

Contesting the nation through a genealogy of girl consciousness¹

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The purpose of this article is to provide a genealogy² of the subversive girl as she appears in the writing of young women in late Meiji (1868-1912) and early Taishō (1912-1926) Japan. In order to do this, I will discuss selected texts of narrative by two writers active at this time, Mizuno Senko (1888-1919) and Shiraki Shizu (1895-1918). I will argue that, in spite of the fact that both young women were writing a decade prior to the time generally considered to signal the emergence of the girl phenomena, the writing of each reveals an undercurrent of highly subversive girl consciousness. Thus, each can be regarded as a legitimate predecessor to the more overtly transgressive girl texts of the ensuing decades. I will further argue that the texts of Senko and Shizu³ can be legitimately read as an oblique challenge to the oppressive nationalist discourses of the time, particularly those which sought to define and restrict the role of women in society.

When seeking insights into the restricted role of women in early twentieth century Japan it is necessary to look no further than the notion of *ryōsaikenbo*, the good wife and wise mother, an ideal which began to develop in the early Meiji Period. Vera Mackie notes that the notion was first formally promulgated in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898,⁴ whereupon it was implemented with increasing vigilance by successive administrations. In a detailed discussion of the concept of *ryōsaikenbo* Koyama Shizuko notes that an essential element of this project was the creation of self-effacing women whose principal role was marriage and the production of sons to fuel

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² The expression genealogy is used here in the Foucauldian sense of displacing a notion of essential origin with the search for continuities of difference.

³ In the absence of convention with respect to identifying these relatively unknown young women, I will adopt the common practice of referring to each writer by her given name.

⁴ Mackie 1988, 29.

the growth of *fukokukyōhei*, the Japanese nation of wealth and military might.⁵ In other words, women were regarded as objects whose use value was defined in terms of the contribution they would make to the nation as dutiful wives and caring mothers. For younger women, a prescriptive education regime was established to ensure their compliance as obedient daughters in preparation for their *ryōsaikenbo* future roles. That some women vigorously resisted these restrictive roles, and the political acquiescence expected to accompany it, is evident from the case of Kanno Suga (1881-1911), the young woman executed with her socialist lover, Kōtoku Shūsui (1871-1911), following the High Treason Incident of 1910.⁶ In their textual endeavours neither Senko nor Shizu demonstrate anything like the indomitable public opposition to authority displayed by Suga. Nevertheless, in their own ways both strongly resisted the definition of ideal woman circulating at the time.

The notion of the girl is one that has had an increasing profile in the fields of both cultural and literary studies. However, the concept does not elicit consensus agreement among readers and there are several differing theories circulating regarding the girl and her significance. Some commentators regard her as a metonym for uncritical complicity with the status quo,⁷ given the fact that one strategy she deploys is withdrawal from and disinterest towards social engagement. Other critics, however, recognise the potential of this withdrawal to destabilise and interrogate existing power structures. Takahara Eiri, for example, advocates vigorously for the girl as an agent of subversion with the power to seriously disrupt gender and other normative discourses.⁸ This is not to say that Takahara is unaware of the tendency of some girl texts to operate in an uncritical or discursively neutral manner. Thus, he excludes Yoshiya Nobuko's (1896-1973) text, *Hana monogatari* (1916-24, Flower Tale), from his discussion of the development of girl consciousness, in spite of the fact that this text is popularly regarded as an influential narrative written in girl mode.

In this discussion my use of the terms 'girl' and 'girl consciousness' follows that of Takahara. Therefore, it will be useful at the outset to identify precisely those points

⁵ Koyama 1991, 37. For a detailed synopsis of the concept of *ryōsaikenbo*, see Koyama's opening chapter 1-63.

⁶ For an account of Kanno Suga and the High Treason Incident see Raddeker, 1997, especially 39-62.

⁷ For an account of the ambivalent attitude of commentators to, for example, girl literature diva, Yoshimoto Banana, see Sherif 1999, 278-283.

⁸ Takahara 1999.

valorised in his theory of the girl. The following excerpt from Takahara's 1999 discussion entitled *The Territory of the Girl* provides a succinct synopsis of the critic's position as follows:

Why advocate the thinking of girls and girl consciousness? I do so because the desire for freedom and arrogance, unique to modern times, is most effectively depicted in the person of the girl.

