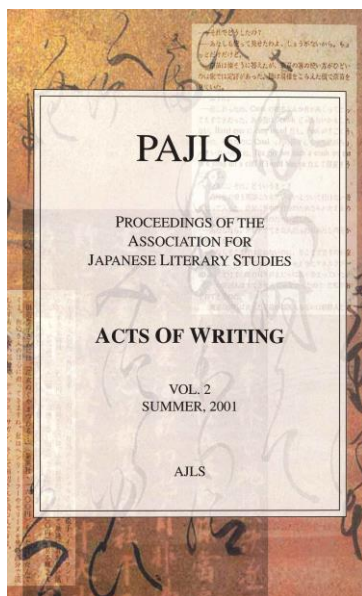


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Giorgio Amitrano 

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THE GENDER OF SOLITUDE: CHANGING SEXUAL IDENTITIES IN RECENT JAPANESE FICTION

GIORGIO AMITRANO

When in 1976 *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (Almost Transparent Blue) by Murakami Ryū received the Akutagawa Prize and became a bestseller, selling over one million copies, themes like homosexuality and sexual ambiguity were by no means unfamiliar to Japanese readers. More established writers, Mishima for one, had already dealt with them long before and more exhaustively. In his novel Murakami just touches on these themes in an off-handed, almost casual way. He is much more interested in the phenomenology of a decadent lifestyle in which sex plays a fundamental role, rather than in the discussion of sexual identities.

The narrator, named Ryū like the author to reinforce the autobiographical references, is involved in a repetitive series of promiscuous drug-laced sex encounters. In one scene he is suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to overcome the limits of his individuality in order to merge in a state of ecstatic chaos. He feels as if his "insides were oozing out through every pore, and other people's sweat and breath were flowing in. (...) I wanted to take in the greased, shiny bodies of the black men and rock them inside me."¹

But to go beyond the boundaries of his own self, he also needs to cross the barrier of sexual identity. In another passage, Ryū, at his African-American friend Jackson's suggestion, wears a silver *negligée* and heavy makeup. Looking at himself in the mirror, he has the impression of having become a completely different person, and as he dances he enjoys his newly discovered female self. "As I breathed I forgot who I was. I thought that many things gradually flowed from my body, I became a doll. (...) The feeling that I was a doll became stronger and stronger. All I had to do was just move as they wanted, I was the happiest possible slave."² The scene shows the progressive emasculation of the hero who eventually abandons himself passively (and euphorically) to multiple

¹ Murakami Ryū, 37.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

penetration both by a man and a woman. The writing gathers momentum before exploding in the graphically realistic finale. But it is interesting to note, amid this stylistic maelstrom, that Ryû's sexual descent is described without any particular emphasis. Murakami was apparently oblivious to the problematic aspects that such a devastation of virility could involve.

In fact, although the novel's congested, feverish atmosphere hardly suggests a toned-down approach, no particular significance is ever given to the narrator's homoerotic side or to his penchant for cross-dressing. All his acts, albeit perceived through the hazy filter of drugs, are described with the detachment of an entomologist, without any digressions of a moral or philosophical nature, as mere *variations* in a wide range of sexual expressions. Murakami's attitude towards unconventional sexuality does not seem to stem from the same tradition of modern Japanese writers as Mishima Yukio. If we compare *Kagirinaku tômei ni chikai burû* to Mishima's *Kamen no kokuhaku* (Confessions of a Mask, 1949), we realize that they belong to completely different ages. These works are intrinsically different, of course, but also historically distant. The contemporary readers of *Kamen no kokuhaku* could easily understand and share the drama of the narrator, independently from their sexual orientation, because they understood very well how the sense of one's personal identity could be threatened by the discovery in oneself of homoerotic tendencies. But in 1976, nearly thirty years later, even the most outraged critics could hardly refuse to acknowledge that traditional boundaries of sex definition were no longer so definite and that they could not be regarded as foundations of individual identity, at least not in the same terms as before. *Kagirinaku tômei ni chikai burû*, with the hero's indifference to conventionally accepted gender norms, may be considered one of the first examples of an unprecedented challenge to traditional boundaries of sex definition which was then starting to take place in Japanese literature and which is still in progress.

