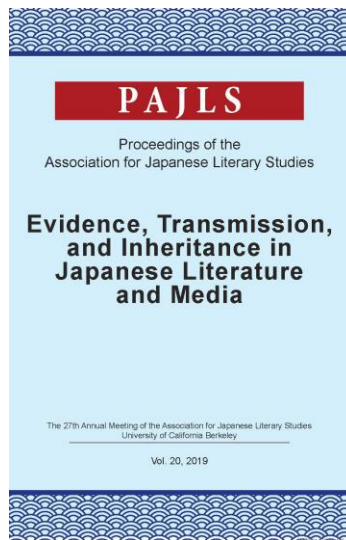


“Material Form, Genre, and Reception: The Case of Setouchi Harumi’s ‘Kashin’”

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MATERIAL FORM, GENRE, AND RECEPTION: THE CASE OF SETOUCHI HARUMI'S "KASHIN"

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Let us reflect on the differences between bookstores and libraries, and the sort of evidence scholars of literature can obtain by turning their attention towards the bookstore. A bookstore is a space that contains only books that sell and books that people are reading now. It is a synchronic archive of people's current tastes and needs. Unlike an archive or a library, however, people can purchase the books on the shelves. Thus, in a bookstore, books are units of commerce for the public to buy. This is why books are wrapped in layers of advertisements and are strategically marketed. The cover, the dustjacket, the *obi*, the books' position on the shelf, and the shelf arrangement in the bookstore all conspire to draw the attention of customers and maximize sales and profits.

In contrast, in an academic library, books are works of art for the public to appreciate. Purified of the chaos of capitalism, books in this space are presented within a unified order so that the readers may examine their texts objectively. As residues of commerce, the *obi* and dustjacket are typically excluded from the space of the library and from the rigor of scholarship. They do not pass into the library because generally they are not creations of the author. Librarians consider them to be tools of the merchant—fabrications of the publisher in a shameless effort to sell units. Thus, they are cast aside so that patrons may forget a book's origins in commerce and instead experience it as art. The normative presumption behind the exclusion of these paratexts is that they do not contribute to the literary work or to the literary experience. In other words, the normative presumption is that a literary work is no more than its text.

I argue that a literary work comprises both the text and its material form, which includes a variety of paratexts, such as the *obi*—paratexts that can generally only be found in bookstores. That is why methodologically, the forum of research for this paper is not the library and its artificial (though useful) space. Instead, it is the bookstore. Bookstore paratexts provide crucial evidence for interpreting texts: they tell a story different from the mainstream critical reception, promote new readings, and offer insights both into reading practices and into how genres and audiences are shaped. I take as an example Setouchi Harumi (*Jakuchō*)'s short-story

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“Kashin” (The Floral Core, 1957) and trace its publication and reception history. I describe its initial unfavorable reception in 1957, offer an alternative reading of the story as literature of the flesh (*nikutai bungaku*), and explain its current reception as a love story or love literature (*ren'ai bungaku*).

The title (also the first paratext) of this work is *kashin* (花芯), an obscure Chinese word. It “refers to the stamens and pistils of a flower, and is also a euphemism for the female sexual organ.”² The author references the common association between flowers and the feminine reproductive organ, but she does so through a novel textual form.³ From the title she sexualizes her work and plants the seed of what will come, priming us for a story about the pursuit of female sexual pleasure. “Kashin” tells the story of a woman who deserts her husband and child to pursue her passion for another man; in the process, she is drawn into a world of sensual pleasure and eventually becomes a prostitute.

A film based on this story was released in August 2016. In preparation for the release, advertisement leaflets were distributed in cinemas and bookstores across Japan.⁴ The leaflet presents stills from the movie and information about the cast (Figure 1a). It also includes a picture of the paperback version of the story, thus promoting the sales of Setouchi’s work (Figure 1b). The back side of the leaflet reads: “Sexuality, love and life portrayed through the experiences of protagonist Sonoko. This work led people to brand Setouchi ‘the uterus writer.’ Presenting the first film based on this vibrant and original work of love literature (*ren'ai bungaku*).” The leaflet fuses two readings of the story: the first is that of a critic, Hirano Ken, who read it in 1957 and, indignant about its content, criticized the author for abusing and overusing the word “uterus.” The second reading is presumably that of the production and advertising team of the film, who read an expanded version of the story, now available in paperback, and decided to promote it as “love literature.” More important than the differences between the two versions of “Kashin,” however, are

² Masayo Kaneko, “Setouchi Jakuchō: Female Subjectivity in the Exploration of Self, Sexuality, and Spirituality,” in *The Outsider Within: Ten Essays on Modern Japanese Women Writers*, eds. Tomoko Kuribayashi and Mizuho Terasawa (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), 71.

