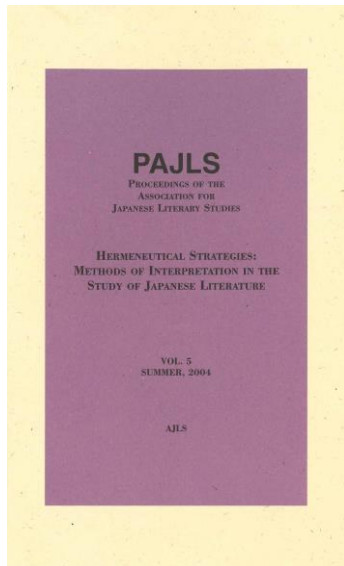


“Women Who ‘Hate’ Women and Other Feminist Problems in the Literature of Takahashi Takako”

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WOMEN WHO “HATE” WOMEN AND OTHER FEMINIST PROBLEMS IN THE LITERATURE OF TAKAHASHI TAKAKO

Julia C. Bullock

The history of feminism is not a history of simple progress, of leaving the past behind.... There will be no point in the history of feminism at which it will have become obsolete to read Simone de Beauvoir.¹

Recent Western feminist scholarship seems to have something of a love-hate relationship with the work of Simone de Beauvoir. While recognized as a foremother and inspirational figure who energized the “second-wave” feminist resurgence of the 1960s and 1970s, she is simultaneously taken to task for embracing a so-called male-identified version of feminism. As Toril Moi writes in her intellectual biography of Beauvoir,

...it would seem that since the 1960s it is feminist intellectuals—women who write, teach, and publish on feminist issues—who have produced the harshest critiques of Beauvoir....Denouncing their precursor for hating the female body, glorifying maleness, lacking any sympathy with or understanding of traditional female pursuits including marriage and motherhood, such feminists resent her for not being *positive* enough in her representation of women.²

Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of feminist discourse that tried to recuperate the female body toward a more positive valuation of sexual difference,³ Beauvoir’s work began to appear decidedly *passé*. According to this modernization theory of feminist progress, “male-identification” became an ailment at best politely ignored, and at worst quickly dispatched with scathing critique before moving on to nicer topics.

¹ Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyrne*, p. 42.

² Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, p. 181.

³ See the theory of French philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, among many others. The quantity and variety of such works makes it impossible to offer a full accounting of the scope of this discourse.

A feminist proceeding from this set of assumptions could easily level the same accusations of "male-identification" at Takahashi Takako, the subject of my paper. It should become obvious fairly soon that I am not that feminist. Rather, I am interested in interrogating precisely those elements of Takahashi's discourse that make some feminists (including myself) squirm with discomfort. My presentation examines Takahashi's literature from a simultaneously deconstructive and feminist perspective. Rather than rehearsing the standard theoretical objections to such a practice,⁴ I will focus my commentary on how these two can be profitably combined toward a reading of a specific example of modern Japanese literature, as well as the difficulties that arise in the process of such reading.

Takahashi's high point of literary production in the 1970s coincided with a surge in feminist activity in Japan, and thus many of her most acclaimed works were published during a historical moment in which the concept of femininity was radically contested. Given the fact that Takahashi was one of the first generation of young women to receive an elite education,⁵ thanks to Occupation-era educational reforms, it is perhaps not surprising that her literature features unconventional female protagonists. She was one of a tiny minority of young women who attended college in a highly male-dominated and chauvinistic environment, where she was constantly plagued by feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis her male classmates, who had received better preparation for university under the old system of separate-but-unequal education. Yet precisely because of her unique situation, she found it equally difficult to relate to conventional standards of femininity, or to the multitude of women who conformed to such standards. Thus, while on one level the image of women in her stories can be seen as consonant with contemporary feminist efforts to re-imagine the concept of "woman," in other ways her narratives incorporate what some might consider to be disturbingly reactionary assessments of her sex.

In fact, critical portraits of Woman (as a categorical term) permeate many of her works, as is evident from her short essay "Onnagirai" ("Woman-hating," 1974):

One often sees the phrase *onnakodomo* ("women and children") in writing. Of course men are the ones writing it.

But when I was a child, I didn't know that this was written by men, and so when I saw the phrase *onnakodomo*, I just

⁴ For a concise overview of and rebuttal to such objections, see "Unnecessary Introductions" in Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme*.

