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The plight of 'Single mothers' in the Japanese society as reflected in Hayashi Fumiko's literary works

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Abstract:

Hayashi Fumiko (1903-1951) was one of the feminist writers of the modern Japanese literature. Her writings portrayed women from a unique perspective which was different from the mainstream writing of the age where women were portrayed majorly as emotional and dramatic beings, however the author explored the depth of women's humanity, womanhood and the social injustices they faced living in Japanese society.

Hayashi Fumiko wrote on various subjects like poverty, marriage, illegitimacy, post war Japanese society, single mothers and women's struggle. Many of her works were inspired by her own experiences of life and through her works she emphasized on women's right to choose and free will. Her post war works often depict the challenges in women's life of the age and this paper focuses on her selected post war works which are centered on single mothers and shed a light on the plight of single mothers in the post-war Japanese society, their struggle and the hardships of raising children alone. This paper examines author's depiction of single mother's plight through literature and how the portrayal reflects the lives of single mothers in post war Japanese society.

Key words: Hayashi Fumiko, Feminist author, Japanese society, single mothers, and Women's plight.

Introduction:

Literature is called as the reflection of a society and culture. The relationship of literature and society has been widely discussed, the way it portrays the norms of a society, conduct of people, social realities, social issues and many other important social aspects. It is a significant part of human civilization that portrays the social phenomenon as well as the social changes that occurs in a society through the stories that we read, which might be fictional and imaginative but are often inspired by the happenings of a society that we experience and witness around us. Literature is not only a medium of communicating ideas and experiences but it also shapes our idea about the humankind and make us think about various social issues and raises questions which are important and needs to be discussed. It also gives voice to underprivileged and vulnerable section of the society through various fictional and non-fictional stories. Hence, this paper is also an attempt to understand and explore the struggles of single mothers in Japanese society through the lens of literary works written by Hayashi Fumiko.

This paper focuses on the selected post war writings of modern Japanese literature author, Hayashi Fumiko who was one of the feminist authors of her time period. She penned down her experiences and thoughts about poverty, women's struggle, single mothers, post war Japanese



society, marriage, illegitimacy etc. in numbers of works including novels and short stories. Her writings often included women's issues from a modern perspective that not only showcases her intellect but also gives the readers an understanding of social and historical context of the Japanese society of that age.

An Overview of Hayashi Fumiko and her writings:

The author was born on 31st December 1903 in Moji city in Fukuoka prefecture.

She was an illegitimate child of Hayashi Kiku and Miyata Asataro. Her father abandoned both the mother and daughter when she was only seven years old. Thereafter, a man called Kisaburo adopted her and registered her in their family register. Fumiko's parents were peddler and could barely make ends meet, so much so that on some days they struggled to have a meal. She saw poverty very closely and struggled through poverty until she established herself as a writer. She had to change her residences and school very often because of the nature of her parents' work. Fumiko completed her high schooling from Onomichi Municipal Girls' High School and then moved to Tokyo in 1922 to become a writer. To support herself financially she did odd jobs and worked at various places including factories, shops, cafe etc. Since, she belonged to a lower economy class family and struggled through poverty, most of her early writings talked about hardships and everyday struggles that poverty brings to people. Hayashi Fumiko had an unconventional life and her mother was even more unconventional, particularly in her relationships with men than Fumiko herself. Many of her pre-war writings are distinguished because of their semi-autobiographical nature that often portrays free spirited women whose will power to live is very strong, and the author herself was an independent free spirit woman. She also discussed the subject of illegitimacy and institution of marriage in many of her works which was a major discourse of her life.

The selected works 『下町』 "*Shitamachi*" and 『水仙』 "*Suisen*" which are the primary sources for this paper are not autobiographical but fictional in nature, however these works are also influenced from her experiences to certain extent and reflects the author's observations about single mothers and their struggle living in the Japanese society.

Scope and Objective of the paper:

The objective of this paper is to understand the lives of single mothers as portrayed in Hayashi Fumiko's selected post war writings namely "*Shitamachi*" and "*Suisen*". The paper also aims to understand the plight of single mothers in the Japanese society by analyzing the portrayal of single mothers through the selected writings. This paper explores how the author penned down the daily struggles and hardships that single mothers faced and their key to survive from varied perspectives in the post war Japanese society.

