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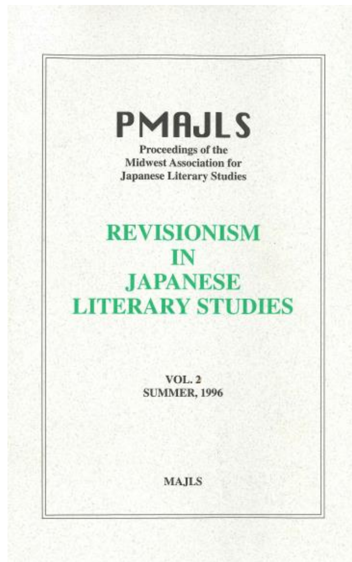
Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies 2 (1996): 253–267.



PMAJLS 2:
Revisionism in Japanese Literary Studies.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

RE-READING TAMURA TOSHIKO: A FAILED "NEW WOMAN"?

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Contemporary critics of Tamura Toshiko (1884-1945) dismissed her work for being merely sensual and for creating insufficiently liberated female characters; recently, critics have begun to re-evaluate that harsh judgment, and in fact, in this paper, I maintain that a careful re-reading which takes into account her treatment of women characters and the literary and historical context in which she wrote will show her to be a pioneering spirit for women at the beginning of the Taishō period.

I begin with an excerpt from Tamura Toshiko's novella *The Rouge-Lipped Mummy* (*Miira no kuchibeni*), which was published in the April, 1913, edition of Chūō Kōron. The early parts of the novel establish that Yoshio, the writer/husband, is despairing over his stalled literary career; that he has been unable to interest a publisher in any of his manuscripts, and that he has recently been attacked in print as an "old-fashioned" writer. He and his wife Minoru have no money, and their financial situation grows more desperate each day. By the time of this excerpt, Yoshio has been forced to take a regular day job, and although he is unhappy with it, he and Minoru have settled into domestic life.

> Even in such a [relatively quiet] period, their contradictory spirits clashed--he, with his fickleness, she with her craftsmanlike steadiness; and there was never a lull in their goading of each other. His determination to never lose to a woman and her disposition to never lose to a man went beyond irritating each other, to the point where it was not at all unusual for them to trade insults until they

came to blows. Sometimes, when the two of them disagreed over the meaning of a book which Minoru had read, they argued loudly until two or three in the morning, oblivious to the fact that their voices could be heard out in the street. When, at last, Minoru would quit arguing and stare disdainfully at Yoshio's narrow forehead, his eyes would get red and he would shout:

"Stop being insolent! What can someone like you accomplish, anyway."

He spoke like a common laborer who spits at those he scorns. Sometimes, when she heard these words, Minoru could not help but feel her spirits lift. She only regretted that she had no ally to attest to the certainty that his knowledge was inferior to hers.

"I dare you to say that again," she said as she hit him on the shoulder.

"I'll say it over and over. I'm saying that someone like you is no good. You don't understand anything."

"Why? Why?"

When things came to a head like this, Minoru would not stop until Yoshio struck her.

"Why is it you won't apologize, when you're in the wrong?"

Minoru raised her hand to hit him on the head, wanting to force him to apologize, when she was hit hard by him.

"In the end, you'll be nothing more than a cripple." [Yoshio growled at her.][1]

The next evening, while Minoru clears the supper table, Yoshio asks when she is going to do something with the writing she does in private. He has heard about a literary contest, and he wants her to enter, because the ¥1000 prize would ease their financial problems. He suspects she has been working on

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[1] Tamura Toshiko, *Tamura Toshiko Sakuhinshū*, Vol. I. Tokyo: Orijin Shuppan Sentā, 1987, 333-334.

something, and indeed, he is right; but she has withheld it because she didn't think she could complete it in time for the deadline. She has hesitated, too, because of his attitude: she resents his treatment of her work as a gamble which might pay off. She feels used and would prefer to work at the phone company, if it is income they need. She is revolted to see that only the material aspect of her work is of any interest to him; otherwise, he expresses only low regard for writing by women. He is outraged that she refuses to understand the severity of their economic problems or do anything to alleviate them. For the first time in their history of confrontations, she is afraid and runs out of the house.

Nevertheless, she returns later that evening to acquiesce to his demand that she compete in the literary contest. While she had walked about earlier, thinking things through, she kept hearing in her mind the accusation he had flung at her: "You don't care anything for our life together!" She feels her vulnerability before him. If he identifies her writing with "serious" work, and if her doing it would make him happy, then she should have the womanliness *(onnarashii kiyasusa)* to do it. She feels her cowardice, the weight of her weariness. She appears to herself like a star which is extinguished by the arrival of daylight.

