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THE PROBLEM OF SUICIDE AND DOUBLE SUICIDE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE

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This paper explores the problem of suicide and double suicide in contemporary Japanese literature. Characters from fourteen stories are under consideration, with respect to categories such as shame, guilt, and retribution. Based on stories of six popular Japanese writers (Hoshi Shinichi's "The Overtaking", Atōda Takashi's "The Hair", "The Ghost of the Office", "The Red Dress", "The Visitor" and "The God of Happiness", Akagawa Jirō's "The Double Suicide", "Let's Shock", "The Dancing Man", "The Gossip" and "The New Worker", Miyabe Miyuki's "Don't Say Anything", Otsuichi's "Ishinome", and Isaka Kōtarō's "Grasshopper") I analyse characteristic features of these "suicide" stories in the Japanese literature of the last four decades. Refs 23.

Keywords: contemporary Japanese literature, suicide, double suicide, shame, guilt, retribution.

САМОУБИЙСТВО И ДВОЙНОЕ САМОУБИЙСТВО В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ЯПОНСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ

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В статье рассматриваются произведения современных японских писателей, сюжет которых построен на самоубийстве. Анализируются следующие произведения: рассказ Хоси Синъити «Обгон», рассказы Атода Такаси «Волосы», «Призрак офиса», «Красное платье», «Посетитель», «Бог счастья»; рассказы Акагава Дзиро «Двойное самоубийство», «Давай шокируем», «Танцующий мужчина», «Сплетня» и «Новый сотрудник»; рассказ Миябэ Миюки «Ничего не говори»; рассказ Оцуити «Исиномэ»; роман Исака Котаро «Кузнецик». Выделяются четыре основные причины самоубийства персонажей в современной японской литературе: самоубийство влюбленных из-за невозможности быть вместе; самоубийство в результате мук совести — как самонаказание за совершенное злодеяние; «офисное» самоубийство из-за проблем на работе — часто как единственный способ восстановить запятнанную честь; самоубийство родителей ради блага детей. Проводится параллель между причинами самоубийства в литературе на рубеже XX — XXI веков и суицидом в японской литературе прежних времён; совпадения обнаружены в двух случаях: самоубийство влюбленных и самоубийство как способ сохранить достоинство в драматической ситуации. В первом случае очевидна разница в мотивах и последствиях суицида по сравнению с литературой более ранних периодов: так, например, двойное самоубийство влюбленных может быть продиктовано эгоистичными или корыстными целями одного из них и оказаться «подставным», что было невозможно для подобных произведений предшествующих эпох. Для произведений, относящихся ко второй названной категории — «самоубийство чести», характерен более глубокий психологизм. Также в статье представлен краткий экскурс в историю: как формировался и находил воплощение подход к суициду в традиционной японской культуре. Библиогр. 23 назв.

Ключевые слова: современная японская литература, самоубийство, двойное самоубийство, стыд, вина, воздаяние.

1. Introduction

In Japan, suicide traditionally was a way in which warriors (samurais) could expiate their crimes, apologize for error, escape from disgrace, redeem their friends, or prove their sincerity. Often people who did not belong to military class killed themselves as a result

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of so called “magical thinking” — a fantasy that, in relation to suicide, is associated with a feeling of power and complete control: a “You’ll be sorry when I’m dead” fantasy. An illustration of magical thinking and suicide is the old Japanese custom of killing oneself on the doorstep of someone who has caused insult or humiliation [1, p. 155]. Such perception of suicide and approach to it has its roots in the basic belief typical of the Japanese: that is the ancient Buddhist concept of *musokan*, a philosophy that says the human body is merely a temporary home for the soul. Thus, biological existence may not have much meaning [1, p. 138]. Historically, authoritarian cultures have produced a very high suicide rate. Some experts believe that this type of culture affects a person’s self-concept. For instance, in the past, the highly authoritarian Japanese culture produced a very high suicide rate in that country, according to sociologists Mamoru Iga and Kichinosuke Tatai [1, p. 21] and writer Chkhartishvili G. [2]. One example of Japanese suicide tradition is known worldwide as kamikaze: the national military authority over the kamikaze pilot was so pronounced that he lost his own personal identity and instead wished to sacrifice his life for his country.

Japan also has a high youth suicide rate. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people. The unbelievable stress placed on Japanese teenagers during examinations is one of the factors that contribute to the high teen suicide rate in Japan — one of the highest in the world. The examination system is referred to as “Examination Hell” [1, p. 217].

