

The Construction of Female Identity in Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's Naomi: Male Gaze and Unreliable Narration

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Abstract

In Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *Naomi*, the complex image of female identity is constructed in the interaction between Joji Kawai and Naomi, a young lady to whom male desire, Westernised modernity, and patriarchal power all contribute. The challenge that this study takes up is that Naomi is commonly read as a modern woman or *moga*, but her identity is mediated through Joji's first-person narration. This study attempts to explore how the female identity of Naomi is produced via the male gaze and unreliable storytelling. This study combines a qualitative literary method with a close reading approach. The data were extracted from selected narrative sections, character descriptions, and dialogues in the novel that indicate Joji's perception, control, and interpretation of Naomi. The data were studied via the lenses of male gaze theory, unreliable narration, narratology, and the concept of identity creation. The results imply that Naomi is not produced as a stable and self-defined female subject but as a figure constructed through Joji's desire, fantasy, envy, and patriarchal gaze. His gaze places Naomi as an object of beauty, education, possession, and worry, over and over, and his self-justifying narration makes his story unreliable. The study finds that the picture of Naomi as attractive, manipulative, childlike, or dangerous should be regarded as a creation made through a biased male narrative perspective and not as an objective truth.

Keywords: female identity, male gaze, unreliable narration, Naomi, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, modern woman

Introduction

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Naomi* occupies an important position in modern Japanese literature because it dramatizes the intersections of sexuality, westernisation, consumption, social mobility, and gendered power in interwar Japan. The novel explores the relationship between an adult male engineer named Joji Kawai and a young café waitress named Naomi, whom he attempts to educate, possess, and transform into the ideal modern woman. But on the very first page, Naomi does more than tell a thrilling story of love and obsession. It sets up a certain narrative condition: the entire story is narrated from Joji's perspective, in the first person. Joji begins by stating that he will write about his relationship with Naomi "as clearly and honestly as I possibly could" and refers to his experience as an "important memoir" which may be of some use to its readers (Tanizaki, 2025). This opening assertion is important because it requires the reader to trust Joji

before the reader has any independent access to Naomi's own ideas. Or, put another way, the narrative opens not with Naomi speaking for herself but with Joji speaking for Naomi.

This narrative design is the core of the present investigation. The text does not state neutrally or objectively that Naomi is a female identity. Rather, it is mediated through a masculine voice that asserts honesty and, at the same time, frequently conveys desire, possessiveness, jealousy, and self-justification. Following Hall's argument that identity is not a fixed essence but a construction produced within discourse and representation (Hall, 1996), this paper considers Naomi's identity as a narrative production rather than as a stable psychological fact. Thus, Naomi is read not simply as a female character, but a character whose meaning is created by the way in which Joji looks at her, identifies her, characterises her, teaches her, recalls her, and explains her to the reader.

Previous study on Naomi has concentrated on the novel's relationship to the figure of the *modan gāru* or *moga*, the "modern woman" linked with Western fashion, urban consumerism, changing sexual morality, and women's growing presence in modern Japanese public culture. Kaynar, for example, contextualises Tanizaki's modern woman characters in relation to objectification, narcissism, spectacle, and male fantasy, showing that the modern woman in Tanizaki's fiction becomes a site where desire and anxiety meet (Kaynar, 2020, pp. 43–45). Other studies have looked at Naomi through the lens of Westernisation, mimicry, and postcolonial ambivalence. Pujimahanani et al. observe that the previous study has often read Naomi as a figure who imitates Western styles, habits, and values, thereby embodying an unstable cultural identity between Japan and the West (Pujimahanani et al., 2025). Similarly, Setyowati's study of mimicry in Naomi emphasizes how Western cultural signs, including language, fashion, music, and lifestyle, become central to the formation of Naomi's modern identity (Setyowati, 2018).

These studies are useful in that they reveal Naomi to be neither an isolated woman nor someone in a private relationship. She is also a cultural figure, whereby Tanizaki embodies modernity, Western influence, class aspiration, and changing gender relations in early twentieth-century Japan. However, the supremacy of the *Moga* and the Westernisation frameworks has also caused a restriction. Naomi is more generally seen as a symbol of modern womanhood than as a product of the narration of Joji, but the latter is less emphasised. Even existing works that deal with objectification, mimicry, or ambivalence tend to focus their analytic attention on what Naomi signifies within Japanese modernity, instead of how Joji builds her image through his own language, gaze, and narrative authority.

