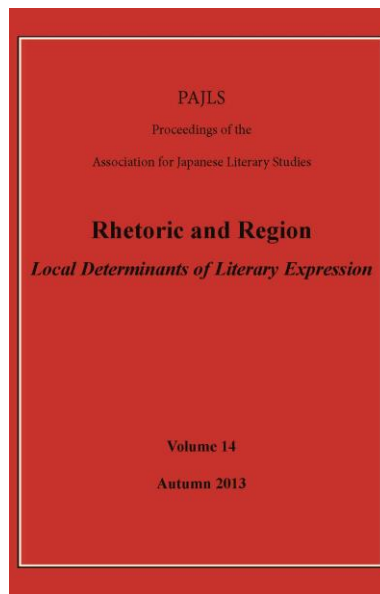


“Miyabe Miyuki’s Descriptions of *Shitamachi*  
Tokyo”

Noriko Chino

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## Miyabe Miyuki's Descriptions of *Shitamachi* Tokyo

Noriko Chino

Independent Scholar

In this paper, I argue that much of the appeal of Miyabe Miyuki's mystery fiction lies in its detailed and precise descriptions of identifiable neighborhoods in Tokyo. In many ways, Miyabe and other writers of genre fiction are the inheritors of Japan's realistic tradition, a tradition that placed emphasis on a writer's ability to describe urban landscapes from the time of Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693). Of course, prewar cityscapes in Tokyo, having suffered severe obliterations, bear little connection to their postwar counterparts. And this, in turn, has led to criticism that contemporary fiction, the work of Murakami Haruki, for example, lacks grounding in Japan's material culture, locales, and settings. Miyabe Miyuki is one novelist who has undertaken the depiction of a radically transformed *shitamachi* that has been stripped of its prewar literary associations.

The common denominator of the stories I am going to discuss is the detailed description of the Tokyo environs that draws the readers into the stories. Hirai maintains that Miyabe illustrates the scenery of *shitamachi* with passion and nostalgia.<sup>1</sup> For example, her illustration of the corners of *shitamachi* is so vivid and detailed that it makes the readers feel as if they are standing at the same corner with the protagonists. It is Miyabe's commitment to portraying the milieu of contemporary neighborhood Tokyo that makes her work distinctive. To illustrate the manner in which Miyabe incorporates contemporary cityscapes into her work for the purpose of portraying Japan's pressing social problems, I will examine four novels: *Tokyo shitamachi satsujin boshoku* (Murders in the gathering dusk of shitamachi Tokyo 1990), *R.P.G.* (Role playing game, 2001), *Hitojichi kanon* (Captured, 1996), and *Kasha* (Wheel of fire, 1992).

### Miyabe Miyuki and Her Upbringing in *Shitamachi*

Miyabe Miyuki was born on December 23, 1960 in Kōtō Ward, which includes the Fukagawa district, traditionally regarded as a typical *shitamachi*, working class neighborhood in Edo. Her father was a skilled factory worker and her mother a seamstress. Miyuki's extended family, at time twenty members under the same roof, was the fourth generation of the Yabe family living in the Fukagawa district. Miyabe Miyuki is of a typical working class family with generational roots in a commoner neighborhood in Tokyo. She started writing at the age of twenty three.

Miyabe still resides and has her office in the Fukagawa district of Kōtō Ward. She remains committed to the portrayal of everyday life in Tokyo, and her early life experience is also evident in her later turn to historical fiction and tales of the supernatural, all set in the Edo period in *shitamachi* environs.

After her graduation from high school, Sumidagawa High School, in 1979, she failed an initial qualifying examination to become a court stenographer, and she entered Nakane Shorthand

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<sup>1</sup> Hirai Shūsei, "Miyabe Miyuki *Riyū* ni miru toshi no hyōshō," *Bulletin of Tokoha Gakuen* 2 (2003), p. 11.

