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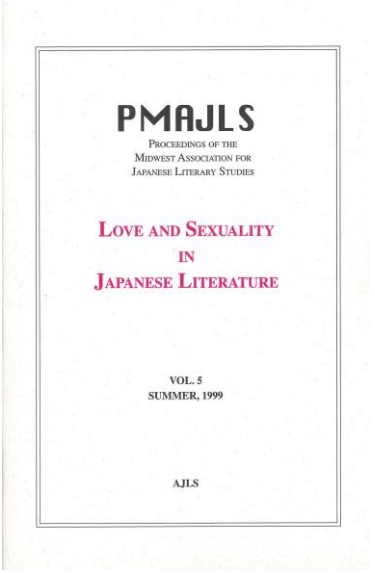

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MAN-EATERS: WOMEN WRITERS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF THE *YAMAUBA* MOTIF

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Recently I began noticing images of *yamauba* (mountain Furies) lurking in the narratives of several Japanese women writers. In texts by Enchi Fumiko (1905–86), Ohba Minako (1930–), Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–), and Tsushima Yūko (1947–), the *yamauba* topos is appropriated to deal with problematic issues such as identity, sexuality, and the role of women in society. Enchi's "Haru no Uta" ("Spring Song," 1971) and *Saimu* (Colored Mist, 1975),[1] among others, reflect images of women who "drain" the life force from the men with whom they have had sex and suggest men as victims of supernatural, empowered women in the *yamauba* tradition. Ohba's "The Smile of the Mountain Witch" ("Yamauba no Bishō," 1976) and "Candlefish" ("Rōsoku Uo," 1986)[2] offer updated versions of the *yamauba* topos from an insider's point of view rendering a sympathetic feminist revision of the female demon from the past. Kurahashi's "Spring Night Dreams" ("Haru no Yo no Yume," 1989)[3] suggests that women are capable of becoming demons, merging dream and reality, as women seeking sexual satisfaction talk of devouring and ravaging men as if they were modern reincarnations of *yamauba*. Tsushima's "Maboroshi" ("Illusions") and "Yume no Michi" ("Path of Dreams")[4] depict images of women running through the mountains, mountain paths leading to seemingly uninhabited mountain huts, moth-

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[1] Enchi Fumiko, "Haru no Uta" in vol. 5 of *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1977):253–65 and *Saimu* in vol. 13 of *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1977):215–429.

[2] Ohba Minako, "The Smile of the Mountain Witch" in *Stories of Contemporary Stories by Japanese Women Writers.* Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden, trans. and eds. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1982):182–96 and "Candlefish" in *Unmapped Territories: New Women's Fiction from Japan.* Yukiko Tanaka, ed. (Seattle, WA: Women in Translation, 1991):18–38.

[3] Kurahashi Yumiko, "Spring Night Dreams" in *The Woman with the Flying Head and Other Stories by Kurahashi Yumiko.* Atsuko Sakaki, trans. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998):67–76 and "Haru no Yo no Yume" in *Yume no Kayoiji* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1989):184–95.

[4] Tsushima Yūko, "Maboroshi" and "Yume no Michi" in *Danmari Ichi* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1984):42–61 and 24–39.

ers who inadvertently hurt their children, and aging women who transform into *yamauba* simply by growing old.

A number of questions come to mind: why would these women writers choose to incorporate such a negative image of a man-eating female monster into their texts, and after having done so, what do these writers hope to achieve by placing the *yamauba* into their narratives? In the course of trying to refine the image of the *yamauba*, I began to sense that the *yamauba* may have some mysterious relationship to powerful female archetypes from ancient stories or myths. Perhaps the *yamauba* of traditional Japanese folk tales harkens back to female prototypes in ancient creation myths that impart a sense of empowerment to women. Maybe by choosing to write about the challenge of living as women in patriarchal society, women writers are able to exorcise or alleviate their feelings of frustration. Otherwise, why would most of these writers choose to promote negative images of women if not to express their ambivalence or anger at having to cope with life in patriarchal society?

