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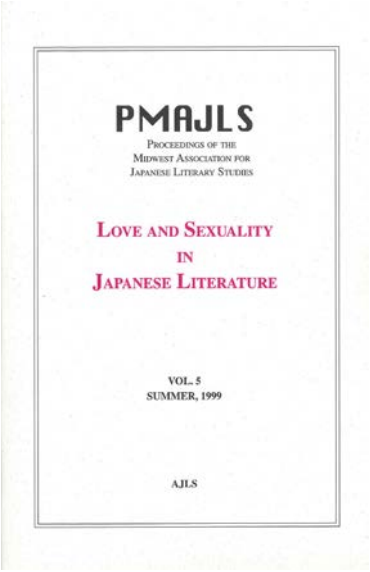

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A MOTHER'S LOVE: KISHIMO AND THE RE-WRITING OF MYTH

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KISHIMO MYTH

Both Okamoto Kanoko (1889–1939) and Hirabayashi Taiko (1905–1972) performed a re-vision of the traditional "Goddess of Children" legend, Okamoto in her 1928 short story "Kishimo no ai" and Hirabayashi in her 1946 short story "Kishimojin." In my paper I will argue that the ambivalent view of motherhood presented in these works represents the embodiment of certain tensions which, though particular to each story, are also related to the larger, on-going "motherhood as institution" (*bosei shugi*) debates.

By virtue of their titles, both stories are expected to follow a certain pattern, namely, the pattern laid out in the original Kishimo myth. To summarize the traditional Buddhist tale, Kishimo is the demon mother of five hundred (alternately one thousand or even ten thousand) children. One day, in an act of characteristic violence, she steals away the children of a nearby village and eats them. This circumstance is brought to the Buddha's attention and he orders one of his disciples to sneak into her home and steal her favorite, youngest child. Kishimo arrives home to find her child gone without a trace. Unable to locate her child after much searching, Kishimo goes mad with grief. The Buddha then reveals the child's location and helps Kishimo realize that each time she steals and eats a child, that child's mother must go through the same kind of suffering. Kishimo recognizes the error of her ways and is converted as a protector of Buddhism, as well as a goddess of children and of childbirth. Often, she is depicted in statues and paintings as having a baby tucked into the breast of her robe, indicating her dual role as both demon devourer (concealing the child within her robe) and benevolent maternal figure (cradling the child in her arms). Also, she is often depicted as holding onto the fruit or the leaf of a pomegranate tree.[1]

[1] Kishimo is also referred to as Kishimojin, Kishibo, Karitei, Kariteimo, and (in Sanskrit) Hariti. In addition to the more usual version given above, Soothill's dictionary also offers a slightly different rendition: "A woman who, having vowed to devour all the babies at Radjagriha, was reborn as a Rakshasi, and gave birth to five-hundred children, one of which she was to devour every day. Converted by Sakyamuni she entered a convent. Her image is to be

MOTHERHOOD AS INSTITUTION DEBATE

Motherhood has been the subject of much political debate, legislation, and propaganda in Japan since at least the beginning of the Meiji period in 1868. In her article, "The Mystique of Motherhood: A Key to Understanding Social Change and Family Problems in Japan," Masami Ohinata outlines the history of motherhood in governmental policy, concluding that " [one] characteristic of governmental policy toward the family in Japan... has been that one function of the family—namely, 'motherhood'—has always been targeted" (Ohinata 1995, 205). *The bosei shugi*, or "motherhood as institution," debates brought a great deal of critical attention to the relationship between governmental policy and social expectations regarding the maternal role.

Briefly, the *bosei shugi* controversy centered on how women could best reconcile their socially-mandated roles as mothers with their individual desires for social equality and economic independence. The debate began in 1918 in the pages of the magazine *Fujin kōron*, with commentators eventually splitting into three distinct groups. The first group, led by poet Yosano Akiko, advocated for women's complete independence both from men and from the government. Consequently, this group denied the need for any state support of motherhood. Headed by author and editor Hiratsuka Raichō, the second group claimed that economic independence for women was impossible unless the state provided certain supports for motherhood. Finally, the third group, led by yet another author Yamakawa Kikue, contended that economic independence for women and protection of motherhood were in fact both impossible outside of a socialist society.[2] Though the three original groups advocated for different solutions, each focused on the conflict between individual desire and social role. Furthermore, all three groups envisioned a harmonious union of individual desire and social role, provided that government, or at least governmental policy, changed in certain ways.

