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HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE WORKS OF ICHYŌ HIGUCHI

Introduction

This paper aims to examine how Ichiyō Higuchi 樋口一葉 (1872-1896), who is often called the first modern Japanese woman writer, represents in her stories the social and political changes of Japan in the Meiji-period, concerning their effects on human relations and the status of women¹.

The Status of Women during the Meiji Period

The modernization and the opening of the country (*kaikoku*開国) caused that Japan became inundated within a few years with foreign mentality, a new way of thinking (almost without any local roots), various political ideologies (eg. liberalism, conservatism), Christian faith, new customs, and economic ideas that were previously unknown in Japan (especially industrialization).

Although the ones mostly affected by them were men, the new trends also called forth some changes in women's lives, initially in the externals such as clothing or coiffure. In addition, their learning and work opportunities also expanded. Of course, all of these changes affected only a very narrow social layer, and needed more time to take root.

Among different political ideas gender equality² also necessarily appeared, but women's emancipation had become a debated issue for many decades which divided public opinion.

The newly appeared Christian values also preached equality between men and women and at any rate evaluated women more positively than Confucianism or Buddhism did. Not surprisingly, every progressive politician and thinker of the Meiji period was, almost without exception, baptized.

¹ For more detailed information about the social issues in the Meiji-period see my master thesis (Nyeste Zsolt. „A nők helyzetének változása a modernizáció során (1868-1912) (MA-thesis, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2005.)

² Gender equality and women's suffrage was only legitimized after World War II., in 1946.

Despite the changes the traditions of the Edo period were still living, and have solidified over two hundred years, so much so that to some extent they still exist today. These traditions also affected the attitude towards women.

A woman's life in the Edo period was determined above all by the *Onna Daigaku* 女大学 (Greater Learning for Women)³ written by Kaibara Ekken 貝原 益軒. It was an educational and behavioural prescription for women and gives us great insight into the public expectations towards contemporary Japanese women.

The slogan of the Meiji-era was *danson jōhi* (男尊女卑) respect for the male, contempt for the female). The role of women was limited to manage the household and raise children. Their submission to men was absolute and passive. In childhood they had to obey their father, in marriage their husband. They were not allowed to leave their home until the age of forty. They were judged much more severely than men in case of adultery or divorce. For women the punishment for adultery was death, and it was beyond possibility for them to initiate divorce. They could only take refuge in a monastery. The husband, however, could easily divorce, and in such cases a bad light was cast on the woman and her family: the public always blamed the wife.

Proceeding into the Meiji period the life of average people was still affected by these traditions. The newly formed government did not find it necessary to improve the situation of women. Their sole purpose was to train *ryōsai kenbō* (良妻賢母) good wives and wise mothers), and though the learning and job opportunities for women were expanding, the government still did not encourage women to participate in public life. The new laws⁴ were designed only to entrench women's inferiority⁵.

In this interesting and in many ways transitional period appeared Ichiyō Higuchi, a women writer of outstanding talent, who died at a young age, and who was regarded as equal by her male contemporaries.

³ First translated to English as *The Greater Learning for Women* in Basil Hall Chamberlain's *Things Japanese: being notes on various subjects connected with Japan for the use of travellers and others* (1905.)

⁴ E.g. the 1870 law, that eliminated all the distinctions concerning wives and concubines; the civil registration policy in 1871, that made it possible for the husband to declare who was his lawfully wedded wife (in this case they mostly named the woman, regardless of her being a real wife or merely a concubine, that gave birth to his heir; and the Meiji Civil Code in 1898, that guaranteed full powers for the father. So, if the sons (below the age of 30) or daughters (below the age of 24) disobeyed his will, they were considered to have committed a crime. And for getting married, they also needed his permission.

⁵ Statements like this, reflect of course on a Western point of view. Based on the Western way of thinking many think that the changes in Meiji-Japan were only minor, conservative reforms. Even though if we examine this problem from a so-called Japanese point of view, the reforms in the Meiji-period viz. the changes concerning the status of women seem to be quite radical opposite the strict restrictions of the Tokugawa-era.

