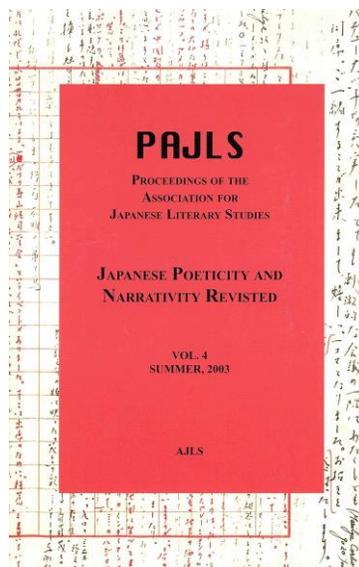


“Poeticity of Feminine Subjectivity: Contemporary Women’s Poetics from Tomioka Taeko to *Shōjo manga*”

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**POETICITY OF FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY:  
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETICS FROM  
TOMIOKA TAEKO TO *SHŌJO MANGA*<sup>1</sup>**

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The concept of the poetic has caused a number of controversies through literary history. Of course I do not mean that poetic-ness is the only problematic category in and outside literature: other generic and formal paradigms like novel and realism have equally been controversial. What I really mean, however, is the shared assumption that poetry is more untranslatable and thus closer to the core of literature than other literary genres, and is thus regarded more capable of encompassing the essence of culture and language. This idea is strengthened concerning Japanese literary history, because the traditional poetic form declined as Western civilizations entered and modernized Japan. Consequently, despite its neutral appearance as artwork, poetic writing has been heavily loaded with political ideologies and strategies. Terry Eagleton's historicization of literature in his classic *Literary Theory*, for instance, emphasizes that with the rise of Romanticism the modern definitions of literature began to develop,<sup>2</sup> through the process of differentiating, or rather privileging, the imaginative and the creative from the prosaic and the actual. The notion of literature as what differs from actuality is possible because of the imaginary presence of poetry at the center, the purer and more concentrated essence of literature. This idea can be applied to Japan's literary condition, yet with different contexts. The (re)invention of *haiku* in the late 19th-century Japan, led by Masaoka Shiki, helped to retroactively structure the Japanese tradition of poetic writing, simultaneously reinscribing the cultural essence of literary heritage. In other words, the apolitical appearance of poetic writing is its politics.

As we already live in post-Romantic period, it is not difficult to protest this romantic notion of poetry in favor of realism, modernism, or even postmodernism, but my question lies in how poetic writing has acquired different rhetorics of aesthetics and politics to survive the challenges of modern literary discourses. A notable example of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Japanese names used in this paper will appear in the original Japanese order (family name first).

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983): 18.

political strategy in contemporary poetic writing is the feminist theorization of the allegedly “feminine” quality of the poetic practice. It was in the 1970s that Julia Kristeva coined the term “poetic language” to pursue the unbounded signifying practice of the “unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language” (Kristeva 17),<sup>3</sup> asserting that the poetic language operates only through “the semiotic,” i.e., the heterogeneous pre-linguistical stage which “logically and chronologically precedes the establishment of the symbolic and its subject” (41). It was also in the 70s that Tomioka Taeko, who has been known as a feminist writer especially after the late-80s publication of her roundtable discussions with Ueno Chizuko and other well-known feminists, expressed thoughts somewhat similar to Kristevan idea of the semiotic, but using far simpler words and examples. Both of them aim to subvert the existing system of language by proposing the pre-symbolic phase of language, that is, the signifiers yet fluidly and heterogeneously connected to the body and the feminine/maternal subjectivity. Their approaches significantly differ, however, in the sense that Tomioka repeatedly brings in the question of national identity, namely, that of Japan’s cultural particularities, whereas Kristeva always speaks in the universalist language. This difference is nothing new, as already attacked by many critics and feminists, but it is important to note that this difference made Tomioka pursue the feminine subjectivity toward prosaic language against the poetic. Their feminist missions share the same cause and rationale, but their approaches to poeicity interestingly oppose each other.