Murakami Haruki, who belongs to the same generation as Murakami Ryû, has also expressed the need for a redefinition of masculine and feminine roles, but taking an entirely different approach. A rethinking of gender roles in Murakami's work comes into focus for the first time in his 1987 bestseller *Noruei no mori* (Norwegian Wood). Tôru, the narrator, a rather monolithic and apparently conventional male character, is forced by his relationships with three complex female characters into

reconsidering his attitude towards women. In talking to him—uncharacteristically conversation seems to be a better means to knowledge than sex—they reveal to him their inner thoughts and experiences. As he listens to them he becomes aware of their real individual natures: they cease to exist for him as mere projections of his male desires and expectations. Such increased awareness, which enables him to communicate and interact with them on a much deeper level, is paralleled by a loss of control over these women's sexuality and existence at large.

Haruki, of course, is no closer to Tanizaki and Kawabata than Ryû is to Mishima. In Tanizaki's and Kawabata's works, the tension of male heroes was basically centered on their fantasy of total control over female sexuality (epitomized in the mannequin-like docility of Kawabata's sleeping beauties), whereas Murakami Haruki's heroes try to re-educate themselves into understanding women through a discipline of attention. Learning about women's most intimate thoughts is sometimes a painful task. In *Nejimaki dori kuronikuru* (The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, 1994-1995) the narrator's estranged wife confesses to him that she never enjoyed sex with him, whereas her excitation was easily aroused by a man who meant little to her.

In unraveling women's inner thoughts and secret experiences, Tôru comes across lesbian desires. In Murakami's treatment of the lesbian theme in *Noruei no mori* we can find both a stereotypical fear of homosexuality as an element of social disorder and a genuine interest in its "otherness." Both attitudes are reflected in the construction of the Reiko character. She is in her mid-thirties, and in the past has suffered a nervous breakdown. Now life with her husband and her little daughter is apparently serene, until the day a young girl seduces her and then accuses her of sexual abuse and violence. Everybody believes the girl, and Reiko is silently banished from the social community. Her fragile equilibrium is upset and she relapses into mental disorder. What drives Reiko to mental illness is both her feeling of being a social failure and her inability to come to terms with the sexual awakening provoked in her by the young girl. Murakami's stance probably reflects the widespread attitude that regards homosexuality without contempt, as interesting, even

attractive and morally acceptable, but still hard to place in the social structure.³

When Murakami Haruki again takes up the lesbian theme a few years later in *Supûtoniku no koibito* (The Sputnik Sweetheart, 1999), he seems to have acquired a broader vision of the matter. His perception of female homosexuality does not reflect any longer a fear of social danger, and Sumire is presented as a lovely, sympathetic character whose identity, unlike Reiko's, is not defined or even affected by sexual orientation. If her love for same-sex Myû is unrequited, so is the male narrator's love for Sumire herself. Again, the narrator's process of getting to know women is paralleled by his loss of control over their sexuality. The more he listens to Sumire's confessions, the more her friendship for him deepens, but in the process she becomes fully aware of her lack of interest in him as a partner and of her love for a woman. Although Myû is very fond of Sumire, she cannot reciprocate her sexual passion. In the following passage she describes the discovery, in spite of their mutual affection, of their incurable solitudes.