The Art of Ichiyō Higuchi⁶

Higuchi was born in 1872, in a low-ranking samurai family. At the age of 12 the compulsory education ended for her, but she successfully persuaded his parents to enroll her in the *Haginoya* 萩の谷 poetry school. But she was barely 17 years old when their family business went bankrupt and they lost both her brother and father, thus she became the head of the family. To support her mother and sister, she undertook washing and sewing. Encouraged by the success of her schoolmate, Miyake Kaho⁷ 三宅花圃, she decided to become a novelist. In those days writing was considered to be an ideal activity for women since it did not require more than a separate room⁸.

Considering that she would need a mentor, she visited Tōsui Nakarai 半井 桃水, who wrote serial novels for newspapers. Nakarai tried to reshape Higuchi's style in order to make it more popular, but that would have meant a decline in literary standards. According to her diary she was in love with him, but after a while she became estranged from her earlier mentor mostly because of his lecherous lifestyle and because of the rumors about the two of them.

After her initial works – full of complex and stilted literary hints – she gradually developed her own unique style that followed the traditions of Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 and Ihara Saikaku 井原西鶴 (despite his never cropping up in Higuchi's diary) among others⁹. Murasaki Shikibu was a court lady in the service of Empress Shōshi 藤原彰子, and she is well-known for her masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji* 源氏物語, written about the life and romances in the Heian era's imperial court. Saikaku wrote all of his prose works between 1682 and 1693. His works may be classified into four general categories: the love books (*kōshokubon* 好色本), sketches and adaptations, homosexual love and vendetta and finally the financial life of the middle-class merchants. In the second half of her career, Higuchi – inspired by Saikaku – returned to the classical tradition and was able to draw honesty, passion and frankness in her works so intensely.

⁶ For Higuchi's biography see in English: Robert Lyons Danly, *In the Shade of Spring Leaves. The Life and Writings of Higuchi Ichiyo, A Woman of Letters in Meiji Japan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981.) and Margaret Mitsutani, „Higuchi Ichiyo. A Literature of Her Own”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22/1, East-West Issue: 53–66; in Japanese: Shioda Ryohei, *Higuchi Ichiyo*, (Tokyo: Yoshikawakobunkan, 1986.) (Jinbutsu Shosho)

⁷ Yabu no uguisu (Nightingale in the grove)

⁸ Considering the concept of an own room, this is an interesting parallel to Virginia Woolf's thesis: „A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

⁹ Thein Alfréd, „Icsijo Higuksi” in *Mai japán dekameron* ed. Thein Alfréd (Budapest: Nyugat, 1936) 67–68.

In 1894, Saikaku's collected works were published, but Higuchi may have read them earlier, as the same year her work *The Last Day of the Year* was finished, with some striking echoes of Saikaku.¹⁰

Her works often reflect the atmosphere of the late Edo period, however, as we shall see later, the spirit of the new era also appears in them.

Higuchi is the first, who, after a long time, deals in her novels – that also contain many autobiographical elements – with people living on the margins of society. Since she moved many times around in her life, and lived for a while close to *Yoshiwara* 吉原, the famous pleasure quarter in Edo, she chronicled the everyday life and habits of its inhabitants too in her most famous works.

In the present paper I examine five of her works, as follows:

- Yamiyo 闇夜 (1894)
- Ōtsugomori 大つごもり (1894)
- Nigorie¹¹ にごりえ (1895)
- Jūsan'ya 十三夜 (1895)
- Wakaremichi わかれ道 (1896)

Human Relations in the Edo and Meiji Periods

As an impact of Confucianism, the dominant ethical doctrine of the Edo period, Japanese society was based on a strict hierarchical system. This system listed five different kinds of human relationships.

- Parent - child
- Master - servant
- Husband - wife
- Elder sibling - younger sibling
- Friends

Of all relations above only the last one represented equal partnership.

In most of Higuchi's stories, as well as in the ones mentioned above, we can observe a breakout attempt, by which the heroine tries to defy the social norms of

¹⁰ Robert Lyons Danly, *In the Shade of Spring Leaves. The Life and Writings of Higuchi Ichiyo, A Woman of Letters in Meiji Japan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981.) 110-111.

