

# Tanizaki's 'Kagi' (The Key) Novel Viewed from 21<sup>st</sup> Century Medical Perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to identify the medically relevant themes portrayed in the 1956 novel 'The Key' by Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965). It created controversy in Japan, for being pornographic in recording the sexual cravings revealed in the separate diaries of an aging married couple. I offer a re-evaluation of this novel, for its conspicuous treatment of so many medically relevant themes.

**Methods:** The English translation of *the Key* novel, by Howard Hibbett, originally published in 1961 was studied, with a focus on medically relevant themes.

**Results:** The novel consists of 62 diary entries, from Jan.1<sup>st</sup> to June 11<sup>th</sup>. Twelve medically relevant themes recognized by Tanizaki in his composition of the diary entries of the couple are alcohol misuse/abuse, cognitive aging (memory lapse), diary writing as a therapy, emergency treatment at home surrounding, paraphilia — foot fetishism, voyeurism, parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict), primal scene, sexual dilemma: adultery, spousal bereavement, spousal jealousy and treatment to tuberculosis and hypertension.

**Conclusion:** *The Key* reveals that Tanizaki was far ahead of his times in portraying middle aged woman's sexuality and alcohol misuse/abuse by Japanese women. The vehement controversy and opposition the novel had in 1956 was a reflection of the entrenched male chauvinistic dominance that prevailed in the Japanese society.

## KEY WORDS

diary writing, elderly sexuality, medication, paraphilia, spousal jealousy, Junichiro Tanizaki

## INTRODUCTION

Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965) was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's elite novelists, whose works have been described as 'characterized by skillful story-telling and by a deep concern with the psychic forces rooted in human sexuality'<sup>1,2)</sup>. (Fig. 1) One of his masterpieces 'The Key' [*Kagi*, 鍵, Fig.2] created controversy in Japan when it was first published in 1956, for being pornographic<sup>3-5)</sup>. Subsequently, the novel was made into a Japanese movie, directed by Kon Ichikawa in 1959, with an inane English subtitle 'Odd Obsession'<sup>6,7)</sup> (Fig. 3) According to Japanese movie historian Donald Richie, 'though the film is flawed by its lazy conclusion (the maid done it), the tensions of its theme and of Tanizaki's original intentions are still there.'<sup>7)</sup>

While this novel had been studied for its literary merit<sup>8-9)</sup>, with the exception of one analysis<sup>10)</sup>, considerable significance 'The Key' projected for illness in elderly has not been focused from a medical angle. As such, the objective of this study was to identify the medically relevant conspicuous themes portrayed by Tanizaki in 'The Key' novel.

## METHOD

The English translation of *the Key* novel, by Howard Hibbett<sup>4)</sup>, originally published in 1961 was studied, with a focus on medically relevant themes.

## RESULTS

Tanizaki had used the theme of elderly sexuality between a married couple (55 year old professor and his 44 year old wife Ikuko) as the main plot device in this novel, written in a twin-diary format. The husband has 24 entries, before he succumbs to stroke, and the wife completes 38 entries. The specific details of the diary entries between the couple beginning from the New Year's day (January 1) to June 11<sup>th</sup> are highlighted in Table 1. Altogether there are 62 entries, which can be conveniently split into two halves. The first half, from Jan 1 to Apr 15, is filled with alternate entries by both husband and wife. The second half, from Apr 16 to Jun 11, is limited to only wife's recordings, and she mentions that her husband had a stroke on April 17<sup>th</sup>, when they enjoyed conjugal coitus, and he died on May 2<sup>nd</sup> suddenly.

Apart from the two protagonists, two additional characters who appear prominently in the diary entries are Toshiko (the daughter of the couple) and her fiance Kimura. In addition to the central theme of elderly sexuality, Tanizaki also had incorporated parental perplexity (mother — daughter conflict) or generation gap skillfully in the plot. Four health care workers who receive passing mention in the diary entries are, Dr. Noma, Dr. Kodama, nurse Koike ('a pretty girl in her early twenties') and an unnamed doctor ('massage therapist from the Ishizuka Clinic').

A list of 12 medically relevant themes raised in the diary entries of the couple are presented in Table 2. These include the following: alcohol misuse/abuse, cognitive aging (memory lapse), diary writing as a therapy, emergency treatment at home surrounding, paraphilia — foot fetishism, voyeurism, parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict), primal scene, sexual dilemma: adultery, spousal bereavement, spousal jealousy and treatment to tuberculosis and hypertension.

