“Translating Family Violence in Contemporary Japanese Literature: Dynamics of (Cruel) Affectivity in *Zangyakuki* by Kirino Natsuo”

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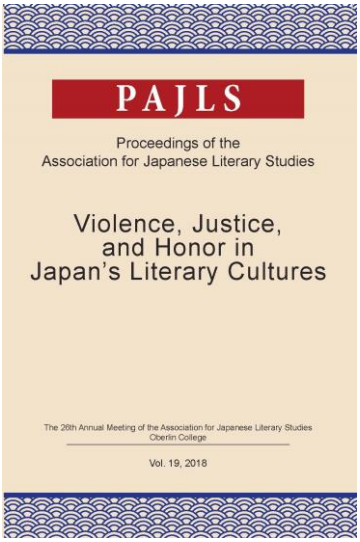
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 19 (2018): 198–208.



PAJLS 19:
Violence, Justice, and Honor in Japan’s Literary Cultures.
Editor: Ann Sherif
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

TRANSLATING FAMILY VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE: DYNAMICS OF (CRUEL) AFFECTIVITY IN *ZANGYAKUKI* BY KIRINO NATSUO

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Kirino Natsuo—pen name of Hashioka Mariko—was born in 1951, and became famous almost worldwide as outstanding *noir* author in 2003, when her 1997 novel *Out* was published in English translation.[2] As many critics pointed out, in her portrait of four Japanese women working on the graveyard shift at a boxed-lunch factory in a dreary suburb of Tokyo, Kirino exposes a less exotic and unfamiliar Japan, far from the glamorous and mysterious land of geishas, kimono and pinkish cherry trees.

Since 1997 Kirino has received much attention from critics and readers, as well as important recognition from literary circles, including outstanding literary prizes. But, as noted by Mina Qiao, it was the Medal of Honor with Purple Ribbon awarded to her by the Japanese government in November 2015, that served as official acknowledgement of her contribution to society as a novelist.[3] In an October 2019 interview, Kirino states:

> I'm more interested in depicting people in difficult situations—who through no fault of their own find themselves pushed into tight corners and impossible situations. This inevitably involves describing the tensions and strains in society. And if you're writing about people who are being bullied and abused, people who are cut off from the mainstream, then inevitably you'll be writing about women more often than not. The problems faced by women in contemporary society are sensitive and complex—so I always try to take care to make sure that I'm not treating the issues in a superficial way.[4]

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0226-2410
[2] Kirino Natsuo, *Auto* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997). Kirino Natsuo, *Out*, trans. Stephen Snyder (New York: Kodansha International, 2003).
[3] Mina Qiao, "Kirino Natsuo: A Salute to Everyday Life," *Japanese Language and Literature*, 52:1 (April 2018). Special Section: Kirino Natsuo, 113.
[4] https://www.nippon.com/en/people/bg900066/an-endless-tunnel-author-kirino-natsuo-on-the-problems-facing-japanese-women-today.html. Accessed August 15, 2020.

Indeed, Kirino's works focus on the most debated issues in contemporary Japan, and that's the reason why in *Out* and in the following novels (*Grotesque*, *Real World*, *In*, to name just a few) female characters are not the stereotypical acquiescent dolls with pure white skin, weak and delicate, but individuals trapped in dysfunctional relationships with men who are violent predators or dull parasites, working hard under the burden of heavy chores and responsibilities.[5] They are women emotionally and financially squeezed, bearing the heavy brunt of social injustice.

In a 2003 interview, Kirino Natsuo observed that, "It's a very confusing experience living as a woman in Japan. If your husband is white-collar, the wife is blue. Even if you marry a person of status, the wife inevitably remains a rung below."[6] Consistent with this view, over a decade later, in 2014, Kirino asserted that "being a woman in this society is mainly an anonymous existence. I don't think the fact that the environment is such that women are nameless and overlooked is a good thing."[7] However, women are redefining marriage and family, seeking a way to fulfil their aspirations for happiness within and without the wife/husband relationship and the home's limited space, rejecting conventional, established roles, claiming the right to pursue a career. In Kirino's view, it is a bumpy path:

> The old family system is collapsing more and more. Although the division between men and women remains—men still go out and women still stay in—a man now cannot sustain the entire family. We have reached the point where women have to put the children into childcare so that they can work to help support the family, too. Then, the children themselves are under extreme educational pressure. So everybody is making the best effort to sustain him or herself. It is a very confusing time for our society. I have the feeling that people don't know what to do to get out of their situations.[8]

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[5] Kirino Natsuo, *Gurotesuku* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2003); *Grotesque*, trans. Rebecca Copeland (New York: Vintage International, 2008). *Riaru wārudo* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2003); *Real World*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2008). Kirino Natsuo, *In* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2009); *In*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Secker, 2015).