In this study, I do not seek the modern version of the *yamauba* found in the texts of modern female authors. Here, I present two creation myths, the Japanese and the Great Mother, as prototypes from which a cycle of folk tales about the *yamauba* evolved and developed. I argue that the creation myths provide inspiration for the *yamauba* topos by introducing female prototypes that give birth later to a variety of female demons. I propose that the Japanese creation myth, which posits the female body as the site of defilement and pollution, was a ploy adopted by patriarchy to associate females with negative attributes to gain control of property and inheritance rights that were originally under the jurisdiction of females.[5] I refer to studies of the Great Mother creation myth to suggest the privileged position occupied by females based on their procreative ability in prehistoric times that was usurped later by patriarchy. Finally, I extrapolate why some modern women writers chose this topos as a vehicle for literary expression.

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[5] Donald Philippi concurs with my view that the Japanese official mythology was compiled for political purposes, but he does not delve into the details behind the political agenda of the compilers of the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihongi* (also *Nihon Shoki,* Chronicles of Japan, 720). On the other hand, Yoshida Atsuhiko in *Mukashibanashi no Kōkogaku: Yamauba to Joshin* (Archeology of Folk Tales: Yamauba and Jōmon Goddesses) (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1992), connects the *yamauba* topos to the Japanese creation myth and the Great Mother creation myth and suggests that great mother worship was actively displaced by patriarchal society.

Studies of the *yamauba* traditionally begin with medieval short stories, then proceed to medieval Nō dramas with a more literary flair, and conclude with folk tales collected from all over Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. The folk lore studies I have read thus far do not refer to myths as the source for the inspiration of the *yamauba* topos nor identify her nature as the two-faced "terrible mother," sometimes nurturer and other times destroyer. Only when I delved into the study of myth did I discover the work of Yoshida Atsuhiko who locates the true origin of the *yamauba* topos in the creation myths of the Japanese and the Great Mother. To my knowledge, no study in English focuses exclusively on the connection between the *yamauba* topos and these creation myths.

What or who is a *yamauba*? *Yamauba* is most commonly translated as "mountain witch" or "crone." *Yamauba* is usually defined as a woman with superhuman strength (*kairiki*) who lives deep in the mountains or a female demon (*kijo*) who lives in remote mountains. The medieval pronunciation, *yamanba*, is most often defined in classical dictionaries in terms of its relationship to the Nō play and will not be included in this study. However, modern dictionaries define both *yamauba* and *yamanba* as old female monsters (*rōjō no kaibutsu*) who live deep in the mountains. Classical Japanese dictionary definitions of *yamauba* do not mention the age of the female demon, but in modern dictionaries, the meaning takes on the connotation of aged female monsters. The recent trend toward treating the two terms synonymously leads to some misunderstanding of the character of the *yamauba.*

Meera Viswanathan in the article "In Pursuit of Yamamba: The Question of Female Resistance," defines the *yamauba* as a "terrifying old woman with long gray hair, possessing superhuman strength and prescience, dwelling in the mountains, preying on stray male travelers who intrude on her as she occupies herself with the task of spinning; she is capable of extraordinary transformations, ranging from animal to beautiful maiden. Should her prey attempt to escape, she chases it down in the mountains and devours it with uncanny delight."[6]

While Viswanathan provides a much-needed introduction to the *yamauba* topos, her work is not without problems. Viswanathan falls under the spell of Ohba Minako's modern metamorphosis of the *yamauba* described in the short narrative, "The Smile of the Mountain Witch" and confuses Ohba's modern version with the traditional *yamauba.* Viswana-

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[6] Meera Viswanathan, "In Pursuit of the Yamamba: The Question of Female Resistance," *the Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996):242.

than assumes Ohba's creative transformation of the *yamauba* to be characteristics that can also be attributed to traditional *yamauba*. First, Viswanathan mistakenly endows traditional *yamauba* with the ability to read people's minds, when prescience is never mentioned in medieval stories or folk tales about the *yamauba*. Another innovation by Ohba that Viswanathan falsely assigns to *yamauba* is that female monsters devour their male victims "with uncanny delight," when traditional folk tales never describe the monster's actions with emotional detail. Third, Viswanathan adopts Ohba's description of *yamauba* as long, gray-haired, old women as the norm when in some folk tales *yamauba* are beautiful young women who have not yet revealed their supernatural quality or they are not described in any detail, making it difficult to gauge their age. From my perspective, striking similarities between the *yamauba* and the female deities indicate that the inspiration for the *yamauba* topos originated in the creation myth recorded in the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan, also *Nihon Shoki*, 720).