STATEMENT OF THESIS

In my paper, I will argue that Okamoto Kanoko and Hirabayashi Taiko also participated in the on-going *bosei shugi* debates through their literary contributions. It is my contention that Okamoto's short story "Kishimo no ai" ("The Love of Kishimo") and Hirabayashi's "Kishimojin" ("The Goddess of Children") represent the formation of yet a fourth

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seen in all nunneries." *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, s.v. "Preta-Hariti."

[2] This summary is based directly on the synopsis provided by Mioko Fujieda and Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow, "Women's Studies: An Overview": 157.

position. Okamoto and Hirabayashi widen the debate to include an attack on the "social" role of motherhood itself. Both authors use the mythical Buddhist figure Kishimo as the dominant image in their stories, revising the traditional tale in certain ways so as to cast Kishimo as, at best, an ambivalent mother. Whereas the political feminists mentioned above focused on a conflict between motherhood and individual desire, Okamoto and Hirabayashi use the Kishimo image to depict the conflicting desires that exist within the maternal role itself. By centering their stories on such an image, Okamoto and Hirabayashi are thus able to cleverly expose the social role of motherhood as a myth, an idealized image.

OKAMOTO SUMMARY

In Okamoto's story, Kishimo is the single mother of ten illegitimate children. Their father, or fathers, are never mentioned. In addition, she resides on the very outskirts of town and, for the duration of the story, is never once shown to have any contact with the village adults. In short, Kishimo leads an extremely marginalized existence, only venturing into town when she needs to go to market.

Vaguely aware of her penchant for destruction, she tries to avoid any contact with the village children. Nevertheless, drawn by the sounds of their voices, she struggles to control herself and her desire. Eventually calling a child to her side, she bends down to bestow a kiss. This encounter, far from being motherly, is in fact described in terms of a sexually-charged seduction. Propping the child's face in her hand,

> first, she sucks on his lips. The small lips were softer even than the moist petal of a flower. Then, she sucked the child's eyes, whereupon the child's eyelids and eyelashes shuddered slightly and he let out a small laugh. . . . As soon as Kishimo's lips touched the child's cheek, that delightful touch, as of a ripened fruit, echoed in her heart. Whereupon a mysterious blood rushed backwards through her five senses and gathered at the roots of her teeth. In spite of herself, she bit down on the child's cheek (Okamoto, 107).

Kishimo does not so much devour the child as a beast would; rather, she seems to be sucking something out of the child, almost like a vampire. Kishimo seizes on the child's perfect beauty and wishes to make it her own, to erase the differentiation between herself and the child. To do so she consumes him, in a sexual sense as well as in a literal one. With

the blood not yet dried on her hands, she runs home overwhelmed with remorse.

As in the traditional myth, the Buddha sends one of his disciples to steal away her favorite, youngest child. After searching through the night, Kishimo, mad with grief, stumbles into the temple to consult the Buddha as to her child's whereabouts. In the crucial scene that follows, the Buddha questions Kishimo like "a doctor who, while the patient is pinned down, hurries to finish the surgery before the patient breaks loose again" (Okamoto, 114). As Okamoto has thus far followed the form of the traditional myth rather closely, our expectation as readers is that Kishimo will next be convinced of her guilt, redeemed, and transformed by the Buddha into a mother goddess figure, and this is basically what happens.

YONAHA'S INTERPRETATION OF OKAMOTO

Yonaha Keiko argues that the story "Kishimo no ai" represents Okamoto's belief in a positive transformation from "role-based motherhood," where the mother's hopes and dreams are forced onto her children, to "pure motherhood," where a woman can express both her maternal and her amorous sides.[3] Yonaha's theory is in direct parallel to the position that the three main feminist groups took with regards to resolving the *bosei shugi* debates. Like them, Yonaha envisions a harmonious union of individual desire and social role, provided, in this case, that the definition of motherhood changes in certain ways to allow for amorous expression as well as motherly love. Yonaha claims that Kishimo eats the child "not just for the act of eating. [This consumption] is because she is unable to express her own excessive love for the child" (Yonaha, 110). In other words, like the earlier feminists, Yonaha sets up a conflictual dichotomy between Kishimo's role (as a mother figure) and her desire (to consume other's children).