Technical College (Nakane sokki gakkō). After this training, she passed the examination to gain qualification as an official stenographer.<sup>1</sup>

Like most of her family for generations before her, she chose a career path in a craft. She started working at a law office and in the evenings took on part-time jobs transcribing tape recordings. She has stated that her five years of experience in shorthand transcription has had a great influence on her development as a writer.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, she began taking a night course on popular fiction writing sponsored by the mass publishing company Kōdansha, a company known for its emphasis on popular entertainment. Her teacher was Yamamura Masao (1931-1999), a popular mystery fiction writer who became head of the Association of Japanese Writers. Shinoda Setsuko, Kikuchi Hideyuki, Takegawa Sei, Muroi Yuzuki, and Suzuki Kiichirō are professional writers who came out of the Kōdansha sponsored course under the tutelage of Yamamura.<sup>3</sup> All, including Miyabe, are known for working in genres of popular fiction: fantasy, science fiction, mystery fiction, horror, and tales of the supernatural. Miyabe Miyuki started writing fiction at the age of twenty three.

After several submissions of her work for literary prizes for new writers, her short story, “Warera ga rinjin no hanzai” (Our neighbors’ crimes) won the 1987 prize for the best work of mystery fiction by a recently published author, a prize awarded by the magazine, *Ōru yomimono* (All Entertainment), one of the most successful and enduring periodicals of popular literature in Japan. Meanwhile, her story, “Kamaitachi” (The wind cuts like a scythe), was awarded the 1987 prize for new historical fiction by the periodical *Rekishu dokuhon*. In 1989, *Majutsu wa sasayaku* (Devil’s whisper), a full-length novel, won The Japan Mystery/Suspense Award sponsored by Nihon Television and Shinchōsha. Receiving critical acclaim and enjoying increased popular sales, in 1989, Miyabe quit her regular employment and part-time jobs and devoted herself to a career as a professional writer.

What followed was a series of critically acclaimed novels and anthologies that were also a popular success. In 1992, *Honjo fushigi zōshi* (The Mystery booklet in Honjo) won the Yoshikawa Eiji New Writers Award and *Ryū wa nemuru* (The sleeping dragon) won Japan Mystery Writers’ Organization Award. In 1993, *Kasha* (All she was worth) won the Yamamoto Shūgorō prize. In 1997, her *Gamōtei jiken* (The Mystery at Gamōtei) won The Japan Science Fiction Prize. She also is a winner of the prestigious Naoki Prize for *Riyū* (Reasons) in 1999. Her *Mohōhan* (Copy cat) was awarded The Mainichi Publisher Special Award, The Fifth Shiba Ryōtarō Award in 2001 and The Literature Section of the Japan Art Award in 2003. The latest prize she was awarded is the Yoshikawa Eiji Literature prize in 2007 for *Namonaki doku* (Nameless poison).<sup>4</sup>

Miyabe’s youthful experience and her education and training before becoming a professional novelist have influenced her fiction in the following ways. First, there is a

<sup>1</sup> Ōsawa Arimasa, *Enpara* (Entertainment Paradise) (Tokyo: Kōbunsha bunko, 2007):95.

<sup>2</sup> Chagi Norio, “Atogaki,” in *Henji wa iranai* by Miyabe Miyuki (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1994):280.

<sup>3</sup> Nagaya Hideo & Miyabe Miyuki, “Interview with Miyabe Miyuki,” *Hon to computer* 1, (Tokyo: Dainippon Insatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, Summer 1999).

<sup>4</sup> “Bokutachi no sukina Miyabe Miyuki,” *Bessatsu Takarajima* (Tokyo: Takarajimasha, Oct. 2003):130-133.

commitment to place/neighborhood Tokyo, which probably stems, in part, from her family's deep generational ties to the Fukagawa district.<sup>5</sup> Miyabe's stories are characterized by faithful and realistic descriptions of the city and its people, and this can be attributed, in part, to deeply engrained familial experience in neighborhood life. Second, Miyabe is of working class origin, and, to some extent, she regarded fiction writing as a craft. One of the aspects of her craft, for example, is her mastery of the representation of vernacular Tokyo speech, which can be attributed to her long years of transcribing Tokyo speech.<sup>6</sup> Third, her lack of a post-secondary university education led her to not place too much value on serious and foreign literature in the original. In short, Miyabe was free of preconceptions about literature. She has little interest in the self-obsession and introspection that mark many of the works of the modern Japanese literary canon. Instead, she seems free to attempt experiments in mixing genres of popular fiction in entirely original ways. Fourth, she is the product of her generation, a high-economic growth generation that had unprecedented access to various forms and quantities of popular entertainment: manga, historical novels, films, television, translations of foreign popular fiction, such as Stephen King's tales of horror, science fiction, and fantasy.<sup>7</sup> This enormous variety of popular entertainment has influenced Miyabe, and she has been particularly creative in incorporating contemporary forms of entertainment into her work. Fifth, Miyabe is also a product of her generation in the sense that her mystery fiction often deals with contemporary social problems in working class settings. There are very few writers of popular fiction who are capable of doing this.