Significance of Research:

This researched is conducted from a fresh perspective to understand the struggles of women living in Japanese society particularly single mothers through the lens of literature. The post war Japanese society was turbulent for everyone who experienced the trauma of the war and struggled to survive, however women were the most vulnerable among the vulnerable. This research will provide a new horizon to the literary interpretations and it will also help readers in understanding women's struggle as single mothers through the selected literary works.



Methodology:

The methodology used in this research is analytical and the method for analysis is inductive. The research is undertaken by first studying and analyzing the primary sources supported by critical writings about the selected works. To understand the struggle of single mothers in the Japanese society particularly during the post war period, works related to history and social status of women in the post war Japanese society is also studied.

Furthermore, to understand and analyze the portrayal of single mother characters in the selected post war works, the Story outline of both the works “*Shitamachi*” and “*Suisen*” are given below:

Story outline of the selected works:

“*Shitamachi*”– It is a short story written in 1948, centered on the protagonist, Riyo, a 30 years old woman, whose husband goes to Siberia during the war. She raises their son Tomekichi as a single mother, and sells tea to make the ends meet. She doesn’t have a house to live so she takes shelter at one of her woman acquaintance’s house who is from the same village as her. She is not informed about her husband’s present whereabouts and experiences loneliness in her everyday struggle but she is also hopeful for him to return home someday. She comes across a kind man called Yoshio, who has recently returned from the front and is separated from his wife. Riyo and Yoshio enjoy each other’s company for few days, and he takes care of her son as well. The story ends tragically when Yoshio dies in a terrible accident and Riyo feels devastated again but she continues with her life along with raising her son.

“*Suisen*” - It is a short story written in 1949. The main character, Tamae, is 43 years old, and her son, Sakuo is 22 years old. Tamae’s husband abandoned her when Sakuo was 2 years old. The story begins with Sakuo failing a job interview. She worked hard all her life to make a living and did various odd jobs to make ends meet, on the other hand Sakuo remains unemployed even after graduating from high school and continues to live off on her mother’s expenses. He also starts taking money that his mother had saved which results in frequent fights between them. When his mother denies giving him money further he insists on asking his lover, Eiko. Sakuo fights with his mother for not having a father, and her often being away from home either working or with other men. Tamae is also tired of Sakuo, who has no intention of taking the job interview and his career seriously, she feels exhausted providing for him since a long time and therefore asks him to end their cohabitation and set her free. Sakuo refuses to move out, saying working and living is boring for him. At the end of the story, Sakuo gets a job in Hokkaido and decides to go there and tells his mother that he would never come back. A night before leaving for Hokkaido, Tamae and Sakuo walked through Ginza at night, and Tamae while holding his hand tells him that no matter what happens to her, he doesn't have to come back to which Sakuo silently nods and quickly let's go of his mother's hand, and they part ways. Just when Tamae feels liberated from Sakuo, she realizes that this free life that she was aspiring for is going to make her completely alone. She walks alone through the streets of Ginza, steals some items from the shops and puts them in her pockets.

Analysis and Findings of the selected works:

“*Shitamachi*”:

The protagonist of the story Riyo, represents a strong and courageous woman, whose husband is at war and she lives alone with her eight years old son. She struggles to be able to



survive everyday financially and walks door to door carrying a heavy rucksack and also takes her son along most of the time. She represents those women of post war society who not only got separated from their husbands and became the breadwinner for the family but also lost the comfort of a home. She doesn't have money to rent a house and she hardly can manage a full course meal for herself and her son.

Throughout the story, Riyo is sad and lonely but she is getting habituated with the absence of her husband because her daily life struggles to earn money to be able to provide for her son overpowers her emotional struggles. The shift in her behaviour in terms of her appearance and actions when she meets Yoshio denotes the emotional and physical needs of a partner in her life. She feels comfortable and ease around him and feels relieved that Yoshio looks after her son. Her son, Tomekichi is only eight years old who is not mature enough to be capable of understanding her mother's everyday struggle to provide for him but he is neither a trouble maker nor a distressful child and goes on easy with his mother.