**Table 1: A chronological listing of Diary entries of Professor and his wife Ikuko, from January 1st to June 11th in 'The Key' novel**

Dates of Diary entries	Entry count by writer		Specific episode recorded*
	Professor	wife Ikuko	
<b>First Half</b>			
Jan 1 (New year's day)	1		'I'll be 55, she must be 44'. I write from frustration for not talking to her about our sexual problems. I'm a foot-fetishist.
Jan 4		1	'Night before last we observed the old New Year's custom' ( <i>i.e. first coitus, for the year</i> ). I'm far too conventional.
Jan 7	2		Kimura (fiancé of our daughter Toshiko) visited. Though she is cool toward guests, especially men, she is friendly with Kimura.
Jan 8		2	Last night I was intoxicated, but he was worse. He kept after me to kiss his eyes.
Jan 13	3		Kimura visited. 'I wonder whom he is after — wife or daughter?'
Jan 17	4		She and I drink brandy every evening now.
Jan 20		3	My head ached all day long.
Jan 28	5		Tonight, she fainted. Her trouble was cerebral anemia.
Jan 29	6	4	
Jan 30	7	5	
Feb 9		6	Toshiko want to live away from home. I told her 'Go ask Papa yourself.'
Feb 14	8		Kimura introduced Polaroid camera to me. He seems to know 'what goes on at our house.'
Feb 16		7	
Feb 18	9		Toshiko moved out.
Feb 19		8	Toshiko 'misunderstands our marital relationship...my chest trouble aggravated, and hate her father on that account.'
Feb 24	10		I've already used Polaroid camera twice. My pictures are often out of focus.
Feb 27	11	9	
Feb 28	12		
Mar 3	13		
Mar 7		10	
Mar 10	14		I replenish my vitality by taking male hormones once a month...I'd soon be disqualified from my professorship.
Mar 14 about it.		11	to Toshiko: 'You say Papa humiliated me, but are you really so sure he did? I don't feel that way
Mar 18	15		Toshiko: 'Mama's fainted in the bath'.
Mar 19	16	12	
Mar 24	17		'Again last night my wife fainted'...Early this morning, after intercourse, I felt an awful giddiness. Ikuko's face, neck, shoulders, arms — tthe entire outline of her figure seemed double...'
Mar 26		13	
Mar 28	18		'They say my dizziness comes from hardening of cerebral arteries.'
Mar 30		14	
Mar 31	19	15	<i>coitus recorded in both entries</i>
Apr 1		16	
Apr 2		17	
Apr 3	20		
Apr 4		18	
Apr 5	21	19	
Apr 6		20	
Apr 8	22		
Apr 10		21	'The truth is, he isn't the only one whose health is bad. I'm not much better off myself. I began to be aware of it in January...'
Apr 13	23		
Apr 15	24		'My brain is steadily deteriorating... My mind teems with sexual fantasies...My legs are so weak...And I thought of tonight. — <i>last entry of Professor.</i>
<b>Second Half</b>			
Apr 16		22	a massage therapist from the Ishizuka clinic visited — not a masseur, but a doctor.
Apr 17		23	'day critical for husband and me. met Kimura at our hotel in Osaka... We made love in every conceivable way. [ <i>Then, after returning home - night</i> ] He calls me sex-mad, but I'm sure there's no other man so obsessed by it...In a moment he was climbing into my bed, embracing me, showering kisses...I clasped him...his body began to quiver; then he went limp, and collapsed heavily on me. I knew instantly that this was serious.'
Apr 18		24	
Apr 19		25	

Apr 20	26	
Apr 21	27	
Apr 22	28	
Apr 23	29	almost a week since he had his Stroke.
Apr 24	30	1 <sup>st</sup> Sunday after his stroke
Apr 25	31	
Apr 28	32	
Apr 29	33	
Apr 30	34	
May 1	35	2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday after his stroke
Jun 9	36	'My husband died suddenly. It was on May 2 <sup>nd</sup> — probably around 3 am.
Jun 10	37	'I suppose she saw my husband stripping me naked and doing all sorts of lewd things... Toshiko is wily...
Jun 11	38	'I did everything I could to excite him, to keep him agitated, to drive his blood pressure higher and higher.'

\*'She/Her' refers to wife Ikuko, excluding entry 37 on June 10 by Ikuko. 'He/his/him' refers to Professor, excluding entry 3 by Professor, on Jan 13.

