The Other Women's Lib

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“Woman-hating.” That title just leapt right off the page. I was more puzzled than offended because the essay in question was by a woman writer whose work I admired for her portrayal of bold, independent, and bravely eccentric female protagonists—women who challenged the status quo, bad girls, some so deliciously bad that you couldn’t wait to see what they would do next. Aha, I thought, she’s going to give those male chauvinists what for. But upon reading the essay, I encountered the following: “I myself have a strange fear of people with whom rational language doesn’t communicate. In spite of the fact that I’m a woman, I have a fear of women and children.” Women were described as infantile, superficial, materialistic, insipid, and generally inferior to men. And this from an author I had come to think of as “feminist.” What was going on here?

I reread the essay, sincerely wanting to understand why a woman might make such statements about other women. I tried to set aside my own assumptions about what “counted” as feminism and began to notice a degree of rhetorical complexity that had escaped my previous, less patient reading. What I found was a text that was profoundly conflicted, with respect to both the various meanings assigned to the term “woman” and the author’s position regarding those “feminine” qualities. For such an extraordinarily brief essay, the author oscillated with dizzying speed between identifying herself as a woman and critiquing “women” as if this category had nothing to do with her. The text seemed to recognize “woman” as a cultural construct even as it simultaneously appeared to present that term as an essential and fixed category. In short, I finished the essay with a strong sense that the author herself felt profoundly ambivalent about her own gender and at the very least did not want to be a “woman” if that meant conforming to conventionally “feminine” norms.
The author in question was Takahashi Takako, and the essay, “Onnagirai” (1974), sparked my desire to understand this thing called “femininity,” which could motivate such an angry diatribe against one’s own sex. As I read more by Takahashi and her contemporaries, I realized that many other women writers of her generation seemed to share a profound sense of unease regarding what it meant to be a woman in Japanese society. 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. These 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.

Born in the late 1920s to early 1930s and raised in a country mobilized for total war to contribute to the Japanese empire by becoming “good wives and wise mothers,” this generation of women faced a brave new world of opportunity after World War II, when sweeping Occupation-era reforms sought to legislate equality between the sexes. And yet prewar models of femininity persisted into the postwar era, as high economic growth from 1955 to 1973 was underwritten by a strictly gendered division of labor that required women to take full responsibility for the domestic sphere so that their husbands could devote themselves to rebuilding the nation’s economy through paid labor. In the 1960s, women were still discursively constructed as “good wives and wise mothers” even as more and more of them began also to work outside the home.²

The term “femininity,” as understood in Japan during the 1960s, thus primarily denoted qualities associated with women’s nurturing and supportive functions vis-à-vis men. It was also understood as the complement and logical opposite of “masculinity,” so that, for example, women were expected to respond to male activity and self-assertion with passive and self-effacing behavior. In attempting to rewrite femininity, these women writers therefore struggled against binary models of gender that assumed a direct correspondence between the terms “male/masculine” and “female/feminine,” such that bodies were expected to exhibit the gendered behaviors considered “natural” to them. Furthermore, because these terms were understood to be mutually exclusive and complementary, it was expected that there would be no overlap between the characteris-
tics that were considered “masculine” and those considered “feminine.” Embracing one side of the polarity thus meant denying the other.

In a context where those who inhabited female bodies were required to produce a corresponding range of behaviors coded as “feminine,” what possibilities existed to resist these norms? When gender is structured according to a set of binary oppositions that require the subject to choose one of two mutually exclusive positions, how can a woman avoid becoming entrapped in stereotypical notions of the “feminine” without presenting herself as “masculine”? When the terms “female” and “feminine” cannot be thought separately, how is it possible to critique feminine norms without also criticizing the category of “woman” itself, thus opening oneself up to charges of chauvinism or misogyny? And how can the term “woman” retain its structural integrity as an essentialist and totalizing category when, in spite of binary discourses of gender to the contrary, there appear to be as many differences among women as there are between women and men?