Miyabe Miyuki's mystery fiction, then, represents an entirely unique confluence of literary and extra-literary influences. One can say that her work is highly realistic but at the same time she incorporates elements of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. It is often the case that the keys to the conclusion of her mysteries are based on science fiction-like or fantasy-like elements. Consequently, a puzzle solving schema seldom applies in her mystery fiction, if simply because the solution to the mysteries are so "off the wall" that readers cannot possibly guess the solution. Indeed, in her stories, the puzzle solving aspect is secondary. As will be shown below, one more important aspect of her fiction is the unordinary in the ordinary. At the same time, however, the lives of the people in her stories are depicted as ordinary lives. The protagonist can be the next door neighbor. These ordinary people are often accidentally involved in crimes.

What makes Miyabe's novels unique is the adaptation and mixture of genres. Despite her use of fantastical, non-realistic elements in her works, she, like Matsumoto Seichō, places greater emphasis on character development, place, and social context than on solving the crime. Hayashi Mariko, a writer, has observed that "Miyabe Miyuki is Matsumoto's eldest daughter" and that "she is his successor."<sup>8</sup> The critic Fukuda Kazuya has written that "Miyabe occupies much the same position in modern Japanese literature as Matsumoto Seichō" and that he feels a sense of relief and

<sup>5</sup> "Taikyokugu," <http://www.osawa-office.co.jp/index.shtml>, accessed 29 Nov., 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Miyabe, *Heisei okachi nikki*: 175.

<sup>7</sup> Ōta Hideo, "Watashi no Miyabe Miyuki ron," <http://homepage.nifty.com/yamamomo/sub1.htm>, accessed 17 May, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> "Miyabe Miyuki no 'Atama no naka' o daikōkai," *CREA* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, September 1, 2008): 46.

joy that she has maintained that position. Miyabe Miyuki has herself stated that she closely studied Matsumoto's work and that she looked up to him as though he were a heavenly body.<sup>9</sup> In her representations of place and accurate dialects and social registers as well as in her concern for contemporary social problems, Matsumoto's influence is palpable.

Although, Miyabe Miyuki's fiction follows the basic structure of mystery fiction, many of her works mix rational reasoning and the fantastic. In other words, her works usually contain socially conscious elements that are actually taking place in Japan at the time the story was written.

All together, Miyabe has won 10 prestigious prizes. At present count, she has published approximately sixty books, not including short stories and essays appearing in periodicals. It seems clear that both in terms of critical reception and popular sales, Miyabe is the preeminent representative of a new generation of mystery fiction writers in Japan.

### **Illustrations of Shitamachi Cityscapes**

*Tokyo shitamachi satsujin boshoku* is told from the perspective of a junior high school boy, Jun, whose father is a detective. They have just moved to *shitamachi* in Tokyo. There is a rumor in Jun's school that there lives a murderer in the new house by the river. The rumor is started because people had seen young women going into the house but no one ever saw them come out. Moreover, some people saw the man who lived there digging in his backyard, which suggested that he might have buried the women's bodies. Jun starts to investigate the mystery. Early in the novel, we see the evocation of the neighborhood to which Jun and Michio moved:

Two miracles occurred at the same time when Yagisawa Jun started his new life with his father Michio. One of them was that Michio found a rental property within the twenty three wards of Tokyo.... Their new house was located within the Jōtō Police division. It was between the Sumida River and Arakawa and overlooked Tokyo Bay. It is known as a "zero-meter area," which means an area at sea level.