The word "freedom" here refers to all that can be imagined under that name. It is not concrete freedom, but freedom as it functions in the imagined text and is thus not concerned with the issue of whether or not any individual being can actually attain freedom. Arrogance, too, refers to a textual rather than a concrete notion, and might well be regarded as "pride" or "honour" by the person in the street. However, these latter are masculine, social notions without meaning in the consciousness of the girl, whose principle concern is her own ego. Thus, I use the word "arrogance" to clearly indicate the self-satisfaction associated with the heightened sense of self-love we might call narcissism.⁹

The girl, then, presents as a site of expression for freedom and arrogance, the distinguishing features of the modern subject. With regards to freedom, Takahara valorises textual freedom. In other words, his interest is in anything that can be *imagined* as freedom by the human subject, not actual political freedom or even the capacity to achieve this. Arrogance, too, is a textual arrogance and relates to the subject's capacity to centre her or himself in the imaginative process and to imagine that which can fulfil her or his every desire. As will become evident, in spite of their living relatively brief lives and commencing their writing activities at a time of draconian political suppression in Japan,¹⁰ both young woman had the capacity to valorise themselves as subjects and to create texts with the power to free themselves and their readers from the oppressive demands of the discourses of the emergent nation, Japan.

In his discussion of girl literature, Takahara argues that the notion of the girl does not fully emerge until the close of the Taishō Era. He cites *Kuchinashi* (1925, Gardenia),¹¹ by Nomizo Naoko (1897-1987), as the first work by a woman writer which demonstrates girl consciousness, that is, which interrogates the gendered assumptions operating to constrain the girl in the role of daughter or young woman

⁹ Takahara 1999, 20.

¹⁰ Following the previously mentioned High Treason Incident, the authorities executed or gave prolonged prison sentences to almost all members of the literary community who had demonstrated opposition to the policies of the time.

¹¹ Nomizo 2000.

subject to the dominance of the masculinist discourses of the nation. I certainly do not disagree with the importance of the contribution made by *Kuchinashi* to notions of the girl. The text, which opens with an account of the child protagonist, Ajiko, being brutally beaten and incarcerated by her militaristic father,¹² is a direct assault on the ascendancy of the discourse of nation and family as defined by the authorities in early twentieth century Japan. However, Takahara's position must prompt consideration of the possibility of some indication or suggestion of girl consciousness in the work of the generation of writers preceding Nozomi. Rebecca Copeland's questioning, for example, of the position that the brilliance of the early Taishō woman activists of *Seitō* appeared abruptly without any sort of textual or ideological antecedent led to her undertaking a study of the Meiji journal *Jogakku Zasshi*. In doing so she discovered a band of women writers whose work was equally as significant and transgressive as that of many *Seitō* contributors.¹³ Similarly, I was a little incredulous at the idea that there would be no indication of at least nascent girl consciousness in the writing of some women in the generation which came before Nozomi. Hence I selected two young women writers, Mizuno Senko and Shiraki Shizu, whose texts began to appear in the ten or fifteen years prior to the publication of *Kuchinashi*. I then sought to identify some evidence of incipient girl consciousness in the writing of these young women. I will preface analysis of their narratives with a brief outline of the lives of these little known writers, the texts of whom demonstrate the strong sense of subversion, resistance to discursive norms, and valorisation of freedom and arrogance which are the identifying characteristics of the writing of the girl.

Mizuno Senko¹⁴ was born in 1888 in Sukagawa Machi, Fukushima Prefecture. She began sending contributions to literary magazines while still in her teens, eventually coming to the notice of Tayama Katai (1871-1930), whose *Futon* (1907; *Quilt*, 1981) had earlier caused a literary furore. Throughout 1910, her growing stature as a writer saw her work published in journals of the calibre of *Chûō Kôron*. In 1911 Senko married writer Kawanami Michizô, an ailing journalist. A number of Meiji women,

¹² Nomizo 2000, 12-14.

¹³ For Copeland's account of her interest in *Jogaku Zasshi*, see Copeland 2000, xi-xii. It might be noted that in similar vein, Odagiri Hideo notes the tendency to overlook the manner in which the proletarian literature of late Taishō had its direct antecedents in the texts produced in conjunction with the citizen's freedom movements which emerged in the Meiji Period. See Odagiri 1955, 5.