¹¹ For many years Higuchi's only work that was translated into Hungarian (*Borongó felhők* In *Mai japán dekameron* edited by Thein Alfréd. Budapest: Nyugat 69-119.

the time, but these attempts can never succeed: O-Ran's お蘭 (Yamiyo) assassination attempt fails, O-Mine お峰 (Ōtsugomori) is able to help her ill uncle only for a short time, O-Riki お力 (Nigorie) is most likely murdered by her jealous lover, O-Seki お関 (Jūsan'ya) sacrifices herself for his family's welfare, and O-Kyo お京 (Wakaremichi) sells herself and becomes a rich man's mistress.

Yamiyo – A Story of Vengeance

The *Encounter on a Dark Night* begins as a classic revenge story, and therefore we would expect that Higuchi continues the usual Edo-tradition. Besides these, in this story Higuchi explores her own rancor toward the business partners who swindled her father, that lead to his death.¹²

The beautiful O-Ran, an impoverished young lady, whose father, a member of the new Meiji-government, lost his position and committed suicide because of a scandal, lives from hand to mouth in an abandoned house with two servants. Her fiancé, Namizaki 浪崎, who is also a notable public figure such as her father was, increasingly neglects the girl after her father's death, and finally reveals his plan to marry someone else. O-Ran gets to know the young tramp called Naojiro 直次郎 through an accident (the boy is run over by Namizaki's rickshaw in front of O-Ran's gate). Later, after she is informed about her fiancé's plan to marry another woman, but to keep O-Ran as a mistress, she swears revenge, and entrusts the task to Naojiro, taking advantage of the boy's love for her. His attack on Namizaki fails, so Naojiro has to hide away. At that point the story turns into a parody of revenge, since in such cases the samurai, the heroes of the Edo period, used to commit seppuku (a ritual suicide) to preserve their honor, but O-Ran and her accomplice simply disappear. According to many, this strange ending also reflects the fact that Japan welcomed a new age of lower morals, depicted by such despicable acts. Besides the anti-hero, coward Naojiro there is O-Ran, who has her revenge done by someone else, in defiance of the tradition! She challenges the social norm according to which women are by all means subordinated to men, but she chooses a wrong way to do this, maybe out of fear. The representation of this kind of cowardice was unprecedented before in Japanese literature.

The newly emerging political system also appears in the background of the story, in connection with O-Ran's father and Namizaki who are members of the newly formed Western-based parliament.

¹² Robert Lyons Danly, *In the Shade of Spring Leaves*, 82.

Considering all these, *Yamiyo* faithfully reflects the drawbacks of the new age: the deterioration of morals, and the unscrupulous covetousness that became the driving force behind the people's acts, who do not know virtue anymore, and who are ready to sacrifice others for their goals. And in this narrative, Higuchi also succeeds in describing her desire for revenge so dramatically.

Ōtsugomori – Poverty

The Last Day of the Year depicts the lives of maids in a much more realistic portrayal than in Higuchi's previous short stories. Its central theme is the representation of poverty, with which Higuchi always dealt superficially before. The protagonist, the young and beautiful O-Mine devotedly loves her uncle and his family who had brought her up, so to support them she takes a job as a maid. Unfortunately she is employed by the city's richest but stingiest family, where the mistress, the nightmare of servants, makes her life miserable. However, the girl, the model of the perfect servant keeps on doing her job. Meanwhile, his uncle gets ill and accumulates massive amounts of debt. The family turns to the girl for help: they need her to help them out with a small amount. They are counting on her master, because he is immensely rich, and such a small amount of money wouldn't bother him. But the mistress, on the last day, at the end of the year, amid the big New Year's preparations, rejects her and leaves home. O-Mine's nephew is already there for the money, so she steals the requested amount from the family's safe box. But her action is not discovered, as the family's debauched son later takes all the money that was in the box. The story's major theme is the relationship between master and servant: we can feel some sort of didacticism in the opposition of the extremely pretty and perfect maid and the stingy mistress, but the story is nonetheless a very valuable source about the life of contemporary female workers.

The other storyline around which the plot is moving, is theft, and in connection with this a fundamental moral problem raises: To whom shall O-Mine obey? Her Mistress or her uncle, who was like a father for her? Both are expecting her to obey. But how shall she rank them? Which is more important: the loyalty to our lord or the filial piety? According to the narrative, filial piety comes before all things, that is why her theft is not discovered and the mistress, who constantly torments her servants is "punished".

