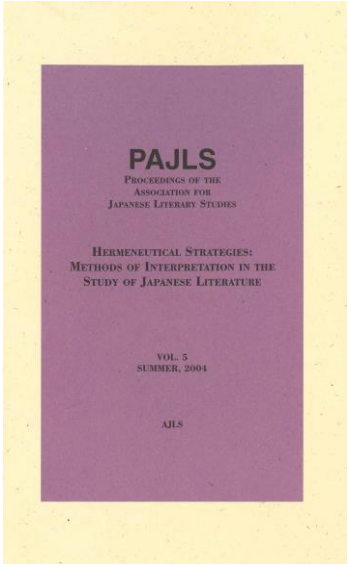
“Reading the Maternal Body in the Works of Hirabayashi Taiko”

Linda Flores

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (2004): 19–32.



PAJLS 5:
Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature.
Ed. Michael F. Marra.

READING THE MATERNAL BODY IN THE WORKS OF HIRABAYASHI TAIKO

Linda Flores

> It was early in the afternoon when the uncomfortable pains in her stomach began, surging up at times and then subsiding. Osen thought about the shellfish she had eaten for breakfast, but no matter how many times she went to the bathroom, when she crouched down onto the toilet nothing came out. Then, suddenly it felt like the fetus was pushing on the skin of her lower abdomen so painfully that it seemed to stretch taut the skin of her already distended stomach.[1]
>
> Hirabayashi Taiko, "Evening Wind"

The above excerpt from the 1927 story "Yokaze" (Evening Wind) demonstrates the graphic and unsettling images characteristic of Hirabayashi Taiko's early Shōwa fiction. Many of her works of this period portray maternity and childbirth, and "Evening Wind" is one of several of that same year which describes an act of infanticide. An author whose works have received little critical attention in Japan and even less in the West, Hirabayashi Taiko is generally regarded in Japanese literary history as a proletarian writer. As such, discourse on her fiction centers primarily on the political ideals of the proletarian literary movement, emphasizing core principles such as proletarian realism, consciousness of purpose (*mokuteki ishiki*), and ideological resolution (*shisōteki ketsui*). Consequentially, issues of gender and embodiment, though typical of many of her works, are subordinated to political and ideological concerns.

Discourse on Hirabayashi for the most part situates the ideology of the proletarian movement as central, and issues of corporeality are therefore interpreted largely *in relation to* ideology. Such evaluations are essentially premised on paradigms of normative heterosexuality engendered by traditional, phallogocentric structures of knowledge in which the female body is defined in terms that ultimately reinforce gendered dualisms of mind and body, consciousness and corporeality,

[1] Hirabayashi Taiko, "Yokaze," *Hirabayashi Taiko Zenshū 1: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985), p. 125.

male and female. The maternal body, seldom considered in literary criticism, offers potential as an alternative site of analysis. Hirabayashi's stories of the maternal body de-center the paradigm of normative heterosexuality and establish maternity, and ironically, its negative counterpart, infanticide, as both the site of ideological contest and the locus of expression.

One distinctive quality of Hirabayashi Taiko's works commonly addressed in discourse is pronounced attention to the body. Terms used to describe her fiction include *namanamashii* (vivid) and *minikui* (unsightly), and it can be argued that the author provoked such critiques through often graphic and at times grotesque literary attention to the body. Aono Suekichi, a major critic of the proletarian literary movement in the 1920s and 30s, cites two postwar works in particular, "Kō iu onna" (A Woman Like This, 1946) for its ability to elicit powerful images of disease and suffering, and "Kishimojin" (Kishimojin, 1946) for its sexual and corporeal narrative descriptions of female physiology and sexuality. He comments: "To the best of my knowledge, the type of graphic physical descriptions found in her early works had never before been seen in modern literature."[2] More recently, Aramata Hiroshi has suggested that even a cursory reading of Hirabayashi's works reveals an abundance of graphic portrayals of human biological functions including defecation, physical disease, and childbirth. He further states:

> Many of the descriptions in her works were so bold and graphic that if they had been published in popular magazines, bookstores probably would have refused to carry them - they were that extreme. It wasn't simply that her works portrayed sex; they vividly described scenes of childbirth in a manner unprecedented in modern literature.[3]

Scholars also frequently reference the graphic and sexually charged story "Azakeru" (Self-Mockery, 1927), which portrays an unusual and somewhat perverse streetcar scene where the female protagonist Yoshiko encounters a man described as "the kind who classifies women by their appearance, who enjoys golf and going to parties at the Imperial Hotel."[4]

---

[2] Aono Suekichi, "Hirabayashi Taiko ron," in *Kindai joryū bungaku* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1984), p. 173.

[3] Aramata Hiroshi, *Puroretaria bungaku wa monosugoi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2000), p. 129.

[4] Hirabayashi Taiko, in "Self-Mockery" in *To Live and To Write: Selections by Japanese Women Writers 1913-1938.* Edited by Yukiko Tanaka (The Seal Press: Seattle, Washington, 1987), p. 77.

Sensing the man's derisive attitude toward her shabby exterior, she deliberately positions herself so that she "accidentally" collides with him with each jolt of the streetcar. This scene depicts a prewar reverse *chikan*[5] (groping, molestation) streetcar incident that positions the female as aggressor and the male as victim. The protagonist in effect reverses the man's objectifying and dehumanizing gaze and transforms herself from gazed upon object into gazing subject. Nakayama Kazuko comments: "This kind of bold behavior from a young woman in her twenties was without precedent in modern literary history."[6]

Among the most explicit and shocking of Hirabayashi's stories are "Seryōshitsu nite" (In the Charity Ward, 1927) and the previously cited "Evening Wind," which portray vivid and dramatically detailed scenes of childbirth. Stories such as these demonstrate the ways in which Hirabayashi's texts flout conventional notions of motherhood and maternity and disturb the boundaries conventionally delineating these "sacred" social spaces. "Evening Wind" is the story of a widow in a small farming town who becomes pregnant, only the father of the unborn child is not her recently deceased husband, but rather a day laborer from town. The brother denounces his older sister for bringing shame upon the family through her illegitimate pregnancy. Throughout her pregnancy, he abuses her both verbally and physically, even kicking her violently in the stomach. Similar to "In the Charity Ward," the story begins with the onset of childbirth and its accompanying labor pains. Forbidden by her brother from giving birth inside the home, she retreats to the storehouse to deliver her child alone. As described in the passage quoted earlier, Hirabayashi vividly depicts the physical torment of the protagonist Osen's labor in graphic detail. Not only were her descriptions of childbirth bold and descriptive, they depicted childbirth in a manner that borders on grotesque. In "Evening Wind" for example, the onset of childbirth is discussed together with going to the toilet; in "In the Charity Ward," the protagonist also describes her experience of childbirth using disturbing and graphic

---

[5] "Chikan" (groping or molestation incidents) have become more common in contemporary mass transit culture, and public consciousness of these crimes has risen significantly during the 1990s and the first few years of the 21st century. Beginning in the late 1990s, Japan Railways and other private rail companies began launching numerous campaigns targeting these incidents. Some train lines have established special compartments designated "Women Only" during peak transit hours as one way of addressing the issue. It should be noted that even in the present day, the perpetrators of these crimes are overwhelmingly male and the victims usually female. Hence, the incident portrayed in Hirabayashi's 1927 "Self-Mockery" is even more conspicuous.

