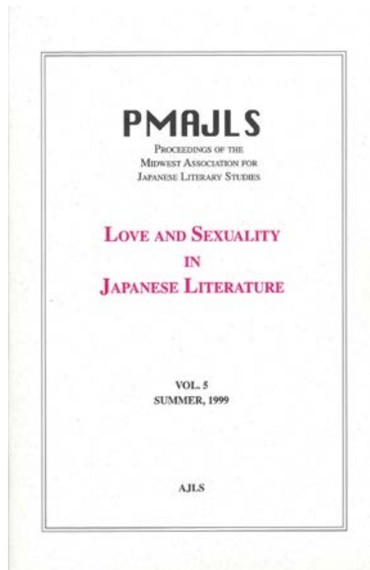
"'Curling up Tight': Tsushima Yūko Finds the *Shōjo*"

Eve Zimmerman

Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (1999): 300–309.



PMAJLS 5:
Love and Sexuality in Japanese Literature.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

"CURLING UP TIGHT": TSUSHIMA YŪKO FINDS THE *SHŌJO*

Eve Zimmerman
Boston University

> Standing in entrances. About to come in.
> My shoulders are hunched forward to hide my breasts.
> When am I going to come into the room?
> Come in, come in, I say to all the fragments
> —From "A Poem of Myself," Rachel Blau Du Plessis

In the prologue to her book of essays entitled *Hon no naka no shōjo-tachi*, (Girls in Books, 1989), Tsushima Yūko describes her attempts to navigate the strange territory of gender as she was growing up:

> As usual, I still had no idea of what it meant to be a girl (shōjo). Moreover, I had begun to think about things without regard to my own sex. Looking around, there were no girls to sympathize with or model myself on. I couldn't even find them in books. This was the way things were, but if I thought of myself as closer to a boy, I could look at the world without anxiety and I could read novels. From the time I went to a girls' high school, I tried to act like a boy. Without a doubt, I had started playing the role of the male impersonator in the Takarazuka theatre group.[1]

For lack of any better description of her indeterminate identity as a girl, Tsushima falls back on the odd image of the Takarazuka actress (*otokoyaku*) who, in her heavy makeup, high shoes and male clothes, creates an idealized image of dreamy maleness on the stage. Perhaps even more provocative, however, is Tsushima's observation on gender and reading; one needs a gender, even if only a simulated one, to be able to read without anxiety. *Hon no naka no shōjo-tachi*, which re-examines famous girls in world literature, is Tsushima's attempt to reclaim the fragments of her own girlhood from long years of reading and document the fact that within the pages of books she found herself erased.

For their insightful suggestions on this paper, I would like to thank my colleagues Shawn Maurer and Brittain Smith.

[1]Tsushima Yūko, "Prologue," *Hon no naka no shōjō-tachi* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Sha, 1989), p.23.

In close readings of famous girls in fiction, Tsushima stitches together a portrait of herself as reader, but she also probes a more complex issue about female authorship in general: if one has been erased over a lifetime of reading, how does one begin to write?[2] Tsushima asserts that as a girl she was able to think of things without consideration of her sex, but her fiction tells a very different story. Shot through and through with conflicted questions about the shifting terrain of gender, Tsushima's fiction taps into a reservoir of childhood anxiety that she could not dispel by becoming "closer to a boy." In fact, Tsushima creates passive heroines who seem supremely at the mercy of their sex—abandoned by "unsuitable" lovers, tormented by domineering mothers, and sporting pregnant bellies—then turns passivity into its own form of resistance. Tsushima's heroines stubbornly drag their feet, refusing the stages that define female maturation—the move from girlhood, to womanhood, to motherhood—and expressing deep ambivalence about all facets of "female" life.[3]

The theme of passive resistance applies most aptly to a figure in Tsushima's early fiction—the young pre-adolescent girl (*shōjo*) who stands at the verge of womanhood and stubbornly refuses rites of initiation. This ragged girl haunts the grown protagonist in memories, fantasies and dreams, moving outside of society's notions of girlhood while seeming perfectly comfortable inside her own body. She also leaves a path of destruction in her wake. Unencumbered by shame, morality or social strictures, she represents a liminal period of hyper-femininity, a

---

[2]The case is more complicated in Japanese literature when one takes into consideration the fact that the greatest works of the Heian period were written by women. With the exception of Tanizaki's *Shunkin-shō* (*A Portrait of Shunkin*) and Saikaku's *Kōshoku Gonnin Onna* (*Five Women who Loved Love*), however, in *Hon no naka no shōjo-tachi* Tsushima chooses her "girls in books" from Western literature. Yet Tsushima does draw on Japanese literary history in her own writing: *Yoru no hikari ni owarete* (*Driven by the Light of the Night*), published in the same year as *Hon no naka no shōjo-tachi*, takes the form of a long letter to an imaginary Heian noblewoman.