Before they moved to this shitamachi area, Michio often recalled with nostalgia, "Living in shitamachi is very nice. There are so many traditional festivals!" However, despite Michio's expectations from his childhood, things were different these days; the area is popular for its location. It is now called the "water front," which denotes fancy living overlooking Tokyo Bay. Thus, many new developments are being planned, and parks and green areas are under construction. While there are still the traditional shitamachi houses and small factories that Michio was familiar with from his youth, new high-rise condos and large corporations have come to dominate the area.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Oku Senkō & Miyabe Miyuki, "Interview with Miyabe," *Ōru yomimono* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, Nov. 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Tokyo shitamachi satsujin boshoku* (Tokyo: Kappa Novels, 1990), pp. 10-11.

The two photographs below illustrate the kind of mixed use district Miyabe is describing. The photo on the left shows the “water front,” now a symbol of luxurious and stylish living. But mixed in among these developments of new condominiums and parks are older *shitamachi* neighborhoods typified by the photo on the right. Upon a closer walking view of the district, one sees that the lowland, “sea level” district of working class houses and shops still survive. It is these neighborhoods that maintain such traditional customs as “Matsuri,” though they are quite different from those of the old Edo of Nagai Kafū’s Sumidagawa.<sup>11</sup>



The novel *Riyū* (Reasons, 1998) is told from several different people’s perspectives. The first protagonist is Nobuko, a thirteen-year-old-girl, whose father runs an inn. She arrives at the police station and claimed that the murder suspect for the infamous killing of four in a condominium has been staying at her father’s inn. The suspect, Ishida Naozumi, has been very sick. The truth is that he is not the murderer. He was thought to be the prime suspect because prior to the incident, Ishida had a problem in acquiring the condominium apartment 2025 where the murders took place.

The murder took place on a stormy night in Tokyo. The whole family of four was brutally murdered in the apartment 2025 in one of the city’s high-rise condominiums. The room 2025 had a history of many unfortunate people. The victims were an old lady in a wheelchair, and a middle-aged couple. Also, a young man’s body that looked like the son of the family was found in the backyard of the condominium right below the room where the murders took place. The family was called the Koito family, and they owned 2025. However, a strange truth was uncovered in the investigation of this crime. The Koito family, who were supposed to have owned and resided in the apartment where the murder took place, was no longer there. The people killed at the condominium were a fake family consisting of strangers.

The brother of Takarai Ayako, Yasutaka, recalls that a little while before the killing in the room 2025, Ayako introduced her boyfriend, Yūji Yashiro, to her family. She was pregnant. However, Yashiro claimed that he had no intention of marrying her. He didn’t want a family of his

<sup>11</sup> Banno Shin, Personal communication (Tokyo: 2012).

own. Ayako decides to have the baby on her own though she knew that Yashiro was a sociopath. Ayako confesses the truth to Yasutaka. Yashiro Yūji killed three of his fake family members because Yashiro had conspired to make easy money. He secretly had contacted Ishida to pay him 10,000,000 yen, and in turn, he would have the fake family move out of the apartment. The motive of the murders was the detection of this deceit by other members. When Ayako visited Yashiro at the condo, it was right after Yashiro's murdering the three people. When Yashiro told Ayako to help him to hide the bloody bodies, Ayako could not take it anymore. Ayako pushed him off from the veranda of the condo on the seventeenth floor. Thus, there were two crimes committed; Yashiro killed three of his fake family members, and Ayako killed Yashiro.

The old lady in the wheelchair had been missing from a nursing home in Shizuoka prefecture for some time. She was a robbery victim. When she went out to do some shopping, she was attacked by a gang of boys. She hit her head on the pavement and lost her memory. While she was wandering around without any memory of her past, a man, Mr. Sunada, kindly took her under his care. He was the man who was killed in the same room. Her family had been looking for her.

The next speaker is the sister of Koito Shinji. The Koito family was the previous owner of 2025. She explains how her brother, whom she hasn't seen for many years, suddenly showed up and asked to borrow money. Knowing his wife's, Shizuko's, spendthrift ways, she refused. The sister describes the increasingly straitened circumstances under which the Koitos found themselves due in large part to Shizuko's psychological problem of shopping dependency.