[6] Nakayama Kazuko, *Hirabayashi Taiko* (Tokyo: Shintensha, 1999), p. 64.

imagery. Ironically, that experience culminates in the dispassionate declaration of the birth of the child as follows:

> At five o'clock in the morning, the head nurse who had just come from the second floor to the toilet downstairs discovered that I was in labor. And there, on top of an old, stained single futon I gave birth to a baby girl all red like a monkey.[7]

Even more shocking, both stories describe acts of infanticide that occur shortly after the scenes of childbirth. The previously mentioned story "Self-Mockery" also alludes to the experience of losing a child. Other stories with similar graphic depictions of the body can be cited, including "Sanagi to issho ni" (With the Pupas, 1927), which symbolically evokes womb imagery in its descriptions of a silk factory. An illegal underage factory girl hidden by the superintendent in the drying room of a silk factory dies a painfully ironic death amongst the fecundity of womb-like cocoons. Given the emphasis on sexuality and the body (and the maternal body) in Hirabayashi's fiction, it is evident that a great deal is at stake when negotiating an interpretive strategy towards corporeality and integrating it with the political aspect of her works.

By 1927, the year works such as "In the Charity Ward," "Self-Mockery" and others were published, proletarian literature had become a major force in the literary world. The proletarian literary movement sought to displace the limited focus on the individual characteristic of the previous literary movement, Naturalism (*Shizenshugi*), and to embrace a broader social perspective. Kurahara Korehito, the foremost theorist of the proletarian literary movement following the establishment of NAPF (Japanese Proletarian Artist's Federation), outlined the demands of proletarian realism in "Puroretaria riarizumu e no miti" (The Path Towards Proletarian Realism, 1928), emphasizing the ideal attributes of proletarian literature such as "vanguard perspective" and "strict realism." Borrowing heavily from Russian discourse on realism, Kurahara outlined the systematic principles for realism in proletarian literature as follows: (1) proletarian realism must view the world from the perspective of the proletarian vanguard; (2) it must portray the world with an attitude of strict realism; (3) proletarian realism demanded a comprehensive grasp of all the various complexities of humanity.[8] Kurahara's position on proletarian

---

[7] Hirabayashi Taiko, "Seryōshitsu nite," *Hirabayashi Taiko Zenshū 1: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985) p. 97.

[8] Kurahara Korehito, in "Puroretaria e no michi," quoted in Yoshio Iwamoto, "Aspects of the Proletarian Literary Movement in Japan," in Silverman and

realism was clearly intended as an overt rejection of the form of realism that had dominated Naturalist writing. It represented a deliberate attempt to shift literary focus away from the internal life of the author towards a socially based proletarian perspective. Furthermore, it endeavored to portray society from a realistic perspective and to express the revolutionary viewpoint of the proletariat. Proletarian literary theory as defined by Kurahara and the reality of proletarian literature, however, were not always in concurrence.

The prominent literary critic Kobayashi Hideo articulated one of the dominant critiques of proletarian literature as both disembodied and "ideology without form."[9] He acknowledged that Marxist literature had successfully challenged the Naturalist trend of focusing on the personal life of the author and that it had employed Marxist social ideology to "transform the concept of 'life' from the mundane into the historical."[10] In his words:

> Never before had writers labored to create by relying so on ideas and theories; again, never before had writers so completely ignored their actual, physical lives. It is not just that they had forgotten how to embody or to internalize an idea. Rather, being intoxicated on a system of thought too bloodless to allow any real internalization or embodiment, our Marxist literary movement was defined, in essence, by its intoxicating effects.[11]

Kobayashi's theories regarding the disembodied nature of Marxist literature speak to a broader debate regarding the fundamental inability of Marxism to address issues of feminism, female production and reproduction. Nonetheless, through depictions of motherhood and maternity, Hirabayashi's works simultaneously demonstrate the problematic relationship between Marxism and feminism and represent one attempt to bridge this ideological impasse.

In this respect, the works of Hirabayashi Taiko occupy a unique position within the body of proletarian literature. Hirabayashi Taiko's stories contest evaluations of proletarian literature as literature that

---

Harootunian, eds., *Japan in Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 163-5.

[9] Kobayashi Hideo, "Discourse on the Fiction of the Self," in *Literature of the Lost Home: Kobayashi Hideo-Literary Criticism 1924-1939.* Paul Anderer, ed. and trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.78.

[10] Kobayashi, p. 79.

