Subversions of Gender and Power
in Ōba Minako's "Yamamba no Bishō"

Samantha Landau

Abstract

Beginning as early as *Genji Monogatari* and continuing to the present, women writers have had a significant impact on Japanese canon. Their perspectives present a critical view of the social structure and its effects on the lives of women, both in fiction and in factual biographical accounts. This essay posits that many female authors from modern Japan defied gender stereotypes and wrote about the difficulties that women faced. To illustrate this point further, Ōba Minako (1930-2007) is introduced as an exemplary author who succeeded in her career despite many potential obstacles. Ōba's writing combines imagery of women's power in the literary tradition as well as motifs from Japanese mythology to express a deep-seated anxiety with regard to the individuation process. Her short story "Yamamba no Bishō" examines this theme from the perspective of a psychic witch haunted by her supernatural abilities. Through an analysis of this story, the author will theorize that these abilities embody women's dual desire to both conform to the existing power structure and to reject it.

Introduction

Two main struggles interest me as a scholar and critic of literature: one, the struggle for individuation within the family structure and the subsequent anxiety that arises from it; and two, the struggle against the family structure imposed by society, or the (attempted) destruction of that imposed family structure. In the Japanese context, examples of the former may be found in the works of such authors as Ōba Minako (1930-2007), Kōno Taeko (1926-2015) and Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-), who deal with marginality and otherness, as well as the roles of father, mother, and children within the family structure and society at large; examples of the latter may be found in the works of Ōoka Shōhei (1909-1988), Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), and many others.

The anxiety arising from the struggle for individuation within the family structure thus presents a turning point in the explorations of familial relations in literature that seek to subvert culturally assigned gender roles. Such roles become opportunities for the author to add plot developments that astonish or shock, even while they still appear to accept existing socio-cultural constructions. These developments run the range of the uncanny, such as the psychic protagonists and mythic motifs to grotesque stories in which betrayal and murder are perpetrated.

The problematic role of gender within the family enables communication between

characters (or between the author and reader) in these stories to become a tool for the re-discovery of newly re-defined relationships of identities and differences. In literature, communication (or lack of it) in the form of verbal language, or in the form of a character's thoughts, can be deeply influenced by social and cultural codes, intercultural experiences, psychological issues, subjectivity, and sexuality. This essay will endeavor to demonstrate that the power structure in familial relationships in literature is clearly influenced by gender, culture, and language. The power structure is also influenced by the marginal nature of authorship, or in other words, the necessity for the author to take a step back out of his or her socio-cultural and psychological situation to sit on the margins of the story in order to narrate, to have experienced alienation, or to be, in reality, what Tomoko Kuribayashi terms "a social or cultural outsider."[1] After a brief exploration of the topic of gender in Japanese women's writing, issues of power structure and anxiety will be examined through a literary analysis of Ōba Minako's "Yamamba no Bishō" ("The Smile of the Mountain Witch") (1976).[2]

Gender Roles and Female Authorship in Japan

It may be said that women's role has been ever-changing, however slowly, since the end of World War II and the reconstruction of Japan, making inroads into both social and cultural consciousness, but more importantly to our discussion, in the literary world. Japan, having left behind the postwar period, underwent an era of enormous change, yet the patriarchal tradition established in the literary community has not experienced the same drastic amount of change, nor has its policies towards female authorship changed along with it. The situation in the literary community may provide signals and signs regarding the accepted or unaccepted treatments of gendered readings of literature. According to Chieko M. Ariga, commentary and criticism on women writers is still almost entirely written by male critics (353). Even authors who are known amongst English-speaking scholars as authors that deal with feminine anxiety, familial issues, and socio-cultural problems as well as the marginality of authorship, even in their "complete works," they are denied printed assessments by other women. For example, commentary and criticism included in the complete works of female authors, in particular Ōba, is also almost completely written by male critics. Because of this situation, scholars who write and publish in English feel that Japanese women authors must defend the right to imagine a female character in their own way.[3] This may be especially true in the cases of Ōba Minako and Kōno Taeko, whose writings clearly show their shared opinion that woman's gendered role in society is being controlled by men's fear; in their works, to subvert the context of that fear and use it to show the truth in the situation is to prove Ōba's statement:

If you look at it from a woman's point of view, she feels like wondering why they [men] are so

afraid. It seems that men, uniformly, think of women as frightening creatures, and even if you read old folktales everything is like that. Women are associated with destruction and ruin; those are feminine things (Ōba *Taidan: "Yamamba" no iru Fūkei* 141).

