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Sarah Frederick

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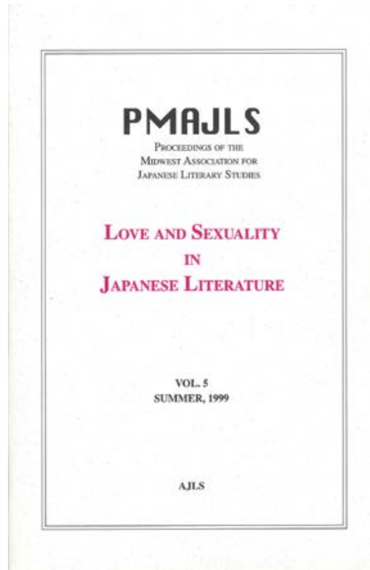

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SISTERS AND LOVERS: WOMEN MAGAZINE READERS AND SEXUALITY IN YOSHIYA NOBUKO'S ROMANCE FICTION

Sarah Frederick
University of Chicago

Formulaic mass-market fiction often uses the clear sex differences of its characters and the gendered personalities, sexualities, and moralities associated with them to create the conflicts and resolutions that drive plot. Particularly in serialized formats, expectations become all-important. Successful publications in the genre usually play off of what men and women characters are seen as likely to do to build anticipation or surprise.

Faced with such texts, readers may always identify in complex ways and across genders, and this may be particularly true in the case of Yoshiya Nobuko. On the one hand her plots often revolve around heterosexual scenarios and emphasize stark representations of femininity and masculinity. Yoshiya's unfeminine appearance- such as her clothing, shown in posed photos in magazines at the time—and the fact that she was known to live and travel with another woman, were known throughout much of the same periodical media in which she was being published. She also helped to craft this persona through her own non-fiction essay submissions and public appearances. This no doubt encouraged other forms of reader and fan identification.

Although seldom considered in Japanese literature studies in either Japan or the U.S., Yoshiya Nobuko had nearly unparalleled success as a writer of serialized fiction for the women's magazine and newspaper markets beginning in the late 1920s and continuing well into the postwar. Although many authors in the late 1920s supported themselves financially with publications in women's magazines and newspapers, saving what they considered to be their best work for literary journals, Yoshiya's fame was located entirely in the popular press.[1] By most accounts, one of her earliest works, *Hana monogatari* (Flower stories) created the new genre of *shōjo shōsetsu* (girl's fiction). It was in the late 1920s that she first began writing for periodicals aimed at adult women in addition to the

[1]For a discussion of the relationship between "bundan" authors and the popular press see Maeda Ai, *Kindai dokusha no seiritsu*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993): 211-283.

shōjo zasshi (girl's magazine) audience among whom she first made her name. The first serialized novel she published in an adult women's magazine was *Sora no kanata e* (Toward the yonder edge of the sky) in *Shufu no tomo* (Housewife's friend) magazine.

The explosion in print media aimed at an audience of women that began in the late teens and increased momentum during the 1920s encouraged novels that interested readers in buying the next installment. New women's publications like *Shufu no tomo*, *Fujin kōron*, and *Fujin kurabu* kept reader loyalty by running novels by popular writers in monthly segments. It was for this audience that Yoshiya intended this story. Eager to be on the women's magazine scene she wrote *Sora no kanata e* with that purpose in mind and sent it unsolicited to *Shufu no tomo.* [2] It is worth noting that girls who had been fans of *Hana monogatari* when it was first published would by this time have been the right age to starting reading a housekeeping magazine like *Shufu no tomo*; such factors may have contributed to is its popularity in that market.

The nature of modern mass publication meant that writers had less contact with their audience and less control over the conditions of its consumption. The ability to print and distribute magazines cheaply by funding printing with advertisements widened and diversified the potential audience. More and more women's magazines used *furigana* to mark pronunciations, and magazines like *Shufu no tomo* made particularly strong efforts to keep the average reading level accessible to elementary school graduates. The majority of *Shufu no tomo* readers were probably of the urban middle class, but readers' letters suggest there were fans among Japanese speakers throughout rural Japan, the United States, Brazil, the Korean peninsula, and Manchuria. Even the urban readership itself was diverse, with surveys showing that it included housewives, factory workers on break, office workers, and husbands of subscribers. When analyzing issues of sexuality presented in this text, it is worth considering these different readerships (colonial, rural, various class backgrounds) as well as its publication format as a serialized novel in a popular magazine.

