



From the Perspective of Gender Discrimination: The Tragic Ending of Female Characters in Higuchi Ichiyo's Works "Self-immolation" and "Childhood Sweethearts"

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Abstract. Higuchi Ichiyo is a famous female writer in the early Meiji period. Her works not only reflected the social status of the bottom class in the Meiji period, but also the forerunner of women's consciousness awakening in the Meiji period. Therefore, based on the analysis of "Self-Immolation" and "Childhood sweethearts", this paper will analyze the tragic endings of female characters in these two works from the perspective of gender discrimination by adopting the methods of common discussion and analysis. This paper analyzes their commonalities from four perspectives: family background, female subject consciousness, society and values, author's ideology, and creation background. From the perspective of gender discrimination, we can learn the status of women and the awakening of female consciousness in the Meiji period.

Keywords: Feminism · modern Japanese literature · Ichiba Higuchi · Meiji period

1 Introduction

As an important issue of feminism, gender discrimination is of great significance to the exploration of gender discrimination in Japanese literature. This paper intends to fill in the gaps. As for the analysis of Ichiba Higuchi's works, there are quite a few works in academic circles, but few scholars have compared the two works, and the research progress in this area is basically blank [1]. The study of the two masterpieces from the perspective of sexism is a good object of comparison between "Self-Immolation". Sex discrimination has always been an important topic of feminism. As an important female writer in the Meiji Period, "Self-Immolation" and "Childhood sweethearts" and "Childhood sweethearts" profoundly reveal the inequality of women in terms of marriage and social class treatment, and the study of its commonness plays an important role

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in reflecting social background [2]. The theme of this paper is based on gender discrimination, and through the exploration of the commonness of the works, we can conclude the injustices in the patriarchal society. This paper adopts the method of text analysis to make a close reading of the research works and explore the similarities between the two works from the perspective of sexism. This paper is devoted to find out the surface of the two works, as well as deep common ground, to better analyze the specific content and characteristics of sexism in the two works [3]. This paper focuses on the analysis of the multiple commonness of the text from the family background, personal cognition and values, social reality, the author's ideology, creative background. The author's background and creation background the "Self-Immolation" and the "Childhood sweethearts" are related to the author's mood and society at that time. The first common trait is family background. In "Self-Immolation", Acho is a virtuous wife who satisfies a man's staring fantasy of a "virtuous wife." Such a beautiful person would have a tragic ending. And "Childhood sweethearts" in the heroine Mei Deng Li is a beautiful, gentle character, naive and happy, people love to see the girl. So, parents and friends to her spoil, care. Maiden Madeleine is full of energy and vitality. Madeleine's life is carefree, and her beauty is beyond question [4]. The second point is that the female protagonist lacks a correct understanding of her own destiny and social reality. The image of the female protagonist satisfies the aesthetic orientation of the male. However, its active period in the Japanese literary world, is the most chaotic period after the Meiji Restoration, the low status of women is a prominent social feature of this period. Men's superior, superior and women's inferior were written into the household registration law, and women who were not legally granted independent citizenship were clearly identified in marriage and family. The third point is that social reality and people's values. The society in which Amachi in "Self-Immolation" and Madeleine in "Childhood sweethearts" do not recognize women's own efforts and excellence, and it depends on her husband's a little conscience to feel pity for her. In an age when gender is the original sin, the fate of abandoned wives born to marry women will never be resolved. Marriage without equality will not make women happy but will push them into a more desperate abyss. Here we can see that the accurate grasp of women's living conditions is not only the author's complaint and struggle against the times, but also the embodiment of the author's female subject consciousness. Finally, the common four lies in the author's ideology and the background of the era. As a staunch defender of women's position, Ichib Higuchi struggles against social discrimination, which is expressed in her works as women's unique lyricism and rich and delicate perceptual thoughts. Talking about the background of the times, the thought of men being superior to women in Meiji society is very serious, but women still have some independent consciousness in society. In a word, his works play a positive role in promoting women's freedom, equality, and liberation.