When she sits down at her desk to write, she is stymied by her inability to find a "subject." Yoshio refuses to regard that as a problem. "There's no such thing as being unable to write," he tells her. In his view, all she has to do is to keep putting the words down. But she knows that he misses the point: wanting to write and not wanting to write, she is too conflicted to be able to produce. It is finally her realization that she must write in order to keep him, that drives her to write feverishly, pausing only for snatches of sleep. She meets the deadline, with a feeling of despair: what she has accomplished has nothing to do with art, and

everything to do with her fear of punishment at Yoshio's hands.

At this midpoint in the novella, Minoru emerges as a woman writer. She has written for years, privately, in spite of her husband's castigations against her. Yet the decisive factor in committing herself to writing is her fear that she will lose her husband if she does not follow his urgings to submit something to the literary contest. As she works day and night, the image she has before her is that of her husband--the eyes of the one who held the whip over her.

One might expect that a woman who sits down to write after a challenge as derogatory as Yoshio's ("You'll be nothing more than a cripple") would write from strength. Instead, Minoru's writing is an act of submission. That is what gets her to the writing table in a serious way. She has shown the strength to confront her husband verbally day after bruising day, as they struggle for power in their relationship, but she is unwilling to step outside their relationship on her own initiative. Indeed, she is not only unwilling to leave him; she clings dependently to him.

Toward the end of the novella, life for the two of them has become bitter. He is appalled by her continuing extravagances--books, flowers, hairdressers, and so on. She realizes she will soon be discarded by him.

> [Yoshio speaks to Minoru about her writing.]
> "Give it up. You don't have any luck. You don't have enough self-respect. You've been born to suffer an ordinary life. .....
> It's too bad. My work has been worthless, too. Since I don't have the strength to support you any longer, I think we should separate. If I reach a point where I can support you and your extravagances, we could get together

again."(364)

Just as they prepare to go their separate ways, they receive word that Minoru has won the contest and the ¥1000 prize, a huge sum in the days when ¥25 a month was a respectable salary. Yoshio comments right away that it is because of him that they have achieved this success. She retorts that she supposes this means they can stay together now.

The final chapter of the novella opens with Minoru's statement: "I have no right to that kind of work" (368). The story she had been compelled to write has brought cheer to her household, but it has not conferred any sense of power on her. She feels uneasy with Yoshio's joyful acceptance of the new fate which has buoyed them up; furthermore, she finds herself now reconfirmed in her life with him. She feels the need of a new start, some way to cut through the emptiness of her life. Encouraged by her success, she begins to study assiduously. Her eyes, which had seemed sleepy, are now clearly wide awake. As Yoshio fades in importance to her, she discovers he no longer controls her. For the first time, it is Minoru herself who propels her. Her pride grows strong within her. Gradually, Yoshio becomes aware of her change, too; but he attributes it to the receipt of the literary prize and thinks her strengthening sense of self is due to what he has done for her. He doesn't say anything, but he begins to suspect wearily that he is being left behind.

The final scene in the novella takes place the morning after a party for writers which Minoru attends in the company of a young university student of literature. She is energized by the accolades and the conversation. That night she has a dream of a male and a female mummy in a transparent glass case. Their gray bodies lie side by side. The female mummy lies face up, her

large eyes open, her lips painted bright red. In the morning, Minoru excitedly tells Yoshio about the dream and sits down to draw it on paper. He responds: "I hate dreams."

The mummy is an exotic image of this writing couple, Minoru and Yoshio. They are confined in a suffocatingly tight space, stuck with each other. They are desiccated, lifelike but lifeless. Minoru is exhilarated by her dream and sees something hopeful in it. It is certainly more affirming than the "cripple" image which Yoshio had flung at her. He concentrates on the limitations he sees in her: "crippled" by her gender, by her lack of talent, by her love of luxury, and by her sensuality. It may be no wonder, then, that she is excited by the vision of the female mummy, which seems the more "alive" of the two, with her open eyes and rouge lips. Certainly in contrast to the male mummy, she seems more animated. Perhaps Minoru sees the female mummy reversing her course and moving back toward life and vitality. The rouge may suggest to her that her artifice and her sensuality might hold the key to revitalization. Indeed, there are many ways in which Minoru seems very much "alive." She responds to Nature, giving herself over to watching the rain fall for an entire afternoon, or arranging flowers to place in the apartment. She buys books and takes great pleasure in them; and she even writes, in private. Her trips to the hairdresser may be self-indulgent, but show an inclination to beauty, for shaping the conditions of her daily life around aesthetic longings.