Yoshiya's writing is full-blown melodrama. She puts her characters through all extremes of situation and emotion. Her flowery prose makes extensive use of exclamation points, English alphabetic text, and exoticized words and images. It is a rhetoric of hyperbole and sentimentality. In *Sora no kanata e* foreign place names and Christian images to create an exotic atmosphere and are combined with up-to-date details of Tokyo life,

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[2]Yoshiya, "*Sora no kanata e* ni tsuite," in *Yoshiya Nobuko zenshū* vol. 2, (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1975):496.

from fashion to very recent events such as the Kantō Earthquake, building a world that is at the same time comprehensible and exciting to a wide range of readers. The story's popularity, I would argue, owes much to its success at calling upon so many of these forms of identification and desire at once while also remaining relatively unthreatening to their assumptions.

Sora no kanata e was serialized from April 1927 to April 1928 and later published in paperback. Movie versions were produced in 1928 and 1939.[3] It is set in the very recent past, spanning the years around the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923. Its main characters are three sisters from a Nagasaki Catholic family who now live with their mother in the Ichigaya area of Tokyo after the death of their antique dealer father. In a "Brady Bunch" style scenario, the schematically named, Hatsuko, Nakako, and Sueko (literally first, middle, and final child) and their mother make up an "island of only women" (*nyogo no shima*), living in an extra building on the property of a wealthy, military family made up of three sons and their strict father. The oldest daughter Hatsuko is a devout Catholic schoolteacher who feels responsible to provide for the rest of her family so that their sickly mother does not need to work. The second daughter Nakako is a *shokugyō fujin* working in the Marunouchi Building. She is the more immoderate sister, going to movies, and eating sushi after work. She has no interest in her sister's religion with its "unscientific" ideas like the Virgin Birth. She focuses most of her attention on newspaper department store advertisements. The youngest (Sueko) is the sympathetic innocent: born blind, probably because of her father's venereal disease, she learns to play the violin with hopes of becoming skilled enough to play her beloved oldest sister's favorite, "Ave Maria." The novel is split into three books: Love (*ren'ai hen*), Suffering (or the Passion) (*junan hen*), and Resurrection (*fukkatsu hen*). *Ren'ai* tells of the sisters' first romances and sexual experiences. *Junan* explores the conflicts that develop out of them. *Fukkatsu* begins with the earthquake during which Hatsuko dies and depicts the resolutions of these difficult relations. The novel ends with a vision of Hatsuko appearing as the blind Sueko plays "Ave Maria" at her grave, a "rebrith" which solidifies the Christ/Mary image for the virtuous Hatsuko.

From the start, the split between women and men characters is made so structurally obvious that it begs one to start with a schematic map-

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[3]Both had the same title as the book. The first was directed by Tatsumi Takeo produced by Shōchiku Kamata. The 1939 version was produced by Nikkatsu. *Zenshū*, vol. 12: 578-579.

ping of the ways masculinity and femininity are described in the text. Yoshiya uses title headings and a didactic narrative style that employs explicit phrases such as "*danseiteki naru mono*" and "*joseiteki naru mono*" ("that which is masculine" and "that which is feminine") to talk about both the nature of male and female sexuality and overall character. In the beginning of the novel, Hatsuko and the boy-next-door Shigeru begin to have romantic feelings. They first read books together: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Ellen Key (a Swedish feminist influential in Japan at the time). He passes his declaration of love to her hidden in the leaves of a book by South African feminist Olive Schreiner.

His father, however, has plans for his son to achieve *risshin shusse* type success and sends him off to the mountains for the summer to develop his body and to grow up. Although he prefers Hatsuko's "feminine love" (276) to his father's and reading feminism to physical activity, he is forced to go off on the trip. Hatsuko waits for him, patiently knitting him a sweater. When he returns, having conquered both the Japanese Alps and a number of women, he has developed a more aggressive sexuality. In the chapter entitled, "*Danseiteki naru mono*" he pushes her to consummate their relationship. She spurns him, saying they must wait and pursue their "pure love" (225). Shigeru is transformed from a sensitive character to a man who is overbearing when aroused. Masculine sexuality is depicted as invading the sisters' quiet, warm world of feminine connections of virtue and purity.

