
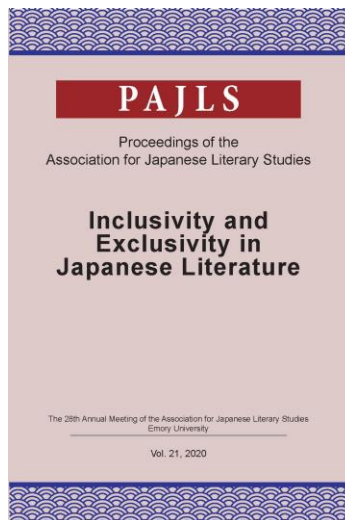


“Matayoshi Naoki and Dazai Osamu: Rethinking
the Solitary Masculine Literary Subject”

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*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 21 (2020): 186–196.



PAJLS 21:
Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Japanese Literature.
Editor: Cheryl Crowley
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

**MATAYOSHI NAOKI AND DAZAI OSAMU:
RETHINKING THE SOLITARY MASCULINE LITERARY SUBJECT**

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The comedian Matayoshi Naoki (1980–) has come to occupy a unique position in contemporary Japanese public discourse between the spheres of popular entertainment and *jun-bungaku* ('pure' literature) after winning the Akutagawa Award for his debut novel *Hibana* (Sparks) in July 2015. Matayoshi and his comedy duo, Peace, were a steady, if not major, presence on television by the time *Hibana* was first published in the *Bungakukai* literary magazine and won the Akutagawa Award a few months later. That the highest literary award in the nation went to a well-known comedian intrigued the public and critics alike, and mainstream media flocked to cover this achievement.

Hibana, about the creative struggles of a young aspiring comic in Tokyo, is clearly based on the writer's own experiences, and the novel resonated with readers. It became Japan's best-selling book of 2015 by a wide margin, selling more than two million copies in that year alone. The story has since been adapted into a serial drama on Netflix as well as a standalone film. However, from the start, critical opinions about the book's outsized commercial success were conflicted. The literary critic Tsubouchi Yūzō remarked: "That everyone should become so worked up (*hashagu*) just because a comedian won the award seems to say that literature has finally perished.... This is accentuated all the more because Matayoshi's novel is actually literature. It is fitting that a literary work won the Akutagawa Award, which led to the demise of literature."² He deems *Hibana* as sufficiently literary, but his point is that a work's sheer artistic qualities are no longer enough to catalyze public discourse about literature. Such laments about how contemporary literature is no longer about literary value per se has pervaded both laudatory and critical discussions of Matayoshi's writings—*i.e.*, how his work is actually quite literary despite its comedian author, or how because of its famous author it sells despite its dubious qualities as literature. Although Matayoshi, who has since published two more novels, is now often treated by the broader Japanese

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² Tsubouchi Yūzō and Fukuda Kazuya, "Bundan autorōzu no sesō hōdan 'Kore de iinoda!'" *Spa!* August 11–18, 2015, 147. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

public as a representative of ‘serious’ writing, within the literary establishment he still occupies an exceptional position.

This paper considers how Matayoshi illuminates and challenges the implicit dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that shape the ideals of ‘literariness’ in contemporary Japanese public discourse. On one level, this concerns Matayoshi’s own hybrid position as an author and as a *tarento* (celebrity). There have been other famous Japanese comedians before him who have published successful works of writing, including in literary fiction. For example in recent decades, the comedian known as Gekidan Hitori has won praise for his story collection *Kage hinata ni saku* (Blooming in the shade, 2006) and his novel *Seiten no hekiireki* (Thunderclap in the clear sky, 2010), as has Chihara ‘Junior’ Kōji for his semiautobiographical novel *14 sai* (Age 14, 2007). Yet Matayoshi’s status as an Akutagawa Award winner is unprecedented. On another level, Matayoshi’s stories critically explore the more general question of what it means to be an artist committed to his medium. Of course, if read meta-fictionally, these stories can be seen to underscore the author’s personal investment in the question of how to be a ‘serious’ writer. I argue that in both his public persona and creative work, Matayoshi seems to at once aspire to the sort of uncompromising creative intensity that dominates popular conceptions of ‘literariness’ inspired by iconic masculine figures in modern Japanese literary history like his role model Dazai Osamu (1909–1948), and to protest the restrictive, alienating, and anachronistic exclusivity of such an ideal. I begin with a brief examination of how Matayoshi has spoken of his identity as a literary writer and comedian in the wake of the runaway success of his debut novel. I then analyze his second novel, *Gekijō* (Theater, 2017), which grapples with the problematic aspects of ‘pure’ literary genius in the mode of Dazai, especially in terms of its gendered implications, even as it still operates within its conventions.