But the story's ending casts a doubt in the reader: it turns out that her theft could only delay her uncle's fall with a few months, so soon enough the same problem will arise. The other thing is the role of the master's son Ishinosuke. Higuchi herself proposes the idea, that he only took the money left to cover her crime. If it is so what will happen to the girl?

Typically this story can be one of Saikaku's *Wordly Reckonings*¹³: on more tale about people, who are unable to pay their bills when the year draws to its close, but it is not a vintage Saikaku, mostly because its bleak tone. It can be considered as a sign of new realism,¹⁴ that lacks in her earlier writings.

Nigorie - The misery of pleasure quarters

The *Troubled waters*, along with one of Higuchi previous works, the *Takekurabe* たけくらべ (literally *Comparing heights*) describes the lives of the residents of the pleasure quarters but not as romantically idealized, as did other writers. In her Yoshiwara life is miserable, hopeless, and one has to pay a big price even for occasional successes. The life of O-Riki, a young courtesan seems to be a story of a great success: she is young, beautiful and she attracts most of the costumers to the Kikunoi teahouse. But the possibility for a great career does not satisfy her: she sinks into deep melancholy and is thinking constantly of death, drinks heavily and lives what can be considered a self-destructive life. She pushed her love, Genshichi into ruin: he spent all of his money on her, so he ended up living in misery, hardly making living for his son and his jealous wife. O-Riki refuses him, as he has no assets, yet she is longing for him. Despite she has a new guest, Yuki Tomonosuke 結城友之助, O-Riki does not much for capturing the man's attention, but it is her indifference what attracts him. Higuchi makes in this short story a caricature of the past's literary traditions: the pleasure quarters are so closely knit to the concept of *shinju*, the double love suicide: the men who wasted all their money and their courtesan lovers chose this solution in several previous novels and plays. In this case however, this does not happen: the desperate Genshichi 源七 after he lost also his wife and son, murders the girl and then himself¹⁵. The parody of these traditions can also be perceived as the sign of a new age.

Even though its plot is quite slender, Higuchi's sense of place and the lively dialogues make a vivid rendering of the frayed edges of the night world. The women are lamenting about their life and circumstances, and they drag in men by the sleeve, while dreaming of a man who will pay their debts, and saves them from the pleasure district¹⁶, where they are living like prisoners¹⁷.

¹³ Seken Mune San'you 世間胸算用1692.

¹⁴ Ibid. 112

¹⁵ Although the ending is dubious, this version is implied to be the truth.

¹⁶ Ibid. 141

¹⁷ These women were often sold to the brothels by their own parents between the ages of about seven to twelve (like O-Riki). If they were lucky, they could become an apprentice to a high-ranking courtesan. When a girl was old enough and had completed her training, she

Despite being successful, impoverishment and degradation have turned O-Riki into a desperate woman. Although Genshichi kills her at the end of the story, her own selfdestructive behaviour may also invited her early and violent death.

Jūsan'ya¹⁸ - An unhappy marriage

The penultimate story that I deal in this paper with, is according to many Higuchi's most lyrical work, represents the hell of a young woman's marriage, and her last escape attempt, when O-Seki visits her parents, to obtain a permission for a divorce, but eventually returns to her husband's house and resigns her personal happiness, not to complicate the parents' and her brother's lives.

Maybe this is the story, where in a few pages the author can sketch all of her era. We can learn from the contemporary wedding customs, see the then formed Meiji-government officials and their brilliant career, in a sharp contrast with the poor.¹⁹ From O-Seki and Isamu Harada's 原田勇 marriage we can get to know the pitfalls