³ The Chinese characters also mark the woman as “the other.” As scholar Masayo Kaneko comments, “the use of a foreign term effectively invokes the otherness of liberated sexuality and *jouissance* for female subjects.” *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴ In the summer of 2016 I bought several paperbacks at the Maruzen bookstore located next to Tokyo Station. The shop assistant slipped this leaflet in the bag together with the purchased volumes.

the differences between the context in which Hirano Ken read the first version of “Kashin,” and the context in which readers encounter this story now. By comparing these two different moments in the life of a literary work, I demonstrate that its interpretation and even its genre emerge not just from the linguistic content of the text but also from the paratextual apparatuses that surround it at any given time. Many of these paratexts are creatures of the bookstore.



Figure 1a: 2016 leaflet advertising the film adaptation of “Kashin.”
(Collection of the author.)

Figure 1b: 2016 leaflet advertising the film adaptation of “Kashin.” (Collection of the author.)

Hirano Ken read “Kashin” in the October 1957 issue of the prestigious literary magazine *Shinchō*, where it appeared next to Ishihara Shintarō’s story “Kanzen na yūgi” (Perfect Play) about the rape and murder of a young woman. In a review for the newspaper *Mainichi shinbun*, Hirano commented on both short stories, revealing a lot about reading practices, institutional concerns, and literary norms in 1957. Hirano began by criticizing Ishihara’s story for its senseless violence, which he ascribed to

“the numbness of the senses triggered by the poison of sensationalist mass media.”⁵ He then continued by lambasting “Kashin”:

This numbness of the senses has caught on. For instance, it is the same with Setouchi Harumi’s “Kashin.” It portrays the transformation of an average housewife into a perfect harlot. This work overuses the word uterus. A while back I read a collection of short stories by this author and enjoyed one work in the style of I-novels, on the impasse of a romantic relationship (*ren’ai*). I was also impressed with a story about the romance (*ren’ai*) between an office worker and the manager of a small business on the verge of collapse. I thought that her literary abilities can rival those of Harada Yasuko and Ariyoshi Sawako. However, this recent work portraying the physiology of a woman in her thirties is clearly influenced by the sensationalism of mass media. This is the weakness of this work, a weakness reflected in the abuse of the word ‘uterus.’ This new writer has already been contaminated by the poison [of sensationalist mass media].⁶

Hirano likely took offence not simply at the frequency of the word uterus, but also at the way it was employed. Specifically, for the protagonist of Setouchi’s story, the uterus ceases to be just the reproductive organ, and becomes the locus of unbridled sexual pleasure. Hirano’s criticism was harsh, but he was correct in reading “Kashin” as an extension of the popular discourse on female sexuality. At the time magazines abounded in articles on female sexual pleasure, which intersected with the discourse on gender equality and the democratic project in Japan, as some intellectuals demanded gender parity both in the public domain as well as in the intimate lives of the citizens.⁷ However, in this discourse, female pleasure was always limited to the realm of matrimony. It was understood as an expression of the love between the spouses and a way to strengthen the marriage.⁸

⁵ Hirano Ken, “Kongetsu no shōsetsu, besuto surī,” *Mainichi shinbun*, September 18, 1957.

⁶ Hirano, *Ibid.*

⁷ Mark McLelland, *Love, Sex, and Democracy in Japan during the American Occupation* (New York: Springer, 2012), 110–111.