[11] Kobayashi, p. 78.

portrayed only the suffering of the masses. As Ishikawa Naoko has argued, Hirabayashi's works integrate the "I" (*watashi*) into a genre of literature that sometimes found individual consciousness problematic.[12] If we accept Kobayashi's contention that proletarian literature is disembodied, then Hirabayashi Taiko's works diverge from this model, as her literature is profoundly embodied. Her narratives situate the body as central to the issue of subjectivity. They reinscribe the body into literature that was regarded as "disembodied," and demonstrate how the political can be intensely personal as the very flesh of her protagonists is invested in their ideological struggle.

Hirabayashi's relationship with the proletarian literary movement and the Communist party was from the start an uneasy one. Initially drawn to the principles of socialism at a young age, Hirabayashi grew increasingly disenchanted with party politics and for the most part resisted party affiliation. Although she was a member of the Proletarian Artistic League for a brief time in 1927, she withdrew her membership the following year out of frustration with the politics of the members. Hirabayashi maintained the resolute conviction that political ideology should not infringe on artistic production and that art should never be slave to political ideology.[13] In "'Seryōshitsu nite' no koro," an essay written thirty-nine years after the publication of "In the Charity Ward" she expresses a similar philosophy towards ideology and literature: "...As a writer I was certainly influenced by the doctrine of consciousness of purpose that was in common currency at the time, but I wrote according to my own artistic convictions."[14] Her political and artistic beliefs notwithstanding, Hirabayashi's works were often evaluated according to the principles of the proletarian literary movement. The theories and ideologies associated with the movement profoundly influenced readings of her work, a fact reflected not only in methods of interpretation, but also in the use of the language of the proletarian literary movement. An analysis of discourse on the 1927 story "In the Charity Ward" clearly illustrates this point.

Published in *Bungei sensen (Literary Front)* in 1927, "In the Charity Ward" is partially autobiographical. After being released from prison for suspected leftist activity, Hirabayashi Taiko and her partner at the time,

---

[12] Ishikawa Naoko, "Hirabayashi Taiko ni okeru "shintai kankaku" to "shisōteki ketsui" no kiseki: keibō rearizumu no kakutoku." in *Hirabayashi Taiko kenkyū: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985).

[13] Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 1160-1161.

[14] Hirabayashi Taiko, "'Seryōshitsu nite' no koro," *Hirabayashi Taiko Zenshū. v.1* (Tokyo: Shinko Teshirogi, 1979), p. 101.

Yamamoto Torazō, traveled first to Korea and then to Manchuria to evade the watchful eyes of the Japanese police. She worked as a cook for Chinese railway construction workers for several months until they were both arrested by the police and charged with subversion. Torazō was imprisoned, but because Hirabayashi was eight months pregnant and ill with beriberi, she was released shortly after questioning. She gave birth to a baby girl, the only biological child she would ever have, who died about two weeks later.

Similarly, the protagonist Mitsuyo of "In the Charity Ward" and her husband are arrested in Manchuria for plotting a railway strike and charged with subversion. Her husband is imprisoned, but since Mitsuyo is pregnant, she is allowed to give birth in a charity hospital, with the understanding that she will be remanded to prison following her delivery. The authorial creation of an "invented law" (*inchiki hōritsu*) within the narrative establishes that a child born to a prisoner will be cast out in society as an orphan.[15] This invented law serves an important function within the narrative as it later provides the protagonist with moral justification for her actions regarding the act of infanticide. Although an avowed "charity" Christian hospital, the motives of the staff and doctors are mainly financial and the charity patients are either mistreated or ignored. Destitute and suffering from beriberi, Mitsuyo cannot afford to purchase milk for her newborn child and the hospital will not provide any for her. Ultimately, in an act of absolute desperation, Mitsuyo resolves to feed her newborn baby girl milk from her own diseased breasts, fully cognizant of the fact that this will certainly result in the child contracting beriberi and dying. The story criticizes the capitalist and dehumanizing economy of the so-called "charity" hospital and compellingly portrays the hospital patients in graphic detail. It has attracted much critical attention for its explicit depictions of childbirth and the human body as well as for the act of infanticide inscribed in the story.