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/17/books/a-tokyo-novelist-mixes-felonies-with-feminism.html. Accessed February 15, 2018.

[7] http://theculturalgutter.com/notes/interview-with-natsuo-kirino.html. Accessed February 15, 2018.

[8] https://www.indiebound.org/author-interviews/kirinonatsuo. Accessed July 24, 2020.

Similarly, Yukiko Tsunoda, a lawyer committed to defending women's rights, describes Japan's society as a male-dominated system, typically patriarchal and hierarchical in structure, "inherently anti-female."[9]

Kirino's heroines are often represented as victims of a culture that privileges the male experience over the female one, and her novels can be read as a sharp allegory about the subjugation of women in Japanese society and the risks that this condition entails (in *Out*, an explosion of violence that results in murder and crime). Again, in a recent interview she expressed her feelings about the socially prescribed gender roles:

> Men and women are not on good terms in Japanese society. […] There is too much gender-specific role division. Men are almost like slaves in the corporate world and Japanese women are contained within the household. Their lives are disconnected. That is one of the sources of this boiling rage. [10]

Writing fiction allows her to explore "the things that lie buried in society."[11] Kirino has confirmed in several talks and interviews that the elements that intrigue her—as a writer—about crime fiction, are the psychological aspects of crime, not the pursuit of the crime's perpetrator:

> When a person is cornered, they do unimaginable things—things that one usually thinks they would never do. And there is this single moment where a person becomes susceptible to committing a crime. To delve into these things is to explore the whole of human psychology.[12]

In her crime stories, she focuses on crimes that happen within our comfort zones, homes and neighborhood, and the reader is invited to consider *why*—rather than *how*—a crime might have been committed.[13] As for the methodology behind her works, Kirino also states that her main

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[9] Yukiko Tsunoda, "Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence in Japan," http://www.tuj.ac.jp/newsite/main/law/lawresources/TUJonline/S. Accessed May 13, 2019.
[10] David Pilling, *Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival* (London: Penguin, 2014), 204.
[11] Ibid.
[12] https://www.indiebound.org/author-interviews/kirinonatsuo. Accessed May 12, 2018.
[13] Mina Qiao, "Kirino Natsuo. A Salute to Everyday Life," *Japanese Language and Literature*, 52:1 (April 2018). Special Section: Kirino Natsuo, 116.

motivation to write is to "observe the fabric of human relationships."[14] Novel after novel, the attention increasingly moves more and more on specific dynamics affecting human relationships, and especially those related to violence in family contest—and/or in emotional relationships contest—and to what I have defined as "cruel affectivity."

In particular, the novel *Zangyakuki* (2004) is centered on the blurred border between (cruel) affectivity and violence.[15] It speaks also of how we recount and transpose the suffering in our memories, of how the human mind and survival instinct filter our perception of the world itself. Kirino notes, "The story contains shocking aspects, but what I intended to write about was the way a person struggles to express such things."[16]

Keiko, a 10-year-old girl, has been kidnapped on her way home from ballet class. Her abductor keeps her as a prisoner in the upstairs of the factory where he works, and one year passed before the factory owner's wife discovers and frees her. Twenty-five years later Keiko, now a famous writer, leaves her husband without a word except for a post-it note upon her latest novel manuscript, titled *Zangyakuki*. Alongside the novel lies a letter from her abductor, Kenji, who recently has been released from prison. *Zangyakuki* focuses on Keiko's relationship with Kenji during her captivity, and the reader relives Keiko's experience through her eyes. But it's quite impossible to know what is fiction and what is real, what is said and what is unsaid. In the novel, cruelty and violence infect one's interpretation of reality and keep us imprisoned.

In *Zangyakuki*, Kirino Natsuo actually investigates a suffering rooted before and beyond the outrage, into the dirty suburbs, into the empty eyes of people watching without seeing, into Keiko's ill-functioning family. In my analysis of the novel I will focus on the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion emerging in the broken or breaking up family relationships and in the urban and suburban spaces, dynamics which are at the core of the novel: the ambiguous relationship between Keiko and Kenji indeed stems from their both being "outside/outsider," and fated to be forgotten.