**Table 2: Medically relevant themes raised by the Couple in 'The Key' Novel**

Selected dates of Diary entries in the novel	Relevant themes of medical interest
Jan 8, Jan 17, Jan 30	alcohol misuse/abuse
Mar 10, Apr 10	cognitive aging (memory lapse)
Feb 24	diary writing as a therapy
Jan 4, Jan 29, Mar 10,	elderly sexuality
Mar 24, Mar 31, Apr 17	emergency treatment at home surrounding
Mar 18, Apr 17	
Jan 1, Jan 29, June 10	paraphilia — foot fetishism, voyeurism
Feb 19, Mar 14	parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict)
Feb 9, June 10	primal scene
Apr 17	sexual dilemma: adultery
June 9, June 10, June 11	spousal bereavement (widow's grief)
Jan 7, Mar 28	spousal jealousy
Mar 28, Apr 10	treatment to tuberculosis and hypertension

## DISCUSSION

I present discussion under three subheadings; (1) conjugal love of aging couple, (2) parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict), and (3) significance of this novel.

### (1) Conjugal love of aging couple

Tanizaki died on July 30, 1965, at the age of 79 years and 6 days. Thirty one years later, empirical data on the coital behavior of married, aging Japanese men was published by Aoki *et al.*<sup>11)</sup> in a relatively larger sample of 3,389. According to this study, 26% of those aged 50-59 years and 10% or less of those aged 60 years or more responded that they engaged in coitus once a week or more times. Additional empirical data on the coital behavior of married, aging Japanese men and women appeared in the post-Viagra period from 1999 onwards<sup>12,13)</sup>. Among the 367 Japanese married couples who answered a mail survey on the estimated duration of their coitus, for researchers affiliated to the Department of Urology, Toho University School of Medicine, Tokyo, 132 men and 112 women were 45 years and above. The main findings of this survey<sup>13)</sup> were, (1) the mean desired intromission time for women was 15.7 min.; (2) Women consider a wide variety of intravaginal insertion times to be desirable. Based on these evidences, would it be improper if one tags Tanizaki as a writer ahead of his times, in tackling a culturally sensitive issue of conjugal sexuality of aging couples in his novel? A related issue of spousal bereavement (widow's grief), as presented in the last three diary entries (June 9 — 11<sup>th</sup>; Table 2) should also not be ignored<sup>14-17)</sup>.

In the lengthy diary entry of June 9<sup>th</sup>, after becoming a widow, Ikuko expresses her sorrow as follows:

"...because his sudden death burdened me with all sorts of family duties; partly, too, it's because I lost the desire — perhaps I should say incentive to go ahead with it He wasn't sixty yet; once he had regained his health, no matter how slowly, he ought to have been active for several more years — over ten years, if all went well. It was really quite unexpected...Doctors are never very accurate about predicting how long a man will live..."

I think he was being quite sincere when he called me his 'beloved wife'. I haven't the slightest doubt of his love...my only regret was that he didn't fully satisfy me. Instead of accusing him of weakness, though, I felt ashamed of my own lustful appetite. I was sorry about his declining vigor, and, far from blaming him, tried to be all the more devoted..."

A prevalent myth in many societies is that elderly population are devoid of sexual interests and sexual urge<sup>18,19)</sup>. It should be recognized that Tanizaki's novel was published a decade before the publication of myth-breaking Masters and Johnson's book 'Human Sexual Response',<sup>20,21)</sup> which provided observational data on the sexual response patterns of aging men and women. This fact may partly explain the controversy and opposition to the central plot of elderly sexuality presented by Tanizaki. Now, sexual behavior among elderly couple, including Japan, has come to be accepted as a reality.

### (2) Parental Perplexity (mother-daughter conflict)

Parental perplexity is defined by Francoeur *et al.*<sup>22)</sup> as 'The incapacity of parents to understand and communicate effectively with their children and to provide needed guidance and support because of their own confusion, frustration and inability to decide what is best for or needed by their children.' Interaction between mother-daughter dyads revolving around sexual activity and health education have received attention lately<sup>23-25)</sup>. In his commentary, Johnston<sup>10)</sup> had failed to focus attention on the parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict) presented by Tanizaki. Other than elderly sexuality, I consider this theme deserves equal attention as well.

Parental perplexity (mother-daughter conflict) between Ikuko and Toshiko was well illustrated by the dialogue that appears in the diary entry of Mar. 14, by Ikuko. Excerpts:

"I've already told you as much as I can bear to, even if you are my own daughter. Please don't ask anything more. And please believe that I was only obeying your father. I do whatever he wants, even against my will, because I consider it my duty. It may be hard for you to understand, but to a person like myself, brought up on the old morality, there's no choice in the matter. If he's so eager to have nude photographs of me, I'm willing to swallow my shame and expose myself to the camera — especially if he's the one who operates it."

