

【研究例会 IN ハンガリー発表】

**Gender Consciousness in Natsume Sōseki**

**Kayoko Takagi**

This presentation aims to explain how in the context of Meiji society Natsume Sōseki developed his consciousness about the gender issues throughout his works. His approach to the female figure starts from the romantic dreamlike image, putting it as something inevitable, yet distant to the man. Some works from his early period show a clear demureness towards women, but this perception changes gradually towards a recognition of the female role in men's life as a companion, friend and even as a counterpart of a taut relationship between man and woman. We can trace this development by reading his major works. At the same time he was critically aware of the European feminist movement; which soon after found itself on Japanese soil.

**Sōseki as an enlightened writer**

Natsume Sōseki is one of the most important and influential writers at the dawn of the modern Japanese literature in the Meiji era (1868-1912). His works have been intensely and widely studied, both inside and outside Japan. For his time, Sōseki along with Mori Ōgai, was an enlightened intellectual when Japan started to assimilate Western civilization, despite all the troubles that entailed. His popularity in Japan surpasses other writers of the past and makes him appear as a favorite writer for many contemporary writers, such as Murakami Haruki<sup>1</sup>. On my part, I can confess that, as a young student of Junior High School, I started to read Japanese literature thanks to his works, such as *Botchan* or *Sanshiro*.

One of the reasons of this phenomenon is, most probably, his experience to be, first, an English teacher in several high schools and, later, a professor at Tokyo University. Although he neglects repeatedly the tedious days he spent in Matsuyama or Kumamoto, where he taught English language and literature, or his duty as the successor of Lafcadio Hearn at the University, he had a number of important young followers coming every week to his home to meet him. We can mention, for example, 芥川龍之介 Akutagawa Ryunosuke or 和辻哲郎 Watsuji Tetsurō, two of the most relevant intellectuals in the Taisho era, who received his direct influence. The world described by Sōseki has something akin and attractive to young readers of different generations. In other words, he communicates well with the young over time.

<sup>1</sup> Murakami told this remark during his participation in the talk show for the literary awards created to commemorate late 河合隼雄 Kawai Hayao, Murakami's best friend and an important authority of clinical psychology.  
(<http://www.sponichi.co.jp/society/news/2013/05/07/kiji/K20130507005752400.html>, consulted date: 24/9/2013)

## Early image of the woman and the general status of women in the Meiji era

When one reads *我輩は猫である* *Wagahai wa nekodearu*, (*I am a Cat*), his very first novel so well received by the general public, one discovers a rather ordinary life of an intellectual described and scrutinized by his pet, the cat. It seems that in his works in this period, including his following novel *坊ちゃん* *Botchan*, he was not so much aware of the role of women in society. He acts rather like a gentleman who dominates his family, but, at the same time, depends on the service of his wife and his maid. The novel is presented as a global parody of his surroundings, and all the characters men and women, including himself, are ridiculed to provoke laughter. Nevertheless, the way of describing the wife of Kushami-sensei is that typical stereotype of a male who looks down on his wife because of the low education she had received and her general status in such system called *家制度* *Ie-seido* (Japanese Family System), established in Meiji era.

In this system the head of each household should be a man and his successor also should be a boy, the eldest son of the family. Therefore, the system has a patriarchal character and served to maintain the male-centered order of the society. For this reason, it will be useful that we trace back the gender issues raised during Meiji era in order to grasp roughly the general women's situation.

The expression for the ideals of the female at that time is *良妻賢母* (*Rhōsai-kenbo*), literally, good wife and wise mother. The idea was inherited from the education given to the girls during the former period of Edo through *女大学* (*On'na Daigaku*)<sup>2</sup>. According to it, women must obey the orders of her parents and husband without exception, and their behavior must be humble and diligent at every moment.

During the Meiji period, Japan experienced two major international wars, the Sino-Japanese war (1894-5) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5). In this context, what was expected from the women was to give birth to many male babies and raise them in sound health to serve the country's progress. They were deprived from the right of succession and, until 1872, the fifth year of Meiji, men could hold as many concubines as they wanted or could afford.

The best-known feminist activist of this time, who claimed the rights for women, was 平塚雷鳥 *Hiratsuka Raichō* (1888-1971). In 1911 she founded the first literary magazine entirely run by women called *青鞥* *Seitō* (Bluestocking) and contributed to the feminist movement in modern Japan through the New Women's Association.

