

*Ethical Anguish, Ethical Conflict and Ethical Choice:
An Exploration of Futon from the Perspective of Ethical
Literary Criticism*

YANG JIAN

Abstract. The transcendence of society and ethical dimension are often embodied in the Japanese I-Novel. The writers of the I-Novel are not outside society, actually their social care permeates their literary works in which the characters possess a strong ethical awareness within a deep, dignified, and sentimental ethical narrative writing strategy. *Futon*, an I-Novel masterpiece, contains many ethical implications from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, such as the ethical anguish in love affairs which is caused by their ethical environment in the late Meiji. With violent conflicts between individual desire and social ethics, the common Japanese faced the crisis of emotion and belief and felt confused on ethical issues during that period. The ethical choices made by the hero and heroine in this novel had touched the moral bottom line of human being.

Keywords: Tayama Katai; *Futon*; I-Novel; Ethical Literary Criticism

The I-Novel has its ethical dimensions. Through telling his own personal experiences, the author expresses his own personal experience as well as the concerns of the time, the anguish of the modern people and the sorrows of life, which are fully immersed with ethical implications. The author of the I-Novel is courageous enough to face and dissect himself, through “internal realistic writing” and “self-confession”. He freely exposes his internal self and thus conceives self-criticism and moral practice. Hougetsu Shimamura once pointed out in his “Preface to *On the Naturalism of the View of Life*” that this is the era for hesitant confession, but he should gaze at himself, expose and repent his own evils. Thus, the I-Novel has some characteristics of confessions. The ethical salvation has mainly two approaches, namely self-exposure and self-confession

The I-Novel exposes boldly one’s personal psychology and private life, which was once the source of huge concern in Japanese literature. The representative work of the I-Novel, *Futon*, stood in the breach and it shocked the Japanese literary field. It was applauded by the people for its bold confession and exposure of one’s innermost thoughts without restraint. On its publication, Hougetsu

Shimamura commented immediately: “This is a penitential of a human being true to life [...] In the mingling of sense and madness, the author presents such a modern personality full of self-awareness to the public that the bareness is unbearably envisaged. Somehow this is the life and value of the work” (quoted in Pan Shisheng 2001: 108). It differs from the confession in western literature in that the confession of the characters in the I-Novel is valued from the perspective of social morality, for the Japanese culture is a shame-based one.

Many scholars maintain that *Futon* (1907) of Tayama Katai is the first work in the I-Novel genre. It is regrettable that in Chinese literary criticism there is a very limited coverage of it. Only a few papers broadly comment on the relationship between naturalism and the Japanese tradition in the work, and its stylistic features and writing techniques as an I-Novel. Given that, this essay approaches the work from the point of view of ethical literary criticism, with the attempt to re-evaluate its moral value in view of the ethical main line, ethical environment, ethical situation, ethical anguish, ethical conflict, ethical identity, ethical choice, and thus assert that writers of the I-Novel are not dissocialized. Quite to the contrary, the characters have very rich moral feelings, and these feelings are embedded in a deep and profound moral narration with sentimental overtones.

The Ethical Anguish of Being in Love but Unavailable

Futon depicts a married man, the middle-aged writer Takenaka Tokio's affair with Yokoyama Yoshiko. While the ethical main line lies in the emotional crisis of a married middle-aged man and his hopeless lust for a young woman, the sorrows, anguish and sadness are caused by the restrains of worldly ethics. The story is based on the writer's personal experience. The prototypes of Takenaka Tokio and Yokoyama Yoshiko in real life are Tayama Katai and his pretty disciple Okada Michiyo. The novel avoids fiction and focuses on reality. It conveys privacy and anguish, sorrow, sadness and despair which form the basis of the narrative.

Tokio's anguish originates from the married middle-aged man's emotional crisis as well as from the dullness and boredom of his life. He once fancied starting an extramarital affair to alleviate his solitude. “If possible, I'd re-experience a new love” (Katai 2013: 4). “He even had the unconscious fancy that his wife may die suddenly of a difficult delivery” (*ibid.*). Then he could marry other young and pretty women. However, his anguish originates more from his uncertainty about his affection for Yoshiko, and his inability to figure out whether in her amiable attitude love is concealed or not. “The young

woman's heart is most incomprehensible. Perhaps the warm and pleasing love is only a natural outlet for women? Are their beautiful eyes and gentle attitude all unconscious or meaningless? Just like the natural flowers which comfort people's heart" (Katai 2013: 1). From the perspective of plot development, we know that between Tokio and Yoshiko there is the immoral love of a teacher and his student. Their love is restricted to the spiritual level, as they dare not transgress the bounds, and as such it is doomed. The anguish of Tokio also stems from his inability to face Yoshiko having a new lover. When Tanaka, the lover of Yoshiko, appears, he panics and becomes depressed, fearing that his love is to be taken away from him.