In that moment I realized. It had been fun travelling together for a while, but after all we were just solitary metal aggregations, each rotating in its own orbit. Seen from a distance we might have looked graceful, like meteors, but we were just prisoners condemned to move in our fixed route, without any chance to change direction. Sometimes our orbits would meet and we could catch a glimpse of each other's face. Maybe even our spirits could meet. But it lasted just one brief moment. Soon we would go back to our absolute solitude.⁴

But in this Schnitzlerian *ronde* of unrequited loves, there is a difference between individual destinies. As the narrator's unfulfilled desire fades into the routine of an uneventful life (he is a

³ The same ambivalence can be detected in some widely-circulated products of popular culture. A favourite 1993 *terebi dorama*, *Dôsôkai* (An Alumni Meeting), and films like *Kirakira hikaru* (Shining Bright, 1992) and *Okoge* (Fag-hag, 1992), show a similar contrast between a fascination with homosexuality and the difficulty in accepting it as part of the normal environment.

⁴ Murakami Haruki, 171.

school teacher who fills the emptiness of his days having an affair with the mother of one of his pupils), Sumire's unrequited love brings forth pain, loss, maybe tragedy. She disappears mysteriously on a Greek island, where she might have died or simply transmigrated into a different dimension (the famous Murakamian topos of *atchi no sekai*, "the world out there"). Wherever she might be, none of her friends can reach her. So although Sumire is never represented as a deviant or an outsider because of her love for another woman, in the end one cannot help inferring a connection between her sexual orientation and her disappearance into a realm of loneliness. Solitude is one of the most recurrent themes in Murakami's books. It is not true to say that he only condemned his gay characters to loneliness, and we must hope he never sacrifices his inspiration to political correctness. But it would be hard to deny that the search for a redefinition of sexual roles is often linked, in Murakami as well as in other authors, with a feeling of loneliness or exclusion. After all, even though unconventional sexual models are becoming more accepted as Japanese society is becoming more differentiated, there is still no recognized place in the post-Confucian Japanese society for homosexuals, transsexuals, transgenders (and even for heterosexual singles), who often take shelter, either as customers or employees in the world of *mizu shōbai*, a traditional haven for "irregular" people.

But the world of *mizu shōbai* provides no shelter for Eriko, the transsexual father in Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchin* (Kitchen, 1988), killed by a psychopath in the gay bar where she works. *Kitchin* is the story of Mikage, a young woman who, finding herself alone after the death of her grandmother, moves in with Yūichi, a young man of about her own age or perhaps a bit younger. His mother, he explains quite nonchalantly, is actually his father, but following his wife's death he decided to assume the mother role, and went so far as to have a sex-change operation. The second part of the story opens with the news of Eriko's death and is centered on the healing process of Mikage and Yūichi. The theme of sexual ambiguity surfaces again in the novella *Mūnraitō shadō* (Moonlight Shadow), included in the same volume as *Kitchin*. Hiiragi, a young man, wears the clothes of his dead girlfriend. Actually, no reference is ever made to Eriko's or Hiiragi's homosexuality. Eriko's and Hiiragi's acts can simply be read as "a refuge from loneliness after

the death of a loved one”.⁵ So loneliness, although once again linked with eccentric sexual identities, is the cause rather than the consequence of an unconventional choice. Both Eriko’s assuming the female identity of his dead wife, and Hiiragi’s wearing the clothes of his dead girlfriend, are ways of trying to conserve an illusory intimacy with the deceased, but they also represent a form of resistance against the socially-accepted gender norms, as if their bereavement had made such rules suddenly unacceptable to them. This would seem to suggest that people who are made more vulnerable by loss start to resist any form of social pressure, including the obligation to conform to gender rules.