In the meantime, the middle sister Nakako has become obsessed with buying a cloth pattern that she has seen in a newspaper department store advertisement. She finds what she likes but cannot afford it. Looking at it in the department store she is mistaken for a shoplifter by a rich mother and daughter. But she happens to run into the son of her company president, described as "masculine, with a deep voice" who discovers her crying and buys it for her telling her to disregard those "petty bourgeoisie" who have mocked her (221). She sleeps with him in return, and he offers to set up a house to keep her in near Osaka for him to visit when he likes. She agrees because she too embarrassed to be around her sisters and mother after having lost her virginity, although this, the narrator argues, is merely proof of her abiding "virgin character" (*shōjosei*):[4]

[4] In general, "shojo" should not necessarily be translated as "virgin" as less explicit usages were in circulation at the time. Its use in this novel in direct reference to immaculate conception and other implied references to sexual behavior led me to choose to translate it this way here. For an introduction to the defining discourses surrounding the term see Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Sekushuariti no kindai,* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1996): 5-12.

At one point she accompanies this man on his trip to Kyushu, and when alone just happens to run into Shigeru who, sexually rejected, is on his way to Pusan to try to make his fortune. After this unlikely chance meeting, a stock device of the romance novel, he drinks with Nakako, and she seduces him, not knowing of his relations with her older sister. Feeling guilty, he promises to marry her. Touched by his kindness, she agrees. Hatsuko is hurt but in her typical self-sacrificing way insists that Shigeru marry her sister.

Nakako and Shigeru go to Pusan together and she becomes his frugal housewife. Femininity is defined as incarnated in the reformed Nakako. She has pawned all her fancy clothing to buy cooking utensils, a calico apron, and suits for Shigeru to wear at work and tries to manage to make ends meet. Unfortunately, Shigeru loses sexual interest in her now that she is no longer "a beauty living a cheap and dissolute life as a man's toy" (316). A didactic aside in the narrative tells us that men "[are] made drunk with pleasure only by the low class plaything of a woman's white powder and lipstick rather than the beauty, devotion, and sacrifice that characterize a women's true heart" (316). He turns to wasteful spending and drinking and the cafes of Pusan. Disgusted, Nakako flees him, setting off with the intention of going back to Tokyo alone.

Nakako and Shigeru's household in Pusan is depicted as a created and protected area that is both feminine and Japanese within the space of the colony. Her happiness is at its peak when she has purchased a rice cooker and Shigeru shaves bonito flakes for her with his knife. But her surroundings in Pusan, which were never described as long as she stayed within the domestic space she and Shigeru had created, suddenly emerge into her consciousness and into the narrative for the first time. She finds them desolate and vaguely threatening in contrast to her former life with her sisters in Tokyo and her short-lived domestic bliss. It is this experience that puts her in the state of mind to go willingly back with Shigeru when he comes out to find her. That same night, he saves her from that space, and their relationship remains in what she describes in a letter to her sister as an imperfectable "*danjo seikatsu*" (life shared between a man and a woman) but she never tries to leave it again (308). This gives us an unusual view into a vision of domesticity (in multiple meanings) imagined to be reproducible in the colonial space only by virtue of its Japaneseness, rationality, and femininity (Nakako's presence is central). Certainly this episode would have operated in complex ways among both *Shufu no tomo* readers in the colonies and in the "*naichi,*" bringing out an anxiety about whether it would be possible to "set up house", or instead neces-

sary, as it is for Nakako and Shigeru, to return home and then home to Japan.

In this end this story sets up a not very subtle contrast where men are driven by sexual desire, unreliable, wasteful, and never quite capable of a pure kind of love. Women are devoted (to their relatives, lovers, god, and their virginity), self-sacrificing, and frugal. Of course, this is not meant to be a didactic text but one which tries to use these exaggerated contrasts and familiar conflicts to create a suspenseful story, one that is moving in both a melodramatic and sexual sense. It achieves its effects to a large extent by playing off the modes of discourse and assumed values according to which the magazine in which it was printed operate.

In *Sora no kanata e* women's desire for material goods (Nakako's department store experiences and movie going) is opposed to frugality (Nakako as housewife and Hatsuko's hard work to support her sister and mother). Rebuffing or accepting sexual advances is the other axis on which the story turns. These themes of sexual and consumer restraint are closely related to the articles of *Shufu no tomo,* the magazine in which this was printed. This is the era when the "modern girl" was being defined and other categories of women seen to be out of control both sexually and as consumers such as the "*furyō shōjo*" (delinquent girl) were discussed. Thus the themes of frugal home finances were linked to a sort of sexual self-management. These representations of excess desire in literature and didactic texts were presented not only to criticize but also for entertainment.

