

Elderly Care Issues in East Asia Through Novel *Kokotsu No Hito*

¹W.A. Wan-Ibrahim, ²I. Zainab and ³H.A.R. Asyraf

¹School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia,
06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

²Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

³Centre for Foundation and Liberal Education,
Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Kuala Terengganu Malaysia

Abstract: This study was conducted to analyze some issues of the provision of care of older persons in Japan. Utilizing data collected through a novel, entitled *Kokotsu No Hito*, some care issues of older persons in Japan have been detected. *Kokotsu No Hito* is a novel written by a famous Japanese author, named Sawako Ariyoshi. The 463 pages thick, the novel has been written in 16 chapters, translated into Malay version by Thaiyibah Sulaiman with the title *Meniti Senja*. It was chosen for discussion based on important questions presented by the author who discusses major issues at the international level nowadays relating to question of older persons and the provision of care. The main question behinds this novel is the life of elderly in Japan and the problems they face for care and the problems faced by others in connection with the care. This novel also highlights issues of gender, where it is the woman who feels the beat of difficulties living with the family.

Key words: Population Aging • Elderly • Support • Elderly Care • Care Giver

INTRODUCTION

Gerontologists and demographers agree that the aging of the population is a significant by-product of the demographic transition process in the country and population aging is primarily the result of the reductions in fertility in the process [1]. The extent to which population experiences aging varies from one country to the other [1]. Recently Japan, because she has the highest proportion of the older persons, became the demographically oldest of the world's major nations [2]. The provision of care within the family becomes more difficult in areas with high levels of urbanization such as Japan as family size decreases and women, the main care providers, increasingly engaged in employment in the paid-jobs outside the home. Maeda and Shimizu [3] notes that most of the Japanese elderly living in families with other family members and cared of by children until they died. As a result of urbanization and industrialization such patterns have changed. In a novel, entitled *Kokotsu No Hito*, some elderly care issues in Japan, East Asia have

been detected. In parallel with the increase of older persons globally, issues of the care of older persons at the global level are also highlighted by this novel. In developed countries, even though every country has its own support system for the elderly, the family still becomes an important element of care. Support system is established with the purpose of keeping the old people maintain a good life. Ogawa [4] points out that in developed countries, support to older persons is the responsibility of the government, while in developing countries it is mostly the responsibility of family and neighbors. This development is in line with several studies on support system carried out on the older persons in some developing countries which show that informal support, particularly family is important in terms of care for the elderly.

In South Korea, Sung-Jae Choi [5] also describes that there is about 99.7% of the population aged 65 and over living in the family or community and only 0.3% were living in welfare institutions. Shanas [6] points out the elderly will first find a family member to get care before

turning to welfare institutions. In the United States for example, the family is still the main source of support and care as well as serve as liaison between family members with the bureaucracy. The same conclusion have also been made by several other researchers, such as Cantor [7] and Horowitz and Dobrof [8] who stressed that the members of the family are those who dominate the care and support for older persons. Besides family and other close kin, neighbors also play an important role. The older persons will only find formal support from formal institutions if the supports from these sources are not available.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a content analysis study. Content analysis is suitable when researchers study and analyzed secondary data from published materials. Tipu Sultan *et al.* [9] also used content analysis method in their study on problems of single mothers in Sweden and Denmark. This method employs data that is already existed. It involves the examination of human communication through a novel titled *Kokotsu No Hito* written by a famous Japanese author, named Sawako Ariyoshi in 1975. The 463 pages thick, this novel was written in 16 chapters, translated into Malay version by Thaiyibah Sulaiman with the title *Meniti Senja* [10]. The novel chosen for discussion in this article is based on an important question presented by the author who discusses major issues at the international level nowadays that relates to the question of the older persons and their care. The main question behind this novel is the life of the elderly in Japan and the problems they face for care and the problems faced by others in connection with the care. This novel also highlights issues of gender, where it is the woman who feels the beat of difficulties living with her family, husband, children and other guardian of family members. The distinctive characteristic of this novel is that it is a combination of fiction and fact. To get the facts, as described by the translator, author of this novel, Ariyoshi, took about seven years to study, find relevant information, besides learning to understand the problems of the older persons before beginning to write this novel. What is so surprising is that although the narration and description on the problems of the older persons written in 1970s, this novel truly becomes a reality in today's Japanese society.

