

# ELLEN KEY IN JAPAN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY

**Tatiana V. DAHLGREN**

Stockholm University

“She is magnificent and her equal is not to be found throughout the whole of Sweden”.<sup>1</sup> These words, uttered with vehemence in a Stockholm street at the beginning of the 1880s, referred to Ellen Key (1849-1926), the Swedish thinker and debater.

In Japan at the beginning of this century she was characterized by her publicists with epithets such as “joketsu” (heroine or outstanding woman), “idai na fujin” (a great woman) and “daigaku sha” (a woman of great erudition).<sup>2</sup>

The thoughts and ideas of this highly esteemed woman had been introduced into Japan through various channels. Japanese students and scholars staying in Berlin had become acquainted with Key’s works through German translations, while others had read English or German translations of her books in Japan. They found her views and ideas interesting and according their own commitment to various questions raised by her, wrote articles dealing with Key or even translated her works, or parts of them, into Japanese.

Ellen Key is perceived in Japan as a woman-liberation thinker along with others such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels and August Bebel.<sup>3</sup>

In her views on marriage and love she was greatly influenced by Spencerian evolutionism and Darwinism. In her statement: “Love makes every liaison moral, whether blessed by the church or not, but a marriage without love is immoral”, we discover the importance she attributes to love in the relationship of a couple. Furthermore to achieve true love the independence of both parties is required. For the woman to obtain this independence, Key advocates economic independence for married women and state-support for mothers. Here we observe two important questions according to Key, love and motherhood.

Her main writings on these topics constitutes the work *Lifelines* (1903), translated into English as *Love and Marriage*.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Nietzsche clearly manifests itself. She proclaims the right of every individual to a completely free development of the personality. She is a great believer in individualism, although not as far-reaching as Nietzsche in his vision of the superman.

In the course of the emancipation of women Key, true to her Spencerian beliefs, saw what she considered a clear risk for women working outside the home under the same conditions as men, in acquiring masculine qualities. How does she combine this view with that of every individual’s free development according to their interest and capability? To cite a Swedish scholar “Key adopted a new feminine ideal: “harmony”, conceived as a state of balance

between self-assertion and self-sacrifice".<sup>5</sup>

For Key a woman's foremost role in society was that of wife and mother. She believed that the sexes had different characteristics, with a woman's more emotional mind and her natural mission as wife and mother. Still childbearing and motherhood should be looked upon as work and be accordingly remunerated by the state. For those women who did not marry or had not the good fortune to become mothers she did not exclude employment, but advocated that this should be in the sectors where a woman could perform her motherly instincts, in areas such as nursing, teaching and social work. In this connection Key coins the conception of a "social mother". However, she still considered motherhood as woman's ultimate mission in life.

Key summed up her thoughts concerning children's upbringing and education in the work *The Century of the Child* (1900).<sup>6</sup> She wanted children to be the focus of the twentieth century, and also demanded statutory mother and childprotection. The individual child should be treated as a separate personality for the encouragement of its interests and abilities. Here the family with the mother at the centre, together with the public educational system, had a great task to fulfil, especially when bearing in mind the needs of future generations. Key had been a primary school teacher until she became completely occupied by her writing.

Key was a product of her time: the Sweden of the 1880s and 1890s. The 1880s was the time when Spencer's and Darwin's theories were debated. The nineties were a time where in life, as in poetry, the view of the individual's right to a free and independent life prevailed, and was the characteristic note of the age admired by the great geniuses, such as Nietzsche.

The first evidence of Ellen Key's works appearing in Japan, as far as I have been able to discover so far, is *The Century of the Child* which was partially translated into Japanese. This translation was undertaken by Ōmura Jintarō and published as early as 1906.<sup>7</sup>

Ōmura Jintarō appears to have been an official at the Ministry of Education who was sent abroad to study European pedagogy in Berlin. His reason for translating only parts of Key's work reflects the fact that he considered some of her opinions too radical and too theoretical for Japanese readers, and not applicable in Japan.

