

“mafias.” They are in everything. Privileged ones who have a “free pass” to Culture. They are represented in anthologies, in publications, in jobs created to help artists. They reproduce and cling like ivy. Today they are contest judges and they acquire friends; tomorrow they will be the contestants and their friends the jury and, thus, an eternal cycle forever and ever.

Finally, ourselves. Half “errant Jews.” Searching here and there. An enormous silent multitude. In a country of 23,000,000 poets.

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ATSUMI IKUKO / JAPAN

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## Modern Japanese Women Poets: After the Meiji Restoration

There is no doubt about the prominence of women poets in contemporary Japanese literature. This, however, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there were two periods in the long history of Japanese literature in which women poets really bloomed: one was in the *Manyō-shū* period (A Collected Million Leaves) in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the other was in the Heian court period from the ninth to the twelfth century.

In *Manyō-shū*, the first national anthology including the works of emperors and beggars alike, Princess Nukada freely recited her longing for the Emperor Omi:

While with longing  
I waited for you  
Swaying the bamboo blinds of my house  
The autumn wind blew.

And Lady Kasa wrote on a majestic scale:

I love and fear him  
Steadily as the surf  
Roars on the coast at Ise.<sup>1</sup>

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Author's note: All unnoted translations are mine. All the names in this article are written with the family name first according to the Oriental custom.

<sup>1</sup> These *waka* were taken from Kenneth Rexroth's *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*, New Directions, New York, 1964.

In the Heian period, Lady Murasaki, known world-wide as the author of *Genji-monogatari* (Tales of the Shining Prince) wrote:

Someone passes,  
And while I wonder  
If it is he,  
The midnight moon  
Is covered with clouds.<sup>1</sup>

A passionate Izumi Shikibu, the author of a diary on her love affairs:

Will I cease to be,  
Or will I remember  
Beyond the world,  
Our last meeting together?<sup>1</sup>

A legendary beauty Ono No Komachi:

As certain as color  
Passes from the petal,  
Irrevocable as flesh,  
The gazing eye falls through the world.<sup>1</sup>

They were mainly love poems or the accounts of occasional emotions and the form called *waka* (5,7,5,7,7 syllables) remained dominant until the end of the Meiji era, although the name was changed to *tanka* in the modern age.

In the Edo period, when Bashō established the shorter form *haiku* (5,7,5 syllables), some women poets like Chiyojo appeared, but they were not very important. During seven hundred years of wartime and feudalism, women were oppressed under the Confucian virtue of smothering their egos.

In 1867, the Restoration of Meiji imperial rule took place and Japan opened itself up to the rest of the world. It was a *tanka* poet, Yosano Akiko (1878-1928), who first burst out, expressing strong female consciousness fearlessly in her *Midaregami* (*Tangled Hair*) in 1901, 35 years after the Restoration.

Chibusa osae Shinpi no tobari Soto kerinu Kokonaru hanano Kurenai-zo  
koki

Holding my breasts  
I softly kicked the mysterious door open;  
The crimson flower here is deep.

Yawahada no Atsuki chishio ni Furemomide Sabishi-karazu-ya Michi  
wo toku kimi

Without touching the hot blood of my soft skin  
Are you not lonely,  
My priest?

Hitonoko-ni Kaseshi wa tsumi ka Wagakaina Shiroki wa kami ni Nado  
yuzurubeki

Is it sin  
That I used my arms  
To embrace man?  
The whiteness of my arms  
Is not inferior to that of God.

