

## **Social Science Meets Literature: Using Sawako Ariyoshi's *The Twilight Years* in Sociology and Psychology Courses**

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### **Additional Documents**

- Some Statistics: Aging in Japan
- "The Japanese Family," by Anne E. Imamura
- "Retirement in Japan," by John Creighton Campbell and Ruth Campbell

### **Themes and Goals**

Today's Japanese families face a growing problem: as the number of elderly in Japan increases, more families must care for elders who can't care for themselves. The goal of this unit is to use a translated novel to better understand the relationships between gender, family roles, and an aging population. The unit examines the complexity of women's roles, changing family structures, and the impact of a growing elderly population on family life in Japan. The unit also explores ideas about death and dying, funeral arrangements, and coping with a loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

Literature can be used in both lower and upper level social science courses to illustrate concepts and ideas, to provide a framework to discuss research findings, and to help students develop a subjective understanding of how gender impacts our lives. Novels allow students to explore sociological and psychological concepts. Students can develop a subjective understanding of human problems and a better understanding of cultural differences through an analysis of the various characters in the story. *The Twilight Years* by Sawako ARIYOSHI is a wonderful piece to use. It is a novel that investigates the problems faced by the elderly and their families, especially when an elderly family member becomes senile. It is well written and very accessible to students. The relationships between the characters seem real, are complex, and serve as a springboard for the discussion of a variety of family issues.

After reading and discussing *The Twilight Years*, students will come away with a greater appreciation and understanding of the complexities of Japanese family life, the problems of

taking care of an aging parent, and coping with death. They will begin to see how aging is a gendered issue, particularly in terms of care-giving. The novel can serve as a jumping off point to explore what types of social policies might be enacted and what types of social services will be needed as we confront a graying society here in the United States.

### **Audiences and Uses**

*The Twilight Years* by Sawako ARIYOSHI is an appropriate novel for inclusion in courses dealing with aging, death and dying, marriage and family, Japanese society, gender studies, or disability studies. It can be incorporated into undergraduate survey courses or specialized courses. The unit is designed to span two 75-minute class periods.

The following types of courses might find the novel useful:

- Sociology of Aging
- Sociology of Disabilities
- Death and Dying
- Marriage and Family
- Asian Literature in Translation
- World Literature in Translation
- Women in Literature
- Changing Gender Roles
- Women's Studies
- Introduction to Japanese Culture or Civilization
- Postwar Japanese History

In an upper level Sociology of Aging course, cross-cultural materials are useful to examine the impact of aging on society. Because Japan, like the United States and many other western nations, has a large elderly in its population, these Japanese materials are useful for comparisons with the United States and Europe. For a course featuring comparative elements, *The Twilight Years* can be paired with Mitch ALBOM's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Topics in the course that can be related to *The Twilight Years* include: social policy and social services, family relations, chronic illness, dementia, and death and dying.

In lower or upper level courses on marriage and the family or in other courses that explore themes of love, sexuality, and gender, religious texts, short stories, essays, poems, and novels are useful to examine family life, marital relationships, and family relationships.

In a course on death and dying, *The Twilight Years* could be used to discuss religious customs of preparing bodies for burial as well as families dealing with terminally ill and senile family members. Another approach may be to examine the impact of mental illness on members of the caretaker's family.

## Instructor's Introduction

Sawako ARIYOSHI (1931-1984) was one of the most popular female writers in post-World War II Japan. Her writings deal with such contemporary social issues as racial segregation (*Hishoku*), problems faced by women in the traditional Japanese household (*Kinokawa/The River Ki*), and caretaking in an aging society (*Kokosu no Hito/The Twilight Years*). *The Twilight Years* is a novel about a woman caught between traditional and modern expectations of Japanese women who finds herself with the task of taking care of an elderly father-in-law who is suffering from senile dementia.

See also "Some Statistics: Aging in Japan" and the Imamura and Campbell articles listed in the Student Readings section.

### Synopsis

#### *Cast of Characters:*

Akiko: the protagonist; works full-time as a typist in a law firm; wife to Nobutoshi and daughter-in-law (yome) to Shigezo

Nobutoshi: An office worker; Akiko's husband and Shigezo's son

Shigezo: Nobutoshi's elderly and ill father

Sawako ARIYOSHI's *The Twilight Years* is a powerful novel that tells the story of a middle-aged woman caught between traditions, expectations, personal aspirations, and the reality of living in a time where elderly persons often require great amounts of care for long periods of time.