When the novel was written in 1975, problems of the older persons in Japan have not yet seen as an important issue to Japanese community. But now, in line with what was described by Ariyoshi, due to the increasing number of the older persons, the problems of the older persons

has become a reality and has been a major concern of society and the Japanese government as well. The specialty of the novel is also due to the way the author managed to show in detail about life, needs and behavior of older people who are the subject of storytelling of the novel. With the author's skills that successfully combines the fiction and facts, the novel become so impressive. There are a lot of information and facts about the older persons [10]. In academic context, this novel is not just merely a novel, but can be an important reference for university students on the issues related to older people. Due to these advantages, *Kokotsu No Hito* has once, became a best-seller in Japan when it was published and in less than a year the novel was published, more than a million copies were sold.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plot of the Novel: This novel revolves around a family named the Tachibana family at a place in the district of Suginami, Japan. This novel narrated the life of Shigezo, a senile 84-year-old older person described through the eyes of his daughter-in-law named Akiko. Shigezo, before becoming senile, was a ruffian and tough man. He even did not concern and listen to other's opinion including his own wife until her death. In fact, Shigezo's character reflects character of the Japanese traditional society who does not like women working outside the home. Women should stay at home, manage the household and to be the guardian of the children and husband. Therefore Akiko, Shigezo's daughter-in-law who works outside the home, often assaulted, bullied, ridiculed and called a cynic as she was a working wife. When he become senile after the death of his wife, a furious temperament and hard of Shigezo have changed. Shigezo has become more tolerable and often beg for food from his daughter law Ariyoshi. He, due to senility, no longer recognized their children and grandchildren, except for his daughter-in-law, Akiko. The behavior of Shigezo towards Akiko has changed as he became gentle and concern for others including his own daughter in law. Akiko was one who look after her father in law day and night. She provides him with food, sleeping facilities and other daily necessity. Akiko has to wake up the whole day and night just to look after Shigezo and change his nappies whilst Akiko's husband, Nobutoshi was busy with his office work. At first place, Akiko feel hatred because she felt forced to keep her father-in-law with great difficulty, but in the last days in the life of Shigezo, Akiko began to feel sympathy for her father-in-law and was greatly grieved at his death.

Family as the Caregiver: This novel highlights the family's role to take care of older persons in Japanese society. Although there are elderly care centers, the family member still play an important role of taking care of older persons. Shigezo, although at some extents was sent to the elderly care center, most of his life until his death is cared and looked after by his own family. The importance of family becomes more evident after the death of his wife and when he was senile. If there is no family one cannot imagine how the fate of the senile Shigezo is. Shigezo will have to face tough days throughout his life. This novel was able to demonstrate this fact successfully that the family is an important element of care, especially in the situation where older persons were no longer able to take care of themselves.

In terms of current reality, because of the important of family, we found many parents, who reach their old age, choose to live near their children. In a study on the patterns of family support in developed countries, Gibson [11] notes that most parents, particularly working-class parents, have at least one child who lived nearby. Shanas *et al.* [12] found middle-class older persons in Britain and the United States stay away from children, compared with the working class. The study also found that the older persons who do not have spouse and children, looking for siblings or other relatives for their daily supports.

Women as the Main Caregiver: This novel emphasized women as primary caregivers to the older persons. Although spouse, children, siblings and other relatives are important to provide the care, in terms of gender, women are the primary caregivers of the older persons. Likewise, men cannot live without women. This situation is evident in this novel, in which the main actor of this novel, Akiko worked as a custodian of the Shigezo, the very old person. It was Akiko who look after Shigezo, cook and prepare food for him. It was Akiko who help dressing in Shigezo, even up to manage the issues of death, such as calling a doctor, lay down the body of her mother-in-law when her mother-in-law dead on the bed, calling the undertaker and so on. The Tachibana family in fact will face problems if Akiko does not in the house, or if this woman is ill. Akiko is not only regarded as the guardian of the father-in-law who is old and senile, but she is also important to the care of her husband. This novel also successfully shows the role of women whose task is not only important in the domestic area, but in matters outside the home as well. In everyday life women have multiple roles. It shows that how one law firm where Akiko is working has to close its operation due to Akiko's mother-in-law's death. Even Akiko still in duty

leave, lawyers of her company eagerly waited for Akiko to the office including her taking for maternity leave. The role of women is not only important in domestic area, but also in business outside the home.

The Importance of Neighbor: Sawako Ariyoshi, the author of this novel, also managed to show families, particularly women and neighbors are important for care of the elderly. This condition is consistent with the concept of care and support to the elderly as it is often debated by researchers. In certain circumstances, neighbors are more important than family members, especially if a family member stay away from the elderly. Neighbors have an important position in this novel. As soon as the news spread on Akiko mother-in-law's death, her neighbors, Kadotani Kihara's family take immediate action to visit the house and provide necessary assistance. It is this neighbor who takes responsibility to make preparations for the ceremony. Akiko is also grateful to her neighbor who had also come for the ritual prayers remembering the seventh day the mather-in-law's death and even Akiko admitted the wise as saying that other people who live nearby are better than relatives who live far away

The Importance of Day Care Centers: Another important element of care to the elderly has been a formal support, the support from government institutions, private sector as well as from NGOs. This situation has also successfully shown by *Kokotsu No Hito*. Formal support is important as a complement to informal support from family members or neighbors. It has been shown in this novel that *Umezato Elderly Centre* is a senior citizen day care centre in Japan where Shigezo is sent at certain times during Akiko's work. This center covers of about 150 elderly people. There are many more such centers operated by other agencies, including Social Welfare Department and many of these centers was established in Japan twenty years before the novel was written. At the time this novel was written, such centers can be found in every province and in Suginami alone there were 60 centers.

