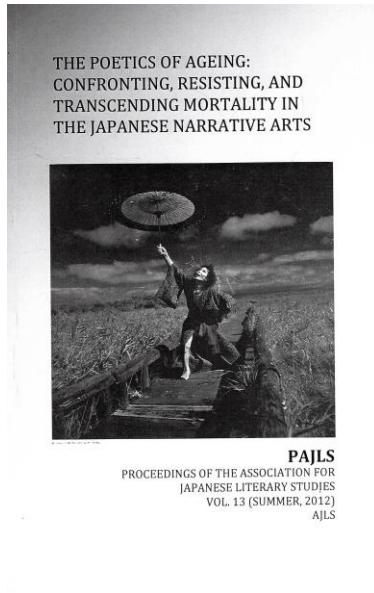


“Kirino Natsuo, the Grotesque Double Life of a Business Woman”

Paola Scrolavezza 

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Kirino Natsuo, The Grotesque Double Life of a Business Woman

Paola Scrolavezza
Alma Mater Studiorum – Bologna University

We, the women, do feel like strangers in Japan.
(Kirino Natsuo, Mantua, September 11th, 2010)

I saw the Marlboro Hag at Maruyama-chō – in front of the statue of Jizō, the gentle Buddhist bodhisattva, protector of those condemned to hell and all who wander between realms. The Marlboro Hag got her name because she was always wearing a flimsy jacket with a white Marlboro logo on the back. She was well known around the office. She had to be around sixty years old. Maybe she was a loony, but she always stood next to the Jizō statue and called out to the men who walked past. Because of the rain tonight, her cheap Marlboro jacket was soaked and her black bra showed through underneath. Not a single man presented himself, but she stood there beside the Jizō as always, like some kind of ghost. She would most likely stay on the streets until the day she died. Once you get fired as a call girl, you have no choice but to go out trolling for your own men. As I stared at the Marlboro Hag's back, I was terrified that a similar fate awaited me in the not-so-distant future.¹

Figures show that Japan is an ageing country, apparently caught in an irreversible process doomed to affect families and employment. As Jeff Kingston reports, in 1999 there were 21 million Japanese over 65 out of a population of 126 million. Family is no longer a pot capable of holding the flood that is overflowing all social embankments. In 2025 demographers expect Japan to have the world's oldest population. It is estimated

¹ Natsuo Kirino, *Grotesque* (London: Vintage, 2007), 357-58.

that 4.3 per cent of the population will be over 85, a five-fold increase from 1965.

I am led to think that Japanese society is bound to collapse gradually. For instance, fewer people get married, the number of *singles* increases and consequently fewer women have children. Recently, one piece of news has caused an uproar: it has been discovered that a hundred of centenarians were not alive anymore, in other words, they were still existing for the register office only because their sons had not reported their decease and continued drawing their pension. It is an absurd story! That is why I am led to think that Japan is going to degrade.²

Japanese society's rapid greying is due to a drop in fertility, the ageing of the baby boomers born soon after World War II, and a sharp rise in life expectancy. In particular, life expectancy for women rose from 54 in 1947 to 83 by 1995.³ This has important consequences for traditional family relationships, already affected by the rising rates of divorce, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, suicide, and teenage prostitution. A growing instability generates uncertainty while simultaneously opening new and unexpected spaces of freedom. For example, the *White Paper on Social Welfare* in 1998 reported that women then were more inclined to delay marriage than men. Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1996 indicated a change in women's attitudes towards marriage: by 1990 only 13.8 per cent of Japanese women viewed marriage as 'a woman's happiness' (*josei no kōfuku* 女性の幸福), down from 39.7 per cent in 1972 and 30.4 per cent in 1984.⁴

² Kirino Natsuo, interview with the author of this paper, Mantua, September 11th 2010.

³ Jeff Kingston, *Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social change and civil society in the twenty-first century*, (New York: Routledge Courzon, 2004), 291.

⁴ Quoted in Yoko Tokuhiko, *Marriage in Contemporary Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 20.

In my view, Japanese women are being committed to survive but they neglect the problem of sexuality; in this sense, the decrease of birth rate might be a sort of women's revenge by those who refuse to have children in order not to make their lives even more difficult. When a woman bears a baby, she becomes an integrating and integral part of the legend of motherhood. But nowadays this system does not work any longer. I think that working women have difficulty taking care of a household and children, thus they try to turn against the system by refusing motherhood and, before that, rejecting sex.⁵

Women are redefining marriage and family, seeking a way to fulfil their aspirations for happiness within and without marriage, rejecting conventional, established roles, claiming the right to pursue a career. Yet the spectre of the end of fertility that for women represents—much earlier than for men—the first step towards old age, remains a threshold of bodily decay and the end of sexuality that they cannot avoid passing through.