would become a courtesan herself and work her way up the ranks. The young women often had a contract to the brothel for only about five to ten years, but massive debt sometimes kept them in the brothels for their entire lives. One way a woman could get out of Yoshiwara was for a rich man to buy her contract from the brothel and keep her as his personal wife or concubine. Another way of freedom would be if she managed to be successful enough, so that she was able to buy her own freedom. However, this did not occur very often. The inhabitants of the district were also prohibited to cross its border except for special occasions.¹⁸ The title of this short story refers to the 13th night of the 9th lunar month, when people held the moon-watching festivities (*o-tsukimi*) to celebrate the autumn moon (the waxing moon). The other *o-tsukimi* (for the full moon) was held on the 15th night of the 8th lunar month, therefore called *Jūgoya*. These festivities originated in the ancient China, where people offered various foods for the goddess of the moon, Chang'e (People ate rice dumplings called *tsukimi dango* in order to celebrate the beauty of the moon. Seasonal produce are also displayed as offerings to the moon. Sweet potatoes are offered to the full moon, while beans or chestnuts are offered to the waxing moon the following month. These traditional foods and the decoration, the *susugi* (Japanese pampass grass) are also mentioned in the story. The legend of Chang'e has many variants. According to one version, Chang'e, the wife of Houyi, the legendary archer, drank the elixir of immortality and her body began to float, so that she could flee from her furious husband to the moon, where she lived alone as its goddess, with only white hares accompanying her. It seems to be more than a mere coincidence, that in Higuchi's narrative the heroine, O-seki is trying to flee from Harada's (her husband) house on the day, commemorating Chang'e and her becoming the goddess of moon. The fate of the two women parallel each other. This topic is worth of another more elaborate study.

¹⁹ Timothy J. Van Compernelle, „Happiness Foreclosed. Sentimentalism, the Suffering Heroine, and Social Critique in Higuchi Ichiyō >>Juusanya<<” *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 30/2, 363.

of a marriage between different social strata, and also that the divorce was still impossible for women, especially due to her family's pressure.

As O-Seki arrives at his parents' home, they happen to be talking about how fortunate they are to have a son-in-law like Harada, whose help secured their future as well as their son's career. The son, Inosuke is the last obstacle that is eventually able to hold the woman back: O-Seki came to his parents resigned not to see again her little son and to be despised by everyone and having to work, but she was unable to bear the psychological terror of her husband. However, Harada supports her younger brother's career thanks only to her and she can not make herself see Inosuke's life going ruined.

Higuchi's qualities as a writer and her great sense of drama are best reflected in this story. If one examines the narrative, its dynamism is more like that of a play: in only a few hours a lot of life-changing events happen, and there are too many coincidences, e.g O-Seki's parents are talking about their lucky life and their gratitude for their good children exactly when she arrives. The dialogue of the characters is more like a monologue in a play: its aim is to describe a situation and not the authenticity, the total opposite of *Wakaremichi*'s realistic dialogues. When O-Seki returns home it is "coincidentally" her childhood love, Rokunosuke 六之助, who pulls the rickshaw, which she gets in. Roku's path is the opposite of O-Seki's: from a well-to-do merchant he becomes a tramp. The reason of his fall, as O-Seki concludes, might have been his disappointment, when her parents married her to the wealthy Harada. Roku also married, but he could not abandon his dissolute way of life, so within a short time his wife left him, and he was residing in a miserable little inn, making his living of pulling rickshaws. His fate is also a metaphor of the fading Edo-period: there's no place for romantic dreaming anymore, only Harada, the unscrupulous husband, the paragon of the successful officials can fit this new world. Higuchi contemplates the fate of her heroes with compassion, but the pessimistic end is inevitable. However, it is the lack of euphemism that shows vividly and shocking what she, a girl from a poor background, and in general, a woman can expecty line, when she gets married: she is just like a deposit, which warrants the family's well-being. This is, what O-Seki's father says: no matter how fond of his daughter he is and smyphatizes her fate (he's still crying, too), for him financial security is more important and therefore he dissuades her from the divorce. When first hearing this, he might seem an antipathetic figure, but the author portrays him in a subtle way, so that the reader can understand such a situation: one really can not do otherwise, and is under the necessity of giving him the truth.

With the unhappy aspects of O-Seki's life the author describes the harshness of life, and this places the short story within the genre of realism. The scene at the end, when Oseki and Roku are once again (and maybe for ever) separated, is also an example of this realism: it shows how life rarely has the fairytale ending that some (earlier) literature portrays.

