

The Depiction of the Elderly in Contemporary Japanese Literature

By Sugimoto Arata

SEVERAL novels featuring elderly people have been drawing attention in recent years in Japan, whose population is aging at a pace unprecedented in the world. These literary works sensitively portray aging people as partners of love, not as objects of care. If delving into human joy or sorrow is one of literature's roles, it can be said that these novels have been produced from the authors' sincere observation of people.

Here I would like to introduce three works representing such a literary trend in Japan. They were all written in the past two or three years and have won prestigious literary prizes. They are *Hakase no Aishita Sushiki* (The Mathematical Formula Loved by a Professor) by Ogawa Yoko, which won the Yomiuri Literary Prize, *Sensei no Kaban* (The Teacher's Bag) by Kawakami Hiromi, which won the Tanizaki Junichiro Prize, and *Wagimoko Kanashi* (My Pitiful Lover) by Aoyama Koji, which won the Kawabata Yasunari Prize for Literature. Though different in style and setting, they all center on exquisitely depicted love stories.

In Ogawa's *Hakase no Aishita Sushiki*, a housekeeper in her 20s, who is a single mother, is commissioned to take care of a 64-year-old man who is a titular doctor. The man, who was at one time a renowned mathematician touted as a genius, is suffering long-term memory loss due to the injuries he suffered in an accident. He is a grumpy bigot and gives the caregiver a hard time while

showing flashes of his superb mathematical knowledge.

The woman is spurred to study mathematical theories and pretends to be a fan of the Hanshin Tigers, the doctor's favorite professional baseball team, in order to become more acquainted with him. The doctor remembers only the players who were active in the Tigers 20 years ago. As the story progresses, the caregiver and her son become wistfully devoted to him, the old man's existence brings joy to both the woman and her son.

Sensei no Kaban by Kawakami describes a love affair between a 37-year-old woman named Tsukiko and a man in his 70s who once taught Tsukiko in high school. They meet by chance after 20 years and fall in love, calling each other "Tsukiko-san" and "Sensei (teacher)." Sensei speaks ceremoniously all the time, perhaps because he taught the Japanese language in school. They talk over a drink at a small bar near a railway station and go mushrooming. Their love deepens quietly but steadily, without ups and downs. In the latter part of the story, Sensei asks Tsukiko how much longer he will be able to live. Love between young people usually flares up as they believe in the future, whereas older people's love may flare up because they are aware that their time is limited.

Ogawa's novel has won the "Bookstore Grand Prize," the winner of which is voted by employees of bookshops. The novel will be made into a movie, while Kawakami's has already been turned into a TV drama. These novels were warmly received by a wide range of readers, not merely because they dealt with elderly people's actual situ-

ation but also because they were stories written in attractive styles.

Aoyama's *Wagimoko Kanashi* describes the loving relationship of a couple in their twilight years. A 90-year-old writer takes care of his wife suffering from Alzheimer's disease at home. This scenario mirrors Aoyama's own circumstances. Aoyama has stressed that the episodes and details of the story were his own creation, but it seems the protagonist's emotion and feeling reflect his own. As the wife's ailment progresses, her husband is forced to tend to her every need, including excretion. He is grieved but his love for her remains unchanged under such grim circumstances and he is determined to see her life through to the end with dignity. Because of such a scenario, the story hardly gives a dark impression. As he recollects his younger days, he asks himself, "If someone pointed a gun at her, would you stand in front of the gunman to protect her?" He replies, "Of course. Now, shoot me," and expresses his determination to take responsibility for his love for his wife so that he would lead a worthy human life. Their position, with the husband attending to the wife and the wife receiving care from the husband, will remain unchanged, but the couple has begun to tread a new path as partners just like they did in their young days.

Both Kawakami's and Ogawa's novels are stories about women who provide company for men of advanced years. But the women hardly think about their partners being old. They must address the pressing problem of whether or not to love the men in front of them. They regard the men as their partners who share time, which will not be long. In this sense, both Kawakami and Ogawa depict universal love, not aged people's love. The same can be said of Aoyama's work. It seems that all three writers were not aware of writing stories about aged people.



From left, *Hakase no Aishita Sushiki*, *Sensei no Kaban* and *Wagimoko Kanashi*

Though it has drawn less public attention than the above-mentioned three works, *Lisa Obasan* (Aunt Lisa), a short story about aging society by Yamada Minoru, a writer and a scholar of French literature, deserves recognition. The protagonist of the story is a retired university professor who leads a single life after his wife is hospitalized due to an injury. He is immersed in reminiscences, thinking of an Aunt Lisa who was nice to him in his childhood. But his bedridden wife says her husband has never told her about Aunt Lisa. The couple also has different accounts of the circumstances



A scene in the TV drama, "Sensei no Kaban," produced and broadcast by WOWOW Inc. in 2003

surrounding the death of their son. The professor is surprised and grieved as he thinks that his wife has become senile. But Yamada's story suggests that it is the husband, not the wife, who has lost the memory of Aunt Lisa and their son, though the writer doesn't say so outright. Readers can feel the laments of aging from this short story. This would be a serious situation if occurred in real life, but the husband and the wife share a memory which gives them only a feeling of peace. Yamada is asking whether humans are happy if they have a correct memory and whether a memory can be changed in accordance with one's convenience. The problems described in this novel are not limited to elderly people, and the author is acutely delving into the meaning of life.

Et Alor by Watanabe Junichi describes love and other human relationships among residents of a nursing home in a city. The title of the novel means "So what?" in French. As a best-selling

writer, Watanabe, now in his 70s, describes passions that humans have regardless of age in a plain style. While sex involving the elderly somehow evokes negative aspects, Watanabe wonders "et alor," as the title of the story suggests. He is challenging the fixed ideas of society.

The latest trend of these literary works suggests that contemporary Japanese literature is gradually maturing. In 1947, Niwa Fumio wrote *Iyagarase no Nenrei* (The Age of Harassment), which describes a man who takes care of his senile mother. In the following years, various works dealing with problems of aging appeared, including *Narayamabushi Ko* (Interpretation of Narayamabushi) by Fukazawa Shichiro, *Kokotsu no Hito* (Senile People) by Ariyoshi Sawako and *Koraku* (Falling Yellow Leaves) by Sae Shuichi. These novels were written from the viewpoint of children who observe their parents getting older. They analyzed the serious

describing in shocking ways the difficulties and grim realities of taking care of an elderly parent or parents.

In this sense, the recent trend of literary works dealing with aging-related problems suggests that Japanese readers are themselves maturing. In a rapidly aging society, the emergence of novels focusing on elderly people is taken for granted. Stories delving into the international world of the elderly are being widely read because they convey the image of people who lead confusing daily lives. Describing the aging only with a negative image or with saccharine sweetness using such catchwords as "lively" or "pleasantly" as mentioned in advertisements will not arouse sympathy or solidarity among people. **JS**

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