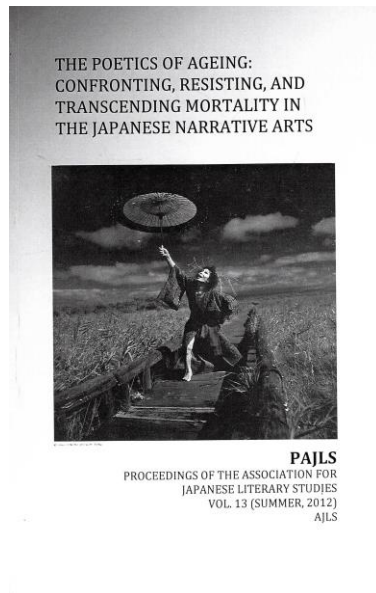


# “Tanabe Seiko’s ‘Ubazakari’ Series: Old Women Enjoy Their Lives”

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*The Poetics of Ageing: Confronting, Resisting, and Transcending Mortality in the Japanese Narrative Arts.*

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# Tanabe Seiko's "Ubazakari" Series: Old Women Enjoy Their Lives

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## Introduction

Tanabe Seiko's "Ubazakari" (Old Women in Full Bloom) series, which debuted in *Shōsetsu shinchō* (The New Tide of Fiction) in 1979, portrays a lively seventy-six year-old heroine named Yamamoto Utako. Utako's free spirited personality and sharp tongue quickly gained the series popularity among female readers, and it continued for over twenty years.<sup>1</sup> The stories of Utako's life and those of the elderly people around her are humorously narrated in the Osaka dialect. Utako's husband, the owner of a textile company in Osaka, has long since passed away. Now, having handed the business to her eldest son, Utako is free; she feels that she has been released from her familial obligations. She enjoys her life as a single woman. She lives in an expensive apartment in Kobe and teaches calligraphy a few times a week at a local culture center. She takes English conversation lessons, travels overseas alone, goes to see the Takarazuka Review and sings karaoke with her friends. With the Takarazuka music school's slogan "*kiyoku tadashiku utsukushiku*" (Pure, Proper and Beautiful) as her motto, she lives independently and elegantly.

The "Ubazakari" series, dealing as it does with the sexuality of elderly people, elderly care, marriage fraud, elderly people's dating, etc., is a perfect conduit to the examination of the idea of an aging society. In this paper, I will discuss the literary and cultural values of this work; and by focusing on the portrayal of Utako, I will reveal the female culture of the eighties that forms the context of the piece, examining the factors which motivated Tanabe to create this charming, outrageous, and powerful heroine.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Ubazakari" series was published in *Shōsetsu shinchō* irregularly. The series was compiled in four volumes with different titles, *Ubazakari* (between 1979 and 1981), *Ubatokimeki* (Old Woman in Love, 1982-1984), *Ubaikare* (Old Woman in Bliss, 1985-1987) and *Ubagatte* (Selfish Old Woman, 1991-1993).

## Ageism in Literature

Since Tanabe Seiko (born in Osaka in 1928) received the Akutagawa award for her *Senchimental jāni* (Sentimental Journey) in 1964, she has produced a tremendous amount of essays and fiction. Written in a casual and humorous tone of voice, her writing has been widely supported by a female audience. Aside from her fame as a popular writer, she is also known as an expert on classical Japanese literature: she has published modern translations of several literary works including *The Tale of Genji*. She has also written biographies of female literary figures, including Yoshiya Nobuko, who was a popular writer and feminist who influenced Japanese modern female culture through her writing.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that Tanabe has established her position in the Japanese literary world and garnered respect for her writings, the study of her literary works has been insufficient. Recently, however, Tanabe's literature has come into the spotlight. In 2005, the twenty-four volume Tanabe Seiko Complete Works was released by Shūeisha. The following year, Kan Satoko edited a special issue on Tanabe Seiko for *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō*. Among the key topics that were discussed in this issue was Tanabe's feminism. Although the "Ubazakari" series is light hearted, it certainly contains serious gender issues and is an important text through which to examine culture and society.

