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When Women Narrate the Self: Personal Narratives in Modern Women's Literature

Mizuta Noriko

Translated by Nadeschda Bachem

In her essay “When Women Narrate the Self: Personal Narratives in Modern Women’s Literature” (1992), Mizuta Noriko reflects on how women’s socially marginalized position has compelled female writers to create innovative narratives of the self. In a departure from the perception of femininity as a lack and constrained by restrictive models of maternity, for women to narrate meant creating a substance for the female self anew and freeing themselves from the limiting conceptions that bound them. Mizuta cites two archetypal strategies that female writers employed in order to create a “narratable” female substance: on the one hand, a specifically female recourse to motherhood that reclaimed maternity for female artists, and on the other hand, its reversal, the exploration of the destructive “witch-like” woman as counter example to the socially constrained version of motherhood. However, as Mizuta explains, these strategies are still fundamentally bound by the myth of motherhood, even in their attempts to subvert it. She therefore goes on to show how writers like Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) and Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951), who also grappled with the fundamentally binding concept of motherhood, tried to dissolve the myth of femininity within larger categories of the existentialist human or classed subject. Mizuta concludes that these authors posit the self as a “concrete universal” in exchange with the other, with society. In the second part of her essay, Mizuta discusses the skillful use of the everyday and ordinary in the work of Tomioka Taeko (b. 1935). She explains that Tomioka’s recourse to the mundane offers new paths for dealing with the ego in modern literature. Mizuta holds that female writers who narrate the self ultimately provide a countermeasure to the exhibitionist tendencies of self-referential exposure that prevail in much of modern literature.

(Nadeschda Bachem)

Throughout long periods of history, women were unable to participate in the arena of public discourse. When women, barred from writing and expressing themselves as subjects, in turn became the objects of depiction, they were inscribed in a highly conceptualized manner. That this depiction of women was realized within the ideological framework of the “pure woman” (*junsui josei*) means that the men depicting them did not attempt to write women as individuals with a sense of selfhood.

However, this does not mean that women did not express themselves. Through informal and private systems of expression—such as letters or conversations—from confessional narratives to assessments of the people around them, women had at their command a less constrained means of expression precisely because it was informal. Alongside official modes of expression, female communication therefore occupied an important structural position as a private means of expression. And while female communication was indeed private, it went beyond private expression in the sense of mere conversation between individuals or within the family; holding a “semi-official” (*hankōshiki*) position within the domain of female culture. Indeed, women’s expression fulfilled its function superbly and circulated within a cultural domain that realized its main role not in society but in the unideological everyday space of the community.¹

This tells us that all discourses in society were considered “public” (i.e. official) and thus male. Meanwhile, although society may have considered women’s expression to be unofficial, “private” (*shiteki*), and peripheral, women themselves considered it as also having a public form. For women, neither the home, nor the domain of female culture were private individual spheres at all. While for men, the singularity of both their respective households and their everyday lives were afforded as private spheres, for women, only their own individual interiority was entirely private.

“Narration of the self” (*jikogatari*) is thought characteristic of modern Japanese women’s literature. This means that when women—who held awareness of this private realm—gained the possibility of expression, they did not conceive of themselves as narrating an overall female culture. When deciding to become writers, women are aware of the discomfort arising from their double estrangement from both female culture, to which they belong, and official society, from which they are excluded. It is precisely this awareness that lies at the origin of their written expression and leads women to become writers. Given the tendency of modern literature to place an emphasis on self-awareness, Japanese women’s literature can be considered one of its most radical manifestations, because it renders the completely private domain of the self its founding point of departure.

Not only did women’s culture occupy a definite structural position within the fabric of society, but also, as a set of philosophies, or rather myths, it fulfilled a structural function as a constantly reproduced subculture; creating its own personal forms of expression through journals, novels, plays, and lectures targeted at women, as well as female culture more generally. When women developed the impulse to write, it was

not to be a spokesperson for female culture; paradoxically, the primary foundation of women's literature was the desire to be liberated from self-reproducing female culture and the awareness of the self in isolation from it. At least insofar as women in Japan are concerned, this is how modern literature began.

Through their double estrangement from female culture and society as well as the lack of role models, mythical prototypes, traditional patterns, and ideological definitions, women have gained an awareness of their interior selves solely through absence. In romantic love and literature of the modern period, the female ego was tasked with a stereotypical pursuit of the self, but this was depicted less as a method of self-expression and individual fulfillment than a requirement of needing to love and write in order to become an individual. To paraphrase Yoshimoto Takaaki, "if men perceive the self through difference and relationships, women become aware of the self through absence." In other words, the conceptualization of the self is just a fantasy—or an entity in disguise—to which the gap between being and consciousness itself leads.²

The female ego in modern literature does not experience a "blissful" (*shiawase na*) dismantling of itself. Women do not have access to the consciousness of its own dismantling that Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, and Tayama Katai posit at the origin of self-awareness³—there is no destruction of the old self or realization that what one thought to be the self was an immaterial illusion to begin with. This is because the self is recognized only in terms of what it lacks.