One of the major genres of mass-market magazine articles was the "confession" (*kokuhaku*) genre, written, or supposed to be written, by readers (but elicited, edited, and often written by the editors). *Kokuhaku* used themes of seduction and its refusal to moralize and to entertain. A series of articles published one month before *Sora no kanata e* was entitled, "Young working women's worries about seduction by the opposite sex."[5] Other titles, such as "Confessions of young women seduced by delinquent boys," were common. These were generally framed by the admonishments of a "reporter," but, at the same time, they tended to be graphic, with lengthy descriptions of the tension leading up to the attempt at seduction and the confessor's sensations of temptation. It is clear that these stories were solicited and printed primarily for the combination of their shock value and appeal as erotic reading material. The same format was even used in some advertisements for birth control or abortificants, with titles like "The frightening thing that happened during my

[5] "Isei no yūwaku ni nayamu wakaki shokugyō fujin," April, 1927: 72-77.

summer vacation"—events that ended in unwanted pregnancy but also set up a voyeuristic reading dynamic in the process.

Many of Yoshiya's scenes operate on the same register. Both of the scenes of physical contact (kisses) between Hatsuko and Shigeru are steamy. The "first kiss!" scene is so sexual that seven lines of it were censored from the version in the magazine. This kept the readers of the original from witnessing, for example, Shigeru using his "strong arms," "pulling himself alongside her on the floor," and "pressing his lips against Hatsuko's crimson virgin lips" (235). But the surrounding description that remained is still full of mussed hair, faces flushed with excitement and embarrassment, and the series of censoring X's are suggestive enough in and of themselves. The conventions of magazine confession articles at the time would have made filling in the blanks even easier. Her refusals follow the basic bodice ripper conventions before returning to emphasizing Hatsuko's "pure love" stance. Though it is her purity and Virgin Mary-like status that make her the heroine of this novel, it is the threats to it that would have registered the most reading excitement.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the insistence of the narrator that women are by nature self-sacrificing and frugal, there is considerable enjoyment in watching Nakako fulfilling her frustrated desire to consume. In the magazine as well, the demands of advertisers meant that despite its home frugality stance the magazine needed to represent the pleasures of consumption as well. What was emphasized then was not absolute frugality, but active consumption that was always rational and controlled (in contrast to the uncontrolled appearance and behavior of the "*moga*") - a control that was defined as being uniquely female and tied to her more traditional roles. *Shufu no tomo* readers were likely to have sympathized on different levels. Both the housewife skimping as her husband wastes her carefully planned out spending money and the pleasures of buying fashionable clothing are explored through the exaggerated transformations in Nakako's character. Both would have had appeal. Of course it is important to remember that frugality for many of the readers was not merely a feminine virtue. Material necessity would have both limited and enabled identification with the characters in this story.

One of the most explicit connections we can see between the story and its place in the periodical is the letters submitted by readers that were published after each installment in *Shufu no tomo*. Of course, all of these were probably not genuine fan letters and were likely selected for being the most positive in promoting the story. Still, they give some clues as

to what the imagined relationship between the readers' interests and the text was.[6]

Many of the letters conflate Yoshiya, the writer, and Hatsuko, the character. Some of these focus on Hatsuko as romantic lead. One writes to "please" not let Shigeru marry Nakako, to "make Hatsuko be happy." A woman from Osaka writes, "Shigeru and Hatsuko's love is exactly like situations we working women experience. No matter what sorts of defamation you face, please don't be weak like us but live out your true love forever." Of course, Hatsuko does not fulfill the expected role of heroine who either marries her love, suffers tragically, or commits suicide - the options most commonly expected in this genre. The main character's "eternal virgin" status puts a new spin on these expectations. The other types of identification we see are based more on Hatsuko's independent attitude or her devotion to her sisters. One writes, "What beautiful writing about sisterly love this is. Kind to her little sister at home but strong when walking about in the world—this is a model for us women."

Many other letters focus on Yoshiya herself. Some of them imagine her to be holding strong against male discrimination. One writes that she has always imagined Yoshiya in a "cement office building" "working, a woman alone among oppressive men." Another mimics Yoshiya's own penchant for the exclamation point. "Oh, waiting for the April issue! Nobuko-sensei! Nobuko-sensei! *Shufu no tomo* banzai! Nobuko-sensei Banzai!" It is clear that even in this early story her persona and over-the-top writing style are well known. A picture appears in the issue of the first installment with Yoshiya in her bobbed hair, skirt, sweater, and necktie. One letter asks, "Do you, as I suspect, live in a 'culture house' in Ochiai?" showing her familiarity with Yoshiya's personal life.[7] Others suggest a crush-like and even erotic relationship toward the author. "Miss K" from Tokyo writes,

> I love Yoshiya's *Sora no kanata e* so much I can't stand it. Perhaps it is because Sensei's pure beautiful spirit is thrown into it that when I read the work I feel like she is right in front of me, kindly comforting me. "Yoshiya"—just seeing the name makes my heart race.