Does the difference come from cultural particularities that are imagined to be incompatible between the West and the rest, or are there significant discrepancies or flaws in theory of poetry and feminism itself? How has the poetic been defined and utilized for the feminist propagandas of feminine subjectivity and women’s uniqueness (whether socially constructed or biologically given) and what political, social and cultural forces have formed the discursive connection of the poetic and the feminine? This paper will examine Tomioka Taeko’s feminist philosophy of poetic and prosaic languages in relation to the Kristevan notion of poetic language which is more commonly applied to feminist theory. I will further discuss the poetic language developed in *shojo manga* (girls’ comics in Japan) in the same period, which explored another paradigm of feminine/poetic subjectivity within poetic narrative, contrary to the

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Trans. Margaret Waller (NY: Columbia UP, 1984). All the quotes from Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* in this article come from this edition.

prosaic narrative of coeval women writers including Tomioka Taeko and Tsushima Yuko.

**POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF POETIC WRITING:  
KRISTEVA'S THEORY AND JAPAN'S CULTURAL CONTEXTS**

What the poetic means depends on what the prosaic means in each specific historical context, and it is not exaggeration to say that, ever since prose fiction had emerged as an epitome of modern literary realism, in or outside Japan, the notion of the poetic has been re-invented and re-structured as a challenging force to the discourse of post-poetic literature in the modern age. One of the most famous yet problematic definitions of poetry in this context is perhaps "Crisis of Poetry" written by the French symbolist Mallarmé, who, with deep anxiety with naturalism, proclaimed poetry's superiority to prose. In this essay, Mallarmé considers language as what always lacks the supreme, and thus poetry makes up for the lack of language, i.e., truth itself in its substance.<sup>4</sup> If the modern discourse of the poetic emerged as a counterforce to naturalist language, it is also understandable that the poetic came to signify difference itself, to pursue the imaginary other, and the unnameable within language. The idea of the poetic as the lack itself roughly explains how minority discourses, especially feminist theory, have contextualized the value of the poetic. As poetry being the impossible of language, the invisible and the silent have better chances of representation, at least on the level of theory. One can also situate the poetic language simply as an alternative to the existing system of signs, as Adrienne Rich expressed in *The Dream of a Common Language* for example, which can free itself from the dominance of patriarchy and then create the linguistic utopia. Or one can connect the poetic "lack" with linguistical psychoanalysis, as Kristeva did.

Kristeva's proposition of poetic language is obviously inseparable from the psychoanalytic theory of the subject, and thus what underlies her feminist project is the strategic equation of the poetic (the semiotic) and the feminine subjectivity. For Kristeva, at least at the point of her theorization in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the poetic is treated as an equivalent to the esoteric and the semiotic, which means that the poetic is a primordial phenomenon that resists to integrate into, or possibly that surpasses the limits of, the communal socio-linguistical structure, as exemplified by shamanism and carnival (16). Between the two forms of the poetic, namely sacrifice and art, art is the dynamics Kristeva ascribes

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<sup>4</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. & intro. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956): 38.

to her idea of poetic language, since art is a manifestation of the semiotic through the symbolic, whereas sacrifice is a ritual murder consecrated by the symbolic to the semiotic. Her focus is always placed on this semiotic intervention of, and interaction with, the symbolic (not *vice versa*), where signifying process becomes incessant and heterogeneous re-formation of the subject. This Kristevan theory requires us to see the metaphoric connections among a number of things, especially the logics that bind poetry, art, unconscious, corporeality, femininity, and maternity. These bindings may cause problems in other socio-cultural contexts, especially that of the equation of art/poetry and feminine language.

It is in this sense that simply applying the French-based theory of poetic language to Japan's feminist discourse of the poetic will cause numerous problems. What supports Kristeva's poetic language is the idea that poetic art can manifest women's preverbal materiality (e.g., body, sex, and procreation) better than prosaic realism. But this assumption is also closely connected with the status of poetry in the West as what was sublated by modern civilization while literature developed from macrocosmic world of epic poetry to microcosmic world of prose. A similar idea of poetry as primordiality repressed by modern society can also be found in Japanese literary history. In the case of Yosano Akiko, a woman *tanka* poet of modern Japan, the archaism of classical form well matched with the revitalization of female sensuality that has allegedly been suppressed under modern civilization. Unlike Kristeva's somewhat euphoric bipolarization of the modern West and the ancient East,<sup>5</sup> however, both categories in Japanese contexts must represent the privileged positions of the symbolic domain. In other words, historical contexts demand us to see the predicament of Japanese feminism that is trapped in a dilemma between the Kristevan unfettering of the poetic and the "cultural uniqueness" fettered by Japan's poetic tradition. Rebecca Copeland, for instance, argues that "Western feminist literary critics have contended that the lack of a female tradition in Western letters impeded attempts by modern women writers to authorize their literary efforts. In Japan, the opposite could perhaps be argued. The appearance of a glorious literary heritage of female authorship threatened to frustrate the early