[3]The Takarazuka *otokoyaku* is an apt metaphor for the 1980s, a period when feminist critics began to understand gender as simply another set of clothes we cut for ourselves, a discursive category shaped by contingencies of social status and historical position. For a discussion of the shifting aspects of gender and the pitfalls of even working with a category such as "woman," see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Yet Tsushima's focus on pregnancy and the palpable anxiety over identity in her fiction suggest her deep concern with the physical realities of gender. Unlike clothing, the pregnant belly cannot be taken off at the end of the day.

feminine identity perfectly in harmony with itself.[4] At the same time, this girlhood self is deeply sexual or at least fascinated by sex itself. By reaching back to the figure of the pre-adolescent girl, I hope to explore what Marianne Hirsch calls "female plotting," the complex relation of the female writer to her texts and to the dynamic creation of narrative.[5] I also wish to liberate the figure of the *shōjo* from her passive position in Japanese popular culture. In the work of Ōtsuka Eiji and others, she is an empty sign, a piece of flotsam in late consumer-driven capitalism, whose subjectivity is equated with narcissism and nostalgia.[6]

Before I turn to Tsushima's fiction, however, I would like to consider critical readings of Tsushima's work both in the United States and in Japan. Certain critics read Tsushima as a writer of *shishōsetsu* (I-novel), or the pseudo-autobiographical fictions which have as their mecca a country of the "self," charting the journey of a male protagonist through conflicts, confusion, betrayal and/or a radical break with an authoritarian father figure. Van C. Gessel represents this view in this country, although he at least suggests the gendered origin of the *shishōsetsu* when he writes:

> . . . Tsushima's writings deal almost exclusively with the practical, day-to-day attempts of isolated women to cope with their circumstances. . . . Tsushima returns to the rather narrow focus of the earlier I-novels, though hers is a pragmatic feminine perspective that has not appeared before.[7]

Another critic, Ōtsuka Tatsuya participates in a classical case of biographical criticism when he comments that Tsushima becomes fixated on motherhood in her fiction after becoming a mother herself.[8]

---

[4]For a discussion of the confidence of the pre-adolescent girl in the United States, see Carol Gilligan, "Preface," *Making Connections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 6–29.
[5]Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.43.
[6]See John Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The Shōjo in Japanese Popular Culture," in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 275–308. Treat, on the other hand, paints a more complex portrait of the shōjo, allowing her the possibility of resistance, although he, too, reads her as lacking in "libidinal agency" (281).
[7]Van C. Gessel, "Echoes of Feminine Sensibility in Literature," *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV, No.4, October–December, 1988, pp. 415–416.
[8]Ōtsuka Tatsuya, "A Guide to the Author," in *Tsushima Yūko, Yoru no Hikari ni owarete* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1989), p. 437.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find critics who view Tsushima's work as an inversion or even an assault upon the traditional institutions of "mother," "father," or even "self." Perhaps foremost among these critics is Karatani Kōjin, who reads Tsushima's *Chōji* (Child of Fortune) as a parody of those fictions that promote the notion of a transcendent, even other-worldly, self. When the mother in the story tells her daughter, "The real me? I'm the snow woman," (*yuki onna*),[9] Karatani takes this as a sign that Tsushima not only recognizes the self as a social and historical construct but is also willing to lampoon it.[10] Miura Masashi follows this thread of reasoning in his reading of *Hi no kawa no hotori de* (By the River of Fire). At the end of the novel a man and a woman, stripped of names and personalities, appear. Tsushima, Miura writes, is posing the question "What is family?"[11]

Both schools of reader—those who file Tsushima's work under the rubric "classic explorations of self" and those who harness her work to deconstruct traditional values—have advanced understanding of Tsushima's work and recognized her as the important modern writer that she is. Yet certain readings of Tsushima focus on the general aspects of Tsushima's work—its political, social and theoretical implications—at the expense of losing its subtleties—the whisperings of her prose, the resilient tissue of her images, her fascination with spatial forms, and her sleight-of-hand tricks to stymie closure.[12] In view of the need for close readings of Tsushima, I limit my subject to an exemplary early story, "Kusamura," (Clearing the Thickets, 1976), because it provides a window into Tsushima's representations of the pre-adolescent girl and illuminates certain aspects of her work which have been neglected.

