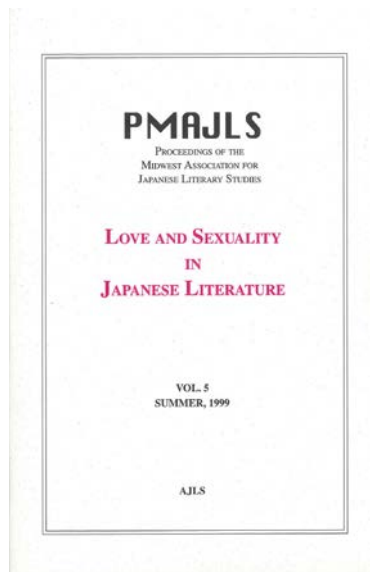


“Female Gender and Father’s Abuse: On the Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Writings”

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**FEMALE GENDER AND FATHER'S ABUSE:
ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY IN
CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WOMEN'S WRITINGS**

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Let me start with a few words on the title of my paper. I was asked by the organizer to reconsider the original title I proposed which used a four letter word. He was, in turn, asked to make a change by some other authority. As I did not want to cause him extra trouble and hassle other than the already tedious job of organizing an international conference, for which I am extremely grateful, I accepted the request and changed the title to what now appears on the program. To be consistent with the change, I am going to censor myself all the appearances of the expression in question which I will pronounce in the paper. But categorically avoiding it would make it impossible for me to speak on this subject at all, since the thematic of Uchida Shungiku's novel, which I am going to discuss, centers on the concept that I need to censor. So, what I will do is to replace the consonant *f* with the consonant *s* whenever it occurs in *that* word. That is to say, whenever you hear an s-word in my paper, please, put it back into an f-word in your mind. Hence, I will be mainly talking about Uchida Shungiku's sensational novel *Father Sucker*. And the original title of my paper read: Female Gender as Father Sucking: On the Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Japanese Women's Writings.

Frankly speaking, though, it came to me as a big surprise to have been asked to reconsider the title when you visit MLA these days and find in the program all these expressions even a hooligan would blush to utter. It seemed as if we had almost forgotten the kind of shame which was associated with sexual matters that plagued Victorians. But, lo, it is still there, authorizing Foucault's problematic when he writes in *The History of Sexuality* "We Victorians." This also authorizes Uchida Shungiku's thematic, since, obviously, when she purposefully chose the title of *Father Sucker*, she wanted to sensationalize. Though we, Japanese, are infamously bad in English, especially in colloquial English, we are familiar with the expression mother sucker, which, we have been told, is just about the worst curse you can utter. If it is the worst, that would make father sucker all the more sensational.

In fact, unlike the Victorian notion, it does not appear to me that the contemporary Japanese culture has passed too rigid a condemnation against mother sucking. Around the end of the 1970s, the mass media

reported a series of incidents that more or less shocked the public. Mothers were reported to have sucked their sons preparing hard for college entrance examinations. Their apologia was that their sons needed it in order to rid themselves of the sexual frustration which could interrupt their work. Rather surprisingly, most of the mothers appeared to have little sense of guilt for their act. It was, to them, a maternal duty. The society, naturally, censured them, but, apparently, did not stigmatize them too seriously. There were even comments sympathetic with the mothers. If I dare to make a sweeping generalization, the contemporary Japanese culture is far more tolerant to mother sucking than Euro-American cultures. The critic Ōtsuka Eiji points to the surging of the themes of mother-son incest in recent comics, culminating in Takami Mako's *Mariko*, in which such incest is strongly affirmed in the end (294).

In contrast, such a tolerant attitude toward mother sucking is not observed in father-daughter incest. Hence, the textual strategy of Uchida Shungiku of purposefully choosing a scandalous title that represents a stigmatized act. The effect is exaggerated by her use of the English term (*Fazaa fakkaa*), with more disgraceful connotations than the Japanese term (*fūshi sōkan*), which has a scientific/objective nuance.