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<sup>5</sup> Much like Roland Barthes' Japan, Kristeva uses ancient China as a counter example to the modern West. Especially Chinese ideographs (i.e., kanji in Japanese) are frequently referred to as a model of signifying process that organically merges the semiotic with the symbolic order. One should doubt her theory when Kristeva, for instance, claims that the maternal reproduction does not threaten the patriarchal order (100) in a society which we know to be predominantly Confucian.

efforts of modern Japanese women writers".<sup>6</sup> Through the Meiji revival of poetic writing as model education for modern women,<sup>7</sup> the role of the poetic in modern Japan established its basis as feminine tradition supposedly originated from the Heian literature of "female-hand." Whereas men's prose fiction in realist language, known as *shi-shōsetsu*, and their extensive adaptation of Western philosophy, constituted the male domain of literature, women's task as a writer resided in maintaining the quintessential nature of premodern Japanese literature<sup>8</sup>, the domain of the unchanging purity of Japanese beauty.

With this assumption, our reading of poetic language must become more cautious toward modern women writers of Japan, ranging from the writings of Yosano Akiko in the traditional 31-syllable form of *tanka*, to those of Tawara Machi, who was celebrated as a contemporary Yosano Akiko. The term *joryū*, signifying the female gender of both the author and the text's writing style,<sup>9</sup> has helped to maintain the myth that there are uniquely feminine traits of writing that exist across time, as the biological traits of the female sex remains unchanged through history. This notion seems to serve the purpose of valorizing modernity than the feminist purpose of celebrating women's heritage. The idea of the poetic is closely connected to the premodern and the feminine, that helps modern Japanese literature to successfully detach itself from the imaginary domain of "tradition" and thereby to produce the illusion of modernity. Sentimentalism and immaturity of erotic identity, which is attributed to both Yosano and Tawara, is in a sense a mere antithesis to the literary ideals of modern Japanese prose, especially *shi-shōsetsu*, which has complacently promoted objectivization of the self and treated sexual affairs as hidden part of adult's life. For contemporary women writers, therefore, the notion of the poetic is overloaded with traditions and norms, which discourage them from engaging with poetry. Japanese literature's dilemma is the paradox that, when it seeks innovations, it ends up re-discovering premodernity as its antithesis to modernity, reinscribing the notion of heritage opposed to Westernization. This equally became a dilemma of women's literature in postwar Japan, which aspires to find that

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Copeland, *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2000): 50.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985): 110.

<sup>8</sup> Copeland, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Ericson, *Be a Woman: Hayashi Fumiko and Modern Japanese Women's Literature* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1997): 27.

which transcends the dialectics of old Japan and new Japan, or feminine heritage and modern male prose.

#### ANTI-POETIC LANGUAGE: TOMIOKA TAEKO'S PROSE POETICS

Tomioka Taeko's political reading of Japan's narrative tradition is one of the most prominent attempts to pursue the new feminist language in postwar period. Her career itself clearly shows how she has struggled with poetic language and then came to strategically perform her struggle itself as her feminist rhetoric. Born in 1935, Tomioka started her career as a poet during her college years, but by the early 70s, she became more aware of limitations of poetry than its possibilities as a medium to express her stress and confusion with gender. She was deeply discontent with modern Japanese language over all, forms and aesthetical values of which are standardized through educational hegemony of male, national language.<sup>10</sup> She turned to prose fiction writing (of course the verse/prose distinction itself is quite controversial here), so as to pursue the form of language that has potential to represent feminine consciousness and corporeality.