What Ōmura considered too radical might have been Key's idea of abandoning universal education because of her emphasis on family education. Ōmura notes Key's critique of the uniformity in school, and her aim to develop individuality and destroy formal education. He finds her arguments full of progressive ideas, impossible to realize at that time and therefore too theoretical.

Ōmura selectively translated and somewhat modified the parts he found too radical or irrelevant for Japanese circumstances. He admits that this changed the tone of the original text and that it is far from what he calls "the original masterpiece". Notwithstanding this fact he decided to publish the translation as "there is demand for educational reform today".

One seems to be able to detect a wish on the translator's part to initiate a debate on children's education in Japan through the presentation of this book.

A complete translation of Key's work, by Minoru Harada, appears in 1916. Harada was a

graduate of Waseda University's Faculty of Pedagogy, and was appointed Professor of Honour at the same university. However, it was not until much later that Japan started to consider more seriously Key's thoughts on education.

At the beginning of this century we find references to Ellen Key mostly in regard to questions on women's position in society.

In this connection Hiratsuka Raichō (1886-1971) stands out as the foremost articulator of Key's thoughts. Hiratsuka started in September 1911 editing and publishing the magazine *Seitō* (Bluestocking). Initially it was a literary magazine but later on it was transformed into a forum for women's issues. The magazine was to become a mouthpiece for the Seitōsha (Bluestocking Society), a literary society for women which was founded at about the same time.

Both Hiratsuka Raichō and Ellen Key belonged to the upper class of society, and had a good educational background. Key was born on a country estate and received her education at home, partly from her mother and partly from private tutors. Her father was a well-known politician whose high estimation of women and advocacy of women's emancipation was to become of great significance to Key. Her home was liberal and progressive and the same can be said of Hiratsuka's family background.

Hiratsuka's family were descendants of samurai. Her father was a government official with interests in Western thoughts and literature. He wanted his daughter to receive an education, which was still fairly uncommon. Hiratsuka could always count on her mother's support, not least financially. To help Hiratsuka in publishing *Seitō*, her mother offered the money which had been put aside for her dowry. Her family stands out as rather remarkable for the Japan of this period.

From her youth Hiratsuka took an interest in Zen Buddhism and philosophy, and she was well acquainted with European writers, especially Nietzsche.

Hiratsuka learned about Ellen Key for the first time through an article written by Kaneko Chikusui which was published in the September, 1911, issue of the magazine *Taiyō*.<sup>8</sup> The article was entitled 'Genjitsukyō' [The Religion of Reality], and subtitled 'Ningen kaizō ron' [On the Reform of Human Beings].

A philosopher and Professor of Aesthetics and Psychology at Waseda University, Kaneko deals with Key's views on life and marriage from a positivistic point of view. He comments on Key's ideas as being "a realistic view on life and a philosophy based on practical problems": a comment very much to the point. In the development of Key's views he refers to the influence of Nietzsche and Darwin, however, he appears to attribute to Nietzsche views which in reality belong to Spencer, whom he does not mention at all.

In Kaneko's comments on Key's view on love as "love religion", unfortunately he unnecessarily complicates her reasoning by seeking more defined concepts of love. He states that he "cannot agree with the idea that love life is the centre of human life and everything is viewed in terms of love".

For Key it was very simple. Love between man and woman in a marriage or a common-

law marriage was the essential thing in life, and for the woman matrimony was the highest from of life. It is true, however, that Key does not give a clear definition of love. For her, the erotic, spiritual and emotional love life was blended into a higher unity, becoming almost religious in nature, since only through true love can the individual achieve a higher goal in life.

This conception of Key Kaneko does not fully perceive, which appears to have been caused by the many contradictions with in Key's views. It is quite understandable though when one takes into consideration that Kaneko seems to have based his critique only on *Love and Marriage*, which is one work of many by Key's hand.

This article of Keneko roused Hiratsuka's interest and it was to be roused even more upon reading another article on Key. This was written by Ishizaka Yōhei, with the title 'Jiyū rikonsetsu' [The view on free divorce] which appeared in the magazine *Teikoku Bungaku*, in, 1912.