The consciousness of its own dismantling operates as both a phenomenon and a foundation, at both the surface and the depths of the multiple cultural and psychological levels of the self. It entails an awareness of the cultural and cumulative complexity of the self, which is enabled through insights from Freud, Jung, and Mead. The modern male awareness of the self, which has emerged through the processes of the consciousness of demolition, has continued in its descent into the deeper realm of the psyche in its pursuit of a stereotypical and quintessentially archetypal state of being. In modern literature, this place of arrival—the archetypal native place of the soul—can lie in the mother's body or in motherhood itself, and when the dismantling of the individual becomes a grave ideological task, motherhood is mythologized and idealized as the source of life that transcends the ego.

For women as well, motherhood was the ideology that greatly dominated the regulation of the self, but rooted in discomfort with female culture, the female ego also realized that mythologized motherhood was an obstruction to her. What, then, was the rite of passage toward self-awareness for women? Needless to say, Freud's and Jung's contemporary myths fail to anticipate such a dilemma. Instead, both women's psyche and sex are defined as anima, muse, and motherhood, all of which are characterized by their chaotic nature and the origin to which we irrevocably return. Because women are rendered synonymous with life and nature, their very femininity is subsumed by the imperative to accept and fulfill such an essential notion of selfhood.

This myth of motherhood is thus fundamentally incompatible with the modern concept of individuality. Not only does modern theory not conceptualize the female ego, it develops from the notion of deep layers of consciousness that modern thought posits as its own negative, against which it understands the mythologized transcendence of the self through motherhood and within which it dissolves the female ego.

Women in the modern period distanced themselves from motherhood—which had come to be considered the essence of femininity—and this created an ideological vacuum within which they had to search for a means of turning their self-awareness into something of substance. The female ego is premised on the recognition of the self as lacking. The process of women awakening to self-awareness was also a process of becoming aware of the dark and empty space in one's own uterus—the womb as a hollow vessel, like a bowl. The question of how to fill this empty space or interiority of the self can therefore be understood as the most pressing concern of the female ego in modern literature.

Women in the modern period tried to give the self, which they perceived as absence, a visible core through narrating the self and finding love. However, it was not that the female ego and its expression then became the object of narration in modern women's literature—that women had an ego and self was narrated as an expression of that ego—but rather, through narration, the traces of female consciousness now became visible. Such an endeavor constituted a struggle against the phantom of a historical self that was always already othered. This is because, even though women created myths in order to give shape to the substance of their selves, the very act of becoming an individual self necessarily entailed becoming an other. Thus, in order to make the lack of an ego visible, women had to detach themselves from female culture, motherhood, their social system, and also from their individual selves. This also constituted an escape from the unconscious mind and the psyche of the self.

The self that we are able to perceive through narrative is, in fact, a virtual image. This is because its essence—its substance—is lacking, and to narrate means to create an archetype of the self, that is, to create an image of the self that can be narrated. This necessitated rethinking the archetypal female image, even though a large part of this process stood in conflict with modern thought. The female self had been perceived as a non-person, a virtual body without substance, a non-existence that could even be considered an illusion. When presenting the self through narration, what kind of idealized fantasy could women, who were narrating in an attempt to create a visible substance, possibly create?

The first method they employed was to give substance to the self by narrating their own circular return to motherhood. In so doing, such women writers themselves completed the myth of motherhood in an attempt to position the female ego within a genealogy of men in modern literature who longed to return to the womb of the ego.

Okamoto Kanoko and, in the West, Anaïs Nin are surely among the most brilliant figureheads of this form of literature.⁴

The second method is a technique of tracing an awareness of the empty womb in the tradition of witches. Takahashi Takako has stated that it is not that there are mothers and diabolical women, but simply those who have woken up to the existence of the ego, and those who have not. However, one could also say that the ego is precisely the consciousness of the witch. Apart from Takahashi, Enchi Fumiko in Japan and Sylvia Plath in the West are representative of this kind of literature.⁵

It is important to note that this return to the legend of witchcraft is inseparable from the return to motherhood. Because the myth of motherhood already contains as its negative the myth of witchcraft, one can think of them as two parts of the same whole. Witchcraft already enacts the destructiveness of motherhood and need not be constructed as its antithesis. Diabolical witchcraft has been institutionally detached from motherhood, but both are the same in substance. It is no contradiction that Takahashi both depicted diabolical women and at the same time promoted a discourse of women as the origin of life. The experience of infertility as a life-affirming sensation, seen in Kōno Taeko's work, is a reversal of the longing for motherhood. It is, so to speak, the perverse return to the myth of motherhood.