Although the Meiji reestablishment of poetic tradition for women's good-wife-wise-mother education somehow corresponded with the feminist claim of "heritage," women's writings in postwar Japan, as exemplified by Tsushima Yuko and Tomioka Taeko, pursued the narrative of the self in the form of prose fiction instead. In her award-winning short story, "Silent Traders" (Danmari-ichi, 1982) for example, Tsushima metacritically employs the symbolic relationship of words and meanings unique to prose. The story consists of somewhat desultory speculations of the narrator, a mother of two children, on the cats living in the park they are walking and on the children's absent father. Through the fragmented pieces of her memory and conversation, the narrator tries to find an answer for the question of what relationship children and the father should develop between them, and this process becomes somewhat irritating to the reader as she defers her answer by addressing the issue only in the metaphor of "trading." As Karatani Kojin commented on her earlier work, *Child of Fortune* (*Choji*, 1978), Tsushima's narrative seems to postpone meaning and thereby perpetuate the signifying process.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of silent trade strengthens this effect, by suggesting the exchange of unspoken, thus imagined, words and their meanings between two people (between children and their cat-father in the story). Tsushima's technique

<sup>10</sup> See "onna no kotoba to kuni no kotoba" (women's language and nation's language) in *Fuji no koromo ni asa no fusuma* (1984).

<sup>11</sup> Karatani Kojin, "Onna ni tsuite." *Hanbungakuron* (Tokyo: Kodansha gakujutsu bunko, 1991): 179.

of writing a woman's state of mind seems to originate from this incessant attempt, which is simultaneously failure, to signify, which results in prosaic prose without conclusion or end.

It is no coincidence that Tomioka's writing style is often considered comparable to Tsushima's, beside the fact that they are contemporaries. For Tomioka, poetic language must realize "genbun-icchi of meaning," i.e., the unification of what is meant and what is said.<sup>12</sup> The texts called poems nowadays, however, are usually words that only customarily fulfill our illusion of semantic unification of sign and meaning. As a poet, she probably aimed for the state that the symbolic language and the preverbal "something" (*chora* in Kristeva's term) unified in writing, where the intervention of the preverbal into the symbolic is far more dynamic and strong than the opposing dynamic (= "sacrifice" in Kristeva's theory). When the non-verbal corporeality threatens and ruptures the symbolic order, poetic language emerges from the heterogeneous dynamics of the two domains. One of her goals is thus to unsettle the fixture of language through interventions of bodily materiality. The formal and generic question of poetry/prose is not her concern.

On the level of theory and feminist concern, there is little discrepancy between Kristeva and Tomioka: what made Tomioka shift from poetry to prose? Tomioka herself does not clearly explain "what's wrong with poetry" in her essays, but points out several interesting factors that separate poetry from prose narrative in her biographical account of Murou Saisei's life entitled *Murou Saisei* (1982). The book focuses on the process Saisei changed his career from poet to novelist, but it reflexively explains Tomioka's own view of the two writing practices as well. For Tomioka, first, poetry necessarily entails elitist consciousness of poets who consider themselves as superior to novelists. The elitism of poetry also supports the sense that poetry comes from "out there" and is thereby written with "talent" or *saino*, rather than with the writer's efforts or learned techniques. Whether these common beliefs are true or not, Tomioka's claim resides in her understanding of writing practice that "poetry enchants the self and places him at the center of the world" whereas "prose disenchant the self and places him at the margin of the world".<sup>13</sup> According to her, poetry can be engendered only at the close-to-impossible moment that the two domains coincide, which is in

<sup>12</sup> Tomioka Taeko, "Separation of *uta* and *shi*." *Tomioka Taeko shu*, VII (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1998): 16. According to Tomioka, the formal character of poetry is thus a result from the successful "unity" of meaning and word. All quotations from Tomioka in this paper come from *Tomioka Taeko shu*, vols. VII-IX.