Ishizaka, a literary critic and politician, pays most of his attention to the eighth chapter, entitled 'Free divorce', in Key's book *Love and Marriage*. He merely makes a presentation of the first half of the chapter, and does not offer any personal view but simply translates and summarizes Key's arguments. He refers to the article of Kaneko, which he finds rich in implications but rather abstract.

In the eighth chapter Key discusses adultery and "the compulsory marriage", as she puts it. A marriage in which one of the parties tries to detain the other against their own wish. In response she calls for free divorce without any legal restrictions.

As a concluding remark Ishizaka finds that her arguments "are brilliant and make the reader feel the energy of her thoughts". Furthermore he agrees with the words in the preface to the translation of Key's book, that "her writings are the candid expression of her intimate self".<sup>9</sup>

From reading these articles Hiratsuka found Key's new views on love extremely interesting, and she secured a copy of the 1911 translation *Love and Marriage*.

This was to be the first step towards a life-long interest in Key's writings, an interest which deeply affected her own views and ideas. In her, Hiratsuka had found a woman who responded to her own, not yet fully developed, thinking about issues such as love, marriage, divorce, motherhood and children's education. She wanted to bring out Key's views to a wider public and translated from English, *Love and Marriage*, which was serialized in *Seito*, starting with the January issue of 1913.<sup>10</sup>

Noteworthy is the fact that Hiratsuka provides an introduction to this translation of Key's work. Usually, when presenting foreign literature in *Seitō*, no comments about the author or the work are offered, and there was no follow up to the presented theme. This introduction indicates the importance Hiratsuka attributes to Key's work. She even presents a translation of the book's foreword, which had been written by Havelock Ellis.

In making a comparative study of the legal position of women during the period in question, we find striking similarities between Sweden and Japan. Although we are talking

about different cultures their respective views were on women not that dissimilar.

In Sweden at the turn of the century, the married woman had no legal independence, as she could not manage her own property. The husband was the manager of all the family's property. He held a "private ownership" of this wife and children, as Key puts it.<sup>11</sup> Legally this was expressed as the "guardianship" of the husband.

In contrast an unmarried woman had the benefit of the legal right of possession, after coming of age at 21. However, if she married after this age she then reverted back again into the status of a minor. She lost all her rights when she entered into a marriage and a situation could arise where, in regard to legal rights, an unmarried daughter was ranked above her mother. This legal provision was in force until 1921, when a new code was promulgated, which gave women equal rights.

In Japan we find similar conditions which extended even further on in time. "In the pre-war period... [the head of the family] had exclusive rights of control over the property of the family. The family relationships were strictly hierarchical... Female members were considered to be inferior to male members and even the mother was ranked below the eldest son. The wife had no legal capacity at all was listed as an 'incompetent' in the Civil Code".<sup>12</sup>

Comparing the laws regarding divorce, we find that in Sweden a divorce could only be obtained with the consent of both parties. The main rule was that a marriage was indissoluble. The law made provisions though for two grounds for divorce, adultery and abandonment by leaving the country. In Key's view these two provisions worked as a class distinction, as only rich people could afford a journey abroad in order to abandon the home.<sup>13</sup> In extreme cases royal dispensation on other grounds could be obtained.

In Japan the same requisite of mutual consent was required. However, it appears that a practice developed where the husband could get a divorce through merely presenting a so-called "letter of divorce" (*mi kudari han*), in cases where the wife could not bear him a son or proved unsatisfactory in some other way. Even if the law gave the woman the right to oppose a divorce, "it was very easy to obtain feminine consent", as one observer put it.<sup>14</sup> We should bear in mind that the law was not always identical with social practice and tradition.

One can make this observation with regard to Sweden, that the case of abandoning the home by going abroad could be considered as a kind of unwritten version of "*mi kudari han*" since it entitled the person to get a divorce as if it had been demanded by the other party.

In a further comparison the Japanese tradition of arranged marriages could also be found in Sweden, though the requisite of love in a marriage came to be more and more essential at this time. However, as the position of women was not equal to that of men, marriage for the woman was still a kind of "supporting marriage", as Key put it. A marriage was sometimes the only way for a woman to secure a livelihood. It goes without saying, that in this connection love was not always considered a preference.