When Tanabe wrote "Ubazakari" (the first episode of the series) in 1979, she was fifty-one years old. Tanabe states that what motivated her was a desire to empower women and obliterate "the conventional image of an elderly woman," and that she also wanted to depict "a beautiful silver lady who is elegant, bold, and invincible to younger women in terms of power and sexuality."<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the "Ubazakari" series appeared in the late seventies, when the issue of elderly care had just begun to receive media attention. Ariyoshi Sawako's *Kōkotsu no hito* (The Twilight Years) shocked readers in 1972, suddenly

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<sup>2</sup> Seiko Tanabe, *Yume haruka Yoshiya Nobuko* (Endless Dreams Yoshiya Nobuko) (Asahi shinbun sha, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Tanabe Seiko, "Sekiyō kagirinaku yoshi," in *Tanabe Seiko zenshū* vol. 17 (Shūeisha, 2005), 670.

awakening Japanese people to the seriousness of the issue of aging. This bestselling book revealed problems that had been hidden deep inside the *ie* (family)—the “shameful” reality of aged parents who had gone senile. The story depicted a daughter-in-law’s horrific experience with the care of her elderly in-laws. What scared people the most was not just the reality of senility, but the unpleasantness of the family situation, which could happen to anybody. Such terms as 寝たきり老人 (the bed ridden elderly) and ボケ老人 (senile old person) came to be widely used. The word 介護 (elderly care) appeared in *Kōjien* dictionary in 1983 for the first time.<sup>4</sup> In the eighties, society and the government realized the necessity of being prepared for the aging society that was soon to arrive.

Tanabe Seiko’s “Ubazakari” series addressed these issues from a different perspective than that of Ariyoshi. In “Ubazakari,” the problems that revolve around aging are present; however, Tanabe’s focus was not simply to expose the depressing reality. Her goal was to focus on ordinary lives of elderly people and, in particular, elderly women’s culture, which had rarely been featured in mass media or literature. Kan Satoko points out that “aging has been discussed in the context of Japanese male society for a long time. Women have been excluded from the category of old people.”<sup>5</sup> I agree with Kan’s point. Tanabe exposes the problematic structure of society and the modern Japanese family system (近代家族), which impose a heavy burden on housewives and elderly women under the dictates of “familial love,” which I will explain later.

### Feminism in the “Ubazakari” Series

The first episode of “Ubazakari” opens with a display of Utako’s anger. She explains the biased way in which an elderly woman living alone in an apartment is viewed. She gets upset when a policeman, who kindly visits her, calls her *obāchan* and

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<sup>4</sup> Kasuga Kisuyo, “Kazoku kaigo no mirai,” in *Shōsetsu Tripper* (Asahi shinbunsha, 1998), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Kan Satoko, “Yūmoa to hiyōseishin: ‘Ubazakari’ shirīzu, ‘Shihon Genji Monogatari shirīzu o megutte,” in *Tanabe Seiko zenshū* vol.17 (Shūeisha, 2005), 696.

shows his concern that she must be lonely. Utako claims “I have retired, but I am still a business woman. How dare he call me obachan.” She refuses to be treated as a cute and vulnerable elderly woman. She states that the reason why she “puts on trendy clothes and makes herself look neat and fashionable” (Tanabe 1981, 20) is precisely because she is fighting against such stereotypes.

The episode also emphasizes Utako’s matriarchal power in her family. Not only does she refuse to be taken care of by her sons, but she also bluntly says what she thinks to them. Utako calls her late husband “*akantare*” (an Osaka expression, meaning “idiot”), emphasizing how much he needed and relied upon her. Utako enjoys her single life now, stating “it makes me depressed to think of having put up living with a man who would constantly be around in the same room.” (Tanabe 1981, 11) This first episode is a perfect introduction of Utako, a free spirited and independent elderly heroine.

Utako repeatedly states that only at the age of sixty did she finally achieve freedom. When she was younger, she was a typical domestic woman. As the wife of the son of a business owner in Osaka, she had various roles that she had to fulfill; she was a dutiful daughter-in-law, a wife in a merchant family, and the mother of three sons. Her life was solely devoted to the prosperity of her family and the protection of the family business. When the enterprise was on the verge of failure during the war, Utako worked hard to revive it and pushed it forward.