But the modern reader cannot wholeheartedly embrace Minoru's optimism. In truth, Minoru's hopefulness is muted by the reader's recognition of the barriers or limitations she chooses to ignore. Does she fail to realize that even if the power in the relationship with Yoshio has shifted to her, she is still trapped in

the relationship? Doesn't she sense that as long as she is "confined" in relationship with him, she will not be able to develop fully as a writer? Why can't she see that the transparency of the coffin suggests that she is held back by invisible barriers she refuses to confront?

These questions point to a fault line in the story that critics have noticed in other stories by Tamura, as well. Tamura's women seem to demand too little, be too self-abnegating, and too willing to depend on their men, even when they are denigrated by them. Often, they are unwilling to look for "self" outside their relationships to their men. Moreover, the female/male relationship is often hostile and competitive, with a winner and a loser. Power is not shared; it flows from one to the other sometimes, but one person is always up and the other always down.

When Tamura Toshiko took up her brush and began to write seriously, for publication, in 1911, she wrote against the background of two narratives for women: the domesticity narrative which had elevated samurai notions of femininity to a cultural ideal for all women and had been summed up in the slogan "good wives, wise mothers" (*ryōsai kenbo*); and what I shall call the feminist narrative, the ideals summed up in the phrase "New Woman" (*atarashii onna*). The feudal concept of "good wives, wise mothers" defined feminine virtue in terms of submission, obedience, quiet performance of one's duties, and self-sacrifice. In the late Meiji period, the State had enlarged upon this by extending feminine duties to include service to the State, through work in factories, diligence in saving, and the production of children who would grow up to be loyal citizens. Although some of these duties might give a few women a public role, such as in the Women's Patriotic Society, women by and large were expected to confine themselves to the private sphere, tending quietly to the

welfare of their households and families.

By the time Tamura Toshiko began publishing her fiction, the old "good wives, wise mothers" ideal was being challenged publicly by a newly articulated feminist ideal of the "New Woman." The term had perhaps been used first by Tsubouchi Shōyō in his lectures in 1910 entitled "The So-called New Woman" (*Iwayuru atarashii onna*), in which he discussed the heroines of plays by Ibsen, Shaw, and Sudermann. It referred to the suffragettes in England whose activities were reported in the Japanese press. It was also used to refer to the actresses who played the roles of the heroines in Western plays. In any case, the term was eventually appropriated by the Seitō group, which tried to define it for themselves and their reading public in a series of essays in their January, 1913, issue. Both Itō Noe and Hiratsuka Raichō, editors and contributors to Seitō, described the "New Woman" as someone on a heroic quest for the "authentic life," an adventurer who sets out even though she is not sure where her quest will lead her.[2] Raichō described the "New Woman" as someone who did not live in the past. She refuses to be satisfied with the qualities men have historically valued in her: ignorance, slavish devotion, sexuality. Further, she advocates the destruction of the old morality and the family system which prevent women from achieving the freedom which should be theirs. However, when Raichō points to the future, she does not argue for a political solution to women's oppression. She emphasizes the importance of searching for a personal solution to the problems women faced; self-cultivation, rather than social action, would inevitably lead to the transformation of society from the inside. In fact, she locates the

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2 *Seitō* (January, 1913): 5.

greatest obstacles to progress in women's own self-doubt and lack of perseverance. Itō Noe looks at the personal cost of trying to live an "authentic" life of freedom and self-definition, and describes the "New Woman" as a lonely and suffering pioneer, forced to draw deeply on her own strength in order to combat deep despair.

These Seitō writers developed their concept of the "New Woman" just at a time of increased suppression by the government in the wake of the Great Treason Trial of 1911. For male writers, the changed political climate led them to retreat from public life, and many took refuge in the private reflections afforded them by the I-novel. When they embraced this personalized form of writing, they were pulling back from the public stage. For women writers, however, as Bardsley has pointed out,[3] the exploration of their private lives in fiction afforded them not only the opportunity for self-cultivation, it also allowed them to ease into a more public realm of expression than they had engaged in previously, and as they did so, they had few models to emulate. In late Meiji Japan, only Yosano Akiko had raised her voice (and that, in poetry) to endorse women's sensuality as the key to self-awareness and to developing strength as individuals. Just ten years later, in 1911, Tamura Toshiko began exploring in her fiction the apparent weakness of women who cannot conceive of themselves without their men. Afraid of losing the relationship they need, her women characters waver between fighting back against mistreatment and censoring or even silencing their true thoughts. They want more freedom in their relationships, but they also do not want to be

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[3] Unpublished doctoral thesis on Seitō by Jan Bardsley (University of California at Los Angeles, 1987) made available to this writer.

discarded. In their conflicted sense of self, they embody the tension between the traditional domesticity narrative and the feminist one.