Hiratsuka's interest in Ellen Key and the introducing of her in *Seito* initiated several articles on and about Key, criticizing or defending her.

In the women's magazine *Shin Shin Fujin* of July 1913, we find a short comparison of Key

with Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), the South African author and feminist.<sup>15</sup> The author of the article remarks that Key is very detailed and elaborate in her writing, with an abundance of honorific language, to the point of being troublesome. Olive Schreiner on the other hand endeavours to be more descriptive and writes in a simpler style, which makes her work easier to understand. It is clear that when it comes to comprehending their work the author's preference lies with Schreiner. This is quite understandable as Key's writings are both voluminous and verbose, and her lines of thought are not always easy to follow as they are fairly contradictory. The *Joshi Bundan*'s November, 1914, issue contains an article about Key's early years in Sweden, presenting a picture of her literary education and influences, and her family background.<sup>16</sup>

In 1916 Hiratsuka found herself obliged to defend Key's thoughts in the famous debate on the protection and support of motherhood. This debate started when the poet Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) criticized Key for not attributing women any individual life or the right to work.<sup>17</sup> This critique appeared in the *Taiyō* edition of January 1916.<sup>18</sup>

In May Hiratsuka responded in the *Bunshō Sekai*, accusing Yosano of not having understood Key correctly. The article was entitled 'Bosei no shuchō ni tsuite' [On the Demand for the Protection of Motherhood]. Here Hiratsuka defends Key by pointing out that "Ellen Key does not maintain the importance of motherhood only, but also emphasizes freedom of choice of occupation and a life based on respect for individuality".

Here one can again remark that, in Key's view, the free choice of occupation should be within pronounced women's occupations, and that the holding of an occupation outside of the home was incompatible with motherhood. A woman evolves her individuality within the family as, according to Key, a woman is basically different from a man and will remain different. It is possible to presume that Yosano had in a certain way interpreted Key correctly especially, if one considers the limitations Key drew for women's work.

A woman like Yosano with several children, an active life as a poet, and who left her children to be looked after by a young girl, surely did not fit Key's ideal picture of a mother.

It is interesting to note how Hiratsuka's views on motherhood changed when she became a mother.<sup>19</sup> She now found motherhood essential to being a woman and develops thoughts similar to those of Ellen Key. Earlier, in an article in *Seitō* in 1913, she asks: "Must a woman's entire life be sacrificed for the necessity of preserving the race?" and "Is being a wife and mother the whole of a woman's mission in life."<sup>20</sup>

In 1917 Hiratsuka wrote an article in the August issue of the *Fujin Kōron*, about the emancipation of women and the cultivation of their individual mind. This article is based mostly on the thoughts of Ellen Key, a point expressively stated by Hiratsuka.

Indeed we recognise Key's thoughts in many of Hiratsuka's statements. She writes that the cultivation of the individual is the most important thing for today. What she means by cultivation is not only moral cultivation since it also includes the discovery of every spirit. "We have to learn the art of life", she says, "and it must be women who promote this."

Hiratsuka is critical of women working. She wonders if they have spent even one

occasion during a week listening to music or enjoying nature. She thinks it is morally wrong for working women to have no children. She criticizes married women who are not living to be mothers, or who lose their ability to bear children due to hard work. To be a mother, Hiratsuka declares, is the highest goal for a woman an occupation given by heaven. Concerning general education she is critical of group education. It is better for mothers to take care of their children's education. This is a mother's obligation: the obligation to sacrifice herself for her children. In this article by Hiratsuka we recognise Ellen Key's concept of self-assertion and self-sacrifice for a woman.

## Concluding remarks

In this paper I have attempted to show how Ellen Key was received in Japan at the beginning of this century, how she was interpreted, and who introduced her to Japan. From a Swedish point of view it is a remarkable fact that firstly, she seems to have been very well received; and secondly, that she was introduced so quickly after her first works appeared.

By making a comparative study of the legal position of women at that time and showing how certain social structures coincided, aside from the general reception of Western thought in Japan, we find that the ground was very fertile for the consideration or adoption of the thoughts of Ellen Key.