Matayoshi’s mixed status as a writer and as a popular comedian seems to have initially caused more consternation for his critics than for himself. In a 2017 interview just prior to the publication of *Gekijō*, he recalls that after *Hibana* won the Akutagawa award, he had been “relentlessly asked” by journalists whether he was now a *geinin* (comedian) or a writer.³ He states that each time, he had confidently replied that he would fulfill both roles.⁴ But, he continues: “I have since learned my lesson about how

³ Matayoshi Naoki, “‘Hibana’ to ‘Gekijō’ no himerareta kankei,” *Bungei geinin* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2017), 13.

⁴ Matayoshi has frequently discussed how he balances his work as a comedian and as a writer. For example, he has opined that insofar as both comedy and literature are artforms that rely on language they are similar, even observing that *konto* (skit-

difficult this is... I should amend my remarks to say that '[To do both] is an incredibly psychologically taxing endeavor.'"⁵ He explains that as his writing deadlines approached: "The voice saying 'Oh no (*yabai*), I have to write a novel!' and the more objective voice that laughs at myself by saying 'Hey, this guy is really panicking!' would fight against each other. This perspective has been very helpful."⁶ Matayoshi implies that he was able to maintain a buffered distance from his creative anxieties by relying on his comedian side. Yet, he states that he struggled to balance his performance duties and media appearances as a comedian with the time he needed for writing, and that had he not been able to schedule a four-day hiatus to concentrate solely on his manuscript, he would probably have been unable to finish *Gekijō*. During this short interval, in the time-honored tradition of Japanese writers, Matayoshi ensconced himself in a hotel room '*kanzume*' (tin can)-style in order to focus the entirety of his attentions on his novel, emerging only for meals. Looking back on this period he remarks: "But if I were receiving four days just for writing a novel, I guess I can't say that I am balancing comedy and literature."⁷ Despite the commercial public's support for his writings and his own conscious emulation of a writing practice associated with literary lore, Matayoshi expresses the anxiety that he was not quite living up to the exacting rigors expected of a professional writer.

Matayoshi's devotion to literature started long before he began writing and publishing his own novels. He has recounted on multiple occasions how, as a middle-schooler, he discovered the allure of reading through Dazai Osamu's now-canonical novel *Ningen shikkaku* (No Longer Human, 1948) and how Dazai has since served as his literary idol.⁸ Starting

based comedy) and novels share much, as do *manzai* (talk-comedy) and novels, but that *konto* and *manzai* are very different. See Hashimoto Tomofumi and Matayoshi Naoki, "Dokusen Intabyū Matayoshi Naoki: 'Hibana' kara ninen, tsui ni nisakume happyō e," *Bungakukai*, 71:3 (March 2017), 59–60. But to the question of whether he saw himself primarily as a comedian who also wrote novels, he has also answered affirmatively. He qualified his response though by adding that he rarely considers "what percentages [of his identity] to allocate to being a novelist or a comedian." See Matayoshi Naoki, "Jinsei no kurushii jiki o egaku 'Gekijō.'" *Voice* 476 (Aug. 2017), 239. See also Matayoshi Naoki and Kawakami Hiromi, "Manzai to shōsetsu no chikasa," *Bungakukai* 69: 9 (Sept. 2015).