During the Nineties, Japan went through a series of deep transformations on political, economic, social and cultural levels. Family is certainly one of the areas in which this is more evident. The decline in births compared to the baby boom in the immediate post-war period, the

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[14] https://upclosed.com/people/natsuo-kirino/ Accessed July 27, 2020.
[15] Kirino Natsuo, *Zangyakuki* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2004). The English translation, *What remains* (New York: Random House, 2008), is not available.
[16] http://threeguysonebook.com/interview-with-natsuo-kirino/.

fast ageing of the society linked to the increase in life expectancy, the high rate of divorces, the dramatic escalation of domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, suicides, child prostitution, are all factors that have led to a growing instability in the traditional family system. Japan has witnessed the definitive decline of the so-called 'tri-generational' model (three generations coexist in the same house) in favor of different and diversified forms of cohabitation.[17]

Since the early 1970s, a major social issue has been domestic violence, including children's physical and emotional violence against their parents, often understood as children's reaction to parents' pressure for their academic success.[18] Even if the first nationwide investigation of child abuse was conducted by the government in 1973 in response to a critical problem called "coin-locker babies," in which newborn babies were found in coin-operated lockers in train stations, only since the early 90s has awareness of other types of domestic violence, especially violence against women and children, increased.[19]

In August 2016 the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare issued preliminary figures about the number of child abuse reports to which child guidance offices had responded nationwide, with the total topping 100,000 for the first time. (The number of reported cases was 1,101 in 1990, when statistics were first compiled.) Psychological abuse comprised 47.5% of the reports, proving to be the most commonly reported of the four types of abuse: physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. It is also harder to detect.[20] However, it should be noted here that the prominence of this figure could be a consequence of classifying the witnessing of domestic violence as a form of psychological abuse under the Act on the Prevention of Child Abuse: indeed, the 2004 revision of this law expressly states that

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[17] Marcus Rebick and Ayumi Takenaka, *The Changing Japanese Family* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3–16; Fumie Kumagai, "Introduction: Toward a Better Understanding of Family Violence in Japan," in Fumie Kumagai and Masako Ishii-Kuntz (eds.), *Family Violence in Japan: A Life Course Perspective* (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 1–39.

[18] Kumagai, Fumie, "Filial Violence: a Peculiar Parent-Child Relationship in the Japanese Family Today," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 3 (1981), 337–349.

[19] Kozu Junko, "Domestic Violence in Japan," *The American Psychologist*, 54 (1999), 50–54.

[20] Roger Goodman, "The 'Discovery' and 'Rediscovery' of Child Abuse (*jidō gyakutai*) in Japan," in Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto and Tuukka Toivonen (eds.), *A Sociology of Japanese Youth: From Returnees to NEETs* (London: Routledge, 2012), 98–121.

witnessing domestic violence is tantamount to a psychological abuse for a child (Art. 2, (iv)):

> 四　児童に対する著しい暴言又は著しく拒絶的な対応、児童が同居する家庭における配偶者に対する暴力（配偶者（婚姻の届出をしていないが、事実上婚姻関係と同様の事情にある者を含む。）の身体に対する不法な攻撃であって生命又は身体に危害を及ぼすもの及びこれに準ずる心身に有害な影響を及ぼす言動をいう。）その他の児童に著しい心理的外傷を与える言動を行うこと。
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> (iv) Use significantly violent language or take an extreme attitude of rejection against the child, use violence upon one's spouse in a family in which the child is living together (meaning illegal attacks on the body of the spouse (including the one who is under circumstances substantially equivalent to marital relationship although the marriage notification has not been made) that threaten the spouse's life or body, as well as the words and behaviors equivalent to said attacks which would have harmful effect on the spouse mentally or physically), or otherwise speak or behave in a manner that would be significantly traumatic to the child.[21]

As for children witnessing domestic violence, it is worth mentioning that Kirino addresses this issue in *In*, a 2009 novel dealing with the interplay of reality and fiction, that has much in common with *Zangyakuki*.[22] Keiko actually doesn't witness domestic violence or abuse, but notices the dramatically growing distance between their parents, resulting into indifference towards her.

> I do not have many happy memories related to my childhood. Someone claims that my view of things has been altered by the story of the kidnapping, yet I cannot help thinking that child age is itself a period of life often surrounded by dark shadows. I say this because the child is basically a being who lives exclusively

[21] http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/law/detail/?id=2221&vm=04&re=02&new=1. Accessed August 13, 2020.
[22] Kirino Natsuo, *In* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2009); *In*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Secker, 2015).

