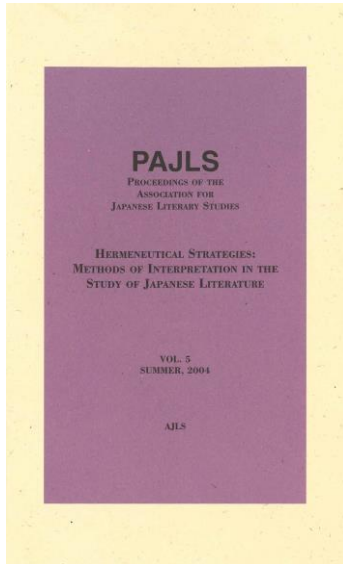


“The Hermeneutics of Transgression and Gender: a
Female Modernist in Chaos (Gendered Place)”

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THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRANSGRESSION AND GENDER: A FEMALE MODERNIST IN CHAOS (GENDERED PLACE)

Kiyomi Eguro

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I would like to examine ‘gender’ in the context of modernist literature¹, through the use of cultural research theories, namely “border transgression”. This will be done via an analysis of the works of Osaki Midori (1896-1971), the Japanese modernist writer (from Taishō /Shōwa era), whose career ended after her disappearance from the literary scene in 1932. The works to be examined in this paper include, *Daimana kankai hōkō* [Wandering Around the Seventh Sense World] (1931) and others.

METHODOLOGY

Although the term ‘border transgression’ is used very broadly in discussions of Japanese literature; in this paper, the term ‘border transgression’ will be used for its literal implications, that is, the process of something crossing a frontier into another place. Usually this term is used to describe the passage between two clearly demarcated spaces, for example, the transgression between the borders of neighboring states. However in this paper, I will use this concept to explain not only transgressions between geographical places, but also those of sexual identity and consciousness.

In Midori’s works, there are occurrences of transgressions, which are specifically relevant to gender and the spaces in which women live. Midori also explores sexuality and consciousness through her characters. In the author’s life there is evidence of geographical transgressions between rural Tottori prefecture and urban Tokyo. In this paper, the term ‘border transgression’ will be used to explore the crossovers of consciousness, gender roles and identities, as well as geographical spaces. My primary focus will be on the way in which women’s roles and identities were limited to the patriarchal standards that were set by the institutionalized spaces in which they lived. ‘Border transgression’ will be used as a method of exploring how women who didn’t fit into and

¹ The movement of Dadaism happened in literature from the Taishō period to the early days of the Shōwa period. Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari took the opportunity to establish Neo-sensualism of modernism in Japan.

reinforce these stereotypical roles, were excluded and marginalized in their societies. 'Women's places' will be analyzed using the geographical and social conceptions of the "village", "field" and "mountain", which Mizuta Noriko² developed and further expand the theory. Mizuta says as follows:

The forest (mountain) is an external space that is the extreme Other of the village; it is a dark, evil place excluded from the boundaries of civilization, humanity, and culture. In contrast, the fields are adjacent to the village; they are a space where the borders between field and village, mountain and forest are obscured. When the people of the village enter the space of the fields, they are wandering outside of culture and civilization. The body and sexuality of the fox-woman who makes this middle region her dwelling place are ambiguous and thus evade the precise Othering/genderization of the village. For that reason, Foucault's theories about the necessity of the body for the formation of the subject are ambiguous. The body of the fields exceeds the boundaries of the body confined within the hegemonic sphere of the village = society paradigm. In the fields, trees and plants grow wild, various types of animals live, and people travel back and forth. The fields are a chaotic, disorderly realm where the laws of culture and civilization cease to function. They are adjacent to the village, they are the outskirts of the village, and the boundaries between fields and the village are not always clear. The body and sexuality that make the fields their dwelling place are not evil, but though untouched by the village, they constantly infringe upon it through their chaotic, opaque, dangerous sexuality of multiple meanings. (9-10)

There are four kinds of 'border transgressions'. The first is the social border transgression between spaces constructed by gendered society as places for women; "the village", "the mountain" and the "field". The second is the geographical border transgression from rural to urban areas. The third is the border transgression of gender from woman to man, and vice versa. The final is the transgression from the realistic world to the fictional world.

² "Unconventional Woman:" *From the Body as the Site of Domination to the Body as the Site of Expression* by Noriko Mizuta, English Supplement No. 20, 2001.

TRANSGRESSIONS OF SOCIAL BORDERS AND SPACE

THE VILLAGE, THE MOUNTAIN, AND THE FIELD

When we prescribe the living space as having standardized “cultural” and “gender” systems in the context of “civilization” and “the village”, we can presume that the “uncultured” and “primitive territories” are “nature”, “wood” and “mountain”. In addition, there is a vague territory in the middle where the civilized and the primitive cross paths. This middle area sits outside the institutionalized village and the unconventional mountain. This middle ground is the “field”, a place where culture can brew; a place that is flexible and yet chaotic.

