The “High Miss” and Female Identity in the Fiction of Tanabe Seiko

Nathaniel PRESTON  
Ritsumeikan University

ABSTRACT

The fiction of Japanese author Tanabe Seiko (b. 1928) makes an important critique of women’s social position in postwar Japan. Tanabe’s Noriko trilogy (1973-1981) explores the strictures placed on women as the protagonist confronts her double, descends to the brink of madness, and ultimately accepts her own mortality. Likewise, Tanabe’s 1992 short story “Don’t Be So Sweet” depicts a character whose complex gender identity blurs conventional boundaries between male and female. Together, these texts reveal Tanabe’s insistence that human beings may be happy only when they are free to express their naturally complex and inconsistent identities.

Keywords. Tanabe Seiko, Japanese Literature, Women’s Literature, female identity, “High Miss”

Introduction

Tanabe Seiko (田辺聖子; b. 1928) is one of Japan’s best loved living authors. She has received numerous prizes for her writing, including the Akutagawa Prize in 1964 for her short story “Sentimental Journey,” (Senchimentaru Jaanii 感傷旅行) and the highly prestigious Order of Culture in 2008. In her more than four decades of literary activity, Tanabe has published over 200 volumes of fiction, essays, critical biography, and translations of classical Japanese literature (Kurosawa 2006, 95). Tanabe’s publisher, Shueiisha, recently celebrated this distinguished career by selecting highlights from her prodigious output and re-releasing them as a 24-volume edition of her “complete works.” And Tanabe’s prolific and successful career has earned her an exceptional degree of public recognition, as can be seen in the public television network NHK’s depiction of her life in the 2006 morning drama Potato, Octopus, Pumpkin (Imo Tako Nankin 萝卜たこなんきん).

Common features of Tanabe’s fiction include romance-based plots, the regional dialect of her native Osaka, and humor based on word-play and verbal banter. As Suzuki Keiko (2006, 141) remarks, Tanabe herself has used terms like “light literature” and “frivolous” to describe her own work.2 Tanabe’s fiction is certainly light in its tendencies toward romance and humor, but it also comments seriously on social issues including women’s status, aging, and life satisfaction for the disabled. In particular, Kan Satoko (2006, 154) notes how Tanabe anticipated social trends in literary portraits of the “High Miss” office lady in her works from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. The term “High Miss,” while not widely used today, appeared in postwar Japan as a corrective to the pejorative “Old
Miss” used to describe unmarried female office workers who had passed their mid-twenties, the assumed upper limit of the age of marriageability. Tanabe did not create the term “High Miss,” but in the late 1960s and early 1970s she began consciously using it to refashion the image of unmarried working women (Kan 152; 158).

Tanabe’s fiction from that time period has been recognized for helping change social attitudes toward working women, and she has continued to explore gender issues in her more recent fiction, such as the 1992 collection The Scale of a Goldfish (Kingyo no Uroko 金魚のうろこ). In works from both periods, Tanabe’s “High Miss” protagonists find themselves in liminal spaces between established social norms, particularly those connected to gender, and this conflict stems from the protagonists’ attempt to elude or rise above restrictive social frameworks. Tanabe’s protagonists assert their freedom either in terms of their self-concept or their behavior, but even the most liberated characters do not reject society entirely, preferring to seek moments of transcendence while maintaining their careers and personal relationships. Tanabe thus engages with the problem of self and society that drives much of modern and contemporary Japanese literature (Kameyama 2008, 13-14).

Doubling the “High Miss”: Come-ons
Tanabe’s most extensive depiction of a “High Miss” character is found in the Noriko trilogy, comprised of 1973’s Come-ons (Iiyoru 言いよる), 1976’s Private Life (Shiteki Seikatsu 私的生活), and 1981’s As I Crush Strawberries (Ichigo wo Tsubushinagara 苺をつぶしながら). These three volumes have been deemed “classics of the romance novel genre” (Suzuki Keiko 2006, 139), but their focus is more on the protagonist’s identity development than on romance itself. Together, they chronicle the life of Tamaki Noriko (玉木乃里子) between the ages of 31 and 35 as she pursues a number of love interests, marries, divorces, and adjusts to a new single life. Noriko started out as an office worker but left her company to work as a freelancer in several creative fields: she designs clothing, household goods and accessories, draws manga, publishes essays, holds exhibitions of her paintings, and sells handmade dolls.

Although the 1960s and following decades brought considerable freedom for women in Japan, many difficulties faced those who wished to pursue their careers at a high level or who chose not to follow conventional family patterns. As Ito (1985, 219-20) notes, the increased demand for female workers starting in the mid-1960s did not lead to a notably higher ceiling of professional opportunity for women, as many employers preferred that women quit their jobs once they got married. Yet women as a group were marrying later during the 1960s and 1970s, and more women were choosing to remain unmarried for life (Retherford, Ogawa &

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1 Japanese names will follow the conventional Japanese ordering: surname followed by given name.

2 All quotations from literary texts and Japanese-language criticism are in my translation.
Matsukura 2001, 66). This created a natural conflict between the need for income and limited economic opportunities, which was compounded by a social stigma toward female singlehood, voluntary or otherwise (Tamanoi 1990, 20).

It is at the crux of these conflicting forces surrounding women that Tanabe writes her Noriko trilogy. As Tanabe critiques the dynamics of the “High Miss” phenomenon through the character of Noriko, her novels’ structure and imagery follow a recognizable pattern of female awakening. The highly self-conscious Noriko is repeatedly forced to analyze herself and speculate about the motives of others, creating situations where she is doubled by the characters around her or inwardly fragmented, and she eventually turns to tranquilizers for relief from her psychic pain before she discovers the joy of single life after her divorce. To some extent, then, she resembles characters from Anglophone women’s fiction, such as Jane Eyre and Clarissa Dalloway, whose encounter with a doppelgänger plunges them into madness, a painful disintegration that allows them to forge a “personal identity which at least partially redefines what society has deemed to be the ‘nature’ of woman” (Rigney 1980, 120). Tanabe’s oblique comment on the status of women in 1970s Japan is thus encoded in the conflicting forces that propel Noriko through this inner journey.

First, in Come-ons, Noriko experiences a number of psychic dislocations connected to romantic and sexual love. She has sexual relationships with Nakaya Gō, the scion of a prominent industrial family, and with Gō’s middle-aged neighbor Mizuno. But even as she continues these connections, she thinks only of Miura Goro, a college friend of her brother who fascinates her with his abstracted and melancholy air. Whereas Noriko’s relationships with other men are marked by her sharp wit and playful banter, her intense yearning for Goro renders her powerless to confess her feelings to him. She observes that “there are two types of people in the world: those you can come on to, and those you can’t. For me, Goro was somebody in the latter category. The people you can truly come on to are the ones you don’t love very much” (243-44). As she goes on to explain, real love creates a fear of loss; we cannot risk exposing our feelings for fear they might be rejected.