This limitation is significant since the narrative frequently indicates that Naomi is offered to the reader through the interpretive authority of Joji. He is attracted not to Naomi's personality but to her name. He claims he likes the name "Naomi" since it sounds "like a Westerner. Soon after, he likens her appearance to that of the actress Mary Pickford (Tanizaki, 1925/2025). These first scenes show Naomi entering the work already mediated through translation, cinematic comparison, and Western imagination. Joji doesn't meet Naomi; he makes her. Her identity is immediately inscribed with Westernness, attractiveness, and visual attraction. Thus, in the narrative, Joji's gaze both instantiates and develops Naomi's modern femininity.

It becomes clear when Joji starts to consider Naomi not as a companion, but as a personal project. He wants to "take her in," educate her, and "make her into a respectable woman" (Tanizaki, 1925/2025, p. 9). On first reading, this language suggests safety, education, and social

progress. But the language of care cannot be divorced from the language of ownership. Joji picks up Naomi, brings her in, teaches her, dresses her, and benchmarks her growth against his own ideal of modern female identity. More crucially, Joji is not only the masculine character trying to shape Naomi in the novel but also the narrator who develops the meaning of Naomi for the reader. The same man who attempts to "make" Naomi over into a modern woman has a right to tell the reader what kind of woman Naomi is.

The novel provides us with concrete evidence for this possessive logic of storytelling. Joji keeps a diary of Naomi's physical development, "Naomi's Growth," buys a camera, and photographs her face in different lights and angles (Tanizaki, 2025). Later, he tells her, "You are my treasure, the diamond I have found and polished myself" (Tanizaki, 2025). This metaphor shows that Naomi is not an autonomous subject. It describes her as a valuable object discovered, polished, and possessed by Joji. The same logic appears again when Joji admits that Naomi is "not only my wife, but also a rare doll and an ornament" (Tanizaki, 1925/2025). These statements show that Naomi is narrated through a discourse of visual possession in which education, erotic display, cultivation, and commodified beauty merge. Consequently, any interpretation of Naomi as manipulative, superficial, childish, or dangerously modern must first consider that such images are delivered through a narrator who openly treats her as a treasure, a doll, and an ornament.

For this reason, male gaze theory and narratology are highly appropriate for analyzing Naomi. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze explains how patriarchal visual culture positions women as images and men as bearers of the look (Mulvey, 1975). Although Mulvey's theory originated in film studies, it is important to this literary study since Joji continuously objectifies Naomi as visual pleasure, comparison, display, and possession. He compares her to actresses, photographs her body, arranges her clothing, and measures her value through her ability to look Western, beautiful, and desirable. In this way, Joji's narration functions like a visual apparatus: it instructs the reader how to look at Naomi through his desire.

However, the male gaze is not solely responsible for the complexity of the narrative. The problem is not simply that Joji gazes at Naomi, but that he narrates Naomi. Thus, the theory of unreliable narration by Booth is crucial because this study may explore the gap between Joji's statement and his narrative. According to Booth, an unreliable narrator is one whose presentation of a story is not totally credible as the narrator's perceptions, judgements, or values are not entirely shared by the underlying norms of the work. Joji is consistently shown as a man who is honest, reasonable, and victimised in Naomi. But his own narration reveals his possessiveness, class prejudice, erotic obsession, and desire to control. His account, therefore, demands critical distance. The reader must choose whether Naomi is truly as dangerous and manipulative as Joji claims, or whether that image is produced by Joji's wounded masculinity and narrative bias.