Myths are powerful tools that shape the values of society and legitimize the political ideals of the ruling hegemony. Keeping the persuasive power of myth in mind, I will present some of the most important elements of the Japanese creation myth from the *Kojiki*: Izanami gives birth to multiple offspring at one time. She is mortally wounded when she gives birth to the fire god. After she is injured and dies, she goes to Yomi. Her corpse gives birth to thunder gods and gods of clay, gold, water, and bountiful crops. Izanagi goes to Yomi to get Izanami to come back and finish creating land. While waiting for her, he violates her prohibition by looking at her body and discovers a hidden aspect of her nature. Izanami is shamed and sends the Shikome and the thunder gods from Yomi to destroy Izanagi before chasing him herself. He throws objects that turn into food and slows down the progress of those chasing him. In the *Nihongi* variant, Izanagi makes water against a tree and his urine becomes a big river the Shikome must ford. He throws peaches at the thunder gods at the head of the Yomi army, causing them to retreat and enabling him to escape to the land of the living. Izanami says she will strangle 1,000 people each day and Izanagi says he will build 1,500 parturition huts per day when they face each other at the boulder that separates the world of the dead from that of the living.

There is also the related myth of Iwanagahime (Long Rock Princess) and Konohana no Sakuyabime (Flowers Blooming on the Trees Princess), daughters of the mountain *kami* Oyamatsumi, who are both given as brides to Ninigi no Mikoto. Ninigi no Mikoto refuses Iwanagahime as a bride because she was too ugly and sends her home. Oyamatsumi or

Iwanagahime herself in some variants state that because of this refusal the lives of humans were shortened to that of flowers, rather than enduring long like rocks. Ninigi deigns to sleep with Sakuyabime for just one night, then makes her prove the paternity of her children by sealing herself inside a parturition hut and setting it on fire before bearing three offspring. In this myth too females are held responsible for shortening the life span of humankind.

Negative images of women such as female *oni* (demons) are recorded in a medieval collection, *The Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku monogatari,* ca. 12th c.). In "How a Woman Who Was Bearing a Child Went to South Yamashina, Encountered an Oni, and Escaped," a female demon says a baby boy looks good enough to eat, causing the mother to whisk her child off to the safety of the capital. In "How the Hunters' Mother Became an Oni and Tried to Devour Her Children," an old woman with superhuman strength becomes an *oni* and tries to eat her sons. In the two medieval stories of female *oni*, both women are old, beyond the age of child-bearing, and at least one of them demonstrates superhuman strength. The two women also fulfill the criteria of living in remote mountainous areas, yet their behavior differs quite markedly from this point on. The old woman who gives the unwed mother shelter cannot definitely be called an *oni* since she never acts upon her verbal appreciation of the baby's culinary potential, but the mother of the two hunters is quite malevolent, displaying superhuman strength as she acts upon the urge to devour her own children. Threatening female monsters continue to appear in the *yamauba* cycle of folk tales of more recent time collected and catalogued by Yanagita Kunio.

There are five folk tales with the *yamauba* topos for which I will provide short plot summaries. In the first, "The Three Charms" (Sanmai no Ofuda), a novice priest is captured by an old female *oni,* throws magical paper charms to conjure obstacles such as a big river to slow the *yamauba's* progress, and escapes to a temple where the *yamauba* is tricked into becoming a bean by a priest, then is stuck into a piece of *mochi,* and devoured. This tale resounds with echoes from the creation myth: a woman chases a man with the intent to kill; a man "sees" the hidden side of a woman that causes fear; and a man throws objects at a woman to cause delays that enable him to escape. The story also connects *yamauba* to *mochi* (pounded rice cakes), a thread we can trace to other tales in which the *yamauba* makes an appearance.