Though somewhat vague, Yonaha's theory seems to be that, forced to admit that her children are not actually a physical part of her, Kishimo is then able to express her love for all children, indeed for all living beings, equally. Thus, she transforms into a wholly benevolent goddess of children and childbirth. To me, this theory does not ring true and I question whether Okamoto's story actually ends on such a positive note. Kishimo does indeed proudly declare her new role as "universal mother" and this is where we would expect the story to end. Indeed, it is where Yonaha's criticism of the story ends. However, in a separate, final paragraph

[3] This summary is based on Yonaha Keiko, "Okamoto Kanoko: 'Junsui' bosei to 'yakuwari' bosei": 109–115.

Okamoto states, "The story ends here. However, the Buddha said two or three things to Kishimo afterwards and, though they have been weeded out [in other sources], I will include them here as they may well be like an ore from which some gold can be mined" (Okamoto, 116).

Citing a medieval burlesque, Okamoto continues the story. In this new ending, the Buddha gives Kishimo a pomegranate, saying, "After you die, you will transform into a goddess of children.... But for now there is no helping your [desire to eat children], so you should eat this pomegranate. It tastes like human flesh" (Okamoto, 116). In other words, for now at least, the transformation is incomplete and the ideal union of social role and personal desire that Yonaha proposes remains conflict-ridden and disharmonious.

OKAMOTO ANALYSIS

As we can deduce from a quick summary of the tale, Okamoto's 1928 story is fundamentally a re-telling of the traditional myth. She adds poignant details and concentrates on the emotional conditions and psychological processes that Kishimo experiences. Therefore, though Okamoto parallels the myth closely, she manages to do so from a different viewpoint, one that attempts to get inside the character of Kishimo.

For example, the opening scene shows Kishimo going into town to do some shopping,

> trailing a basket from her hand. On the way, she was thinking, *as a normal housewife would*, of the market prices for wild honey or donkey tallow. She was *also* thinking, for example, that perhaps if the left-overs from a carcass half-eaten by a lion or tiger had been dragged in from the forest and put out in front of the butcher shop she frequented, she would be able to buy the meat, still clinging to the bone, for a cheap price (Okamoto, 106, my emphasis).

This passage imagistically pin-points some of the tensions of Kishimo's existence and sets up the dichotomy between rational housewife and desirous beast with which she is to struggle for the rest of the story. The geographical location of her home at the edge of town limits reflects her emotional and psychological states as well: she is perched on the edge of self-consciousness, not entirely aware of who she is. At one point later in the story she looks at her ashen-colored hands, the hands that have just killed a village child. Though she has been mourning her actions up to this point, the image of her own hands is too much for her and she de-

cides that there must be "some sort of demon [following] behind me" (Okamoto, 110). Unable to envision, or even to stand the vision of, herself as both animal and mother, Kishimo exists in a liminal space, somewhere between the "normal housewives" in the village and the beasts in the forest, and she wavers between the two.

Okamoto's story, however, does not hinge on an admission of guilt for eating other mothers' children. Kishimo already recognizes her guilt over that. Rather, the story hinges on an admission of guilt over ambivalence towards her own children. When he reveals her child, the Buddha questions Kishimo, asking her why she does not eat her own children. Before she can answer, he claims, "You do not think of your children in the same way that you think of the other children of the world. The sensation you feel regarding their charm is completely different" (Okamoto, 113). Kishimo responds,

> Children from another place are like fruits ripened on another tree. . . . My children are like the branches or knots of my own trunk. . . . There are times when I am annoyed by my children because they resemble too closely the parts of me that I don't like. . . . There are times when I hit and scold my children because they keep me from being free (Okamoto, 113).

Thus, we see that, on the one hand, Kishimo compares the village children to fresh fruit ripening on a tree, fruit which, if left uneaten, will fall and germinate, finishing the cycle of reproduction. On the other hand, she compares her own children to the bumps and knots, in other words the imperfections, of her own trunk. Though she always recants quickly after hitting her child, hugging it and wiping away its tears, the core feeling of ambivalence remains. The Buddha forces Kishimo to admit this ambivalence towards her own children. In the story, it is this admission that triggers her only partially successful transformation into a mother goddess figure. Therefore, I believe that, rather than attempting to depict the successful and joyful acceptance of motherhood that Yonaha and the "motherhood as institution" debaters posit, Okamoto focuses instead on a depiction of the conflicting desires involved in the maternal role itself.

HIRABAYASHI SUMMARY

I will now turn to Hirabayashi's re-vision of the Kishimo myth, which is much more loosely based on the original. In fact, the connection is only directly mentioned twice: once in the title and once in the closing paragraphs. Though impossible to state with certainty, the setting is Ja-

pan, probably some time just after the end of the Pacific War. Keiko, the female protagonist, sees herself as a very worldly person who, through her various experiences, has been able to test the boundaries of what it means to be a woman. She is extremely proud of herself for having done more in one life than many people manage to do in ten thousand, a number that has particular resonance when connected to the versions of the myth in which Kishimo has ten thousand children of her own, but is still driven to consume others.