Raichō at the age of 20 years fled with Morita Sōhei (1881-1949), a married man, one of the most enthusiastic disciples of Sōseki at that time. They attempted love suicide. This scandal ended to turn into the fiction work written by Morita. The novel *煤煙* *Baien* was endorsed by Sōseki to be published in *Asahi Shimbun*. Morita was compelled to write something about this incident that must be considered his misbehavior from his master's point of view. On the other hand, Sōseki's stance towards the couple was rather neutral; he showed good understanding on Raichō's brave determination to act as Morita's counterpart of the affair. He did not take a moralistic position driven by the social conventions during the time. In this respect, it is interesting to see the account of Sasaki Hideaki who argues that

<sup>2</sup> A book for girls' education in Edo period based on Confucius philosophy by 貝原益軒 *Kaibara Ekiken* (1630-1714) published in 1716.

Raichō could be the model of Mineko, the heroine of *Sanshirō* and a new woman of the era.<sup>3</sup> This episode shows well enough that Sōseki was aware and interested in the sprout of feminist movement that was being oppressed in many ways in Meiji society.

### Female roles in 三四郎 *Sanshirō*, それから *And Then*, and 門 *The Gate*

As Sōseki progresses towards serious creation of modern novels, we start to notice the change in his attitude regarding his way of dealing with female characters. The phrase repeated by Mineko in *Sanshirō*, “The stray sheep,” expresses symbolically *Sanshirō*’s state of mind, in particular about Mineko, the desired counterpart with sexual and spiritual attraction but in full enigma for *Sanshirō*. The description of the scene — *Sanshirō* saw her for the first time from far away — shows the distance, the wonder, the curiosity and the yearning of a female. This image overlaps that of Tsubouchi Shōyō, who declared in his criticism 小説神髓 *Shōsetsu Shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*) that the heart of arts must be love and suffering.

The second of the series is *それから And Then*. Here, the yearning object is married to a friend and we find the man with the determination to keep his love despite the possible disinheritance from his father. The woman figure plays, after all, a passive part of the story and lacks individuality. Her destiny depends totally on the man’s choice. We observe a clear contrast between Daisuke’s delirium to break up the old ethic ties and the sad static attitude of Michiyo.

The last novel *門 The Gate*, deals with the couple who seems to be abandoned by the society after having been responsible for the incident of *And then*. The wife is the accomplice of the crime they had committed and their shadowy and hidden life is a course of redemption to the society. However, Sōsuke, the main character, wonders if he could find his escape in Zen Buddhism. His attitude can be scrutinized in the sense that he only thinks of his salvation ignoring the existence of his companion Oyone. It seems he cannot, or does not want, to find any possibility to seek another solution to their common struggle counting on his wife’s participation in the problem.

### こころ *Kokoro*, 行人 *The Wayfarer*, and 道草 *Grass on the Wayside*

This attitude of the male character continues in the following works, such as *行人 The Wayfarer* and *こころ Kokoro*. We can see a woman as a direct cause of the hero’s inner anguish and trouble, yet he roughly misses the psychological descriptions of the heroin. She is regarded by the hero as an unreachable or distant existence despite their kinship as his wife.

In *行人 The Wayfarer*, the wife of the hero is described as a cold and almost heartless person. Probably this perception of the hero pushes him to suspect of her having an affair with his brother, although, in the bottom of his heart, he is longing for her warmth and care for him. His spiritual distress cannot find the comfort in her and he plunges into a desperate self-destroying situation. After all, the female figure hidden behind the male character holds the secret of his longings.

For many fans of Soseki *こころ Kokoro* is the best structured and accomplished work. Ojō-san is a typical daughter of the upper-middle class family in the Meiji period and her life depends entirely

<sup>3</sup> Sasaki Hideaki, 「新しい女」の到来—平塚らいてうと漱石 (Arrival of a new woman-Hiratsuka Raichō and Sōseki), Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 1994,.

on her widow mother's plan for her. Sensei finally gets married with her but, because of his dishonest behavior towards his friend, he will carry regretful days for the rest of his life. Sensei declares that his wife should not know the reason of his suffering because he wants her to keep being the purest thing in this world. In his farewell letter Sensei writes to Watashi:

“...I was glad that she had not witnessed the terrible scene immediately after his death. I was afraid that a beautiful person such as she could not behold anything ugly and frightful without somehow losing her beauty. Even when the fear within me became so strong that it seemed to touch the very roots of my hair, I refused to move, not daring to expose her beauty to ugliness. I thought that to help destroy such beauty would be no less cruel and meaningless than to beat down a pretty, innocent flower.<sup>4</sup>”

And his last wish before the end is:

“I want both the good and bad things in my past to serve as an example to others. But my wife is the one exception- I do not want her to know about any of this. My first wish is that her memory of me should be kept as unsullied as possible. So long as my wife is alive, I want you to keep everything I have told you a secret-even after I myself am dead.<sup>5</sup>”

We see that the idealized image of a woman is omnipresent in both novels and it is the reason for the hero not to be able to interact face to face with her. When a woman is such a precious existence for the hero, he cannot interact with her as a companion of his life. It is not exactly how other authors of romanticism dealt with female characters in their novels. Yet, as Japanese Romanticism declared that love should be the heart of a novel, we can see a certain influence of this trend in Sōseki's way of describing women.