The *Nihon Shoki* (also *Nihongi*, Chronicles of Japan, ca. 720) records an interesting variation of Izanagi's flight from the Shikome. While Izanagi is running away from the Shikome, he makes water against a

large tree. The water immediately turns into a great river. While the Shikome are trying to cross the river, Izanagi is able to reach the pass to the land of the living, and to place a boulder across the pass. This version provides an archetypal image of a river as an obstacle to slow down women in pursuit of a fleeing male.

In the second, "O Sun, the Chain" (Tentō-san Kane no Kusari), a mother eats her youngest son, and her two remaining boys climb a peach tree, pray to the sun, and is rescued by a golden chain they climb to safety. There are faint whispers from the creation myth: the peach tree that Izanagi told to help humankind gives temporary refuge to the boys; the image of a woman chasing males is similar to Izanami's chase; and the stone, reminiscent of the boulder that blocked the pass between the worlds of the living and the dead, is often associated with *yamauba* for the rock caves in which they give birth to offspring or rocks on which they leave marks etched during the pain of childbirth as in the fifth tale to be discussed. Prototypes for mothers devouring children are found in the figure of Lilith and in Jungian interpretations of the myth of the great mother which posits the development of individual personality as a path away from the engulfing effects of the mother.

In the third, "The Ox-leader and *Yamauba*" (Ushikata Yamauba), a *yamauba* eats mackerel, an ox, then tries to eat the ox-leader, but he escapes to a house owned by the *yamauba*. He steals her *mochi* and soup but blames it on the fire god. In the end, the *yamauba* is tricked into going to sleep in a chest, is locked in, and is broiled to death. The ox-leader gets rich when he sells her remains as medicine. This story, linking food to the *yamauba* through the images of *mochi* and wine (or soup), is related to the idea of the great mother as the provider of sustenance. The *yamauba's* death by boiling is equally related to cooking as the example of Jōmon clay plots with human heads and breasts signifies feeding off the body of the mother goddess. Yoshida Atsuhiko's contention that the remains of the *yamauba's* burned body being sold as medicine and making the man wealthy is related to the principle that beneficial things are produced from the body of the *yamauba*. The most interesting element is the inclusion of the "fire god" and that the *yamauba* dies by fire. In the creation myth, Izanami is fatally injured while giving birth to the fire god and descends into the darkness of Yomi; similarly, the *yamauba* secludes herself in a dark chamber and dies. The fire god binds the creation myth to folk tales through the image of a female who dies by fire. But in some variants, the *yamauba* turns into a spider after being boiled to death, a filament we will trace in the following tale.

In the fourth, "The Woman Who Eats Nothing" (Kuwazu Nyôbo), a wife eats everything through a hole in the top of the head, eats the husband's friend, and is killed or repelled by irises and mugworts. *Yamauba* as weavers inspire variant tales of their corpses turning into spiders, recalling images of spider as spinners of fantastic yarns and hunters of male victims. Here the woman displays supernatural attributes such as a hole on the top of her head, the ability to eat mass quantities of food, and the power to transform into spiders in some versions. Like Izanami and Izanagi in the creation myth, this couple had been happily married until one day he "sees" a side of his wife of which he had previously been unaware. Furthermore, the husband has to run for his life when he shames his wife by looking, as did Izanagi when he violated Izanami's prohibition. The story also shows the dual nature of the *yamauba:* depending on who is "gazing," she is viewed either as a beautiful woman or as a demon. When the *yamauba* transforms into spiders, it posits the *yamauba* as a negative female figure, a hunter who weaves a web of deceit to capture victims in her trap.