In gerontology, elderly care centers are not a strange issue. Cantor [13], with her complementary approach, says the process of getting support is a hierarchical process where spouses and children are a fundamental resource in support system. If older citizens failed to get support from these sources, the elderly will be looking for siblings or other relatives. If these resources are not available, then the elderly will find friends, neighbors, or formal organizations as an alternative source of last resort for support. Through this support system, social support is

viewed as a chain of sequential networks. If one source in this network is not available, or is quite difficult to get, then other sources will be the next in the network to provide support. Therefore, in theory, both informal and formal resources needed to provide support and care to the elderly. The responsibility for providing support to the elderly should be shared between the informal with formal support systems. This is in line with what is said by some researchers, for example, Litwak [6] that all the needs of the elderly will be met when there is a close cooperation between the informal and formal support system. Informal support itself is seen unable to function properly without the cooperation of formal support.

CONCLUSION

Utilizing data collected through a novel, entitled *Kokotsu No Hito*, some issues of the provision of care of older persons in Japan have been detected. The provision of care within family becomes more difficult as family size decreases and women, the main care providers, are increasingly engaged in employment in the paid-jobs outside the home. Thus, the issue of elderly care is often discussed, debated, analyzed and studied by researchers who are interested about the elderly in the academic world. Care and compassion to elderly people are something that should be addressed and exposed especially to the children. The elderly will be facing a situation where they had to depend entirely on others who will then provide support, care and love for them. This novel has provided a lot of information about the care of the elderly in Japan. Care issues highlighted through this novel are so relevant to the issue of aged care in today's life. This novel also highlighted the importance of neighbors in providing care for older persons. Older persons who their family members living far away, neighbors will then play a key role for their care. This novel should be read because it can raise awareness about the importance of providing care to their elderly parents.

REFERENCES

1. Conception, B. Mercedes, 1987. The Elderly in Asia, in United Nations, Population Aging: Review of Emerging Issues. Bangkok: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.
2. Kinsella, Kevin and Wan He, 2009. An Aging World: 2008. International Population Reports P95/09-1. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
3. Maeda, Daisaku and Yutaka Shimizu, 1992. Family Support for Elderly in Japan. In Kendig, H.L., Hashimoto, A. and Coppard, L.C. (eds.). Family Support for the Elderly: International Perspectives. New York: Oxford University.
4. Ogawa, Naohiro, 1992. Resources for the Elderly in Economic Development. In Kendig, H.L., Hashimoto, A. and Coppard, L.C. (eds.). Family Support for the Elderly: International Perspectives. New York: Oxford University.
5. Sung-Jae Choi, 1992. Aging and Social Welfare in South Korea. David R. Phillips. (ed.). Aging in East and South-East Asia. Great Britain: Edward Arnold.
6. Shanas, E., 1979. The Family as a Social Support System in Old Age. *The Gerontologist*, 19(2): 169-174.
7. Cantor, M.H., 1980. Caring for the Frail Elderly: Impact on Family, Friends and Neighbors. Working Paper for the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego.
8. Horowitz, A. and R. Dobrof, 1982. The Role of Family in Providing Long-Term Care In The Community. New York: Brookdale Center on Aging.
9. Tipu Sultan, Muhammad Shoaib, Yasir Saeed, Saadia Dildar and Sarfraz Khan, 2012 Problem of Single Mothers and State Provisions: A Case of Sweden and Denmark. *Middle East Journal of Scientific Research*, 11 (7): 988-991.
10. Thaiyibah Sulaiman, 1999. *Prakata Penterjemah. Meniti Senja*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
11. Gibson, M.J., 1981. Family Support Patterns, Policies and Programs in Developed Nations. Working Paper for the 34th annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Toronto, USA.
12. Shanas, E., P. Townsend, D. Wedderburn, H. Friis, P. Milhoj and J. Stehouwer, 1968. Old People in Three Industrial Societies. New York: Atherton Press.
13. Cantor, M.H., 1979. Neighbors and Friends as Overlooked Resources in the Informal Support Systems. *Research on Aging*, 1: 434-463.