¹⁴ Mizuno Senko is a pen name. The writer's family name was Hattori Tei, sometimes given as Teiko or Sadako.

including Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-1896) and Tazawa Inafune (1874-1896),¹⁵ literally wrote themselves into the grave. Senko, too, assumed huge responsibilities for supporting herself and her unwell husband through a combination of writing narrative and taking editorial and journalistic work. The pressure eventually overwhelmed her. In 1916 she was diagnosed with tubercular pleurisy and died in May 1919 at the age of 31.

Shiraki Shizu was born in Sapporo in 1885. The daughter of an early pioneer of elementary education in Hokkaido, she was diagnosed with a tubercular infection in her teens which led to her leg being amputated. A coincidental meeting saw her come to the notice of Morita Sōhei (1881-1949), a member of Natsume Sōseki's coterie of followers. Sōhei mentored her style and ensured publication opportunities for her work. In the few brief years prior to her death in 1918 she produced over twenty fictional works and more than forty essays. In the face of considerable opposition from her family, she married artist, Uenoyama Kiyotsugu, and gave birth to a daughter. Shizu herself was recognised as a minor artist and gave a joint exhibition of oil paintings with her husband. She was regarded as one of the leading emerging writers in the early Taishō Period.

In this discussion I will focus on two texts by each author. These are 'Shijūyonichi' (1910, 'For More Than Forty Days')¹⁶ and 'Kagurazaka no Han'eri' (1913, 'The Kimono Neckpiece from Kagurazaka')¹⁷ by Mizuno Senko, and 'Matsubazue o tsuku onna' (1913, 'A Woman on Crutches')¹⁸ and 'Sanjūsan no shi' (1914, 'Death at Thirty-Three')¹⁹ by Shiraki Shizu. I will argue that although these texts were published at least a decade before Nomizo's *Kuchinashi*, each has evidence of what might be called nascent girl consciousness. This is not to say that the stance taken by either Senko or Shizu is as overtly defiant of the father or the nation as that of the ill-fated Suga or even Nomizo. Nevertheless, each text resonates with a desire to express subjectivity, to undertake the pursuit of what might be termed legitimate self-indulgence, and to attain a modicum of both 'freedom' and 'arrogance.' Each of these

¹⁵ Ichiyō's early death from tuberculosis is quite well known. Inafune, following a failed relationship with Yamada Bimyō, returned to her parental home where, in spite of illness, she continued to write.

¹⁶ Mizuno, 1965 b.

¹⁷ Mizuno 1965a.

¹⁸ Shizu 2000a.

¹⁹ Shizu 2000b.

elements, while deviant in terms of accepted feminine ideals, is a strong example of the expression of girl consciousness.

‘Shijūyonichi’ (1910, ‘For More Than Forty Days’) is loosely based on the experiences of the writer’s own family. The narrative is an account of events in the Yamazaki household, a family of moderately successful merchants, following the agonising labour, and death at birth of her infant for the second time in a year, experienced by twenty-nine year old O-Katsu, the eldest of the family’s three daughters. In the absence of household help and with the mother fully occupied tending to the needs of her seriously ill daughter, responsibility for the day to day conduct of domestic matters is assumed by the youngest daughter, O-Yoshi. The narration is given from the perspective of O-Yoshi, twenty years old by *kazoedoshi*, the Japanese count of ages.²⁰ I have written elsewhere of the manner in which the text is a narrative account of both the inscription, literal and discursive, of women’s bodies and the aspiration of one young woman in provincial Japan to subvert the dominant social practices which exact this inscription.²¹ On this occasion I wish to shift the emphasis from the process of inscription and how this is represented in the text, to the strategies of resistance deployed by the girl protagonist, O-Yoshi, and, indeed, to the subversive current of girl consciousness which pervades much of the narrative.

It should be stressed that the textual process of subversion operating in ‘Forty Days’ is oblique rather than overt. There is little doubt, for instance, that O-Yoshi affiliates strongly with the women in her family, and with the family structure itself. She unhesitatingly, enthusiastically even, accepts the role of housekeeper while her mother devotes herself to the ailing eldest daughter. She is also the principal ally of her brother-in-law, Sōzaburō, when tension develops between the latter and his in-laws following the stress of O-Katsu’s prolonged illness. In other words there are signs of the girl protagonist’s willingness to embrace, at some level, *ryōsaikenbo* discourses. Nonetheless, the textual topography also features spaces in which O-Yoshi clearly and transgressively records her discontent with these discourses. As the

²⁰ Since this method calls for the individual to be designated as one year at the time of birth, and then one year older on successive New Year’s Days, the girl might, in fact, be even two years younger by Western reckoning.

