



*The Other Women's Lib:  
Gender and Body in  
Japanese Women's Fiction*  
Julia C. Bullock

Reviewed by YUKIKO INOUE

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Julia Bullock is an assistant professor of Japanese at Emory University of Georgia. Bullock's research interests are in the areas of modern Japanese literature, film, popular culture, and gender theory. She has published articles on feminine subjectivity, gender and national identity, female homoeroticism, misogyny, and Japanese feminism.

In this impressive publication, analyzing the philosophies of gender in fictional form, Bullock highlights the work of the three most well-known Japanese women writers in the 1960s: Kono Taeko (河野多恵子) (1926- ), Takahashi Takako (高橋たか子) (1932- ), and Kurahashi Yumiko (倉橋由美子) (1935-2005). These women writers are well educated. Kono finished her economics degree at Women's University (currently Osaka University). Takahashi received her undergraduate degree in French from Kyoto University. Kurahashi received her undergraduate degree in French literature from Meiji University, and did some graduate work at the same University.

Kono received critical attention after the publication of the English translation of *Toddler-Hunting and Other Stories*. Takahashi is well known for her short stories featuring protagonists engulfed by illusions and personal fantasies. It is well known that Kurahashi gained sudden prominence in the Japanese literary scene while she was a college student when she published the story, *The Communist Party* (パルタイ), in a university magazine; much as Françoise Sagan's (1935-2004) debut on the literary scene with her story *Bonjour Tristesse*. Kurahashi is "best known for her absurdist, Kafka-esque plots, which employ pastiche, parody, and other elements typical of postmodernist writing" (p. 49). *Violent Stories for Adults* (大人のための残酷童話), which is full of unconventional and sordid tales, is considered to be her most popular work. In Kurahashi's words (1984):

*Fairy tales are absolutely logical, and are not fantasy. Compared with fairy tales, other stories or novels seem to be fantasies...clearly law and logic exists in a fairy tale. The system of this law and logic is a kind of magic, and the magic,*

*systematically and logically, does create a super-unrealistic world....that is why the worlds of fairy tales are so cruel and brutal. (pp. 198-199)*

(Translated from the Japanese language by the reviewer.)

Regarding her story, entitled *Mummy-Hunting for the Bizarre* (みいら採り猫 奇譚), Kono (1990) explains as follows:

*There is no masochism among animals....I believe that masochism creates a world in which human nature alters what is normally infused with elements common to other species. Although usually human sex has both elements of human nature and animal nature, masochism has a distinctly human kind of power. And so, as a writer, I am much interested in such power. (p. 8)*

(Translated from the Japanese language by the reviewer.)

Realizing that many other women writers of these three authors' generation seemed to share a profound sense of unease regarding what it meant to be a woman in Japanese society, Bullock provides this analysis as follows: "This seemed to have much to do with the fact that during the 1960s, when so many of these women made their debuts on the literary scene, Japanese society was experiencing a resurgence of the prewar 'good wife and wise mother' ideology—a stereotype of femininity that many of these women resisted" (p. 2). And so, these women writers "defied models of normative femininity through their literature, crafting female protagonists who were unapologetically bad wives and even worse mothers: frequently wanton, excessive, or selfish and brazenly cynical with regard to 'traditional' conceptions of love, marriage, and motherhood—when they did not opt out of this system entirely" (p. 2). Contributions of this first chapter, *Party Crashers and Poison Pens*, include its background discussion of Japan in the 1960s. Its insights include details such as the fact that men "worked longer and longer hours to satisfy the demands of high-growth economic productivity" (p. 17), and the fact that by the 1960s, marriages for love had become an attainable ideal for many in Japanese society." It is important to note that these writers' fictional narratives sought to resist historically dominant paradigms.

In Chapter 2, *The Masculine Gaze as Disciplinary Mechanism*, and Chapter 3, *Feminist Misogyny? or How I Learned to Hate My Body*, Bullock explores the way that subjects are engendered through both *hard* (formal or explicit) and *soft* (informal or implicit) disciplinary mechanisms. Focusing on the notion that men wield the gaze, and women are subjected to it, Bullock brings up Laura Mulvey's path-breaking article, entitled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Specifically, "Mulvey even contends that filmic techniques work to so thoroughly construct the gaze of the viewer as masculine that in order for female viewers to derive visual pleasure from such forms of spectatorship, they must subconsciously adopt a masculine subject position vis-à-vis the women onscreen" (p. 54), emphasizing the importance of the masculine gaze in disciplining women to behave as "appropriately" feminine subjects. Kono, Takahashi, and Kurahashi "challenge the misogynist logic [defined boundaries between *clean* and *unclean*,

*normal* and *abnormal*—or in this case, *masculine* and *feminine*] head on by crafting narratives that demonstrate the psychological cost to women who are thus rendered *inferior*” (p. 78).