In the fifth and final tale, "Child-bearing Mountain Recess" (Ko-umi Tawa), a *yamauba* retreats to a cave, gives birth to multiple offspring, and is inadvertently burned to death by farmers burning fields. Plague and pestilence abate only after the *yamauba*'s skull is properly worshipped as a mountain *kami*. This tale focuses on the deified aspect of *yamauba* when she is enshrined as a mountain *kami*. The inspiration for the connection between the *yamauba* and the mountain *kami* probably comes from the Japanese creation myth through the daughters of the mountain deity, Iwanagahime and Konohana no Sakuyabime. In this story, the *yamauba* gives birth to multiple offspring at one time, demands respects or exacts retribution in the form of pestilence or illness, thereby alluding to the two-faced character of the *yamauba.*

In the Japanese creation myth, females are discouraged from taking the initiative in sexual relations (e.g. the birth of a malformed "leech" child) and are encouraged to become passive recipients of male sexual attention. The myth tries to reverse the practice of women who actively chose males with whom they had intercourse in the tradition of the Great Mother. By restricting female sexuality, males were able to identify and control paternity.

In the Japanese creation myth, the female body is subject to injury and decay when giving birth to various deities, but the male body is impervious to either. The myth posits the male as the only body that can be ritually cleansed or purified. The female body, frail and defiled, is placed in a secondary position to the male body.

In making the body of Izanami, the female *kami,* the site of defilement (via illness, blood, and death) in Shinto, the myth associates females with negative qualities situating them in a subordinate position to males. But when the corpse of the female *kami* gives birth to the deities of clay, gold, water, and bountiful crops, it reveals vestiges of a belief in the Great Mother whose body symbolically fed the people.

In the divorce decree, the myth causes Izanami, the female *kami,* to state that she will strangle 1,000 people a day to punish Izanagi for violating her prohibition that he not look at her body. The myth completely denies biological fact by making females the agents of death rather than the creators of life. The Shinto concept of ritual purity is violated when the female body is defiled by blood each month and because childbirth also violates ritual purity it is conducted in a parturition hut that is ritually cleansed by fire after a child is born. Finally, Izanami is made the principal deity of Yomi, reflecting an affinity with the Great and Terrible Mother as the wielders of both life and death. Similarly, Iwanagahime shortened the lives the humankind when she was rejected as a bride by Ninigi no Mikoto in the Japanese creation myth.

In conclusion, the Great Mother and Japanese creation myths suggest that the origin of the *yamauba* topos consists of a mixture of ancient folk myth and a myth consciously designed to enforce the political agenda of the ruling patriarchal hegemony. The attribute of man-eaters can be interpreted as an attempt by the mother to subordinate the personality of the child (son/lover) and to delay the differentiation of the personality from a Jungian perspective. The image of the spider reveals vestiges of the Terrible Mother in the *yamauba* since the male is posited as the unwary victim of females who seek to entrap the male. The image of the womb from which humans emerge is also seen as a sarcophagus, the final resting place, to complete the picture of the Great Mother who is both the source of life and death, order and chaos.

The power of myth is so strong and pervasive that to this day women writers instinctively feel a primordial connection to the image of the *yamauba.* Women writers may even realize that the *yamauba* owes her inspiration to the vilified female deities of the Japanese and Great Mother creation myths, but even if they do not, they seem to sense some mysterious kinship between the female monster and archetypes of threatening, empowered females. Perhaps the female psyche intuitively recognizes the maligned image of the *yamauba* as a figure worth reviving in the world in which we live. What is astonishing is that some women writers, like Enchi Fumiko, seem to revel in the negative associations of dangerous women, by employing images of vampires and femme fatales who lure

men to their doom, perhaps for the same reason that some religions believe that contact with defilement can sometimes empower those who dare to do so. Using images of blood and bald assertions of female sexuality and desire, women writers today challenge patriarchal norms by appropriating formerly negative associations as active, positive means of expressing discontent.

If, however, negative associations cannot be dispelled, contemporary Japanese women writers seem to brandish the *yamauba* topos as a sword to mow down misconceptions of the female condition. Like the *yamauba* herself, if women today cannot be revered or worshipped as the creators of life, they prefer to be feared as agents of death as decreed by myth, than to bow down meekly as the oppressed Other.

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