Male critics and other men alike may have actually something to fear regarding authors like Ōba and Kōno: they may fear the power of prominent women writers who have the ability to utilize fantastic themes in order to subvert their hegemony.[4] Although it is somewhat overly simplistic to say that critics/criticism rule the literary world, the pattern seems to indicate a lag in the equality between women and men within the literary world, the effects of which are worth further consideration.

Female authors often point out the problems with feminine roles, especially motherhood in their works. Kuribayashi has noted that "the socio-cultural construction of Japanese motherhood" is a prominent theme in Japanese fiction, and it is a special preoccupation for Japanese women writers (Kuribayashi xxii note 9). Examples of how Japanese women approach motherhood may be seen in the works of Kōno Taeko, Tomioka Taeko, Takahashi Takako and Ōba Minako, as well as many others. Even while these authors give the appearance of accepting motherhood as a natural occupation for women, they subvert that social role by adding fantastic, shocking, or surprising developments in their stories. There must be a reason for their need to use their writing to raise gender issues, especially within the family setting. Ariga states that while women do not necessarily have to raise gender issues in their writing, the peculiar case here may be due to "the postmodern emphasis on categories as constructs [which] often ignores the fact that women continue to experience daily collective discrimination in the material world based in their gender classification" (374 note 4). By becoming authors, these women have already challenged what Ariga terms "a pitfall of post-modern criticism," reclaiming the cultural construct of "woman" that so many male authors have tried to apprehend by positioning themselves in that role (*loc. cit.*). Moreover, through their expression of anxiety towards the familial structure, they re-possess the position of "woman" in their stories. But why is this re-possession even necessary? A brief exploration into legitimacy and authorship in Japan may provide some hints.

On one hand, the male tradition of authorship and publication is certainly strong, and there are many fine authors who are highly acclaimed the world over; there are even two Nobel Laureates in the category of literature, Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburō, both of whom are men, and both of whom use very different themes, motifs, and symbols in their works. On the other hand, one may posit that the tradition of Japanese women as writers is as old and well-established as the Japanese literary canon itself: even the most widely read book, *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), was written by a woman, Murasaki Shikibu. Japanese women were writing, despite struggling to find their literary voices in the midst of an oppressive society.[5]

However, literature written by women was not recognized by women as a canonical tradition to which they could refer with pride as their literary foremothers. Especially during the World War II era, literature written by women in the Heian era was not used to demonstrate women's ability to write and think; it was instead used to teach women etiquette and manners (Ōba Minako "Special Address: Without Beginning, Without End" 20). However, as Ōba handily points out, the Japanese government was too ignorant of its domestic literature to realize the "subversive power" of such works as *Genji Monogatari*; they looked only at the surface of the story and seem inexplicably unable to realize the deeper meaning of its origins and its contents. Moreover, they were too distracted with ousting non-Japanese literary influences and confiscating Western literature to realize the danger of women reading Heian literature (*loc. cit.*). Ōba Minako's comments are similar to those of other scholars: the works of female authors are placed centrally in Japanese literary canon and also greatly influence female authors of later generations. In fact, recent landmark studies (in English) on fiction written by modern Japanese women and the image of women in the works of modern Japanese male authors discuss just that.[6] Even as they were oppressed in Japan, literary foremothers have had a particular and lasting impact on subsequent generations of Japanese women, an influence highly visible in the subject matter treated by female authors such as Hayashi Fumiko, Takahashi Takako, Enchi Fumiko, Kōno Taeko, Ōba Minako, Uno Chiyo, Kurahashi Yumiko, and many others. They deal deftly with such heavy subjects such as the psychosocial repression of the female, breakdown in communications between family members, the search for happiness outside of culturally assigned gender roles, and other serious socio-cultural commentary about the roles of women in society.

Their ability to speak out in strong literary voices was partially made possible by the constitutional revisions and new Civil Law enactments in 1947, which empowered women and rejected the old, rigid patriarchal social structure. The new governmental structure "based on the principles of family life grounded in respect for individual dignity and equality of both sexes" was meant to give women and men an equal footing (Yoshizumi 189). With the old "family" system abolished, parental rights became cooperative and the written law recognized the legal equality of husbands and wives, as well as the management of separate finances and property ownership.[7] In theory, modern laws provide for a relationship between two individuals characterized by freedom and equality: "neither can possess the other, and neither can govern the other according to her or his will. Even though the husband and wife are a couple each is an individual and entitled to retain her or his personality and will" (Yoshizumi 196). So although the ideology behind marriage no longer functions as, or represents, the linkage between families, the concept of marriage still implies the making of a family (or nuclear unit) itself.