It is precisely the cultural tradition of the myth of motherhood, based on this logic, which causes women to perceive of their selves as lacking. However, even if both these orthodox and perverted returns to the myth of motherhood theoretically fill up the void of the womb, they are caught in a prison of their own making, like a snake eating its own tail.

Anaïs Nin, who attempted to be an artist by succeeding in performing as a woman—that is, by returning to her own myth of motherhood and expressing herself in this cycle—clearly explains the self-contradiction that lies therein. In her diary, she paraphrases the psychologist Otto Rank, who stated that “when neurotic women are cured, they become women, but cured neurotic men become artists,” thus conveying the belief that destruction is necessary for creativity but that women are incapable of destruction and are consequently unable to become great artists. According to the myth of motherhood, women are beings whose function is essentially to preserve and protect, and that being the case, Nin attempts to establish a new model for the female artist, namely, as one who preserves and protects.

Nin's literature is an expression of the process of consciously attempting to be a woman. Nin defines being a woman as being a muse, a mother, and a lover and regards women as beings who embody union, harmony, and exchange, as giving life, as beings who provide salvation from madness. Men's isolation and loneliness—their so-called objectivity—causes them to lose touch with nature and destroys even logic, but Nin defines women as a “nature” (*shizen*) that encompasses instinct, and she says that it is precisely this nature that rules men's subconscious.

While, on the one hand, Nin asserts that woman's creative process is a process of fulfilling motherhood, on the other hand, Nin envies the destructiveness, the sense of liberation, and the freedom possessed by Henry Miller; she is lost in a reverie of what could be if only she were able to release her poetic demon in a single stroke. Ultimately, Nin's literature confesses that to devote oneself to "woman" as a subject is to become complicit in men's illusionary myth of motherhood, and when this becomes the very cause of estranging women from their selves, the return to this process of self-estrangement continues to obstruct the possibility of being reborn as an artist.

In Nin's "A Spy in the House of Love" (1954), the deceitful female protagonist, who keeps performing her role as wife, is persistently tormented by her false sense of self. Her womanhood remains a mere performance, which relies on her pursuit of an illusionary notion of masculinity. As Simone de Beauvoir has shown through her analysis,⁶ the domain of the psyche, which extends to a place where women can probe the depths of their inner selves, and the mythical and archetypal female domain, are perhaps nothing more than paradoxical worlds—a room with a mirror that reflects the small, dark places of the self.

Nin's literature, which was heavily influenced by Freud, is naturally laced with a strong longing for fatherhood, but this shows how the ideology of motherhood, which is determined through its contrast to paternity, paradoxically binds the female ego. As many feminists have already pointed out, Freud's influence can thus be seen to have obstructed the female ego.

De Beauvoir's and Miyamoto Yuriko's "narrations of the self" (*jikogatari*)⁷ seem to be examples of an attempt to form not only a female self-awareness rooted in its separation from the myth of motherhood but also a new concept of humanity within the existing system of thought.

Socialism and existentialism superficially destroy the paradigms of masculinity and femininity, and fatherhood and motherhood, by proposing that neither social class, nor existence itself, exist. They take the view that the classed ego overcomes the division between the sexes, which, in addition to the position of "being-in-itself" (*être-en-soi*) (*taiji*)⁸ and the "thing in itself" (*sokuji*),⁹ places women and men in an equal relationship. In Miyamoto's case, the influence of socialism seems to have had an important role in formulating a concept of humanity independent from the myth of femininity. Certainly, it can be said that both de Beauvoir and Miyamoto were able to conceptualize the non-existence of a female ego through a new ideology that permitted them to produce a female image that was independent from the myth of femininity. As such, they both theorized the growth of women into new selves as part of a process of liberation from the myth of femininity—de Beauvoir from a point of view denying that human essence precedes existence, and Miyamoto from a point of view suggesting that class-awareness clouds self-awareness.

Miyamoto's *Nobuko* (1924) bears traces of the agony of the attempt to overcome one's femininity in order to be an artist, but, conversely, in her autobiographical works

following *The Two Gardens* (Futatsu no niwa, 1947) the protagonist's womanhood is unrestrained. However, this might undeniably be the result of the female protagonist's liberation from the myth of femininity. In *Nobuko* it is clear that being an artist and being a woman are inseparable, and the protagonist Nobuko suffers precisely because she longs to be a woman. Nobuko is deeply entangled in the illusion of femininity and ultimately condemns men, who refuse to turn this illusion into something tangible.

It could be argued that when *The Two Gardens* was written, the virtual image of femininity as an archetypal self was already present in Miyamoto's work. It is, no doubt, precisely the process by which the protagonist Hiroko breaks out from this illusion of femininity that causes her to grow anew as a person. This is the self-image that Miyamoto wanted to depict in her later autobiographical works. Sustaining this self-image is her humanist and socialist conception of humanity.

