

ARISHIMA Takeo (1878-1923): A Case Study towards a Better Understanding of the Taisho Period (Presented at JASC 2006 Annual Conference, Thompson Rivers University, October 12-15, 2006) Yuzo Ota (McGill University)

During the course of Japanese history, there was often alternation between a period of openness to the outside influences and a period in which Japan was rather self-contained. The Taisho period (1912-1926) was an open period in which new developments took place in various fields partly in response to the stimuli from the western world. One of the areas in which there was some sign of new development was the male-female relationship. It is well known that the feminist movement attracted the public attention in Japan for the first time during the Taisho period. Among men too we saw some men in Taisho Japan whose attitude towards women was significantly different from that of the majority of men around them. Arishima Takeo, a major writer of Taisho Japan, was one of them.

In this paper, I would like to discuss him focusing on matters related to the most sensational event of his life, namely, his love suicide with a beautiful married female journalist.

The publication of the volume one of his collected works in October 1917 from Shinchsha in Tokyo transformed Arishima into a famous writer. This volume contained two works which dealt with women's life and death. One was *The Death and Before and After It*,<sup>1</sup> a drama based on Arishima's experience of losing his wife<sup>2</sup> due to tuberculosis. The other was a novel titled *The Death of Sue*,<sup>3</sup> which depicts with great sympathy the destructive effect of poverty upon a family, finally resulting in the suicide of the daughter Sue. While he was a student of Sapporo Agricultural College and was involved as a volunteer with a night school for children from poor families, he got acquainted with a girl called Segawa Sue. Several years later Arishima returned to Sapporo as a teacher of his alma mater and met her again, now a mother with a small child. In his diary entry written in English, Arishima expresses his admiration for this poverty-stricken mother of an illegitimate child: "Poor Sue! You were born a creature who should encounter hardest destiny of life. Your pensive but almost over passionate countenance tells it plainly. I pity you. But it is yours to taste the greatest privilege of humanity, that is, to penetrate into the very depth of life and drink the crystalline drop of the deepest sorrow or highest joy. I pity you because you are destined to drink the former. Still how good it is to taste even grief than to taste nothing and pass this life away without any unerasable impression upon one's life."<sup>4</sup> It is virtually certain that Segawa Sue, who eventually committed suicide, was the inspiration for writing *The Death of Sue*. Arishima's works, such as those mentioned above, and his essays in support of

women's liberation, such as *Awakening to One's Self: A Writer's View of Women*<sup>5</sup> and *Wives' Sufferings Arise from the Present Institution of Marriage*<sup>6</sup> helped Arishima to win female admirers. To cite an example, while Arishima was hospitalized in 1918 an unknown woman anonymously gave him a beautiful bouquet of rose and fresh fruits.<sup>7</sup> Then a few weeks later she came to see him. His first impression of this lady, Mrs. Sakurai Suzuko, written in English reads, "She is a little cranky, but very clever, eyes sparkling with charm."<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Sakurai is one of the women who figure conspicuously in his diaries or letters of the period after his loss of his wife. However, Arishima came to feel that she was a woman who was just "trying to fill the emptiness of her life."<sup>9</sup> Kamichika Ichiko, a pioneer activist of women's liberation movement and a member of House of Representatives in the post-World-War-II period, commanded a greater respect from him. Arishima met Kamichika for the first time in May 1917. Kamichika was out on bail after stabbing Sugi Sakae, her estranged anarchist lover in November 1916. Arishima regarded her highly: "She has a penetrating intellect rarely seen even among men and she also has plenty of enthusiasm."<sup>10</sup> Their friendship deepened quickly until on July 14, 1917, Arishima "was forced to kiss her."<sup>11</sup> Less than a year had passed since his wife's death and what happened on that day caused "Horrible accusation of self."<sup>12</sup> Arishima admitted to Kamichika that he had behaved ambiguously on July 14, but explained to her that he could continue his relationship with her only as a friend and not as a lover. Kamichika felt that she would not be able to control her emotions and their relationship was terminated.<sup>13</sup> In an article published in 1923, Arishima denies that the memory of his wife had been working as an impediment to his remarriage.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, the inhibition, which Arishima felt at the time of his short-lived friendship with Kamichika, vanished with the passage of time. However, in practice Arishima continued to avoid overtly amorous relationship. To a woman called Tomizawa Mihoko, a teacher by profession, Arishima proposed to sever their relationship if they could not remain just good friends, when he suspected that she had fallen in love with him.<sup>15</sup> A woman who presided over a private academy for girls fell in love with Arishima. In her case he was even more clearly not attracted by her: "Our conversation again turned to the topic of love. Her heart is still attached to me. I feel sorry for her, but I cannot feel any love for her."<sup>16</sup> Even in the case of a few women who attracted Arishima, normally he did not declare his love for them, very likely because he was afraid of marriage as something incompatible with freedom. Some women were postponing their marriage in the hope of marrying Arishima until their patience was exhausted. A female painter named Asai Mitsui to whom Arishima wrote more than eighty letters between 1919 and 1923 must have been one of them. One of her sisters, Otake K