For Noriko, then, the world is bifurcated into two realms: Goro and not-Goro. Goro attracts her because of his purity (kiyoraka 清らか or muku 無垢) and innocence (mushin 無心), and Noriko uses these words repeatedly in describing him. Noriko therefore does not understand how to reconcile her sexual desire, which seeks to bring Goro into this world, and her possessiveness, which seeks to keep him separate and unstained. When he visits her apartment after a gig with his Hawaiian band, Noriko is frustrated by her inability to connect the two worlds: “I gradually realized that I was thinking the most lustful things; my face turned red, my words got bottled up inside me, and I felt I was on the brink of tears” (78). This woman, who with other men plays jolly sex games such as Reluctant Virgin, is incapable of communicating her desire to Goro. Nor can she confess her other love affairs to him “because if he were to congratulate me and say, ‘how nice,’ it

3 See, for instance, pages 70, 71, 181, 201, 230, 290, 292, 293, and 307.
means he does not love me as a woman. And if he withholds his blessing and flies into a rage, it means he knows that I've made an irreparable mistake. Both of these possibilities frighten me” (211). Thus, Noriko's desire for Gorō conflicts with her fear of losing him, and these forces bind Noriko into a painfully bifurcated world. Are her relations with other men unimportant dalliances or fatal mistakes? Noriko assigns Gorō the power to answer this question, and she therefore lives in a state of indeterminacy. But to Noriko, the pain of being stretched between two poles of meaning is preferable to the danger of loss, and she hides behind a shield of silence.

Tanabe emphasizes Noriko's sense of displacement through her use of the character 甲 (ko) to evoke the rigid boundaries constructing Noriko's world. The core meaning of 甲 is shell, but it is also used in the phrase te no ko (手の甲), which refers to the back of the hand. When Noriko watches Gorō's Hawaiian band perform, she rests her chin on the backs of her hands, suggesting that her view of Gorō is supported or protected by her rigid gaze (66). Further, when she and Nakaya Gō play their game of Reluctant Virgin as a prelude to their first sexual encounter, Noriko places the backs of her hands to her eyes and pretends to cry as she wails, “Mommy's going to be mad at me” (47). Noriko is hard pressed to keep from laughing out loud as she and Gö continue their erotic role-play with lines like “We're definitely getting married, so your mother won't mind” and “it's going to hurt, so I don't want to” (48). Their game is a ritualized, humorous enactment of a value set that situates women as helpless victims of male desire and ties their worth to virginity. Noriko thus seems to have rejected or transcended this ideology, but later in the text when Gorō declines to visit her apartment after his concert, she adopts the same role in all earnestness. Significantly, her anxiety is connected to her status as a single, sexually liberated, working woman:

In the hours of isolation I spent sleeping with Nakaya Gō, working by myself, targeting the purses of High Misses, working by myself, targeting the design of toilet-shaped ashtrays—in truth I always felt lonely during that time. Taking that thought a bit further, in the bottom of my heart, I'm always wanting Gorō. I must be wanting to be supported by Gorō.... I put the backs of hands to my eyes, and cried. (80)

The role of the weak woman who depends on men, one she lampooned hilariously with Gō, now becomes a genuine performance. And the repetition of 甲 (ko) in the reference to her hands emphasizes the rigidity of the divisions she has created between pure, unstained Gorō, and the lonely remainder of the world. Noriko displays this attitude repeatedly, as in her later remark that “with Gorō here in front of me, that Nakaya Gō, and Mizuno too, seemed like something from another world” (208). This sense of a divided world appears in her fantasy of married sex with Gorō: in Noriko's imagination, Gorō demands to know whether she has completed various domestic duties, and only when she responds in the positive does he call her to bed (103). Thus, even as she follows a modern and uninhibited lifestyle in regard to other men, Noriko places herself within the shell (甲 ko) of traditional femininity when it comes to Gorō.

Dividing the world in two gives Noriko a sort of double vision, which
Tanabe conveys through recurring references to mata megane 股眼鏡, the act of stooping down and peering through one's own legs. This word, which serves as the title of the second of the novel's five sections, first arises in connection to one of Noriko's paintings which depicts a woman—clad in white panties, peach-colored high heels, and a watch—in the mata megane pose. This woman, in Noriko's description, is “peering through her own legs at an upside-down world of a different dimension, utterly rapt, fascinated” (98). Noriko herself experiences this shift in perspective after an unexpected encounter with Gō's neighbor Mizuno, a middle-aged man who matter-of-factly seduces her after serving her a lunch of sashimi. This refined and gentlemanly married man's actions, which are “more direct, precise, confident, and experienced” than those of other men, make her think, “now this is an adult person's way to come on to someone” (153-54). This realization fills her with fresh astonishment “as if the world had gone topsy-turvy—yes, as if peering at the world through my own legs” (154). Mata megane could here be re-rendered homophonically as 又眼鏡 or “again glasses”: her impulsive day with Mizuno allows Noriko to see the world afresh.

This trope of perception in a new dimension suggests that Noriko can potentially break through the shell of her infatuation with Gō: if she can awaken in him some fresh perception of herself, she may be able to win his love. And she implicitly expresses this intention in her exhibition by reserving the mata megane painting from sale so she can give it to Gō. Yet her plans all go awry. She calls Gō, finds him to be out, and then with a rush of intuition knows that he must be with her friend Mimi. Noriko goes to Mimi's apartment to give the picture to Gō, but while Gō is cooking Noriko's dinner, Mimi appropriates the painting; Gō ultimately suggests hanging it in Mimi's apartment (246-47). Mimi's interference thus prevents Noriko's encoded message from reaching its intended recipient. Gō remains affable but cool, and Noriko returns home feeling “as though my mouth and chest were stuffed with bitter salt. This was not the thing we call jealousy; my chest was simply bursting with an undirected sense of uneasiness” (251). Her mata megane strategy has produced an unexpected result. Hoping to change Gō's view of her, she instead is the one confronted with an unsettling new perspective, a view of Mimi and Gō together in a comfortably domestic setting.

In this sense, Mimi functions as Noriko's double, carelessly and crassly enacting Noriko's deepest, unuttered desires. Indeed, the plot of Come-ons is largely driven by Mimi's impulsive behavior. The novel opens with Noriko assisting Mimi in negotiations to extract “compensation money” from Mimi's boyfriend Takayuki, who has reluctantly broken up with Mimi to pursue an advantageous arranged marriage. Noriko and Mimi decide to declare a fictional pregnancy and demand that Takayuki pay money for an abortion. This strategy ultimately works, and Noriko visits Takayuki's friend Gō to collect Takayuki's first payment. Noriko and Gō are mutually attracted but Mimi disrupts their evening together: she calls Noriko to declare that she thinks she really is pregnant and wants to keep the baby (55). To Noriko, breaking a preexisting commitment to others is simply unthinkable, but the headstrong Mimi declares, “Now that I'm really pregnant, I feel differently” (55). This episode highlights Mimi and Noriko's opposed value...
sets: Noriko always watches others and adjusts her behavior to suit them. She takes sidelong glances at Gō when they drive to his vacation home on Mt. Rokkō, and she gazes raptly at Gorō while he performs his Hawaiian music (30; 66). But Mimi never observes or considers others, instead displaying an incredible degree of self-absorption: she claims that she got involved with Takayuki because she wanted to name her baby Taa-chan after its father (57). Apparently, any man whose name starts with Ta would have been acceptable.