2 The Commonalities Between the Characters

2.1 Commonality 1—Family Background

From the perspective of tragedy, the definition of tragedy is the building up and then the destruction of all good things, so Higuchi Ichiyo initially laid much emphasis on the

family background of the female characters in her setting of the story. The family background of these female characters is undoubtedly superior, and even in *Self-Immolation*, Achachi's husband was adopted into her family. In the secular view, the male in marriage should be lower than the female, and Achachi has more right of speech [5]. For her husband, Achachi provided him with a strong financial support: a excellent career in politics and a chance to show off to others, not to mention the meticulous care she gave him. Higuchi Ichiyo painted a picture of a wife who should fulfill all the needs of a man, a perfect wife but the end is that Achachi was kicked out of the family. The Midori in "Childhood sweethearts" has a beautiful appearance and a gentle character. She is very happy every day and is loved by everyone. Her parents and friends loved her and gave her infinite care. The Midori is full of vitality and vitality. However, the original strong, bright, simple Midori, because her sister became a famous prostitute, she and her parents moved to the brothel house to give birth to. Quickly, Midori was badly affected: because of the brothel ethos, she became flashy and capricious. The arts begins with the fate of Midori, a beautiful girl who grew up in a brothel and is destined to become a prostitute. Moreover, the ending of the novel echoes the opening chapter, once again revealing Midori's tragic fate. Superior family environment could not become a shield for women's happiness in that era, the low status of women in the Meiji period and the social imprisonment of women's thoughts. In other words, the "female commandments" compiled by the society for women are the main culprit of their tragic end [6].

2.2 Commonality 2 – Lack of Correct Understanding of One's Own Destiny and Social Reality

From this common denominator, the tragic end of female characters tells the public that there will not be a good ending without a correct understanding of their own destiny and social reality. She wanted to awaken the true awakening of the female consciousness [7]. The tragic experience of the Higuchi Ichiyo itself prompted the awakening of the female subject consciousness, coupled with the hard life of the family, so that Higuchi Ichiyo was able to have extensive contact with the people at the bottom of the society. Japanese Women's Literature in the Context of Globalization reads: "It (female consciousness) is not only the gender consciousness of a writer as a woman, but also its social consciousness as a person. It is a fusion of social consciousness and gender consciousness." Aho in "Self-Immolation" was spoiled since childhood, with the strong financial capital her father left to her, satisfying the male gaze of her with the "perfect wife" fantasy. But after her husband became involved, all the property went to her husband. Aho lost its independent source of income and lost the property. Aho became an accessory to men. Aho's position in the marital relationship was switched just after she gave up her management of the property, and it was also the beginning of her tragedy. The image of the heroine in "Childhood sweethearts" overlaps with the experiences of the book's author herself. Primary school education in the Meiji period enlightened the people through the Confucian family' concept. "Childhood sweethearts" was created in this context [8]. At that time, it was generally believed that women must receive housework and self-cultivation education. They thought that obeying their parents was inevitable, and even if they fell into the bitter life, they thought it was fate and must accept it. Midori studied "cultivating" self-cultivation in school, and "cultivating self-morality"

is listed as the first place of Meiji women's education, that is, the girls are required to cultivate "virtuous virtues and sentiments" from an early age. Growing up in a harsh environment, coupled with the influence of the family and the surrounding environment, Midori's beautiful girlhood ended at the age of 14 [9].