Yosano Akiko was born to the owner of a cake shop in Kansai, in the west of Japan, and was absorbed in reading *Genji-monogatari* in her teens. In those days, the 1890's, poets of *Shintaishi* (New Poetry) were forming the pre-romanticist movement centering around Bungakkai, the Circle of Literature. They were attracted by Tu Fu, Bashō and Byron, and their poems, in a style imitating western verse, had a meditative sweet sorrow. Akiko made her start as a *tanka* poet under the influence of Heian court literature and this New Poetry of pre-romanticism. She was a prolific woman. She wrote more than 17,000 *tanka* and nearly 500 *shintaishi*, published 75 books including translations of classical literature, and had eleven children. When she met Yosano Tekkan, her future husband, he had advanced the reformed-*tanka* movement in his masculine "tiger-and-sword" style to inspire the youth in the days of the Sino-Japanese War, and founded the Shinshi-sha (New Poetry Brotherhood) to publish the magazine *Myōjō* (*Evening Star*). It was, however, Akiko and the eros in her poetry that actually reformed old-fashioned *tanka* and made the *Myōjō* the top literary circle of Japanese romanticism. Two more *tanka* poets, Yamakawa Tomiko (1879-1909) and Chino Masako (1890-1946), were also *Myōjō* members. Their works, neat, clean and reserved, are quite in contrast to Akiko's.

I shall hide myself  
Within the moon of the spring night.  
After I dare reveal  
My love to you. (Chino Masako)

The three of them together published a collection of *tanka* called *Love Garment*.

When we compare Baba Akiko's *tanka* to that of Kujō Takeko, we understand how modern *tanka* has evolved in several decades.

I do not consider myself  
Worth counting;  
But sometimes, even for me,  
This Heaven and Earth seem too small. (Kujō Takeko)

God punished the moment of love  
When I looked back;  
The Milky Way  
Brims over with His jealousy. (Baba Akiko)

Kujō Takeko (1887-1928), the daughter of the abbot of Honganji Temple in Kyoto, was a poet of spiritual endurance who wrote staring at her inner self during the ten-year absence of her husband, who had been sent to Europe. All the rest of the *tanka* poets as well wrote by the traditional method of reflecting themselves in their description of nature. But having been through modernism, especially surrealism, which was introduced to Japan in the early thirties and came to fruition in the late fifties and sixties in the field of modern poetry, *tanka* has overcome the realistic method. The works of Baba Akiko clearly illustrate this progress. This Akiko, a poet of brilliant talent like the other Akiko, is active also in the field of criticism.

In autumn, words sound  
Like an echoing stone ax;  
Even some demon in me  
Would rise and walk away. (Baba Akiko)

Among the *haiku* poets in the modern age, Sugita Hisajo (1890-1946) was by nature an erotic type. But since *haiku* is so short a form, her eros, her passionate romantic taste with a sensibility similar to *Manyō-shū* poetry, couldn't find its full expression. She became insane and died, having been expelled from the dominant school of *haiku*, *Hototogisu*. Both Nakamura Teijo (1900- ) and Hoshino Tatsuko (1903- ) also belonged to the *Hototogisu* school, whose characteristic was a world of lightness and domestic happiness. They often expressed their daily emotions—such as mother's love for children—which were good, but their works often became one-dimensional *haiku*.

O flower garment!  
When I take it off  
Various strings coil round me. (Sugita Hisajo)

The season of changing clothes  
For summer! I see a bridge  
Not so far away. (Nakamura Teijo)

O brightness  
Of peony's buds  
Softly splitting open! (Hoshino Tatsuko)

In contrast to them, Yagi Mikajo (1924- ) is a writer of typical modern *haiku* which has undergone the influence of surrealism.

A marathon runner's legs  
Fan in and out.  
Are they the disciples of a waterfall? (Yagi Mikajo)

Of the six *haiku* poets, Mitsuhashi Takajo (1899-1972) is the best. She looked up to Yosano Akiko as her model in her young girlhood and started as an orthodox *haiku* poet. But through an impulsive pursuit of her inner self, so hard as to have led her to self-cruelty, she walked into the world of illusion and developed a splendid spiritual world, which has been called "solitude-hell." In her late years she intended to attain a completely unrestrained sensibility in her old age.