But as different as the two women's personalities may be, they are linked in a single pattern of action, and the examples cited above reveal how the two seem to instinctively contact each other at key moments. Tanabe hints at both their differences and their uncanny connection through Mimi's name, which is written in kanji as 美々. The literal meaning of 美々 is “beautiful, beautiful,” but Mimi's selfish actions (and perhaps her name's echoing of the English “me”) make her a foil for the more generous and broad-minded Noriko. However, Mimi's pregnancy also connects her name with its homophone 身身, which literally means “body, body” and refers to childbirth as the reproductive act of doubling the body. And in a figurative sense, Mimi becomes a second projection of Noriko's body, recklessly saying and doing things that Noriko keeps hidden behind her shell of traditional femininity.

In this capacity as Noriko's double, Mimi realizes Noriko's dream of marriage with Gorō. Mimi decides to keep her baby but wants a for-show marriage so the child will not be born out of wedlock. Takayuki and Gō are not viable candidates to “lend” her a surname, and Mimi instinctively seizes on Gorō (179). One evening Noriko is waiting for Gorō to come over and deliver some theater tickets, when Mimi, true to form, arrives unannounced; when Gorō rings the bell it is Mimi who answers. Although Noriko warns her not to ask Gorō, Mimi whispers in his ear while Noriko fixes him a snack. Mimi then seizes the snack tray and presents it to Gorō as if she had prepared it herself (202). Noriko learns that her best friend has displaced her as both hostess and seductress: Gorō has already agreed to marry Mimi.

Although Noriko is horrified by this prospect, her self-consciousness renders her unable to intervene. She realizes that “at that moment, I should have, for my own sake, emphatically said no” (204). Yet several worries about her image prevent Noriko from speaking her mind. Mimi will think that Noriko is jealous and laugh at her, or she might think that Noriko is greedily trying to possess both Gō and Gorō. Further, Mimi cannot imagine the depths of Noriko's passion for Gorō, and Noriko would be embarrassed to confess her feelings (204-5). Unable to say these things, Noriko gives a sour and tacit acceptance to Gorō and Mimi's marriage of convenience, with the understanding that they will divorce soon after the baby is born. Mimi's impetuous selfishness thus accomplishes what Noriko's wiles could not; Gorō even lauds Mimi as “natural” and “womanly” for her spontaneous decision to keep the baby (205-6). Noriko can only grit her teeth as she watches her double enact her deepest desire; little did Gorō know that the theater tickets he delivered would lead to this closet drama. As time passes, the “act” of Mimi and Gorō's marriage gradually takes on an air of reality, and Gorō is drawn
to Mimi’s childlike whimsicality and helplessness (241). When Noriko delivers her mata megane painting, Gorō and Mimi seem to her like a genuine married couple, and she one of their siblings (251). Her silence has enabled a genuine romance to develop between her two friends.

The sight of their happy domestic life throws Noriko to the brink of psychic death. The death of Mimi’s baby after a difficult delivery, which ends the need for Gorō and Mimi’s marriage, instead draws them closer together, and Noriko is the one who symbolically confronts death. While Mimi’s own survival is still in doubt, Noriko uses the bathroom in the hospital, where she encounters another woman who seems to have lost her baby: “Her hair was wild, her eyes were like black caverns, and her whole face was stained with tears. And she came staggering out [of the stall], appearing beyond concern that her face was observed by me” (307). Here is another manifestation of Noriko’s double, whose grief, representing the consequences of concealing one’s inner desires, is a harbinger of what she must suffer. Noriko recognizes this connection as she remarks on how the grieving woman reflects the common animality of all people (308). This moment of the text is a turning point that boomerangs Mimi from near death to increasing health and vitality, but sends Noriko hurtling toward inner crisis. As Rigney (1980, 122) observes about the novel of female identity, upon recognizing the doppelgänger, the “protagonist begins a decent into actual madness, or at least into the vicarious experience of madness” before being reborn. Noriko follows this pattern: when she learns that Gorō is now living with Mimi, she says, “I smiled, but I felt a part of my heart blacken and rot away inside me” (Come-ons 337). And when she returns home, she vomits and cries in her bathroom, reenacting the behavior of the deathlike woman she encountered in the hospital (338). Yet this is but the beginning of Noriko’s trauma, as she has yet to taste the married life she longed to experience with Gorō.

Marriage and the Great Beyond: Private Life and As I Crush Strawberries
The remaining volumes in the Noriko trilogy trace Noriko’s descent into a deep dissatisfaction with life during her marriage and her discovery of a healthy and balanced identity after her divorce. Thus, a “phoenixlike” Noriko “is able to surface as sane, equipped with an integrated self, an identity” (Rigney 122). In Private Life, Noriko’s obsession with Gorō has vanished, and she is now married to Nakaya Gō, the scion of a wealthy industrial family. Noriko and Gō are compatible in many ways, and Noriko thinks of their well-timed banter as being like that of a manzai comedy duo. However, through her own volition as well as Gō’s insistence, Noriko represses her natural self to play the role of a good wife. She thus faces the same conflict between inner feelings and outer appearance she suffered in Come-ons, but where Noriko actively pursued Gorō to fulfill her internalized sense of “proper” womanliness, she now becomes the object of desire and is forced into the mold of “wife” as both she and her husband envision it. These constraints create a gap between what Noriko feels and what she may express or do. The artificiality of her role appears most clearly when Gō makes absolute demands: she must return home before he does; she must wear baby-doll nightdresses (Private Lives 33; 300).
Individually, these strictures are minor, and Noriko admits that “it’s my style to say, ‘sure, why not?’ and do as he says” (301). But taken together, the rules governing Noriko’s married life narrow Noriko’s ability to form fulfilling relationships with Gō and other people. In the novel’s opening, for instance, she reflects that Gō’s sleeping face looks pitiable, like that of a “scolded schoolboy” or “Christ with a case of the runs” (8). To Noriko, these are terms of endearment, but she knows that they will only make Gō angry, so she refrains from expressing them (8). Again, this single act of self-restraint may be small, but it is part of a larger web immobilizing Noriko.