This tension of the times can also be seen in contemporary evaluations of Tamura Toshiko's work. Early in the Taishō period, Tamura Toshiko was already a compelling enough figure on the literary scene that Chūō Kōron published a collection of essays about her by established writers and critics in August, 1914. The longest article is written by Tamura's spouse, the writer Tamura Shōgyo, who writes at length about her writing habits, details of her personal life (such as that she was an early riser) and about her character (which was formed, in his opinion, by the internal contradictions between optimism and depression, kindness and coldness, and persistence and vacillation).[4] He notes that Tamura called herself an "untamed woman" (*hōratsu na onna*). He also describes her as a madwoman when she wrote: she would work for a whole week until she finished a 45-page story, her shoulders tight, her eyes shining, surrounded by manuscript paper, having headaches, refusing to talk. He quotes her as saying that "to love is to be free" (*aisuru koto wa jiyū da*). In his opinion, she was incapable of living without a love relationship (*aisezu niwa irarenai hito*).

The well-known literary critic Masamune Hakuchō begins his essay by saying that the hallmark of contemporary literature is its sensuality, and that Tamura Toshiko's work, too, displays this quality.[5] Higuchi Ichiyō was "old" in both her style and attitude; but Tamura Toshiko seems to break away from that, and

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4 *Chūō Kōron* (August, 1914): 93-100.

5 Ibid.,. 107.

seems not to fear the self. Yet, she seems to be only on the verge of breaking away from tradition, reluctant to make a complete break. He speculates that it is difficult enough for a male writer to follow literature as a vocation, but it is much more difficult for a woman, who bears a heavier psychological burden which derives not just from the pressure from literary critics, but also from the exposure of one's private life to rumor and distortion. He muses that Tamura Toshiko probably has the strength to endure this burden, although at the same time, he does not expect Japanese society would allow her to develop as fully as she could.

Tokuda Shūsei[6] asserts that Tamura Toshiko was indeed a "New Woman," and while he affirms sensuality as a distinguishing feature of her work, he insists that she is more than merely sensual. She has developed characters who act on the basis of their own will, not only on the basis of sensual desires. He points out that Tamura is one of the few women writers whose voice had not been diminished by marriage, and since she had also avoided bearing children, she was much better positioned than Yosano Akiko to continue producing work.

In contrast, Iwano Hōmei describes Tamura as "still old-fashioned" (*mada yabokusai*).[7] He disliked her characters because they adhere to the old morality and do not aspire to break out of it. His wife Kiyo in her article agrees with him and goes on to criticize "The Rouge-Lipped Mummy" specifically for Minoru's materialism and her failure to love art for its own sake.[8] She levels another charge at Tamura Toshiko: that she shrinks back

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6 Ibid., 108-109.

7 Ibid., 100-103.

8 Ibid., 103-106.

precisely when she should plumb Minoru's hatred and her yearnings. She intimates that Tamura does so because she is herself too shallow.

Nogami Yaeko claims to know little about Tamura Toshiko, but she praises her anyway for her sensuality, her beautiful style and passion, though faulting her for her lack of intellectual acuity.[9] Hiratsuka Raichō is much harsher.[10] She says she is compelled to say that Tamura Toshiko is not a person with a core sense of individuality. She is not a "New Woman" who seeks an authentic life or is willing to work hard to achieve it. In fact, she is an "old-fashioned Japanese woman" (*furui nihon fujin*) who is typical of the old Shitamachi area of Tokyo: decadent and materialistic.

Thus, we can see that Tamura's contemporary critics tend to emphasize those elements in her work which are generally considered distinctly "female": her sensuality, her lack of intellect, her eccentricity or strangeness, her lack of restraint in private behavior coupled with an inability to shrug off the bonds of the old morality. Predictably, they are nearly unanimous in their judgment that Tamura Toshiko is an incomplete "New Woman" at best, and most argue vehemently that she is stuck in the past.