O bird's singing!  
The dead walk  
On the plain of the sea. (Mitsuhashi Takajo)

After the Second World War, some critics presented a strong denial of short-form literature like *tanka* and *haiku* from the viewpoint of reexamining the traditional culture. They insisted that we had to expel the spirit of *tanka* and *haiku* to establish the true modern spirit. *Tanka* and *haiku* received a serious wound. The works of Baba Akiko, Mitsuhashi Takajo and so on are, however, more than enough to repel such a denial.

When we take a look at Japanese women poets, we realize that really good poets are divided into two types: an erotic type who bursts into flame, emphasizes love and lets eros overflow the whole universe, and a mental type who hides passion in the enduring spirit, observes the inner self and treats objects in an intellectual way. It is a little dangerous to divide in such a way and there are of course some excellent poets who belong to neither of them or rather, to both, but we can easily trace the line of erotic type from Princess Nukada in the *Manyō-shū* period, Izumi Shikibu and Ono No Komachi in the Heian period to Yosano Akiko, and

the line of the mental or intellectual type from Sakano-e-no Iratsume, Lady Murasaki and Princess Shikishi to Yamakawa Tomiko or Chino Masako. The contrast of the two in each period tells us the feature of the period. And interestingly enough, it is poets of the erotic type who played a greater role in liberating female consciousness in Japan. Their poems survived all the more admirably for having been severely attacked by contemporary moralists.

Yosano Akiko's *Tangled Hair* was extremely controversial. Some critics said she was a prostitute. As Akiko later wrote in her essay, "my singing is rooted in unending love"; she kept on loving Tekkan and writing *tanka*. If we read hundreds of her early *tanka*, changing the order in her book, we find a world of tales emerging like a picture scroll, tales in which Akiko is a heroine. Her *tanka* was from the beginning rooted in the soil of Heian literature, united with the *Shintaishi* (New Poetry), as I mentioned before. The difference between *tanka* and New Poetry was for her only a difference of length. That was the reason why she wrote the well-known long poem "You Must Not Die" as so natural a cry out of her heart when the Russo-Japanese War broke out and her younger brother was surrounded by the Russian army. Since this poem had lines criticizing the Emperor, she was again attacked by the whole society.

In Japan naturalism occurred after romanticism in the early 1910's. As romanticism declined, Akiko became more concerned with national affairs. After travelling to Europe following her husband in 1912, she began writing critical essays and poems on or reflecting social problems and actively participated in the movement for women's rights. Her poem "The Day When Mountains Move" was a declaration of awakening for Japanese women. She published it in 1914 in the magazine *Seitō* (*Blue Stockings*), the magazine of the first earnest women's liberation movement started by Hiratsuka Raichō in 1911. An anthology of modern American women poets which was published in New York recently has the title *Mountain Moving Day* after this poem of hers.

In the beginning of the twenties, a destructive linguistic revolution took place to overthrow the decadent Taishō democracy and the traditional rhythm in poetry by introducing European avant-garde movements (futurism, cubism, dadaism, expressionism) all at once. This revolution became the starting point of contemporary Japanese free verse *Gendai-shi* after the fruits of *Kindai-shi* in the Taishō era on the line of *Shintaishi*. If we translate the words *Kindai* and *Gendai* into English, both will be "modern." But in Japan we distinguish poetry in the Shōwa era from that in the Taishō era because they are different in quality.

As to flowering women writers in contemporary free verse, I would like to focus on four poets: Ishigaki Rin, a representative of the social school, Tomioka Taeko, a syntax reformer, Yoshihara Sachiko, an intellectual type, and Shiraishi Kazuko, an erotic type. In the case of Ishigaki Rin (1920- ), we feel that the life of post-war Japan bears down heavily on her shoulders. An unmarried poor woman who has to work to support her father and mother-in-law, both sick in bed in a small Japanese-style house—this is the actual situation of her poetry. She cannot escape from this situation. All that she can do is to stare at it with the eyes of a merciless realist, to stare at the cursed family system, the naked fact of living that the living kill the living to eat, the being of a Japanese woman who has repeated dreadfully monotonous labor for a long time to sustain the foundation of existence. No progress, but there is love for others. Her poems seem to be anti-women's liberation, but in fact they take root in Japanese womanhood with simple and firm language. Her poetry has serious humor.