The authors whose works are analyzed in this study were keenly interested in these theoretical concerns at a time when raising such issues placed one firmly outside the boundaries of culturally ingrained “common sense.” In their fictional works, and often in nonfiction essays as well, they persistently grappled with the problem of feminine subjectivity against a discursive backdrop that rendered this “logically” impossible. In their willingness to radically challenge binary models of gender, they share much in common intellectually with the “women’s liberation” activists of the following decade, who argued in explicitly political terms what these writers had already envisioned in the realm of fiction. This volume represents the first systematic analysis of the narrative and representational patterns through which normative femininity was contested by women writers of this period, in advance of the flowering of “second-wave” feminism in Japan in the 1970s. In the sense that both fiction writers and activists sought to critique and subvert hegemonic discourses of femininity that confined women to the “traditional” roles of wife and mother toward a broader range of permissible expressions of feminine subjectivity, I argue that both groups should be understood as espousing a feminist position.

Histories of feminism in Japan tend to give prominence to the Seitō (Bluestocking) group of writers in the 1910s and then touch on the “housewife feminism” of the early postwar period before moving on to the more exuberant generation of women’s liberation activists in the 1970s. Vera Mackie’s landmark study, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, provides a considerably broader spectrum of feminist activity, as Mackie gives equal
attention to women’s organizations that aided the war effort during the 1930s and other lesser-known or more politically problematic activists like the women of the Red Army. However, much of the existing literature on Japanese feminism seems to concentrate primarily on women’s political activism as a crucial marker of their participation in projects to alter normative constructions of gender.

Thus discussions of radical feminism in the 1960s tend to focus primarily on student-movement activists who would go on to create the philosophical base of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s. From the massive anti–Security Treaty demonstrations that paralyzed the Japanese Diet in 1960 to the takeover and occupation of university campuses during the worldwide unrest of 1968–1969, young women organized and struggled alongside men during this turbulent decade, which included inter- and intrasectarian violence and pitched street battles with riot police. However, as in the United States and other countries that experienced such counterculture movements, many Japanese women became disillusioned with the New Left organizations that emerged during the 1960s because of the chauvinistic treatment they received from male comrades—ranging from their relegation to kitchen duty to sexual harassment and even rape. In the 1970s, such frustrations erupted around the world into a flurry of “women’s liberation” movements or woman-centered political organizations and theoretical attempts to redefine women’s roles in society. In Japan, this came to be known as ūman ribu (women’s lib).

While explicitly political expressions of radical feminism did not emerge in postwar Japan until the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, women writers of fiction began to challenge normative discourses of gender much earlier. In the 1960s, as some women participated in New Left student movements, others contributed to an extraordinary boom in literary publication by women, whose radical and shocking articulations of feminine subjectivity forced a new dialogue on sexuality and gender roles within the community of intellectuals known as the bundan, or Japanese literary world. To date their work has been largely neglected in histories of Japanese feminism, most likely because many of these writers eschewed explicit political activism in favor of an implicitly political rewriting of femininity through literature. However, I argue that their literature must be seen as part of a larger attempt to negotiate alternative discourses of gender during the 1960s. Like the “women’s lib” activists of the following decade, they identified everyday relationships between men and women as a primary source of gendered oppression and critiqued the way the power dynamics that structure such relationships suppress or manipulate
women’s sexuality in order to harness it toward the goals of a patriarchal order. Like the feminists of the 1970s, these writers challenged “commonsense” assumptions of motherhood as woman’s “natural” role and attacked binary models of gender that defined woman as man’s eternal complement. Like these explicitly political feminist activists, they identified women’s bodies as the site of gender oppression and thus attempted to trouble facile linkages between body and gender, biology and destiny.

The contributions of these writers of fiction to emerging feminist discourse helped to lay the theoretical groundwork for a more explicitly political “women’s lib” in the following decade. What they imagined first in the realm of literature—from insightful observations regarding how gender roles are constructed and enforced, to problematizing binary models of gender, to questioning the category of “woman” itself—reemerged in later decades as more explicitly political articulations of feminist theoretical discourse. By demonstrating the contributions of these women as theorists of gender, whose ideas were very much a part of larger debates on gender and sexuality taking place in Japanese society at this time, this study bridges scholarship on Japanese feminist history and modern Japanese literature to fill an important lacuna in our understanding of feminist theoretical development prior to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s.