How is the older female body depicted in contemporary Japanese women's literature? Ageing represents a fundamental turning point in a woman's life, and, in recent years, it has been casting multiple shades on contemporary women's culture, especially the performing arts, photography, literature. Through the cruel gaze of the viewer, often a man, time's passing is imprinted on the body and soul of single women, whose steps echo all through the empty architectural space of the city that no longer is conceived to hold them: anonymous coffee bars, convenience stores one like another, deserted sidewalks. They are broken identities, wandering across the metropolis, desperately trying to engrave a sign, to make a mark of their existence.

In *Grotesque* I dealt with a very sorrowful case, because, as a matter of fact, I took into consideration the problems of women living in Japan. In *Out I*

⁵ Natsuo Kirino, interview with the author of this paper, Mantua, September 11th 2010.

analyzed housewives' difficulties, whereas in *Grotesque* I examined the tragedy of sexuality for working women. I have meant to reflect on this issue because it has touched me profoundly. In the case of *Real World*, the main character kills his wife but the story is focused on the difficulties of teenagers, oppressed by moulds that are too tight. That is my goal: to reflect on the sorrowful condition of women in Japanese society.⁶

Grotesque (『グロテスク』, 2003) by Kirino Natsuo 桐野夏生 (1951-) is based on a true story of a single woman who lives a double life: during the day she is a business woman in a prestigious consulting firm, but at night she works as a prostitute. Kazue apparently is a successful woman, who has refused marriage and traditional roles of wife and mother. But inside her, the teenager she once was keeps on surviving – ridiculed, humiliated, marginalized by her playmates, ignored by boys, suppressed by the strict sense of duty inculcated in her by an overly severe father. In the nights she gets rid of the sober managerial cloths and a different woman comes to life, created in the image and likeness of the seductive Yuriko, a former classmate, daughter of a Japanese woman and a European man, ambiguous beauty, disquieting, irresistible. Monstrous. But somehow the body and the face much more resemble the grotesque Marlboro Hag who has descended the stairs of prostitution and spends her nights soliciting a few clients at the corner of the road. Kazue will end up killed, strangled at the age of thirty-nine by a young Chinese illegal immigrant, escaped from his rural village and dazzled by the artificial lights of the hyper-modern metropolis of Japan.

The rate of women in managerial positions in Japan is much lower than in other advanced countries: fewer than 10 per cent of managers at Japanese firms are women, which means that insurmountable gender barriers are still erected. Kazue is one of the managers. And like many she is *single*. According to statistics, there is a clear correlation between the choice not to marry—or to

⁶ Ibid.

delay marriage—and educational attainment.⁷

As Naoko Takemaru notes, there are a large number of derogatory words and phrases to ridicule single women past *tekireiki* 適齢期 (the period of marriageable age, in their mid- to late 20s) in Japanese: *urenokori* 売れ残り (unsold merchandise), *ikiokure* 行き遅れ (late to marry), *ikazu goke* 行かず後家 (widow without marrying), just to quote the most popular ones. And then there is *kurisumasu kēki* クリスマスケーキ (Christmas cake), a coinage from the 1980s, which likens single women to fancy cakes that people in Japan consume on or before, but rarely after, Christmas day (the 25th). And if it is true that derogatory terms are becoming less frequently used in urban areas that have relatively large populations of single women in their 30s, one should not forget that there are no pejorative terms for single men past *tekireiki*.⁸

In other words, whether to marry or stay single should be a very personal matter, but in Japanese society it is not regarded as such. During the 1990s, the number of single women past *tekireiki* has increased steadily, and the expression *toshikoshi soba* 年越しそば (buckwheat noodles consumed on New Year's Eve) has replaced *kurisumasu kēki*. Now, single women are likened to buckwheat noodles that in Japan are traditionally consumed on New Year's Eve for longevity. And nobody wants either *toshikoshi soba* or single women after the 31st.⁹

That means that long before menopause, which is the beginning of a woman's non-fertile age, women enter phase one of what we could define as pre-oldness. The expressions mentioned above perfunctorily describe physical decay through the metaphor of spoiled – cake or soup – food. Physical decay accompanies the renunciation of sexuality in the cultural imagination. Kazue looks for an escape from these schemes in sex for sale, in increasingly squalid hotel rooms, in dark and narrow alleys.

