its narrative.

By foregrounding the discursive mechanisms at work, this Foucauldian approach demonstrates that Shinjū Tenno Amijimaoperates not only as a work of dramatic art but also as a site where power is exercised and gender ideology is reproduced under the guise of moral storytelling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender, Ideology, and the Discursive Construction of Femininity

Shinjū Tenno Amijima presents an idealized image of womanhood that closely mirrors the patriarchal ideology of Edo-period Japan. This conception of femininity was not merely a social expectation but a systematically constructed ideal disseminated through moral education texts such as Onna Daigaku (Greater Learning for Women) by Kaibara Ekiken (early 18th century). As one of the most influential instructional manuals of the era, Onna Daigaku codified obedience, chastity, modesty, and self-sacrifice as the cornerstones of feminine virtue. Women were instructed to obey their fathers before marriage, their husbands after marriage, and their sons in widowhood—thus positioning female identity entirely within the patriarchal household.

Against this ideological backdrop, the female characters in Shinjū Tenno Amijima—Osan (the wife) and Koharu (the lover)—embody these prescriptive ideals. Their speech, behavior, and emotional expressions demonstrate internalized obedience, self-effacement, and loyalty to male authority. Although their voices appear distinct, both articulate perspectives shaped by the desire to uphold male honor and happiness. The result is a discursive structure that aligns women's subjectivities with male-centered values, transforming moral obedience into emotional virtue.

Women's Sacrifice as Moral Discipline

Osan's unwavering devotion to her husband Jihei exemplifies how sacrifice functions as a moral and discursive norm. Her decision to pawn her children's clothes and personal belongings to preserve Jihei's public reputation—"It doesn't matter if the children and I have nothing to wear. My husband's reputation concerns me more" (Keene, 1997, p. 193)—illustrates how female virtue is constructed through the internalization of male-centered values.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Osan's actions reflect how power operates not through coercion but through discipline. She willingly enacts her subordination because she perceives it as moral duty—a process Foucault (1980) describes as the productive function of power. Her sacrifice restores Jihei's dignity while reinforcing her own subservience, situating women as guardians of male honor. Jihei's public shame and Osan's private suffering represent a gendered division of emotional

labor: men express crisis, while women resolve it through self-denial.

Osan's virtue is not innate but socially manufactured. Her obedience mirrors the ideals outlined in Onna Daigaku and broader Confucian ethics, where loyalty and silence are equated with moral excellence. This normalization transforms self-sacrifice into a desirable trait, demonstrating how discourse disciplines women to reproduce patriarchal order without overt enforcement.

Prioritizing Male Happiness: The Internalization of Patriarchal Desire

Osan's offer to become a nurse or servant for her husband's mistress—"Shall I become your children's nurse? Or the cook? Or perhaps retired mistress of the house?" (Keene, 1997, p. 193)—captures the depth of her internalized subordination. Her sarcastic tone conveys sorrow, but her compliance reveals the extent of discursive control. Osan does not resist Jihei's affair; instead, she submits to the logic that her husband's happiness defines her own worth.

In Foucauldian terms, this is the effect of panoptic power: social surveillance becomes unnecessary because individuals monitor and discipline themselves. Osan's behavior demonstrates how women internalize patriarchal expectations, transforming obedience into self-regulation. Her identity as a "good wife" emerges not from compulsion but from her belief that sacrifice is virtuous.

Similarly, Koharu's character, though a courtesan, achieves moral redemption through loyalty and self-sacrifice. Her willingness to die for Jihei aligns her with Edo-period ideals of chūgi (loyalty) and jisei (self-renunciation). In both cases, female virtue is constructed not through autonomy but through devotion to male desire. These moral categories function as mechanisms of control, rewarding submission and rendering resistance unspeakable.

The Subordinate Position of Women

The discourse of subordination is most evident when Osan rejects Jihei's gratitude, declaring:

"Why should you bow before me? I don't deserve it. I'd be glad to rip the nails from my fingers and toes, to do anything which might serve my husband." (Keene, 1997, p. 194)

This statement encapsulates the internalization of inferiority as moral virtue. Osan's refusal of recognition—her insistence that she is unworthy of respect—demonstrates what Foucault (1972) terms "prohibited speech," where language itself defines the limits of what can be said or imagined. Within this framework, female dignity is unspeakable, while suffering becomes sanctified.

Osan's acceptance of her husband's affair, even encouraging him to "go to her with a smile," transforms humiliation into devotion. This normalization of suffering underscores how discourse constructs female identity as inherently self-effacing. The narrative not only portrays but also legitimizes such behavior, presenting subordination as the highest form of love and moral excellence.