²¹ Hartley and Aoyama forthcoming. The preceding paragraph and Senko’s biographical details have been adapted from this discussion.

narrative progresses it becomes apparent that she has a strong desire to avoid the “whirlpool of marriage,” including the ordeal of childbirth and domestic responsibility, to which both her mother and her sister have been subject and from which the only escape would appear to be death.

It is clear from the text that until the time of her sister’s crisis following the death of the newly born child O-Yoshi has had little domestic responsibility. After the completion of a couple of perfunctory chores to assist the other women in the house, she has, in the past, been free to depart the house each morning for sewing-school. Sewing-school classes have had the appearance of light-hearted social gatherings. The girls sit in a circle. Certainly they are required to sew. However, there is also ample time to ‘stretch, exchang[e] glances every so often and [laugh] noisily.’²² Following the class, O-Yoshi apparently socialises further with friends, for she often does not return home until after dark. Life thus presents few difficulties. In fact, the reader is told, O-Yoshi previously ‘managed to enjoy herself from day to day without too many worries at all.’²³ In addition, she would seem to have been successfully resistant to an education system designed to turn women into good wives and wise mothers, leaving, for example, the care and mending of her clothes to her own mother. Such is her reluctance to bother with domestic matters that she prefers the discomfort of bare-feet and chilblains in winter when no clean or darned socks are at hand, rather than attending to the washing or mending of these items.²⁴ Similarly, she has been strongly reluctant to acquire the linguistic protocols of adulthood. In spite of the fact that she is at least eighteen years of age, her manners during social exchanges are markedly impolite. When scolded by the mother and urged to be more forthcoming on such occasions, the narrator defiantly declares that ‘O-Yoshi was proud to be told she was childish.’²⁵ In other words, like the archetypal girl, she is innately suspicious of the adult word and the demands this world places on her.

The issue of New Year Card games is also an important element in defining O-Yoshi’s strong sense of girl consciousness. Following her assumption of household responsibilities, she is rather chagrined to discover that she cannot, therefore,

²² Mizuno 1965a, 359.

²³ *Ibid.*, 356.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 357.

participate in the card games that are being held at the houses of other friends and to which she has received many invitations. While she is not so overtly rebellious as to refuse to undertake the household tasks allocated to her, she does long to participate in the festivities. On one occasion when she is shopping she cannot resist the temptation to stop by at the house of a friend where a card game is taking place. Here she longingly eyes the special festive garments worn by her friends, which she bleakly compares with her own domestic smock.²⁶

However, one passage which provides particular insight into O-Yoshi's girlish desires, that is, her yearning for freedom and arrogance, gives an account of her musing on the consequences of the possible death of her ailing sister. O-Yoshi's self interested perceptions of O-Katsu's crisis and its implications for own subjectivity are evident in her narcissistic reflections en route to the Inari Shrine in order to make an offering on her sister's behalf. As the passage proceeds, the reader is rather taken aback to find that the narrator's concerns about the possible death of the older girl relate less to any sense of loss, than her fear that she might be forced by the family to marry her sister's husband, Sozaburo, who is also the family's adopted son. O-Yoshi muses as follows:

“Will O-Katsu die? Please don't let her die!”

She thought of the effect her sister's death might have on the family. The very idea was unbearable.

“Sôzaburô is the family's adopted son,” she reasoned. “But if O-Katsu dies, then his bond with the family will be broken and a rift might appear between my parents and he. What if he brought in a bride from outside? The rift would grow even wider. But sometimes when an older girl dies, the younger sister has to marry the adopted son. Oh no! What if they tried to make *me* marry Sôzaburô?? I would hate it. I would hate it. The very thought terrifies me. If it happened to me I would die. But dying is not for me. Perhaps it would be my chance to leave for Tokyo at last”²⁷

Rather than altruism, O-Yoshi's call to the heavens to save her sister is motivated by her overwhelming desire for personal freedom. On arrival at the Shrine, O-Yoshi is ‘too distracted to join her hands dutifully and deliver her mother's prayer.’ Again it is likely that this ‘distracted’ state is the result of the girl's desperation to remove herself to the putative world of freedom invoked by thoughts of Tokyo rather than any sorrow for her sibling.