Recent critics are more inclined to notice what is genuinely new in Tamura's work. Writing in her 1971 history of women's literature of the modern period, Itagaki Naoko credits Tamura Toshiko with being the first woman writer in the modern period to develop women's issues in fiction, and in fact, with being the only writer of fiction to deal with the "New Woman" at the end

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9 Ibid., 109-110.

10 Ibid., 110.

of the Meiji period.[11] She cites the boldness with which Tamura treated women's desire for independence and the friction between men and women. "The Rouge-Lipped Mummy" is, in her view, a work of genius. Writing in 1987, Hasegawa Kei states that Tamura Toshiko was very representative of the spirit of the "New Woman" in that she emphasized the development of individual talent and the search for self-fulfillment.[12] She successfully depicts women who are no longer submissive, and who confront their men in face-to-face struggles; yet he acknowledges that she tends to see the chief obstacle to the realization of women's dreams not in the men but in the women themselves, in their need for greater strength.

Those early critics who dismissed Tamura Toshiko's women characters and therefore the writer herself, for being insufficiently strong or independent or self-determined, have, I think, accepted the female characters' own view of themselves. Minoru in "The Rouge-Lipped Mummy" takes comfort from the lifelikeness and surface vitality of the female mummy. In her mind, that mummy mirrors her own internal movement toward life and strength. However, that is the only part of the image she appropriates. She fails to consider the ambiguity of the image, taken as a whole: though it seems to be imbued with life and energy, it is still a mummy and confined in a very small space. The latter aspect of the image suggests that Minoru's insight into her own situation, that she is experiencing a rebirth of self, is inadequate. As a reader, I share the writer's sense of irony in observing Minoru's situation. We join her in observing that Minoru

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11 Itagaki Naoko, *Meiji Taishō Shōwa no joryū bungaku*. Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1967, pp. 71-86.

12 In Imai Kumiko et. al., eds, *Josei Bungaku*. Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1987, pp. 47-56.

fails to understand that she cannot become an independent self and continue in her relationship with Yoshio. In that the image of the mummy effectively depicts the limitations of the female protagonist and her lack of awareness of the extent of her limitations, Tamura's work powerfully describes the situation of many women at that point in Japanese history. They have some insights about themselves, but they are unable to act on them to change their lives fundamentally.

When we re-read Tamura Toshiko's work, we find in her stories a sensitive exploration of the inner lives of women of her time. That their inner lives were stunted by their inability to act on the insights they achieved cannot be denied. But this cannot be used to accuse the writer of limitations of her own, for she explored the lives of women of her period fully, and by exposing their limitations, shed light upon the contradictions with which they lived. Modern readers can see that Tamura's characters are not "New Women" in the sense that Seitō members defined that term; Tamura herself may not have been a 100% "New Woman," to borrow a phrase from Murakami Haruki. But the unflinching sense of irony with which she describes her women characters such as Minoru gives modern readers a powerful sense of the tensions with which they lived. In fact, the irony she employs gives us an "authentic" portrait of the inner lives of women at the beginning of the Taishō period, when they were caught between an old feudal system of values which they rejected and a new system of values they could not wholeheartedly embrace. In exploring women's contradictory attempts at self-definition, Tamura Toshiko struggled with the implications of the "New Woman" ideals and pioneered new territory for women.

Tamura Toshiko's influence reaches to the present, through

the literary prize which has been established in her memory. She may not have known her exact destination when she set out to be a writer, but she was one who led the way for others. Tsushima Yūko, the contemporary woman novelist, recounts that she had not heard of Tamura Toshiko until she was awarded the Tamura Toshiko Prize for Literature[13]. The prize came to her at a particularly low point in her life: her work was not recognized, she was pregnant, the father of her child had left her, and she was worried about finances. The prize eased her financial troubles, her work gained some recognition, and she decided to go ahead and have the child. She began to read Tamura's work, and found in it a remarkable, vulnerable mix of strength and weakness. Connected by the prize to Tamura Toshiko, she felt supported by her example, no longer alone, as though she were being watched over.

Tamura Toshiko may not have been a "New Woman" in the idealistic sense that the members of Seitō used the term; nevertheless, she broke new ground in her depictions of women of her time, and in the honesty with which she wrote, continues to inspire women writers who have succeeded her.

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13 Tsushima Yūko, "Tamura Toshiko o jikkan shita koro," in *Geppō* 1, included in *Tamura Toshiko Sakuhin Shū*, Vol. I. Tokyo: Orijin Shuppan Sentā, 1987, 4-5.