This study centers around a sustained analysis of the works of three of the most famous women of this generation—Kōno Taeko (1926– ), Taka-hashi Takako (1932– ), and Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–2005). Kurahashi, the youngest of the group, was the first to capture the attention of the literary world, and her controversial ascent onto the literary stage in 1960, while still a university student, marked the beginning of that decade’s boom in women’s writing. Takahashi, a fellow student of French literature, has much in common intellectually with Kurahashi, in spite of being slightly older and married at the time of her debut. Kurahashi, a graduate of Meiji University, and Takahashi, a graduate of Kyoto University, were part of the first generation of young women to attain entrance to the prestigious male-dominated universities that had been closed to women during the prewar period. Being somewhat older, Kōno did not have that opportunity, but her passionate interest in English literature (which began during her student years at Osaka Women’s University), as well as her evident fascination for the bizarre and the grotesque, makes her a perfect complement to Kurahashi and Takahashi in terms of her willingness to challenge gender stereotypes from unconventional perspectives.

Another reason that these authors were chosen is that all three of them are readily available in English translation, for the benefit of readers
who cannot understand the original Japanese texts. Because I have selected
texts for analysis primarily on the basis of their employment of common
themes and tropes, not all texts analyzed in this manuscript are available
in English, but other texts that address similar themes are, and thus the
English-language reader can readily compare translated stories to the ones
I have included here.

One final criterion employed in the selection of texts for this project
was their year of publication. I have limited the scope of this study to
works published between 1960, when Kurahashi’s debut inaugurated the
boom in women’s writing of this decade, and 1973, the year that most
scholars cite as the end of the period of high economic growth. As noted
above, the discursive constructions of gender against which these women
writers struggled to define new models of femininity were intimately
interwoven with the ideological and structural fabric of Japanese society
in the age of high economic growth. They were difficult to resist precisely
because they seemed to “work,” in the sense that such binary models
of gender drove the engine of economic recovery forward. Challenging
these models of normative gender effectively meant challenging the very
basis of prosperity itself, something that violated contemporary common
sense and rendered the challenger a subversive threat to the integrity of
a newly stabilized Japanese society. Under the circumstances, then, it was
no wonder that in the 1960s such challenges took the form of avant-
garde literary feminism, which then morphed into more explicitly politi-
cal activism once the recession of the 1970s and resultant environmental
and social problems made it easier to question the fruits of economic
growth.

In order to understand the theoretical contributions of these women
to postwar Japanese feminist discourse, it is also necessary to understand
the ways that gendered discourses and behaviors were transmitted and
enforced through networks of power at all levels of society, from the most
official of government institutions to the most intimate personal relation-
ships. In this sense, Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopower” is useful in
helping to elucidate the way normative models of gender are produced and
deployed. In volume one of his History of Sexuality, Foucault traces the
process by which the social and sexual behavior of Western populations in
the modern era came to be shaped, not so much by repressive government
controls, but rather through regimes of “biopower,” which required the
consent and active participation of the individuals they targeted. Mod-
ern nation-states required disciplined and healthy populations capable of
contributing willingly and eagerly to national projects, whether those be
waging war on another country, combating the spread of famine and disease, or contributing labor toward the development of industrial capitalist economies. In addition to government legal and bureaucratic structures, Foucault cites the pivotal role played by schools, military organizations, and prisons, among various other institutions that served to produce the “docile bodies” necessary for such projects.8

As Sheldon Garon notes, although with respect to Western nations it is difficult to describe these disciplinary institutions as part of a deliberate and coordinated effort by governments to shape the development of their societies in a calculated fashion, in Japan this is precisely what happened. As Japan suddenly and abruptly opened up to the West at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912) out of a sense of urgency to beat the imperialist powers at their own game, reigning oligarchs explicitly and deliberately crafted administrative institutions and strategies to remake the Japanese people into a cohesive and nationalistic populace capable of contributing to the project of imperialism.

The [Japanese] imperial state did not rely on repression alone in its efforts to increase national power, promote economic development, and maintain social order. In more positive terms, the government energetically disseminated an “emperor-system ideology” to the public, inculcating patriotism, loyalty to the emperor, and the virtues of diligence and thrift. The state did so by utilizing a highly centralized set of institutions: the national school system, the military, a network of State Shinto shrines, and numerous hierarchically organized associations. If social control in the West implies society’s regulation of its members or one group’s domination over another within society, its Japanese analogue—the emperor system—refers to the unrelenting drive by a transcendent state to control society as a whole between 1868 and 1945.9

Garon further demonstrates, in his book Molding Japanese Minds, that the kind of “moral suasion” that the Japanese imperial government used to mobilize its subjects before the end of World War II continued, albeit in modified form, into the postwar period, as economic growth came to replace imperialist expansion as the new national project.

Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” harnessed toward the national project of postwar economic growth, is a useful rubric through which to understand the disciplinary process of engendering that contributed toward
the gendered division of labor that increasingly characterized Japanese society during the 1960s. Men and women were exhorted to take up the complementary roles of salarymen and housewives respectively, not simply through repressive governmental controls, but also through institutional and organizational structures that shaped their behavior in less explicit ways. These gender roles increasingly came to seem not only “natural” but also desirable to much of the mainstream of Japanese society, creating the illusion that individual behaviors were a matter of choice rather than the “administrative guidance” that nurtured not only economic growth during this era but also the human capital that made this project possible.

Under such circumstances, when disciplinary mechanisms of engendering are woven seamlessly into all aspects of social life, how is it possible for the individual subject to resist hegemonic discourses of gender? Judith Butler, in her landmark work of feminist scholarship, *Gender Trouble*, explores one way this is possible in her theory of the performativity of gender. By complying with gender norms yet performing them differently—for example, through excessive or parodic expression, as in drag performance—one may highlight the ways in which gender is a learned and socially constructed set of behaviors rather than a “natural” and individual expression of inherent qualities. For feminist critics, highlighting the artificiality of gender norms is a necessary first step toward changing them, and the authors whose works are explored in this book often follow precisely this strategy, using literature as a vehicle for the excessive or parodic performance of femininity in order to problematize such gender norms. Capitalizing on the rich potential of fictional worlds to highlight ironic disjunctions between feminine stereotypes and feminist realities, they actively participated in creating alternative discourses of femininity during the 1960s and early 1970s—even as this era of high economic growth seemed to render such gendered distinctions not only inevitable but also necessary to the cause of national and individual prosperity.

The primary objects of my analysis—novels and short stories written during the 1960s boom in publication by an elite cadre of women writers—represent the perspectives of a new female intelligentsia that came to question dominant constructions of femininity from within the bundan, the literary world that had previously been dominated by male graduates of prestigious Japanese universities. It was through literature that many female members of this emerging intellectual elite pushed for recognition of women as more than wives and mothers. Therefore, their fictional work serves as an important clue to the way discourses of gender were discursively negotiated at this moment in time—in advance of the more
explicitly political discourses of liberation forwarded by the “women’s lib” movement of the 1970s.

This is not to say that they were the first generation of women writers to question normative femininity or that they were in any way typical of their own generation in terms of their willingness to question reigning common sense. Generations of female political activists and literary figures, from the early Meiji-era Popular Rights Movement feminists in the 1870s to the members of the Seitō group in the 1910s, to prominent writers like Enchi Fumiko whose educational background earned the respect of male and female contemporaries alike, had each in her own way contributed to the negotiation of gendered discourses in previous eras of modern Japanese history. What made the 1960s boom in women’s writing so significant, though, was that for the first time many of these writers were able to speak from a position inside the academy—or at least fight for inclusion in that hallowed space from a position of strength. Post–World War II legal and cultural transformations in Japanese society, due to Occupation-era reforms that had given prominence to the elevation of women’s status, had guaranteed women the right to attend school alongside men through a system of coeducation that extended from primary school through university, and many of these women were the first to take advantage of this new system. Armed with new social and educational capital that had been denied to their forebears, they began to participate in the literary world in ways that rendered them not merely cloistered writers of fiction but also public intellectuals with serious academic pedigrees who actively participated in debates that included, but were not limited to, the role of women both in the bundan and in society more generally.

In focusing my analysis on works of fiction, I do not mean to imply that these literary creations should be understood as transparent representations of the reality of these women’s lives. Rather, I see these stories as imaginative recreations of a process of gender role negotiation that was playing out simultaneously in Japanese society at this time. Understanding these stories as discourse—or more specifically, as philosophies of gender in fictional form—allows us to read them against the nonfictional discourses of gender that were in circulation at this time, toward a better understanding of how women like these writers challenged the center of gendered representation from the margins. I am interested not only in what these stories say, but also in how they say it and in what ways this form of expression can be seen as itself produced through negotiation with discourses in circulation in the real world that always seems to hover on the margins of these texts. Real world and textual world are thus seen as separate but
mutually imbricated spaces that operate according to analogous rules and structures and shed light upon one another.