The research gap is addressed in these two frameworks. Previous studies have examined Naomi as moga, as a figure of Westernisation, as an object of male desire, and as an embodiment of cultural ambivalence. Still, a more focused analysis of how Joji's first-person narration constructs Naomi's female identity through the male gaze and unreliability has yet to be pursued. The gap is not simply that Naomi has not been discussed as an object of desire; rather, the gap is that Naomi's objectification has not been properly connected to Joji's narrative control. This study presumes that the intersection of the male gaze and unreliable narration means that Naomi's identity is not just represented by the novel, but rather actively constructed by the narrator's gaze,

language, and self-justifying memory.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to re-examine how female identity in literary texts is mediated by narrative authority rather than presented as a transparent representation of women's experience. In *Naomi*, the reader's understanding of Naomi is almost entirely shaped through Joji's self-justifying first-person narration. Therefore, accepting his account without critical distance risks reproducing the patriarchal logic that frames Naomi as seductive, manipulative, childish, or dangerous. This issue is important because previous readings of Naomi as a modern woman, *moga*, or symbol of Westernised femininity may overlook the narrative process through which her identity is produced by masculine desire, visual possession, and unreliable narration. By analysing how Joji's gaze and narrative bias construct Naomi's image, this study contributes to feminist literary criticism and narratology by showing how gendered power operates not only through representation but also through the act of narration itself.

Based on this gap, the present study examines how Joji's first-person narration constructs Naomi's female identity in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Naomi*, how the male gaze shapes Naomi's representation as an object of desire, education, possession, and anxiety, and how Joji's unreliable narration affects the reader's understanding of Naomi as a modern woman and as a female subject. These three questions are closely connected. The first question examines the broader narrative process through which Naomi's identity is constructed. The second question recognises the male gaze as one of the key engines of that construction, notably with Naomi's body, looks, dress, education, and attractiveness. The final question is how Joji's unreliability makes Naomi's reading complicated for the reader. Taken together, these questions extend the conversation from representation to narration, from Naomi as a cultural symbol to Naomi as a contested textual construction.

In this paper, therefore, it is proposed that *Naomi* should be re-read not just as a novel about the modern woman but also as a work about the formation of female identity under the dominance of the masculine narrative. What Joji tells us in the first person is not a transparent window into the soul of Naomi. It is a rhetorical performance formed by desire, fantasy, class aspiration, jealousy, and fear over the loss of authority. The core issue is not a question of simple Westernisation, manipulation, seduction, or threat to Naomi. The more interesting question is what Joji's narration makes such meanings out of. The novelty of this study lies in the critical focus that it moves from Naomi as a fixed icon of modern femininity to Naomi as a narrative invention formed by the masculine gaze and unreliable narration. Through this approach, the article tries to expose the functioning of gendered power in the narrative as well as the representation in the novel.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary method with a close reading approach. This method is used because the research focuses on textual meaning, narrative structure, character representation, and gender discourse in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Naomi*. As Creswell and Poth (2018) state, qualitative inquiry is concerned with interpreting meanings within specific social and cultural contexts. In this study, close reading is applied to examine how Joji's narration, gaze, and interpretation construct Naomi's female identity.

This research is based mainly on Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Naomi* and especially on the

English version utilised in this study. The primary data are words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narrative sequences, chosen for their relation to the image of Naomi. The data were taken from paragraphs that exemplify Joji's description of Naomi's name, body, appearance, attire, education, westernised image, social behaviour, and relationship with other males. Key passages are Joji's statement that he wrote about Naomi "as clearly and honestly as I possibly could" (Tanizaki, 1925/2025, p. 7), his Mary Pickford comparison, his diary entitled "Naomi's Growth", and his description of Naomi as "my treasure", "the diamond that I found and polished myself", "a rare doll", and "an ornament" (Tanizaki, 1925/2025). These passages are selected because they explicitly illustrate Joji's gaze, desire, possessiveness, and narrative control of Naomi.

The data collection method was carried out in four stages. The first step was that the researcher read the novel thoroughly to comprehend the plot, characters, point of view, and the evolution of the relationship between Joji and Naomi. Secondly, the researcher identified and marked the textual material connected to the development of Naomi's identity, particularly the sections including Joji's descriptions, judgements, fantasies, and emotional reactions to Naomi. Third, the data selected were divided into three categories: male gaze, unreliable narration, and female identity construction. Fourth, the researcher chose representative quotations from each category to support the analysis in the findings and discussion section.