Characteristic of the emphasis on ideology reflected in discourse on Hirabayashi, one reading of "In the Charity Ward" identifies ideological "resolution" (*ketsui*) as the focal point of the narrative.[16] Discussed in relation to the protagonist's decision to feed her child beriberi-infected breast milk, Tsuboi Shigeharu argues that corporeality in this work is inconsistent with the protagonist's ideological resolution. He interprets the incident broadly, in relation to the struggle of the proletariat, describing the act as "defeat within struggle" rather than commitment to the

[15] Tsuboi Shigeharu, "Hirabayashi Taiko ron," in *Kindai joryū bungaku* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1984), p. 162.

[16] Tsuboi Shigeharu, "Hirabayashi Taiko ron," in *Kindai joryū bungaku* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1984).

proletarian struggle, symbolized by resistance against the capitalist economy of the "charity" hospital.[17] Therefore, when Mitsuyo chooses to feed her infant infected breast milk with full knowledge of the consequences, she not only surrenders the life of her child, she symbolically abandons the struggle of the proletariat. Within the framework of the ideological struggle of the proletariat, the act of infanticide can signify nothing other than absolute defeat. Bound by the language and principles of the proletarian literary movement, these works can only be interpreted as narratives of success or failure.

A more recent reading by Ishikawa Naoko suggests that viewing works such as these only from the perspective of proletarian ideals such as "consciousness of purpose" risks overlooking crucial points in Hirabayashi's works.[18] She proposes a strategy for reading Hirabayashi's works that incorporates emphasis on the body with ideology. According to Ishikawa, the female protagonist Mitsuyo represented a decidedly new breed of protagonist in proletarian literature at the time—a woman whose worldview as a proletarian activist was mediated through her physical sensations—that is, through the body.

The body, she argues, is the fulcrum that inverts this work; the female protagonist of "In the Charity" establishes her own body as the origin of ideology. Ishikawa states: "What is significant about this work is that it portrays the protagonist as a person who attains [ideological] consciousness when placed in a limited situation and, by establishing her own body as a foundation, acquires ideology through the body."[19] Mitsuyo acknowledges her position in the capitalist economy, transcends individual emotion and consciousness, and acquires ideology through her body. Separated from her husband, the protagonist Mitsuyo has nothing save her own body on which to rely, and therefore she accomplishes ideological resolution through what Ishikawa refers to as her "corporeal sensations" (*shintai kankaku*).[20] These various corporeal sensations include labor pains, pain in her breasts, and the physical suffering of gestational beriberi. Emphasized most strongly among these physical sensations, however, is the protagonist's consciousness of her love/sexual relationship with her husband. Mitsuyo's nostalgic recollections of her husband are presented as

---

[17] Tsuboi, p. 161.

[18] Ishikawa Naoko, "Hirabayashi Taiko ni okeru "shintai kankaku" to "shisōteki ketsui" no kiseki: keibō rearizumu no kakutoku." in *Hirabayashi Taiko kenkyū: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985).

[19] Ishikawa Naoko, "Hirabayashi Taiko ni okeru "shintai kankaku" to "shisōteki ketsui" no kiseki: keibō rearizumu no kakutoku." in *Hirabayashi Taiko kenkyū: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985), p. 64.

[20] Ishikawa, p. 64.

clear evidence that she is inextricably bound by this relationship. This love/sex relationship establishes a triangular structure within the story that links the female protagonist, her husband, and society.