⁵ "'Hibana' to 'Gekijō' no himerareta kankei," 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See for example Matayoshi Naoki, "Boku to Dazai Osamu," *Yoru o norikoeru* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2016), 161–196 and Matayoshi Naoki, "Ningen shikkaku," *Dai ni toshogakari hosa* (Tokyo: Gentōsha Yoshimoto bunko, 2011), 147–150.

in 2008, Matayoshi held an annual comedy-and-talk event called “Dazai Night” that included readings from the late author’s oeuvre on June 19, Dazai’s birthday as well as the day that his corpse was discovered following his double suicide with a mistress at the age of thirty-nine.⁹ Since his debut in 1935, Dazai had been seen as a literary maverick who wrote in a uniquely open and self-critical manner about his experiences with suicide attempts, drugs and alcoholism, and love affairs. Fellow novelist Kawabata Yasunari famously voted against his candidacy for the Akutagawa award citing “an unsavory murkiness to the writer’s life, which would seem to hinder him from expressing his talents.”¹⁰ Yet until his death in 1948, Dazai continued to develop as a prolific writer as his personal life deteriorated; it is as though the “unsavory” aspects of the writer’s life fed into his artistic prowess.

Dazai’s own persona, and many of his literary characters, thus embody the Romantic trope of the tortured, solitary male genius whose artistic callings were antithetical to the lulling, domesticating imperatives of a stable personal life.¹¹ For example, of the calm middle period of Dazai’s career when he married, had children, and produced a range of critically acclaimed stories, it has been assessed that: “As soon as he actually began leading a life in petit bourgeois society—that is, as soon as he became the agent of an actual quotidian life—he lost his [true] life. He lost the real experiences that became folded into his interiority. He became unable to see the truth of society the moment he entered society. He became a living corpse who could only write aesthetically by burning the truth of his past experiences.”¹² Dazai’s literary legacy as a writer of hard-

⁹ The final “Dazai Night” was held in 2019 because Matayoshi decided to halt the annual event once he himself reached the age when Dazai died. See: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/%E5%A4%AA%E5%AE%B0%E3%83%8A%E3%82%A4%E3%83%88?f=live>

¹⁰ Kawabata Yasunari, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke shō senhyō” (1935), *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982), 34: 297–298.

¹¹ For a discussion of how Victorian biographers of Romantic poets sought to counter and complicate their subjects’ mythos of autonomy and male genius, see Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). North writes that: “Biography in practice and theory claimed that to domesticate was to democratize, to question the exclusivity of cultural production that withholds itself from general consumption and to insist upon the connection between the public/historical and the private/domestic worlds” (6). A similar dynamic often occurs in discussions of Japanese *bungō* (canonical literary giants), especially writers like Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) and Dazai Osamu, whose artistic progress continued even as, or because of, the deterioration of their personal lives.

¹² Okuno Takeo, *Dazai Osamu ron* (Tokyo: Shinchō bunko, 1984), 112.

won insights into human nature is founded on his popular image as a perpetual itinerant and outsider who found solace only in fleeting affairs, since he was fundamentally incapable of sustaining a functional home base.

Indeed, nihilistic, dissolute male artists and the long-suffering women who support them make frequent appearances in Dazai's stories. Perhaps the most famous example is Yōzō, the protagonist of *No Longer Human*, whose original intention was to become a painter before his misanthropic anxieties consume him and he falls into a life of vice. In an early scene, Yōzō recalls how moved he had been as a middle school student when he encountered the raw expressivity of European modernist painters: "These are people whose dread of human beings is so morbid that they reach a point where they yearn to see with their own eyes monsters of ever more horrible shapes.... They had dared to paint pictures of devils. These, I thought, would be my friends in the future. I was so excited I could have wept."¹³ In his later life though, Yōzō does not fulfill his dream to become a painter. He instead becomes a comic illustrator with the help of a kindly lover. Soon, he finds himself feeling oppressed by her benevolence and his alcoholism worsens. He then leaves her to live with another woman, a pattern he repeats throughout his life. Yōzō muses: "My conclusion was that though women appear to belong to the same species as men, they are actually quite different creatures, and these incomprehensible, insidious (*fukakai de yudan no naranu*) beings have, fantastic as it seems, always looked after me."¹⁴ All the while, he feels ashamed about his profession as a commercial manga artist, and a part of him perpetually aspires to be a 'pure' artist. Such tortured male artists recur throughout Dazai's fictions.