### Nursery Rhyme<sup>2</sup>

Daddy is dead  
Put a white napkin on his head

Just as you cover  
The food

Everyone cries  
It's his unbearable taste perhaps

When mummy dies  
I'll put a white napkin on her head  
It's like the proverbial  
Three meals

And when I die  
I'll die like an expert

Like good food  
Under a white napkin

Fish, chicken and cows  
They die so well, so deliciously (Ishigaki Rin)

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<sup>2</sup> These poems, translated by Kijima, were taken from Kijima Hajime's *The Poetry of Postwar Japan*, University of Iowa Press, 1975.

Among those who have strong social consciousness, Ibaragi Noriko (1926- ) has more human life-force than Ishigaki. Born in Osaka, in western Japan, she is strongly rooted in life and takes up political or social themes in the bright and lively tone of a typical Japanese housewife in the west of Japan.

Takada Toshiko (1916- ) succeeded in popularizing modern poetry among housewives by taking charge of a column every week in the largest Japanese newspaper. We can put Nagase Kiyoko (1906- ) in this group too. Her poems come from her deeply human sense of unity. Takiguchi Masako (1919- ) has a more artistic sense than most of the social group. Since she lost everything, visible and invisible, during the war in Korea, where she had lived for twenty years, her poems are full of bitter pain. "Blue Horse," her representative poem, forms a prototype of her thought in her solitary time to dream of the cold flames.

### Blue Horse<sup>2</sup>

Sunken murmurs come from the bottom of the sea.  
A horse, blind in both eyes, can be seen  
through a crease of water.  
The blue horse plods along the sea bottom;  
the memory of a man on its back almost entirely gone.  
How long has this horse lived in the sea?  
Is the blood splashed on its back its own?  
One leg brushes aside clinging seaweed,  
and the horse's blind eyes become  
a far deeper and lonelier indigo than the sea.  
It moves unpretentiously on.  
Blood oozing from its wounded belly  
is washed off by sea-water  
and carried from wave to wave . . .

A cold fog rises from the sea in autumn—  
by a rock at the sea bottom,  
the horse crouches alone, legs folded,  
enduring the cold;  
enduring the wait. (Takiguchi Masako)

There is a poem titled "On Man," in which Takiguchi writes on the cruelty of man, who feels nothing but physical desire for woman, and also a poem titled "At the Slaughterhouse," in which woman's body makes love with man only because of his sexual desire. Her body and the body of a



cow killed at the slaughterhouse are overlapped. Both are interesting pieces from the viewpoint of feminism.

Tomioka Taeko's (1935- ) poems are amusing in the sense that she is a syntax reformer. They sound very different from others' because she is the first poet in Japan who managed to slip out of her poems. She learned this technique from cubism and Gertrude Stein, whose works she translated into Japanese. As she consciously makes herself slip out of her poems, her nonchalant attitude can make language itself into the free coming and going between sense and nonsense, between the fixed and the non-fixed, between reality and non-reality, escaping from the world of fixed significance. So the reader feels as if thrown into a state of anti-gravity. She is, like Ibaragi, from Osaka, a realistic commercial city in the west of Japan. So although her poems look very modern, they in fact take root in the Japanese climate, and she talks garrulously. Although her poems look like anti-sexism, her theme is anti-modern age and anti-progress in woman. Therefore her poems receive applause both from conservatives and progressives. Her method of slipping out of her poems is unique as well, especially in the climate of Japanese literature which produced the peculiar *I* novel, a mixture of diary and the descriptive scenery developed in *tanka* and *haiku*. She gracefully made the transition from poetry to fiction several years ago.