The relationship paradigm can be summarized as follows: the protagonist becomes conscious of her own corporeal sensations, and these physical sensations link her to her husband. This in turn establishes her connection to society and the proletarian movement. It is only through this complex series of linkages, mediated through the husband, that the protagonist achieves ideological resolution. The protagonist is denied autonomous access to the public sphere, as it is precisely *through the husband* that her perspective as a proletarian activist is actualized. The identification of the husband as the female protagonist's point of association with society and the proletarian movement represents a common theme in Hirabayashi discourse, in which the female body and its accompanying states of maternity, sexuality, and infanticide are interpreted primarily in terms of ideology. Moreover, they reinforce the bifurcation of gender roles in which the male is associated with the public sphere and the female with the private. Recent studies of Hirabayashi's postwar works demonstrate her sophistication in integrating issues of these seemingly dichotomous categories as well as issues of both class and gender.[21]

The status of the maternal body in Hirabayashi's fiction suggests an alternate strategy for reading the body and sexuality, one that holds potential to bridge the divide between what has been described as the "unhappy marriage" between feminism and Marxism. The maternal body becomes the site where the realms of public and private, consciousness and corporeality intersect in a dynamic way. Elizabeth Grosz's term "embodied subjectivity," which rejects the gendered separation of knowledge, offers a productive method for reading bodies, and the maternal body in particular, in Hirabayashi's texts. Grosz argues that the Cartesian dualisms of mind and body are the result of a primary abjection in which phallogocentric knowledge has accomplished the separation of the two terms.[22] Within the categories of mind and body, psychology and biology, interiority and exteriority, the latter terms are subordinated to the former: "Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its

---

[21] Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 156.

[22] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart."[23] The division of the two terms, mind and body, is premised on a gendered distinction: the body, traditionally devalued in Western philosophy, is associated with the female, while the disembodied mind is associated with the male. In her words, "As a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body."[24] Embodied subjectivity provides a productive technique for reading the maternal body, one that avoids both the pitfall of the mind/body schism and reductive discussions of the body in terms of biological essentialism.

The maternal body occupies an especially problematic position in feminist discourse: Identified in Western philosophical discourse as a site of manifest difference, it is coded as unpredictable, irrational, and subject to hormonal functions. The maternal body is also defined as a site of exclusion, as Luce Irigaray has argued, "the initial dependence and erasure of the maternal body are the very processes through which the patriarchy is constructed."[25] Plato's definition of *chora* suggests that the maternal body serves as a mere dwelling place for children (as subjects) who, after being born into the social world, are interpolated in a system in which their being is grounded on the existence of one's father rather than one's mother. Within the patriarchal order, children are considered the property of the father, and it is the proper name of the father that determines the right of ownership for the entire family. The child adopts the father's name and all rights associated with that name.

In Hirabayashi's stories of the maternal body, however, children are not regarded as the property of the patriarch (the father); they are unequivocally their mother's children, and in most cases, their mother's *daughters*. These stories gradually displace narrative focus from the heterosexual, male-female relationship, transferring it to the maternal relationship. This narrative progression also marks an epistemological movement from center to periphery, from public to private, and from object to subject. To a certain degree, the significance of the maternal relationship is premised on the undermining of the male-female /heterosexual love relationship in Hirabayashi's works. Her narratives abound with images of absent, inconsequential, or emasculated father figures; the father of the infant in "Evening Wind" for example, receives

---

[23] Grosz, p. 3.

[24] Grosz, p. 4.

[25] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 83.

scarce mention. Likewise, "In the Charity Ward," articulates both paternal anxiety and the cultural marking of the child as the property of the father as he inquires to his wife in a letter: "Does it look like me?" and speculates whether the child has inherited his family trait of deformed toes.[26] The presence of the husband, however, though considerable at the start of the narrative, is gradually eclipsed by the maternal relationship. The relative unimportance of father figures in these stories is further underscored by the fact that the infants in the stories (all female) are never named and thus do not bear the proper name of the father. The seemingly deliberate act of non-naming locates them outside of the symbolic order and directly addresses male paternal anxieties. Unnamed and extrinsic to the symbolic order, the children are recovered to the space of the maternal body through acts of infanticide. These infanticides, both symbolic and actual, in stories like "Evening Wind," "With the Pupas," and "In the Charity Ward" accomplish the symbolic castration of the patriarchy.