Noriko thus has little space in which to be herself. Gō, seeking to possess the whole of Noriko, resents the time she spends with her friends, and she therefore drifts away from her former circle of friends in the art and design industries. She still has her apartment in Osaka, but she no longer uses it to produce her art (44). This room of her own, now dusty and lifeless, has become a mere repository of the memories of her single life (45). As a symbol of Noriko’s inner being, it expresses the parched state of her soul: as she sits amid the debris of the past, Noriko realizes that “something inside me has died away, and this room, too, has died!” (46). This withering of the soul is itself traumatic, but Gō insists on possessing these lingering memories of Noriko’s past: he steals the keys to her apartment and reads her diary to find out about her past relationships with other men (168-69). Noriko naturally feels a sense of defilement, reflecting that “that room had been my very heart, and Gō just barged straight in” (170). She goes back to her apartment and burns her diaries, but she cannot purge the sense of violation. As her memories vanish into smoke and ashes, Noriko comments on the need for boundaries between husband and wife:

No matter how congenial a sidekick, not matter how beloved a comedy partner, (I detest “husband” and “wife” as both words and expressions), there is an area labeled No Entry Beyond This Point.

Gō barges straight into that space with his muddy feet. (189-90)

Noriko recognizes that Gō’s desire to possess his wife totally is an act of violence, as much so as the physical beating a jealous Gō gave her in Come-ons (Private Life 190).

Having lost this stronghold of her inner being, Noriko can exist only in the role of wife. After a single act of rebellion, a night out with an artist friend, Gō insists that she stay in the house while he is at work, and he takes her car keys to ensure her obedience (232). Deprived of physical liberty and spiritual freedom, Noriko becomes a two-dimensional echo of her former self: “being shut in, I lost my color, and like a paper doll pasted in a house of cut paper just stared out the window” (234). Ultimately, Gō insists that Noriko sell her apartment and car, move with him to his father’s home in Tokyo, and dedicate herself to the role of hostess at social functions connected to his family’s business dealings (312; 316-17).

This flattening of her vibrant personality into a shadow of her husband’s existence throws Noriko into a state of nervous depression, from which she can emerge only by recognizing, and ultimately rejecting, the narrowness of the
role she has played. She reflects that “lately I’ve been on edge, and I keep taking tranquilizers. But they haven’t worked, and at certain moments I suddenly tear up, or get angry at Gō” (274). The person who assists her psychological recovery is Nakasugi, a middle-aged man who understands well the theatrical dimension of love relationships (102-3, 283-84). Where Noriko’s romantic and sexual relationships have seemed to her like “viruses”; Nakasugi evokes “a different feeling, something you might call convalescence” (105). This is a different kind of male presence than Noriko has known. Goroˉ, who never acknowledges Noriko’s womanliness, has the remoteness of an “angel” or “an overgrown child” (Come-ons, 70; 72). Noriko’s sexual partners, Gō and Mizuno, are both described in the language of predatory weaponry: Gō’s eyes shine like a wolf’s, while Mizuno’s eyes are “like gun barrels” (393; 131). Nakasugi, in contrast, is relaxed and mature, obliquely praising her beauty at their first meeting, yet he retains a childlike fascination with the world around him (Private Life, 73; 92). In combining traits of youth and maturity he expresses what Shindō Masahiro calls the “awkwardly unsettled” (中途半端, 127). Noriko, who has used the same descriptor for herself as a “High Miss” woman, naturally gravitates toward Nakasugi’s gentle and reflective demeanor (Come-ons 302).

Nakasugi understands the need to play roles, and he expresses the need to get through life through a process of improvisation he calls damashi-damashi (だましだまし), a term that properly refers to the sort of coaxing one does to keep a balky automobile running long enough to make it home (Private Life 102-3). As a sympathetic witness to Noriko’s role-playing in marriage, he greets the news of her divorce with the comment, “well, it seems the actress has finally returned to private life” (343). Now Noriko’s convalescence can truly begin.

The final volume of the Noriko trilogy, As I Crush Strawberries, is an extended paean to the joys of single life. Noriko returns to the status of an unmarried working woman, and the very independence of this existence that troubled her in Come-ons now becomes a fountain of delight. Before her marriage, for instance, she thought that she talked to herself out of loneliness, but now she almost feels that she chooses to live alone to enjoy the pleasure of these spontaneous utterances (As I Crush Strawberries 38). A representative image is Noriko’s enjoying a simple breakfast of toast and tea in the nude, chortling with laughter at her good fortune (116). Her marriage now seems a period of penal servitude, and she takes work at an easy pace, declining offers for television appearances and often being mistaken for an errand runner when she delivers her creations (114-15). Noriko’s life thus reflects a healthy balance that had been missing in the first two volumes of the series.

What remains for her to deal with is the universal human issue of time. She has discovered the beauty of the present, and she employs the phrase ano yo (あの世), referring to the next world or afterlife, to emphasize an almost transcendent bliss of living in the moment. The phrase “even if I went to the next world, I doubt I’d find anything as good as this” appears on the opening page and runs through the novel like a litany (7). Conversely, Noriko has broken free from the past: although she remembers both Gō’s faults and endearing qualities, to Noriko he is now a person from ano yo, the world of the dead (26).
Yet the temporal world still makes claims on Noriko. Her past with Gö is a fact which will not disappear, and when Gö sees her walking on the deserted Osaka sidewalks in the midst of a rainstorm, she cannot deny that she knows this man or that she can see the happiness he hides behind a brusque demeanor (125-26). And when Gö later appears at her hotel in Karuizawa, she is pushed to the brink of tears by a sudden realization of his loneliness (274). Although she has relegated him to ano yo, Gö is unwilling to fade away. He criticizes Noriko’s single, childless lifestyle, haunting her like a clinging spirit from the netherworld of the past (276).

Likewise, Noriko’s future as a mortal being impinges on her enjoyment of a transcendent now. She finds that at their best, human beings can cope with the flow of time. At age 35, she feels that her beauty is greater than ever before, but she knows that it is difficult to age well (25; 30). Her friend Meri, however, with her aged-ivory skin and gentle demeanor, is an example of how to grow old without taking on an unpleasant aura of a middle-aged woman or obankusasa (お婆ンくささ) (11). Likewise, her new acquaintance Tomu embodies an equivalent possibility for men. Tomu can talk with equal earnestness about his profession as an artist and about daily activities like cooking, and this broad-mindedness frees him from the disagreeable aura of the middle-aged male, or ojinkusasa (オジンくささ) (233). The commonality in these two characters is their violation of gender boundaries. Meri has lesbian tendencies (rezukke レズっ気) but also possesses a talent for manipulating men (9). Tomu similarly combines both male and female speech patterns in his distinctive yet unpretentious version of the Osaka dialect (234). These two characters thus affirm Noriko’s own rejection of the narrow role of wife and suggest that aging can involve a broader or richer human experience, in contrast to the stereotyped image of the oban and ojin (derisive terms for middle-aged women and men, respectively). Noriko visits the resort area of Karuizawa with Meri, her first real vacation since her divorce, and there she runs into Tomu, who is borrowing a friend’s vacation home for use as an atelier. The novel thus surrounds Noriko with these models of positive aging in the timeless, fairy-tale setting of Karuizawa (281). The transparency and freshness of this setting make Noriko reflect that “you could say I was already on top of the world” (221), and she expresses this sentiment using the word uchöten (有頂天), which in its basic meaning denotes the highest, purest realm of embodied existence as a translation of the Buddhist terms Akanistha and Bhavāgra. True to this Buddhist conception of heaven, she is elevated to the highest level of human ecstasy while still being a part of the cycle of birth and death.