In a short eulogy for a fellow writer who died young, Dazai spelled out his own views that committing to a life of literature would lead to abject unhappiness and untimely death. Although he did not know the Japanese Romantic writer Ogata Takashi (1905–1938) well, and Ogata died of illness rather than dissipation, Dazai blames the writer's death on the crushing demands of what he calls the "authorial spirit" (*sakka seishin*). Dazai intones in the eulogy: "If you are so afraid of misery, you should not be an author.... All authors are miserable.... What killed Ogata

¹³ Donald Keene translated the novel in 1958. Throughout the paper I will quote from his translations while also indicating the location of the passage in the original Japanese text. Dazai Osamu, *No Longer Human*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: New Directions, 1958), 53–54. Also, Dazai Osamu, *Ningen shikkaku* (1948), *Dazai Osamu zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1977), 9: 423–424.

¹⁴ *No Longer Human*, 49. Also, *Ningen shikkaku*, 419.

is his own authorial spirit. His strong, first-rate authorial spirit.”¹⁵ The tone of sympathy and admiration in these remarks seems to foretell Dazai’s own death by suicide a decade later.

Let us now turn to Matayoshi Naoki’s *Gekijō*, which he billed as a “love story” (*ren’ai shōsetsu*). The dissolution of the story’s central couple seems foreshadowed in Matayoshi’s open disclaimers that he had decided to write about romantic love precisely because he did not understand it.¹⁶ The protagonist Nagata is an unsuccessful playwright who harbors lofty questions about how the theatrical arts might contribute to the world, although he dreads interacting with people in his everyday life. The novel opens with Nagata’s interior monologue about his feelings of claustrophobia and alienation in the crowded streets of Tokyo: “I walk so that I do not meet anyone’s gaze. There are people behind people, and behind them too. If I fix my gaze beyond them, my eyes don’t meet anyone’s. The outlines of everyone’s faces blur, and if clear lines start to take shape, all I have to do is look down.”¹⁷ He pauses to gather his composure in front of an art gallery’s window and notices another unmoving figure in the flow of traffic around him. He gathers the courage to introduce himself to the woman, Saki, who is both touched and amused by his awkwardness. From the start of their romance, Saki represents for him a safe, nonjudgmental haven from the faceless crush of urban humanity.

As Nagata tells her about his small drama troupe, he remembers the thrill he had felt when he staged his first plays in middle school. He recounts: “It felt like a miracle when my writings were reconstituted through other people’s bodies and voices. And there was nothing quite like the pleasure of the audience receiving my visions. At some point, any life outside of the theater became inconceivable for me.”¹⁸ At the heart of his creative mission is a desperate urge to convey his perspectives to his audiences. Although it could be said that this is a desire that drives all artists who present their works publicly, readers start to see that this communicative will is particularly dire for Nagata, who in his actual life

¹⁵ Dazai Osamu, “Ogata-shi o koroshita mono” (1938), *Dazai Osamu zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1977), 10: 115.

¹⁶ Matayoshi states that he became interested in writing a love story because he does not quite understand romantic love. Matayoshi Naoki, “‘Gekijō’ kankō kinen intabyū: ren’ai ga wakarani kara koso, kakitakatta,” *Nami* 51:5 (May 2017), especially p.7.

¹⁷ Matayoshi Naoki, *Gekijō* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2017), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

has difficulty registering the viewpoints of others and expressing his own views effectively.

