



# The Study of Female Writing in Higuchi Ichiyou's Novels

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**Abstract.** Higuchi Ichiyou's works described the vicissitudes of life of the middle and lower class people in Japan, depicting many female characters. Female characters in Higuchi Ichiyou's works began to understand themselves and have deeper thoughts about their existence. After the awakening of self-awareness, these female characters have a bold pursuit. They pursue the free love and the equal marriage life between men and women, and they also express their emotional and social needs. However, the above is only the initial awakening of self-consciousness, once it meets resistance, it is easy to compromise and fall into a lost state, which is the limitation of the female self-consciousness in Higuchi Ichiyou's works.

**Keywords:** Higuchi Ichiyou's novels · Meiji era · female writing · Self-awareness

## 1 Introduction

Higuchi Ichiyou (1872–1896), a famous female writer and poet in Japan, is one of the pioneers of modern Japanese literature. She enjoys the reputation of “Meiji Murasaki Shikibu” [1] in the Japanese literary world. The portrayal of female characters is one of the characteristics of Ichiyou's novels. “Most of the female characters in Ichiyou's works are in the lower class of Japanese society” [2]. They have different understandings and experiences in love, marriage and freedom from traditional Japanese women. In addition, they begin to realize the ego. Women with initial self-consciousness are trying to pursue their emotional and social needs. However, there is weakness and compromise in their egos. The pressure from inside and outside makes them unable to carry out their egos to the end, and the pursuit of self-emotion and social demand also ends in vain.

It can be said that in order to thoroughly understand Ichiyou's works and even the literature in Meiji period, it is necessary to understand the reasons for the existence of such limitations. The limitation of self-consciousness expression reflected in Ichiyou's works is not only related to Ichiyou's family background, education and personal experience, but also closely related to the background of Meiji Era. Taking Ichiyou's short stories as the research object, and on the basis of the self-consciousness expression of female characters in these short stories, this paper discusses the limitations of such self-consciousness expression and explores the reasons for such limitations from two dimensions of external social environment and the author's own cognition.

## 2 The Suppression of Common New on Free Love

Love is a strong and positive emotional state and psychological state. It represents a deep and sincere feeling for people or things. Such feelings originate from the intimate relationship between people or the connection between people and things, and can also originate from admiration, compassion or common interests. Generally speaking, love brings warm attraction, strong enthusiasm and selfless giving. And love is the highest self unity, the most complete and natural embodiment of instinct and personality. Love can even surpass other love, such as Natsume Soseki's *Later* and Musyakoujisan's *The Friendship*. In the writings of Japanese modern writers, when there is conflict between love and friendship, they choose to let love defeat friendship. As for the relationship between love and people's self-consciousness, Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach once wrote that in love, people show dissatisfaction with their lonely individuals, sincerely demand the presence of others, and count others as their essence. Moreover, only the life that is connected with love can be regarded as a really life that truly belongs to human beings and is only conceptualized with human beings, that is, a life that is compatible with human beings [3]. The individual is defective, imperfect, weak and poor. However, love is strong, perfect, satisfied, free from lack, self-sufficient and unlimited. In love, the sense of individuality is the sense of perfection of class. Japanese Meiji literati expressed their self-awareness through love, which can be seen in the work of literary giant Moriōwai's *The Dancer*. In his works, Houtarou, before studying in Germany, has always standardized himself according to the Confucian standards and tried to live up to his mother's expectations. After studying in Germany, under the influence of Western civilization, he realized the independence of human beings and the awakening of human nature. He fell in love with Alice, a German dancer. Regardless of the external pressure, he chose the latter between the expectations of the country and his mother and Alice. As Mr. Liu Lishan pointed out, "Houtarou, for his own happiness, resolutely broke the old stereotypes. Then he was slandered and plotted against by the 'compatriots of the motherland'... The legation accordingly revoked the qualification of Houtarou as an overseas student in charge of fees... In spite of this, Houtarou did not doubt the value of love, but his relationship with Alice was further sublimated..." [4].

Love is a common theme in Higuchi Yiyō's works. The love in her works is not as beautiful as a fairy tale like a prince and a princess. The protagonists and heroines in the story are men and women in an ordinary world who live in the middle and lower classes of society, struggle for survival. In the story, helplessness is intertwined with sincerity, hope and disappointment are repeated, and finally all end in regret. Among them, *Childhood Sweethearts* is the most famous. Yu Hua once said that this is the most beautiful love story he had ever read. The work describes the love story between two young boys and girls in their prime of life. Itiyō describes the psychological activities of young boys and girls with exquisite strokes, and presents the initial feelings of love, which is as hazy and sacred as a layer of gauze. In *Ignored*, tyō is a poor girl who lives at the bottom of the society, while Tatukuma is a rich boy who is active in the society. The simple, tyō goes to Tatukuma with all his heart, thinking that he has found a lover who can be entrusted for life. However, Tatukuma just regards Ah Die as a chess piece and plans to use Ah Die's beauty to lure an officer to realize his career. Such a fact is very sad. Another example is *Traveling Clouds*, which tells the story of a Meiji