²⁶ Ibid., 360-361.

²⁷ Ibid., 358.

The thought of flight to Tokyo is O-Yoshi's most transgressive desire. She has sent contributions to a number of magazines and these have been commended by critics. In addition, 'unseen friends' urge her to leave the provinces for the capital. At the objective level she realises that her assistance is needed at home. Furthermore, cognisant of the discursive demands placed on women, she in fact voices the view that there is little hope of her becoming a writer, for 'a woman could never do what she liked.'²⁸ Nevertheless, she constantly fantasises about this possibility and the potential for freedom it promises. And while she does not actually summon the courage to sever her family ties and leave for the capital, throughout the course of the text this option is constantly on the mind of the girl protagonist in a manner that is highly subversive of the ideal of the obedient daughter preparing to be a good wife and wise mother.

'Kagurazaka no Han'eri' (1913, 'The Kimono Neckpiece from Kagurazaka'), written after Senko's marriage, is a brief interiorised account of a young wife's deep disappointment at her husband's inability to understand and satisfy her 'arrogant' desires. The pair live in intense poverty accentuated by the man's ill health. Upon receiving a small emolument they go shopping, whereupon the wife sees the eponymous kimono half-collar in a shop window. Longing for the collar, but reluctant to buy it herself, the woman conveys her desire to her husband in the hope that he will purchase the accessory for her. At one point in the text, the husband asks the woman to wait in a particular store while he leaves to shop alone. The woman is overjoyed, convinced that he has gone to buy the collar she longs for. However, her joy is short-lived. When the husband returns he has merely been looking for a special bottle of ink unavailable at the shops they had been to. The story is brief. However, it clearly counters any notion of the dutiful wife who would suppress her own indulgent desires and accede to the needs of her husband. Neither the good wife policies nor those of the wise mother, so diligently enforced by authorities, offered any option for self-indulgence on the part of women. In fact, the wife who overtly desired adornment was seen as socially deviant and thus without value. However, unnecessary in the practical sense though the collar may be, this wife instinctively knows that without these small

²⁸ Ibid., 358.

episodes of narcissism her life is without meaning. Having a partner who lacks the ability to understand this is a source of deep dissatisfaction.

Shiraki Shizu's 'Matsubazue o tsuku onna' (1913, 'A Woman on Crutches') is an account of a young woman in her teens who has undergone the amputation of her leg. The narrative focus is the period following her release from hospital during which time she and her family are coming to terms with the loss of the limb. The protagonist, Mizue, was expected to die during the operation, as articulated in her mother's words 'shujutsu no toki [...] shinde kuretara.'²⁹ The 'kureru' verb ending in Japanese has the implication of someone doing a favour for or assisting another. Thus, an English translation might be, 'if only you had died for us in the operation.' However, Mizue confounds all expectations by not only surviving, but by dogmatically declaring her 'freedom and arrogance' in the face of her family's demands for her to conform to the stereotype of asexual, retiring, invalid. Her girl consciousness is evident from the opening pages of the text, during which an account is given of her desire to remain in the hospital which has come to represent something of a fantasy space for the girl.

The hospital is 'a paradise,' 'a hot-house'³⁰ in which for three months the protagonist has luxuriated in the on-going attention of the nursing staff. Within the hospital perimeter the weather conditions defy the patterns of mid December. Outside a fierce gale whips through the streets and thoroughfares, billowing dust and chill discomfort. The hospital garden, however, with its brilliant sunlight and sasanqua camellias, is reminiscent of early autumn.³¹ Unlike her own home with its ugly dark rooms and recesses, the white walls and naturally illuminated tops of the hospital building initially imbue the site with a strong sensuality. This sensuality has engendered a relationship between the convalescing Mizue and Suzuki-san, a young woman who works in the dispensary. The hospital environment erases quotidian considerations and the pair is jointly complicit in a full and frank expression of the ego unhampered by the discursive restraints of the outside world. In fact, the relationship between the two young women has overtones of the intimacy enjoyed by the protagonists of Yoshiya Nobuko's widely read text of physically intimate girls published seven years

²⁹ Shiraki 2000a, 401.

³⁰ Ibid., 389.