2.3 Commonality 3—Similarity Three Social Reality and People's Value

Acho, the heroine of "Self-immolation" Society does not recognize women's own efforts and excellence. Whether they can keep the marriage on which they live depends mainly lies on the conscience and compassion of their husbands, therefore their tragedy is predictable. In an era when gender is the original sin, the fate of abandoned wives who were born to marry someone will be irreversible. Marriage without equality will not make women happy but drive women to despair. Therefore, the author believes that Higuchi's accurate grasp of women's living conditions is not only the author's unyielding complaint and struggle against society in the times, but also the concentrated embodiment of the author's female autonomy consciousness [10]. Midori, the heroine of "Childhood Sweethearts", created destined sadness in society and people's values at that time. Yoshihara Flower Street is a red-light district with a nearly 200-year history. Residents there rely on brothels to make a living, so the presence of girls is more urgent and precious than boys. It is not a decline in feudal idea of male superiority and female inferiority, but the unique and intricate social atmosphere of Yoshihara Flower Street. Every family in this district tries to improve their economic situation by her daughter and hopes them to become the most popular one in a brothel. This also has a great impact on boys when they wander outside brothels, and people's values are absurd in a deformed social posture. The spiritual level and the inner beauty of human beings seems funny in this atmosphere. She has an inevitable fate as a prostitute, and the future she face is dark. The creation of "abandoned women" in this work revolves around married women. In the current era, the heroine Acho can be called the "perfect wife", and the image of the rich daughter and the beautiful appearance give her the ability to choose a partner. As a wife, Acho provides as much financial support as possible for her husband Kosuke Kimura, which strongly meets the criteria for a successful man from a secular perspective. However, for Acho, her fate was to become an abandoned woman and deprived of everything. The so-called perfect husband has extramarital affairs outside, and even has an illegitimate child. After Acho became more and more timid after knowing the truth, and she even accepted her husband's request to adopt his illegitimate child [11]. Her wish was to maintain this precarious marriage and family condition, but her contact with the scholar dug a grave for herself on the way. The maidservant exaggerated the story, and some malicious people turned this story into something else. This happens to challenge the so-called dignity as a husband. In a patriarchal society, women's chastity is regarded as the most inviolable thing. Once they lose it, they will lose fame, property, and even houses, all of which belong to men. On the other hand, in this false "fact", the husband only wants to an excuse to get away. In the most chaotic period after the Meiji Restoration, the most prominent feature is the low social status of women. There is no legislation to compete for women's rights and independence, and their marriage and family status are always fixed. The stability of marriage depends only on the charity

and conscience of the husband. As the saying goes, gender is the original sin, and unfair prejudice has become universal and correct justice.

2.4 Commonality 4—Author’s Ideology and Historical Context

Higuchi Ichiyo was born in the early Meiji period, the new Meiji government also created an indelible imprint for the citizens of that era. Western ideas have just been introduced into Japan, and the ideas of gender equality and equal rights for men and women have gradually taken shape. But the thought is not mature, and the equality and freedom that women aspire to are just fantasies. Under continuous reforms, the status of women has become lower and lower, and many scholars believe that this is the darkest era for Japanese women. From the unique perspective of women, Higuchi Ichiyo has deeply depicted all kinds of injustices and discrimination suffered by women in the times, complaining about the current social situation and overall values in a literary way. Historical context leads to Writing is the initial stage of women’s reform. In “Childhood sweethearts” and “Self-immolation”, Midori and Acho both lost the election under the gaze of allmen and were suppressed by others. Some scholars believe that “Childhood sweethearts” describes the predestined image of women while reflects the historical problem of Japan being staring at by the West in the process of implementing the “anti-prostitution movement”. During that period, it was normal for female characters like Acho to be criticized, which reflects men’s stubborn and ugly ideology and greedy nature [12]. The tragic image of Acho in “Self-immolation” is vividly portrayed in the work. She is shackled by a patriarchal society, deprived of the right to live in liberty, and is greatly suppressed in social welfare.

3 Conclusion

The main contribution of this paper is to compare and analyze the two works of “Self-Immolation” and “Childhood sweethearts” from the feminist perspective for the first time. Through the study of the similarities between the two works, it is not difficult to find out the causes of the subtle relationship, which is of great significance to reflect the status of women and the bud of women’s consciousness. The disadvantage of this paper lies in the fact that the two works should be combined with more empirical historical data, to distinguish the decorative elements in the works. In addition, this paper seldom summarizes the development of feminism before the Meiji period, so that readers without relevant research background cannot get more complete concept expression from this paper [13]. Due to the limitation of space, this paper cannot analyze all the similarities between Self “Self-Immolation” and “Childhood sweethearts” from the perspective of female discrimination. This paper hopes to find out more common points of meta-dimensions and better understand the status of women from the perspective of sexism. As for the comparison and analysis of “Self-Immolation” and “Childhood sweethearts”, the remaining works are also of analytical value. Feminist or literary-related scholars should fill in the blank and develop.

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