In fact, Shungiku has shown a persistent interest in abnormal kinds of sexuality. This tendency of hers is not restricted to her literary discourse. In her works in comics, too, her interest has consistently lain in scandalous sexuality. Her obsession with perversion, based on the blurring of sexual identities, is one of the most conspicuous features of her comic works. In *Close Your Eyes and Hold Me* a hero meets a singer at a gay bar, where he dropped in by a sheer mistake. The hero falls in love with him, or her, a kind of love that he had never known before. The singer's sexual identity is still unclear as the series is not complete yet, but he/she appears to be hermaphrodite. His original girlfriend/lover, being jealous of his new lover, goes to see her to complain, only to be allured by her sexual charms and finds a hitherto unknown pleasure. Thus, the heroine creates two types of heterosexual or homosexual relationships with two partners, themselves partners of heterosexual relationships. Such an elaborate relationship completely mixes up the normal sense of sexual orientation and relationship.

In *Fundamental* there is a series of episodes featuring a man who turns into a woman once a month. He has a girlfriend. And remarkably enough, his metamorphosis does not disturb the couple enough to prevent them from having a lesbian act once a month, which, incidentally, they enjoy more than their "normal" heterosexual sex.

Obsession with perversion is not restricted to Shungiku, but largely shared by the women's discourse of her female contemporaries. Most significant is the so-called *yaoi* fiction, sometimes called *tambishōsetsu*, a popular genre almost exclusively featuring the depiction of beautiful young boys and their homosexual activities. It is extremely sexually explicit, to the point of being considered as pornography for women. A similar thematic and expression is observed in *yaoi* comics, published in "Ladies comics."

Now, what is the significance of such a genre? Catherine McKinnon once argued, to my dismay, that it is probably created by male writers in disguise and is meant for women who have psychological problems, possibly arising from their experience of having been sexually abused in childhood (a lecture delivered at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto on Oct. 29, 1995). Her comment was not only unfounded but also quite problematic as she pathologized female readers. A different theory, an insider's view, came from a writer, Sakakibara Shihomi, in her recent book, *Yaoi genron*. According to her, a woman with both trans-sexual mentality and homosexual orientation, that is, a gay man in woman's physical/biological constitution is never happy with the reality. As a gay, he (or she; hereafter referred to as zhe as normally described in current gay-lesbian discourse) is not interested in women, but zhe has a problem finding a male homosexual partner since biologically zhe is a woman. Under the pressure of such a complex situation, zhe finds his/her frustration released by reading *yaoi* fiction. She argues that this is not an escape from reality, as some critics think, since the fantasized world is itself his/her reality. *Yaoi* fiction is a genre that specifically caters to people with that kind of difficulty (chap. 6 et passim).

Although I appreciate Sakakibara's defense of *yaoi* and the authority of her theory as a writer of *yaoi* fictions herself, I take issue with her explanation of the function of *yaoi* fiction, as it is not that different from McKinnon's view in its pathologization of the female readership. In fact, even if *yaoi* fiction is a rather exclusive genre for enthusiastic fans alone, the theme of male homosexuality and the interest in cute boys are very common in various contemporary women's discourse. They have consistently appeared in mainstream (not maniac, that is) girls comics. Some of the most famous examples are: Takemiya Keiko's *Kaze to ki no uta*, published in *Shōjo komikkusu*, a harbinger of this type of narrative and Kihara Toshie's *Mari to Shingo*, a story about Meiji high school students, published in *Hana to yume*. These examples clearly contradict Sakakibara's hypothesis.

As a matter of fact, *yaoi* fiction itself has become a popular genre, acquiring a wide readership not restricted to maniac fans. Let us take a brief look at the text of a recent *yaoi* fiction, as it appears to me to demonstrate a feature quite different from Sakakibara's description of the genre as a secret medium for an exclusive club. It is the first story in the anthology, entitled *Boys Selection: Classmates*, a collection of short stories by those writers who are considered to be the leading *yaoi* novelists. I quote several opening lines in the original.