Tanabe therefore does not allow her protagonist to escape from the influence of time. Noriko is in the midst of her uchöten moment when past and future disrupt her bliss. The past comes in the person of Gö, who appears at her hotel and interrogates her about her life while she is waiting for Tomu to take her on a walk to his atelier (241). And late that same night, she is awoken by a phone call from Osaka informing her that a friend, Hara Kozue, has been in a serious automobile

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4 For a brief English-language discussion of the concept of Bhavāgra, see Lusthaus, 2003, 140.
accident (294). Her day of fairy-tale enchantment at Tomu’s cottage in the woods is thus sandwiched between intrusions of past entanglements and future death. And Gō brings the two together in his criticism of Noriko’s solitary lifestyle: “haven’t you considered that you might fall sick while you’re alone?” (276). At the time, she flippantly responds, “Maybe I will, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ll just die by myself,” but the sudden news of Kozue’s accident shocks her deeply (276). Kozue, like Noriko, has chosen the life of a single working woman, and Noriko reflects, “I had thought of her as a great model for emulation, paid her respect, and rejoiced that my life had been enriched by awakening to the attractiveness of women like Hara Kozue” (295). As Noriko’s model and teacher, Kozue represents the danger that Noriko, too, may face a sudden death in isolation. As she struggles to find a means of transportation back to Osaka, Noriko “superimposed [herself] over Kozue’s situation, and cried” (301). In the course of a single day, Noriko has been confronted by the relentless clinging of her past in the person of Gō, and the harbinger of her own death through her double Kozue.5

This is the last stage of Noriko’s development, in which a descent into grief allows her to return to her life with a measure of acceptance of her unchangeable past and future. Noriko is desperate to return to Osaka to be at Kozue’s side, and the one person who can help her is Gō, who has driven up to Karuizawa from Tokyo. If he gives her a ride back to the metropolis in the middle of the night, she can catch the first flight home. Confessing her need to the man she left is not easy, however, and her indistinct entreaties over the telephone only anger Gō, who cannot understand why Noriko wakes him on a seeming whim (299). When he calls back to lecture her on common decency, however, she has imaginatively identified herself with Kozue, as quoted above, and now her tears render her speechless. This is a new moment in her relationship with Gō (301). She has laughed with Gō, fought with him, analyzed him, and sought to please him, but never before has she displayed this kind of weakness. Her confrontation with her own mortality thus allows a new beginning with her ex-husband, and the nighttime drive they share back to Tokyo reminds the reader of their first time alone together, when Gō drove her to his vacation home on Mt. Rokkō where she was to receive Mimi’s compensation money from Takayuki. Suzuki Keiko (2006, 146) reads this as the rekindling of romance, but Tanabe does not suggest that time can rewind itself. Gō and Noriko’s first trip together was an early evening drive to the mountains, when the night’s activities were just beginning, and they savored a sense of anticipation as they exchanged sidelong glances, sizing each other up (Come-ons 30). In contrast, as a divorced couple, they drive away from Karuizawa while the night wanes, and the barely suppressed excitement of their first encounter is replaced by a comforting warmth (As I Crush Strawberries 306). Noriko realizes that she contains a “machine” whose function is producing tender words toward Gō. This machine has been broken, and there is no hope of repairing it. But she

5 In the preceding quotation Tanabe evokes this sense by using the English word double as a Japanese verb “Watashijisin to Kozue no mi no wo daburase, naite ita 私自身とこずゑの身の上をダブらせ、泣いていた” (literally, “Doubling up Kozue’s situation and my own, I cried”).
may still be able to use a different part of her heart, her “friendship machine,” to forge a new relationship with her ex-husband (329).

Noriko has always thought of her past lovers as “close siblings,” a connection defined by the sharing of a sudden, unconditional happiness when she meets one of them by chance. She specifies, however, that she does not desire to return to the past or sleep with them again (Private Life 130-31; As I Crush Strawberries 24, 77). The fulfillment of Noriko’s story, then, is her accepting of Gō as one of these “close siblings,” and indeed in the last chapter she deems Gō a “spaghetti friend” based on their occasional meetings to chat over Italian food (331). Noriko has thus come to terms with her past, and this enables her to accept her own mortality: she finds comfort in the thought that although she may die alone, her male friends will someday serve as her pallbearers (335). Seemingly, then, for Tanabe the opposite of death is not romantic love, as Suzuki Keiko (2006, 146) puts it, but friendship. The male and female friendships Noriko cultivates in the last volume of the series illustrate her “sense of identity which then permits her to cope effectively with what continues to be, nevertheless, an essentially hostile world” (Rigney 1980, 122-23).

As she struggles toward this self-actualization, Tamaki Noriko tells us much about the contradictions implied in the “High Miss” phenomenon. She relishes her freedom as a sexually and economically independent woman, but at the same time she longs to exchange these freedoms for marriage and conventional femininity as Miura Gorō’s wife. Her marriage to Nakaya Gō brings her into conflict with the “hundreds of years of traditional attitudes”; although society now offers women wider economic horizons, marriage entails a return to age-old restraints (As I Crush Strawberries 27). As these forces nearly consume her, Noriko rejects the dyadic narrowness of marriage and finds wholeness among a network of friendships. This extended portrait of Noriko’s growth documents a real social phenomenon, but it also reflects Tanabe’s indignation at the low status accorded to unmarried women and her desire to challenge received attitudes. As Kan Satoko (2006, 151) observes, the current acceptance of women’s choice of life-pattern shows how Japanese society has changed to match Tanabe’s fictional world.

A Fragrant Multiplicity of Gender: “Don’t Be So Sweet”

One of Tamaki Noriko’s most attractive features is her ability to hold two points of view in mind at once. Even when Gō is on his worst behavior, Noriko does not forget his redeeming traits or fail to acknowledge her own limitations. In a deeper sense, she defies ontological duality in her statement that, for women at least, the body is part of the spirit, and the spirit is part of the body (As I Crush Strawberries 27). Likewise, her willingness to be “awkwardly unsettled” (chūtohanpa 中途半端) as an unmarried working woman implies a radical openness, a living in the moment without clinging to normative views of self and other, and this openness allows Noriko to wonder briefly whether she shares her friend Meri’s lesbian leanings (28).