Keiko now wants her husband to support her experiment with Yoshiko, a young girl whom they have just "received" from another family. Following the traditional Japanese sleeping pattern, Keiko puts Yoshiko down to sleep "like a DMZ" between herself and her husband Ryōzō (Hirabayashi, 85). The tensions between the simple love that Keiko feels for Ryōzō and the complicated emotions she has for Yoshiko escalate throughout the story.

This situation comes to a head one day when Keiko is giving Yoshiko her daily bath. Though she doubts whether she has the authority to examine her child so closely, Keiko notices that,

> Lately, as she was wiping down towards the feet, [her] eyes would be indescribably drawn to that line in the peach, which would crack when Yoshiko moved her legs. The interior of it, red as a spread of scarlet silk, half-opened its mouth. Keiko's gaze was rooted in her desire to unreservedly search out the essence called "woman" that was inside this girl.
>
> It would seem like a lie to say that someone of Keiko's age knew nothing concerning women's cycles, but it would be the truth. She was a person who, not knowing the letters, was ashamed to say the words. Even though it might seem absurd, was it really so odd that, not knowing exactly where urine came out, she urinated all the same? Strange societal norms, though, held even this kind of knowledge from Keiko (Hirabayashi, 88).

In this last scene, Keiko physically violates Yoshiko. She insists on cleaning her vaginal area. When Yoshiko refuses, Keiko pulls the young girl's legs apart, "like a new pair of disposable wooden chopsticks," and something, identified in the story as the parent-child bond, breaks forever (Hirabayashi, 89). Gazing at Yoshiko who lies screaming and crying on the bathroom floor, Keiko remembers the tale of Kishimo and thinks to herself that she, too, should be known by that name.

COPELAND'S INTERPRETATION OF HIRABAYASHI

Through the short summary given above, we can see that, similar to Okamoto's character, Hirabayashi's protagonist Keiko seems almost ravenous in her desire to devour. Keiko's desire, however, is broader; she yearns to devour new experiences. She hears "an insistent voice within, telling her, 'I've experienced the breadth of women's existence. From now on, I want to gather that same strength and carve the depths'" (Hirabayashi, 84).

Rebecca Copeland provides an extremely positive reading of this story. She describes a conflict between social role (represented by what she calls the Great Mother figure) and individual desire (represented by the pre-transformation Kishimo) that is inherent in the original myth and contends that Hirabayashi "explores and exploits the demon-mother dichotomy and other male-authored myths" (Copeland, 104). Drawing on Adrienne Rich's discussion of the power relations between motherhood and patriarchy, Copeland interprets Keiko (the mother) enforcing on Yoshiko (the child) the same travesties that she (as a woman) has been subjected to by male-dominated society. Thus, Copeland argues, by admitting her guilt at the end of the story, and aligning herself with Kishimojin, Keiko "finds herself longing to be like the Great Mother Goddess . . . fiercely protective of this her most precious daughter" (Copeland, 108).

HIRABAYASHI ANALYSIS

I question whether the story merits such a positive reading. After all, Hirabayashi chooses to end her re-vision of the Kishimo myth with Yoshiko lying on the floor, screaming as Keiko does nothing either to comfort her or to communicate with her. My own argument would focus on Keiko's ambivalence within the maternal role, a situation she has long been aware of. Once, when she was much younger, someone had suggested that she, being childless, should adopt one child from a family that was over-burdened with offspring. To this person she had replied, "'Hmm. This house is so small... where would I raise it? I wonder if the garden would do?'" (Hirabayashi, 84)[4] Now that Keiko is in fact responsible for such a child, her ambivalence is even more pronounced. Comparing herself to "normal" mothers, Keiko decides that

[4] The character used for "to raise" is *kau* (飼う), which is the character used to indicate "keeping" an animal as a pet.

> [r]iveted on their children, mothers' eyes are near-sighted, like those of hens, and a sort of fog thrown up by instinct will, at times, blur and veil their children. Part of Keiko laughed at such a condition, but all the same part of her longed for it. In her case, she found the thought of turning into [this] kind of mother both hideous and interesting. . . . (Hirabayashi, 83).