In a particularly telling scene when Nagata meets with his theater troupe, various group members voice their dissatisfaction with his directorial style. Two actors state that they want to leave the group, complaining that Nagata never listened to their insights and only saw them as a means for enacting his own visions. Aoyama, the sole female cast member, also announces her intention to leave the group. Nagata mentally disparages her: “This woman (*kono onna*) always starts talking with the worst timing. She’s always been attention-hungry, and must have been waiting intently for the chance to become the center of the conversation.”¹⁹ However, with her respectful, intelligent speaking style and incisive remarks, Aoyama serves as an effective counterpoint to Nagata’s self-perceptions as a victim of his ungrateful actors’ egos. She represents the opposite of Saki’s smiling indulgence, and is a key character who represents Matayoshi’s questioning of a Dazai-esque mode of solitary, artistic masculinity unable to connect with others.

Aoyama says: “Speaking with you, Nagata-san, I know that I am not appreciated. This relates to what the others were saying earlier but you only see me as an actress (*onna yaku*), don’t you? I don’t think you have ever evaluated me as an actor.” To his mild protests that her female presence is indeed helpful for the troupe, she continues: “Is my identity just that? I suppose you ultimately cannot remove the outdated filter through which you see everything.” Nagata retorts: “Every single person who works in an expressive capacity is a mass of self-consciousness and the desire to assert themselves. Me too, and all of you too.... I think of theater as an arena that common sense theories can’t meddle with, so I can’t have a conversation with the likes of those who just want to talk in platitudes.”²⁰ This exchange highlights that Nagata’s artistic philosophy takes antisocial self-centeredness as a premise. While Matayoshi depicts Nagata’s hubris with gentle humor, readers deduce that Nagata is too trapped in his ego to produce anything that would inspire his cast and resonate with his viewers. Nagata’s fundamental lack of respect for women is also brought into relief by his condescending, clearly misogynistic attitudes towards Aoyama.

Saki on the other hand, does not question Nagata’s conflation of his extreme introversion with a premise for artistic genius. Though she weakly attempts to assert herself a few times—such as by asking him to contribute

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33–35.

to the rent of her apartment many months after he moves in, and hinting that she would like him to take her to Disneyland—she never directly demands anything of Nagata. When he wants to concentrate and think about his latest play, she takes pains to be quiet in her own home. She does not criticize him when he returns home drunk at odd hours or stays up all night playing video games. She is endlessly accepting, the perfect Dazai-esque woman.

Eventually, Nagata's life begins to change thanks to, of all people, Aoyama, his former troupe-mate whom he had insulted. Aoyama's emotional maturity is underscored by her concern for his welfare, and she introduces him to various writing jobs after chastising him for living off Saki's generosity. Nagata moves out from Saki's apartment once he has saved up enough money, and it looks as though he is finally finding his way in the world. However, Nagata spirals into a jealous panic once he learns that Saki and Aoyama had gone to see a rival playwright's production without him. In a drawn-out text message exchange with Aoyama, Nagata tells her not to meddle with Saki, to which Aoyama retorts that Saki is not his property and that she has the right to choose what to do and with whom. Nagata's feverish response reveals many of the issues that readers already perceive about him by this point. He types:

I agree that the rights you declare should indeed be respected. But with certain conditions. When I try to swallow your ideas wholesale, I fall into the delusion that, for example, my mother's life had no meaning. I mean this in the sense that she would be powerless to answer what it was that she herself had wanted to do, having spent her life at the beck and call of her husband and children. But don't forget that humans also have the right to depend on others. I think that you so readily accept anti-discrimination ideologies from the West because you too have been badly treated. That's why you always use foreign words.²¹ It's up to you to hold opinions that help protect your own ego, but don't force your ideas onto other people. Do people like my mom have to be trampled on by your values and feel that their lives were a big mistake? No way!²²

²¹ Nagata says that Aoyama's words are "katakana bakkari," or all foreign loan-words.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

He then reflects: “When I talk about my mom here, I might actually mean Saki.”²³

There are many points to unpack, but foremost is Nagata’s own oblique admission—through his rather sudden references to his mother—that his treatment of Saki is in fact rooted in an outdated patriarchal view that relegates women to a domestic realm that provides succor but not much else. In earlier scenes too we have seen his intellectual disdain towards Saki, for instance in his admission at one point that: “Because I am not sure that Saki comprehends what I am talking about, it became a habit of mine to interject ‘Do you get it?’ at frequent intervals to check with her.”²⁴ Nagata’s defensiveness towards Aoyama shows that he knows that gender norms have evolved, thanks in large part to imported cultural influences and discourses, and that Japanese women of his generation expect more respect from men than their predecessors. His cry that “humans also have the right to depend on others” rings hollow in apparently referring only to men, particularly creative men with their eyes on artistic ideals that they believe women cannot begin to appreciate. From his overly sensitive reaction, it seems that Aoyama’s critiques have managed to at least partially shake Nagata’s retrograde views about masculinity and femininity, and by extension, their impact on his self-images as an artist.