kichi, was once a conspicuous • gnew woman• h associated with *Seit* [Blue Stockings], a journal whose creation in 1911 marked the beginning of women• fs liberation movement in Japan.<sup>17</sup> A few months after Arishima had got acquainted with her, he learned from this sister that Asai Mitsui was a girl who did routinely bold scandalous things, a revelation for which her charming letters had not prepared him.<sup>18</sup> Arishima• fs friendship with her continued undisturbed, however. Then she stopped writing to him or coming to see him. He learned that she was getting married. He congratulated her on that and asked her just to remain friends with his mother, his children and himself as before.<sup>19</sup> In his letter of 19 February 1923 to his friend Asuke, we read, • gThank you for advising me to get married. That person got married at the end of last year, after agreeing with her sister not to see me, even if I come to see her, and not to reply to my letter, even if I write to her. That was the end. • h<sup>20</sup> I think that Asai Mitsui could not continue to visit the Arishima family because she had to tear herself away from Arishima emotionally by minimizing her contact with him.<sup>21</sup>

If we set aside his wife and the partner of his love suicide, Arishima probably declared his love only to two women. One was Matilde Heck, the daughter of the owner of a hotel in Switzerland where Arishima stayed for a week in 1906.

Arishima• fs confession of love to her<sup>22</sup> (• hI am not fond of you. I loved and love you. • h) was made at a time when, with the passage of time, such a declaration was devoid of serious practical consequences. Arishima never saw her again but corresponded with her to the end of his life. • gTildi, believe, strange is the love which lines one• fs heart to other. I feel my heart beat whenever I address you. May you live ever young and kind in the very bottom of my bosom, • h<sup>23</sup> reads the last of over seventy letters he wrote to her.

The other woman to whom Arishima confessed his love was a woman called Misono Chiyo. She probably ran a small inn where Arishima could stay or go for the day to write.<sup>24</sup> In an essay published in 1921, Arishima alludes to her, • gWhile my wife was still alive, I met a beautiful woman and I felt love towards her, even though I loved my wife• h<sup>25</sup> and mentions the suffering and struggle which his love towards this woman caused him.<sup>26</sup> Arishima• fs confession was made in a letter written shortly after the second anniversary of the death of his wife: • g. . . from the time when my wife was still alive, you were the seed of my sorrow. Trying to forget my sorrow through my love towards you, I was plunged into new sorrow. • h<sup>27</sup> However, the purpose of this confession was to tell her that his passion had at last been tamed to gentle harmless friendship: • gWe do not have to worry any longer. When inner pains that only an artist knows overcomes me, it has become my best solace to go to your place and spend a half day in that quiet room. I have been able

to make my quiet conversation with you the source of my supreme comfort.<sup>h28</sup>

Misono Chiyo continued to occupy a special place among Arishima's female friends. Apart from his mother, she was the only female recipient of a farewell message which Arishima wrote the day before, and on the day, of his suicide.<sup>29</sup>

How can we evaluate or interpret Arishima's death? Was Hatano Akiko with whom he died really the most important woman of his life? She does not figure very prominently in Arishima's letters and diaries.<sup>30</sup> In his letter of 16 December 1922 to a woman called Karasawa Hideko, Arishima mentions Hatano's letter in which she asked him if Arishima and Karasawa were good friends. Arishima replied to the effect that they were good friends but not lovers.<sup>31</sup> Arishima met Karasawa, a former professional actress (stage name: Sakurai Yaeko), once in April 1921 during his trip.<sup>32</sup> Then they met again in Tokyo in the autumn and their friendship really started. Between 29 September 1921 and 1 June 1923, Arishima wrote 76 letters to Karasawa, who, according to her husband, excelled most in her goodness to her siblings and parents, next in painting, next in poetry, and least in acting.<sup>33</sup> These letters reflect the intensity and richness of their friendship.