「おーい、神崎イ」

雨の昼休みを過ごしている二年組の教室のところから、でかい男が吠えた。

八島博紀のガタイは、でかいという表情がびったりだ。もしも彼が何やら愛敬のあるメガネの愛用者でなかったら、そのガタイだけで物騒な人間だという誤解を食らっていただろう。

「ほーい、ここいるよ」

教室の中から答えた声は、やや高めではがらか。いつも、自分が笑っているか、まわりを笑わせているかのどちらかの神崎稔は、おしゃべり中だった四、五人の輪の中から手を振ってみせると、ベンチにしていた机の上からひょいと立ち上がって、八島のところへやってきた。

「なん？ 部長」

八島は稔が所属しているミステリー小説研究会のリーダーである。

「図書館に新刊が入ってたんで、ゲットしといたぜ」

男子高校生にしては地味な用件を告げた八島に、稔はパッと目を輝かせた。

「おっ、マジ？ サンキュ」

「あ、そだ。世界史の副読本、持って来てねエ」

「あるよ」

「ラッキー！ 貸してチョ！ 俺の行方不明なんだ。」

(Akizuki 5-6; slightly edited)

The story, then, explains a special kind of emotion Yajima Hironori feels toward Kanzaki Minoru, which he has only recently realized. But those opening lines give no sense of a hidden form of sexuality. Instead, it is written in a strangely banal style, incorporating the very colloquial, coarse language that the young generation uses (*gatai*, *hōi*, *nan?*, *getto shita*, *maji?*, *kashitecho*, etc.). Of course, it may faithfully represent their real language and their everyday reality, but then, it contradicts the unrealistic situation that follows, that is, Kanzaki is the son of a professional thief of fine art and trains with his father every night.

I am not criticizing the work from some aesthetic point of view, though. After all, it is this sort of narrative, and not Ōe Kenzaburō, that is commonly read by young girls and that influences their construction of subjectivity. Rather than evaluating *yaoi* fiction using the concepts of literary theories familiar to us, we should try to understand and explain what the appeal of such narratives and such a style to young female readers is.

Nonetheless, the description in the above passage is so mundane that it has nothing to remind the readers of the term *tanbi shōsetsu*, which these fictions use to advertize themselves. As it unfolds itself, the story reveals nothing sublime, perverted, or fantastic. Toward the end of the story, under a rather eccentric situation, Yajima rapes Kanzaki and is determined to keep it secret, yet he speaks of this secret not as a terrible sin but as something casual. It does not appear that their entry into this realm of love would lead them to some magical world. Surely, this is *yaoi* fiction, *yama nashi, ochi nashi, iminashi* (no climax, no narrative closure, no meaning). Probably, the readers, high school girls, need such casual treatment of the subject matter in order to accept the fictional world as a potential reality and play with the fantasy. At the same time, the narrative foregrounds a very unrealistic situation and also a marginal form of sexuality. Co-existence of these contradicting principles, the mundane and the abnormal, appears to be a remarkable feature of *yaoi* fiction.

This brings us back to Shungiku's *Father Sucker*, for the novel also seemingly foregrounds the two contradicting principles: the depiction of the scandalous and the depiction of the mundane. The work distinguishes itself with its consistent use of a highly detached style, defying the shocking subject matter. The first few passages of *Father Sucker* read:

People often say that I have a face of a whore. When I tell them that I have had several professions, including a hostess at a bar, they ask: "Maybe, you did *that*, too?," implying prostitution. They ask such a question in a very matter-of-fact manner. Although I have tried not to show my disgust, I have hated it a lot. . . .