Despite the fact that woman’s identities were clearly and explicitly “defined” by the patriarchy, there never existed a single unified identity. There has always been a plurality of woman’s identities. However, women who could not follow the phallogocentric standard or perform their designated roles in the “village”, had only a few options for liberation. They could choose to continue living inside the “village” as reproductive and sexual objects of men. Others chose to escape to the mountain, a place where they could live “outside” of society’s expectations. However, these women became too unconventional and could never return to the “village”. The “field”, on the other hand, offered a middle ground where many kinds of marginalized women, including even prostitutes or could wear a “village” woman’s mask and, yet have a Yamanba’s mentality, thereby making transgression unproblematic.

TRANSGRESSIONS OF GENDER

Osaki Midori was born in 1896, in Tottori prefecture, and tried to quietly find self-realization in defiance of the andro-centric society in which she lived. She did this by escaping the repressive forces of rural conservative Tottori and moving to a modern, urbanized Tokyo, where she began her writing career. From the beginning, Midori wrote naturalistic literature, and was fond of lyrical expression since her debut work *Muhūtaikara* or [From the Doldrums] which was written in the Taishō period in 1920. She also wrote lyrical stories for the popular girl’s journal *Shōjo Sekai*, [Girls World].³ These stories were always about women, either sisters or stereotypical Japanese mothers.

After this, her style changed from naturalism to modernism. This change was obvious in her later works. Mothers and sisters didn’t appear at all; instead a new character, a “realist” and benevolent grandmother, was introduced. Perhaps more importantly for the context of this paper, the secondary characters became brothers.

³ Editor, 笠井龍峰 Kasai Ryūhō, Hakubunkan Publisher.

By changing her characters from sisters to brothers, Midori brought a “male” perspective to the story. The brothers metaphorically represented “an intellectual window to the outside world”. The relationship between older brothers and younger sisters is very important in Midori’s works because she herself grew up with three older brothers and three younger sisters. In Midori’s story, *Appurupai no gogo*,⁴ [An Afternoon for Apple Pie] an older brother made his younger sister marry his friend. This tacit agreement, which Natsume Sōseki wrote about in his works,⁵ was common among men at that time. According to Levi-Strauss,⁶ the patriarchal idea of the hierarchical system placed women in a subordinate position, where they were simply a commodity that could be exchanged at anytime, for anything. Women had no identity other than that of her father, brother or husband’s property. This robbed women of any legal rights, and those who didn’t follow the rules were shamed by patriarchal society.

Moreover, no real father figure exists in Midori’s works. In the novel, *Appurupai no gogo*, the father lived far away in the countryside. He only communicated with his son and daughter through letters; otherwise, the word “father” never appears in her stories. This omission was no accident. Midori ignored and excluded any traces of a father. This was her resistance against the conservative ideas of the male-dominated society in which she was living. Is this a tacit sign from Midori that “the father of the symbolic phallogocentric world” is not needed in Modernism? According to Rey Chow,⁷ Modernism and patriarchy were not on good terms. It seems that in Modernism, the father did not even have a voice.

Midori’s era, was one in which conservative ideas dominated society as a whole, thus patriarchy and heterosexuality could not but be accepted. Midori’s “theoretical” isolation was exacerbated by the fact that she was living in a small rural district where departing from the “norm” was deeply frowned upon. This gave her little space from which to express herself, so she sought escapism through her writing. Here, Midori could clearly recognize her position and thus express her resistance through her fantasy world which existed outside of everyday life.

⁴ 『アップルパイの午後』, “An Afternoon for Apple Pie” (1929).

⁵ 『虞美人草』 [Gubijinsō], (1907), 『それから』 [Sorekara], ‘And Then’ (1909).

⁶ Levi-Strauss, Claude (1908-), French anthropologist.

⁷ *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention In Contemporary Cultural Studies*, 1993.

She successfully created a space in which her experiences as a woman could be given a voice, but simultaneously her denial of the “male” gender caused a chaotic ambivalence in her works. This refutation of the phallogocentric notions of gender gives the reader the impression that she felt a sense of incongruity about her sexuality.

TRANSGRESSIONS OF SEXUALITY

The transgression from heterosexuality to homosexuality can be seen in her works through the reoccurring theme of “unrequited love”. Her characters never actually “realize” their love for each other and so love scenes are omitted entirely from her works.

The only hint of sexuality that she depicted, is when she describes the neutral mating of a moss plant.⁸ Perhaps, this is related to Midori’s private life, in which many questioned her sexuality as a result of her relationship with her best friend Ayako Matsushita who lived with a while.

Midori also focuses on sexuality in *Kōrogijō*, [The Cricket Girl],⁹ through the English poet William Sharp, who is struggling with the inner fragmentation of his ‘gender’ identity. Sharp sometimes changes his sexual identity from male to that of a female poet, Fiona Macleod. Furthermore, in *Ruridama no mimiwa*, [Ear Rings of Lapis Lazuli Beads],¹⁰ Midori introduces us to three sisters, none of which can be described as ‘normal’ according to the conservative standards of her era. One of the sisters is portrayed as a sexual pervert, while another is a “tomboy”. More importantly for the purpose of the exploration of sexuality, the elder sister is a lesbian.