The data were evaluated by interpretive textual analysis. In the first phase of the investigation, the study looked at how Joji's first-person narration manages the reader's access to Naomi. This stage focused on how Naomi is introduced, named, remembered, and described by Joji. In the second step, we examined the modes in which the male gaze constructs Naomi as an object of desire, beauty, education, possession, and worry. This phase centred on Joji's visual descriptions of Naomi, his comparison of Naomi to Western actresses, and his treatment of Naomi as a body to be seen, clothed, photographed, and shown. The third stage examined Joji's unreliability by comparing his claim of honesty with his possessive actions, jealousy, and contradictory judgments. The fourth stage interpreted how these narrative and visual mechanisms construct Naomi's identity as modern, Westernised, attractive, childish, manipulative, and threatening.

This study uses several theoretical perspectives to guide the analysis. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is used to explain how Naomi is positioned as an object of visual pleasure and male desire (Mulvey, 1975). Booth's theory of unreliable narration is used to examine the gap between Joji's claim of honesty and the bias revealed in his narration (Booth, 1983, pp. 158–159). Genette's and Bal's concepts of narrative voice and focalisation are used to explain how Naomi is seen through Joji's narrative perspective (Genette, 1980, pp. 186–189; Bal, 2009, pp. 145–148). Naomi's identity is understood through the lens of Hall's notion of identity construction, which understands it as a product of discourse and representation rather than an unchanging nature (Hall, 1996).

The research uses theoretical triangulation to establish analytical validity. The research interweaves feminist literary criticism, masculine gaze theory, unreliable narration, narratology, and identity theory. These theories are used conjointly since Naomi's identity is established not only through gendered representation but through Joji's narrative authority. The study is limited to the English translation of Naomi and does not include a comparison of the translation with the original Japanese text. The analysis focuses exclusively on the construction of Naomi's feminine

identity through the masculine gaze and unreliable narration in the translated text.

Findings and Discussion

This section summarises the study findings for the three research issues. The analysis shows how Naomi's female identity is constructed through three interconnected mechanisms: Joji's first-person narration, the masculine gaze and the untrustworthiness of his narrative point of view. These mechanisms do not act in isolation. Through Joji's narration, we are able to view Naomi; the masculine gaze allows us to perceive Naomi's body and her femininity; and unreliable narration challenges the reader to accept Joji's narration as objective reality. Naomi's identity in the narrative is, however, not fixed, neutral, or self-determined. It is produced by Joji's need to gaze at her, teach her, own her, judge her and finally explain her to the reader.

Jōji's First-Person Narration and the Construction of Naomi's Identity

The first finding points out that the female identity of Naomi is formed from the beginning by the narration in the first person of Jōji. Naomi does not enter the novel as a topic identifying herself. Rather, she appears through Joji's memory, attraction, and interpretation. This is important since Jōji starts the story by declaring that he will write about his relationship with Naomi "as clearly and honestly as I possibly could" (Tanizaki, 1925/2025, p. 7). The phrase seems to offer authenticity, but it also sets up Jōji as the only narrative authority through whom the reader may come to know Naomi. However, from the perspective of unreliable narration, such a claim must be read carefully. As Booth argues, a narrator becomes unreliable when the reader is required to distance themselves from the narrator's judgments and values (Booth, 1983, pp. 158–159). In *Naomi*, Joji's claim of honesty becomes problematic because the story that follows repeatedly exposes his possessiveness, vanity, jealousy, and desire to control Naomi.

Naomi's first appearance is already mediated by Joji's fantasy. He admits that he is first attracted to her name because "NAOMI" sounds Western to him.

Everyone called her 'Nao-chan', but when I asked her real name, she told me it was 'Naomi'. That name intrigued me, because it looks beautiful when written in Kanji. But if you write in Roman letters, it sounds like Western's name. Ever since then, i started paying attention to her. Just from knowing her name, she started to look like a Westerner and smartish, which I feel like her working in a mere place like this is such a waste (Tanizaki, 1925/2025).

This is important since Naomi's identity is not based on her personality but on Joji's interpretation of her name as a signal of Westernness. Joji projects his desire for modernity into her name, which becomes a cultural screen. Hall contends that identity is not a static essence but is formed in representation and speech (Hall, 1996). Hence, Naomi's identity is constructed through the discourse of Joji before it is shown through the actions of Naomi herself.