The contradiction-embracing “High Miss” thus allows Tanabe to explore how even supposititiously objective markers such as “male” and “female” can shift and
transform. As Iida Yūko (2006, 174) remarks, feminism “places heavy emphasis on multiplicity and transformability. Even when the focus of discussion is on ‘woman,’ extreme care is taken not to allow the meaning of that term to become fixed.” While Iida judiciously refrains from deeming Tanabe a feminist author, we have seen how Tanabe depicts the same transcendence of set categories in the Noriko trilogy. Tanabe pushes this notion of an unsettled, multiple selfhood a step further in her short story “Don’t Be So Sweet” (“Yasashiku Shinaide” やさしくしないで) from the 1992 collection _The Scale of A Goldfish_ (Kingyo no Uroko 金魚のうろこ). In this story, binary oppositions between male and female become blurred, and Tanabe uses the trope of mingling fragrances to evoke how the mixing of opposites can enrich human life.

The protagonist of “Don’t Be So Sweet,” Tamai Yuri (玉井ユリ), exists in a gray area between the concepts of male and female, blending her feminine identity with some behaviors and traits conventionally associated with men. Tamai is an OL or “office lady,” a general term for female office workers, but at age 28 Tamai is one of the older women in her office and thus fits into the “High Miss” category. Tamai lives with her parents, and on the weekends she helps with the family liquor store in the stead of her younger brother, who reneged on his “promise to carry on the family business”; thus, in helping at the liquor store, Tamai is literally doing a man’s job (149). Much like a male office worker, Tamai pays no attention to housework, and she reasons that helping with the family’s business justifies her in shirking domestic duties. Tamai’s gender thus varies with her surroundings: she has a more feminine identity at her workplace and a more male identity at home.

Further, Tamai rejects stereotypically female attitudes toward love. Hamanaka, Tamai’s boyfriend and coworker, is married, so their relationship must remain secret. However, as Tamai explains, “If asked whether we were in ‘office love,’ I’d feel that it’s nothing so exaggerated. If the question were ‘is it adultery?,’ then I’d feel that it doesn’t have so gloomy an image” (149). She explains why categories like these fail to satisfy her:

> The combination of a family man and an unmarried office lady usually ends in, like, a filthy mud-slinging contest: They call each other names, and the woman goes around wailing, “I’ve been deceived, I’ve been injured”; it grows into a ruckus that draws in the man’s home and workplace, and the man returns to his family; the woman then bites her lip in anguish, thinking that if only she had super powers like a horror-movie demon, straight off she’d lift the man up by his hair, shake him senseless, send his wife to an anguished, gore-spewing death, and make his house burn up in a fire of mysterious origin ... all while tears of bitterness well up in her eyes.

But I, like, _despise_ that kind of stuff. (149-50)

Humorously depicting the typical love tragedy, Tamai rejects the stereotypical role for a woman in her position. Instead, she and Hamanaka simply enjoy “shooting fireworks together” until their affair ends when Hamanaka suspects Tamai is involved with their coworker Akiyoshi (149). As with her work life, Tamai rejects the conventional feminine role in romance, and she embraces...
behaviors and attitudes commonly associated with men. This rejection places her in other areas of indeterminacy, as we see in the emotional ambiguity of the eventual parting with Hamanaka she imagines: she hopes that she will be able to say “with a smile, 'Thanks, it was fun' even while feeling both satisfied and a little unfulfilled” (150).

Tamai is attracted to this middle space between genders and other binary categories, but she is aware that in rejecting gender norms, she risks incurring the displeasure of others, and she fears the exposure of her hidden male side. When Hamanaka tries to kiss her, Tamai demurs, requesting with comical formality “a month’s notice beforehand” (163). She further explains that “I don’t smoke at work, but at home I smoke from time to time. Don’t men often say so—that when they kissed a lady smoker, it was a letdown because she reeked of tobacco, and it was like kissing a man?” (162). Tamai, who does a man’s work at home, worries that the tobacco she smokes at home will make her seem repulsively male. But Hamanaka accepts her as she is, and the two share a kiss mixed with laughter, the moods of comedy and romance blurring together, much like the male and female aspects of Tamai’s gender identity. Despite Tamai’s initial fears, Hamanaka grows increasingly fond of Tamai because, as he later explains, he likes how she “combine[s] both man and woman” (167). In his view, Tamai is like a man because she can converse about their workplace, but because she is a woman, they can enjoy romantic pleasure. While his analysis self-servingly focuses on male pleasure, it is the only open recognition Tamai receives of her mixed gender status: Hamanaka, who exults that her double gender makes her “the greatest!” adores the condition that Tamai was reluctant to disclose (167).

Tanabe’s layers her text with other mixed states that complement Tamai’s mixed gender identity. The most noticeable of these layers is the word play we see in Tamai’s habit of forming whimsical abbreviations and nicknames for familiar people, places, and things. For example, she abbreviates the name of an energy drink called “Stiffness Free,” lopping the auxiliary verb zu from the negative verb stem shira (“know”). The name thus becomes korishira (コリシラ) instead of korishiraazu (コリシラーズ). This re-naming suggests both that Tamai derives energy from her habit of abbreviating and that she likes to be free from stiff or rigid patterns of thought. Appropriately enough, Tamai is drinking korishira on the evening when she and Hamanaka fall in love. Hamanaka teases her for “really going at it” as she upends the small bottle, and Tamai wonders, “just now, as I gulped it down, perhaps as a woman, I was being a little crude, overdoing it a bit” (156), again fearing the exposure of her mixed gender identity. But Hamanaka accepts her as she is, and he enjoys her abbreviation-riddled speech, jovially remarking, kettaini ryaku sunayo (怪っ体に略すなよ), or “don’t make freaky abbreviations” (157). While the word kettai is usually written in hiragana, Tanabe inscribes it using the kanji for suspicious or dubious, 怪, and body, 体. This “dubious body” refers directly to Tamai’s body of speech, but it also evokes the transformations love brings to her physical self: during their lovemaking Hamanaka covers Tamai’s body with kiss marks, which they view as “fireworks” and as “flower petals,” beautiful but evanescent markers of their shared pleasure (167-68). Expressing her mixed
nature physically liberates Tamai: she says that being in love makes her whole body relaxed and her stiff shoulders (kori) totally forgotten (shira) (160). Thus, Tamai’s dubious verbal play overlaps with her dubiously mixed body, and both elements provide a deeper expression of Tamai’s mixed, unsettled nature.