Now Utako feels that she has been liberated and has finally achieved a “golden age.” She states, “I thank the war. Without the war, I would have been bonded by the old conventions of Senba ... The war was horrible, but it demolished bad old things.”<sup>6</sup> She is free from the *ie*. She is also free from her own female body. She is no longer be bothered by female physical issues such as menstruation and menopause. She is free from the idea of reproduction. In society and culture, the lack of reproductive capability in women, and of financial productivity in men, is looked upon as weakness and elderly people suffer from the stigma that they lack social functions and require care from

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<sup>6</sup> Tanabe, *Ubazakari*, 184.

their children and society.<sup>7</sup> However, Utako views old age positively and lives as she pleases.

Each episode includes Utako's friends, not all of them living as freely as Utako. Although her friends seem to be living enjoyable and cheerful lives, they all have problems or issues at home. Wakita Tsune, for instance, is the wife of a controlling man who considers a wife's primary job to be taking care of her husband. She even needs his permission to take calligraphy lessons from Utako. After having put up with her husband's selfish behavior for a long time, Tsune starts to contemplate divorce. However, one day her husband collapses from cerebral hemorrhage and becomes paralyzed. Seventy-three-year-old Tsune devotes herself to the care of her husband; she feeds him, cleans him and helps him change clothes every day, in addition to her daily domestic chores. She even quits the calligraphy lessons that she loved so much. Tsune, in a letter addressed to Utako, states, "Men have time to retire, but why are women never be able to retire from work?"<sup>8</sup>

In mass media, paralyzed *netakiri* elderly people are viewed sympathetically. However, Tanabe does not give the condition of Tsune's husband the sympathetic portrayal that paralyzed *netakiri* elderly people traditionally receive in mass media. Instead, she ignores it. Her focus is on the predicament of the wife who is the caregiver. Behind the comical tone, Tanabe projects a cruel reality in which women suffer doubly during their husbands' post retirement years. According to Kasuga Kisuyo, the *ie* system, which assigned a son's wife to be the caretaker of his parents, has substantially collapsed; and now, a new type of family structure that values affection over obligation has become the mainstream. The wife of the son is no longer obligated to take charge of her in-laws' care. It has become the aged wife's job to serve the role of caretaker of her husband. Women of older generations are trapped between the traditional *ie* system and the idea of the modern family. In the story, the invisibility of the

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Coming of Age*, Simon de Beauvoir states, "I have never come across one single woman, either in life or in books who has looked upon her old age cheerfully." (297)

<sup>8</sup> Tanabe, *Ubagatte*, 190.

wives' suffering and sacrifice is stressed when Tsune suddenly passes away. Although her son praises Tsune by remarking how devoted she was to her family and how loving a mother and wife she was, he does not understand her true feelings and the physical and emotional burdens that she endured behind her good, devoted mother image.

Mrs. Hasegawa is another example. Mrs. Hasegawa's hobby is karaoke. Whenever she sings in front of her friends, she always wears "a dress like a parachute," and immerses herself in her singing.<sup>9</sup> Like "a giant whale, her body stretches upward and swings right and left, as her fat arms wave in tune with her singing."<sup>10</sup> She has been practicing her favorite song, "Futari zake" (Couple's Wine), an *enka* which depicts the love and care of a husband for his wife for two months in preparation for the upcoming community karaoke contest. A week before the contest, however, an incident occurs. Ms. Hasegawa calls Utako in tears saying that her husband has gotten sick and has forbidden her from attending the contest, so that she can stay home and to take care of him. He has cut the shiny dress that she was going to wear to the contest into pieces. It is ironic that the song that she has been enthusiastically practicing is about a perfect married couple, but this image only exists in the world of karaoke.

Utako becomes furious, proclaiming "I cannot tolerate this anymore! . . . Why do women always have to be *Kannon* (merciful goddesses)? Our roles as goddesses should include time for retirement."<sup>11</sup> She tells Ms. Hasegawa to threaten her paralyzed husband by telling him a story about an American couple she read about in the papers; a fat wife jumped on her husband during a fight and accidentally choked him to death. The story about Mrs. Hasegawa is humorously concluded; however, the issue that Tanabe dealt with here is serious. Many women are overwhelmed with domestic work and unable to escape from their expected domestic roles. Utako's anger represents ordinary women's true voices.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 193.