<sup>13</sup> Tomioka, IX 193.

fact close to religion (dialogs with God, so to speak), or more precisely, shamanism, as Kristeva said. This is the point Tomioka actually decides to leave practice of poetic writing, as suggested by her shift of interest toward popular narrative like Osaka *manzai* (stand-up comedy) and *kayokyoku* (popular songs). Tomioka's choice of mundane and "low" narrative as the locus of feminine subjectivity makes an interesting contrast to Kristeva's choice of high art by male poets, typically Mallarmé and Lautreamont. This makes us reconsider what Kristeva meant by "heterogeneity" of signifying process. In the semiotic space of poetic language, *chora* and the thetic interact with each other so as to make the signifying process mobile and heterogeneous, but from Tomioka's perspective, this practice ultimately aims at unification, whether this interactive space takes the form of rejection or contradiction, because it still embodies harmony of opposing forces that converge on and integrate into, one entity. While comparing poetry to religion, Tomioka calls prose writing an act of paraphrasing and annotating (IX 87–8), which allows endless slippage between what is written/spoken and what is meant.

This idea is crucial in understanding Tomioka's concept of "a poet who became a novelist." I do not intend to present biographical interpretation of Tomioka's works, but rather, I would like to stress that her performative attitude as a "formerly poet prose fiction writer" itself is a central part of her poetics. In *Murou Saisei*, she writes that Saisei's strategy was to meta-critically write about his farewell to poetry in the age that poetry is already dead (IX 91–105). For Tomioka, playing with the death of poetry is the pleasure of prose. She seems to enjoy this act of murder and giving-up (IX 100), with the despair of the fallen angel who murdered God and is crawling on ground without voice. This shows her poetics that prose narrative's fundamental failure of signification is exactly the possibility for feminine language. Ultimately, in Tomioka's theory nonsense narrative of comedy, pops, and melodrama most effectively expresses the corporeal desire and sexuality of the feminine subject.

**SHŌJO MANGA'S POETICS IN THE 70s: HAGIO MOTO  
AND OSHIMA YUMIKO**

If history can be stratified as decades that respectively have individual characteristics, the 1970s can be called a decade of emerging language for feminine consciousness. I am a little reluctant to use the term "feminist consciousness" here, for popular culture, ranging from *kayokyoku* to *manga*, could not be as objective and self-critical as discourses propelled by intellectual elite feminists. But this is exactly why Tomioka saw more

potentials in colloquial “low” culture. Many of the narratives that serve for women’s daily consumption of emotion and identity provide a locus for embodiment of feminine subjectivity through language. The 70s is characterized by the emergence of this phenomenal feminine subjectivity which some scholars may call *shōjo*. Whereas Tomioka’s discontent with poetry led her to prose writing, some other media, especially girls’ manga (*shōjo manga*), developed quite a peculiar sense of poetic narrative. How did manga find poetic language as an effective expression for feminine subjectivity? Works by some of the most important women manga writers of the period, namely Hagio Moto and Oshima Yumiko, will present an answer for this question.

Hagio Moto’s *The Poe Clan* (*Pō no ichizoku*, 1972–6)<sup>14</sup> was a ground-breaking work that made *shōjo manga* widely known as highly “literary” media that had won readership far beyond adolescent girls. The story mainly depicts a beautiful vampire boy, Edgar, who lives eternal boyhood by regretting the loss of his beloved sister Marybell and traveling with another vampire boy, Allan (whom Edgar “vampirized”). In addition to the character names’ reference to Edgar Allan Poe, the narrative style and setting show the dominance of European taste “smelling of butter,” which was back then a significant feature of *shōjo manga* that detested things Japanese. It simply surprises us to see how this Gothic world of adolescent vampires and roses starkly differs from sensual emotive narratives of *yoruri*-style women in Tomioka world. The poetic narrative of *The Poe Clan* deprives the text of time and body, as becoming a vampire means to lose temporality and human (re)production. It is also important to note the fundamental absence of the younger sister, Marybell, located at the center of narrative, whose death and incestuous love with Edgar is exactly the force that propels the story. The story forecloses the bodily desire of humanity, from eating and sex to simply growing up. In sum, the poeticity of *The Poe Clan* pertains to the loss—or rather, inhibition—of humanness. The feminine subject here is identified with the lost girl in the empty center, who is quite close to what John Treat defined as *shōjo*, “a category of being more discursive than material, an adolescent space without substantive or fixed subjective content”.<sup>15</sup>

