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Short Communication



Unlawful Homicide of Two Ugly and Disabled Victims in a Japanese Tale Based on a True Story

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Abstract

It is extremely rare for an ugly wife to be killed by her husband because of her ugliness. The aim of this study is to draw inferences regarding the treatment of children and women who were disfigured or disabled during the Japanese Edo period.

“Shiryo-Gedatsu Monogatari-Kikigaki”, reportage literature based on a true story was analyzed.

Yoemon remarried Osugi, and her son Suke was born with an ugly face and unnatural legs. Yoemon hated Suke and urged Osugi to abandon Suke, and in the end, Osugi threw Suke into the river and killed him. Yoemon and Osugi later had a daughter and named her Rui. Rui had a very similar appearance to Suke. Thus, the village people called her Kasane, saying that Suke was reborn. Kasane married Yagoro, who became the second Yoemon. Yoemon disliked Kasane for her ugly appearance, so he killed her by pushing her into the river and continued to take subsequent wives, but each of them died after marriage. After the sixth marriage, his only child, Kiku, was tormented by Kasane’s spirit. About the appearance of Kasane, Kiku said: “The woman named Kasane had black skin, one eye was rotten, her nose was crushed, her mouth was wide, her face was marred with boils, her hands were bent, and one leg was short. She had the appearance of a scary old woman, like I had never seen before.”

Through this story, we learn that there has been widespread hatred for children or women with an ugly appearance.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that beautiful women are treated better than ugly women and that ugly women are treated unfairly [1,2].

However, it is extremely rare for an ugly and disabled child to be killed by his or her parents, or for an ugly wife to be killed by her husband because of her ugliness.

As known, ugliness is a subjective quality often characterized by the perception of something as aesthetically displeasing, unattractive, or offensive to the senses. Among the concepts of ugliness, aesthetic ugliness refers to the

visual aspects of something that are considered unpleasant or unattractive, such as distorted features, asymmetry, or lack of harmony and proportion. According to recent research, the standard of the perfect body propagated by media influences adolescents’ self-image and, consequently, self-esteem and is considered an unattainable goal, corresponding to a standard of beauty described as artificial and unreal. However, it causes great suffering and discrimination against those who do not feel they are attractive, which can lead to health problems resulting from low self-esteem [3].

Herein, we present a reportage storybook from the early Edo dynasty, based on a true story, which recounts two

unlawful homicide cases involving victims who were ugly and disabled.

Through this analysis, we can draw inferences regarding the treatment of children and women who were disfigured or disabled during the Japanese Edo period.

Analysis

“*Shiryō-Gedatsu Monogatari-Kikigaki*” (死霊解脱物語聞書), written by a monk named Zanjyu, is a classic work of reportage literature written in kana during the early Edo period, based on a true story [4].

The book begins as follows:

There was a 14-year-old girl with spiritual possession in the Edo era in the 17th century. On January 23, 1672, she experienced several acute attacks characterized by seizure-like episodes, opisthotonic posturing, mutism, unconsciousness, and dyspneic attacks, followed by religious hallucinations. The headman and villagers recognized that she was possessed by the ghost of Kasane, who had been killed by the girl’s father 26 years earlier.

Plot summary

Yoemon (与右衛門) remarried Osugi (お杉), and her son Suke (助) was born with an ugly face and unnatural legs. Therefore, Yoemon hated Suke and urged Osugi to abandon the child, and in the end, Osugi threw Suke into the river and killed him. Yoemon and Osugi later had a daughter and named her Rui (累). Rui had a very similar appearance to Suke. Thus, the village people called her Kasane, saying that Suke was reborn. Tragedy repeated itself, and Kasane, left alone after her parents died, married Yagoro (谷五郎), who became the second Yoemon. Yoemon disliked Kasane for her ugly appearance, so he killed her by pushing her into the river and continued to take subsequent wives, but each of them died after marriage. After his sixth marriage, his only child, Kiku (菊), was tormented by the spirit of Kasane. The Buddhist monk Yuten (祐天) channeled Kasane’s resentment through the mouth of Kiku and helps her become a Buddha, but Suke’s spirit attaches to Kiku again, causing Suke to become a Buddha as well.

Appearance of Kasane, the ugly wife

Kiku said, “The woman named Kasane had black skin, one eye was rotten, her nose was crushed, her mouth was wide, her face was marred with boils, her hands were bent, and one leg was short (Figure 1). She had the appearance of a scary old woman, like I had never seen before.”

Discussion

Suke was killed by his own mother and his father-in-law.



Figure 1: Drawing of ‘Kasane’. Rotten right eye, deformed nose, wide mouth, and right claw hand are expressed. From “The Ghost of Kasane”, in the series ‘Comparisons for Thirty-six Selected Poems’ (Mitate sanjurokkasen no uchi, 1852). Drawn by Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) [6].

Although Kasane was kept alive by her parents’ intervention, she was killed by her husband. When Yoemon arrived at the Kinugawa River, he pushed Kasane into the water, then jumped into the water, trampled on her chest, threw sand from the river bottom into her mouth, gouged out her eyes, and strangled her to death. Many people witnessed the unlawful homicide, but because Kasane was ugly and had a bad temper, no one interrogated Yoemon about his crime.

When Yoemon said that people ignored him because of Kasane, it is highly likely that he was discriminated against due to his wife’s ugly appearance. Furthermore, the reason Yoemon killed Kasane was because he thought that people around him looked down on him for marrying an ugly woman like Kasane.

The Edo period, also known as the Tokugawa period, spanned from 1603 to 1868 in Japan. During this period, certain societal expectations and prejudices existed, shaped by the era’s cultural, social, and economic conditions. Beauty standards were indeed stringent, with a particular emphasis on features considered attractive at the time, such as fair skin, long hair, and certain facial characteristics. Women would often use cosmetics to enhance their appearance. Ukiyo-e prints and literature of the time sometimes idealized these beauty standards, potentially reinforcing societal preferences.

The ugliness described in this work includes black skin, a low-set nose, a wide mouth, facial scars from boils, hand deformity, and short asymmetric legs.

Many patients with facial disfigurement, whether congenital or acquired, seek out plastic surgeons to correct their deformities. An analysis of disfigured faces depicted in modern visual media revealed that characters who experienced an improvement in their facial disfigurement were 7.85 times more likely to have a happy ending than those who did not. Among the methods employed by characters with disfigured faces to address their deformities, surgery had the highest success rate. Although surgery has its shortcomings, the reality is that there are no other alternatives [5].

Conclusion

Despite the emphasis on beauty, it has been generally accepted that outright hatred or severe mistreatment based solely on appearance was not a widespread norm. However, through this story, we learn that there has been hatred for children or women with an ugly appearance at least in certain provinces of Japan.

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