A related textual element is the mixed drinks the characters consume on their first romantic evening together. Hamanaka introduces Tamai to a bar which strikes Tamai as a strange blend of urban nightspot and student cafeteria, with its bright lighting offset by “bunny girl” waitresses in fishnet stockings. Hamanaka orders two “beer cocktails,” including a beer infused with mint liqueur for Tamai. As they order their third round, he imitates Tamai’s way of abbreviating. Tamai requests an orange squash (orenji sukasshu オレンジスカッシュ), which Hamanaka abbreviates as “osuka” (160). The “bunny girl” barmaid mistakes this utterance for the noun osu (male animal) and the question particle ka. She thus misinterprets his utterance as the question “are you a male [animal]?” and, surprised, turns to answer, “No, I’m a female [animal] … you mean me, right?” (いえ、メスです。あたしのことでしょう?). This jumbled communication sends Hamanaka and Tamai into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, which in a subtly postmodern movement, carries the lovers out of themselves, dissolving even the categories of self and other. The text breaks at that moment, and in the following paragraph, Tamai states that she cannot remember how she and Hamanaka left the bar. In this scene, liquor mixes with beer, male mixes with female, animal mixes with human, laughter mixes with love, and subject mixes with object. These improbable combinations result in a moment of transcendence that would elude characters lacking Tamai and Hamanaka’s openness.

As his verbal play in the bunny-girl scene suggests, Hamanaka seems to be the ideal partner for Tamai, and he in fact straddles several categories in a way that parallels Tamai’s gender ambiguity. Having married into a wealthy family, he is “a secretly wealthy man” who wears custom tailored suits yet chooses to obscure his stylishness behind a pair of “black-framed, humdrum, Japanese-made” eyeglasses (153; 152). His covert enjoyment of wealth echoes Tamai’s secret enjoyment of a mixed gender identity: neither character wishes to reveal that hidden trait for fear of rejection from narrow-minded coworkers. Further, Hamanaka defies the norm for his fellow executives in his relaxed and outgoing manner. Tamai comments that among the many ambitious workers on track to advance within the company, “quite a lot of them are work-obsessed drones who just glance at you with bloodshot eyes as they rush about” (151). But Hamanaka manages to be both a star on the fast-track and an affable coworker: he stops to chat with the office ladies and is able to compliment them on their hairstyles without seeming patronizing (151). He thus balances career ambition with a suave decorum that allows him to be equally at ease within the masculine and feminine spaces in the office.

Yet for all these promising signs, we also find clues that Hamanaka’s willingness to straddle categories is only superficial. He reveals that the world

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6 The Noriko trilogy also repeatedly connects the animal and human worlds, most notably in an extended comparison of monkey and human societies in *Private Life*.
of the executives is actually split into two rival factions and that his, led by the company’s managing director, is the more powerful one. He “lectures” Tamai on this aspect of her company, and although she does not have much interest in these factions she realizes that “he always exudes confidence and is so popular due to that sense of superiority” stemming from his secret affiliation (166). Thus, his sense of selfhood is not one that crosses boundaries but instead rests on an exclusive affiliation with other elite males. Here we may recall his self-serving definition of Tamai’s mixed-gender attractiveness: she offers sex appeal while affording him the ability to discuss his work. And he fails to notice Tamai’s listless responses to these lectures, showing that he seeks less a partner for mutual communication than a passive audience for his monologues.

Hamanaka and Tamai thus hold and act upon differing visions of selfhood. Tamai accepts and expresses her mixed nature, but Hamanaka covertly relishes social divisions and the power relationships they generate. In the end, Hamanaka cannot resist forcing Tamai into a new category of his own making. When complaining about his unfulfilling marriage, he jokes that people fall into one of three species: “man, woman, or wife” (167) and praises Tamai for combining the best traits of the male and female genders. But a groundless rumor about Tamai and her co-worker Akiyoshi sends him into a jealous rage worthy of Gō from the Noriko trilogy. Hamanaka declares that “now you’re even more than a wife to me” (176), creating a new but rigid category just for her. He explains that all men are jealous, and that “truth be told, I’d rather not even allow my woman out of doors,” firmly connecting himself with masculinity and her with a subservient and domestic female position (175; 176).

Being forced into such a category disheartens Tamai. She reports that “a wave of exhaustion hit me all at once … and I felt like drinking a bottle of korishira” (175). But the sort of verbal play embodied in the beverage’s name shifts her perspective and restores her vitality, enabling her to condemn male hypocrisy with a caustic wit that Noriko shares but never directs toward others. Tamai confronts Hamanaka, exclaiming, “You’re fooling around yourself, and then you go off on me over a mere rumor—that’s pathetic. Commanding me like a dictator, Mr. Hamanaka, you’re just like Hitler. You’re an old grump who’s a Hitler, so that makes you Grumpler!” (177). Tamai thus rebuffs his attempt to possess and categorize her, making another kettai abbreviation that illuminates the dictatorial nature of externally imposed gender categories. Reflecting back on this moment of parting with Hamanaka, Tamai comments that her habit of forming mixed and abbreviated words gives her a sense of security, which in turn allows her to view the conflict objectively, not getting drawn into the heat of the moment (176). Her mixing of language both supports and draws strength from her mixed gender identity, enabling her to assert herself in response to a lover, and a society, that tries to reduce her to the status of possessable object.

Interestingly, Tamai’s given name of Yuri provides insight into her shifting, changeable selfhood. The primary meaning of the Japanese word yuri is the flower called lily in English, and according to the Kōjien dictionary (1998), yuri’s origin may be in the verb yuru (揺る), which means to bend and sway, or to hesitate
between choices. Yuri’s name thus reflects her mixed, unsettled nature, and Tanabe plays upon this meaning, using the related verb *yuragu* (揺らぐ) in Tamai’s comment that her “mood strangely wavers” when Hamanaka calls her Yuri. Further, although Tanabe writes the name Yuri in katakana, as she often does for the names of her protagonists, all readers will be conscious of the kanji for yuri (百合), which could be literally rendered as something like “one hundred convergences,” subtly reinforcing the image of a mixed or blended entity. This sense of the word derives from the Chinese reading of the characters 百合 as *hyakugō*, which refers to the lily flower but has as its primary meaning “a perfume compounded out of many fragrances” (Kanjigen 2005; Morohashi 1989, Vol. 8, 47). This resonance of the characters 百合 lurks behind the katakana ユリ that Tanabe uses to inscribe her character’s name, Yuri. The unstated kanji are present in the minds of her readers, and the kanji waver between flower and fragrance, just as the lily wavers on its stem, and as Tamai Yuri wavers between feminine and masculine identities. Even the choice of angular katakana ユリ instead of the more fluid hiragana ゆり adds a subtly masculine edge to a traditional female name through its appearance and historical association with male writing. In making these choices, Tanabe adroitly mixes kana with kanji, and Chinese readings with Japanese words, to hint at her protagonist’s fragrant multiplicity.

