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The Marriage of Untrue Minds: The Representation of Matrimony in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Written by Women

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Abstract

This essay will explore the representation of the dynamics of heterosexual marriage in terms of emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, in a selection of contemporary Japanese fiction written by renowned female novelists such as Natsuo Kirino, Yūko Tsushima, Mitsuyo Kakuta, Yukiko Motoya, among others. The objective of this essay is to analyze some novels as a means of cultural resistance and open criticism regarding mandatory marriage in contemporary Japan. In other words, both in Japan contemporary society and some of its current fiction written by female authors, both the centrality of heterosexual marriages and the particular forms those relationships should take are being implicitly and explicitly challenged.

For my dearest friend masu

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza cómo se representan temas de la dinámica del matrimonio heterosexual —en términos de insatisfacción emocional y sexual— en una selección de ficción japonesa contemporánea escrita por renombradas novelistas femeninas como Natsuo Kirino, Yūko Tsushima, Mitsuyo Kakuta, Yukiko Motoya, entre otras. El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar algunas novelas como medio de resistencia cultural y crítica abierta al matrimonio obligatorio en el Japón contemporáneo. En otras palabras, tanto en la sociedad japonesa contemporánea como en algunas de sus actuales obras de ficción escritas por autoras femeninas, se cuestiona implícita y explícitamente la centralidad de los matrimonios heterosexuales así como las formas particulares que deben adoptar esas relaciones.

Para mi querido amigo masu

The Marriage of Untrue Minds: the Representation of Matrimony in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Written by Women

Alejandra Tapia

Why so Unhappy?

The title of this essay is related to the 116th sonnet written by William Shakespeare in 1609, that bears the name of "The Marriage of True Minds". The poem attempts to define love, in terms of what it is and it is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love is perfect and unchanging because it does not admit obstacles, and it does not change when it finds alterations in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker defines love through a metaphor of stability: a guiding star to lost ships that is not susceptible to storms. In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: although beauty fades in time, love remains the same.

I altered the title of this sonnet because after several years of reading a plentiful of contemporary fiction written by Japanese women, I began to notice a pattern in the works I have read so far: there is almost no female character that is emotionally and sexually satisfied in their depicted heterosexual marriage.

In other words, matrimony in works of renowned novelists such as Natsuo Kirino, Yūko Tsushima, Mitsuyo Kakuta, Yukiko Motoya, among others, turns out to be represented as a heavy and miserable burden. To be more specific, matrimony is described as the experien-

ce of being married to a stranger that is actually quite hostile, or else, quite ghostly; similar to sharing home with some "roomie" you barely know and do not even like.

This approach reminds me of another famous literary reference in world literature, this time from the Russian novel *Ana Karenina* by Leon Tolstoy, and its famous opening sentence "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 2014, p. 9), a fact that I would like to explore below.

Firstly, I would like to begin with some history and social theory to broaden the scope of this essay. In her book *The Modern Family in Japan*. Its Rise and Fall (2009), the renowned Japanese feminist Chizuko Ueno points out that the private sphere was created during Modernity as an essential but invisible twin of the public sphere. The former was meant to be a sanctuary of love and comfort, whereas the public realm was full of stress from competition and demands of efficiency. However, the meaning of the private sphere is totally different for men and women. Even though home may be a refuge for men, it is workplace for women, who are expected to supply love and comfort there (Ueno, 2009).

In other words, while for men industrialization meant turning into salaried workers, to women it meant complete isolation as a housewife in the nuclear family, who got married as a means to survive. On top of that, there is the reality of male dominance in the Japanese house, which is far from the idealized happy home. The relationship between husband and wife has even been compared to that of lord and servant in a despotic state due to its asymmetry: Married women remain financially dependent on their husbands and thus the relationship is fundamentally unequal (Ueno, 2009).

Although this model of couple and family dates back to the Meiji era (1868-1912), it still haunts present-day Japan, and it is far from outdated in general terms. For instance, nowadays the wage gap between Japanese men and women is still considerable, a situation that surely perpetuates inequality.

In her book *Intimate Disconnections: Divorce and the Romance of Independence in Contemporary Japan*, the cultural anthropologist Allison Alexy points out that: "Throughout Japan's postwar period, heterosexual marriage has been a powerfully normative social force, marking married people as responsible social adults. The vast majority of people got married, and being in a heterosexual marriage demonstrated a person's 'normalcy'" (Alexy, 2020, p. 4).

Alexy also notes that in the 1970s and 1980s, common images of an ideal marriage represented husbands and wives as a pair tightly linked through economic dependencies but largely disconnected from each other in everyday life (Alexy, 2020). Why is this? Her answer echoes Ueno's research: husbands and wives often have very separate and unrelated spheres of responsibilities and work.