⁸ Furukawa Fumie, “Sengo Nihon ni okeru futatsu no onna no sei—*Fujin Kōron to Shufu no tomo* 1945 nen–1950 nendai no bunseki kara,” *Sōgō joseishi kenkyū* 24 (2007): 26; Tanaka Aiko, “‘Kanjisasereru onna’ to ‘kanjisaseru otoko’—Sekushuariti no nimajita kōzō no seiritsu,” in *Sekushuariti no sengoshi*, eds.

For protagonist Sonoko, the discovery of sexual pleasure does not strengthen her marriage but leads to its dissolution as she begins to listen to the urges of her uterus and becomes involved in an affair. Initially, Sonoko holds onto the ideal that there must be a difference between sex as a “physical act” (*kōi*) and sex as an expression of “passionate love” (*koi*), while longing for a love that will shatter her core. But to her astonishment, she discovers that the sexual act is the same no matter the partner. To her and her uterus, men are interchangeable. The protagonist deviates both from social norms and from the media discourse as she takes the female orgasm away from the realm of marriage and the realm of love. She attempts to liberate herself from any social or ideological strictures through the body. Thus, unlike Ishihara’s story, Setouchi’s is not just another story about the rebellious postwar youth. In fact, Setouchi was born in 1922 so her experience and motivations for writing were fundamentally different from those of Ishihara, as I shall demonstrate. However, the juxtaposition in the literary magazine *Shinchō* of Setouchi with Ishihara obscured other themes in her story and precluded other possible interpretations. Hirano’s influential reading of “Kashin” was colored and “contaminated” by his reading of Ishihara’s story.

Contrary to Hirano’s interpretation of “Kashin,” I argue that the story is an example of literature of the flesh (*nikutai bungaku*) that never quite received the appreciation it deserved. In literature of the flesh, writers such as Sakaguchi Ango and Tamura Taijirō sought “liberation-through-carnality that suggests carnal hedonism as a corrective to the political identity of wartime.”⁹ Proof that “Kashin” as literature of the flesh could have been a reading embraced by a larger audience resides on the 1957 *obi* of Setouchi’s first single-authored collection *Shiroi tebukuro no kioku* (The Memory of White Gloves, 1957), published only a couple of months before “Kashin” (Figure 2). On the one side, the *obi* reproduces blurbs from famous writers and critics at the time. The critics remarked on the eroticism in her works, as well as on her portrayal of the dynamic between the conqueror and the conquered and of the returnee experience. The backside sums up the critical comments, promoting Setouchi as “the long-awaited feminine voice of the war-time generation” (*onna senchūha tsui ni tōjō*). The *obi* also describes the collection as “the powerful work of a new woman writer who probes the wounds of current life and takes

Koyama Shizuko, Kanako Akaeda, and Erika Imada (Kyoto: Kyoto Daigaku Gakujutsu Shuppankai, 2014), 101–126.

⁹ Douglas Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

revenge for a lost youth” (*gendai no kizu ni kirikomi ubawareta seishun ni fukushū suru joryū shinjin no rikisaku*). The publishers, utilizing curated snippets from critics, presented Setouchi’s debut volume as a commentary on the war and its aftermath, suggesting to potential readers that the eroticism in her literature functions as “revenge for a lost youth.” Such a political interpretation of eroticisms resonates with the literature of Sakaguchi and Tamura. It is also a frame of interpretation that could have been applied to “Kashin.”

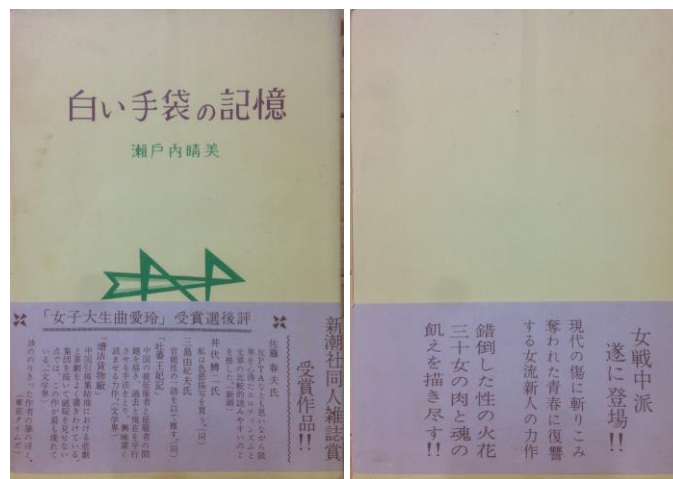


Figure 2: Front and back of Setouchi’s 1957 collection *Shiroy tebukuro no kioku*, wrapped in *obi*. (Published by the Hōbunsha Publishing house. Collection of the author.)