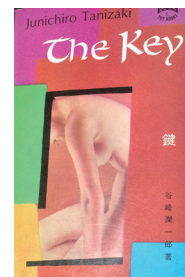
Toshiko was shocked. 'Do you really mean that?' she asked. I said of course I did. 'Mama, you're contemptible! she burst out. I began to suspect I'd enjoyed offending her, and had somewhat exaggerated my true feelings..."



**Fig. 1: Junichiro Tanizaki - circa 1940s [source - Kadokawa Shoten, 1953]**



**Fig. 3: The husband photographing his wife in a scene from 'The Key 鍵 (1959), with the English caption 'Odd Obsession', directed by Kon Ichikawa (1915-2008). Actors were Ganjiro Nakamura II (1902-1983) and Machiko Kyo (1924-2019).**



**Fig. 2: 'The Key' ( 鍵 ) book (English translation) of Tanizaki, published in 1961.**

Though Johnston inferred that at the end, Ikuko (the wife of professor) was 'elated over the death of her husband, the other diarist, as a result of his conscious mismanagement of his high blood pressure'<sup>10</sup>, I tend to differ. In my reading, Tanizaki had presented an alternate angle. The final sentences of Ikuko's diary entry for June 11<sup>th</sup> reads as follows:

"...I do feel, after all, that I can claim to have given him the kind of happiness he wanted.

I still have a good many suspicions about Toshiko and Kimura. She said she found the Osaka Hotel for us — through 'a sophisticated friend of hers — 'because Mr. Kimura wondered if I knew of somewhere'. Was that really all there was to it? She herself may have used that hotel with someone maybe using it even now.

According to Kimura's plan, he'll marry Toshiko when the mourning period is over. She'll make the sacrifice for the sake of appearances; and the three of us will live here together. That is what he tells me."

Tanizaki had ended the novel with mother Ikuko worrying about the menage a trois arrangement suggested by her future son in law.

### (3) Significance of 'The Key' in the Japanese medical curriculum

As presented in Table 2, 'The Key' novel covers a range of medically relevant themes that deserve attention, especially alcohol misuse/abuse by women. Regular national surveys in Japan indicate that alcohol consumption among women had shown drastic increase in the past few decades<sup>26-28</sup>. Aligned to this trend, women victims trapped in alcohol-induced rapes at binge-drinking parties receive frequent media coverage. Thus, Tanizaki's portrayal of wife Ikuko, whose decision making skills about her sexual needs were blurred due to her excessive taste for alcohol deserve merit.

Reasons for why studying literature is helpful to the practice of medicine have been presented in the past<sup>29-33</sup>. The main reason suggested was, literature allows either a physician or a nurse to comprehend the patient's emotion and suffering, rather than the disease symptoms. This will in turn aid in better treatment of the disease. Many reviewers offer samples from the writings of Western literati (for example, English, French and German) as appropriate teaching tools for inclusion in the medical humanities curriculum. Given their deficit and poor comprehension of western languages, Japanese medical and nursing students, are handicapped to read the works of Western literati. Thus arises the value of incorporating the works like *The Key* novel of Tanizaki in the medical humanities curriculum in Japan, which could be read in their original by the students. Another marginal merit of this novel, is as a teaching text for students' diary writing as a means for self-evaluation to focus on positive and negative events in one's life<sup>34-40</sup>.

To mention a limitation of this study, I was unable to locate a primary source that described the motivation of Tanizaki for writing *the Key* novel. Maybe, this is available either in the 30 volume oeuvre of Tanizaki (谷崎潤一郎全集) published by Chuokoronsha or in the unpublished papers of him. Few analysts have opined that this novel is semi-autobiographical; Tanizaki was 70, and suffering from high blood pressure, when he wrote it. His third wife Matsuko (one of his Muses, in the second half of his life) was 53 in 1956.

## CONCLUSION

Even half a century after the publication of *the Key* novel, from a nationwide mail survey conducted with 1,313 board-certified Japanese breast surgeons, Takahashi *et al.*<sup>41</sup> inferred that 'talking about sex related topics is still repressed in patient-doctor encounters in Japan. It is an urgent matter to increase doctor's awareness and clinical skills to deal with patients' sexual issues.'

In my inference, *the Key* novel studied in totality, reveals that Tanizaki was far ahead of his times in portraying middle aged woman sexuality, alcohol misuse/abuse and widow's grief by women in Japan. Simply dismissing the novel's plot as 'the record of sexual cravings and personal hatreds revealed in the separate diaries of an aging married couple'<sup>33</sup> is nothing but a distortion of the totality of the message delivered by Tanizaki. The vehement controversy and opposition the novel had in 1956 was a reflection of the entrenched male chauvinistic dominance that prevailed in the Japanese society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS AND FUNDING

None declared.

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