*道草* *Grass on the Wayside* is one of the last long novels Sōseki offered to his readers. It is almost an autobiographic account of his life and the dark tone of the narration is provided by the extreme conditions of mind of the couple, Kenzō and his wife. The romantic female figure becomes a realistic wife who was looked down on as there must have been in many homes of the Meiji era. Kenzō is disgusted with anything around him and his irritation is escalated when he faces the resistance of his wife to accept things without questioning. She cares him dearly when he is sick. She sells her last formal kimono in order to get some money to contribute to their poor economy. But, when she is challenged by her husband to obey blindly, she demands him to admit her opinion too. For Kenzō the attitude of his wife was as if she was saying: being husband does not allow a person to be respected automatically, he must show why he deserves it.

Although their relationship is of the worst kind, they cannot live without each other. The wife is finally a counter mirror of Kenzō that embraces all his shortcomings: nervous, eccentric and egocentric personality. Sōseki, reaching his final works, could describe the reality as he knew how to do so. He positioned himself out of the naturalist movement when he started to write, but his endeavor to find the real meaning of novels pushed him towards the narration that could be mastered by studying the naturalist essence.

<sup>4</sup> *Kokoro*, trans. By Edwin McClellan, Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1975, Tokyo, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.248.

*虞美人草 The Poppy and 明暗 Light and Darkness*

Many of the literary critics point out that Sōseki examined into deep the human ego as the key feature of the stories. His first attempt of this kind focused on a woman appears already in *虞美人草*, *The Poppy*, before all other novels he wrote for Asahi Shinbun as a professional writer. Although it is considered a sort of irrelevant work of his in comparison with others, I can trace a similar intention of the author in both, this one and his last unfinished novel, *明暗*, *Light and Darkness*.

Sōseki tried hard describing a woman he wanted to present to us, Fujio, a beautiful, brilliant and stronger woman than anybody else in this World. The main character of *The Poppy* is the opposite image of what the people of that time usually conceived as the ideal lady in society. Her malignant stubbornness and arrogant egoism is decorated by her expensive silk kimono and stylish hairdo. The author follows her slightest movement of hands and eyes to describe an attractive yet malicious nature in the woman. When this sand castle is torn down and her pride is hurt, she cannot exist any longer in this world. The story ends abruptly while she cannot accept her failure.

In *明暗* *Light and Darkness*, his unfinished long novel to be, Sōseki returns to this concern of the female ego. Onobu is a well brought up young wife who had chosen her husband Tsuda by her own decision much to the admiration of other young women. The people envy Onobu and Tsuda as an exceptional beloved couple. However, they have to go through a strained relationship because of the clashes of the egos they experience daily. Onobu tries hard to defend her position against all personal and social barriers she encounters. Her inner voice is present at all moments and their dialogue builds up a love battle between Tsuda and Onobu.

Probably, this is the novel Soseki wanted to write from an early period as a professional writer. His consciousness about the female role in society developed through the time towards the recognition of their values as a person. In one of the last speeches he addressed to the students of Gakushuin University titled *私の個人主義* *My Individualism*, he speaks of the concept of freedom accompanied by the sense of obligation. He assures that when one claims his individualism among others this should entail the acceptance of other people's opinion too. One should respect the fellow person so that he can be respected in return. From our point of view, actually, he is speaking of the most important principle of democracy.

He also refers to the exaggerated manifestation of the feminist movement, which was going on at that time in England and reflected the capacity of the British society. He admits that it is an irregular case for the normal attitude of the people in the country, but his understanding is that the British people love freedom, the freedom to express one's idea, while at the same time being aware of one's obligations. No matter if you are a man or woman, when speaking your ideas, if you lack your own personality and consideration to others, immediately harmony is lost. To me, Sōseki struggled through his works to show the readers the real face of individuals, humans, in particular, women whose life and existence weigh so much as or even more than men.

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(たかぎ かよこ・Universidad Autónoma de Madrid 助教授)