Tanabe’s plays on these resonances of the name Yuri in her use of various fragrances at key moments of the text. First, Tamai purchases *korishira* at a Chinese medicine shop called Shunkōdō (春香堂) or “hall of spring [or youthful] fragrances,” and the shop’s interior is pleasantly redolent with herbal aromas (154; 155). Tamai finds this mix of fragrances invigorating and states that visiting the store makes her “want to become a believer in natural remedies…. In other words, it arouses a desire to go back to the ancient medicine that seeks to preserve human health using herbal ingredients” (155). This response to the mix of health-inducing smells in Shunkōdō echoes Tamai’s need to express her naturally mixed gender identity, and it is at Shunkōdō that Hamanaka runs across Tamai drinking the bottle of *korishira*. Here again, the herbal smells become important. Tamai remarks on a “refreshing fragrance and slight sweetness” that makes the beverage slide enjoyably down her throat. Likewise, the mint beer she drinks afterward has “the spicy aroma of peppermint, and is bracingly pleasant” (158). Her key encounter with Hamanaka is thus punctuated by complexly fragrant beverages that Tamai ingests. As Yuri, or as Hyakugō, she thereby enriches her true nature as a harmonious mingling of distinct attributes. And the story’s conclusion returns to the sense of smell. Tamai runs into Akiyoshi, whose rumored affair with her provoked Hamanaka’s fit of totalitarian jealousy. The two sit on a bench near the river, gazing at the shrubbery across the way. Tamai’s last observation is that “I couldn’t see the river’s dark surface, but I could detect the smell of water” (180). The smell of water works to complete both halves of the bittersweet ending. Her

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7 An intriguing parallel to this use of yuri appears in *Private Life*: Noriko is holding a lily flower when she runs into her former lover Mizuno and wavers between a desire to sleep with him once more and her instinctual knowledge that she should not return to that addictive habit (156).
relationship with Hamanaka at an end, Tamai has seemingly lost a place to express her mixed gender and other identities: complex fragrances give way to something simpler and less fulfilling. At the same time, water has a pure and natural smell, and it can serve as a base for a variety of fragrant infusions: Tamai has not forsaken her identity to cling to Hamanaka or to encourage the advances of Akiyoshi.

**Tanabe's Natural Beauties**

Tamaki Noriko and Tamai Yuri follow similar life patterns. Both choose to remain single working women and thereby take on “High Miss” status. Both get involved with wealthy men who become their partners for comedic banter and sexual fulfillment. The single-minded possessiveness of those men, however, eventually leads both characters to return to their “private life” as unattached women, where they show a remarkable capacity for enjoyment that frees them from any need to depend on men. In closing, we might note one last similarity: the character 玉 (tama) in their surnames. This character ideographically represents precious stones and also expresses the connected meanings beautiful, cherish, and noble (Kanjigen 2005). In the case of both Tamaki (玉木) and Tamai (玉井), the predominant meaning is beautiful, so we could translate these names as “beautiful tree” and “beautiful well” respectively.

These surnames thus point to connections the characters have with the natural world. We have already seen how Tamai, as a “beautiful well,” is associated with the element of water through the fragrant beverages she consumes, her hidden identity as the compounded perfume hyakugō, and the story’s closing scene which emphasizes the smell of water. Tamaki Noriko is likewise associated with trees: her post-divorce apartment looks out over the trees surrounding Osaka Castle, and she expresses delight at the birches and larches she sees in Karuizawa (As I Crush Strawberries 116; 225, 245, 284). In fact, she becomes something of a tree herself, wearing a hand-painted pinecone around her neck when she dines with her friend Meri in Karuizawa. Meri observes that the pinecone “is marvelous. It suits you perfectly, and nobody other than you could pull it off” (229). Tanabe thus imbues these characters with an ethos of natural beauty that emerges as they transcend restrictive concepts related to gender.

Critics who read this transcendence as no more than a sort of stoic acceptance may underestimate Tanabe’s contribution to Japanese women’s literature. Iida Yuuko (2006, 175), for example, does not consider Tanabe a feminist author on the grounds that she does not attempt to challenge or transform an unjust society:

> If we consider feminism to have as its center that sort of change-oriented energy, it is neither easy nor appropriate to place within that framework the protagonists depicted in Tanabe Seiko’s works—men and women who accept or rebuff unpredictable interpersonal relationships and their own equally complicated internal desires, men and women who are ready to greet the coming day, not dwelling too deeply on where they might go.

Iida justly recognizes that our view of Tanabe and feminism rests on how we define
feminism itself (175); Iida herself emphasizes active resistance toward oppressive social structures as a necessary condition for feminist literature and accordingly concludes that Tanabe’s characters “are hardly depicted as radical” (176). Tamaki Noriko and Tamai Yuri, however, enact a quiet form of resistance through a transformation of their own consciousness: they discover fulfillment by accepting and expressing their multiple, inconsistent, fragrant selves.

Tanabe thus frees her characters from goal-oriented conceptions of femininity in which marriage and childbirth become indispensable sources of meaning in the life journey. We see this liberation in the texts’ non-linear structures. The Noriko trilogy seems to follow a straight line of romance-marriage-divorce, but the plot spirals back on itself, as discussed above, beginning and ending with Noriko’s nighttime journeys with Gō. At the end, Noriko has not concluded her life story, but rather risen above it by accepting herself as a temporal being. The final volume’s title, As I Crush Strawberries, emphasizes this transcendence by situating Noriko’s consciousness in a moment of time without entrammeling it in a specific context. And Noriko indeed crushes strawberries in the opening and closing lines, suggesting a delicious and eternal now that both encompasses and stands above the novel’s action. By embracing contradiction—by accepting her mortality while living in the eternal present—Noriko gains the vitality she displays in the closing chapter of her story.

“Don’t Be So Sweet” likewise eschews linearity, beginning with the rumor that ends Tamai and Hamanaka’s relationship and ending with Tamai in an unresolved space that contains both her dwindling love for Hamanaka and her new appreciation for Akiyoshi. In this sense Tamai does not journey from one goal to another or struggle to resolve the tension between self and society. Rather, she accepts the contradictions that emerge out of her personality, and she savors occasional moments of transcendence when others like Hamanaka accept and reflect her mixed nature.

Just as her characters defy social classifications, Tanabe herself is an exceedingly difficult author to classify. Iida, for example, discusses Tanabe’s relation to feminist literature in terms of “overlaps and divergences.” And Shindo Masahiro (2006) points out another set of contraries embodied in Tanabe’s writing:

> Regarding the act of reading, the tendency that emphasizes escape from reality is, in extreme cases, realized in the forms of fantasy and historical novels. The tendency that aspires to convey everyday experience in literary language gives birth to the reality-centric forms of which the I-novel is representative. The place where these contrary tendencies coexist with a marvelous degree of harmony is in the novels of Tanabe Seiko. (137)

In straddling categories such as realistic and imaginative, feminist and traditional, Tanabe’s career reflects the very values expressed in her stories. And Tanabe surely does not mind being a writer who defies classification. But we should be careful not to let the lighthearted aspects of her work tempt us into overlooking her stories’ literary worth. Hardly light fiction, Tanabe’s texts challenge us, thrusting us into a multi-layered literary reality as complex as the society in which we live.
GLOSSARY

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