Utako's biting language and unconventional attitude point out the unfairness of society from an ordinary woman's perspective. In one scene in which Utako touches upon the tradition of female submission, Utako insists that the proverb, "A woman has no home of her own in the three worlds," is nothing but a means for men to control women.

To hell with the teaching of women's submission!  
It is a vicious male plot to deprive women of  
wealth and pride. Men have succeeded in doing it.  
But now, women have information. Increasing  
numbers of women don't succumb to social  
pressure and they say 'to hell with society.'<sup>12</sup>

The story's humor increases in step with Utako's outrage. Humor is a means by which to criticize society and touch upon taboo issues; with it Utako fights against tradition and conventions that have oppressed women.

Tanabe's perspectives on women's issues resonate with what feminists dealt with in the late seventies and early eighties. Various grass root organizations fought for reproductive rights, access to childcare and equal job opportunities. In the eighties, the academic world took note of women's issues stating them from perspectives of class, race and sexual orientation.<sup>13</sup> The public began to acknowledge the term "feminism." When the popular writer Hayashi Mariko had a heated debate with singer and commentator Agnes Chan because Agnes brought her baby to a TV studio, women's opinions (whether her action indicated a lack of professionalism or a mother's right) were divided, and the incident was enthusiastically covered by mass media.<sup>14</sup> The issues dealt with in the "Ubazakari" series represented those of contemporary women. Tanabe's messages were her reaction to what was being discussed in society: a positive understanding of elderly sexuality, reproduction as a woman's choice, the importance of releasing women from domestic obligations, etc.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>13</sup> Tanaka, 349.

<sup>14</sup> Tanaka, 250.



Saitō Minako held that “though most of the people probably did not realize it, Tanabe was a “*libu na onna*” (a woman who shares similar values with women’s lib activists).<sup>15</sup>

Tanabe’s feminism is characterized by her humor and wit, as witnessed not only in the stories, but also in the titles of some of the episodes. For instance, Tanabe combined two words, “姥 (*uba*, old female) and ざかり (*zakari*, flourishing), subverting the conventional use of “flourish” in connection with young women (“娘ざかり [*musume zakari*]”). The practice of 姥捨て (*ubasute*, abandoning elderly women), which indicates the horrific old custom of northern villages where younger villagers left their aged mothers in the mountains in times of famine in order to help the rest of the family to survive,<sup>16</sup> is parodied with one story’s title, “爺捨ての月” (*Jijisute no tsuki*, “The Moon to Watch for—on Abandon Elderly Men Day”). Such word play makes us realize how many ideas associated with elderly women are negative, condescending, and biased. Tanabe’s feminist tactic of word play reminds us of Yoshiya Nobuko, who similarly made political statements by playfully entitling her works in a provocative manner; *Otto no teisō* (A Husband’s Chastity) and *Onna no kaikyū* (Women’s Class) are good examples. Tanabe’s feminism utilizes humor, softly but poignantly challenging society.

Despite the feminist quality of her works, however, we cannot help but think that the portrayal of Utako is overly optimistic; for Utako’s position as an independent and powerful

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<sup>15</sup> Saitō Minako, “Tanabe Seiko ni manabu otona no onna no tame no essei kōza,” in *Tanabe Seiko: Sengo bungaku e no shin shikaku*, Kan Satoko, ed., (Shibundō, 2006), 180-92: 192). There is a critical view of Tanabe’s feminism. Ida Yuko is uneasy discussing Tanabe’s works in the context of feminism because there are many aspects that do not follow the theory of feminist argument; “I am not saying that Tanabe’s literature and feminism contradict each other. They slightly overlap but are looking at different directions.” (178) “Tanabe Seiko to feminizumu,” in *Tanabe Seiko: Sengo bungaku eno shinshikaku*, ed. Kan Satoko (Shibundō, 2006), 172-79.