No wonder that given all reasons mentioned above the phenomenon of suicide has affected the Japanese literature. Suicide and especially double suicide built plots of many famous dramas of the Japanese literature [3], [4]. Those suicides were mainly committed either because of unhappy love, when circumstances did not let two lovers be together, or because the suicide was the only way to keep one’s dignity [5], [6]. In the Japanese literature of the twentieth century to the forefront come the characters who are disappointed and tired of social injustice [7]. The character of the Japanese prose of the 20th century is perplexed and melancholic, torn by complexes and doubts, having no force to stand up to the reality. Most characters demonstrate indecision and obedience to external circumstances, the rebellion often “burns out” inside and no spark becomes a flame. Nothing can be a consolation for the character — either love or work or friends or relatives; without finding understanding the characters live in the atmosphere of alienation and foreignness to the surrounding world and suicide seems to be the only way out.

In the Japanese prose fiction of end of the 20th — the beginning of the 21st centuries we find some both new and old reasons and circumstances of the suicide. We will base on fourteen stories of six popular Japanese writers: Hoshi Shinichi’s (1926–1997) “The Overtaking”, Atōda Takashi’s (born in 1935) “The Hair”, “The Ghost of the Office”, “The Red Dress”, “The Visitor” and “The God of Happiness”, Akagawa Jirō’s (born in 1948) “The Double Suicide”, “Let’s Shock”, “The Dancing Man”, “The Gossip” and “The New Worker”, Miyabe Miyuki’s (born in 1960) “Don’t Say Anything”, Otsuchi’s (pen name; real name Adachi Hirotaka, born in 1978) “Ishinome”, and Isaka Kōtarō’s (born in 1971) “Grasshopper”.

2. Suicide of love and pangs of guilt

One of the main reasons for suicide is still an unhappy love — but the consequences differ from that in the suicide stories of the previous ages: the character who survives

experiences pangs of guilt which are so strong that they provoke hallucinations; and hallucinations bring the character to a tragic ending.

Let us see some examples. In Atōda Takashi's "The Red Dress" story [8] the young woman Misako learns that the wife of her lover had committed suicide presumably because she knew that her husband was unfaithful; Misako is suffering a big deal and is so severely tormented by pangs of conscience that is expecting every minute that the dead wife of her lover would take revenge on her. She hallucinates and remembers all horror stories she knows when a vindictive ghost came — and in the end she burns down under unknown circumstances, presumably because she enflamed herself.

The character of Hoshi Shinichi's "The Overtaking" story [9] has been long tormented by pangs of conscience because of the suicide of his former girlfriend who committed suicide after he had left her. All of a sudden the character sees her ghost in a car driving by and the ghost is reaching out towards him; the man crashes into a lamp post without finding out that "the ghost" was just a mannequin created by the artist who had been inspired by her beauty.

In Akagawa Jirō's "The Double Suicide" [10] the chief offers the hero to marry his daughter promising him career promotion and financial help. The man decides to take advantage of this chance to make his way in life. He does not know how to tell his present girlfriend about it and persuades her up to drown themselves together; he deceives her, however, and comes out. Here we can obviously find an allusion on the story "The Overtaking" written by Hoshi Shinichi. But writhing with pangs of conscience, like the hero in Hoshi's "The Overtaking" story, the character of "The Double Suicide" story is interpreting the situation in the wrong way: he reads the characters incorrectly, and in a harmless note on the front door he recognizes a threat from the deceased girl who has returned from the afterlife to revenge herself. Being shocked he steps back from the door and finds himself on the roadway where he is knocked down by a truck. Thus, like in Hoshi's "The Overtaking" story that we have discussed above the situation that is not actually a mystic one looks mystic in the eyes of the hero, and the perpetrator of the tragedy punishes himself.

It is interesting that "The Hair" horror story [11] by Atōda Takashi reveals an obvious allusion to the short stories "The Overtaking" by Hoshi and "The Double Suicide" by Akagawa about women who committed suicide because of their unhappy love. However, in Atōda's story the woman is not a victim but a culprit: she knew that she was terminally ill but did not tell her beloved about that and persuaded him to commit suicide allegedly because of the impossibility of being together (their families were against their marriage). The man happens to avoid death through drowning but he still experiences pangs of guilt that he survived; and twenty years later the dead woman comes up for her beloved from the sea bottom as a vindictive ghost, entangles him with her fair long hair, and fulfills her plan to deliver him to the afterlife.

In Miyabe Miyuki's adventure detective story "Don't Say Anything" [12] Ashihara Shōji, a former exemplary husband of a sick wife became a victim of a young avaricious mistress Reiko, whom he finally found and killed. His terminally sick wife had been long dreaming for double suicide with her husband but first she wanted to make sure that he did not kill his mistress, — because otherwise the husband and wife would never be able to meet on Heaven. In order to help his wife die peacefully Ashihara had to find a girl who would look like his mistress Reiko, and to show her to his wife as a proof that he is not a murderer — before killing himself in the car together with his wife.

