

# Keeping or Breaking: Ethical Conflict and Ethical Choice in Shimazaki Toson's *Broken Commandment*

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**Abstract** The main ethical line of Shimazaki Toson's *Broken Commandment* is a conflicting process of keeping or breaking commandment for civilian intellectual Segawa Ushimatu who was born with eta background. Through the description of his mental anguish, the novel reveals an intense ethical conflict between the modern concept of eliminating class distinctions, advocating the equality of human rights and the traditional concept of remaining feudal hierarchy in a period of social transition after Meiji restoration. Under the influence of modern enlightenment, Ushimatu's self-consciousness was awakened and he finally chose to break the commandment. He exposed his real identity in public and repented his concealing in the past. Through his ethical choice, the novel shows a strong appeal for social justice and his consideration of individual moral transformation.

**Key words** Shimazaki Toson; *Broken Commandment*; Segawa Ushimatu; Ethical Literary Criticism

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*Broken Commandment*, a novel written by Shimazaki Toson, described an elementary school teacher named Ushimastu Segawa keeping his father's commandment: Never reveal his eta<sup>1</sup> background. Once the commandment were

1 During the Edo Period, some people, named "Eta" or "Burakumin," were discriminated as a distinct subgroup of the Japanese society. They formed their tribe community, and also named "tribesman." In 1871, the government declared to abolish this clan system, they became "new commoners." However, they had never shared the equal rights with others.

broken, he would be abandoned by the society. Segewa is a young man with progressive thoughts and awakening self-consciousness, he hates the evil forces, sympathizes with the weak and idolizes Rentarou Inoko who is an enlightenment thinker with eta background. He was greatly encouraged by the works written by Rentarou Inoko. On one hand, he wishes to challenge the society and declare his real identity in public; on the other hand, he is afraid of the pitiless social reality. Therefore, this dilemma has trapped him in the condition of hesitation, indecision, inaction, anguish, and worries. However, his progressive inclination and good relationships with students provoked the suspicion and hatred of the school president who is actually reckless with greed boasting his ideas of loyalty to the sovereign. The president and school inspector regarded Ushimastu Segawa as a dissident, acted in collusion and tried to exile him with illegal ways. Later, Rentarou Inoko was killed by his political enemies, which pushes Segewa to make up his mind to declare his eta background, and ask for his students' forgiveness for concealing his family background in the past. He broke the commandment, the whole Japanese society will reject and not forgive him. With his lover's courage and comfort, he moved to Texas, a city in North America, to begin a new life.

### **The Main Ethical Line and Ethical Environment in *Broken Commandment***

The main ethical line of *Broken Commandment* is the whole process of Ushimastu Segawa, as a civilian intellectual with eta background, from keeping the commandment to breaking it, and his change from a man formerly yielding to the reality by concealing his eta background to finally confessing it to his students and repenting his concealing. The novel reveals accurately and delicately the anguish, wavering attitude, and the struggling of Ushimastu Segawa's inner world during the process.

Clan system involved in this novel was a special political system existing in ancient Japan — The system of identity distinction in feudal society was a product of blood relationship of tribes in primitive society which still survived in a hierarchal society, and it caused great influence in Japanese society. Due to career and other reasons, this identity distinction system which did not originate from ethnical distinction was fixed and led to some tribes treated as lower class factitiously. After the Meiji Restoration, the governors declared to abolish this unfair identity system superficially. However the feudal forces were still powerful in modern Japan, and the problem of eta remains still unsolved after the Second World War, not even to mention the time when *Broken Commandment* was published. In 1920, the Writer wrote the following when he reviewed the history:

To look back to the past half century, the remains of feudal society still exist in our internal and external world. Though we experienced the Meji restoration, something deeply rooted in the past has not been renewed totally. To some extent, something presented to us now is just the modernized remains of the feudalist society. (Liu zhenying 1-2)

The author is deeply dissatisfied in his contemplation over “the modernized remains of the feudalist society,” which is the coexistence of the superficial and shallow modernization and the remaining old thoughts and concepts in the new period.

The motif of *Broken Commandment* concentrates on criticizing the unreasonable and brutal identity system, the corruption and darkness of educational institution under the monarchism of the Japanese emperor. More importantly, it reveals the intense ethical conflicts of the modern Japanese society under the ethical environment of the transformational period of Meji restoration.