youth, Keiji Nozawa, who went to Tokyo from Yamanashi County to study, boarded with his adoptive father's friend, the Uesugi family. Despite his marriage engagement, he fell in love with the daughter of the Uesugi family, Nuu, but after returning home, he completely forgot his vows to Nuu. In addition, Riki in *Darker Currents* has a vision of love. She is dissatisfied with the status quo of life committed to being a lover, and longs for a home for true love. But the person she loves does not love her, and the person who is willing to marry her is not the one she loves. Riki failed to harvest love and ended up with a tragic ending. Whether Itiyou does it intentionally or unintentionally, the love in Itiyou's works shows the female's inner desire in the early Meiji period, and expresses the awakening of self-consciousness through the desire and pursuit of love. The love story in Itiyou's novels that ended without a hitch is not a coincidence again and again, but comes from Itiyou's own bumpy and unfortunate emotional experience, which, to a large extent, comes from secular pressure. Itiyou herself or the characters show their self-awareness through their desire for love. However, the current secular ideas are too deep-rooted to contain self-consciousness in infancy.

### 3 The Deep-Rooted Feudal Thoughts

“Literature is the son of one's own era”, and the era endowed Higuchi ichiyou's literature with unique vitality. Higuchi ichiyou lived in the Meiji period, which was in the alternation of the new and the old. The tension between feudal thoughts and western modern thoughts in this period had a great impact on the Japanese at that time. They demanded to transform the feudal culture handed down from generation to generation in order to get rid of the backward cultural state as soon as possible. At the same time, women were especially persecuted by the feudal system. Therefore, women's bold pursuit of free love and the desire to achieve equal social status between men and women are doomed to run into a brick wall in such a reality.

In the novel *The Thirteenth Night*, Seki's husband often rebukes she in an imperative tone, dismissively saying that she is uneducated that she can't do tea ceremony, flower ceremony and painting like other people's wives, and attributes all of the family's unhappiness to his wife's responsibility. Seki is like living in a dark valley, suffering from domestic cold violence from her husband every day. Until she could no longer bear it, Seki returned to his parents' home on the night of September 13, a traditional Japanese festival, to ask for a letter of divorce from his parents. In the face of daughter's crying about an unhappy marriage, the father resolutely rejected the divorce with an almost bystander attitude. In her father's opinion, divorce is disgraceful after all and will certainly damage the appearance of family. In addition, the future of the younger brother of Seki, also depends on his son-in-law Harada. If Seki is divorced, the future of the younger brother will end abruptly. Finally, for the sake of the young grandson, Seki's son, he can't divorce, or the young child will lose his mother. Seki complied with father's persuasion and decided to return to Harada's home. On the way home, Seki met her girlish sweetheart. After some inquiry, she found that both of them were in an unhappy life. However, their previous love has become a memory. With a feeling of loss, they walked towards unknown lives.

*The Thirteenth Nigh* reveals that the traditional “family” system and the patriarchal system inhibit the expression of women's self-consciousness. The “family” system in

Japan began in the middle of the Edo period, and reached its peak from the end of Edo to the Meiji period, then began to collapse in the Taishou period, finally disintegrated sharply after World War II. In the novel, the father's opposition to Seki's divorce is influenced by the traditional family collective consciousness. After his father analyzed why she could not get a divorce, Seki gave in immediately, without hesitation. As a modern Japanese woman, Seki's thinking embodies the shadow of modern thoughts. As a result, she complained to her parents about her husband's cold violence and asked for a divorce certificate, which is what traditional women who have been branded as good wives and mothers dare not do.

It can be said that the traditional thoughts and modern thoughts have played a great role in promoting women's awakening. On the other hand, we have to admit that the strength of old thoughts and the weakness of modern thoughts limit women's to find a new way after self awakening. These female characters were aware of their sadness and misfortune, but they did not really liberate themselves and did not have any substantive resistance, which reflected the incompleteness of women's ideological awakening in the early Meiji period. Women of that era needed great courage to unilaterally file for divorce and get rid of the life attached to their husbands. Seki opposed the oppression of women by the old system and yearned for equal marital relations and beautiful love, but he failed to get rid of the "female" way formulated by men and the deep-rooted family collective consciousness in Japan, so she had to find her own way out in the crevice of strong self assertion and reality contradiction, and the so-called way out was just to be careful and endure misfortune.