⁵ She entered Kyōto University in 1950, receiving a Bachelor's degree in French literature in 1954 and a Master's in the same field in 1958.

couldn't understand what it meant. Why were women and children linked together? Being ignorant of the phrase, I even thought it might be some particular kind of noun meaning female child, or effeminate child, or some other silly thing. That was how much that word bothered me, since if human beings can be divided into men, women, and children, it made no sense to have a special word just for women and children.

However, as I grew up, I began to understand why. In other words, I began to understand the feeling with which men lumped women and children together. Why do men do this? One could probably give historical reasons for it. There are probably also people who would argue against it from the standpoint of equality of the sexes. But the point of my argument is completely different.

In one of my stories, I describe scenes at a women's public bath and a beauty parlor.⁶ The main character of that story is a woman just over twenty years of age. It was my intention to portray the fear that the protagonist, past girlhood and just entering the stage of womanhood, felt towards members of her own sex.

When she enters a women's bath for the first time, the main character is shocked that the other women expose themselves like lumps of flesh—that is, like corporeality itself—seemingly without feeling any embarrassment. Then when she enters a beauty parlor for the first time, she is taken aback by the aggressiveness of the women lined up in pursuit of physical vanity, as if trying to make themselves uglier rather than prettier.

What would a man feel if he were to enter such a place, not for the purpose of voyeurism, but as a lone individual in the midst

⁶ Takahashi is referring to "Toraware," originally published in the literary journal *Gunzō* (April 1970), and also anthologized in her short story collection *Kanata no mizuoto* (Kōdansha, 1971). For the bath scene, see p. 82 of the anthologized version; the beauty parlor is described on the previous page. The beauty parlor theme is also treated in strikingly similar fashion, but at greater length, in the short story "Hone no shiro" (originally published in the coterie journal *Hakubyō*, v. 10, 1969; reprinted in the collection of the same name, published by Jinbun Shoin, 1972).

of such a group of women? He would probably feel unable to go in, bewildered by such a horrifying sight. And if previously he had felt that women were members of a different tribe that he simply couldn't relate to, wouldn't those feelings appear to intensify in a place like a women's bath or a beauty parlor?

I've used a very circuitous form of expression here, but what I mean is that men can't relate to women on the basis of rational language. I mean that men and women are like members of a different tribe with different languages. Well then, what is women's language? One could call it biological language, or language of the flesh. That is, it's close to children's language. In some important way, then, it's natural for men to lump women and children together and distance themselves from that category.

I myself have a strange fear of people with whom rational language doesn't communicate. In spite of the fact that I'm a woman, I have a fear of women and children.

Walking around town, one sees various types of families. Now that nuclear families have become common, it's not unusual to see men walking around with their wives and children. Until very recently, I would feel sympathetic toward these men who, though unknown to me, seemed bored of accommodating themselves to the inclinations of their wives and children. Maybe it's just my imagination, but compared with the contented looks of their wives and children, the men seemed to be wearing expressions of sardonic humor. However, lately, for whatever reason, this doesn't seem to be the case. Men in the company of their wives and children now have the same contented expressions.

When I see this it makes me think that men these days have really become dull. Such men probably wouldn't lump women and children together. They've become so insipid that they themselves belong in this category. I'm the type of person that needs the illusion that men are spiritually superior. I've had a lifelong admiration for men as surpassing women in this regard. At the very least I want the men of this world to

possess the kind of authoritative individuality that casts aside the concept of women and children.⁷

Such examples of apparent male chauvinism by a female author present an intriguing methodological dilemma: Can these texts be read from a feminist perspective, and if so, how? What strategy of reading should a feminist critic adopt with respect to such texts?

At first glance some of the more egregious examples of “misogyny” seem to jump right off the page. What is a feminist to do with comments such as “I’m the type of person that needs the illusion that men are spiritually superior” to women, and “In spite of the fact that I’m a woman, I have a fear of women and children?” Takahashi appears to be drawing a fairly stereotypical contrast between the concepts of male—as rational, spiritually transcendent, and individualistic—and female as irrational, embodied, and emotionally linked to children (which is apparently a bad thing, according to this logic of binary opposition).