The novel's protagonist Akiko is a worker, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. In addition to working full-time, she also has full responsibility for all domestic matters, receiving little help from her husband, son, or in-laws. Her life takes an unforeseen turn when her mother-in-law suddenly dies. At this point, Akiko and her husband Nobutoshi, begin to realize that her sickly father-in-law, Shigezo, is not only physically sick but is becoming senile.

Over the years, Shigezo had treated Akiko rudely and sarcastically referred to her as the "working wife," making light of her contribution to the family and importance of her work outside the home. Because of Shigezo's disrespectful treatment of his daughter-in-law Akiko, she and Nobutoshi built a cottage in the back of their house for Shigezo and his wife rather than allowing the couple to move into Akiko and Nobutoshi's home. Although they were in close physical proximity, there was an emotional distance between the generations.

Almost immediately after the death of his wife, Shigezo seems unable to recognize his son and daughter but clearly recognizes Akiko and becomes increasingly dependent on her. As Shigezo becomes more delusional, it becomes clear that he can no longer live alone in the back cottage. Akiko and Nobutoshi determine that they must move him into their small home. As Shigezo

becomes more childlike and more dependent on Akiko, she begins to despair about what she will have to do.

Akiko enjoys her work as a typist in a law firm. Having worked for them for twenty years, she has more responsibilities in the firm than just typing. The family has also come to depend on Akiko's salary. When Akiko broaches the subject of her father-in-law's care with Nobutoshi, he does not reply. Already overloaded with the tasks of a five-and-a-half day full-time job and a home and family to take care of, Akiko wonders how she can also take care of an older childlike obstinate man. She doesn't think that she can, but her husband's silence leads her to ask herself: "Is Nobutoshi about to tell me that I cannot go to work and leave his father unattended? Will he also say that it is high time I stay at home where I belong?"

As Shigezo's condition continues to worsen, Akiko finds herself getting up in the middle of the night to help Shigezo relieve himself in their garden, bathing him because he no longer knows how, and cleaning up after his messes. She hires an older woman to sit with her father-in-law during the day so she can continue working. These problems are compounded as Akiko makes a great effort to resolve her conflicted feelings for Shigezo.

One day she returns home to find that the older woman taking care of Shigezo has left. Akiko's son suggests that they put Shigezo in a nursing home but Akiko feels that she cannot make such a decision because she is not a blood relative in spite of being the sole caregiver. Eventually, she consults with a social worker who suggests that it is better to keep her father-in-law at home. Although Akiko is losing weight, always tired, and has been missing days at work, she reluctantly agrees.

Shigezo's condition continues to deteriorate. He disappears, nearly drowns in the bathtub, develops pneumonia, smears feces on himself and his bed linens, and wakes up screeching in the night. After Shigezo nearly dies, Akiko makes a decision that she does not share with anyone. She decides to take a leave of absence from her job and resolves to do her best to prolong her father-in-law's life for as long as possible. Talking with other women, she takes comfort in learning that she is not alone in her suffering.

### **Instructor Readings**

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

\*\*\*BASS, Scott A., Robert MORRIS, and Masato OKA. *Public Policy and the Old Age Revolution in Japan*. New York: Haworth, 1996.

The chapters "Introduction: Japan's Aging Society" (pages 1-12) and "Expansion of Formalized In-Home Services for Japan's Aged," (pages 147-159) provide background materials on the status of the elderly in Japan and the shift from fulltime care provided by daughters-in-law to the growing use of in-home care providers.

\*\*LECHNER, Viola M. and Masahito SASAKI. "Japan and the United States Struggle with Who Will Care for Our Aging Parents When Caregivers Are Employed," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, Volume 1 and 2, (1995):97-114.

Summarizes the extent of the problem of managing work roles and caretaking roles. Also summarizes various government, employment, and community responses to solving family care problems.

\*\*MAMOLA, Claire Z. "Yakudoshi: A Critical Age for Japanese Women and Japan," *NWSA Journal*. Volume 13, Number 2, Summer (2001):149-156.

This article discusses *yakudoshi* (the bad luck years) in the lives of women in Japan.

\*\*TRAPHAGAN, John W., and John KNIGHT, eds. *Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society*. Albany: State University of New York, 2003.

This collection of articles provides a demographic and ethnographic exploration of how the aging Japanese society is affecting the family.

\*\*TRAPHAGAN, John W. *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan*. Albany: State University of New York, 2000.

Traphagan examines the cultural construction of categories of senility in modern rural Japan by focusing on those elderly who have managed to maintain continuity in their social relationships throughout most their adult lives.

### **Student Readings**

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

\*\*\*ARIYOSHI, Sawako. *The Twilight Years*. Translated by Mildred TAHARA. New York: Kodansha International, 1984.