Upon first reading, "Kusamura" is a portrait of female self-hatred raw in its intensity. A young unmarried woman (*musume*) loses her lover to another woman, a beautiful classmate wearing a red dress. After the lover leaves the house, the young woman curls up as tightly as possible in a

---

[9]A supernatural being who takes the form of a woman and a mother for a short time on earth.

[10]Karatani Kōjin, "Onna ni tsuite," *Hanbungaku-ron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1991), pp. 178–179.

[11]Miura Masashi, "Shinriteki jijitsu ni tsuite," in *Tsushima Yūko, Hi no kawa no hotori de* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1988), p.449.

[12]There are exceptions, of course. Livia Monnet, for example, does justice to the complexity of Tsushima's work in her analysis of fantasy, jealousy and knowledge in the 1983 story, "The Chrysanthemum Beetle." See Livia Monnet, "Connaissance delicieuse, or the Science of Jealousy: Tsushima Yūko's "The Chrysanthemum Beetle," in *The Woman's Hand*, ed. Paul Schalow and Janet Walker (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1996), pp. 382–424.

fetal position on the bed, chastizing her body for having grown to its present size.

This gesture of regression, of shrinking, is followed a few months later by another symbolic movement backwards; the young woman, now pregnant with her former lover's child, returns to her mother's house. In the heat of summer she, her mother and her sister spend their time weeding thickets of grass in the garden. One day while lying in a thicket resting from her exertions, the young woman overhears the mother and sister discussing an incident from the woman's own childhood regarding a pair of mice that the mother had bought for her at a fair. The girl took good care of the mice, and when they had babies, she cuddled them close to her body. But as the babies grew a little patch of white fur, the girl began to bury them in a hole in the garden. The young woman has just overheard her mother and sister talking about her:

> The young woman drew a breath and resumed work. Her trembling fingertips lost their grip. She remembered the caged mice busily mating. And herself sprawled watching. A skinny girl with narrow eyes. She was always fretting, silently chewing the inside of her cheek. Why had she been so excited about keeping those mice? In the end she'd buried every last one alive and thrown out the empty cage.[13]

Looking back at the past, the young woman tries to understand her childhood self. Her question about the mice is an act of interpretation, an attempt to make a bridge to the girl of the past. At first the distance between the two selves seems unreachable—the grown woman now pregnant and wracked with shame and the skinny girl with the narrow eyes who watches the mice mating with a knowing look and buries their babies in the garden. Commenting on a similar passage in Tsushima's story "The Chrysanthemum Beetle," Livia Monnet discusses the insect killing practiced by the heroines and considers "the equally fantastic possibility that Izumi and Kazuko act cruelly towards insects because they fear that their "real" insect natures might be betrayed by their kind."[14] Monnet's reading is an instructive one, but it should be taken one step further. The young girl in "Kusamura" is able to kill not because she identifies with her victims, but because her age gives her the ability to

[13]Tsushima Yūko, "Clearing the Thickets," *The Shooting Gallery*, tr. G. Harcourt (New York: New Directions, 1988), p.113.
[14]Monnet, p. 393.

maintain her distance and her sense of balance: watching the mice with narrow eyes, she is as of yet untouched by biological change. By destroying the mice, she both roots out and claims the fertility that she senses will destroy and banish her. The girl represents a femininity that is not hemmed in or determined by the body, but one forged by intellect and fantasy and which indulges in the most forbidden impulse—the urge to kill.

As a representative of unbridled impulse, the young girl is linked to the endlessly reproducing forms of nature in the story—the baby mice, the grass that cannot be tamed, the snakes caught by the mother and sister, the bugs in the grass, the blind bugs she senses within her body. Like these living things, the girl (who is described as dirty) is aligned with the messy and the unfinished, or, in Bakhtinian terms, with that which is in the "process of becoming." If we look back to the beginning of the story, we could read it in a similar way. The young woman's curling up into the fetal position is not a gesture of defeat but rather a birth backwards—to an incomplete self who saw clearly before it tumbled into womanhood. Most importantly, the story of the mice and the images of multiplication bear directly on the young woman's present condition; as she overhears her mother and sister talking about the mice, she feels the baby fluttering inside her. Momentarily at least, the production of life internally need not signal the limitations placed on the woman by biology and motherhood but rather can represent a step forward in the move toward multiplicity and fluidity, as she salvages a self that was not always contained by the physical. At the same time, the story of the mice foreshadows a horrible but possible ending to the story: the young woman killing her own baby.