Someone speak to me. Call out to me and take me

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Naoko Takemaru, *Women in the Language and Society of Japan. The Linguistic Roots of Bias* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), 157.

⁹ Ibid, 158-59.

out. Please, please, I'm begging you, say something kind to me.

Tell me I'm pretty, tell me I'm sweet.

Invite me out for coffee, or more...

Tell me that you want to spend the day with me and me alone.

As I continued on my way along the Ginza streets, I gazed pointedly into the eyes of the men I encountered, beseeching them wordlessly. But every man who happened to glance in my direction quickly averted his eyes with an irritated look. They would have nothing to do with me.

I turned off the main avenue and darted down a side street. Women who looked like they worked in hostess bars brushed passed me, their faces thick with makeup, the air around them heavy with perfume. These women refused to look at me too, assuming I'd accidentally stumbled onto their turf. They only had eyes for men – potential customers.¹⁰

The city scheme provides spaces that are socially and sexually bounded: in the outskirts, in slums, there is place for misfits, immigrants, women, people excluded from the center of the power, be it economic or social. Those seeking degradation deceive themselves by finding a space of freedom. They are grotesque characters, excessive, somehow “wrong.” The best definition of the margin has been provided by Shimada Masahiko 島田雅彦 (1961-), writer, journalist, director and screenwriter for cinema, theater and television. Provocative, irreverent, today one of the most interesting voices within the cultural Japanese landscape, he opines that everything starts from the periphery. That margin, born as a result of the escalation of capitalism, now expands its surface on earth like a spreading desert.

Periphery is a place where history ceases and time and space lose their meanings. That's why boredom and alienation are the main traits of the periphery.

¹⁰ Natsuo Kirino, *Grotesque*, 370-71.

There are only two ways out: one is suicide whereas the other is writing. I have chosen the latter. I was 14, as the same age as Anna Frank, when I began to deal in literature, to keep a diary, to note and drive my dreams, that is, to fight the suicidal instinct. Tokyo's periphery is where I was born, and where I lived in my gas chamber.¹¹

The urban periphery becomes the location of crime, as a breakthrough into what is commonly perceived as *mankind*. Hallucinated atmospheres, suffocating alleys: urban reality is caught in its darkest aspects. Inspiration is drawn from news about crime or from metropolitan tales. In this and in many other forms, the metropolitan reality has overtaken the literary page; cities are not just a background, but the protagonist of a narrative that is unstoppable in its making. The post-modern or hyper-modern subjects face these phenomena and in them and through them they perceive their own condition of alienation and loss. Reality, hallucination, utopia, nightmare. In this context, writing, once again, discovers its own thaumaturgic potentiality and does not hesitate to measure itself against human and world sensorial distortions. The *noir* today, in this sense, seems to impose itself as a privileged genre. And the narrative structure of the *detective story* is back again even in tales that technically cannot be considered such: perhaps because at the heart of the so called *mal de vivre* is a loss, of self, of steady models. And writing can only configure itself as research.

The space where the female characters of Kirino Natsuo's novels move—is a *noir* of peripheries, a marginal place, a translation into iconic and physical terms of the marginalization of the characters who pass through. Reading Kirino means discovering the reality of Japan and today's Tokyo, as narrated with ruthlessly clear thought, without the filter of a more or less mannered exoticism. It is a town that the writer does indeed love.

Firstly, I do like Tokyo very much. It is amusing and

¹¹ Interview, accessed on February 6, 2011, <http://www.nonluoghi.info/old/masahiko.html>.

every day, walking its streets, I feel happy to live there. I am convinced I am not the only woman to think that. For some, life in Tokyo is too hard perhaps. Notwithstanding, its being chaotic and confused amuses us. I think that the metropolis is suitable for women. I am used to writing stories about women. I often narrate women who suffer. But my readers gather from the lines that such women love Tokyo.¹²

Being born and living as a woman in Japanese society is an extremely difficult thing. This is because a woman in Japan is never herself, but always something else, the reflection of what men want, desire and dream. Suddenly a mechanism sets off that leads them to commit extreme acts, breaking with the rules and traditions (as in *OUT*, her most famous novel¹³). Kirino is a master in melding the *suspense* of a detective story with acute psychological and social analysis: crime is a breakthrough, a lack of morality and values that allows us to illuminate deep aspects of reality. The writer uses them to redesign the literary image of Japanese woman, inscribing her by way of her outlines of real living and working women.