Through the protagonist the author describes the poverty in the life of single mothers and children and their hardships in finding work, doing difficult job to survive in the post war Japanese society. One of the harsh realities for Riyo is not having a home and being homeless with her son which worries her throughout the story. The protagonist also points out subtly on women's sexual needs not being fulfilled as compared to men after getting separated from their spouse which emphasizes the social stigma attached to single women's sexual desire.

"Shitamachi" is a classic short story based on the fragility of life, a compact tale of loneliness and loss, and the equally fleeting moments of happiness. The tone of the narration throughout the story adds to its relatability with the reader.

"Suisen":

The main character, Tamae, is a passionate "woman" whose husband had an affair resulting in their separation. She is always aware of her status as a woman, and feels a strong sense of helplessness about her aging, and is angry that the cause of her aging is her son, whom she has been raising alone since they were abandoned by her husband. The mother son relationship in the story is at too extreme and their conversation often ends in negative and hateful tone towards each other. She doesn't show a trace of maternal love whatsoever towards him. However, the work was written during the post-war period of turmoil which also reflects the struggle of a single mother who is trying to make a living for herself, moreover providing for his adult son is an added struggle.

Many women who lost their husbands in the war were raising children alone, and they were on the tether's end by the stress of making ends meet, and, like Tamae, they ended up putting their womanhood on the back seat. It is like a lament in the heart of a woman who, while trying to support her family and raise her children, and in the process losing her radiance as a woman. Her son, Sakuo, like many other post war children felt lonely and dissatisfied with their mothers who, for supporting their family, often remained absent from home which made the children struggle emotionally and thus did not feel the comfort of a home and a nurturer. Sakuo had always been dissatisfied with the lack of love he felt, and Tamae often expresses her desire to be free from the responsibility of her son which feels like a burden to her.

The story has a sad connotation and it describes the sufferings of both the mother and the son, the former lost her womanhood and the latter lost his father as well as missed her mother's



love. Hence, the household is loveless, discomforting and full of silent battles in both their lives. One of the themes in the story can also be described as the decline of a woman, and the realistic portrayal of this theme is a mixture of humour and loneliness, making the story very moving. This literary work shed a light on the frustration of a single mother who goes beyond her capacity and ends up feeling exhausted, empty and lonely.

The post war Japanese society and the adversity for single mothers:

The post war Japanese society was difficult to survive for everyone, the financial instability that the war brought made it rigorous for everyone particularly women households in providing for themselves and the children. Many people were homeless and did not have any financial support system which made them do filthy and undesirable jobs to be able to survive in the post war Japanese society. In such a devastated society, single mothers who were raising their kids without homes and financial support system were struggling physically, emotionally, financially and hence living a distressful life.

The aftermath of world war brought a period of upheaval in Japanese society and single mothers were among the most vulnerable groups. They not only struggled with economic hardships but also gender discrimination and social ostracism. The war widowed and abandoned women were left with extremely limited employment options and low wage jobs such as domestic labors, textile workers, and the entertainment as well as sex industries workers who were over exploited and abused because of their unfavourable situations.

The cultural, traditional and religious Japanese value system like Confucian based moral on gender norms where it suggested that women are inferior to men and the ie system (patrilineal household) also stigmatized single mothers and made their survival brutal in the Japanese society.

Later in 1940's and 50's there were legal provisions that were implemented for women including the 1947 revision of the Civil Code which included gender equality in marriages and parental rights and the abolition of the traditional ie system. Further, the Mother and Child Welfare Law of 1952 was introduced to assist single mothers and provide them with welfare loans, housing assistance, and job training programs. However, these legal forms took a very long time in implementation and failed to reach a majority of women and single mothers who were in need. Hence, the everyday struggle in raising their children and surviving in the society remained unparalleled and drained women in so many ways.

How single mothers face challenges and their struggle living in the modern Japanese society:

One of the biggest challenges for single mothers in present day Japan still remains the financial hardships that come with raising a child and the social stigma attached with being a single parent makes it ruthless for women to survive in the society. In the modern-day Japan, the cost of living is quite high and the households having one income faces a lot of financial constraints, although with a full-time employment system single mothers can maintain a decent lifestyle. However, single mothers usually cannot afford a full-time job because of the time constraint as they are the primary care taker of the child also. Therefore, they are often seen working as a part time worker or Freeter (フリーター). The difficulty in finding an affordable housing is commonly seen as one of the major problems that single mother faces in Japan hence many a times they live in filthy condition and miss the comfort of home. In Japanese culture, the social customs still showcase deeply rooted patriarchal norms and the belief that children should be

raised by two-parent households is still prevalent. Single mothers are often judged for their lifestyle and choice of work, which in fact is not their choice but helplessness, that makes it more difficult for them to find social support leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Moreover, the societal expectations from single mothers are very consuming for women because they are expected to keep the needs of the children above themselves, in that process they often lose their womanhood and leave behind their dreams, desires and aspirations. They could barely survive at the expense of the suppression of their dreams and aspirations.