Then, yesterday, I finally remembered. I was a whore. . . . Till yesterday I had completely forgotten that I was one. The brothel was found at the west end of the city. The matron was a woman who brought me up till the age of sixteen, who happened to be my real mother. The customer was her lover and my step father. (5-7)

In other words, until she realized it, father sucking had been her trite everyday reality, not to be wondered at, not to be remembered, and perhaps repressed in her unconsciousness. Such a tone persists till the end of the story when she leaves the family, suddenly realizing that she does not have to stay with them. And she leaves, just like that, in a manner completely different from Shimazaki Tōson's supposedly "tragic" flight to France to get away from the stigma of having sucked his niece.

The detachedness of Shungiku's style was observed in many of the reviews of the novel. The writer Ida Makiko wrote in *Asahi shimbun* that *Father Sucker* together with its sequel *Atashi ga umi ni kaeru made* gave the sense of boring everyday life and its description centered on its ordinariness (Feb. 25 1996). Mizushima Yōko mentioned that *Father Sucker* was written in a spirit of super dry humor (*Jiyū jikan* Oct. 21 1993).

Such reviews are in clear contradiction to the male discourse that followed the publication of *Father Sucker*, which was predominantly interested in the scandalous aspect of it. Sensational magazines such as *Friday*, *Shūkan gendai*, *Shūkan bunshun* were intent on finding out whether the story was true or not. Headlines read:

“自伝小説ファザー・ファッカーの口にするのはばかられる内容”
 (Shūkan bunshun Sept. 30 1993) or
 “ズバリ直撃！やっぱりこの人この質問過激自伝小説『ファザーファ
 ッカー』「あれは全部実話ですか？」”
 (Friday, Jan. 14 1994)

From the male perspective, *Father Sucker* is just a scandalous story and nothing more.

Thus, I have argued that some of the women's discourse in contemporary Japan that treats marginal sexuality foregrounds conflicting principles: the scandalous and the mundane, the marginal and the ordinary, and the subverting and the conventional.

The last pair is observed in Shungiku's own attitude toward her *Fundamental*, which, as we have seen, is a work presenting various forms of sexuality that challenge the dominant forms. This subversiveness is, however, contained by her essentialist ideology. Ostensibly, the subject of this comic is to find *fundamental* forms of love for a man and a woman, although such a thematic is betrayed by the content. Such an interpretation on the theme of the work is proposed by a zoologist, Hidaka Toshitaka, a good friend of Shungiku's. In the postscript he explains the meaning of the title thus:

For me, specializing ethology, a man falls in love with a woman and a woman falls in love with a man according to the program structured by the genes. Therefore, it is, for humans and for animals, extremely *fundamental*. Furthermore, the program has its own reward. A man makes love to a woman and it feels good. A woman is made love to and she feels happy. In this way, genes scheme so that their own copies may multiply. Therefore, it is *fundamental*.(376)

Hidaka's comment is essentialist and even sexist. In his explication a woman is a passive vessel for male desire. Genes define all sexual relationships and there is no place for homosexual passion.

Strangely enough, Shungiku apparently buys into Hidaka's male discourse, approving his interpretation in her own postscript, responding to Hidaka's (370–71). If Hidaka's argument is consistently masculinist and consistently consistent, Shungiku's comment is contingently masculinist and consistently inconsistent. For her argument is betrayed by her own comic representation of sexuality.

I come back to my previous point. One feature of the contemporary women's discourse on marginal sexuality is that it foregrounds, in a bizarre manner, conflicting agenda: the scandalous represented by the mundane, the subversive contained by the essentialist, the eccentric co-opted by the casual. Given the prevalence of such a pattern, one may wonder if one could expand Sakakibara Shihomi's hypothesis about *yaoi* fiction and argue that the entire contemporary female readership has a problem of self contradiction, the kind of uneasiness of being, not unlike that experienced by a trans-sexual woman. I do not, however, have an answer to this question yet, nor do I know what to make of such an aporia, but conveniently, my time has run out and that is the end of the show for now.

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