But a close reading of this essay reveals that the boundary between the supposedly airtight and distinct categories of “male” and “female” is not so clearly defined after all. In fact, on closer scrutiny the concepts of male and female seem to approach the status of empty signifiers as men demonstrate their own emotional connectedness to their wives and children, and the cohesiveness of the signifier “female” is undermined completely by the author’s own admission that “in spite of the fact that she is a woman,” she cannot relate to others of her sex. In short, while on the one hand her narrative seems to insist on the “difference between” the categories of male and female, it is simultaneously haunted by the more pernicious specter of the conceptually slippery “difference within.”⁸ In a sense, the terms “woman” and “man” are always already plural, and Takahashi’s discourse seems on one level to be conscious of this fact even as it tries to elide it.

Significantly, in this essay the conflation of femininity with corporeality seems central to Takahashi’s philosophical distinction between masculine and feminine. In fact, anxiety toward the notion of embodied subjectivity, and the desire to transcend the corporeal in favor of a thoroughly spiritual existence, is a prominent theme throughout

⁷ Reprinted in *Tamashii no inu*, pp. 229-232.

⁸ “The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences between entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression of differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself.” Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, pp. x-xi.

Takahashi's literary oeuvre. Longing for transcendence is expressed obliquely in "Onnagirai" through the fantasy of an objective and disembodied subject position, problematically articulated as masculine.

That this notion of transcendent subjectivity *is* merely a fantasy is evident in her example of the women's bath as a typical expression of ugly and shameless corporeality. In this passage she posits a theoretically objective male observer who enters the bath and judges the women to be "horrifying." Significantly, the author feels obliged to add the caveat that this observer enters "not for the purpose of voyeurism." Why? With this phrase she simultaneously creates and undermines the fiction of a neutral observer, careful to distinguish between her ideal (asexual) "male" point of view and an actual male subject, who *might* in fact become so preoccupied with the role of voyeur that he forgets to be horrified by the sight of naked women.

This longing for an impossibly disembodied subject position that permeates much of Takahashi's work can perhaps best be understood as what Penelope Deutscher would term a "constitutive contradiction." In her deconstructive reading of Rousseau, which owes much to Derrida's analysis of the same text in *Of Grammatology*, Deutscher notes that in his effort to characterize sexual difference as "natural," Rousseau mobilizes a variety of interlocking nature-versus-culture binary oppositions which, though mutually contradictory, are functionally operative in structuring and reinforcing Rousseau's claims. For example, "while the agrarian is at one point described as the social, at another point it is privileged as the 'natural' if another state is relegated to the status of the 'social,'" as in the case of an agrarian-versus-urban distinction.⁹ While these oppositions prove to be logically contradictory when viewed as a total structure, in isolation they perform as a powerful justificatory schematic that underlines Rousseau's argument of binary sexual difference as "natural." Deutscher goes on to argue that this kind of "operative instability" characterizes the work of many of the great philosophers, particularly in cases where they attempt to account theoretically for sexual difference.

Binary oppositions seem to perform similar work in Takahashi's text, where her fantasy of transcendent subjectivity is only made comprehensible in contrast to its opposite, the state of immanence or embodiment. Thus the author employs overlapping binary oppositions, like masculine/feminine or rational/irrational, that destabilize themselves even as they structure her narrative as constitutive contradictions of the text. For example, the masculine principle here is articulated as closest to the "origin" by virtue of the "authoritative individuality" the male displays

⁹ Deutscher, pp. 117-118.

with respect to his wife and children—a kind of real-world approximation of the transcendence of the mundane. Yet closer scrutiny of this “authoritative individuality” makes it seem a poor approximation of transcendence indeed—it leaves the male apparently still mired in mediocrity, wherein his only consolation is a kind of cynical detachment. Furthermore, as we have seen, masculinity is increasingly threatened with erosion through its possession of the trace of embodiment (a.k.a. femininity). And whereas here “rationality” appears discursively to lift the male out of the morass of embodied hysteria that is Woman, in other Takahashi texts irrationality is romanticized as dramatically human, and insanity is portrayed as a kind of transcendental state that brings one closer to God.¹⁰

These contradictions are operative in the sense that they provide the illusion of clarity and order. Though they disintegrate on careful inspection, they continually reconstitute themselves through an endless play of association: masculine is to feminine as spirit is to body as rational is to irrational and so on ad infinitum. Their lack of content makes them no less powerful as structural devices, and degraded terms like “feminine” (cf. Rousseau’s culture, writing, etc.) promote the illusion of their opposites’ proximity to transcendence. Valorized terms like “masculine,” when read against their opposites, allow Takahashi to have it both ways: transcendence then becomes both an impossible dream of plenitude and a status approximable in the here and now—as long as one is biologically male.