The original work was published in 1972 by Shinchosha under the title *Kokotsu No Hito*.

\*\*\*IMAMURA, Anne E. "The Japanese Family." For *Video Letter from Japan II: A Young Family*. Asia Society (1990): 7-17.

Provides an overview of the changes that took place in the Japanese family in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

\*\*\*CAMPBELL, John Creighton and Ruth CAMPBELL. “Retirement in Japan.” For *Video Letter from Japan II: Choices for Men Approaching Age Sixty*. Asia Society (1991): 7-13.

Provides an overview of retirement in Japan through the 1980s.

\*\*BENGTSON, Vern L. and Norella PUTNEY. “Who Will Care for Tomorrow’s Elderly? Consequences of Population Aging East and West.” In *Aging in East and West: Families, States and the Elderly*, edited by Vern L. BENGTSON, Kyong-Dong KIM, George MYERS and Ki-Soo EUN. New York: Springer, 2000. pp. 263-285.

This article discusses the problem of adequate care giving issues for both American and Asian families. It examines how policies (or the lack of them) impact the decisions that families must make regarding the provision of care for elderly parents and grandparents.

### **Discussion Questions**

Some questions for students to consider:

- What are the traditional expectations made of Akiko as a proper daughter-in-law? Why are daughters-in-law, as opposed to daughters, traditionally responsible for the care of the elderly?
- How does Shigezo’s condition deteriorate? What impact does this have on care giving?
- How has Akiko been treated by her in-laws? What are her feelings toward them?
- As her father-in-law’s condition deteriorates, how does Akiko feel about Shigezo?
- What are the responsibilities of Nobutoshi to his father?
- Why is Shigezo not placed in a nursing home?
- How does Akiko feel about the role of daughters-in-law?
- What does the bird in the cage represent?
- What is the impact of the changing family on care giving?
- How is the problem of aging a gendered issue?

### **Video Resources**

“Aging in Japan: When Traditional Mechanisms Vanish.” Directed by Keishi Tanaka, Produced by Seichi Koike. 1990. 45 minutes, color. Available on VHS and DVD. Distributed by: Films for the Humanities and Sciences ([http://www.films.com/Films\\_Home/item.cfm?s=1&bin=2022](http://www.films.com/Films_Home/item.cfm?s=1&bin=2022)) (Purchase price: VHS \$89.95; DVD \$89.95). Also available through some university libraries.

“This program provides a record of a society in flux, in which the traditional mechanisms for looking after old people—who used to be the most important members of the family—are breaking down. Japanese senior citizens created the economic miracle of modern Japan, only to find that the happy retirement they unquestioningly expected has been replaced by isolation. The program takes place in a Japanese public bathhouse, an ancient institution that has assumed a new role in Japan as a place where the elderly,

alienated from society, take up residence and find a kind of permanent impermanence.”  
(summary from Films for the Humanities and Sciences)

“Alzheimer’s Disease: A Multicultural Perspective.” Written, produced and directed by Bob Gliner and Celia Orona. 1992. 34 minutes, color. Distributed by: Terra Nova Films, Inc., Chicago, IL (<http://www.terranova.org/Title.aspx?CatSort=24>) (VHS purchase \$135; VHS rental \$45). Also available through some university libraries.

“This video explores the unique difficulties experienced by minority Alzheimer’s patients, their families, and care providers. Cultural differences create additional burdens in the form of language barriers, the presence of old world views and values, and the “myth” of the stereotypical large, helpful extended family. Interviews with family members of Japanese, Hispanic, Vietnamese, and Chinese Alzheimer’s patients as well as directors of care centers, care providers, and educators explain the significant impact of these cultural differences on the education and training needed to provide quality services to these populations.” (summary from the University of Iowa Aging Studies Program list of video holdings: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~agingstp/videodescrip.html>)

### **Further Reading**

DONOW, Herbert S. “Two Approaches to the Care of an Elder Parent: A Study of Robert ANDERSON’s *I Never Sang for My Father* and Sawako ARIYOSHI’s *Kokotsu no hito (The Twilight Years)*.” *The Gerontologist* 30.4 (August 1990): 486-90

This article examines American and Japanese approaches to providing care for elderly parents. Robert ANDERSON’s play *I Never Sang for My Father* can be coupled with *The Twilight Years* as readings for students.

SODEI, Takako. “Care of the Elderly: A Women’s Issue.” In *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Kumiko FUJIMURA-FANSELOW and Atsuko KAMEDA. New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1995. 213-228.

This article discusses traditional gender roles in Japan, the role of women in providing care for elderly relatives, and the stresses and strains on family life in contemporary Japan.