Joji's comparison of Naomi to American actress Mary Pickford is evident. One of their early discussions, Joji says to Naomi, "Naomi, you have a resemblance to Marie Pickford, do you know that?" (Tanizaki, 2025). Naomi's reply is very easy; she says people often tell her she appears mixed-heritage (Tanizaki, 2025). What makes this conversation relevant is the power of interpretation in differential terms. Joji identifies Naomi as the Western actress Marie Pickford, to which Naomi answers with nothing but the comparison. She doesn't start the fantasy; she gets placed into it.

Joji is both the narrator who narrates and the focalizer through which Naomi is viewed, from a narratological perspective. Genette's distinction between voice and focalisation is essential in this context, because it makes it clear that the reader is given Naomi through the same awareness that seeks and perceives her (Genette, 1980). Bal also states that focalisation affects how characters and events are seen in narrative discourse (Bal, 2009). In Naomi, the reader does not have an impartial or independent opinion of Naomi. Instead, the reader is given Joji's Naomi: one already sculpted by Western fantasy, visual appeal, and patriarchal desire.

The study satisfies the first research question by showing that Joji's first-person narration creates Naomi's female identity through identifying, comparing, and interpreting. Naomi is not initially depicted as an autonomous woman but as a woman who gains meaning through Joji's yearning. Hence, Joji does not discover her as modern, Westernised, attractive, and different; he produces her identity.

The Male Gaze, Visual Possession, and the Making of Naomi as Object

The second finding demonstrates that Joji's narration creates Naomi through the male perspective. According to Mulvey (1975), the patriarchal visual culture has constructed women as images and men as bearers of the look. Although Mulvey's theory was first produced in reference to cinema, it is quite applicable to Naomi because Joji always positions Naomi as a visual object. He looks at her, compares her, dresses her, photos her, puts her body up to be looked at, judged. Such gaze is already evident at the beginning of the story when Joji discusses Naomi's looks and speculates about her future development. but does not merely appreciate her, but speculates about her possibilities as though she were an unfinished thing.

That's why my actual plan was to take her under my wing and care for her. If she ever wished for it, I would give her a proper education, so she would be suitable to be my wife; that was the degree of my plan (Tanizaki, 2025).

At this stage, education is inseparable from possession. Joji does not merely want Naomi to improve herself. He wants to shape her according to his own fantasy of modern femininity. As Joji begins to document Naomi's physical development, the masculine gaze becomes more concrete. He keeps a notebook, "Naomi's Growth," buys a camera, and shoots images of her face in different lights and angles (Tanizaki, 2025). This inscription is not a neutral one. It makes Naomi's body a repository of masculine observation. Joji's notebook and images serve as tools of visual control. Naomi's progress is not told in terms of her own experience of becoming, but in terms of Joji's experience of witnessing her becoming.

Further support for this reading comes in Joji's language of possession. Naomi is a jewel, a diamond that he has found and polished, he says. (Tanizaki, 2025). Later, he reveals that Naomi is his wife and also a rare doll and an ornament (Tanizaki, 2025). These analogies make Naomi an object of beauty, show, and possession. She is valued because she can be looked at, polished, and owned. What the masculine gaze does in the narrative is precisely to convert female identity into visual and aesthetic worth.

This objectification also links to Westernisation. It is not the lady Joji wants; it is the Westernised woman he wants. He continuously compares her beauty with Western actors, Western dress, English, music, dancing, and foreign customs. Kaynar (2020) claims that Tanizaki's modern women are in the intersection of male fantasy, objectification, and social

anxiety. Joji's treatment of Naomi makes this clear. Naomi is attractive because she appears to give access to a modern, westernised society that Joji himself both admires and fears.

The dialogue about Naomi's education illustrates this dynamic. When Joji asks her what she wants to learn, Naomi says, "I want to learn English" (Tanizaki, 2025). At first, her desire to study may seem to imply agency. But Joji rapidly subsumes this longing into his own aim of moulding her into his ideal woman. Her education is part of his scheme, in his opinion, for creating a modern wife who will not disgrace him in the eyes of Westerners (Tanizaki, 2025). Thus, even Naomi's desire to learn is mediated through Joji's fantasy.