A middle-aged couple tells of how Mr. Hayakawa, who is the president of a real-estate firm, helped them to keep their house. They used to own a toy shop in a small town. Because of the new discount stores in the area, their business went bankrupt.

Mr. Hayakawa was intent on using the Koitos and told them to hide for a while. Thus, the Koitos were on the run. By hindering the execution of the bank/court auction of condo 2025, Mr. Hayakawa prohibited or blocked the route for Ishida to occupy his property. If Ishida gave up the right to buy condo 2025, Mr. Hayakawa could buy the room very cheap and resell it for a large profit. This was the way he ran his business.

The trick was set up very slyly. It made it almost impossible for Ishida to obtain the condo. Hayakawa made up a fake lease agreement with the victims that was signed before Ishida's bid and had the victims live in condo 2025. Japanese real estate law requires a complicated process to prove the fact that the signing was done after the bidding, especially when there are actual people living in the property, and it takes forever to have the people evicted. Ishida needed the victims to be physically out for him to gain the right to obtain condo 2025. This was the reason why Ishida was considered as the prime suspect.

The story ends with an interview with Ishida a year later. The reason for Ishida's fleeing was that Ishida was an eyewitness to Ayako killing Yashiro. Because Ishida knew Ayako had a baby, he wanted to help her and the baby. In the end, Ayako surrenders to the police, and Ishida finally obtains the condo, which he puts up for sale right away. The final thoughts of Koito's son conclude the story. He confessed that he had visited the fake family several times. He was very

comfortable with them, so he wanted to move back into condo 2025. Then he wondered if he had gotten tired of the fake family, would he have killed them as Yashiro did?

The setting of *Riyū* is the Arakawa ward, a traditional working class district close to where Miyabe herself was brought up. The backgrounds of the people connected to condo 2025 are detailed and vividly drawn. In addition to the principals, there is the testimony of the isolated families living in the surrounding condo apartments. Often referred to by the numbers of their condos, they all occupy isolated positions high up on the air, separated from their neighbors. Indeed, as Kasai in 2024 states, one of the reasons her husband wished to live in this very expensive high rise building was to avoid the troublesome relationships that occur when living in traditional neighborhoods.

The families who live on the street level, the old couple who runs the tiny toy shop, Koito's sister who tutors students, the small restaurant owner Takarai, the local barkeeper, and so on are faced with a world gone insane with the fever of real estate speculation. The histories of all these families are described in detail, and we see that a number of these long-standing families are in danger of breaking up in the face of rising land prices. The fake family, a collection of victims of Japan's bubble economy and exploitation by Hayakawa, could never hope to live in such a splendid condo as 2025 under normal circumstances. Their personal backgrounds that brought this collection of different individuals to the condo are described in great detail, and their ultimate fates become all the more moving as the reader sees this fake family begin to cohere and care for each other like a real family.

The economic bubble burst in Japan in 1989 or thereabouts.<sup>12</sup> The good times had created a kind of hysteria with seemingly endless opportunities for making large amounts of money. Properties in old working class neighborhoods were suddenly worth unbelievable sums, and high rise apartment buildings and condominiums began to change the class compositions and textures of life of their surroundings. Before and after the bubble burst, these older urban neighborhoods were subject to extraordinary destructive impulses, as the isolated families in the high rises found their investments floundering and the traditional residents at street level were harassed by yakuza gangs and unscrupulous real estate brokers to abandon their homes and businesses. This is the situation that Miyabe Miyuki chronicles so accurately in her novel. Once again, we see how she has adapted the form of the mystery novel to deal with her contemporary reality; in this case, the extraordinary destructive effects on family and neighborhoods wrought by the 1980's bubble and its aftermath.