To explain the relationship of feminine subjectivity and poetic language in *shōjo manga* requires further examination of its socio-cultural contexts. Around 1970, Tomioka writes, the verse of Japanese popular

<sup>14</sup> The edition used for this paper is *Pō no ichizoku* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> John Treat, “Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The Shojo in Japanese Popular Culture” in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (Honolulu: U of Hawai’I P, 1996): 301.

songs changed tremendously. In place of Japan's traditional poetic diction that was conditioned by the 5- or 7-syllabled rhythm from *tanka*, *yoruri*, to *enka*, awkward free verse had begun to dominate popular poetic narratives (VII 70–1). She suggests that the main reason for this contemporary unnaturalization of poetic language is the introduction of pronouns such as I, you, he and she,<sup>16</sup> which occurred under the general influence of American popular songs. Whereas American pops naturally formed the sense of the poetic in colloquial English (especially after the Beatles), Japanese pops had to bear with the clumsiness of colloquial Japanese free verse combined with translated English pronouns, against the poeticity of traditional rhythms. Tomioka concludes that this emerging poetic narrative, which is “empty and light” (VII 79), is not yet becoming a language for women's corporeal desire, yet seems to express another kind of desire (especially of “presence”) through the unnatural dominance of pronouns. Tomioka's argument curiously explains certain characteristics of *shōjo manga*. Poetic narratives in *The Poe Clan* (see Figures 1 & 2) do present the awkwardness of translated Japanese, with frequent use of I, you and we. The emptiness of the poetic language seems to direct the reader's attention astray to another kind of “meaning,” which is simply to cognize the presence without meaning, supported by graphical representations of faces and bodies. The timeless presence of the vampire boys is fundamentally endorsed by the absence of Marybell, whose death, in both terms of plot and signifying process, took away the meaning from the text. In *The Poe Clan*'s case, the poetic language's cognitive act of acknowledging the ontological and semantic emptiness arouses melancholic sentimentalism, which perhaps constitutes the reader's feminine subjectivity.

This poetic mode in *The Poe Clan* shows a problematic model of feminine subjectivity. Far from what Kristeva proposed in her “poetic language” argument, this type of text primarily creates the effect of stasis. It does not question meaning, but instead imagines the signified as dead, unchanging lack in the center, which results in the eternal present of the vampire mentality. In Tomioka's terms also, it negates the philosophy of paraphrasing in prose, nor tries to find the ideal moment of the semantic coincidence in poetry. Does it mean, then, that we should negatively consider *shōjo manga* as an anti-feminist illusion of perpetual semantic moratorium? It is true that popular *shōjo manga* functions to promote the emptiness of feminine subject in many ways, but what I would also like to

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<sup>16</sup> According to TBS's 1968 research on the most popular words in best hit songs, the top three were *anata*, *koi*, and *watashi*.

point out is how and why this sort of illusion in poetic narrative is consumed by large female readership.

Oshima Yumiko's *Banana Bread Pudding* (1978)<sup>17</sup> is an interesting meta-criticism of this *shōjo* subjectivity. It focuses on Ira, a girl whose elder sister's marriage makes her deeply afraid of separation from the sister and thus, in search of a substitute, decides to become a "protective curtain" for a gay couple as their nominal wife. The reality is that, in order to protect Ira from psychological crisis, her friend's brother, Tōge, pretends to be a gay and asks for her "protection." As she learns this fact, confusion and insanity sweeps her barely standing "protective curtain" identity and drives her toward various imaginations of murder. Not unlike other *shōjo manga*, *Banana Bread Pudding* is characterized by poetic narratives consisting of colloquial words, pronouns, and repetitions (=lack of paraphrasing). What distinguishes Oshima's *Banana Bread Pudding* from other typically euphoric *shōjo* manga is actually the conscious expression of the estrangement of poetic/shōjo-ic narrative from the meaning, or the tragicness of the actual situation. In Figure 3, Ira is running with a knife in her hand, believing that she has gone insane and murdered a man. The poetic soliloquy, on the other hand, is apparently failing to convey the tragedy taking place in her psyche. The semantic distance is so great that we start to understand the fact that the true tragedy is her estrangement from language and meaning. A similar language use can be found in Yoshimoto Banana, who is said to have learned her style from *shōjo manga*. In her best-selling *Kitchen* (1987), for example, the narrator's state of mind after her only family member's death is simply described as "marude SF da" ("it's totally sci-fi"),<sup>18</sup> a rather immature and simplistic expression of lament over the beloved's death. The significance of this writing style lies in its failure to signify rather than in the traditional interpretive appreciation. Toward the end of *Banana Bread Pudding*, therefore, it is important to note how Ira realizes that her enunciation of love could reach the listener, who returns it to her as another enunciation of love (Figure 4). Her mental crisis is saved by her simple act of enunciating words that (could) mean what is (imagined to be) meant.