This finding answers the second research question by showing that the male gaze constructs Naomi as an object of want, education, possession, and worry. Joji wants Naomi because she can be remade, artistically and culturally. He teaches her because he wants to create a lady who is the mirror of his ideal. He owns her by treating her like his prize, his toy, his adornment. But he is also nervous when the object he has sculpted begins to outstrip his control

Education, Discipline, and the Failure of Patriarchal Control

The third finding develops the previous point by showing that Joji's educational project is not simply benevolent. It is a form of patriarchal discipline. At the beginning, Joji presents himself as Naomi's helper. He rescues her from café work, provides her with a house, pays for her lessons, and encourages her to study English and music. However, his education is based on control. Naomi is expected to become the kind of woman Joji wants her to be.

This becomes visible in the English-learning scenes. Joji grows dissatisfied with Naomi's ability because she cannot meet his standard of intellectual discipline. He complains that she cannot understand grammar properly and begins to teach her more strictly (Tanizaki, 1925/2025, pp. 43–44). The scene becomes increasingly tense. Joji scolds her and eventually pushes her into emotional resistance.

"You idiot!. Just how stupid can you be!" (Tanizaki, 2025).

The way Joji treats Naomi makes her cross her mind to grab the notebook and tear it into pieces (Tanizaki, 2025). This episode reveals that education is not a neutral process in the novel. It becomes a struggle over authority.

"Do you think academics are unimportant? You said you'd study hard and become a great woman. What on earth happened to that now? What were you thinking when you tore up your notebook, huh? Apologize right now, or I'm done with you! Leave this house, now!" (Tanizaki, 2025).

The dialogue in this scene is important. Joji tells Naomi that if she doesn't apologise, he'll send her back to Asakusa. Joji is unsettled by Naomi's quiet and resistance because they question his authority as teacher, benefactor, and husband. At this point, Naomi is no longer simply the passive object of his educational project. She is transformed into a resistant subject, even though her resistance is mediated by Joji's antagonistic narration.

From a feminist perspective, the scene shows how gestures of good intention are often acts of patriarchy. Joji says he wants Naomi to be a respectable woman, yet his is a hierarchical and disciplining attitude. He plays the part of the reasonable man teacher, and Naomi plays the part of the infantile female pupil. This hierarchy reflects patriarchal ideas about female

development. The man must correct, coach, and refine the lady. But the story is in this order, since Naomi does not stay submissive. Joji is not omnipotent as her hesitation suggests.

This also counters the usual characterisation of Naomi as just spoiled or manipulative. Naomi becomes increasingly difficult for Joji to govern, but the study has to take into consideration how her behaviour seems within a structure of control previously constructed by Joji. He establishes the conditions of dependency, then condemns her when that reliance is demanding. He wants her to be current, to be confident, yet resents her for her social daring. This tension is at the heart of the novel's indictment of patriarchal modernity.

Joji's unreliable narration portrays Naomi as a threatening modern girl

The fourth finding illustrates how Joji's unreliability as a narrator affects how the reader understands Naomi as a modern woman. Joji plays the victim of Naomi's selfishness and manipulation over and over. But on his own account, he has participated in the making of the very Naomi he later fears. And this is the dilemma of the unreliable narrator.

Joji confesses he's trying to build Naomi's confidence in the beginning. He thinks that Japanese women lack the self-confidence of Western women, and that Naomi's self-confidence might make her beautiful and modern (Tanizaki, 2025). However, when Naomi is confident, socially outspoken, and resistant to his control, he views her confidence as arrogance. This contradiction reveals that Joji wants a contemporary lady, but one whose modernity is controlled by him.

The dance scenes provide strong evidence of this contradiction. Naomi wants to join a social dance club and asks Joji to learn dancing with her (Tanizaki, 2025). At first, Joji considers dancing as a way to show off Naomi in society. He imagines that people will admire her beauty and that he will earn status as the husband of an attractive modern woman (Tanizaki, 2025). However, once Naomi enters the dance world, she becomes socially visible to other men. Joji's pride turns into insecurity.

In the dance-hall episode, Joji's shame is made manifest. Naomi criticises his bad dancing and informs others that he is unable to dance properly (Tanizaki, 2025). She dances with other men more confidently than she dances with him, and Joji becomes painfully aware of his own awkwardness. Naomi's modern femininity, which he once wished to put on show, is now a cause of fear. The same public visibility that makes her desirable also makes her uncontrollable.