A stronger resistance to conventionally-accepted gender rules is expressed by the novelist Fujino Chiya, unflatteringly described in the Japanese press as *seidôitsusei shôgaisha*, a person affected by sexual identity disorder, or *toransusekushuaru*, transsexual.⁶ The photographs taken at the ceremony of the awarding of the 22nd Akutagawa Prize, January 2000, published in all Japanese national newspapers, show the winner Fujino smiling shyly between the other Akutagawa recipient, Gen Getsu, a second-generation resident Korean, and the winner of the Naoki Prize, Nakanishi Rei. The contrast between her masculine features and feminine appearance, enhanced by a simple black dress and white necklace, is a striking illustration of Fujino’s “resistance to conventionally accepted gender rules.” The novel that won her the Akutagawa Prize is not less effective. *Natsu no yakusoku* (A Promise for the Summer) tells in a low-key style the story of a gay couple, a transsexual and other friends, all of them single, seen in their lives and work, and their project of going camping together in the summer, which, as in a Chekhov play, will be much talked of but never materialize. We have evidently come a long way from the steamy atmospheres of *Kagirinaku tômei ni chikai burû*, but Fujino might be more subtly subversive than the outrageous Murakami Ryû, in portraying unconventional sex roles as normal. There are no drugs here, and no orgies. As a matter of fact nothing much happens at all, but as the novel unfolds, we understand how the apparently

⁵ Buruma, 31-32.

⁶ The term “transgendered” might be more appropriate, but I will follow the term *toransusekushuaru* used by the author herself.

uneventful lives of these characters result from a constant striving to gain acceptance, to affirm their right to be themselves in public.

The story is set in Tokyo. Maruo, twenty-nine years old, who works for a company, and his partner Hikaru, a free-lance editor, twenty-seven, have a steady relationship and plan to live together in the future. One day, on his way to work, Maruo sees a woman with a dog standing outside the building. Getting closer, he recognizes her.

“Tamayo!” he called out cheerfully.

The person standing there, holding a Maltese dog called Apollo (even though it was a female dog), was Hirata Tamayo, a twenty-six year old beautician. Actually she was not born as a woman: she was a transsexual who had shifted from man into woman, but Maruo was the kind of person that in these matters respected other people’s will, so he had no trouble in thinking of Tamayo as a woman.⁷

Unlike Hikaru, who works in a more open-minded environment, Maruo works for a traditional company, where male employees are expected to be heterosexuals as a matter of course. When the news of his homosexuality spreads through the office, he is prepared for the worst, but nothing he feared happens.

Maruo’s decision to leave the company’s dorm^[8] the year before, was because in the company they had found out about his being gay. Naturally enough, it was a dorm for men only. He had conceived all sorts of horrible fantasies: he would be treated with hate and contempt, they would force him to take his bath by himself out of the dorm, they would spit in his food when he wasn’t watching, they would push him down the stairs. But of course nothing like that happened. Simply, he felt that the air

⁷ Fujino, 9.

⁸ In Japanese: *dokushin ryô*, a dormitory for bachelors. Many Japanese companies provide lodgings for unmarried male employees. They usually have to leave when they become thirty-five years old, considered the age by which a young man is supposed to get married.

around him had somehow changed, and it was that air that defeated him.⁹

Fujino describes with admirable delicacy how the feeling of exclusion can be conveyed even without an overt rejection and how difficult it is to react. It is hard to fight against air. But when society's attempts to marginalize Maruo's existence become more conspicuous, they have the effect of stimulating his vital energy and self-confidence.

On the wall of the toilet was written: Matsui queer.

He had no idea when and by whom it had been written. Since he had found it a couple of months before, he had made up his mind always to do his business in that toilet. "Matsui queer." It had a nostalgic ring to it. At the thought that there were people who, even after entering the adult world, could write such childish things, strangely Maruo felt the courage to live well up inside himself.¹⁰

Fujino may not be a second Proust, but the word "queer," like the taste of the madeleine, evokes instantly in Maruo memories of his childhood as a sensitive sissy out of step with the world. He remembers the many times the word has been used against him. The first time the rumor spread that he was gay—he was a junior high school student at the time—his schoolmates had locked him up in a chicken coop in the school backyard. Since then he had never told anybody, but wherever he went someone would inevitably find out. In high school he had been wildly beaten by an older student who said he wanted to chase out the devil he had inside. At university a colleague needed blood for a relative who had had an accident, but when Maruo had offered his help the colleague had refused saying: We don't need your blood. And even now he and Hikaru were insulted by groups of schoolboys shouting "queer" after them.