Kazue, *Grotesque*'s main character, seems to personify the grotesque body, as Bakhtin defined it, as "a symbol of biological and social irregular interchange." She is unmarried, near the end of her fertile age. By choosing excess, she breaks the edges of gender and sexuality. She is not a mother, nor a wife. She is a prostitute—anorexic, engaged in an obsessive search for painful sexuality.

The Japanese language has a wide variety of terms to denote females and males. For instance, *onna* 女 (woman) and *otoko* 男 (man) are the informal terms that refer to an adult woman and an adult man. But, as Naoko Takemaru has pointed out, *onna* has more negative and sexual undertones than *otoko*.¹⁴ This is perhaps

¹² Natsuo Kirino, interview with the author of this paper, Mantua, September 11th 2010.

¹³ Natsuo Kirino, *Out: A Novel* (London: Vintage, 2005).

¹⁴ Takemaru, *Women*, 116.

a “remnant of the *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 (good wives and wise mothers) mentality,” which can still be observed in various spheres of life in contemporary Japan. For middle-aged women, there are expressions like *chūnen josei* 中年女性 (without a particular nuance) and *toshima* 年増, with a negative connotation dating back to the Edo period, when this term was used for prostitutes who were past their prime.¹⁵ Lastly there is the *oni baba* 鬼婆, an ogre disguised as a cruel and merciless old woman that frequently appears in Japanese folk tales. But *oni baba* today is also the derogatory term for an elderly woman, like *babā* 婆, or *kuso babā* 糞婆, derived from *baba* 婆 (old woman), which has a less negative undertone.

There are very few Japanese words and phrases to denote the age of women, particularly those in their 30s and older, without negative undertones.¹⁶

Kazue’s life and image are built in relation to models offered by Yuriko and the witch Marlboro: the former is a sort of “hybrid,” in which her mother’s “oriental” traits and father’s “western” traits blend, resulting in an ambiguous and disquieting appeal. Recalling the mermaids’ song of *eroguro nansensu*, the latter is *Maruboro bāsan* マルボロ婆さん, the old hag, the woman who crosses the threshold of oldness and nevertheless presents herself as a sexual object according to a scheme that can be associated only with youth. They are both grotesque, excessive figures. In the contemporary world, such representations of a women’s ageing as “monstrous” overlaps with a destabilizing image of woman that escapes role and gender classifications.

I hurried down Dogenzaka in the grips of a new plan. I needed to find a department store so I could go in one of the restrooms there and touch up my makeup. I was going to horn in on the Marlboro Hag’s business. I had no problem standing around for hours at a time. I’d wanted to have my own

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 175.

clientele. And since I'd been fired from the hotel escort service, now seemed like the time to get started. Moreover, there was no better time than the present to get past all the bitterness I had tasted today.

I could see the 109 Building. It stood like a veritable beacon of fashion at the crotch of a Y-shaped intersection: Dogenzaka on one side and the road leading to the Tokyu Department Store shopping arcade on the other. Throngs of people poured through the streets on both sides of the building. I pushed myself past young men scoping out the girls in their midst and clawed my way through clumps of office ladies engrossed in shopping. Finally I reached the restroom on the basement floor. The room was teeming with young women, but I staked out a place for myself in front of one of the mirrors and began coating my face with makeup. I painted my eyelids with blue eyeshadow and slathered on lipstick even redder than usual on my lips. The pièce de resistance, of course, was the black wig that I had tucked away in my shoulder bag. My transformation was complete. Yuri-san stood before the mirror, hotel call girl *par excellence*, ready to take on the night. While I stared at the change in myself, I felt my hearth throb with confidence. I don't need that stinking agency. I'll handle my own business.

I felt the same sense of accomplishment and triumph I'd experienced earlier, when Yoshizaki had affirmed my value. Now I was ready to acknowledge my own worth, to set my own price. The time had come for me to take charge. No form, no agency, no escort dispatcher. I was going to stand on my own two feet, and I was going to start by standing in front of that Jizō statue. There I would be able to be myself, to be free. I wondered why I had earlier felt sorry for the Marlboro Hag. She was a woman to be respected, a woman

among woman after all.¹⁷

On the edge of the city, in those liminal spaces in which characters waste their lives, a new female subject comes to life, capable of releasing herself from the marginalization to which contemporary society has banished her. Kirino reframes a male stereotype recurrent in representations of female oldness, from the image of *yamanba* to the subsequent revisions of *eroguru nansensu*, and tries—not through an external perspective but through one coming from the inside—to overturn it, speaking out against a society that still rejects “diversity.”

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¹⁷ Kirino, *Grotesque*, 387-88.