This fear gets worse when Joji hears the rumours about Naomi from his coworkers. They hint that Naomi is involved with students and that she is not the respectable woman Joji imagines her to be (Tanizaki, 2025). Joji is shaken, yet he again proves himself unreliable in his answer. He moves between denial, jealousy, shame, and fear. He wants to believe in Naomi's innocence, and yet at the same time, he imagines her as corrupt and deceptive (Tanizaki, 2025). The reader is placed inside Joji's unstable consciousness, where Naomi's image changes rapidly according to his emotional fluctuations.

It is a necessary instability. Naomi's dangerous modern woman status is not posed as an objective reality. It's being born from Joji's wounded masculinity. Naomi, as Pujimahanani et al. state, is an example of ambivalence, since she represents both appeal and concern in the context of westernised modernity (Pujimahanani et al., 2025). This study extends that argument to show that such ambivalence is formed narratively. It is not just Naomi's modernity that is problematic,

but that Joji narrates her modernity through dread, envy, and loss of power.

This finding answers the third study question and provides proof that Joji's inaccurate narration influences the reader's perception of Naomi. If you believe Joji's story, Naomi is a dangerous and deceptive woman. But if the reader is to regard Joji as unreliable, Naomi is a more complicated character. She is a woman made by masculine desire, conditioned by male authority, and punished for stepping out from under male rule.

Naomi's agency emerges through performance, negotiation, and reversal

The fifth finding implies that Naomi is not only a passive object of Joji's attention. Her identity is mostly built by Joji's narration, but she also figures out how to use that building for her own purposes. Joji's narration mostly builds her identity, but she also discovers how to use that construction for her own ends. Naomi's agency is accomplished not by escaping the masculine gaze altogether, but by working inside it and slowly reversing it.

This is demonstrated in the way Naomi learns to manage attractiveness, attire, social performance, and emotions. Joji teaches Naomi the importance of Westernised appearance, confidence, and presentation. Through the years, Naomi begins to handle these signs herself. She chooses her clothes, goes to dance halls, socialises, and bargains her own independence through Joji's yearning. In this way, Naomi flips Joji's fantasy on its head.

The inversion is seen in the bedroom and in social contexts. Naomi is initially perceived by Joji as a girl to be trained and protected, but it is Joji who ends up being emotionally dependent. In the moment where Hamada and Kumagai are overnight guests, Naomi boldly plays with the limits of modesty and decency (Tanizaki, 2025). Joji is nervous, envious, captivated, and yet he can't stop her. Naomi's body continues to be the object of his sight, but increasingly she controls the terms under which that stare is possible.

Another example is when Joji advises that Naomi have a child so that they become a "real couple" (Tanizaki, 2025). "I don't want children," Ruth says directly. (Tanizaki, 2025) The reluctance is founded on the assumption that it is motherhood that would locate Naomi inside a traditional household identity. Ruth. She wants to keep the old kind of pleasure, the youth and freedom their partnership once promised. Her refusal is thus a subversion of the patriarchal assumption that a feminine identity is to be achieved through wifedom and motherhood.

The reversal is more thorough in the end of the novel. Joji admits that Naomi has put other restrictions on him, and he has learned to be submissive to her (Tanizaki, 2025). He admits that he still loves her, no matter what others might say (Tanizaki, 2025). It's not just about winning for Naomi. It shows the breakdown of Joji's original idea of control. The woman he tries to mould into an obedient object turns out to be the one dictating the terms of their relationship.

But it's not clear how much autonomy Naomi has. She does gain power over Joji, but it's still power in terms of beauty, attractiveness, and economic dependency. She remains trapped in the patriarchal system. She doesn't. She manipulates the system from inside. This makes Naomi a complex female character. She is not merely a victim or a femme fatale. She is a woman who creates her identity through the male gaze but learns how to perform and exploit the male gaze.

The construction of female identity in Naomi is unstable and contested

The data suggest that Naomi's gender identity is fragile and contested. Joji wants to define Naomi as a modern, beautiful, westernised, desirable woman. Later, he tries to recast her as selfish, rude, manipulative, and dangerous. The descriptions are seemingly conflicting yet united by the same narrative logic: Naomi is continually reading Joji's yearning and anxiousness. Setyowati's reading of mimicry can explain the instability in Naomi's identity. Naomi is connected with the West, but she never becomes completely Western. She is in an in-between position that disrupts Joji's expectations (Setyowati, 2018). Kaynar's examination of Tanizaki's modern women also helps to understand why Naomi is fascinating and unsettling in the masculine dream (Kaynar, 2020). In the present analysis, building on these prior studies, we show that Naomi's instability is not just cultural but also narratological. Joji's narration is shaky, and she is unstable.