In particular we find that in Ellen Key Hiratsuka Raichō met her kindred spirit. Hiratsuka started her society Seitōsha and the magazine *Seitō* with the view of giving women the possibility of cultivating themselves and their talents through literary activities. According to Hiratsuka the cultivation of the mind leading to self-liberation, was the first requisite for a woman before engaging in political or social activities aimed at gaining equality on the social level.

Key also saw the liberation of women not through political or social movements, but through self-realisation as a woman and a mother. In Sweden, Key was attacked by the established woman-liberation movement and not appreciated or understood in her own country. Her fame was to be found abroad, especially in Germany, but also in England and America, and as we have seen in Japan.

Key wanted equality on the intellectual level, as well as on the ethical and moral level. In this respect she is akin to the Norwegian authors Ibsen and Björnson, both of whom gave her inspiration.<sup>21</sup> The woman-liberation movement wanted equality on the social level.

With Hiratsuka as a leading personage in what can be called the first real feminist movement in Japan and her drawing closer and closer to Key's views, one can observe that Key and her ideas constituted an important part of the feminist movement in Taishō Japan.

For Hiratsuka it was not a question of parroting Western thought, but how to make them applicable in her own country.

I have argued that Hiratsuka found in Key the person who resonated most profoundly with her own inner thoughts, or to use a citation of Ellen Key which also might apply to Hiratsuka

Raichō:

“... people cannot know anything about the depth of the personal adoption of a conception of life, no more can they know if not the individual of their own accord long ago have reached the view, to which he then in rejoice agrees when the great genius expresses it.”<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *En bok om Ellen Key* (A book portraying Ellen Key), published on her 70th birthday, with contributions from native and foreign authors, p. 43.
- 2 See the articles of Kaneko, Ishizaka, Takano and Miyata.
- 3 Kokuritsu kokkai toshokan dai 28 kai jōsetsu tenji (1984, 26.4-26.6), pamphlet *Meiji, Taishōki fujin kaihō shisō*.
- 4 Sw. *Lifslinjer I*. The 3rd edition 1923 is entitled *Kärleken och äktenskapet* (Love and Marriage).
- 5 Ambjörnsson, p. 55.
- 6 Sw. *Barnets århundrade I-II*.
- 7 Translated from German as *Nijussēiki wa jidō no sekai*.
- 8 The autobiography of Hiratsuka Raichō *Genshi josei wa taiyō de atta*, 1992 (1971), volume 2, p. 92.
- 9 Preface by Havelock Ellis, an authority on social problems, in *Love and Marriage*, 1911.
- 10 *Seitō* 3, 1 (Jan. 1913), p. 1-19 (appendix).
- 11 Key, *Lifslinjer I: 2*, 1903, p. 264.
- 12 Oda, p. 232.
- 13 Key, in *Social Tidskrift* 5, 1914, p. 12.
- 14 Maybon, in *La Revue Mondiale* 12, 1923, p. 404.
- 15 Takano, in *Shin Shin Fujin* 7, 1913.
- 16 Miyata, in *Joshi Bundan* 1: 1, 1914.
- 17 On the debate over the protection of motherhood, see Rodd, 1991 and Molony, 1993.
- 18 Yosano Akiko wrote under a column entitled ‘One Woman’s Notebook’, under which column she had been writing since January 1915.
- 19 Hiratsuka Raichō gives birth to a daughter, Akemi, in 1915 and a son, Atsubumi, in 1917.
- 20 *Seitō* 3, 4 (April 1913) ‘Yo no fujintachi ni’, translated by Janice B. Bardsley as ‘To the Women of Today’ in ‘Feminism’s Literary Legacy in Japan: Seitō, 1911-1916’ in *The Gest Library Journal* 5: 2, 1992.
- 21 See Henrik Ibsen *Et Dukkehjem*, 1879 (A Doll’s House) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson *En Hanske*, 1883 (A Glove).
- 22 Key, in preface to *Tankebilder I*, 1898 (Images of Thought).