Nobuko, it seems, could not quite free herself from the illusion of femininity, because her view of love prioritized sexual love and considered this *eros* the force of life and the source of her creativity. Therefore, she barely maintained a theoretical balance between sex and art. After writing *The Two Gardens*, sexual love becomes compartmentalized within Miyamoto's writing, as a category that falls under the heading of "society," and is cut loose from all its connotations of the deep psyche. Miyamoto's sexual love, which can be described as health-oriented and completely lacking in decadence, indicates that her liberation from the myth of motherhood is accomplished through the exclusion of the domain of the unconscious mind—namely, of the female psyche. In light of this, Nobuko and Hiroko appear to have been "feminine" (*onnarashii*) pretenses all along, equipped with kindness and a forceful embrace. This phantasm of exaggerated femininity manifests a concept, or even an ideology.

De Beauvoir sets apart society (or history) and men as external to herself and attempts to regulate herself in relation to them. Deeply affected by the psyche as a phenomenon, by delineating the process by which the myth of motherhood functions and the female ego is annihilated, de Beauvoir liberates the self from this very myth of motherhood.

De Beauvoir's long autobiographies—*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, 1958), *The Prime of Life* (*La force de l'âge*, 1960), and *Force of Circumstance* (*La force des choses*, 1963)—can be read as presentations of an archetypal self, but ultimately, an illusory understanding of sex that belongs to the domain of the deep psyche is excluded from these works. Whether the orthodox return to the myth of motherhood or the perverse return as a witch, the attempt to both create an archetypal model of the self and transcend the ego as absence relies on uniting the two at the source of female culture. This attempt had always been expressed as a descent into the realm of deep psychology. Therefore, it was inevitable that liberation from the self-inflicted shackles of the myth of femininity ultimately could only be accomplished through the exclusion of the deep psyche.

The ego, which is perceived as lacking, is constituted by an awareness of an insubstantial partial darkness alienated from both myth and the system. This is a part of the self that can neither be documented nor narrated. Through writing, humans fabricate this shadowy part as a “self that can be expressed” (*hyōgensareuru jiko*). This is how the virtual image as archetype is created. Narrating the self means manufacturing this virtual image and probing into its relationship with the insubstantial darkness. The narrated female self is always already a work of fiction.

Accordingly, both autobiographies and confessional diaries are nothing but self-expression as fabrication. The archetype of the self that the writer presents as expression is accordingly always already an idea, or a meaning, and not a reflection of reality. Women, who began to narrate from a place where the self is perceived as lacking, could only narrate the self as an idea.

Both Nobuko and Françoise in *She Came to Stay* (L'Invitée, 1943) attempt to create self-awareness in the relationship between self and other; women as the self and men as the other. Here, love gains deep significance as an opportunity for self-awareness to manifest itself as an action or as a relationship with one's opposite. However, for both Miyamoto and de Beauvoir, self-image, in order to become an archetype, reaches completion at the point at which aspects of society or the community (i.e., a spatial and historical community) are introduced, and they enter into a three-way relationship with the other and the self. For the writer—who attempts to form self-awareness in the three-way relationship between the projection of the spatial and temporal whole of the community,¹⁰ the act of love, and the self—art and the act of narration are always one and the same process. This is because both history and love are formed over the course of time, and all three are transitional categories. In this sense, it could be argued that art is always a creative attempt at autobiography.

What is lacking in de Beauvoir's self-image and in the works of Miyamoto after *The Two Gardens* is the anguish of the self as an expressive subject of the artist's ego. For both de Beauvoir and Miyamoto, to write is to exist; to create a self-image is to reconstruct the world; and in giving voice to the ego, the self exists as nothing but a process. From the concrete to the universal, from meaninglessness to meaning, the very meaning of writing and existence is to attach significance to the relationship between the self and the world. De Beauvoir calls this the creation of a “concrete universal.” It is the reconstruction or fabrication of the self as evidence of one's own life. This is, however, an attempt to establish communication and exchange—the universal—on top of the originality of the self, a lonely and isolated individual subjectivity. Therefore, this does not resemble the image of a snake eating its own tail, where self-expression and self-fulfillment overlap. The self as expressive subject and as artist is merely one leg of a tripod along with the other legs corresponding to the self of praxis and the self that loves.

Each leg of the tripod is split, and in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) Doris Lessing depicts the process of ceasing to create a harmonious unified image of the self as the agony

of a female author who can no longer write.¹¹ However, it is precisely this agony of the writer that constitutes the issue with “the artist as God” (*kami toshite no geijutsuka*), the epitome of the modern artist, who intends to reconstruct the world through self-expression. When the self-image as archetype—the self that is narrated—is an artist, expression is created for expression, art is created for art, and the artist creates for the artist. Lessing denied her desire for the inflated ego of the artist, which aimed at self-fulfillment through a kind of self-expression that simultaneously contradicted the self, and attempted to start afresh from a place where the artist was reduced to being just one single person. In so doing, she confronted one of modern literature’s major challenges: an impasse created by the ego’s attempt to become a self through narrating the self.