³¹ Ibid., 388-389.

later, *Yaneura no Nishojo*, (1920, Two Virgins in the Attic).³² In a farewell scene charged with a virginal eroticism, the two sing a song about Mt Fuji. As their voices fade away the narrator observes that:

The two young women looked with satisfaction at each other. The white curtain fluttered gently in the breeze as the pale dawn of the morning which came in through the fretwork of the glass in the door shone quietly across the linoleum floor, illuminating the profile of the young women, who looked like nuns.³³

Later in the narrative, during one of the occasions when Mizue returns to the hospital to have her amputation wound dressed, she accompanies Suzuki to the specimen room where she encounters foetuses in jars of formaldehyde. In something of an epiphany she realises that the hospital environment is a place of death, and thus her attachment to the site wanes. Initially, she affiliates strongly with the hospital as a fantasy space which permits the realisation of her egotistic desire to be an *object* of attention and privilege. However, she gradually understands that if her *subjectivity* is to be realised, she will need to expose herself to the wider society.

In the opening hospital setting the narrator deploys two images which are repeated on a number of occasions throughout the text and which might be read as metonyms for the protagonist's girl consciousness. These images are the flower and the hair ribbon. While it is somewhat glib to claim that these correspond respectively to freedom and arrogance, the presence of flowers most definitely evokes a sense of life-force and vitality and the intense pleasure that surely eludes the subject without these. It should be noted that affiliation with the flower is not a valorisation of good health. Vitality is a quality that even the seriously ill might possess. The protagonist 'patient' in this text identifies with a range of flowers, including sasanqua camellias, freesias and dahlias. The ribbon, on the other hand, and Mizue's desire to decorate herself with such, might be read as an assertion of her right to narcissistic self love. This is particularly the case when those around her suggest that she would be better not to adorn herself, in her condition, with the fripperies judged as appropriate only for those healthy young women who qualify as objects of male desire.

³² Nobuya 2003.

³³ Shiraki 2000a, 388.

Shizu's protagonist's contestation of discursive norms assumes a slightly different pattern to that of Senko's O-Yoshi. In the case of the former, the right to a sexual identity is denied her as a result of her losing a limb, which loss is in turn an affliction arising from her tubercular condition. It is useful to note the significance of contracting tuberculosis for a young woman in the early Taishō Era. In a detailed discussion of the history of tuberculosis in Japan, William Johnson cites Susan Sontag's appropriation of disease as a metaphor for 'subjects of the deepest dread' in society.³⁴ He further notes the specific manner in which this phenomena was manifested in pre-war Japan, with particular relevance to mental illness, leprosy, and tuberculosis, as follows:

Before the Second World War, any disease that was permanently disfiguring or considered incurable (*fuchi no yamai*) relegated its sufferer to a marginal social existence. Because it was incurable, it fell beyond both the healing powers of physicians and the purifying powers of priests and shamans. Society placed the persons who contracted one of these diseases on the threshold between life and death, no more of this world, not yet of the next.³⁵

Mizue's tubercular marginality is, of course, exacerbated by the loss of a limb. Her greatest subversion is to resist the definition of liminality which is unhesitatingly visited upon her by those around her, including her mother. For in spite of being confronted with repeated obstacles Mizue is determined to exercise her right to full social status. For Senko's O-Yoshi, this meant resisting the discourses of wife and mother which had so restricted the other women in her family. However, for Shizu's protagonist, full social status meant the right to be regarded as eligible for marriage and motherhood, in spite of the afflictions which, by discursive standards, rendered her unfit for these roles.

Mizue's illness and amputation results in her being damned by her family as asexual. Her mother, after chastising her for being a burden on her brother, suggests that she become a nun. In the following exchange between herself and her brother, the brother tries to convince Mizue that ribbons, a symbol of feminine adornment, have no place in her hair. The passage clearly demonstrates the attitude of family and the expectations of unassuming reclusiveness they impose on the girl in the absence of her leg. The exchange between the two occurs following Mizue's request that her

³⁴ Johnson 1995, 116.

³⁵ Ibid, 116.

brother buy her a ribbon on a shopping expedition to Asakusa. When doing her hair the following morning she is puzzled that the ribbon she requested is not to be found. She inquires of her brother as follows:

“Did you get the ribbon?”

“Ribbon? You don’t need one.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Where do you think you’d wear it?”

“But,” Mizue knew what her brother meant to say. “I just wanted something plain and not too fancy. Why didn’t you get it?”