Arishima's relationship with Hatano does not give us the impression of very rich relationship. The only letter of Arishima's to Hatano in *The Complete Works* is a letter in which Arishima announces to her that he has decided not to have a relationship with her as her lover. After mentioning her husband's constant love to her, Arishima says that he can never deceive such a person and treat her as his love.<sup>34</sup> In fact, as he confessed to his friend Asume, he resisted Hatano's persistent attempt to seduce him, which intensified from the spring of 1923, as long as he could until he succumbed to it on July 4, four days before his death.<sup>35</sup> One factor related to it was that Arishima, who was prone to have spells of depression, was in a gloomy, depressed mood aggravated by the sense that his literary productivity had been declining.

Nowaday, I feel that it would be best for me to die in the hot joy of love by getting a loved woman worthy to risk my life.<sup>h36</sup> If I ever fall in love again, that would be a firm marriage of love and death.<sup>h37</sup> close association between love and death found in his letters of 1923 seems to suggest that passionate love for a woman had become a means to fulfil his longing for death. Arishima wrote to Karasawa Hideko ten days before his love suicide, I really feel lonely these days. I do not feel that I can survive this loneliness easily. . . . Your words that you esteem a person who is capable of wiping away his mistake more than a person who is afraid of committing a mistake are impressive. However, a person may commit a mistake too huge to wipe away. Nowadays I feel that that person may be the happiest.<sup>h38</sup>

Arishima says in his will addressed to his mother and his three children, I know that such an act is abnormal. I do feel your anger and sorrow. However, it cannot be

helped. For, no matter how hard I struggled against this fate, I have not succeeded in escaping from it.<sup>39</sup>

The temptation to be the happiest man by committing a mistake too huge to wipe away finally became too strong for him to resist, and recognizing in Hatano the embodiment of the fate to which human beings could only submit, he decided to agree to become Hatano's lover and die with her. On June 7, 1923, Arishima told Asume, "We started this love affair to die. Both of us wanted to die. Already in Funabashi [i.e., the place where Arishima slept with Hatano Akiko on June 4], Akiko urged me to die with her."<sup>40</sup> Why did Hatano want to die so badly? Her relationship with her husband was not what she made people believe out of her vanity and pride.<sup>41</sup> Arishima who had heard so much about her husband's devotion and love from her was surprised to find Hatano Harufusa, Akiko's husband, behave so differently from what he had expected when he met him on June 6, 1923. He had learned about the affair between Arishima and his wife. Harufusa said at this occasion, "If you are so pleased with Akiko, I would gladly give her to you. However, I am a merchant. A merchant does not give away his goods free. Pay me her price."<sup>42</sup> Later, he suggested the sum of 10,000 yen, although Arishima had rejected his demand for monetary compensation resolutely on the ground that he could not convert the woman he loved into a sum of money even at the risk of being imprisoned if denounced to the police by him. Hatano Akiko continued to paint her husband as a paragon of love and devotion to herself in her two wills, one to her husband and the other to Ishimoto Shizue, Akiko's best friend.<sup>43</sup> Many people felt both the sentiments expressed in them and Akiko herself to be artificial. Asume to whom Arishima had confided his intention of committing love suicide, tried very hard to dissuade him on June 8. He found Hatano Akiko completely unworthy of his friend and said in her presence, "Look at Akiko's cold eyes. Don't they express cruelty itself? . . . Whatever you say, I believe you are dying by yourself on account of your philosophy. No matter whether you embrace her or lie on top of her or not, you are never a person to commit love suicide with such a woman."<sup>44</sup> If Arishima had lived on, he would have realized that there is considerable truth in Asume's view. However, for Arishima who died on June 9, there was no danger of disappointment with Akiko. It was enough that she had become an embodiment of Fate to enable him to overcome his keen sense of responsibility towards his family, friends, and society and obtain release from the life which had become too painful for him.

I think that his uniqueness in the positive sense in the area of the male-female relationship is manifested more in his rich friendship with professional and artistic women, who were increasing in number and visibility during the Taisho period, than

in his love suicide.