The magnified ego of the artist, and especially the conceited longing for a vocalizing self in which self-expression and confession are directly related to art, have come to be criticized as a problem of modern literature in Japan as well. In order to escape the self-referentiality of novels created for novels and artists creating for artists, it has been argued that an attempt should be made to introduce narrative or historical time. However, the introduction of narrative or historical time in itself does not provide an alternative to the longing for the self that sustains modern literature. At this point, where we interrogate anew the relationship between art and the narration of the self, we will have also arrived at modern female literature, which begins with “narrating the self” (*jikogatari*).

Tomioka Taeko’s early works can be considered as exemplary of this quest to narrate the self. So far, Tomioka has written novels with many autobiographical elements. In *A Family of Hades* (*Meido no kazoku*, 1974), *The Strange Story of Kochuan* (*Kochūan ibun*, 1974), and even in *The Festival of Vegetables* (*Shokubutsusai*, 1973), sections that deal with the real life or personal experiences of the author occupy a significant position. Nevertheless, it is apparent that these works are not I-novels,¹² which thematize an internal search for the self. They are quite carefully crafted and, simultaneously, each work presents the reader with a distinct theme. Tomioka succeeds in constructing novels that are quite different in quality from I-novels, with their pursuit of the self and confessions of the narrator’s inner life, and are only sustained by self-consciousness. Indeed, even for a highly-critiqued novel of “narration” (*katari*), the protagonist—and by extension, the author—skillfully succeeds in depicting the role of everyday life and characters who hold an ambiguous relationship to the protagonist.

However, the author’s personal life, which features in all of Tomioka’s works—especially one particular period in her past that she seems to have been fixated on and felt the strongest need to write about—persistently underlies all her novels, and therefore seems to beg the question of its significance. For readers familiar with seemingly autobiographical works in which authors openly recount their own lives, the story that is

told, for example, in *A Family of Hades* is something that they will already know. Even so, the significance of Tomioka's literary world of novels can be set apart from I-novels.

A Family of Hades is formed of four seemingly independent episodes, which become a unified plot through the progression of the protagonist Fukuko (or Hōko)'s personal development: from her childhood; to living together with her lover; to their separation; and finally her marriage. Together with the temporal progress of the protagonist's life "time" (*toki*), the lives of the people around her change as well, and with the changes in those people's extremely ordinary lives, larger cultural transformations and historical "time" are introduced. However, this work is also not a bildungsroman.¹³ This is because the source of the protagonist's growth is not expressed—at least not in the parts featured in the novel—and the work lacks the bildungsroman's characteristic motif of an attempt to establish and affirm the relationship between the self as a historical being and the world.

The protagonist narrates the lives of her father, her mother, her siblings, her lover, and his parents in relation to herself, but rather than pursuing the self in their depiction and narration, this first-person narrator describes and narrates their lives in a carefree way, although with the greatest of interest, as if they were the affairs of other people. Nonetheless, it is not the case that a Henry James-like protagonist has been firmly installed here as "the center of consciousness" (*ishiki no chūshin*). Despite supposedly being the most deeply affected victim of the stories, "I" (*watashi*) seems like an onlooker, and while "I" should be adopting an attitude of detachment toward the characters she is depicting, she instead perceives them as if she is their advocate. Moreover, such a narrative structure leaves the reader completely in the dark about how the protagonist has grown or changed at the point where the story ends.

The main narrative theme in the story, *A Family of Hades* concerns the process of the transformation of two conflicting cultures, or subcultures, and what one might call their respective indigenous secondary cultures, which become absorbed into the culture of the recent postwar. On the one hand, we are presented with the worlds of her father and mother (even though the latter possesses a different internal logic), who both belong to the same subculture and who inhabit, in the words of the author, "a world of humanity and justice, in which they lead clearly distinct lives." On the other hand, there is the volatile and migratory world of her lover Shō-chan and his parents—a world defined by a sense that "we'll manage somehow."

In between these two subcultures, the protagonist experiences astonishment, admiration, fascination, as well as repulsion; and, seemingly forgetting that she is the victim, she vividly tells both her story and theirs. The charm of this protagonist's narration is not in the vivid individuality of her designated supporting characters, but rather that while narrating her own drama, she is unintentionally taken in by the appeal of these characters and her focus moves there, in a style of storytelling that then seems to stray from the main plot. This kind of technique can also be seen in *The Festival of*

Vegetables, and *The Strange Story of Kochuan* in which it occupies an important part of the novel's narrative structure.

In the second part of *The Festival of Vegetables*, the protagonist Tsushima becomes a minor character, developing into the kind of narrator who observes the characters from the outside. Yet, this does not erase Tsushima-san's narrative function as "I." Indeed, in Tomioka's work, the exuberant "I" is the real topic of her novels. Even when she describes the people around her, there is a distinct feeling that this is a digression, which at some point must return to the story of the protagonist. However interesting and profound the story of the respective supporting character is, it is still the story of a supporting character. Further, no matter how much the interior life of the protagonist is concealed, or the work is organized around a topic other than the self, for some reason the intense visibility of her self-expression is one characteristic of Tomioka's novels.