#### 4 The Burden of Home and the Lack of Love

After the death of her father and brother, Ichiyou became the head of the family and took up the burden of taking care of her mother and sister. She once turned to her friend Toranosuke's help. But later, because of the discord between her mother and Toranosuke, the whole family moved to the old-style private school of Nakajima Utako, where she worked as a teacher to bear the livelihood of the mother and daughter. In 1891, *Childhood Sweethearts* received a contribution fee for her work *Warbler In Swamp*. Inspired by this, Higuchi Ichiyou was determined to support her family through writing. Higuchi Ichiyou is consciously responsible for her family, and she will not abandon her family for the sake of herself. In reality, the heavy burden, which comes from her own family and the life without desire, transferred to the novel is that the protagonist also gives priority to the family collective and dares not to express herself too much and voluntarily compromise. This even becomes the weakness of self-consciousness expression. Therefore, although Seki in *The Thirteenth Night* opposes the oppression of women by the deep-rooted feudal system, she yearns for an equal relationship between husband and wife and for the beautiful love. But in the end, "she failed to get rid of the female way which is formulated by men, and failed to get rid of Japan's deep-rooted family collective consciousness. She had to find her own way out in the gap between her strong self-claim and the contradiction between reality, and the so-called way out was nothing more than careful living and enduring misfortune" [5].

The New Year's Eve describes the following two different kinds of people. Yamamura's family, who is served by Mine, lives in the rich area. It is needless to say that they

have no worries about food and clothing. The young ladies just want to go to the theatre to show their new clothes for the Spring Festival when every household is busy with the green lunar month. The Yamamura family is very mean, and the maids they recruited often run away after only a few days. Even the family members were not very harmonious. The stepmother hated the eldest son Sekinoseke for fear that he would inherit the family property. Mine's uncle and her families live in a slum. The room for three people is only 50 square meters in size, and there is no decent furniture. You can't afford to be cured even if you are ill, let alone have a decent new dress for energy conservation every New Year. However, they took care of each other. The eight year old brother also realized the difficulties of his parents and often said something comforting to them. Mine worked hard at Yamamura's house, endured the family's criticism, and reluctantly stayed at Yamamura's house. In order to see his uncle, Mine wanted to advance her salary or borrow usury. Finally, she asked Mrs. Yamamura to lend money, and Mrs. Yamamura promised to give it to her on New Year's Eve. However, on New Year's Eve, Mrs. Yamamura broke her promise and didn't keep the two dollars she had promised to lend to Mine. Two yuan is negligible for Yamamura's family, but it is Uncle Mine's life saving money. In desperation, Mine's flesh and blood relationship defeated morality and stole two yuan from the master's family when nobody was around. The kind-hearted Mine didn't mean to be "motivated by money", but decided to steal when she was cornered. Itiyou affirmed Mine's "stealing" behavior, which broke through the moral bottom line. It can be said that the living environment of the heroine Mine is based on the author Itiyou's own living environment. In 1983, Itiyou once stopped writing and moved to the slum to run a grocery store. The area is full of poverty and physical transactions. During that period, Itiyou personally experienced the living conditions at the bottom of the society.

In addition, Ichiyou's fiance had unilaterally broke the promise of marriage, and the Teacher-student Affair with Nakarai tousui ended in a breakup under secular pressure. In her love life, the frustration of her fiance, the unwillingness to bring trouble to her family and paying too much attention to the eyes of the world make Ichiyou and the protagonist in her novel not active enough in personal feelings. In *Darker Currents*, Riki has a longing for love and takes action to have it, but she still fails to harvest love and ends up miserably. What's more, in *Oblivion*, Ichiyou also portrays a woman who yearns for love but is teased by the man she loves. Love is a common theme in Ichiyou's novels. In her diary *Jomogyuu*, she once compared herself to the poor and ugly "Suetsumuhana" in *Genshi Monogatali*. That "Suetsumuhana" is in the shabby house overgrown with weeds, holding a trace of fantasy and painstakingly waiting for the arrival of "Kougennshi" [6]. Ichiyou is desperate for love, but at the same time, she has a strong lack of self-confidence, which leads to the fact that in her novels love is often a beautiful and luxurious existence, an unattainable flower.

Itiyou's economic burden and life without desire in reality have become one of the sources of material for his novel background. Under such a living environment, the female characters in his novels assume the responsibility of taking care of their families. Driven by this sense of responsibility, they have a little confidence in taking care of their families and having a bright future by their own, and thus have a sense of self affirmation. However, the bondage of economy is one of the inducements to restrain the expression of

self-consciousness while stimulating the consciousness of self affirmation. As a result, the female characters in the novel dare not express themselves too much and voluntarily compromise, which even becomes the weakness of self-consciousness expression. This kind of self affirmation generated under economic passivity cannot stand the test of reality and is extremely fragile. Once hit, they will feel self doubt and return to their original self and self silence.

## 5 Conclusion

Higuchi ichiyou's literature shape female images that are different from traditional women. Her female characters express self-consciousness in terms of emotional and social needs, such as Riki in *Darker Currents* and Seki in *The Thirteenth Nigh*. These female characters, showing the living conditions of Japanese women at that time, are reflections of the reality. However, this expression of self-consciousness end sin a mournful submission and confusion. Therefore, the female self-consciousness expressed in Higuchi ichiyou's literature has obvious limitations. This limitation, on the one hand, comes from the traditional requirements for women, on the other hand, it is the self-compromise of the characters. The former reflects the deep-rooted feudal thoughts and the weakness of modern thoughts, while the latter is the embodiment of the author's self-limitation on the characters in the novel.

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