Or perhaps not—while implying the essential embodiment of the concepts of masculine and feminine, she simultaneously ascribes to herself a masculine subject position through her renunciation of “irrationality,” which is identified with the feminine. This brings us to another rhetorical advantage of this *mise en abyme* of interlocking binary oppositions. While she may have been shut out of the category “male” on the basis of anatomy, by equating “masculine” with a host of other terms (spiritual, rational, etc.) and implicitly ascribing these related terms to herself, she is able on some level to subvert the notion of biological destiny even as she inscribes it in her narratives.

But why go to all this trouble? Why must Takahashi insist on these binary structures, even as they unravel upon hitting the page? Specifically, why does she apparently abject the corporeal in favor of the spiritual, particularly in light of the gendered division of ontology implicit in this

¹⁰ See “Furansu no dai-ichi inshō” and “Kurū,” also in *Tamashii no inu*. These themes also permeate her fictional works. For one of many examples of this treatment of insanity, see *Arano*, 1980.

relationship? In other words, the author cannot be oblivious to the fact that, in spite of her attempts to distance herself from "feminine" corporeality, the fact that she is biologically female on some level includes her in the category of embodied irrationals that she claims to fear. As Derrida notes, the field of play is not infinite,¹¹ and the writer does not have absolute control over her tools,¹² which suggests that the speaking subject is doubly limited by language as she attempts to express herself. Does this mean that Takahashi is unavoidably locked into a structure of gendered binary oppositions that prevent her from seeing anything outside of an absolute opposition between the subject positions of "male" and "female"? There may be some truth to this, but it isn't entirely satisfactory as an explanation.

This brings us to one major limitation of a deconstructive reading of this text: while deconstruction makes much of the "free play" of the signifier, it tells us little about the playing field, or the players themselves. In particular, Derrida's failure to account for the gender of the speaking subject who sets the "free play" of the signifier into motion suggests a serious limitation of deconstruction as an explanatory paradigm, at least insofar as it might or might not be compatible with feminist readings of the same text. While Takahashi's use of constitutive contradictions may seem structurally similar to that of Rousseau, from a feminist perspective, it seems to matter whether the speaker who equates femininity with irrationality is male or female.

Which brings us to the theoretically dangerous question of *why* Takahashi would choose to align herself with such apparently misogynist notions of feminine ontology. This is perhaps not a question that Derrida would be likely to encourage, to say nothing of the (no longer very) New Critics, but somehow it is irresistible, if also more or less unanswerable. I

¹¹ "If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions." See "Structure, Sign, and Play," p. 289.

¹² "...the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system....[R]eading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses." See *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

am not suggesting a joyful return to the intentional fallacy, or that we throw the deconstructive baby out with the bathwater. I am merely suggesting that there is something else at stake in addition to language, that however valuable deconstruction is toward an understanding of the play of language in Takahashi's text, other things remain unaccounted for—such as gender, and culture, and lived experience.

So at the risk of being charged with theoretical promiscuity, is it possible to “supplement” deconstruction with something else? And what would this deconstruction “plus alpha” strategy of reading look like? Let's begin with the category of gender. According to Diane Elam, from a feminist perspective, one of the most valuable aspects of Derrida's theory of difference is the way it accounts for a non-binary notion of gender.¹³ This is certainly true, and evident as well from the unraveling of binary gender difference that obtained in the deconstructive analysis of the Takahashi text above. But although deconstruction has shown itself to be useful in exploring the textualization of gender as a topic of discourse, it is less helpful toward an explanation of the way an author positions herself as a gendered subject with respect to her text.

For example, Derrida's discussion of the work of Lévi-Strauss in “The Violence of the Letter” provides a thorough analysis of the logical inconsistencies at work in his notion of the “authenticity” of so-called “primitive” societies,¹⁴ but leaves us to wonder about the motivation for such a claim. What does Lévi-Strauss stand to gain (or lose) in valorizing “primitive” cultures, given the fact that his own modern European society then becomes “inauthentic” by comparison? For that matter, what motivates Rousseau to characterize sexual difference as “natural,” in light of the logical gymnastics he has to perform to support such a claim?