3. Suicide as a retribution

In a number of stories the imagination plays the role of “the punisher” when it grows and drives people crazy, thus driving them to suicide: this is, for example, “Let’s Shock” by Akagawa Jirō [13] where the man learns that stress has a most detrimental effect on the health of people with heart problems and tries to drive his wife — who has a weak heart and has become repulsive to him — to a heart attack by means of silly jokes and hoaxes now and then, making her think that he has died: for example, he calls her allegedly from the site of a car accident and then suddenly appears in front of her like a ghost shocking the woman, etc. The wife does get worse every day, and the man rejoices that he will soon be able to live happily with his mistress — when suddenly his mistress shares her suspicion with him that the wife has exposed them. Soon the wife utters some insignificant phrases about the impact of different factors on one’s health; the man interprets them wrongly and commits suicide thinking that she is hinting that she is going to denounce him to the police.

In the same way in “The New Worker” story by Akagawa [14] the protagonist carried away by the pictures drawn by his imagination jumps out of the window (which is a punishment for his cruel treatment of junior employees and abuse of people — a similar idea of Karmic retribution was typical of the short stories of the Late Middle Ages in Japan). Thus, the suicide sometimes becomes a self-punishment for the evil done.

4. Office suicide: guilt and disgrace

In traditional Japanese society, in certain situations suicide was seen as the appropriate moral course of action for a man who otherwise faced the loss of his honor. Compulsory seppuku (also known as harakiri) was declared illegal in Japan in 1868. The custom had been reserved for the nobility and members of the military caste, who would plunge a ceremonial knife into the stomach when disgraced [15, p. 55]. The Japanese at one time ritualized suicide through the ceremonial death with honor of seppuku, as practiced by the samurai, or members of the military class. Harakiri was officially outlawed in 1868, yet the tradition of suicide in the name of honor still influences certain Japanese practices. This ancient glorification of death with honor (such as the Japanese soldiers who died as kamikaze pilots during World War II) may be responsible, at least in part, for the high rate of suicide among young Japanese today [15, p. 91].

Let us see how the suicide of honor affected contemporary Japanese literature. In a number of stories the characters try to or do commit suicide because they have problems at their working place. The woman character from “The God of Happiness” story by Atōda Takashi [16] is stealing money from the company where she works to help her beloved, a scoundrel and gigolo. When he left her she went to Hokkaidō to commit suicide far from everybody because she thought she would never be forgiven by her boss, and she prefers death to a disgrace.

In Akagawa Jirō’s “The Dancing Man” story [17] a harmless lonely young man becomes a butt for his colleagues’ ridicule and an object for constant nitpicking for the superior; however, the young man never retaliated against his offenders. He only began to buy dolls and paint or decorate them to resemble real people — the chiefs who worked their frustration off on him, unpleasant clients and other offenders for whom the man had to

smile patiently, enduring the streams of insult. The subconscious feeling of guilt towards the dolls must have been so strong in the man that he lived the life of those dolls: he danced like a doll ballet dancer and dressed like a doll girl, etc. At the end, the man was found hanged among his torn dolls. He never let off his real feelings, suppressed his discontent with the unfair attitude and eventually became a marionette of his suppressed fears and grievances; and while committing suicide he felt that the dolls were taking revenge. In this story the dolls are a metaphor for the suppressed complexes, fears and grievances that grow unable to find a way out, start “toying with you” and are capable of destroying the man who no longer has any power over them.

In Atōda Takashi’s “The Ghost of the Office” story [18] the principal character commits suicide after having long been mocked by his boss — but when he comes back to the office as a ghost to take vengeance on his boss, he does not dare to, because even being an otherworldly creature he still is afraid of his boss.

The suicide because of office problems seems so common that no one doubts that this is a suicide, and it becomes an obstacle for further investigation even when in fact an employee was murdered. For example, Koike, the hero of the detective story “The Gossip” [19] does not come to work for the first time in twenty years, and so his co-workers first suppose that he has died and then set a rumor about his suicide about the department. People always easily believe bad things being inattentive to one another — while the whole story has turned up due to the fault of a new secretary from the personnel department who has just lost Koike’s holiday application. However, the story does not end with just the return of the hero to his workplace: taking advantage of the situation, the secretary, who was in a close relationship with the employee appointed to Koike’s position calls the “buried” employee from his holiday under a false pretence, kills him to vacate the position for her lover and plots everything as if Koike himself had jumped off the roof after learning what happened: “He said, ‘Nobody was worried about me’, and ran away. I rushed to find him but I did not. I could not even think that he would jump off the roof” [19, p. 174]. And no one doubted that was true, because the company employees were inclined to think that feeling oneself lonely and forgotten by one’s colleagues would be enough reason to kill oneself.