Though she earnestly yearns to experience true motherhood, what Keiko desires most is knowledge of her own female sexuality. In the same way that Okamoto's Kishimo devours children for their beauty, Keiko, too, has begun thinking of Yoshiko as "a medium for something else" (Hirabayashi, 87). In addition, she begins comparing Yoshiko to various fruits and vegetables, likening Yoshiko's belly button to a ripe grape, her breasts to cucumbers or pumpkins, her head to a melon, and finally her vaginal area to a peach. Again, the stage is set for a highly sexualized consumption; as readers we expect Keiko to devour Yoshiko. In the closing scene, while giving Yoshiko a bath, she does just that.

In addition, as with Yonaha's argument, Copeland's criticism interprets only one half of the ending. In fact, in the closing scene, Keiko recalls two myths. Before mentioning the name of "Kishimojin", she wonders aloud, "From here on, I wonder how much blood I'll spill..." (Hirabayashi, 90). This prompts her to remember first the Hinoemma, a legend concerning women born under the fire horse sign in the sexagenary cycle. These women were rumored to be particularly strong-willed and inclined to devour their husbands. Though Keiko was not born under this sign, she, and women like her,

> try to grow, chomping on whatever grass the length of rope they are tied to will allow them to reach. What they eat can be called neither medicinal nor poisonous, but they have a life force like that of animals. However, there are many times when even those monstrous beings, chewing up everything in their area until it is nearly bare, remain surprisingly unconscious of the shortness of their ropes (Hirabayashi, 90).

Certainly, she has accomplished a transformation, but rather than embrace the Great Mother archetype, she embraces that of the insatiable demon devourer. At this point, Keiko effects her own transformation by recognizing that, in her search for self-knowledge, she has injured another human being, specifically a younger female. In other words, Keiko's transformation, unlike that of Okamoto's protagonist, does not hinge on

guidance from a more knowledgeable, paternalistic figure. Rather, it is a self-guided acceptance of responsibility for the injury she has caused. Unfortunately, by admitting her capacity for violence, she feels she must name herself "Kishimojin." Unlike the original *bosei shugi* debaters, and unlike Copeland's criticism, in my view, Hirabayashi's story does not conclude with an embrace of motherhood. Rather, her story depicts conflicting desires, showing both Keiko's positive and nurturing feelings toward Yoshiko, as well as her negative and destructive feelings toward her.

CONCLUSION

Both Okamoto's revision and Hirabayashi's revision end on the same note: the moment of self-realization. If an embrace of motherhood is, as Copeland and Yonaha claim, the goal of the story, then why is it not described? Why is Yoshiko still screaming and why does Okamoto's Kishimo still need a pomegranate to satiate her? When conducting an analysis, we must pay attention to the fact that neither author chooses to continue the story past this point of self-recognition, whereas the demon-mother portion of the traditional tale provided the authors with plenty of fertile ground to produce new imagery and new meaning. Therefore, I believe that the aim of these stories is not a reclamation of motherhood. They indicate, at best, only an ambivalent embrace of motherhood and its responsibilities. Unlike any of the earlier feminist positions, and in contrast to the criticisms Copeland and Yonaha have levied on them, these stories refuse a positive ending. The vision they present is not one of harmonious union of social role with individual desire. Instead, both protagonists come to the realization that they are at odds with common notions of motherhood: their specific desires are not reconcilable with their roles as idealized mothers.

One author, Okamoto, "solves" this quandary with a *miraculous deus ex machina* type finalé. The Buddha will make Kishimo into a goddess of children. However, even after this painful, male-guided intervention, Kishimo will still desire, from time to time, to devour children. She still needs the flesh-flavored pomegranate to satiate her. The other author, Hirabayashi, does not even continue the story this far, significantly passing up the opportunity to re-voice the traditional ending. Her story seems to end almost mid-sentence. By continuing mercilessly in her search for self-knowledge, in the end Hirabayashi's protagonist refuses her role as mother altogether. Yoshiko lies kicking and screaming on the floor as Keiko ponders her new identity.

Therefore, though these stories also focus on the conflict between social role and personal desire highlighted in the *bosei shugi* debates, unlike any of the three original groups, a positive and harmonious union of the two is not posited here. The mother figure, so unquestioningly lauded by the three main groups of the *bosei shugi* debate, is problematized in these stories. Okamoto's and Hirabayashi's stories represent the formation of yet a fourth position, one which, rather than focusing on a political solution, chooses to attack the social role of motherhood itself, exposing it as an idealized image, an unattainable and impossible myth.

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