Midori completed this script with the encouragement of her friend, Matsushita Fumiko, and sent it to a publisher, but it was not accepted. The intention behind this was to challenge prejudice and the boundaries of sexuality that could be seen in the age of the early Shōwa era. After Matsushita’s death, the script was found by her family. She had kept the rejected manuscripts all her life.

TRANSGRESSION, EROSION, CHAOS

Transgressions of consciousness are visible in *Dainana kankai hōkō*, [Wandering Around the Seventh Sense World]. In this story,

⁸ In *Dainana kankai hōkō*, ‘Wandering Around the Seventh Sense World,’ 『第七感界彷徨』.

⁹ 『こおろぎ嬢』, [Kōrogijō], 1932, was praised by Dazai Osamu and Hayashi Fumiko.

¹⁰ 『瑠璃玉の耳輪』, [Ruridama no mimiwa], 1927.

transgressions appear to a girl, Machiko, the protagonist who wants to be a poet, as she is wandering around her house. Osaki Midori coined this phrase “seventh sense” to explain the realm of the artist, which is beyond the understanding of most people. ‘The seventh sense world’ is filled with sounds, smells, colors, tastes and the stream of consciousness all mixed together. After the girl sees the world, she always falls into a deep sleep. This sleep represents a border transgression between ‘the seventh sense world’ and reality.

The world is reversed for the protagonist during unconsciousness. It appears remarkable, and according to Midori, “the senses work separately, then dissolve into one, and then come loose again. This process is never-ending”.¹¹ Transgressions change the material and spiritual worlds, creating chaos. The protagonist called these moments ‘the seventh sense world’, such as when the sense of sight, hearing and smell cross the vague boundary line and come together.

With her many journeys in between these dimensions, Machiko leaves ordinary life, and experiences the realm of transgression, erosion and chaos. In several ways Midori’s life was similar to Machiko’s as both of them left reality and lived in “the field”, a world of fiction.

OSAKI MIDORI’S END

In an attempt to escape the conservative repressive forces of Tottori prefecture, Midori built an area of her own by making an imaginary place in a space outside the “village”. She then moved to an urbanized Tokyo, a place that gave her the artistic freedom that she craved. Tokyo, or the “field” was a site in which she could live peacefully, utilizing her intelligence and talent by subtly challenging patriarchal standards of gendered spaces and roles.

Despite being marginalized by the andro-centric literary world, for her unconventional approach, this space nevertheless gave her the liberty to write what she wanted, in the context of modernism, without jeopardizing her principles, although it also resulted in her never achieving social and economic success in her lifetime.

In her thirties, Midori became debilitated by severe migraines and became addicted to the medicine “Migurenin”, in order to control the pain. However, the side effects of these drugs took their toll on Midori, and she began experiencing hallucinations. In 1932, Midori was 35 years old, her brother forced her to return to their hometown. At that time, Midori lived with a man whose name was Takahashi Takeo, just only 7 days. Her final work, *Dainana kankai hōkō* was published the following year, however by

¹¹ *Dainana kankai hōkō*, p.118. Translated by Kiyomi Eguro.

then, she had long been forgotten by the literary world. It is said that her friend Hayashi Fumiko¹² seemed to think, “Midori probably lost her mind and then passed away”, against her long absence.

After she returned to Tottori, a “modern despair” originated in her mind, as a result of the district’s conservative attitude was not giving her a place to write. She spent the following years in various states of depression going to and from the sanitarium of Tottori. To her physical and mental disease was the added pressure of her family persuading her to abandon writing. She regenerated as Yamanba, a “Mountain Witch” by forcing herself to forget about the past. The place her writing once occupied in her life was replaced by her dedication to bringing up her younger sister’s children. Recovering her health, not bringing disgrace on the Osaki family, living as a useful aunt, and performing a role that was appropriate within the confines of her “village”, became her primary goals; forcing her to sacrifice the thing that she loved most and spending the rest of her life alone.

CONCLUSION

Osaki Midori provided a breakthrough in Japanese literature by being the first writer to link modernism with gender. Though Midori was rare because she was a woman writing from a modernist perspective, we must not overlook the fact that her outlook at the time was constructed through a man’s perception of what modernist literature should be. Shoshana Felman poses the following question in *What does a woman want?*¹³

But *from where* should we exorcize this male mind, if we ourselves are possessed by it, if as educated products of our culture we have unwittingly been trained to “read literature as men”—to identify, that is, with the dominating, male-centered perspective of the masculine protagonist, which always takes itself—misleadingly—to be a measure of the universal?
(p. 5, Reading and Resistance)

Midori was inspired by her three elder brothers, as they were her “intellectual windows”. Through them she learned how to acquire knowledge from the perspective of men and unconsciously assumed their way of thinking. But on the other hand, Midori kept having a feminine

¹² 林芙美子(1903-1951), writer. Her major works include *Hōrōki* 『放浪記』 (1928).

¹³ 1993, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

sensitivity. Contradictions arose between people's expectations and those she had for herself. This is the central reason why she placed her identity in the "field". Despite the fact that she had aimed at a self-release, in the end, she wasn't liberated at all. Consequently, I feel the necessity to give voice to the things that she was never truly free to talk about, and expose the 'hidden agenda' in her works.

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