The *obi* of this volume does not explicitly describe Setouchi’s fiction as literature of the flesh. However, the titular essay of this volume, “Shiroy tebukuro no kioku—essē fū ni” (The Memory of White Gloves—Like an Essay) offers further evidence for this alternative reading of “Kashin” because it encompasses Setouchi’s views on war and literature. The essay begins with Setouchi’s childhood memory of the school principal wearing white gloves in order to hold and handle the portrait of the Emperor while students were reciting the Imperial Rescript on Education. Thus, in Setouchi’s essay, “white gloves” become a metonymy of wartime authority, propaganda, and ideological education. “White gloves” also function as a metaphor for the repression and alienation of the body, and the concealment of the truth. Gloves conceal the truth, and the body reveals it. That is why Setouchi declares at the end of her essay: “I have made up

my mind to believe only in what my eyes can see, in what my hands can touch, in what my soul can sense.”¹⁰ By the mid-1950s she was ready to write, to forge her own literature “by discarding the vision of the white gloves.”¹¹ In her desire to trust her senses and her body, she echoed the stance of postwar writers of the flesh, with whose works she was in fact acquainted.¹²

What makes “Kashin” a work in the vein of literature of the flesh? It takes place during and after the war. It alludes to burnt ruins and charred bodies. It begins with the protagonist’s teenage sexual explorations during wartime that define her as a rebel who understands the futility and the absurdity of war. The protagonist disobeys social norms; she is a taciturn woman who rejects language and instead embraces her body as the means of self-expression and as the locus of truth. Describing her relationship to one lover, she says: “my body expresses itself without language” (*karada ga kotoba no yaku o hatashite kureta*).¹³ This is why “Kashin” can be read as a late example of literature of the flesh. Such a reading could have been embraced by a larger community of readers had the work appeared a decade earlier, next to Sakaguchi Ango’s “Hakuchi” (The Idiot) in the June 1946 issue of *Shinchō*, or had it been included in her earlier volume *Shiroi tebukuro no kioku*. The story could have been read as “literature of the flesh,” but this was the reception that did not happen in 1957.

Although Hirano undervalued the story, his claim that the story privileges “physiology” over “romance” is accurate. Then why promote “Kashin” as “love literature” in 2016? And more importantly, what happens when the text is categorized as such? The idea that “Kashin” is a love story appears not only on the film advertisement leaflet, but is also implied in other paratexts. For instance, this is how the work is summarized on the dustjacket of the 2016 Kōdansha paperback edition: “the heroine marries the man her parents chose for her, but falls in love with another.”¹⁴ While this sentence is technically accurate, it does not

¹⁰ Setouchi Harumi, “Shiroi tebukuro no kioku—essē fū ni,” in *Shiroi tebukuro no kioku* (Chuō kōron, 1984), 285.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹² In 1950 she became part of the coterie Bungakusha, which included amongst its members writer Tamura Taijirō, known for his literature of the flesh. See Takezoe Atsuko, “Bungakusha jidai no Setouchi Harumi,” in *Niwa Fumio to Tamura Taijirō*, eds. Hamakawa Katsuhiko, Handa Yoshinaga, and Hata Masahiro (Tokyo: Gakujutsu Shuppankai, 2006), 155–177.

¹³ Setouchi Jakuchō, “Kashin,” in *Setouchi Jakuchō zenshū* vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2001), 24. Setouchi Jakuchō, “Kashin,” in *Kashin* (Tokyo: Kōdansha bunko, 2012), 123.

¹⁴ Dustjacket of Setouchi Jakuchō, *Kashin* (Tokyo: Kōdansha bunko, 2016).

remotely capture the essence of the work and it suggests an old romantic paradigm. A typical story in which the heroine is trapped in a loveless marriage would only reinforce the significance of love and love marriage. But Sonoko denies the importance of marriage, and the idea that sex should follow love, or that sexual pleasure is intensified by love. Even calling it a story of “sexual love” is misleading, because it still suggests there could be spiritual love, or love that blends the physical and the spiritual. But “Kashin” has at its center sex, not love.