Conclusion:

Through the selected post war works, Hayashi Fumiko has portrayed women's struggle as single mothers in the post war Japanese society from varied perspective.

The selected works describe two types of women character; one who was left alone at home after the war and did not have enough resources to have the basic needs fulfilled, and another character who was abandoned by her husband because of his affairs with another women. Both the women characters from the selected stories have the responsibility of taking care of their child and providing for them.

The protagonist of "*Shitamachi*", Riyo is a young lady living alone and has the responsibility of raising her son who is still a child. She feels lonely and tired but is waiting in anticipation for her husband to come back. The biggest challenge in her life is financial hardships and not having a home to live, which was the case for most of the single mothers living in post war Japanese society. Another women character, is the protagonists of "*Suisen*", Tamae, is a tired woman who is providing for her son since last twenty years and is ageing now. She suddenly feels old and losing herself as a woman and at the same time, she feels angry at her son for ruining her life which ultimately leads to the separation between the mother and her son. Tamae thinks that her son is the opposite of filial piety who never understood her struggle in raising him and moreover doesn't become a dutiful and obligated son. Even at the verge of getting old, her son consumes her mentally and financially every day and she never feels at ease and comforted.

In "*Shitamachi*" the protagonist, Riyo, finds it morally incorrect to get involved with another man even though her husband is absent for years because she has the responsibility of her son and she decides to make her ends meet by selling tea even though on some days she is not able to sell them and thus cannot have a meal. On the other hand, in "*Suisen*", the protagonist, Tamae, identifies herself as a woman and seeks for her happiness more than being an ideal mother who spent her entire life raising her son and ultimately feels exhausted. She gets into prostitution and hence involved with various men to be able to earn money. So, the stories emphasize on the juggle of women between choosing the right and wrong, moral and desire.

Along with the portrayal of women characters and their struggles as single mothers, the selected texts are also special because of the setting of the stories that describes Japan right after its defeat in the war where everyone was struggling to survive everyday which can be seen in the hopelessness in the characters.

The selected story also reflects Hayashi Fumiko's experience of being an abandoned child by her biological father. She herself struggled through poverty and did various kind of unsatisfactory jobs in order to sustain herself in Tokyo which is reflected in the selected stories as well. Both the stories also talk primarily about the financial hardships of single mother households where they don't have the freedom to make a choice of work, further they are forced to take up

odd, unsatisfactory and indecent jobs. The post war society was typically cruel to women where they were the most vulnerable and exploited part of the society, and often ended up getting into prostitution to be able to survive in the society. “*Suisen*” also talks about the psychological impact that a single parent household can bring to the children and the parent. The story represents a hateful relationship between the mother and her son which is generally not discussed, the drift between the mother and the son in the story is a product of financial constraints, added responsibilities, emotional struggles and the turmoil of a devastated and unstable society where everyone is struggling to find a stability in life. The story earnestly expressed the way a woman, as a woman and as a mother, struggles with aging and lives a difficult life. The ending of the story, where Tamae breaks up with her son is not conventional in nature because mothers are expected to sacrifice her own desires and prioritize the children according to societal norms. At the end of the story when Tamae shoplifts it showcases a sense of freedom from the responsibilities of being a parent, and she feels like an ordinary human being.

Hence, through the selected texts “*Shitamachi*” and “*Suisen*”, the author has shed a light on the struggles of single mothers in the post war Japanese society from varied perspective and this paper is attempted to understand the adversity it brought to single mother’s lives. Other literary works of Hayashi Fumiko has also presented the various portrayals of women navigating poverty, societal judgment, and motherhood. These works offered subtle critiques of patriarchal norms and highlighted the rising female consciousness in the Japanese society.

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