### Girl Friend

A concubine next door  
chants a sutra.  
In early afternoon  
I saw an animal like an ass  
passing under the window.  
I saw it through the interstice of the curtain.  
There is a woman who comes to see me  
always through the interstice of the curtain,  
but she's not come yet today.  
She promised to come  
in a sort of Annamese kimono  
made of crepe georgette  
with a gait that brings men running.  
As she hasn't come yet today  
she may have died.  
Previously  
when I travelled with her  
she yearned for an old woodcut

of Germany or somewhere  
 at an antique shop in the country.  
 At a country inn  
 I had a chance for the first time  
 to tear her hair  
 as thick as Brigitte Bardot's.  
 We two danced  
 the Viennese waltz  
 with crimson cheeks drawing near  
 as long as we wished.  
 Her transparent  
 optimistic poesy  
 some time dropped.  
 I wish to take that for tears.  
 She doesn't come today.  
 I pray  
 loudly though it's still mid-day  
 like the mistress next door.  
 She  
 hasn't promised not to come.  
 The one who goes,  
 O the one who has gone!      (Tomioka Taeko)

We have two excellent poets quite in contrast: Yoshihara Sachiko (1932- ) and Shiraishi Kazuko (1931- ). Yoshihara came out of the very Japanese soil, moist with karma, duty and human feelings, while Shiraishi, in contradistinction, came out of the western soil, modernism and American subculture.

Yoshihara Sachiko is always face to face with love like two Sumō wrestlers. In her early works she tried to restore the genuine responses of her childhood. And in her latest book, the title of which she took from film director Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, she developed the world of unnatural love with ethical severeness. She stands at the supreme court of love, and questions herself with the sharp edge of words: sin, punishment, betrayal, dialectic of soul and bloodshed. In this way she always tries to step forward to the dead end of the world. It is, however, noble order that sustains her world of shambles. (As to Yoshihara's poems, see *New Directions Annual* 31.)

Shiraishi Kazuko is a typical erotic type and the most unique woman poet in present-day Japan. Different from Yoshihara, she has no concern with sin, punishment or betrayal. Her poetry is a series of stories from her life controlled by dynamic eros, like Yosano Akiko, which she narrates in a

very unusual Japanese language similar to the jazz phrase. She was born in Vancouver and came to Japan when she was six or seven. Receiving her baptism in modernist poetry in her teens, she came back in her late twenties as a poet with an American jazz beat and a counterculture life-style. After that she liberated herself through a somewhat scandalous life and kept writing poems mainly on sex, yet with a universal vision. Her wish is to become a great sexual writer like Henry Miller. Until seven or so years ago, society had looked askance at her sexual boldness and unconventional behavior and considered her more a sexpot than an important poet. Her use of shocking sexual imagery and so-called obscene terms helped to earn her a reputation as an avant-garde poet. But after the revolution of sensibility at the end of the sixties, her poetry became highly valued. She started writing a series of long poems titled *Season of the Sacred Lecher* several years ago. (As to Shiraishi's latest poems, see *New Directions Annual* 31.)

It seems to me that our contemporary poetry is very post-modern. One characteristic is this: it is the poetry of a non-religious people. We are little affected by Buddhism, Zen, or Taoism today, not to mention Christianity. Generally speaking we don't care for metaphysical and ideological poems. Those poems we regard as poems of thought or ideas are different from what you think of in the West. They might often look more like a simple-minded description to you, because although we deny it, we still have the remnants of a long tradition of short-form literature in which we appreciate thoughts melting in the description of scenery.

The second characteristic is that the main purpose of our contemporary poetry is the expression of languages itself. Post-war poetry started but cutting the sense of unity between nature and men. And under the influence of the English poets of the thirties, then modernism, especially surrealism, and then the action poetry of the American beatniks, Japanese poets dug into various interesting veins in Japanese language and culture. They pursued every possible way of using Japanese. They pursued when, where, and how poetry arises. That is why we have many poems in which the pursuit of poetic method is mixed in imagery, and that is the poet's idea. Therefore foreign readers miss the best part of contemporary Japanese poetry, because it is very difficult to translate, almost untranslatable in fact. What you enjoy and appreciate is the works of poets whose syntax is closest to that of the West.