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[6]Reader letters were published on the last page of each installment beginning in the May 1927 issue.

[7] At this time Yoshiya did live in a modern house in Ochiai, a Tokyo suburban neighborhood.

Critics and fans have read Yoshiya as a writer of lesbian fiction and as well as having feminist possibilities. Those final letters lead to the question of whether there is any room for those readings in this story itself. Obvious readings of same-sex desire are difficult to find among the characters since all characters of the same sex are related. Hatsuko and Nakako's triangular relationship with Shigeru leading to an intense emotional situation between the two women is somewhat suggestive, though explicit erotic innuendoes are quite absent. The connections between the women occur on this very intense, almost hyperbolic and also non-physical level. Female sexuality is posed as absent in the ideal here with the "eternal shōjo" presented as heroine. At the same time the experience of reading the more sexually charged scenes and erotic identification with that Mary figure herself were likely to have complicated matters. Crush-like relationships between women living together in dorms or students and teachers were common themes both in Yoshiya's earlier book for young girls, *Hana monogatari,* and in the media in general at this time. From the reader letters it seems that the most obvious mode of female/female desire (though many sorts are potentially here) is that by the readers for Hatsuko or the readers for Yoshiya herself.

Although, Yoshiya's text leaves unquestioned the idea that feminine sexuality is most natural when it is "pure, clean love," she reworks with other formulae of heterosexual romances. Hatsuko rejects the two most common resolutions. She first refuses the proposition to marry another teacher from her school even though he is religious and responsible. The go-between's argument that men and women are "meant by God to marry" is questioned as Hatsuko points out that, like her sister's blindness, all things that *exist* or are practiced, are not necessarily good. In the next chapter, she refuses to mourn for literary figure "A-shi" after his double suicide (clearly a reference to Arishima Takeo's recent suicide with a *Fujin kōron* reporter) rejecting this as a way out and insisting that she will live "beyond romantic love" and its loss by taking care of her sister (298–299). The heroine in this text thus protects her virtue not in order to save herself for some future "true love" but rather in order to preserve her own "pure" sexuality and her intimacy with other women.

These rejections of the typical heterosexual romance would have been popular beyond any audience seeking models of lesbian identity. The novel imagines the possibilities of life without marriage. It also presents women as being important to social action (Hatsuko's work as a teacher and volunteer) in a way that at the same time does not threaten the readers' expectations about devotion to family and the definitions of femininity. Melodramatic accounts provide reading pleasure at least partly be-

cause they are unrealistic and extreme. They invite readers to extend beyond their social and material limits to imagine something else. In this sense, Yoshiya's fiction must have created a real excitement for many of her readers. It is also true that these rather over-the-top texts could well have been read as ironic by savvy readers, and a look at Yoshiya's oeuvre as a whole suggests that she may well have intended them to be read that way. The fan letters are only one of the many suggestions that readers and did they necessarily accept the sexual values promoted in the magazine in which they were published.

Of course, women readers also must have experienced very real limits in their ability to act on this excitement. I do not want to discount the extent to which this magazine format and the socioeconomic circumstances under which it was read limited its possibilities. It would be both socially and economically difficult to live as an "Island of Women" given the wages women could earn or the ideologies about marriage. Hatsuko is able to spurn the second marriage offer she receives (and thus retain her virginal honor) by being a schoolteacher, but this route would not have been open to many readers. With obvious connections to be made with feminists' wartime roles in state enterprise, Hatsuko sees this status as a "public servant" as a way to avoid relying on men. Yoshiya's own role as a P.E.N. writer and collaborative reporter on the colonies as well as work by other feminists to support the war effort suggest the ways in which this became a treacherous approach to financial or sexual independence.

This novel questions the inevitability of marriage and exploring female self-sufficiency without questioning imagined female or familial bonds, compared to women who were seen as more threatening. Figures like Itō Noe whose "free love" relationship with anarchist Ōsugi Sakae was upsetting to popular family values were less palatable than a model like Hatsuko, whose modes of independence seemed grounded in more acceptable views of feminine sexual virtue. To view this melodramatic fiction in the same context as the discourses surrounding such women, however, begins to reveal the range of possible identifications, desires, and ironies with which many its readers are likely to have confronted it and other popular fictions.