But what do these multiple, murderous selves tell us about female plotting, about Tsushima's vision of how much fiction can do or undo? In order to answer this question, I turn back briefly to Tsushima's nonfictional writing in *Hon no naka no shōjo*, particularly to an essay she wrote on Catherine, the heroine of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. First, Tsushima notes that it is Catherine not Heathcliff who draws the reader into the novel when she first makes her appearance as a ghost. The young Catherine, Tsushima notes, is a "komatta ko," a child of nature who is born from the heath.[15] Catherine is most happy when, as children unaware of gender, she and Heathcliff wander free and unsupervised on the heath. According to Tsushima, Catherine is torn from the heath and forced to protect herself as well as Heathcliff by becoming Edgar Linton's

---

[15]Tsushima, *Hon no naka no shōjo-tachi*, p. 100.

wife. But this separation means death. "In her sadness and anger over the fact that society won't acknowledge her longing for her childhood or permit her to return to it, Catherine loses her life".[16]

While noting the importance of Catherine to the novel, Tsushima makes another interesting observation: the young Catherine actually makes very few appearances. In the beginning, she is merely a ghostly presence glimpsed by Lockwood. Furthermore, the blissful time of youth when Catherine and Heathcliff wandered freely over the heath is not represented in the novel, but rather recounted offstage to Lockwood by the servant Nelly.[17] Catherine, as a young girl, becomes a mythic and fundamentally destabilizing presence in the novel. As a child of nature, she is nature itself untainted by figuration, and as such, she must be banished from the pages of fiction.

Tsushima's sophisticated reading of this text corresponds closely to the work of Margaret Homans, who discusses British women writers of the nineteenth century not as victims of oppression, but rather as pragmatists who had to work with the tools of the trade, borrowing the figurative, symbolic language of the patriarch in order to write fiction. To Homans, the young Catherine (the first one) remains loyal to "literal nature" which is not "thematically maternal" but which stands for a necessarily repressed mother who dwells outside the house of literature.[18] In order for Emily Brontë to write, the first Catherine (the wild girl) must be tamed and remade into her daughter, the second Catherine, who will enter the domain of figuration and bow to the father's law.[19] Like Tsushima, Homans notes that the figure of the wild young girl is ambiguous—she is hostile to figuration and the ordering structure of narrative—and must be banished; but, at the same time, there can be no story without her.

Tsushima's reading of Catherine illuminates the character of the girl in her own fiction—a figure who can only be approached in memories or fantasies, and whose taming and eventual banishment are necessary to plot, but without whom no plot can begin. Note that in "Kusamura," the girl's story is told through the reminiscences of others and that it causes her pain to hear it; as she listens, once again she begins to gnaw on the inside of her cheek. Furthermore, as the story progresses, the young woman starts to live more and more in memories and dreams, asking herself why these "childish things" keep returning to her. The answer lies

---

[16]Ibid., p. 112.
[17]Ibid., p. 101.
[18]Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 72.
[19]Ibid., p. 73.

in the necessity of the girlhood self to the woman's survival—the need to tell a story about herself and resist her fear of being drowned by motherhood. One dream is particularly instructive: she is running to a picnic and her mother is nowhere to be seen. The dress that she is wearing is two sizes too big and it slips from her body. Through this dream the daughter breaks her connection to her mother and experiments with the possibility of never becoming a mother herself, even while she is pregnant.[20]

Perhaps nowhere is the young woman's ambivalence toward motherhood so clearly delineated as in the final pages of the story. Here regression takes the form of desperate experimentation. The flood of memories and dreams is a direct response to a mother whose hostility seems more chilling because she understands her daughter's self-hatred so well. The repression the mother (and by extension motherhood itself) exudes drives the young woman ever further, until the surface of realism crumbles under the weight of the unbearable and we sink through. We now stand before a disorienting tableaux with all the vivid strangeness of a surrealist painting. The mother lays the daughter in the grass and, using her sickle, slices her belly in two. She takes out the womb, cuts the umbilical cord and pries the womb open: "Then she drew out a square of red. Beneath it, stuck fast, should be the source of the newborn's cry."[21] But the daughter never sees the baby, and the mother disparages what she has seen inside the womb with a click of her tongue. Then she is gone.