Alexy also reports that there are lots of Japanese men who want to substitute their wife for their mother. Or else, men who want their wives for maids: "The hypothetical husband's words for his wife—hey!— and his words at her—food, bath, sleep!— have become key symbols of the quality of marriage and a common shorthand for structural problems faced in contemporary relationships" (Alexy, 2020, p. 70). It is in this sense that Alexy poses the concept of disconnected dependence. In this model for intimacy —or lack of it—, although spouses are tightly reliant on each other for someneeds, —basic domestic chores for men, money for women—, they are less

likely to share interests or emotional connections. In this sense, while they might need each other, many spouses do not want to spend too much time together because they do not have anything in common (Alexy, 2020).

This idea reminds me of the Netflix series Samurai Gourmet (2017), where although the depicted couple seems perfectly happy with the way their life is arranged, there are some interesting aspects to be taken into account for the purpose of this essay.

When the retired husband finds himself with loads of free time, he can go all over Tokyo to find interesting places to eat, whereas his wife continues to lead a very busy life, full of activities such as yoga and social meetings that are totally independent from his husband, because with the passing of time it is clear that she has built a life for and by herself. Only rarely the husband asks his wife to put aside her hectic activities to have lunch with him. It is as if the separate spheres both inhabit were completely taken for granted or naturalized, and the possibility of living differently their everyday lives hardly, if ever, crosses their minds.

This series mirrors traditional situations in contemporary Japan, where spouses usually need each other, and fully recognize that dependence, but often lead social and emotional lives that are fundamentally disconnected from each other, as I said above. What is more, in the research Alexy carried out, she reports that many of her interlocutors described that after children were born, it was not unusual for couples to stop having sex. In this context of emotional and sexual separation, and in best-case scenarios, divorce can also denote an empowering independence, salvation, or escape.

In her book, Chizuko Ueno refers to Iku Hayashi's *Kaiteinai rikon* (1985) and talks about husbands and wives that are *mentally divorced* but do not take the decision to separate or formally divorce because they share a house, or property. This means that marriage has collapsed from within, because of the distant and bleak relationship between the couple, but economic entanglement, and offspring, keeps it along.

In contrast, the newer ideals for marriage and intimacy in the early twenty-first century suggest that the best marriages are those in which spouses become more tightly linked through emotional connections, and time spent together. Alexy (2020) calls this model for intimacy *connected independence*. In other words, the best marriages are those in which spouses are also best friends, bound by love and support for each other rather than by financial dependencies.

Happy marriages dwell comfortably in self-help books

The works considered in this essay seldom depict contentment, because I understand them an act of cultural disobedience and resistance against the conformism implied in gender norms and their promised satisfaction, particularly regarding the institution of marriage. I will thus consider the concept of *disconnected independence* and some variants posed by myself, in order to analyze the rendered matrimonies in some contemporary novels written by Japanese women.

Hello, stranger

I will begin with *Out*, written by the renowned crime fiction writer Natsuo Kirino in 1997. This novel is about four women who live and work in the margins of Tokyo and of society in a boxed lunch factory. The plot of this thrilling novel is set in motion when one of the female characters called Yayoi kills her husband with his own tie, one day she finally has enough of his infidelities, and of the fact that he spends all of his money and savings on some Chinese escort who works in a bar. This first relationship is depicted as one deeply violent and unsatisfactory, because the husband also beats Yayoi:

> She could never have imagined then that this was the future that was waiting for them: a loser obsessed with a woman he could never have, a wife who detested him, and an unbridgeable gulf separating them. They would never again be on the same side of the gulf, because she could never bring herself to forgive him (Kirino, 2005, pp. 78).
> […]
>
> Then, on top of everything else, three months ago Kenji had stopped bringing home his paycheck, and she had been forced to try to feed herself and the children on the little bit she earned at the factory (Kirino, 2005, pp. 79).
> […]
>
> Kenji left her behind to go out drinking and gambling, and soon she spent most of her time home alone. It wasn't, of course, until fair-

> ly recently that she'd realized that he was fundamentally the type of man who only wanted what belonged to others (Kirino, 2005, pp. 80).