<sup>16</sup> The *ubasute* practice is depicted in *Narayama bushikō* (*The Ballad of Narayama*), written by Fukazawa Shichirō, which was later adapted into a film directed by Imamura Shōhei in 1983.

person is mainly the result of her fortunate financial and family background. For aged women to live powerfully, financial security, familial support and good health are essential. How many elderly people can have all of these? Even if they do, there is no guarantee how long it will last. Utako lives alone, but her sons always call her to make sure that she is doing well. She has enough money to live in an expensive apartment. Although she criticizes her late husband and her mother-in law, she tries to protect the *noren* (literally the front curtain of the store, implying the family business which was traditionally handed down to the male inheritor). Her freedom is constructed on the health she is blessed with and the wealth she has accumulated. Obviously Utako is depicted unrealistically. Nevertheless, readers were not jealous of Utako, nor did they hate her. Readers found her attractive. They yearned to become like her and considered her life style to be a new model, different from the traditional one bound by conventional notions.

### From Utako to Cute Old Ladies

The eighties was called *onna no jidai* (the age of women). In 1985, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed, stipulating that all companies should endeavor to treat women equally as men with regard to recruitment, hiring and promotion. The media often portrayed women as being vibrant and independent with new and progressive values. Meanwhile, the eighties were also called the *yokubō no jidai* (age of desire): many magazines encouraged young female readers to lead fashionable consumerist lifestyles. Women were powerful culturally and financially, and represented a force as consumers. In short, desire for material wealth and success were positively regarded. Utako's stylish lifestyle and her confidence as a rich business owner made her an attractive heroine. She presented an ideal elderly lifestyle for her audience and taught them that life after sixty need not be as bad as they thought. Utako represented a new elderly female model that fit the culture of high economic growth.

Interestingly, the "Ubazakari" series, which started in 1979 and ended in 1993 ran through the so-called "bubble" era of Japanese high economic success. Utako's attitude or philosophy—"Even though I am old, I still want to dress up and be

fashionable”—actually came both from popularized feminism and the consumer culture of the eighties.<sup>17</sup> Her philosophy was well received by readers because Utako represented the summation of the ideal female culture of the time.

Ironically, however, as the bubble economy burst, women soon realized their power and freedom were simply a product of the mass media. There was still a long way to go to remove the gender inequality that remained deeply rooted in society and the workplace.

The fictional Utako was replaced by two newly famous real-life elderly women named “Kin-san and Gin-san.” In 1991, these 100-year-old twins, Narita Kin and Ganie Gin, appeared in a TV commercial and became instant celebrities. That their names, “*kin*” (gold) and “*gin*” (silver), symbolize happiness, plus the fact that they were still healthy and lively at 100 years old resulted in great popularity. They even released a CD entitled “Kin-chan to Gin-chan.” The image of the beloved twins—“Spry, laughing, wrinkled and always identically dressed in traditional kimonos”<sup>18</sup>—spread throughout Japan. Kin-san and Gin-san had interesting life stories. But to focus on attention was on how they looked. As *kawaii obāchan* (cute old ladies), they became national idols and were adored by people of all generations. In contrast, Utako hated to be called *kawaii obāchan* more than anything else. The cynical heroine commented on the Kin-san Gin-san boom, saying, “What’s so great about them? They just lived a long time.”<sup>19</sup>

Why was “cuteness” so beloved by Japanese people in the nineties? Ueno Chizuko points out that “the fact that people want to become cute old ladies comes from their notion that they need to survive by relying on someone.”<sup>20</sup> Cuteness, to Ueno, equals

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<sup>17</sup> Tanabe Seiko, “Sekiyō kagirinaku Yoshi,” in *Tanabe Seiko zenshū* vol. 17 (Shūeisha, 2005), 678.

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Reitman, “Gin Kanie, 108; She and Twin Sister Became Elderly Celebrities in Japan,” *Los Angeles Times*, accessed February 5, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/mar/01/local/me-31938>.

<sup>19</sup> Tanabe, *Ubagatte*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Ueno, Chizuko, *Ueno Chizuko ga bungaku o shakaigaku suru* (Asahi shinbunsha, 2002), 85.

childishness and innocence, which entail the idea of dependency.<sup>21</sup> People wanted to see not an image of an aggressive elderly woman, but a traditional elderly lady, who was apolitical and safe to look at. Consequently, Utako disappeared as the luxurious age of the bubble economy passed.