These narratives express what Jean Wyatt defines as "maternal subjectivity" in relation to the infanticide that occurs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*[27] (1998), a novel which confronts the historical memory of slavery in America and the particular struggle of one female slave as mother under a dehumanizing system of institutionalized oppression.[28] The focal event of the narrative involves the female protagonist Sethe, an

---

[26] Hirabayashi Taiko, "Seiryōshitsu nite," *Hirabayashi Taiko zenshū 1: Shinshū Shirakabahen* (Ōsaka: Miyasaka Eiichi, 1985), p. 93.

[27] Toni Morrison, *Beloved.* (New York: Plume, 1998).

[28] I mention Toni Morrison's compelling story of one woman's struggle as a woman and mother under slavery in part because I have been struck by the similarities between the two texts and in particular by the descriptions of the infanticides at the hands of the mother that characterize both works. However, it is not my intention to equate the centuries of suffering of black slaves in America under the institution of slavery with the experiences of a prewar Japanese woman socialist, activist, and writer and her resistance to capitalism. In fact, for a number of years I resisted critical comparisons of these texts for those very reasons. My first encounter with Morrison's *Beloved* was in a comparative literature course taught by Katherine King at UCLA on the archetype of the infanticide mother in various world literary traditions. During the following academic year, I encountered for the first time Hirabayashi Taiko's "Seryōshitsu nite" (In the Charity Ward) in a modern Japanese literature course taught by Michael Bourdaghs at the same institution. My research on Hirabayashi later led to my discovery of the story "Yokaze" (Evening Wind), with its dramatic post-infanticide scene, as well as other narratives. Since then I remain haunted by the images of infanticide at the hands of the mother that characterize these narratives and it is this precisely this obsessive uneasiness, or perhaps uneasy obsession, that has guided my research in this direction.

escaped slave, killing her youngest child and attempting to kill her remaining three children rather than relinquish them to the slaveholder who has come to capture them and reclaim them as his property. Wyatt asserts that through infanticide, the protagonist in *Beloved* "...extends the rights over her own body - the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery - to the 'parts of her' that are her children, folding them back into the maternal body in order to enter death as a single unit."[29] In the same manner, the protagonists of Hirabayashi's stories of infanticide express resistance to the patriarchal structure in which bodies, particularly female bodies, are marked as objects of exchange, and radically reclaim their offspring by symbolically closing them back into the maternal body through the act of infanticide. In doing so, Hirabayashi's texts redefine the maternal body as a dynamic site crossed by multiple and often conflicting ideologies. This definition of the maternal body resists gendered dualisms that radically separate mind from body as the body is transformed into the locus of intersection for the seemingly disparate spheres of public and private, consciousness and corporeality.

The act of recovering one's offspring back to the space of the maternal body through infanticide can be found in works such as "With the Pupas," "Evening Wind," "Nagusuteyo," and "In the Charity Ward." In "Evening Wind," the act of infanticide itself is not explicitly described, but when Osen's younger brother enters the storehouse, he is confronted with the shocking sight of his sister with her hair wild and disheveled like a madwoman.

> "What the hell happened?" Suekichi demanded.
>
> Osen laughed in clear, arid voice but did not answer.
>
> "What happened?" he asked again.
>
> Suekichi peered tentatively inside the storehouse, and when he did, he was assailed by a foul odor that seemed to pierce his nose.
>
> "I had my baby – right here," Osen raised her head with her wild, untamed hair and laughed dryly. Through the light of the storehouse, Suekichi could see a bunch of tattered rags wrapped in a bundle, and unconsciously retreated a step backward. Inside the swaddled rags he could see the small head of a baby.
>
> "Osen!"

---

[29] Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 108 (1993): 474-88.

> "Aaa-I killed it...ha ha ha ha!" she laughed.
> "What?!" Suekichi asked.
> "Aaa-I killed it...hahhhahaha."
> Osen sat down on the ground of the dirt floor one step beneath the storehouse and laughed in a terribly fierce voice. Then there was nothing except for the sound of straw rustling.[30]

The protagonist thus reclaims the body of the newborn, harboring it from patriarchal society and symbolically enclosing it back into the maternal body.