*Banana Bread Pudding* proves to be a case in which *shōjo manga*'s poetic narrative is performance that protects her from madness. To borrow Kristeva's terms, the *shōjo* subjectivity is constantly fighting against the foreclosure of the thetic, which ultimately leads to the "mutism of the

<sup>17</sup> Oshima Yumiko, *Banana bureddo no pudingū* (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Yoshimoto Banana, *Kicchin* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1998): 8.

paralyzed schizophrenic” (182). The empty words of poetic language at least provides the illusion of the signifying act, which is in fact schizophrenically mutilated from the function of the symbolic order in *shōjō manga*. If it is right to say, following Kristeva, that murder is the most violent form of the semiotic negotiation process between the symbolic and the corporeal, then the feminine subjectivity in *Banana Bread Pudding* reveals a mode of the suicidal/murderous despair in signification hidden behind the euphoric *shōjo* performance. It is in this sense that the poetic language of *shōjo* narrative cannot be dismissed simply as “bad writing”: the crisis of feminine subjectivity finds its path through the complementary fusion of failed signifiers and graphic representations.

#### FUTURE OF WOMEN’S POETIC LANGUAGE

I have laid out the two approaches to poetic language that emerged in the 70s Japan, namely, Tomioka’s post-poetic prose narrative and *shōjo manga*’s empty poetic narrative. One aims for the sign’s constant sliding off the meaning, extending text to infinite paraphrasing, whereas the other secures the illusory fixation of signifying process through the emptiness of the sign. The logics of the two approaches oppose each other, as they take opposite strategies to the poetic, but a truly important thing common to both of them is the resistance of their language against authentic narrative of serious male literature. It does not necessarily mean that they intentionally go against the authentic mode, but they simply attempt to find the narrative that best represents the idiosyncratic experiences of feminine sexuality. Tomioka narrativizes the body through moaning from sexual desire. *Shōjo manga*’s poetic emptiness narrativizes its negation of body, time, and sexuality in *shōjo* subjectivity, where the paralyzed stasis of imagined meaning prevents the subject from schizophrenic crisis.

The last question is how these two approaches survive as a form of (anti-) poetry in the age of dead poets. In the age of late-capitalist society, poetry can hardly be more than a postmodern product stuck in the loop of automatized mass-consumption, not too far from the way we consume the lyrics of popular songs. In this sense, Tomioka’s playfulness with poetic seriousness is one of the most effective literary strategies. An interesting example is Tomioka’s Japanese translation of a phrase from W. B. Yeats she presented against Ōe Kenzaburo’s version (VIII 286–7):

Yeats: For men improve with the years;  
 And yet, and yet,  
 Is this my dream, or the truth?

Ōe: なぜならば男は年々みずからを改良するものだから。  
しかれども、しかれどもさ  
それはおれの夢見ることか、真実か?

Tomioka: 人間て歳月がうまく変えてゆくんだよね、でもさ、  
これ夢かもね、いやいやホントかも?