Even while they represent different cultures, Nahoko's father and her lover Shōchan are alike insofar as they live as selfishly as they wish. This close resemblance lies in the way in which they do not become intellectually involved in things beyond their way of living life; and in this respect her mother—who perceives herself as the father's victim—is also similar in that she persistently lives through hardships by faithfully adhering to the internal logic of her world. Indeed, even the protagonist's little brother, Akira, a modern kid who she admires for some reason, seems to carry a hidden "dark room" (*anshitsu*) inside him, according to the particular logic of which—or to the surrounding logic of which—he lives his life.

The interest in this kind of other, one who is a mystery and controls his own world, is well described in *The Strange Story of Kochuan*. The characters of *A Family of Hades*, meanwhile, are not artists or clearly defined "expressive subjects" (*hyōgensha*), but ordinary people, and their concern is not to write a novel but to live their everyday lives. However, in *The Strange Story of Kochuan* Tomioka again reflects her own position between the poles of expressive subject and the subject of everyday life, and refuses to define the stubborn expressive subject—the hermit in the jar, Yokokawa Sōta—as a "strange person" (*kawatta ningen*).

The Strange Story of Kochuan reduces this formula of depicting "I" seen in *A Family of Hades* to its most basic equation. Here, the "exhibition of the dark place" (*ansho kaichō*) surrounding the central character Yokokawa Sōta is thought to represent the internal impulse of the first-person narrator and presents us with a clearly-defined relationship between protagonist and narrator.

In classic Poe-esque narrative style, there is a protagonist who acts and a narrator who sees and describes him, and the narrator gradually becomes immersed in the protagonist's inner world. When the two internally merge in the narrator's climactic discovery, it becomes apparent, in this structure, that the narrator skillfully uses a narrative convention in which the protagonist is clearly detached from everyday life (or lives in a world of insanity), and the narrator lives in the world of the reader. Accordingly, in these

works the climax of the plot, and, potentially, the journey of the narrator's internal quest, reaches a point where the narrator is separated from and transcends the protagonist—namely, the point where the narrator gains a particular type of awareness through his or her involvement with the protagonist. However, *The Strange Story of Kochuan* in fact breaks through the simplistic relationship between perpetrator and witness, protagonist and narrator, and reacts with even deeper inquiries about why the “I” writes about Yokokawa. These are the author's own queries into the relationship between author and work, between everyday life and the world of the novel, between living and expressing.

The Strange Story of Kochuan is a story of the “expressive subject” (*hyōgensha*) creating a strange thing—a work of literature—in order to cover his genitalia while clearly already “taking possession of” (*shoyū*) them. However, this novel becomes a superb analysis of decadent literature (or art)—even in the Romanesque of Yokokawa's sexual delusions, he can be thought to be interchangeable with the writer Kawabata Yasunari, and one could say that the protagonists of the writer Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's early works are Yokokawa's very selves. A significant theme in Western late romantic literature is the perversion that lacks passion for anything but a desire to possess the “dark room” (*anshitsu*), all the while developing an extreme fear of its exposure.

In *The Strange Story of Kochuan*, “I” holds the key to Yokokawa's dark room, and while she comes close to exposing it to the light, she declares that she has no interest in doing so. In a small jar, Yokokawa cultivates, like pearls, only those special things that are allowed entry, but he says that he does not know of the bottom of the jar and the pearls, which is reality and which is illusion. For the expressive subject of the story, who creates a miniature book—not for self-exposure or self-liberation but as a toy for self-concealment—this book is really an act of “resentful masturbation” (*uramigamashii jii*). However, the author discovers this childhood disease-like monomania in both the artist and in those ordinary citizens who do not have the ability to adapt to real life, such as society's collectors and lechers.

In the novel, the view of art espoused by both the author and “I” is manifest in the line, “I think that neither the task of writing reality, nor creating things is particularly significant”; it is apparent that our protagonist does not believe that the fake world is actually that of the novel itself and that “the *real* world is actually his room in the back.” For “I” to watch Yokokawa means that “the reality beyond [his] literary work was not the eccentricity of an odd person,” and as a “spinal caries-stricken” (*kariesunaru byōki*) expressive subject, he is affirmed as an artist but also as his own self and, finally, as an ordinary person. The line between artist and ordinary person is blurred here.