Towards the end of the novel Saki is physically and emotionally exhausted, and she decides to leave Tokyo to recuperate in her rural hometown. Nagata is full of regret and as they pack up her apartment, he tells her that he has realized that: “Everything I can do in the theater, I can do in reality too.”²⁵ Since their earliest days of dating, he had not shared his artistic dilemmas with Saki as a real peer, and though it is too little too late, he now sees how selfish he has been. He wants to share his ideas with her not just through the artistic venue of the stage but through actual lived communications. In the final scene, Nagata attempts to cheer up the crying Saki by donning a monkey mask that he had once used in an old play. “Boo!” he says to her while striking funny poses in the mask, to which she finally smiles in apparent “resignation” (*kannen shita yōni*).²⁶

This last scene suggests that while Nagata may no longer take Saki for granted as endlessly indulgent, he still does not entirely view her as an equal. He treats her like a child, performing for her as a clown rather than

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 136.

²⁵ Ibid., 196.

²⁶ Ibid., 207.

seeking to learn her thoughts. Saki's resigned smile indicates her acceptance that they will never be able to truly communicate. Unlike Dazai's doomed protagonists for whom amending their self-destructive ways is not presented as a real option, Matayoshi leaves enough ambiguity so that it is possible to imagine that through the experience of losing Saki, Nagata will rethink his views on romantic love and recalibrate his relationships with other human beings more generally. In turn, he may also come to reassess his creative work as not just a solitary retreat from reality, but a process of mutual exchange in which he shares his imagination with others and grows from their reactions.

In *Gekijō*, Matayoshi therefore questions the state of alienation that Dazai had stipulated as necessary for the excruciation of serious artistic work. Masculine emotional solitude has long been a trope of modern literary expression in Japan, beginning with the rise of the confessional-style 'I-novel' genre in the early twentieth century, which strove to express to readers a sincerity and transparency that the author presumably could not achieve in his actual life. Dazai is widely considered an I-novel writer.²⁷ In this light, *Gekijō* can be read as more than the bittersweet story of a failed love between a solipsistic young man and a kind-hearted young woman who realizes that she deserves more, but also as the repudiation of notions of artistic purity that deny art's connection to lived realities and emotional needs, as well as the gendered, exclusionary implications of such ideals. Nagata might be seen as a modern-day parody of the 'serious male writer' in the mold of Dazai, and both his amorous and creative failures suggest Matayoshi's critique of this literary convention, which is itself ironic considering that Dazai had been considered unconventional in his own day. Yet, in his humorous and emotionally resonant depictions of his young protagonist, it is undeniable that Matayoshi also humanizes and perhaps even romanticizes this particular model of creative struggle. This ambiguity might be said to illuminate Matayoshi's own desires to, like Dazai, break down and democratize the boundaries of 'pure' literature, and also, to be included within its precincts. His third novel *Ningen* (Human Beings, 2019),²⁸ a more explicitly I-novel-esque tome featuring a solitary writer and his alter-ego, an Akutagawa Award-winning comedian, continues to plumb the theme of artistic ideals and human connections, but I will reserve my remarks on this latest work for another occasion.

²⁷ Phyllis I. Lyons, *The Saga of Dazai Osamu: A Critical Study with Translations* (Stanford University Press, 1985), 7–8.

²⁸ The work was first serialized in the *Mainichi shinbun*. That he was tasked with a serialized novel in a major national newspaper can be said to show Matayoshi's now-canonical status as a writer.

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