Therefore, this book is organized not according to discrete analyses of individual authors but according to the various tropes they employ to challenge, reformulate, and/or lament the constructions of femininity that structure the lives of their protagonists and, by extension, Japanese women like them who inhabit nontextual spaces. In each chapter I read several authors against one another, as well as against the historical backdrop that forms the context for their work, to understand the similarities and differences in expression of each trope or theme. While each chapter is devoted to a different trope, it is important to note that all of these narrative strategies highlight the female body as both the object and instrument of the process of engendering. Women are subjected to feminization in these texts precisely because they inhabit female bodies, and they live in a society that assumes a direct and logical connection between biology and identity or role type. Severing this discursive connection between bodily sex and gender is thus a primary objective of these narratives and a necessary first step toward envisioning a less restrictive model of subjectivity for women in modern Japan.

Chapter 1 is intended to contextualize the work of these authors against the historical backdrop that framed their literature, with particular attention to the production of hegemonic ideologies of gender and the ways in which these writers’ fictional narratives sought to resist such dominant paradigms. The next two chapters explore the way that subjects are engendered through both “hard” (formal or explicit) and “soft” (informal or implicit) disciplinary mechanisms. I begin in chapter 2 with a trope that seems crucial to the process of construction of femininity as these authors understand it: the “masculine” gaze—so gendered because society itself, or more properly the structures of authority that permeated Japanese society at this time, is understood to be masculine. Being fixed by the disciplinary gaze is depicted in these texts as a kind of scopic violation akin to rape, an experience that forces the subject to acknowledge herself as female and therefore to internalize appropriately feminine behaviors.

In addition to this oppressive and violent means of disciplining women as “feminine” subjects, these authors also highlight the function of “soft power” in enforcing feminine norms. Chapter 3 takes as its objects of analysis texts in which women are induced to comply with normative femininity through a self-imposed abjection of their own bodies. The protagonists of the narratives explored in this chapter learn to internalize the binary logic that aligns women with the inferior plane of the corporeal
in contrast to men, who are envisioned as spiritually and intellectually superior. This “logic” is mastered in the context of intimate relationships with male lovers or mentors, who reward complicity and punish resistance by withholding the affection or respect that is desired by the woman in question.

Once having exposed the artificiality of such gendered constructions, these authors are then eager to problematize the logic of strict binary distinctions between masculine and feminine subject positions, which serve to rationalize the enforcement of gender norms. Chapter 4 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. Curiously, many of these embodiments of alternative corporeality are male bodies that are queered in various ways—for example, they are frequently attributed with typically female bodily processes or feminine behaviors—in an apparent attempt to strike at the heart of the sex/gender system. If male subjectivity forms the ground upon which feminine difference is understood, then using male (rather than female) bodies to disrupt conventional linkages between sex and gender effects a more radical “troubling” of that difference.

Finally, the texts analyzed in chapter 5 all attempt to problematize the coherence of the category of “woman” itself by highlighting the differences among women, even as they acknowledge the potential for similarity or connection. The body of the Other Woman is variously figured in these texts as an object of desire, fear, and identification in ways that incorporate other women textually as privileged sites of self-knowledge. The doppelganger, or second-self, motif frequently appears in these texts as a means of depicting an Other that is simultaneously not other yet always somehow out of reach of the protagonist. While acknowledging a desire for relationships with other women, these texts are unanimous in highlighting the impossibility of true intimacy between women, as the protagonist’s desire for the Other Woman is continually frustrated and frequently ends in tragedy.

In the conclusion, I highlight specific points of connection between the literary feminist agenda of these three authors and the goals of the “women’s lib” movement of the following decade, with particular attention to the function of power, violence, and language in each type of feminist discourse. These three categories of analysis are significant because they represent problems that continually reassert themselves in all the texts analyzed in this study. Each in some way limits the way these authors are able to express, envision, and theorize new forms of feminine subjectivity,
even as it enables the production and expression of subjectivity on other fronts. In other words, feminine subjects in these texts are produced *within* networks of power that simultaneously constrain and form them *through* violence, which alternately shapes their possibilities for expression *in* language. Although this yields a form of feminist discourse that is profoundly conflicted in its articulation of “femininity,” this conflict is productive not only because it draws the reader’s attention to contradictions in hegemonic discourses of gender that oppress women, but also because it helps to define and clarify many of the theoretical problems that would occupy subsequent generations of feminist activists. The result is an alternate version of “women’s lib” that shares much with the explicitly political feminist speech of the following decade while differing from it in important ways.