“I” neither believes that such masturbation-like works are outstanding pieces of art, nor does she think of egoistic expressive subjects, who go so far as to get involved with other people's lives, as superior artists. The world of the various “elegant” and “erotic” shells that have been bred inside the jar is something that she “has no business” with, and since the first-person narrator sees no meaning in the miniature book and the

works lined up in the display case, she does not even try to touch them. Nor can she bear to peek into the dismal, ugly, and weak world inside the jar, which she has no desire to drag into the light. Here lies the author's utterly biting criticism—of a perverse literature that has lost its touch with self-absorbed reality and can abruptly change position. As a writer, she feels personal shame toward this grotesque beauty, as if it is her own genitalia that has been exposed.

However, the fact that “I” is by no means in a position to deny this beauty becomes clear in her investigation of Yokokawa. In order to scrape by in life (as her pretext goes), and to avenge having become “unwittingly embroiled” in the expressive subject's suppressed egoism, there are things the first-person narrator “wants to have ascertained” and she sets out to undertake an “investigation” of Yokokawa's interior. However, the period in which she is unwittingly embroiled turns out to coincide with the period in her life with “Numada Mitsuo,” and to confirm Yokokawa's “dark place” is also to confirm her own unhappiness at her existence of living together with Numada as well as the deepest darkest places of her “cave-like” (*anagura*) life. Yet Tomioka does not write at all about the essentials of this place but, rather, conceals it.

The same can be said about *A Family of Hades*. Nahoko, the first-person narrator of the story, considers her mother, who carries on with strong resolve, restrained as she is by both the conflict between moral obligation and human feelings and the distinction between right and wrong, as both detestable and pitiable.¹⁴ Nahoko is treated badly by the always smiling, friendly, and irresponsible Shō-chan, who operates under a completely different logic and has an attitude of “everything's going to work out somehow.” Even more so than her mother, she is a psychological victim of her father's ignorant and fascinating *yakuza*-like world. She becomes ill, she is loved and cast away by men, she is yelled at by her mother, and then marries a young man as if it were happening not to her, but to someone else. After her marriage, “I” describes the tragicomic figure of her aged mother whose heart's desire has now been fulfilled in her newly-refurbished house. She is surrounded by young children who live in a world where her logic is not understood but who “tidy their room and sit still.” Her mother, too, who even now clings tightly to the grudge she holds against her husband and tries to live by her own logic in the world of her dreams, becomes senile in the current of time and the flow of a new history.

Observing this, Nahoko is at once both harsh and kind, and while bound to her mother by fate, she clearly also lives a completely different life. After all, in order to “know,” Nahoko pursues the representatives of premodern culture who have either been absorbed, and thereby destroyed by new external elements or have made sure that they will fare well with those new elements. There is, however, no empathy at all shown toward an indigenous culture that has been abruptly and completely changed. Indigenous culture, which is especially valued by her father and mother, is a thing of the past even in the established trajectory of human life and cannot serve as a guiding principle for the first-person narrator.

Tomioka deliberately immerses herself in indigenous things and while she positions herself as a slightly anachronistic entertainer, she does not at all confuse this with its flipside of avant-garde expression. Instead, she has the confidence to locate these kinds of indigenous elements clearly within the realm of history. *A Family of Hades* is a novel that, while autobiographical, refrains from “exposing” the protagonist’s “dark places” (*ansho kaichō*) in its closing. Rather than strong self-affirmation, “I,” the narrator, consistently escapes expression. This is also related to a characteristic of the contemporary novel, which lacks a hero with an interior life that urgently needs to be exposed but is also motivated by the ambivalent relationship between “I,” the author as expressive subject, and “I,” an ordinary person.

“I” is portrayed as being strongly self-assertive in the manner in which she is able to bitterly criticize the art of a social outcaste, by thrusting aside the work of the caries-stricken, genitalia-obsessed expressive subject with thoughts such as “its none of my business,” or “it makes me sad,” without even attempting to ascertain the nature of his dark place; at the same time, she is depicted as an anti-hero. She is, for instance, wonderfully described in the spirit of masochistic self-parody in an episode in which she runs into the bride’s antechamber still in her sweater, does her own makeup while being forced to eat sushi by her relatives who have come to Tokyo for the wedding reception, puts on a Western-style bridal veil, and prepares for a Christian wedding that has absolutely nothing to do with her own religion.

The morals of the commoner within the culture of old city merchants are replaced with the morals of the capitalist city-dwelling middle class, and because migrants always exist beyond the limits of a fixed culture, they can easily scale the echelons of culture to become avant-garde. Although she is aware of this fact, Nahoko anticlimactically proceeds to marry a new man amidst all this. At first glance, Nahoko seems to be written as an anti-hero; however, what kind of relationship with nature and history exists for her aside from writing? Perhaps Nahoko can be read as a hero after all.