“Not too fancy, you say,” said her brother. “It’d look stupid. You don’t need to decorate yourself with anything. You don’t understand but there’s no ribbon that would suit you.”

[....]

“I only want to wear it around the house.”

Mizue said no more. She felt sad for herself having not even a single ribbon.

Decorating themselves was what women’s lives were all about. And not to please their lovers. It was for themselves.³⁶

It is interesting to note here that although Mizue wishes to make herself desirable, she does not envisage herself as a passive object. On the contrary, she demands to be desired as an active, narcissistic subject. Eventually Mizue’s family come to terms with the fact that she will assert her freedom and arrogance, through the wearing of ribbons and having the passionate persona of a dahlia, the flower she suggests best represents her own aspirations. It is a flower the sturdy image of which is diametrically opposed to that of *yamato nadeshiko*,³⁷ the discursive floral emblem of Japanese womanhood. The dahlia therefore offers a fitting symbol for the power of the girl to disrupt and interrogate.

‘Sanjūsan no shi’ (1914, ‘Death at Thirty-Three’) is a text which takes its name from the fact that Morita Sōhei, Shizu’s mentor, was thirty-three when the pair met. Shizu, cognisant that her life would be brief, determined to live until this age in order to achieve the objectives she had set herself. This narrative is a further account of a young amputee woman and her struggle to have her subjectivity recognised. Part of this struggle is her own attempt to come to terms with the ‘incomplete’ state of her body. The protagonist of this work experiences a distinct self-loathing of her ‘disfigured’ body, so different, with its single leg, from the bodies of the young women she observes around her. However, as the passage below demonstrates, the

³⁶ Shiraki 2000a, 406.

³⁷ A small, fringed, fragile looking pale pink flower of the dianthus family.

text also provides evidence of her being in the thrall of a narcissistic self-love quite at odds with the discursive compliance and modesty required of an obedient daughter. In fact the extract presents an interesting melange of the contradictory subjectivities which beset the young woman, as follows

As far as she possibly could, she avoided looking at her own body. However, at night, in the dim light of the bathroom, when she was undressed, she was aware of the pitiful pulsating of her rounded breasts. As she sat in the still warmth of the bath, it was as if she was immersed in dream-like thoughts of death. Finally, her eyes wide open as if waking from sleep, she would find herself sitting on the edge of the bath. For the first time she would look at her own flesh. Sometimes, when she did so, her pulse would race so violently that she would be about to call her mother for help. However, her towel at her breast, she would sit for a while pressing her face into her hands, calming herself with thoughts of the joy of death. [...] Then lifting her face with a feeling of peace in her heart, she would watch the moonlight flow over her body, pure and beautiful as that of a goddess.³⁸

Here, in an apogee of narcissism, and in a passage surely nuanced with autoeroticism, the young woman compares her own body to that of a goddess. And this is no rosy-cheeked, earth mother goddess. Rather, it is a goddess with the heaving bosom and deathly moonlit skin of the *kekaku bijin*, the tubercular beauty, whose erotic appeal immediately confirms the sufferer's marginal status, even as she contests this status. It is also a statement of the protagonist's sexual desire and availability. Social expectation might be that she becomes a nun, or even dies, to free her family from the responsibility of caring for her in her liminal state, a state which has no defined use value in the ideology of the nation and the family. The protagonist herself, however, determinedly resists this expectation, creating herself as a subject of erotic desire, a desire that is confirmed by the hypnotic gaze she directs towards her own flesh.

The preceding glimpse of the texts of Mizuno Senko and Shiraki Shizu demonstrate the manner in which an incipient girl consciousness is evident in the work of both young women. Both writers positioned themselves obliquely but quite definitely against the discursive demands placed on women by the authorities of the day, demands which recognised and legitimated only those activities on the part of women, such as good wife and wise mother, that would contribute to the growth of the nation. For Senko, subversion of these discourses was related to fantasies of the company of friends, the conviviality of festive card gatherings, the desire for impractical but highly decorative accessories, and flight to the metropolis. For Shizu, whose health

³⁸ Shiraki 2000b, 281.

was significantly compromised even prior to the commencement of her text production, subversion was the insistence on her right to an existence in the centre rather than on the margins of society. Both women wrote as girls, not merely in the chronological sense, but also in their strong expression of their desire for freedom, arrogance, and the right to an active subjectivity, unrestricted by the discursive demands of the era.

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