The quote is clear in that, after so much violence and indifference from Yayoi's husband, there are no possibilities for redemption, only hatred. Once Yayoi has murdered her husband, she asks for help from her friend and main character Masako, who in turn involves other friends in order to cut the corpse and get rid of it. By the way, Masako's marriage is also very revealing in terms of disconnected independence:

> He had already strayed far off a successful career track. More than likely Yoshiki had his own path to follow, one that had very little to do with other people. It was his alone; no one else had made him follow it. Masako knew that there was more than a little resemblance between her husband, who hated the business world and spent his free time shut away in this little room like some mountain hermit, and her son who had given up communicating with the world altogether. For her part, she had decided that there was very little she could do or say to either of them.
>
> They were quite a trio: a son who had given up both education and conversation, a husband in the grips of a depression, and Masako who had opted for the night shift after being downsized from her own company. Just as they had decided to sleep in separate bedrooms, they seemed to have chosen to shoulder their own separate burdens and inhabit their own isolated reality.

> Yoshiki had said nothing to her when she was unable to find another job and ended up on the night shift at the boxed-lunch factory. Masako had sensed, however, that his silence wasn't so much a sign of apathy as an indication that he had abandoned the futile struggle and had begun building his own cocoon, a cocoon that she couldn't penetrate. Her husband's hands, which no longer reached out to touch her, were busy at work now constructing a shell. Both she and their son were somehow tainted by the outside world and so they had to be rejected along with everything else, no matter how much it hurt them (2005, pp. 89-90).

In the above quote Masako does not seem to know how to deal with her husband's depression and his son's apathy. Yoshiki does not seem to have one single interest, not even his job. Her son only speaks during the police interrogation, when he tries to give away his own mother. Masako, for her part, avoids both of them in through her job on the night shift. In spite of the lack of significant emotional ties, and even open hostility, Masako does not leave her husband and son until the very end of the novel. Maybe it is due to a sense of moral duty or the mere force of habit, it is never clear.

The character of Yoshiki can be related to the way Japanese husbands are often perceived: "coldly silent, demanding, or uncaring", besides, "contemporary ethnographic research confirms that many people associate hegemonic masculinity with silence" (Alexy 2020, pp. 64).

Due to different situations, every male character (and also female) in this novel has retreated in their own world, one that involves a very deep loneliness, and a sense of defeat that can be inter-

preted as a social death in the case of Masako's husband and son, and a very literal one in the case of Kenji, Yayoi's husband.

It is also worth saying that Yayoi embodies the idea of women built upon the notion of economic dependence, whereas Masako tends more to economic and emotional independence. However, the open ending of this novel makes it very hard to guess if she actually achieved any empowerment or freedom. In the case of this novel disconnected independence is never resolved as such, because isolation is an essential characteristic of this fictional world.

There are many other interesting Japanese novels that explore disconnected dependence. One of them is *Building Waves* by Taeko Tomioka (2012). In this work, Kyoko, the protagonist, leads a life so independently from her husband that she seems to be a wealthy single woman, very lonely for that matter. She is childless by choice, describes her sexuality as aggressive, and treats men as mere sexual objects. Her husband is a very faded character that only appears briefly towards the end of the novel. Interestingly, she does not seem to work inside or outside her home, and has plenty of time to pursue her interests, such as cheating on her husband, visiting friends, among others. She can do as she likes, and she simply seems to remain married because of comfort, and perhaps only needs matrimony to save face in a society that has conceived marriage as a way to earn a living for women.

There is another novel in which the main female character is much more constrained and deals with economic violence, because the work focuses its attention on the topic of money. Rika, the protagonist of the novel *Kami no Tsuki*, written by Mitsuyo Kakuta (2012), is a childless and disenchanted woman trapped in an unhappy and

sexless marriage. She is controlled by her husband through money: she feels the need to ask for his permission to spend every single yen.

The husband, Masafumi, is a man who lives for work. He is depicted as a very conformist, violent, and patronizing man who feels threatened when Rika starts working in a bank. Whenever he can, he reminds her of the little money she makes. To feel a little better, she starts stealing money from her clients to buy luxury goods, and to lend huge amounts of cash to a young man with whom she gets involved. Rika ends up committing a huge fraud, and, after all the money is spent, debts pursue her, and even her lover turns his back on her, there is only loneliness and disconnection between Rika and the world around her.

On my own

Another interesting case of a novel where the character aims for economic and emotional independence is the autofiction T*erritory of Light* written by Yūko Tsushima (1979). This novel revolves around a recently separated young woman and her three-year-old daughter. Interestingly, it deals with the difficulties and frustrations that can characterize single motherhood, in particular for a full-time working woman. Hence, the protagonist of this novel not only faces a broken heart because her husband leaves her for another woman, but also the challenge of rearing her daughter with all of her exhaustion, and the certainty that she has to build a life of her own with her daughter, from scratch:

> My husband would no doubt have helped out if I'd contacted him, but I didn't want to rely on my husband, even if it meant putting my mother to extra trouble. In fact, I didn't want him ever to set foot in my new life. I was afraid of any renewed contact, so afraid it left me surprised at myself. The frightening thing was how accustomed I had become to his being there (2019, p. 15).