### Conclusion

In Japanese culture, old age is associated with powerlessness (physical, political, cultural, and economic). Women's old age is associated with even more negative connotations: the loss of youth, beauty, and sexuality. In Japanese women's literature, the dark and subversive fantasy of aged heroines has been represented by the works of such writers as Enchi Fumiko, Okamoto Kanoko, and Ōba Minako.<sup>22</sup> As Kan Satoko states, these "elderly women have been discussed through the topics of *yamanba* (mountain witch) and *ubasute* (abandoning an old woman)."<sup>23</sup> Tanabe Seiko presented a new image of the old woman, and depicted their everyday lives in her literature. Her stories are neither subversive nor fantasy; they addressed issues that were of real concern to women. Kan Satoko states that "it was in the late eighties that Japanese feminism started tackling the issue of aging. The 'Ubazakari' series, in a way, presented new values that were ahead of the times."<sup>24</sup> Tanabe challenged society using these women's true voices. Tanabe, in an essay in 1993, states that "the power of elderly women was still premature twelve or thirteen years ago. But in the last few years, Utako has become

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<sup>21</sup> Kazuma Kohara, on the other hand, asserts that the term "*kawaii*" (cute) used by, particularly, young women, has multiple meanings. Cuteness of old ladies connotes youth, and it provides people with "joyful feelings" (31). According to him, the image associated with a cute old lady is "gentle and comforting" (31). See Kazuma Kohara, "Kawaii obāchan": joshidaisei no 'kawaii' no gohō ni mirareru raifu kōsu saishūki ni kansuru shakai no kattō suru kachikan no shiyō," in *Kyōiku, shakai, bunka: kenkyū kiyō* 7 (July 2000), 25-43.

<sup>22</sup> See Kurata.

<sup>23</sup> Kan Satoko, "Yūmoa to hihiyō seishin: 'Ubazakari' shirīzu, 'Shihon Genji Monogatari shirīzu o megutte," in *Tanabe Seiko zenshū* vol.17 (Shūeisha, 2005), 696.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 696.

a conventional type of woman. I have the impression that the number of beautiful and strong elderly women is increasing. These women are knowledgeable and active, and they have their own ideas about their lives and appreciate them.”<sup>25</sup> I agree with Tanabe. Today’s elderly women have learned to enjoy their lives and become more and more visible in society.

One of the roles of popular fiction is to provide readers with new and positive life values. These temporarily release them from the stress of society and give readers suggestions regarding how to cope with social realities. “Writing is ... the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.”<sup>26</sup> The power of popular literature cannot be underestimated. Elderly women’s literature will be or already is a new women’s literary genre, and a perfect subject of study by which to unveil women’s issues. Japan is now approaching the age of *chō koreika* (super-aging society).<sup>27</sup> This genre should contribute to a new field of literary, political and sociological discussion and supply hope and revitalization to an aging society.

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<sup>25</sup> Tanabe Seiko, “Taidan: Imamo mukashimo onna no oi wa osorerareteiru,” in *Nyū feminizumu rebyū* vol. 4: *eijizumu obāsan no gyakushū*, ed. Higuchi Keiko (Gakuyō shobō, 1992), 206. Now, Tanabe herself has reached old age. In an essay written in 1999, at age seventy-one, she revealed that she was taking care of her ninety year old mother and her husband who had been paralyzed by stroke. She expresses the difficulty of balancing her job as a writer with her role as a caretaker. She states that society has not yet been made convenient for elderly people. Tanabe Seiko, “Ubazakari no haha to kurumaisu no otto sore demo tanoshiki rōrō kaigo,” in *Fujin kōron* 84:20 (1999): 19-21: 21.

<sup>26</sup> Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *Signs* 1:4 (Summer 1976), 879.

<sup>27</sup> According to research by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, the number of people over sixty-five years old began exceeding that of younger people in 1997, and it is predicted that by 2006, 39.9 % of the Japanese population will be elderly people.

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