"With the Pupas" symbolically enacts this same movement of re-enfolding one's offspring back into the maternal body through the death of an illegal, underage factory girl. The factory superintendent locks the girl inside the silkworm drying room to conceal her from inspectors. Trapped inside with the steam and heat emitting from the womb-like silk cocoons in the drying room, the girl is essentially forgotten until after the inspector's departure. When the superintendent goes to retrieve her, he is shocked to discover her limp body lying lifeless amongst the cocoons. Again, Hirabayashi's narrative depicts the discovery of the body of the young girl in a manner similar to the scenario in "Evening Wind" described earlier: the superintendent recoils in horror at the sight of the dead girl and in that very instant the gender power hierarchy is inverted. He physically takes a step backward, overwhelmed by what he sees. This story evokes fecundity and maternity through its depiction of the cocoons and of the factory itself, represented as a cavernous womb-like structure. The ironic twist in this story is that the factory, in effect, "rescues" the girl from her life of servitude to the superintendent (and the capitalist machinery) through a symbolic act of infanticide. The body of the young girl is re-enfolded back into the "womb" of the factory and protected from further abuse at the hands of the patriarchy, represented by the superintendent.

Interestingly, these scenes closely resemble the post-infanticide scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* when the schoolteacher arrives to reclaim Sethe and her children as his property and discovers her desperate attempt to take their lives: "By the time she faced him, looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none."[31] Like the schoolteacher in Morrison's *Beloved,* the brother in

---

[30] Hirabayashi, p. 139.
[31] Morrison, p. 164.

"Evening Wind" retreats a step backward from the scene; the act causes each of them to physically recoil in shock and awe. In each work, infanticide is described not merely as an act of sheer madness, but as an inculpable and perhaps even to a degree rational act that both disturbs and unsettles the patriarchy.

Hirabayashi's stories of infanticide express resistance to the patriarchal structure in which bodies, particularly female bodies, are marked as objects of exchange. Moreover, her protagonists radically reclaim their offspring by symbolically closing them back into the maternal body through the act of infanticide. In doing so, Hirabayashi establishes the maternal body as the site of reclamation of patriarchal right, subverting definitions of maternity as a passive and purely biological state. The maternal body is activated as a site that is dynamic rather than static, wielding the power of life and death in a single entity. Crossed by multiple and often conflicting ideologies, the maternal body resists gendered dualisms that radically separate mind from body and becomes the locus of intersection for these spheres.

The concluding scenes of both "With the Pupas" and "Evening Wind" also evoke the image from the streetcar scene in "Self-Mockery" discussed earlier. When Osen of "Evening Wind" confronts her brother with the dead baby swaddled in tattered rags, he retreats a step, but she forces his gaze and is thus transformed from victim to perpetrator in this strange and bizarre drama. Like Osen's brother, the superintendent of "With the Pupas" also recoils in horror and awe at the sight of the body of the dead factory girl. In a similar vein, the protagonist of "Self-Mockery" accosts the young bourgeois gentleman with her "ugliness" and her sneer, refusing to yield and insisting that he see her. She effectively reverses the direction of the gaze and is transformed from gazed upon object to gazing upon subject. In doing so, these texts, like so many others by Hirabayashi, demonstrate their ability to unsettle us, and to challenge our notions of womanhood and of normative female roles in society.

Hirabayashi's texts implicitly upset standard notions of childbirth, motherhood, and maternity. Her texts disturb us in significant ways, provoking a reconsideration of the status of the maternal body in her works. Vivid and disturbing imagery of prisons and hospitals haunt readers for their rawness, their reluctance to be sanitized or to be tamed. Strategically shocking, particularly for their time, Hirabayashi's works refuse to conform to conventional notions of literature, or of how maternity and childbirth should or should not be portrayed in literature of the early Shōwa period.