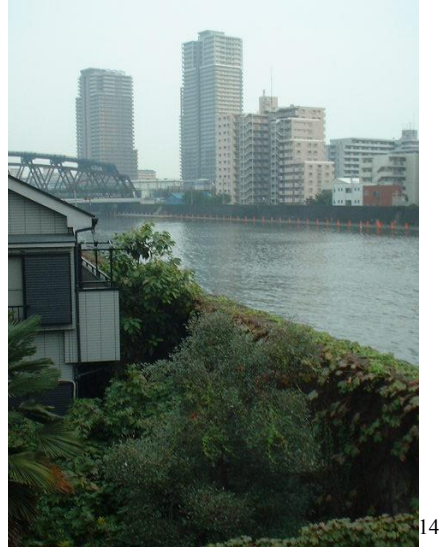
Though the actual address of the high rise is fictional, Miyabe's descriptions of the neighborhood call to mind immediately *shitamachi* working class neighborhoods invaded by monstrous high rise condominium buildings:

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<sup>12</sup> The ensuing discussion owes a great deal to Hirai Shūsei, "Miyabe Miyuki *Riyū* ni miru toshi no hyōshō," *Bulletin of Tokoha Gakuen*, vol. 34 (2003): 1-21.



It was a sunny day. From the platform of the North-Senju Station, the east and west towers of the New City Vandale Condominiums at Senju North rose like huge pillars of the gate forming a fantasy entrance to the sky.<sup>13</sup>



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However, surrounding this fantasy high-rise, which isolates the residents from the community below, is a real neighborhood with all its human entanglements that provide a “sense of place”:

The road to New City Vandale Condominiums at Senju North is lined on both sides by single family dwellings, their old mortar fading, and cooperative apartments with rusting iron stairs. A tin-roofed shop displays work clothes and cloth gloves. Vacant lots are overgrown with wild vegetation. Like an ideal appearing only in a dream, the two towers rose in a vision of purity above the confused mesh of low rooftops and electrical poles and wires of the factory district, exhausted from being exposed to the precipitous onset of economic recession.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Riyū* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1998 ), p. 63

<sup>14</sup> “Miyabe Miyuki *Riyū* no butai o aruku,”

<http://www.geocities.jp/yj3daicho/infosikou/eijyou/miyaberiyuu/riyuutop.htm>, accessed 27 June, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Riyū*, p. 64.



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“Hitojichi Kanon” is told from the point of view of a young woman, Tōyama Itsuko, who lives by herself. She is an office worker. A robbery she becomes involved in takes place in a small convenience store she visits on her way home to her apartment. The clerk is taken to the back room, and the robber, armed with a gun and wearing a black full-face helmet, takes all the money in the safe. The amount stolen was 5,000,000 yen. The thief dropped a baby rattle with a yellow duck drawn on it at the scene. A couple of days later, a young man, Sasaki Shūichi, becomes the main suspect for the robbery. Shūichi was a customer of the store and was famous for wearing a black full-face helmet and was seen carrying the baby toy with a duck on it.

The police finally arrest a man who had worked at the convenience store until a week before the robbery, and they found Sasaki Shūichi’s body buried in the mountains. The truth was that Sasaki Shūichi found the toy on the street. It belonged to an old man who had dementia, and Sasaki wanted to return it to him. The following describes this typical convenience store:

There are four corners to turn to get to Itsuko’s small apartment. At the first corner, there is a Bentō (boxed lunch) shop which closes at nine P.M every evening. At the second corner, there is a garage that tends to be making noise until midnight. However, this garage puts the light on the sign out early, and the street seems empty and dark. All she sees are the florescent street lamps.

When Itsuko turns the third corner, there is a small shopping area. But at one’clock in the morning, most of the stores are closed, except...there is one bright light in front of Itsuko other than the street lamps. The light is coming from the

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17 “Miyabe Miyuki *Riyū* no butai o aruku.” <http://www.geocities.jp/yj3daicho/infosikou/eijyou/miyabe-riyuu/riyuutop.htm>. Accessed 27 June 2013.

convenience store that is open 24 hours a day. The street is dark and still, but the convenience store is bright and shining.<sup>17</sup>



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The contemporary social aspect of the story has to do with the alienation from community that is a function of life in a big city like Tokyo. In short, people become indifferent to each other. It seems this is true of any big city. People don't pay attention to what others are doing. More and more, people come to value their freedom and individualism. Miyabe illustrates this with her depiction of the "convenience" of convenience store. These stores offer the perfect place to shop while keeping personal contact to a minimum. To make the situation worse, people tend to judge a person by his or her appearance. As Itsuko recalls "[I]f one of the clerks of 'Q&A' had known Sasaki's name and the reason for his carrying the baby toy, they would have noticed he wasn't abnormal; he was just an ordinary person with a kind heart. Would it have stopped the crime? Would he still alive? She didn't have the answer to it."<sup>19</sup>

*Kasha* is told from Honma Shunsuke's point of view. He is a detective and taking a long leave from his work due to the injury caused when he was after a criminal. One day, his deceased wife's nephew, Kurisaka Kazuya, asks Shunsuke to search for Kazuya's fiancée, who has suddenly disappeared.