In the same way, in Isaka Kōtarō’s “Grasshopper” [20] there was a criminal organization which drove innocent office workers to a suicide. When some director of the company committed a crime which was about to be revealed he was offered to hire special employees of this criminal organization who would help the director to set up one of his colleagues and to make him commit suicide. During the long practice of this organization none of the set-up colleagues ever tried to struggle; they all were convinced that their guilt was easy to prove and they finally agreed to commit suicide because they were sure that a suicide would be a perfect way to die with dignity and to avoid disgrace and the unfairly blemished name. As a result, none of the crimes were further investigated, because everyone, including detectives, easily believed that the suicide was natural for the employee because he had been very ashamed when he had been caught for the crime against his company.

5. Unhappy parenting and suicide

We managed to find also two stories where an unhappy parent committed suicide. In the novel “Ishinome” by Otsuichi [21] S., the principal character, a young schoolteacher

of drawing, who lived and worked in a small village, went together with his colleague and friend to investigate what had happened to his mother, or at least to seek for her remains if she had been killed. According to what the young man's father and uncle said, his mother was a talented photographer but a selfish and restive career person who had been separated from her son about twenty years earlier and had left for the mountains to commit suicide.

Losing their way in the mountains the young men got into an old house with no signs of civilization. The hostess did not let the friends look at her, so they began to believe that she was a legendary *Ishinome* — a woman whose eyes petrify. One morning, having found the petrified friend in front of the woman's bedroom in the morning the young man demanded that she let him go, but the woman refused to show him the way out of that bewitched place shrouded in mist from morning till night. Then teacher S. decided to kill her. There was a fight during which the young man gave the woman a deadly wound. Only then did the hostess of the house tell him that she was not *Ishinome* but his mother who had been driven from the house at some time because she had been keen on photography more than on caring about her little son. Deprived of her parental rights the young mother who was not allowed to see her child left for the mountains many years ago to commit suicide, but she met the real *Ishinome*. They became friends and quit the world of troubles together. It seemed that when being human yet *Ishinome* had gone to the mountains under the same circumstances. Once the mother of the principal character made a photo of her friend with a Polaroid camera and gave her the photo. Nobody suspected that *Ishinome's* look did not lose its deadly power even in pictures, and the amazing being petrified herself. After her death the mother of the principal character continued what *Ishinome* had been doing — by showing her photo to everybody who approached the house and guarding herself by such murders from intrusion of the civilized world that had long become so alien to her.

Complying with the last request of the mother, teacher S. gave her *Ishinome's* photo; the woman looked at her friend's remarkable beautiful face for the first time and thus killed herself in order to save her son from the sense of guilt that he was the one who killed his mother having given her a deadly wound. The young man took the box with *Ishinome's* photo and planned to commit suicide in the same way his mother had done.

Kanzaki Hatsue from Atōda Takashi's "The Visitor" novel [22] that lived all her life in poverty failed to bring up her daughter properly and the daughter became a woman of pleasure and a thief. Getting employed as a nurse in a maternity home Hatsue waited a chance, killed a newborn daughter of rich Makiko and substituted her for her tiny granddaughter given up by the mother — hoping that at least her granddaughter would have a different life, a life of joy and ease that Hatsue herself had always longed for. Having done this, Hatsue, by the words of the policeman, presumably committed suicide, because she had no other reasons to live.

6. Conclusions

The following characteristic features of the "suicide" stories in the Japanese literature of the last three decades may be pointed out.

1) The suicide because of unhappy love is a popular basis of a plot. However, unlike medieval stories about such suicide [23], one in the couple often has egotistic motifs. Also,

the consequences differ from that in the suicide stories of the previous ages: the character who survives experiences pangs of guilt which are so strong that provoke hallucinations; and hallucinations bring the character to a tragic ending. (Hoshi Shinichi's "The Overtaking"; Atōda Takashi's "The Hair"; Akagawa Jirō's "The Double Suicide"; Miyabe Miyuki's "Don't Say Anything").

2) In a number of stories the imagination plays the role of "the punisher" when it grows and drives people crazy, thus driving them to suicide, so a suicide may be regarded as a self-punishment for the evil done — continuing the traditions of Karmic retribution typical of the Japanese stories of the Middle Ages. (Atōda Takashi's "The Red Dress"; Akagawa Jirō's "Let's Shock", "The New Worker").

3) The "office" suicide of trade company employees is very popular, and the catalyst is either problems with colleagues or boss (Atōda Takashi's "The Ghost of the Office", "The Dancing Man"; Akagawa Jirō's "The Gossip") or a character's fear of a disgrace, when suicide is regarded as the only way to keep their dignity. (Atōda Takashi's "The God of Happiness"; Isaka Kōtarō's "Grasshopper").

4) Twice we saw how criminal parents in hopeless situations kill themselves in order to help their children, as they think. (Otsuichi's "Ishinome"; Atōda Takashi's "The Visitor").

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