Generosity, Loyalty, and the Discursive Production of the "Ideal Woman"

Both Osan and Koharu embody generosity and loyalty, yet their virtues are defined in relation to male-centered morality. When Osan praises Koharu's willingness to die for Jihei—"She answered that she would give you up, though you were more precious than life itself" (Keene, 1997, p. 192)—the text measures virtue by proximity to male happiness. Even their mutual respect, which might appear as female solidarity, in fact reflects shared submission to patriarchal authority.

Drawing on Onna Daigaku and Confucian codes such as gorin goso, this discourse prescribes emotional restraint, obedience, and devotion as markers of feminine excellence. Female anger or jealousy is depicted as moral failure, while quiet endurance is rewarded. Through such representations, Shinjū Tenno Amijima transforms moral principles into disciplinary tools, shaping women who police themselves according to patriarchal norms.

In this sense, both Osan and Koharu exemplify what Foucault describes as the productive nature of power: they become subjects who sustain the very structures that constrain them. Their sacrifices are celebrated

as moral triumphs, their silence as strength, and their suffering as virtue.

Through a Foucauldian lens, Shinjū Tenno Amijima reveals how literature functions as a cultural apparatus that produces and reproduces gender ideology. The play does not simply depict women's suffering—it normalizes it. By glorifying female sacrifice, prioritizing male honor, and defining virtue through obedience, the text participates in a broader system of discourse that disciplines and regulates women.

Osan and Koharu are thus not merely characters but discursive subjects through whom patriarchal ideology is enacted. Their loyalty and silence demonstrate how power operates through normalization rather than force, producing compliant subjects who accept subordination as moral truth. In doing so, Shinjū Tenno Amijima exemplifies the function of Edo-period literature as both cultural reflection and instrument of ideological reproduction.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Shinjū Tenno Amijima does not merely reflect patriarchal ideology but actively participates in its reproduction within the social and moral framework of Edo-period Japan. Through the lens of Foucault's theory of discourse and power, the play emerges as a cultural apparatus that produces and normalizes gender hierarchies. It constructs femininity as a moral category grounded in obedience, emotional restraint, and self-sacrifice—qualities internalized by women as personal virtue rather than external coercion.

The female characters, Osan and Koharu, embody these ideals through their willingness to prioritize male honor and happiness over their own well-being. Their speech and actions reveal how discourse disciplines not only behavior but also thought, shaping what is understood as truth about womanhood. Within this framework, jealousy, anger, or defiance are not simply discouraged; they are rendered morally illegitimate. In contrast, silence, devotion, and submission are elevated as hallmarks of virtue. The play thus delineates clear boundaries between virtuous and deviant femininity, exemplifying how power operates through normalization rather than force.

Importantly, Osan and Koharu are not portrayed as entirely passive victims. They act and make choices, but these choices remain circumscribed within the limits of patriarchal discourse. Their agency is therefore not liberatory but disciplinary—manifesting Foucault's notion of subjectivation, in which individuals become agents of their own regulation. Through their internalization of moral codes, the women of Shinjū Tenno Amijima reproduce the very structures that confine them, illustrating how power functions most effectively when it is embraced as virtue.

The play's moral vision aligns with broader ideological instruments of the Tokugawa era, including Neo-Confucian ethics, Kaibara Ekiken's Onna Daigaku, and social precepts such as gorin goso. Together, these texts form a network of discursive practices that define and sustain women's subordination by framing obedience as natural and desirable. In this sense, Shinjū Tenno Amijima operates as a textual extension of Edo moral education—dramatizing the rewards of conformity and the moral legitimacy of women's suffering.

By exposing these mechanisms, this study contributes to the wider discussion of literature as a site of knowledge production and ideological regulation. It underscores the role of narrative in sustaining hegemonic power by rendering inequality intelligible, acceptable, and even virtuous. From a Foucauldian standpoint, Shinjū Tenno Amijima exemplifies how discourse constructs subjects who willingly perpetuate systems of domination under the guise of moral truth.

This analytical framework offers a foundation for comparative studies of gender discourse in other literary and cultural contexts, highlighting how representations of virtue, loyalty, and sacrifice operate as transhistorical instruments of power. Ultimately, Shinjū Tenno Amijima stands as a poignant example of how literature functions simultaneously as art and ideology—producing gendered consciousness,

legitimizing subordination, and naturalizing patriarchal power within the emotional and moral fabric of society.

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