In this novel, the protagonist is quite hostile not only towards her husband and his lack of commitment, but towards her own daughter, and towards her identity as a wife and a mother, for whom this turn of events is highly inconvenient and disconcerting. In other words, she seems rather reluctant and frustrated to be a single mother, and soon in the novel, her husband quickly slips into a ghostly and secondary character that does not really play an important role in the new life of his family.

In this work, there are no hints that he, Fujino, is actually displeased by the separation, and shows up once in a blue moon, and only to complain. For her part, the protagonist prefers poverty than a life next to her unfaithful and ever-fading husband: "I calculated that without my husband's living expenses to cover, I should be able to get by without borrowing. But it was a calculation made with gritted teeth" (2019, p. 18).

Thus, in *Territory of Light*, there is no such a thing as disconnected dependency, only disconnection, because the desire of the protagonist to recover her past family is weak. Maybe the symbol of this transition towards a new beginning is symbolized by the apartment where she and her daughter live for a while, a place illuminated by a blinding light.

I would like to briefly mention another novel in which the metaphor of a ghostly husband is quite literal. In the work *Kishibe no Tabi by Kazumi Yumoto* (2010), that, as far as I know, has not been translated to English, the limit of the world of the dead and the world of the living is very blurred and unstable. The husband of Mizuki, the main character, mysteriously disappears and she becomes obsessed with his loss. She practically stops living her life and turns herself into a sort of living ghost until the husband finally appears just mysteriously as he vanished, and as a specter. In this novel, the relationship of Mizuki and her husband is one of a very connected emotional dependence, because an economic one is simply no longer possible.

Talking about fiction that can be read as fantastic, I would like to comment upon the novella "An exotic marriage" by Yukiko Motoya (2018), where the strangeness of marriage as a symbiotic relationship is emphasized. In the story, firstly the idea of couple as two human beings that start resembling physically to each other is suggested, because even the wife's facial features start changing over time.

However, towards the end of this work, the ultimate otherness of the husband is deemed more important, because he begins a journey of transformation that ends when he turns into a mountain peony that the narrator can visit whenever she wants: "A married couple was a strange thing. Although we had lived in such close proximity and spent our days and nights together, I hadn't had the faintest inkling that my husband's desire had been to be a single bloom of a mountain peony" (2018, p. 275). In this novella, although there might be hints to physical resemblance, a true connection between the couple is denied, since the wife admits that she ignored what her husband wanted to be deep down.

The More the Merrier

I would like to finish this essay with the depiction of the happy marriage in Kaori Ekuni's *Twinkle Twinkle* (1991). This happy matrimony is not actually heterosexual and there are more than two characters involved. The protagonist couple is one made up of an extremely kind homosexual man, a doctor named Mutsuki, and a neurotic and alcoholic heterosexual woman, the translator Shoko.

Both marry out of social pressure. However, they are excellent companions and best friends, they actually love and care for each other but, naturally, never have sex. In fact, Mutsuki has his own male lover, but there is no jealousy or tension in this emotional threesome. In fact, they end up living together very happily. The following lines describe a perfect happy ending for this unconventional group: "I felt like crying. Love alone helped us get through life. Without it, life was simply too haphazard. […] And this is what our life was going to be like tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the day after that. I poured myself another glass of champagne" (2003, p. 170).

In this novel we find connection, and love among partners, although it is certainly not romantic or exclusive. As a general comment, it is interesting to bear in mind that the depicted relationships that allow satisfaction are often portrayed as previous to heterosexual marriage, or "outside" heterosexual marriage, but rarely part of it.

To be continued…

There is so much to say on unhappy depictions of marriage in contemporary Japanese literature, and this was only a very brief sample of a research in process. In this sense, it would be interesting to go on exploring the ways in which literature establishes a cultural dialogue with the difficulties to have satisfactory interpersonal relationships among women and men nowadays in Japan. This should be carried out particularly in the context of marriage, an institution that is in itself facing a sense of crisis in the arena of fiction and in everyday life, due to the lack of a significant or positive involvement of husbands in the relationship, and in the house chores.

The fiction considered in this essay works as forceful sociocultural criticism that should not be missed, because Japanese female writers are insisting upon marriage as an oppressive institution for most women, due to its structural inequality, among other important reasons such as loneliness and individualism.

The very unhappiness that marriage causes in so many undermines it as the panacea it pretends to be, according to gender norms. This approach to matrimony is more relevant if we consider the tremendously influential image of the happy full-time housewife with time and money to spare, an ideal many Japanese women still aspire to, although for the great majority it is an increasingly elusive mirage in more than one sense.

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