Does this question of motivation really matter? I would argue that from a feminist perspective, it is in fact crucial to ask such a question if we are to reach any understanding of the kind of language we have identified as “problematic” in Takahashi's texts. It may seem “obvious” that Rousseau, for example, would be personally invested in perpetuating a notion of sexual difference as natural because, as a member of the ruling sex, he stands to benefit from a consolidation of patriarchal authority.¹⁵ But can we afford to assume that Takahashi's motives for adopting rhetoric critical of her own gender are transparent? It is not at all obvious to me why a female author would adopt an apparently male-chauvinist

¹³ See her *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyeme*, p. 58, and elsewhere.

¹⁴ In *Of Grammatology*, pp. 137-138.

¹⁵ Note that I say it may seem obvious. I am not suggesting here that Rousseau's motives are any more transparent than Takahashi's in this respect.

posture; rather, it is this very concept of "obviousness" that is most in need of interrogation if we are to avoid the theoretical blunders of Orientalism or historical anachronism.

This brings us to the issues of cultural and historical lived experience. From the perspective of a Western feminist academic operating in 2003, perhaps it seems that any woman who would adopt apparently chauvinist rhetoric toward her own sex is "obviously" a dutiful daughter currying the favor of patriarchal authority, or an elitist snob trying to secure a place for herself within that authority while helping to shut other women out, or simply brainwashed from reading too much literature written by dead French men. But perhaps we can suspend the value judgments for a moment to ask a few questions. How much conscious control does Takahashi have over the linguistic tools at her disposal? To what extent is Japanese structured by the same sort of binary distinctions that govern philosophical expression in Western languages? What are the boundaries to expression that Derrida alludes to in his text?

If we can hypothesize for a moment that the realm of expressible discourse is bounded by factors such as individual experience, opportunity, historical circumstance, and gender politics, then what sorts of discourses were available (or unavailable) to this author in her attempt to make sense of her world through literary expression? It is perhaps futile to speculate wildly about what an author "meant" to say, or would have said, had the realm of all possible discourses been available to her. But if literary criticism is impossible without some degree of interpretation of precisely this sort of authorial intention, then how can Western feminist scholars of Japanese literature offer meaningful readings of texts outside their own historical and cultural milieux, without a deliberate and self-conscious problematization of the very feminist principles that motivate their inquiry?

When faced with binary oppositions that appear to conflate femininity with corporeality, Western feminist scholars today tend to react in a decisively negative fashion. This is hardly surprising, since such binary logic in our culture has historically been used to relegate women to inferior status, and to exclude them from the realms of intellectual and philosophical inquiry. But when examining examples of speech produced in a different cultural and/or historical tradition, we might do well to investigate thoroughly before hurling accusations of misogyny. This is particularly true when dealing with texts written by women authors who are negotiating a space defined largely as masculine, as in Takahashi's attempts to secure a subject position for herself within philosophical

discourse¹⁶. The ideologies of female solidarity and women's liberation that underwrite much of contemporary Western feminist discourse may make little sense to women who have no peers of their own sex and age cohort, who are surrounded by women who appear to comply happily with the terms of their own subjugation as second-class citizens. I would even suggest that one of the reasons why Takahashi's so-called misogynist speech has gone largely uninvestigated by feminist scholars until now is because she problematizes the coherence of the category of Woman in a way that threatens to expose as fiction one of the founding principles of feminism itself.

By combining a deconstructive emphasis on the play of language with attention to historical and cultural context informed by a feminist sensibility, I have tried to illustrate the complexity of such "problematic" speech by one female author. I see Takahashi's rhetoric as simultaneously complicit with and subversive of patriarchal discourse regarding female ontology, and therefore find it difficult either to accuse her of misogyny or laud her for her feminism. But rather than attach a single-word label to her rhetorical stance, it may be more useful to accept this complexity as instructive, toward a better understanding of "feminist" narratology in a Japanese context.

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¹⁶ One could perhaps make the same argument regarding the "male-identified" speech of Beauvoir as well.

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