> under the aegis of adults and suffers for their negative influence. The adults around me never made me happy.[23]

The dynamics of exclusion that Keiko is a victim of are played on multiple levels. First of all, her family is depicted to the reader and perceived by the protagonist and narrating voice as dominated by the figure of the mother, dissatisfied with the family's life and too focused on herself and her own broken youthful dreams to listen and pay attention to her daughter:

> When I began attending kindergarten, my mother began giving private piano lessons. Music was her only hobby and she was very proud of it. Her great dream, once I had grown up, was to open a real piano school at home. But she had to be content with giving some lessons to the children in the neighborhood, during breaks in her household chores. On the other hand, there was not enough space in our house to open a school to satisfy her wishes. When the students came, I lost all rights to stay in the kitchen and I was forced to go out on the balcony. I put a pillow on the stairs and sat there waiting for the lesson to end. In winter it was freezing cold there, so I would prefer shutting myself in the bathroom and reading a book lying in the empty tub.[24]

On the other side, Keiko's father, a low worker in an instant *ramen* factory, is a figure aloof and silent, who stays outside the family dynamics.

> My father crossed the bridge over the T River every day and went to work in the city of K, in an instant *ramen* factory. Sometimes, on the way back, he would stop with his coworkers in the entertainment districts and drink cheap sake. Those nights, when he came home, he always had a sad and melancholic expression. My mother reproached him punctually, telling him that if he really wanted to get drunk, he could do it somewhere in M, near home, rather than in the filthy town on the other shore.[25]

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[23] Kirino Natsuo, *Zangyakuki*, Kindle Edition. All translations of *Zangyakuki* are mine unless stated otherwise.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

With regard to the increasing frequency of psychological abuse against children, sociologists point out that among the wide range of potential socio-psychological factors, the one that deserves particular attention is the declining capability by families to care for their children. A number of social indicators point to such a decline: an increase in marriages preceded by pregnancy and a high divorce rate among those marriages; a marginal increase in the number of teenage mothers; an overall rise in the divorce rate; an increase in single-mother households comprising a young mother and infant(s); a high poverty rate among single-mother households. Generally speaking, these phenomena indicate a shift or a growing deviation from the "standard" of the nuclear family, which emerged in Japan in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, and steadily gained dominance up through the postwar period of high economic growth.

Ochiai Emiko proposes to use the term "modern family" as a catalyst for analyzing the position of contemporary family within the socio-historical context.[26] As Ochiai pointed out, the modern family emphasizes the mother-child relationship: "According to the precepts of the modern Japanese family, children must grow up within the family home. Furthermore, raising children is the mother's task, which she must perform mainly by herself."[27]

However, surveys taken over nearly a ten-year period from 1981 showed that a mother who devotes herself to child care has, surprisingly, a stronger tendency to develop "child-care anxiety," the "emotional condition of accumulated and diffused fear toward children or child care." And anxiety increases exponentially whenever the wife feels that her husband is not taking responsibility for child care and that her social networks (work, hobbies, friends, neighborhood, etc.) are limited.[28]

In the novel, Keiko's mother actually falls into this trap: she doesn't work; she is unable to build a network of positive relationships with her neighbors and relatives; and she is completely dedicated to home and daughter care. But, quoting again Ochiai, contrary to most theories about

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[26] Emiko Ochiai, "The Modern Family and Japanese Culture: Exploring the Japanese Mother-Child Relationship", *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 3: 1, Women and the Family (December 1989), 7–15.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Katsuko Makino, "'Ikuji fuan' gainen to sono eikyō yōin ni tsuite no saikentō", *Kazoku kyōiku kenkyūjo kiyō* 10 (1989), 23–31. Katsuko Makino was one of the first researchers to study the problem of "child-rearing anxiety" among Japanese mothers. See also Katsuko Makino, *Kosodate ni fuan wo kanjiru oyatachi e: Shōshika-kazoku no naka no ikuji-fuan* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2005).

the modern family, a mother cannot raise children unaided. Keiko's mother pours her frustration and dissatisfaction for their life on her daughter, exposing the child—as a powerless spectator—to her outbursts of repressed rage. And it is not by chance that those occur during the preparation of the evening meal, the only one which sees the whole dysfunctional family reunited, and which represents a high symbolic moment in the definition of the role of women within the Japanese modern family. In fact, Keiko is forced to silence, because unheard, and to invisibility, because unseen.

> My mother was quick-tempered. When she was cooking she moved nervously, jerky, and always kept her forehead frowned, two deep furrows between her eyebrows. […] When the time was approaching for my mother to get into the kitchen to prepare dinner, I used to turn on the TV and stay hypnotized by the screen, trying to forget her presence.[29]

Furthermore, her mother's inability to establish relationships with her neighbors or relatives determines the relationships that Keiko herself develops and entertains with her peers—schoolmates or classmates of the dance class—and with her neighbors and the city itself. And loneliness becomes the figure defining and shaping her life inside and outside home.