At first this scene testifies further to the repressive hold of the mother as she invades the territory of the young woman's fertile womb. At the same time, the operation performed by the mother's deft hands promises the ultimate form of regression—the return to a body that cannot produce life. But the vision is ambivalent; the moment before the mother cuts into her daughter's body, the young woman voices resistance, telling herself for the first time that she wants to have the baby. After the mother closes up the womb, the young woman feels guilty wondering if they had gone to work too soon, but even the source of her guilt is obscure. On the one hand, the daughter feels guilt toward the baby for allowing her mother to open her womb and expose the patch of red inside (thus fulfilling her own buried wishes), but on the other, the daughter feels guilty for mistrusting the mother and eagerly desiring a baby of her own. In fact the removal of the daughter's womb—emptying

[20]For an interesting study of motherhood in Japan and the demands that the nursery school makes on the average mother, see Anne Allison, "Producing Mothers," in Ann Imamura, ed., *Re-imaging Japanese Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 135–155.
[21]Tsushima, "Clearing the Thickets," p. 120.

her inside out—signifies a double birth of sorts; as a mammal the young woman struggles to produce a baby, but as a creature of fiction, she breaks from the mother and emerges into the world alone.

After the mother leaves her, the fantasy ends. The daughter continues to weed, her pregnant belly intact, and she considers "the volume of grass. It was her love for her family, for her baby, for the man. It was her love for herself."[22] In Homan's terms, Tsushima seeks a way to align the wild figure of the young girl who dwells in memory and fantasy with the woman who lives under the law. In the face of the oppressive mother and her own ambivalent fears, the young woman reads herself backwards, resorting to fragmentation, memory and fantasy to fashion a space in which she can plot herself and perhaps even replace her mother with a new mother in the form of the grass thickets. [23]

In spite of the uplifting note at the end of "Kusamura," the story resists closure. Here, as in the works of certain female surrealist artists, we are left, literally, with fragmentation: body parts that have been turned inside out, examined, poked through, cut off. As the French artist Annette Messager writes, "I always feel that my identity as a woman and as an artist is divided, disintegrated, fragmented and never linear, always multi-faceted . . . always pictures of parts of bodies. . . . I always perceive the body in fragments."[24]

The visual image of the opened womb is a sign of Tsushima's strategy as a writer—to pose a series of questions, paint tantalizing fragments of memories, dreams, and propose bodies that preclude wholeness. To Tsushima the self is to be found only in its pieces. Tsushima works as a *shishōsetsu* writer in reverse, fragmenting and scattering her materials as she tests her connections to the world around her. To a certain extent this is a gesture of survival: Tsushima's heroine cannot afford to erase the fragments—the memories of the unacceptable girl chewing on the inside of her cheek. Like Emily Brontë, she creates pockets where the untamed girl survives; her women live next to parks or thickets or rivers, their eyes straining into the darkness, their bodies inhabiting the periphery.

The figure of the young girl ultimately proves necessary to Tsushima's existence as a writer: whereas the young Tsushima had to be-

---

[22]Tsushima, "Clearing the Thickets," p. 121.

[23]In a discussion of nineteenth-century European fiction, Marianne Hirsch states: "it is the absence of the mother which creates the space in which the heroine's plot and her activity of plotting can evolve." See *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 57.

[24]Whitney Chadwick, ed. *Mirror Images/Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), p. 21.

come a boy in order to read, she must now preserve the figure of the *shōjo* in order to write. By turning backwards, Tsushima's heroines embrace fragmentation and disorganization as powerful tools—both in form and content—that forestall and even clog the orderly, progression of narrative.[25] Fragmentation, however, is not simply the embrace of meaningless; for Tsushima's characters it becomes the means of representing oneself as an incomplete being—a body giving form to other bodies which can still preserve its own boundaries in the process—or, in other words, a mother who has her own story to tell. In sum, Tsushima seeks to create a womb that usurps the mechanisms of biology, reproducing itself endlessly without consequence. In "Kusamura," the womb becomes the garden, a space of nature that sprouts tufts of grass endlessly, and the young woman curls in on herself stroking her pregnant belly and listening to stories of herself as a child.

---

[25]Tsushima resists many of the "solutions" found in the writings of other Japanese women writers: the mysticism of Enchi Fumiko, who rediscovers the womb as a source of possibilities in middle age; the sadomasochistic explosions of Kōno Taeko; the radical disruptions (even dismemberment) of Kanai Mieko; even the possibility of self-fulfillment alone as seen in the late work of Uno Chiyo.