Joji wants to define Naomi as a modern, beautiful, westernised, desirable woman. Later, he tries to recast her as selfish, rude, manipulative, and dangerous. These descriptions seem conflicting; however, they are united by the same logic of narration: Naomi is continually being read via the longing and anxiety of Joji.

Setyowati's view of mimicry offers a way of understanding why Naomi's identity appears uncertain. Naomi is connected with the West, but she never becomes completely Western. She is in an in-between position that disrupts Joji's expectations (Setyowati, 2018). Kaynar's examination of Tanizaki's modern women also helps to understand why Naomi is fascinating and unsettling in the masculine dream (Kaynar, 2020). Drawing on these earlier works, the present research shows that Naomi's instability is not only cultural but also narratological. Joji's storytelling is unsteady, hence she is unstable.

Hence, this should not be read as the story of a wicked woman destroying a good man. The reading echoes Joji's point of view without interrogating it. A closer look shows that the fault is also in the way Joji tells the story. He objectifies Naomi, cultivates her modernity, enhances her confidence, flaunts her attractiveness, and then blames her for her independence. His narrative produces Naomi as both ideal and menace. So Naomi's female identity cannot be recovered by the reader in its pure form. That is something the reader has to piece together by reading against Joji's voice.

In this sense, the story reveals the contradiction of patriarchal modernity. Joji wants a woman of the current day, but he expects obedience, too. He wants Naomi to seem Western but he is afraid of the social freedom that Westernised modernity implies. He wants her to be seen, but only as his. He wants her to be educated, but not intellectually or socially independent. It is because Naomi pushes over the boundaries of the identity that Joji develops for her that she becomes menacing.

The analysis, therefore, leads to the key conclusion that Naomi's identity is produced through a gendered narrative process. Joji's first-person narration provides him with the power of interpretation. His male gaze turns Naomi into an object of desire and exhibition. His inaccurate storytelling then remakes her agency as manipulation and danger. But Naomi's performance and resistance trouble this structure from within. She is a figure generated by male fantasy but never totally confined by it.

Conclusion

The analysis concludes that the female identity of Naomi in the novel written by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki is not a stable, neutral, or self-defined character, but rather a narrative fabrication created by Joji's first-person narration. Three significant findings emerged from the investigation. Firstly, Joji's narration frames the reader's perception and understanding of Naomi by representing her beauty, imagination, and desire using the language of Westernness. Secondly, the masculine gaze objectifies Naomi as an object of desire, education, possession, and fear. Joji admires Naomi, but he doesn't simply admire her. He sees her as a project to be perfected, a body to be watched, and an ornament to be shown. This is evident in his comparison of her to Western film imagery, in his recording of her bodily development, in his dressing her up according to his imagination, and in treating her as a "treasure", "diamond", "doll", and "ornament". Third, the image of Naomi as a modern woman is complicated by Joji's unreliable narration in that his description repeatedly shifts between admiration and resentment. Naomi's allegedly deadly femininity is linked to Joji's envy, wounded masculinity, and fear of losing control.

These findings reinforce the main thesis that Naomi should not be interpreted as a simple portrayal of the modern woman or Westernised femininity. Rather, she must be read as a contested female identity generated through the intersection of the masculine gaze and unreliable narration. Joji's claim to honesty is undermined by his possessiveness, self-justification, and patriarchal drive to define Naomi in his own image. But Naomi is not wholly passive. She learns to work within the system of male desire and uses Joji's dream to negotiate power, freedom, and control over their relationship. Thus, the story exemplifies the contradiction of patriarchal modernity: it desires the modern woman as spectacle, yet fears her as an autonomous individual. This work is remarkable in its rethinking of Naomi as not a passive femme fatale, but a female subject whose subjectivity is mediated, perverted, and challenged by the masculine narrative authority. The study is limited to the English version of Naomi. Future research might compare the translated text to the original Japanese to investigate the impact of translation on the representation of gender, voice, and narrative reliability.

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