Tomioka's colloquial prose turns Yeats' poetic beauty and Ōe's masculine existentialism into her mischievous laughter at the poetic in her own Japanese, which exemplifies the way Tomioka strives to transform words into utterance not yet divided into sound and signifier. The playful colloquial style typical in Tomioka can be found in the 80s new voices of women's popular fiction such as Yamada Eimi's *Kneel Down and Lick My Feet* (1988) and Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen* (1987), which opened more space for women's narrative for the semiotic practice of the body. The melancholic poetic monologue of the 70s *shōjo manga*, which went hand in hand with the popular song "idoru" culture up to around the early 80s, wore away, as *shōjo manga* began treating more outspoken, self-reflexive girls with comic touch.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that in general the gap between the Tomioka-style post-poetic feminist literature and the *shōjo*-style poetic emptiness has been sublated as they mutually encompassed each other. If what Kristeva called the semiotization of the heterogeneous space between body and language is to be pursued, then it should be where women's language find interstices between poetry and prose, high art and popular media, corporeal materiality and its negation, and at the most fundamental level, theory and practice.

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<sup>19</sup> Some of the most prominent manga writers who represent this transitional period are Ichijo Yukari and Kuramochi Fusako. This period also coincides with the emergence of pornographic manga for women known as Ladies Comics and hardcore Yaoi. These transitions prove that the eternal adolescence of vampirism shifted to everyday life of "just an ordinary girl," which strengthened the fixation of empty narrative yet made *shōjo manga* more open to sexual matters.





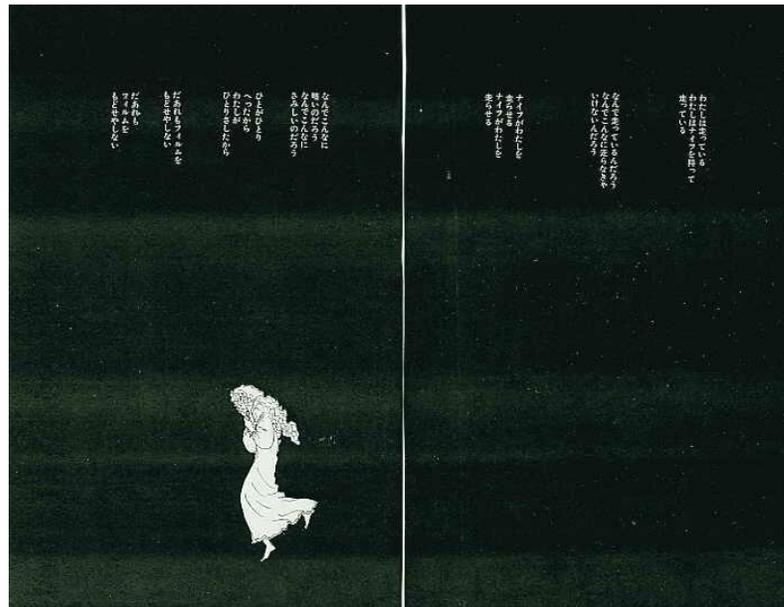


Figure 3

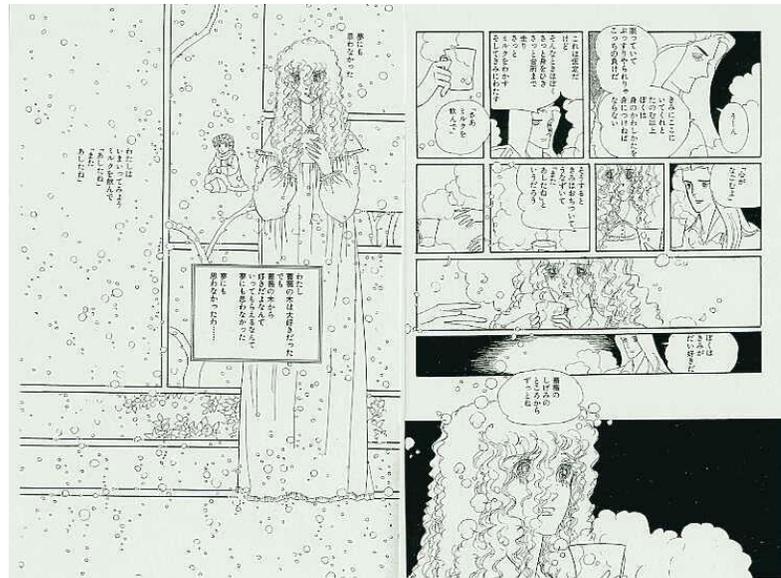


Figure 4