From the demeanour of Yoshiko we may infer the conscious or unconscious scattering of youth, beauty, ambiguity and repressed sexual desire among young women. Yoshiko has "a pompous voice, gorgeous figure, which is in such a sharp contrast with the past solitary life of Tokio" (Katai 2013: 8). For some reason, Tokio thinks of Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Solitary Man* and finds himself sharing in the worry and pains of Johannes Phucaillat, the hero's bosom friend. The appearance of Yoshiko lightens the life of the middle-aged Tokio. "With a modern and fashionable pretty disciple calling him 'sir, sir', Tokio seemingly became a most respectable figure and he was unable not to be moved" (ib.).

The novel abounds with depictions of Yoshiko's gorgeous dresses, charming expression, adorable eyes and lovable conversations. "Young girls' hearts are longing for bright-coloured love stories and their expressive eyes are shining mysteriously" (Katai 2013: 3). The novel mentions especially a long heartfelt letter from Yoshiko to Tokio, which arouses his improper desire for her. Moreover, two months after the letter, in a spring night, the two meet in Yoshiko's dwelling with no one else present. Yoshiko puts on heavy make-up, with an irresistible expression.

The internal anguish and struggle of Tokio is intense. Although he feels that "So to say, we two are really hopeless. I am so silly. I am 36 years old with 3 kids and dare have improper affection for her. But... but..." (Katai 2013: 1), he cannot let it go. "Eventually, I have missed the chance and she has her lover.' He is yelling hysterically while walking and pulling his hair" (Katai 2013: 2). He is unable to work, has lost courage to read and write. He experiences the solitary taste of anguish and bitterness in the coldness of autumn rain and feels that his disappointing fate represses him, which reminds him of the outsider or the extra man in Turgenev's writings. The illusory and changeable life of Turgenev's heroes frequently comes to his mind. He is so unbearably lonely that even at noon he asks for a drink and after getting drunk loses his temper or even stumbles in the toilet. "Bastard! He murmurs, the fucking love is different between a teacher and his student. So sick!" (Katai 2013: 20). He lies

on the ground at the foot of a tree. He is tormented by jealousy and attempts to objectify his state by being indifferent. “The vehement emotion and cold, objective criticism were mingled together tightly like a cotton rope, which exhibited a peculiar state of the spirit” (Katai 2013: 21).

The Conflict between Individual Desire and Social Ethical Norms

The anguish of Tokio stems from the specific ethical environment, ethical situation and ethical conflict in the novel. During the Meiji period, the domestic state of Europeanization versus Nationalism advanced Japanese modernization. After the Russo-Japanese war, Japan gradually wrested itself into the league of modern countries. However, various conflicts between eastern and western thought, the suffering between the “penetrable but unbearable, thinkable but unavailable”, still remained which collided harshly in people’s hearts. The traditional Japanese ethics, especially family ethics, underwent a tremendous shock, and the modern ethical belief in extreme freedom and personal supremacy, which accorded with general human nature, was being stealthily bred. However, the traditional ethical and moral perspective was so formidable that the tension between the two forces caused a split in the modern Japanese intellect. The ethical anguish of Tokio’s unrequited love in *Futon*, his personal desire and conflict with the ethical and moral norms, highlights the emotional and devotional crisis of the Japanese society under its surface layer in the late Meiji period, and expresses people’s doubts concerning ethical morality.

Being fashionable and conservative at once, Tokio is a character in transition from old to new. Influenced by modern European culture, he has read many works by Turgenev, Hauptmann, Maupassant and etc., his self-awareness, free will, individual liberation grow and yet his feudal notions are deeply embedded. For instance, his view of women is contradictory – it fluctuates between “the new woman” of the Meiji period and traditional femininity.

Then, after Yoshiko becomes his student, Tokio develops a dual ethic identity, on the one hand as a teacher, a guardian, a spiritual father, “a tender protector” (Katai 2013: 35), on the other a lover. The novel dwells at length on his pain of unrequited love and his ethical introspection. There is no corresponding description of her internal conflicts. Here, reason indicates traditional ethical moral concepts and norms and the conflict cannot be resolved, until reason takes the upper hand.

Yoshiko has her own lover – a college student Tanaka, so that her exuberant life and passion find a real object, which is also her ethical choice, as she deliberately evades the unethical immoral love between her and her teacher.