Wakaremichi - The end of a friendship

Separate ways is the story of the termination of a male-female friendship. O-Kyo is young and nice working woman who is trying to maintain herself by sewing. Kichizō 吉三 is a teenage boy, who is mocked by many people due to his distorted body, and who works at an umbrella maker's. A deep emotional bond develops between them, as if they were brother and sister, but she find it more and more difficult to endure her misery, and finally decides to give in and chooses a simpler way: he joins a rich man as a concubine. Kichizō experiences this as a betrayal. Although the work's protagonist is the boy, in the character of O-Kyo again a female figure appears, who's trying to defy the norms: trying to support herself. And we can see that this was not typical of the time: rumors are spreading about her that she has lovers who pay her expenses. Only Kichizō stands beside her, and afterwards he is just therefore tremendously disappointed in her: O-Kyo sold himself, instead of freedom she chose money. The boy was apparently unable to comprehend her circumstances, as he was yet only a child. But it is the fact, that he was just child (and of a distorted appearance) so not a full-grown man, that allows them to be equal and become friends. Indirectly this also suggests that women in the Meiji era were still second-class beings, their status only equivalent of a deformed child. The only thing they can use is their beauty and personal happiness does not matter here: their main consideration is the material well-being, they have to surrender themselves completely. O-Kyo's figure in many ways is very modern (we could say emancipated) since she is able to maintain herself without falling in the trap of the "usual" contemporary women-careers (wife, maid, nun or prostitute). But in contemporary society there is no place for exceptions like this, so the girl has to meet the inevitable fate. The story, Higuchi last completed work, consists of the fragments of two small stories (Higuchi wrote many sketches for all her stories) and O-Kyo herself is a mixture of the heroines in these two sketches: a seamstress, who is abandoned by her lover, and a hairdresser-girl, who is taking care of her mother. These two figures created O-Kyo, whose past remains uncovered and therefore she is a mysterious character.²⁰

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This narrative also has some autobiographical reference, as there was a period in Higuchi's life, too, when she considered the opportunity of becoming a mistress of a wealthy man.²¹ She planed to throw herself at the mercy of Kusaka, a wealthy fortuneteller. They had never met before, when she went to his house and for the first

²⁰ Margaret Mitsutani, „Higuchi Ichiyo. A Literature of Her Own” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22/1, East-West Issue: 58–60.

²¹ Danly, *In the Shade of Spring Leaves*, 146.

time chatted with him, according to her diary.²² Later he offered her 15 yens a month to be his mistress²³.

Higuchi's image of women

The short stories show that in her writings Higuchi primarily dealt with the lives of people living in the periphery of society and her heroines also come from this segment. If we examine them thoroughly, five main groups can be distinguished (the above-mentioned short stories are one by one a detailed representation of each group and their surrounding atmosphere). These are the following:

- The residents of the pleasure districts (especially the Yoshiwara district) and their neighbourhood: courtesans, geishas, prostitutes
- Maids, domestic workers, servants
- Ladies from impoverished noble families
- Girls from poor and unfortunate families
- Female workers

Women can be classified in two categories by examining how they relate to contemporary norms and standards expected from women. Some of them passively tolerate the strikes and disasters and silently accept their fate, and however once they try to oppose this (the short stories' main conflicts are about these attempts), they soon become resigned to their fate: O-Seki returns to her husband, O-Mine accepts unconditionally that Ishinosuke helped him and so she will owe eternal gratitude to him, if he returns. The members of the other group are women who keep on opposing the contemporary norms, but this rebellion, which radically opposes the social order, can not be long-lasting: sooner or later their will is broken, and they finally submit themselves thanks to the pressure of the community, they even lose their lives, or just simply disappear. Let us think here of O-Kyo, who becomes a mistress after a short independent life, O-Riki, who can live an independent, self-assured life as a woman, but a jealous lover kills him, or O-Ran who mysteriously disappears after a failed attempt to assassinate her former unfaithful fiancé. The fact that they – if only for a short time – enforce their interests is due to only their beauty alone²⁴. This fact reveals about the contemporary Japan, that beauty was considered the main (or only?) value of women. It was the only capital which they could base their future upon. But Higuchi's works also show that if a woman is trying to ensure her own prosperity with maneuvers like this, it will fail, because it violates the norms. However, since the author deals with such collision points in each of her writings,

²² Ibid, 104-105

²³ Ibid, 107

²⁴ Higuchi's most prominent female characters are mostly young and of stunning beauty.

and in most of the works she shows sympathy for her heroines, the question arises that maybe she wants to draw the readers' attention with her stories to the fact, how unsustainable their contemporary situation was.