In Bullock’s words, *Bone Meat* (Hone no niku, 1969) by Kono “is an example of the type of narrative, wherein the female protagonist’s abandonment by her lover sends her into a state of hysterical self-abjection that may in fact result in her death at the end of the story” (p. 78). In such narratives, the female protagonist’s masochism takes the form of specific positions or orientations of the body. In other examples of the type, including *Like a Witch* (*Yojo no yo ni*, 1964) by Kurahashi, and *Castle of Bones* (*Hone no shiro*, 1969) by Takahashi, male characters convince the female protagonists of the validity of the hierarchically gendered value system. In these stories, “women’s internalization of the superiority of men results in a contempt for their own sex and a desire to transcend feminine immanence in favor of a valorized state of existence that is explicitly coded as masculine” (p. 78).

In the 1960s, women’s contributions to society were “understood to encompass everything that had been excluded from the masculine sphere—reproduction, care of children and the elderly, domestic labor...to support the total dedication of men to the world of work outside the home” (p. 98).

Chapter 4, *Odd Bodies*, especially “illustrates one trope that often serves this purpose in women’s literature of the 1960s—the ‘odd body,’ which defies classification as either masculine or feminine, male or female” (p. 11). For example, in Kono’s *Toddler-Hunting*, it is seen that “a protagonist whose perverse attraction to little boys entails a fantasy of violent inscription of ‘feminine’ bodily characteristics upon a male body” (p. 98). Thus Kono (along with Takahashi and Kurahashi) used literature as a means of exposing, critiquing, and subverting binary models of gender that sought to confine women within restrictive stereotypes of femininity.

In Chapter 5, *The Body of the Other Woman*, Bullock points out that many of these three authors’ narratives “work to highlight the differences *among* women as a counterweight to hegemonic discourses of gender that emphasized the differences *between* women and men” (p. 127). Furthermore, according to Bullock, “the model of gender difference is able to conceptualize femininity only as masculinity’s logical opposite so that women are assumed to embody only those qualities that men lack (or disavow as unmasculine)” (p. 127).

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the women’s liberation movement had become an international movement. Even in Japan there were many nationwide women’s movements in the 1970s. And yet, “It was not until after the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s that public opinion began to shift toward acceptance of the notion that women might legitimately possess and act upon sexual impulses of their own, outside of the context of marriage” (p. 23).

In her conclusion, Bullock focuses on *power*, *violence*, and *language* in the age of high economic growth: highlighting “some of the theoretical implications of these women writers’ contributions to incipient second-wave feminist discourse, comparing their work to that of prominent feminist theories of the following decade and beyond” (p. 153). Note that the “second wave” of the Women’s Movement, Feminist Movement, or the Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States refers to a period of feminist activity that began during the early 1960s and lasted through the late 1970s (“Second-wave feminism,” 2011). During the 1960s and 1970s, the goal of Japan was, indeed, economic growth. Based on Bullock’s analysis, “In numerous stories ‘society’ is conflated with the male-dominated intelligentsia and may even be seen as embodied

in specific authority figures that hold power over the female characters—fathers, mentors, husbands, and lovers” (p. 155). These women authors “implicitly protest the insidious and violent consequence of normative structures of gender that induce women to denigrate themselves and other women so as to elevate men as ‘naturally’ superior” (p. 158). If there were any way out of the “prison-house” of gender, it seemed for these authors to be through language; and noted by Bullock, “Academic styles of writing were indeed associated with masculine speech at this time...and the attempt to create a language for feminism that spoke directly to the heart of women was a prime objective of the Japanese lib movement of the 1970s” (p. 164).

In Japan during the 1960s, as Bullock also notes, women in general were recognized for qualities associated with their nurturing and supportive roles in relation to men. And indeed, that image of Japanese women figured prominently in books and movies that proved popular in other countries, including *Shogun* by James Clavell (TV mini-series 1980), *The Last Samurai* by Helen Dewitt (movie, 2003), and *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden (movie, 2005). In contrast, women illustrated in books by the three authors Bullock considers were unbelievably negative and selfish with regard to traditional conceptions of love, marriage, and motherhood. That might be the major element that led Bullock to challenge these three women’s works. Through these women’s works, Bullock also sensed that the authors themselves felt profoundly ambivalent toward their own gender.

*The Other Women’s Lib* provides an incisive analysis in support of understanding feminist theoretical development prior to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s in Japan. Bullock—passionately and articulately—discusses these fascinating but challenging fantasy and horror writers, who questioned prevailing societal norms regarding sexual relations, violence, and social order. Bullock’s book will be accessible to popular audiences especially, and deeply stimulating to scholars and others interested in gender and culture in postwar Japan, women Japanese writers, or Japanese feminism. It can also be used as a library reference, course supplement, reading text, and resource for professors.

## References

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Dr. Julia C. Bulloch is Assistant Professor of Russian and East Asian Languages and Cultures, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.