> With such a mother, light-years away from reality and often at the centre of the chatter of the neighborhood, I was the ideal target, the different girl to be targeted. In fact, she represented the foreign element within an absolutely homogeneous whole. . . .
>
> At the ballet class I was completely ignored by the other girls, all living in that neighborhood since birth. There were living most of the white-collar workers in the city of M, and that school was attended mainly by the daughters of clerks, civil servants, teachers and wealthy farmers. They formed a compact and indivisible group, they were like a bundle of tangled threads that nothing and nobody could ever unravel.[30]

The latter quote above introduces another important point and level: the urban homogeneous middle-class (the white-collars) dislikes the

[29] Kirino Natsuo, *Zangyakuki*, Kindle Edition.
[30] Ibid.

intrusion of the lower-class workers such as Keiko's parents (the blue suits), who live in the lowly housing estates.

> The complex of public housing where I was born and raised, in the northern suburbs of M, was enormous, a small city in the city. It had developed at a dizzying pace, at the same time as the industrialization of the area, suddenly filled up with families of workers.[31]

> Twenty thousand people lived in public housing: it was like a solitary island, the island of blue suits. There were primary and secondary schools, supermarkets and various shops, that is everything necessary for everyday life. […] The apartments consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. The rooms measured six *tatami* each, while the dining room attached to the kitchen did not exceed four *tatami* and a half. The lodgings were all the same, same and identical planimetry. Even the composition of each individual family was in most cases very similar. It was enough to take a look at the balconies to realize it: a plastic cabinet in the corner, three or four *futon* drying on the railing in the sun, a small *koinobori* waving at the beginning of May, the decorations for the Tanabata in July, and finally the inevitable vase with the ipomoea during summer […].[32]

Behind Keiko's mother's inability to build good relations with her neighbors lies her refusal to recognize herself as part of the group of blue suits, represented through her dreaming of opening a piano school and through her intentionally eccentric clothes. In her daughter she finds her only chance of becoming part of the world of white-collars, but pushing the child to attend a ballet school away from their district only exposes her to different and cruel dynamics of exclusion.

The topic of social exclusion also intertwines with the dynamics of the urban space symbolic construction. The contrast between center and periphery is a recurrent topic in Kirino's works, where urban periphery becomes the privileged arena of crime, as a breakthrough or a crack into what is commonly perceived as *mankind*. Hallucinated atmospheres, suffocating alleys: the setting where the female protagonists of Kirino Natsuo's *Grotesque, Out,* or of the novels of the detective Murano Miro

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

series is a *noir* of peripheries, a marginal space, which translates into iconic and physical terms the marginalization of the figures who inhabit it, or transit through it.[33] Reading Kirino means discovering a representation of today's Japan and Tokyo, as narrated with ruthlessly clear thought, without the filter of a more or less mannered exoticism.

In *Zangyakuki*, the center is metaphorically represented by the space inhabited by the white-collars, while the periphery is the area where Keiko and her family live, the massive housing estates in the northern suburbs, a small city in the city.

Keiko is an outsider on multiple levels: within family, society, urban space: "[I]n a nutshell, I was a girl who was perpetually out of place, who never had realized who she was." [34] She was bullied prior to her kidnapping, and her family was already broken before the divorce of her parents following her release. The psychological abuse she suffered makes her a predestined victim of Kenji's violence. That evening, after the dance class, facing the prospect of witnessing another burst of nervousness from her mother, in a gesture of rebellion, instead of returning home, she heads towards the city of K, the red-light suburb on the other shore of the river: "But on the days I used to go to the ballet school, I came home and saw her there in the kitchen, that unbearable scene before my eyes. I had had enough of her, that evening I did not want to see her anymore."[35] The child heads away from home. Towards the suburbs of the suburbs. Here a child-man looks at her, sees her, talks to her. And Keiko cannot help following him.

In *Zangyakuki*, through Kirino's eyes, we can witness the transformations and disintegration of contemporary family: either true or imagined, cruel or cozy, desired or rejected, often in a precarious balance within the ambivalent space between the real and the ideal.

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[33] Kirino Natsuo, *Kao ni furikakaru ame* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1993); Kirino Natsuo, *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994); Kirino Natsuo, *Rōzu gāden* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2000); Kirino Natsuo, *Dāku* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2002).
[34] Kirino Natsuo, *Zangyakuki*, Kindle Edition.
[35] Ibid.