In her stories, the plot resolves around a suffering heroine. There is an entire population of women, *who live and breathe the air of sorrow and suffering and whose desperate situations stir the reader's capacity for knowing commiseration*²⁵. And for showing her sympathy and presenting a concerted critique of the contemporary ideologies she uses not only the above mentioned realism, but also sentimentalism.

Female and male relationships

Regarding the relationship between the heroines and men three types of relationship can be distinguished:

1. The classical relationship based on inferiority-superiority. This is the typical setting in a marriage: O-Seki and Isamu Harada and Genshichi of *Nigorie* and his wife O-Hatsu お初 belong here. The wife is completely exposed to the mercy of her husband, their relationship is bitter. Men consider their wife a nuisance, who makes life miserable and women are victims. In Higuchi's eyes marriage (by the contemporary meaning!) can only be a source of unhappiness. But this category also includes parent-daughter and brother-sister relationship where from the woman obedience and self-sacrifice for the family is always expected.

2. Equal relationship: the only one like this is the friendship between man and woman. Such as O-Kyo and Kichizō or the relationship of O-Riki and Yuki. What the two cases have in common is that the two women are considered not only as a woman but as a human being. Yuki is not attracted to O-Riki, as a woman, he is only interested in her stories and what makes her attractive is her life and that she is bored of life. Kichizō, because of his distorted body, doesn't count as a full man, so he can be equal to an otherwise second-rate creature, O-Kyo. Men and women can almost never be in equal relationship, only in some rare cases.

3. Reversed relations: they consist of dominant, strong women and weak men. For such women the *Nigorie* has a very apt phrase: *shiro-oni*, meaning white devil. It refers to the white make-up that makes women's complexion desirable. However, it also has some otherworldly allusion: we can associate it with female demons who are tormenting and destroying men. A perfect example for that is O-Riki and Genshichi or O-Ran and Naojiro.

²⁵ Timothy J. Van Compernelle, „Happiness Foreclosed. Sentimentalism, the Suffering Heroine, and Social Critique in Higuchi Ichiyōs »Jusanya«”, 363.

If we look at these three groups, again we get to the conclusion that for women there is only one choice: to obey and submit themselves to the men. The second case occurs hardly, and then ends quickly, and the third one, even if there is such, is short-lived, and such women meet a violent death or they simply disappear, so the order will be restored. But the same is true for the other heroines' breakout attempts that were mentioned earlier: they fail, because they defy the norms.

Summary

If we pick out only five narratives of the above-mentioned Higuchi, we can see the writer's astonishingly life-like representation of a social layer which was so far barely represented. From the five stories we can get to know almost every inch of this layer. It is particularly important that she deals especially with female lives, deprived from the romance and illusion of the previous eras she shows its reality. The fate of women is to be subjected to men: marriage is a living hell, the wife's only task is giving birth to children; the servant girls' life is full of misery, the residents of the pleasure quarters live an empty life, not an idealized one, as did authors from earlier periods tell. But if someone dare to grow independent, it will not seem right in the eyes of the others and they would force her back for a „suitable” position²⁶. Higuchi shows that the contemporary situation of women is untenable, because they all are suffering in this humiliating situation, and despite the issue of equality raised by the modernization and westernization, it was in vain, even though discussions were taking place in different forums on these topics, the lower strata of society (which means the bigger part of the population) there is no trace of these changes. Higuchi brings up such problems with her works which contemporary reformers not really cared for. And what's really interesting is that the writer did not read western literature and also refused the feminist movements; so in her case one can not even say that it is already a “Western point of view”. So the ideas that others received with the help from the West, were also realized by Higuchi, but in a private, own Japanese point of view, that was also more shaded: women were at the time only realizing the facts, but the West wanted already to force their solution upon them: there was no time for them to develop their own solutions. But this also explains why the Japanese themselves were reluctant of the emancipation of women, and it took a few more decades to find an appropriate Japanese solution for this question. It would be worth paying more attention for this approach when examining the status of Japanese women.

²⁶ Leslie Winston, „Female Subject, Interrupted in Higuchi Ichiyo' s »*The Thirteenth Night*«” , *Japanese Language and Literature*, 38/1 (2004), 1–23. 20.

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