Kazuya's fiancée's name is Sekine Shōko. It seems she ran away from Kazuya after he found out that she had once declared bankruptcy. Kazuya is broken hearted. Since Shunsuke is getting bored during his time off, he decided to help Kazuya to find his girlfriend. As Shunsuke proceeds on his search for the missing person, he finds out that the reason for her disappearance is not as simple as it looks.

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<sup>17</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Hitojichi kanon* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1996): 146-147

<sup>18</sup> Chino Hiroataka, *Nights in Tokyo* (Chiba: 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Miyabe, *Hitojichi kanon* (Tokyo: Bunshun Bunko, 2001): 30.

By the time she wrote *Kasha* (1992), Miyabe Miyuki had developed the capacity to transcend some of the genetic limitations of mystery fiction. The puzzle solving aspect of the novel is only of secondary importance. Midway through the novel, the tension of the plot is sacrificed in order to provide readers with Kyōko's, the murderer's, perspective, which of course, the detective is not aware of. Miyabe again emphasizes motivation of characters rather than the discovery of who committed the crime.

What is being taught through the novel has little to do with forensics or the deception practiced by the criminal; rather readers are informed concerning the overwhelmingly ordinary but severe problem of credit card debt. The real villain is predatory systems of the lending industry in Japanese society.

Miyabe Miyuki has succeeded in adapting the standard motif of adopting a new identity so prevalent in the postwar mystery fictions of Matsumoto Seichō and others and applying it to the contemporary problem of identity theft. In her portrayal of the rhythms of contemporary life in this novel, she proved herself to be a worthy successor not only to Matsumoto Seichō but also to Japan's tradition of realism.

Of course, integral to Japanese realism is description of physical environment. In *Kasha*, Miyabe accomplishes this in a manner evocative of contemporary cityscapes:

Honma Shunsuke stood by the door in the first coach of the commuter train. He grasped the pole with his right hand and held a folded umbrella in his left hand.

At three o'clock in the afternoon on a weekday, the train carried very few passengers. There were many empty seats. Shunsuke closely observed every passenger in the coach. There were two girls in their school uniform, a middle aged lady drowsing, slouched over her large purse, and a young fellow swaying to the rhythm of the music from his headphones.<sup>20</sup>

Or again:

While Shunsuke was lost in thought, the rain kept falling. It didn't seem like it would turn into a downpour; however, the rain drops hitting the windows of the train looked large and very cold. The passing houses also seemed cold, as if hunched up against the chill. Once it snows and the gray, cold looking rows of old houses are buried in white fluffy snow, it will be like they're wearing warm white cotton blankets.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Kasha* (Tokyo: Sōyō-sha, 1992): 5.

<sup>21</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Kasha*, 7.



## Conclusion

The appeal of mystery fiction is based on a number of factors but most particularly on its ability to respond in a relatively realistic manner to historical, technological, and societal change. To portray this change in her mystery fiction, Miyabe employs very detailed and precise descriptions of identifiable neighborhoods in Tokyo. It is her commitment to portraying neighborhood Tokyo that gives her work substance.

In Miyabe's stories, there is a commitment to place/neighborhood Tokyo which probably stems, in part, from her family's deep generational ties to the Fukagawa district. Miyabe's stories are characterized by faithful and realistic descriptions of the city and its people, and this can be attributed, in part, to deeply engrained familial experience in neighborhood life. Miyabe retrieves her readers' background knowledge skillfully by using the detailed description of the scenery where her story takes place. She has distinguished herself among popular Japanese mystery writers in her descriptions of contemporary Tokyo and its environs.

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<sup>22</sup>Doukyou, "Shashin kyōjin no hitorigoto 5," <http://doukyou.exblog.jp/>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

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