In fact, the narrative of “Kashin” also advances a subtle criticism of love literature. The protagonist Sonoko constantly receives love letters from her fiancé and future husband which are nothing more than compilations of unattributed quotes from love novels by renowned writers. Sonoko has little interest in these letters and barely reads them. This anecdote is more than an amusing description of the intellectual and sentimental limitations of the protagonist’s fiancé. It also exposes the power of literature, especially of love literature, on its docile readers. The romantic experience is continuously mediated. Oftentimes readers first become acquainted with love through fiction, and so they seek to experience this fictional ideal in real life. The fiancé’s inability to express his feelings in his own words indicates more than just a lack of literary talent—it exposes his failure to imagine romance on his own terms. In contrast, when Sonoko rejects his love letters, she also rejects these prewritten standard romantic plots. She is already searching for something else even before their marriage, and the rest of her story diverges from typical representations of romance.

It might seem then that calling “Kashin” a love story or “love literature” (*ren'ai bungaku*) is nothing short of false advertising. Why describe as “love literature” a story that rejects romantic love, sexual love, and literary representations of love? The reasons are rather simple. To the publisher or advertiser such a label is convenient, readily available and immediately intelligible. The label is useful because it can seamlessly contain and tame (however flimsily) even this iconoclastic work. It furthermore immediately appeals to an audience, a community of readers interested in this topic. Finally, it fulfills the expectations that a woman writer should write about love.

These same trends can be seen on a small leaflet inserted in the Kōdansha paperback version of “Kashin” from 2016 (Figure 3). The leaflet groups “Kashin” with three other paperbacks that “portray a woman’s ultimate love” (*kyūkyoku no onna no ai o egaita 4 sakuhin*). The leaflet takes “Kashin” away from its historical context and places it next to works by women writers from four different generations (Setouchi being the

oldest) and of different literary styles: popular authors such as Tanabe Seiko (1926–2019) and Hayashi Mariko (1954–) with critically acclaimed writers such as Kawakami Mieko (1976–). Although the purpose of the leaflet is mercantile, it has literary implications as well: it perpetuates the category of women’s literature as literature about love, written by women, for women.



Figure 3: Front and back of a small advertisement leaflet included with the paperback version of “Kashin.” (Collection of the author.)

At the same time, lining up Setouchi, Tanabe, and Hayashi has another consequence. Works by these writers are often described as “love novels” or “love stories,” but the protagonists engage in extramarital affairs, and sometimes they even forego heterosexual love altogether to pursue other interests and lifestyles. Paratexts that promote such works as love novels, unintentionally, redefine the meaning of love and retrace the boundaries of the love novel genre to include stories that reject the notion that romantic love and love marriage should be valuable and happy experiences. Thus, in this context and in this age, labeling “Kashin” as love literature might be appropriate after all.

It is difficult to measure to what extent readers are influenced by the interpretative prompts included on leaflets, dustjackets, or book *obi*. Yet it is reasonable to surmise that readers cannot be completely immune to these prompts either. At the very least they might read a story such as “Kashin” and decide it is not a love story, engaging in some way with the

advertisement. Thus, advertisements necessarily play a part in the reception of any text, including “Kashin.”

Furthermore, the decision to label something as a love story or a love novel cannot deviate too much from readers’ expectations, either. It might push the definition of what a love novel is, but at the same time it must be based on publisher’s intuition of reader’s expectations.

The literary terms and labels printed on various paratexts, including advertisements, are the result of a continuing negotiation process, a communication loop between publishers and readers. That is why they are indicative of readers’ interests and expectations, constituting valuable sources for interpreting texts and for gauging the mainstream reception of a text at a given point in time. Thus, evidence for the reception of a text comes not only from contemporary literary reviews published in established venues, but also from dustjackets, *obi*, and other advertisements. However, such paratexts rarely enter libraries and archives. Oftentimes the only place to procure them is the bookstore.

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