### **Ushimatsu Segawa's Ethical Anguish and Ethical Conflicts**

Ushimatsu Segawa was a typical product of northern Shinshu. At twenty-two he had graduated with honours and a teacher's certificate<sup>1</sup> from the teachers' college in Nagano, and became an elementary school teacher in Iiyama. People in the town only knew him as a devoted young teacher. That in reality he was an eta, a “new commoner,” as the official phrase had it, on one had any idea. A “Young teacher” is his decent social identity in public, while an eta is another shameful social identity he concealed on purpose. His father once told him:

How they were not descended, like the many groups of eta who lived along the Eastern Highway, from foreign immigrants or castaways from China, Korea, Russia, and the nameless islands of the Pacific, but from runaway samurai of many generations back; that however poor they might be, their family had committed no crime, done nothing dishonorable. One thing more he added: that the only way — the only hope — for any eta who wanted to raise himself in the world was to conceal the secret of his birth. “No matter who you meet, no matter what happens to you, never reveal it! Forget this commandment just once, in a moment of anger or misery, and from that moment the world will

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1 In Japan, the elementary and junior high school teachers are employed by the government, they were divided into official teacher and apprentices.

have rejected you forever.” (9-10)<sup>1</sup>

The word CONCEAL summarizes everything about commandment. During the young and happy period with daydreams, what Sewaga concerns is the experience of learning, the desire of practicing in the outside world, but he seldom remembers the commandment ordered by his father. He suddenly became aware of the importance of concealing his identity one day, as it matters the survival of his life.

Ushimastu Sewage is a man with complex and contradictory characters, he is over sensitive with his eta background. “Whenever people talk or ask about eta, he would become nervous. He is used to avoiding any topics about eta” (5). Because Ohinata, a man with eta background has been driven from the hospital, he becomes suspicious and absent-minded, then he decides to move to Rengeji temple from the restaurant in Takajo Street. Actually this time he has no solid reason for moving, but because he harbors doubts and fears.

One day, Ginnosuke and Bunpei came to the temple to visit him, their talks involves Inoko, Bunpei shows his dispraise to Inoko. During their discussion, Sewaga keeps silent and stares at the oil lamp with a blind mind. A natural outflow of a painful expression glooms his young and handsome appearance. After the friends have left his house, Sewaga paces back and forth in the room and can’t help repressing the internal excitement. Reflecting on what happens during the daytime and recalling the content they discuss as well as their facial expressions, he cannot help trembling. He reviews the past, and feels regretful and self-condemned for his carelessness, and nothing would make him feel at ease. “Exhausted with worries that led to no clear conclusion. Ushimatsu spent a tortured night, his body restless and his mind wandering in dark places” (38). Finally, he made up his mind: he would never mention a word about Inoko to others, such as his name, his works, his behavior and so on. He sells the books he owns written by Inoko and erases the seal or his signature in the books.

He then begins to blame himself again after helping Senta finishing the tennis game. “Rentaro, Ohinata, and now Senta... linked together, the three names made him shiver with fear. Always, to spite him, wisdom dawned too late” (61). He becomes utterly confused, horror and suspicion control him and make him illusory at the night of the Emperor’s Birthday. In illusion, he heard his father’s voice from the distant farm which reminds him of the lifelong commandment.

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1 All the excerpts of Shimazaki Touson’s *Broken Commandment* are taken from the following source — Shimazaki Touson, *Broken Commandment* (in English). Trans. Kenneth Strong (Tokyo: Orion Press, 1974).

In writing letters to the seriously ill Inoko, he is always irresolute and hesitant in speech, because he dares not to expose his secret of his eta background. “A spasm of guilt struck him as he sighed it. Tossing the brush aside, he sighed, and crept between the cold sheets. No sooner had he begun to doze than nightmare after nightmare crowded upon him” (66). For many times, he has the impulse to throw away his spiritual burden by revealing his identity secret to Inoko. However, he recalls the willing of his father and the warnings from his uncle, then becomes blameful, and filled with fear, confusion and anguish. While talking with Takayanagi “three times denied the man to whom he owed so much, whom he revered as his teacher and guide, as if he were no more to him than any stranger” (149).

Through the description of Sewaga’s inner anguish, the novel *Broken Commandment* reveals the conflicts between the new things and the old ones, the ethical conflicts between the modern concept of eliminating the class distinction, advocating equal human rights and the feudal concept of class distinction which still remained in modern Japanese society. Criticizing the dark reality and advocating the democratic equality in Japanese modern society form the keynote of this novel. And Sewaga’s ethical identity has been transformed totally during the process: from the concealing of his eta background to a civilian intellectual appealing for human equality with awakening self-consciousness.

### **Ushimatsu Sewaga’s Awakening Self-Consciousness and Ethical Choices**

To break the commandment, or to keep the commandment, that is a matter about to obey the feudal force or fight against it. Through Sewaga, who considers both the advantages and disadvantages, he experiences intense inner conflicts. With his father’s commandment warning, the ethical choice made by Sewaga is to keep the commandment for many years. Under the influence of Inoko, his self-consciousness gets awakened, and the tragic death of Inoko finally urges him to make the second ethical choice: to expose his eta identity.

Rentarou Inoko is an enlightenment thinker, with eta background. Sewaga admires him as a senior and is deeply moved by his behaviors. Sewaga talks about Inoko frequently, communicates with him by letters, and defenses for him. The works of Inoko focus on psychological research which are amazing and touching. And sewage buys all his books. “The more he read, the more he felt himself drawn irresistibly toward a new world. His true self-awakening as an eta had begun” (11).