The youngsters' love is pure, far less heavy and sweeter than that with Tokio. Tokio feels annoyed. Now and then, he would like to make his sacrifice complete and help them in order not to be considered selfish. He combats his anguish with intense self-restraint, which is at times very annoying:

“How can a birdling fall in love with an old bird? He has lost beautiful wings, and lost the charm to attract the young one.” Thinking of this, an ocean of unutterable solitude captured him... . “how does the husband, who has been robbed of his wife by his children and meanwhile robbed of his children by his wife, drive away his loneliness?” Sticking to the lamb, Tokio got immersed in contemplation. On the desk lies open Guy de Maupassant's *Fort Comme la Mort*. (Katai 2013: 37)

Currently, his emotional state accords with the basic tone of this novel by Maupassant: Life is horrible, tender and hopeless. He recalls Maupassant's short story *Father*, recalling his intense sorrow when reading it, especially his weeping after the young maid had committed herself to the man.

Ethical Choice as a Teacher

As a teacher, Tokio's ethical choices always touch the moral bottom.

His annoyance derives from his selfishness, cowardice, indecision and also from his remaining conscience – although “his conscience is highly paralyzed” (Katai 2013: 11). He receives a long letter from Yoshiko and has “no idea whatsoever how to reply to her” (ib.). However, after “peeping at his wife in bed a couple of times”, he eventually shifts from a dilemma to “a deep self-accusation” (ib.), and thus he returns to his dignity as a teacher. Although that spring night Tokio found it difficult to resist Yoshiko's temptation, he was too timid due to the traditional ethical moral pressure, he dared not accept it pleasingly and slipped away unexpectedly.

In April, at the turn of spring and summer, Yoshiko falls ill and turns pale, deep in anguish because of her weak nerves. Even with a large dose of drugs, she cannot sleep. “Endless desire and vitality entices this young girl, with no hesitation” (Katai 2013: 12). How can this girl with sexual passion become pacified? Returning to her hometown to recuperate in April, Yoshiko comes back in September with her new lover Tanaka, with good intensions.

Tokio is intolerably annoyed, but he recognizes his own future at last. Having drawn his conclusion from this affection, he then shrinks back, doing his utmost to be a responsible teacher and achieve happiness for his beloved girl.

“It’s suffocating” (Katai 2013: 15). He utters a cry of pain, but he can only make such a choice, or he would be despised by the society.

In order to persuade Tanaka to leave Tokyo and Yoshiko, Tokio puts on an insincere mask. He admonishes him to return to his hometown by offering various reasons, including the future, men’s sacrifice and the development of the whole thing. He decides to inform the parents of Yoshiko to take her back home. He tirelessly preaches to Yoshiko with practical and sincere words, talking of Platonic love, carnal love, the relationship between love and life. Literate women should abide by the female ethical criteria. His reasoning is high-minded, painstaking, sincere and vehement. After Yoshiko leaves, his expression changes. Who would not understand his suffering? Did he not covet the body of Yoshiko? His affection for Yoshiko is unreasonable. We cannot help but pity this man, in that his love is real, he does not act as a shameless seducer and at least, he has some conscience left which is exactly the responsibility of a grown man, a married man, an elder and a master who has to protect a young 19-year-old unmarried girl.

Tokio is unable to fulfil his duty of supervision, he simply cannot persuade Yoshiko to tell the truth to her parents. “Tokio deceived himself as well as others and acted as a ‘tender protector’ – making the so-called solemn sacrifice” (Katai 2013: 40). Knowing that Yoshiko intends to elope with Tanaka, he makes a serious decision – writing again to her parents and urging them to take her back. There is jealousy and selfishness in his action, as well as anxiety that Yoshiko might have illicit sex with Tanaka and be then deserted by him. With Yoshiko leaving Tokyo, Tokio’s yearning and longing for her intensifies. One day he goes to Yoshiko’s former dwelling place, embraces the quilt that Yoshiko had used and sniffs the adorable feminine scent. Sexual desire, sadness and despair overwhelm him all of a sudden. Yoshiko will get married sooner or later, this Kobe-styled fashionable woman perhaps will eventually choose the traditional path, and then how is it possible for him to live the rest of his life? It’s not beyond our imagination. Similar to *The Precept Breaking* by Tōson Shimazaki, *Futon* has also manifested “The Sorrows of The Awakening”. Although the hero is on his way to awakening under the influence of modern enlightenment, he would follow the path of self-liberation. *Futon* abounds in self-exposure and self-confession, while it leaves some questions unasked: Does a person have bodily and spiritual freedom? Is it right to love out of marriage? Is the so-called “mistress or lover” illegal? Is it possible for a teacher and his student to have real love? All the problems remain unsolved till today.

Yang Jian*yangjian64@163.com*

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Central China Normal University
152 Luoyu Road, Hongshan District
Wuhan, Hubei Province, 430079
P. R. CHINA

Works Cited

- Katai, T. 2013. *Futon*. Trans. Wei Dahai, Shao Chengliang and Zhou Xianglun.
Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- Shisheng, P. 2001. About the 'I-Novel' in modern Japanese literature. – *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2, 106–112.