It is precisely this mixture of self-assertion and self-dramatization that Tomioka deploys when dealing with “I,” especially “I” as an artist. Here, she exhibits an uncomfortable feeling of essential shame that relates to two facets of herself. On the one hand, this is “I,” the expressive subject who observes both her own ambiguous relationship with everyday life and those who stand out from general society. On the other hand, it is she as an artist, who, while fixated on her own dark places and embroiled in everyday life, is immersed in self-expression. Further, underpinning her work is the conviction that neither is life nor literary work, human life or product, fully the truth or a lie. The author is fully aware that Yokokawa is read by ordinary people as an “odd person” (*kijin*), just as she herself may be seen as a ridiculous and meaningless artist when viewed through the logic of everyday life. Yet, she is aware that ordinary people as well fixate on things and are also “odd people” (*kijin*) who deal with life while bearing disease within themselves.

While the desire to expose the self is evident throughout *A Family of Hades*, the reason “I” is always concealed is undoubtedly because the author’s ambition is to fix both “I” the artist and “I” living in reality at the same time. It is probably for this reason that the first-person narrator and the characters surrounding her always alternate between playing the protagonist and supporting roles, even though they are always narrated in terms of their relationship with the first-person narrator. Tomioka’s novels share a feature in common with the works of Henry Miller and more recently Erica Jong, in that the more the self is persistently exposed, the stronger is the feeling that something essential remains hidden. The more concretely Tomioka writes in her splendid conversational style, the more strongly her works gain in their symbolic value.

These works are autobiographical not because the author fixates on one particular period in her past, but because through describing the period, she creates an archetype of the self as an expressive subject. These works draw from the stream of artists’ novels that address the birth of the artist; but the newly-born artist does not insist on the ego of the modern artist who is convinced of the enormous individuality and the peculiarity of his or her self. The “I” as expressive subject does not even possess the luxury of displaying her suffering as someone estranged, let alone of taking on the burden of the suffering of the world by herself since she has to do things such as eat and get married. The point of view of the ordinary person, which is presented as a point of view that relativizes the artist’s ego, reduces the “narration of I” (*watashi katari*) to that of the “I” (*watashi*).

Modern women’s literature has begun to narrate in order to converge the traces of self-awareness that can only be seen through narration into an archetypal image of the self. This literature relativizes the absolutized expressive subject’s longing for the self and, by once more introducing a viewpoint that returned to the everyday life of people, puts an end to modern narrations of the self. In Tomioka’s novels, the reason that her “narrations of I” (*watashigatari*) are established by not narrating an “I” is not because the author conceals the ego in order to confess or looks at the ego of the modern artist who suffers in isolation from society. Rather, she thinks of these “narrations of the I” as something that can be found naturally within the human will to live.

As long as one continues to search for the confessing “modern ego” (*kindaiteki jiga*), the “I” in Tomioka Taeko’s novels will remain invisible.

Translator’s Notes

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their kind support in completing this translation.

1.

The Japanese original uses the terms *shakai* (society) and *seken* (community). While *shakai* has come to be used as the Japanese translation of the English term “society” and

describes the structural dimension of the social fabric, *seken* centers on the speaker and their social surroundings. While “society” can also serve as a translation for *seken*, in this case “community” expresses Mizuta’s opposition between *shakai* and *seken* more accurately.

2. Yoshimoto Takaaki (1924-2012) was a poet, literary critic, and philosopher.
 3. Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), and Tayama Katai (1872-1930) are among the most canonical Japanese writers of the modern period.
 4. Okamoto Kanoko (1889-1939) was the pen name of Ōnuki Kano, an author, poet and Buddhist scholar. Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a French-American diarist, essayist, novelist, and writer of short stories and erotica.
 5. Takahashi Takako (1932-2013) was an author and translator of French literature. Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) was one of the most canonical female Japanese writers of the twentieth century. Sylvia Plath (1932-63) was an American poet and author of novels and short stories.
 6. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a French author and philosopher. She is one of the main representatives of the philosophical tradition of existentialism.
 7. Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951) was a proletarian writer of novels, short stories, essays, and literary criticism.
 8. A concept deriving from existentialist philosophy, in particular from Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. It refers to non-conscious being.
 9. A concept that emerged in German idealism, it refers to things as they are, independent of the conditions of possible experience and outside the application of categories.
 10. The Japanese term used here, *tōki*, refers to the Heideggerian concept of *Entwurf*, translated into English as “projection.” It relates to Heidegger’s claim that human beings are arbitrarily thrown into the world. His “projection” refers to the ability of the self to project future possibilities and understand the world accordingly, a way out of the state of “thrown-ness”.
 11. Doris Lessing (1919-2013) was a British-Zimbabwean author and Nobel Prize laureate.
 12. “I-novel” (*shishōsetsu* or *watakushi shōsetsu*) is a native Japanese genre of confessional writing that emerged during the Meiji period (1868-1912).
 13. “Bildungsroman” is a term coined in seventeenth-century Germany and designates a literary genre that depicts the protagonist’s psychological and social transition from youth into adulthood.
 14. The conflict between moral obligations (*giri*) and human feelings (*ninjō*) is thought to have been an integral part of Japanese drama since classic times.
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