This sequence of memories shows the prejudice Maruo and his friends still suffer in a supposedly tolerant society and accounts for the feeling of loneliness that, like a soft, transparent cobweb, seems to veil the characters of this novel. Fujino, denouncing the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

social origins of this feeling of isolation, does not confine them within the role of victims. Their solitude is suggested indirectly, with compassion but without emphasis on the pathetic, as in this passage which describes Tamayo's affection for her dog.

"The two of you get along well, don't you?" said Nozomi. She really thought so.

"The two of us?" Tamayo, on all fours, looked at Apollo, still excited from their game. "Oh, yes, we do. When I wake up in the morning, there she is, sleeping at my side, glued to my body so close that there's not the smallest crack left."

"Really?"

"I curl up when I sleep and in whatever space she can find, Apollo crawls in. We find a nice position, the two of us, and we sleep like this."¹¹

In Fujino's novel, as in the aforementioned works by Murakami Ryū, Murakami Haruki, and Yoshimoto Banana, a new balance between the sexes is created through questioning male and female stereotypes. To a certain extent the reading public has seemed to identify with this, considering that all these novels have been best-sellers and/or prize winners and, with the partial exception of *Kagirinaku tômei ni chikai burû*, have been accepted without scandalized reactions. Still, it is difficult to say whether they reflect a change that has already happened in Japanese society or, as would seem more realistic, merely anticipate a change taking place in Japanese sensibility which has not yet gained ground in society, apart from privileged milieus such as the fashion or entertainment worlds. The feeling of loneliness and displacement which they all seem to associate with the rethinking of gender roles can be seen as a symbolic representation of the difficult transition from individual to social change, from theory to practice.

Solitude is sometimes described as a cold, empty space where people's orbits meet briefly before going back to absolute loneliness (Murakami),¹² a black, frightening universe of "total

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹² Murakami Haruki, 171.

science fiction” (Yoshimoto).¹³ But unlike the cold, desolate landscapes of science fiction, our world can still offer some warmth and consolation.

“Children, they are lovely, aren’t they?” said Tamayo, her eyes following the family that was leaving. “Hmm,” Maruo nodded. Then Tamayo, as if in haste, kissed Apollo’s ear. You are lovely, too, aren’t you?” she said.

“If I don’t do this, she’ll be jealous,” she explained....

“For Apollo, I am 80% of the world, so I have to give her a lot of love.”¹⁴

“She does a lot for me.” ...

“Like what?”

“Well, I have awful thoughts sometimes, you know. I hate people and all that. But when Apollo comes near and clings to me, I can feel she loves me with no reserve. How can she love someone who has the bad thoughts that I have, I wonder, and that makes me think.”

“Come on, are you sure your thoughts are so bad?” said Maruo jokingly.

“They are, let me tell you. When I thought that if I killed someone, Apollo would still love me, I ended up crying.”

“I see.”¹⁵

Maruo looked furtively at Tamayo’s profile. The strong shape of her jaw and neck suggested masculinity, but on the whole it was the face of a woman. Under the orange color t-shirt her not-small breasts moved as she breathed. Of course she was no object of desire to him, and probably she felt the same way about him. Still, they walked side by side. Apollo was quiet, in Maruo’s arms, as if she was asleep. Or maybe she *was* asleep.

¹³ Yoshimoto, 1988, 9.

¹⁴ Fujino, 126-27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128-29.

“It will be so nice, going camping, won’t it?” said Tamayo, under the streetlights.¹⁶

The unconditional love of a dog, the joyful expectation of holiday plans with friends, the feeling of human solidarity that can transcend both sexual attraction and gender stereotypes are like bridges built to connect isolated beings in a sort of alternative, postnuclear family that could take its place as a human archipelago in the geography of a new, unprejudiced society.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-31.

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