*Confessions* is a latest book published by Rentarou Inoko, with its first sentence “I am an outcast” (11). A vivid account followed of the ignorance and squalor to which the eta had been reduced, with portraits of many fine eta men and women

whom society had discarded merely because of their eta origin. “And bittersweet recollections of the writer’s own struggle — from the frustration of his early search for spiritual liberation, and tortured doubts in face of society’s contradictions, to his finding at last of new life, like a long night giving way to the dawn sky” (11). The thought expressed in *Confessions* is “‘the new torment’ being endured by the lowest class in Japanese society” (10). Sewaga “found himself reading with his thoughts concentrated not on Inoko’s narrative, but on himself” (12). He finds out his soul mate in it. However, “reading his hero’s *confessions*, instead of admiration he felt only bitter pain” (13). Through the expression in his eyes, the ways of his walking and the voice of his talking, the loss of his active personality is clearly showed. Although Sewaga’s self-consciousness gets awakened, he realizes the need of self-esteem, he does not find a way out. “But no tears, no arguments, however deeply felt, no ideology, however passionate and powerful its attack, could break down such prejudice; so it was that great numbers of the ‘new commoners,’ honourable, law-abiding citizens, had been ostracized from birth, buried alive in a world that hardly knew of their existence” (37).

While facing reality, Sewaga also shows his image of standing-up. He maintains that “Even as an eta, I belong to society — eta or no, like any other man I have the right to live!” (45) He admires Inoko, “one couldn’t help admiring the courage of an eta who had raised himself from such depths and fought so hard for his convictions” (56). He pitied the nameless eta students, and asks for the inspector’s favor on behalf of him. He has showed his mercy to the rich guy Ohinata and the child Senta. Ohinata has been driven from the hospital in sickness, then driven from the lodging, cruelly humiliated, finally he was carried out silently into the street. All deepens his awareness of the tragic fate of eta. For Senta, he takes his tennis rackets and begins his tragic fighting under the ironic laughter of the onlookers. Sewaga’s attitude becomes more and more determined especially when he debates with Bunpei, he chooses to defend Inoko. All those behaviors prove that Sewaga has become a passionate, active and well-determined soldier-like fighter from a man once in confusion and hesitation.

As fireworks vanish as soon as they appear, Sewaga’s determination of struggling weakens quickly. His self-consciousness has been awakened, yet he is so confused, painful, indecisive and hesitant. The harsh and almost overwhelming traditional power suffocates him and puts him in despair, and he even fears for awakening. Indeed, another reason for his concealing of eta background comes out of the fear of losing his beloved girl O-shio.

The death of Rentarou Inoko pushes Sewaga finally to choose commandment

breaking. He commits his crime of concealing his real identity in the past to his students. At the ending part of the novel, Sewaga holds his hands on the students' desk and bends his head in acknowledgment of his guilt. Feeling somehow that he still had not humbled himself enough, Ushimastu stepped back from the desk and knelt on the wooden floor, and said "Forgive me! Forgive me!" "I am an eta, an outcast, an unclean being!" (230) Some private business brought Ginnosuke to school, he witnesses "Ushimatsu, on the verge of hysteria, was kneeling abjectly to his colleagues; he bowed his forehead to the floor, burying his shame in the dust and dirt" (230). Tears flow on his face while he makes his confession. He begs to his beloved O-shio asking her to think of him, "if ever she did think of him again — as a criminal, an offender against society" (235).

The novel *Broken Commandment* demonstrates the tragedy of an awakening person.<sup>1</sup> The confession made by Sewaga is easily understandable because he conceals it for such a long time, while his servility is far beyond comprehension. He regards the Eta too humble to gain readers' sympathy. On the one hand, it helps illustrating the writer's motivation of emphasizing the sorriness of awakening. More primarily, it reveals the deficiency of Japanese enlightenment movement, the real concepts of "self-consciousness," "individual liberation" are not established, the root of which is originated from the incompleteness of the bourgeois revolution in Meiji restoration and the weaknesses of bourgeoisie under the oppression of feudal political power. This feature has been reflected not only through the hero Sewaga, but also through those positive characters such as Inoko and the lawyer in the town.

Ushimatsu Sewaga's ethical choice, to break the commandment and leave his motherland to live in a distant country, calls for our further contemplation. Some scholars hold this view: "To break the commandment symbolizes Sewaga's awakening of his sense of human rights and equality, and his resisting struggle against identity distinction. Meanwhile, to leave the motherland implies the weakness of bourgeoisie civilian intellectual, and awakening didn't mean the ability and action to change current situation" (Shimazaki Toson 223). Indeed, through the ethical choices made by Sewaga in *Broken Commandment*, it reveals the appeal for social justice, and the consideration of individual moral transformation.

## Work Cited

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1 "The Sorriness of Awakening," is an article also written by Shimazaki Toson, it is about the memory of the writing of the novel *Broken Commandment*.