## REFERENCES

- Ambjörnsson, Ronny, ‘Family Ideas in Sweden and the Tradition of Ellen Key’ in *Traditional Thought and Ideological Change. Sweden and Japan in the Age of Industrialization*, eds. S. Cho and N. Runeby, Japanological Studies 8, Department of Japanese and Korean, University of Stockholm 1988.
- Bardsley, Janice B, ‘Feminism’s Literary Legacy in Japan: Seitō, 1911-1916’ in *The Gest Library Journal, East Asian Women: Materials and Library Research, Special Issue, Volume V, no. 2, Winter 1992*.
- En bok om Ellen Key* (A book portraying Ellen Key), Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm 1919.
- Forel, August, *Die Sexuelle Frage*, Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, München 1905. pp. 553-562.
- Hafström, Gerhard, *Den svenska familjerättens historia* (History of the Swedish Family Law), Studentlitteratur, Lund 1964.

- Hiratsuka Raichō, 'Bosei no shuchō ni tsuite' in *Bunshō Sekai* 11. 5 (May 1916).
- Hiratsuka Raichō, 'Fujin no jiyūkaihō to kojinteki shuyō' in *Fujin Koron* 8, 1917.
- Hiratsuka Raichō *Jiden. Genshi josei wa taiyō de atta*, Kokumin Bunko 881, 1-4, Ōtsuki Shoten, Tokyo 1992 (1971).
- Hiratsuka Raichō, 'Renai to kekkon — Eren Kei cho' in *Seitō* 3. 1 (Jan. 1913).
- Hiratsuka Raichō, 'Yo no fujintachi ni' in *Seitō* 3. 4 (April 1913).
- Ishizaka Yōhei, 'Jiyū rikonsetsu' in *Teikoku Bungaku* 12, 1912.
- Kaneko Chikusui, 'Genjitsukyō. Ningen kaizō ron' in *Taiyō* 9, 1911.
- Key, Ellen, *Barnets Århundrade I-II* (The Century of the Child), Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm 1900.
- Key, Ellen, *Jidō no seiki*, transl. from Swedish by Makoto and Yuriko Onodera, Fuzanbo, Tokyo 1979.
- Key, Ellen, *Lifslinjer I: 1-2* (Lifelines), Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm 1903.
- Key, Ellen *Love and Marriage*, transl. by Arthur G. Chater, G.P. Putnam's Son's, New York and London 1911.
- Key, Ellen, *Nijussēki wa jidō no sekai*, transl. from German by Ōmura Jintarō, Dōbunkan, Tokyo 1906.
- Key, Ellen, *Nāgra randanteckningar vid lagberedningens förslag till äktenskaps ingående och upplösning* (Some notes on the law-drafting board's proposition to entering into and dissolution of a marriage), särtryck ur (off-print from) *Social Tidskrift*, häft. 5, 1914, Stockholm 1914.
- Key, Ellen, *Renai to kekkon*, transl. from Swedish by Makoto and Yuriko Onodera, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1973.
- Key, Ellen, *Tankebilder I* (Images of Thought), Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm 1898.
- Kokuritsu kokkai toshokan dai 28 kai jōsetsu tenji (1984, 26.4-26.6), pamphlet *Meiji, Taishōki fujin kaiho shisō*.
- Maybon, Albert, 'Le Féminisme japonais' in *La Revue Mondiale* 12, 1923.
- Miyata Osamu, 'Eren Kei no seinen jidai' in *Joshi Bundan* 1. 1, 1914.
- Molony, Barbara, 'Equality versus difference: the Japanese debate over "motherhood protection", 1915-50', in *Japanese Women Working*, ed. Janet Hunter, Routledge, London and New York 1993.
- Oda Hiroshi, *Japanese Law*, Butterworths, London 1992.
- Rodd, Laurel Rasplica, 'Yosano Akiko and the Taishō Debate over the "New Woman"' in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein, University of California Press, California 1991.
- Seitō*, reprint of the fifty-two-volume journal, Fuji Shuppan, Tokyo 1983.
- Takano Jūzo, 'Fujin to rōdō o yomu. Oribu Shuraineru joshicho' in *Shin Shin Fujin* 7, 1913.
- Yosano Akiko, 'Hitori no onna no techō' in *Taiyō* 1, 1916.

(Translations of Swedish titles author's, if not otherwise stated.)