When discussing anxiety towards one's gender within the family unit in Japanese

literature, the situation is complex: one must take not only this history into account, but also how its after-affects may have lingered into the modern era. Without the *ie* system, the importance of the nuclear unit is considerably greater, and so is the potential for anxiety to arise in regard to the "ideal" of it. Thus, Japanese women authors, in order to subvert the aforementioned stereotypes, call upon a plethora of literary devices as well as their tradition, rediscovered but not really lost, from their Heian foremothers.

In particular, Ōba has called upon this tradition to strengthen her authorial universe, giving it depth and rich history and enabling her stories to achieve an atmosphere of myth. As an author, she was inspired by fairy tales she read as a child, but she also "identifie[d] with the Heian female tradition of authorship as a direct source of her creative energy as a novelist and literary critic" (Wilson "Becoming, or (Un) Becoming: The Female Destiny Reconsidered in Ōba Minako's Narratives" 294).[8] Even as a child, her desire to become an author was inextricably linked with her uncommon personality; instead of trying to conform to the expectations of those around her, she continued to write prolifically, determined to be true to her nature. I believe that nature is most clearly demonstrated in the scene she relates from her childhood: when she was in elementary school, she was asked to write down what she wanted to be as a grown up and she wrote down "writer," but the teacher told her to write down what school she wanted to enter. She was baffled by her teacher's scolding; she says it was the first time she remembers being confused that adults asked strange things of her. In her mind, what she wanted to be had no real connection with what school she attended (Wilson *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* 169). From a very young age, it seems clear that she did not think the way others did and she felt strange when asked to conform to their way of thinking. Furthermore, even as a girl she knew she wanted to become a writer, and she stayed true to that goal until she had achieved it, which is quite unique. There are, of course, other reasons we could cite regarding her uniqueness, especially in relation to her personal family situation. Her family's ideology was, unlike the aforementioned norms of patriarchal hegemony, dominated by couples who were not only in love with each other, but also helped to raise their children together. This extended not only from her parents, but from her grandparents as well.[9] Furthermore, her maternal family members continually supplied her with literary works, offering her an intellectual atmosphere that was later reinforced by her education (Wilson *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* 11-12). Thus, in her own family, she saw both the trials and the triumphs in expanding women's role in society beyond the domestic sphere.

Power, Family, and Witches

Faced with the falsities contained in the socio-cultural construct of the ideal family and its strict gender roles and the pressure to conform to them, Ōba Minako's protagonists

struggle to find their voices and to be seen as individuals. In a multi-generational fashion, Ōba addresses the past in the form of grandmothers, the present as mothers, and the future as daughters. One of the stories most directly connected with her own distinct nature and also with her style of utilizing traditional feminine images is "Yamamba no Bishō" ("The Smile of a Mountain Witch") (1976). It begins as any other Japanese fairytale about *Yamamba*, the terrible witches who live in the mountains: "Let me tell you of a mountain witch," Ōba writes, inviting the reader to imagine the stories of mountain witches who devour male travelers that wander too close to their homes and seek lodging for the night (Ōba "Yamamba no Bishō" 461). Ōba Minako then uses this to fuel the questions that are at the core of this story: what if a mountain witch was not born as an ugly old hag living deep within the forest in the mountains, but grew up according to the norms of Japanese society? What havoc would that wreak on both the woman with the witch's consciousness and those surrounding her?

The story of that "real life" mountain witch, the unnamed protagonist, actually begins with her death. Then the story flashes back across her life as a young child who could not quite fit in because of her psychic ability to read the minds of others, and to know their true desires as well as their more superficial thoughts. Even her mother is bothered by her strange abilities, but encourages her to stay true to herself. Nevertheless, being true to her nature is very stressful for her, and during her young adulthood, she decides to use her talent to conform to the wishes of others instead of her own, transforming into a woman who refuses to assert her own will. She marries an abrasive man, conforming herself to his desires, constantly feigning jealousy and weakness when she knew he desired her to do so. They somehow live together happily and raise a family, however, because of the protagonist's flexibility and psychic talents. They grow old together. The man demands that she nurse him, but her own age and increasingly heavy body weight makes that impossible. He ends up taking care of her instead, a subversion of their previous marital situation. Eventually, she dies of complications related to cerebral thrombosis, with her daughter by her side. The protagonist smiles when she dies, knowing she will no longer be burdened by her abilities, nor will she be a burden to her family.[10] She smiles a second time when, in death, she realizes that she was a mountain witch all along and can once again return to the mountains.

In this story, the idea of being a psychic woman (not just a witch) may be treated as an issue of labeling. Roles assigned, or labeled, by society such as daughter, wife, and mother are subverted by the protagonist's abilities. As a daughter, she even usurps the role of mother by repeating aloud her mother's thoughts. From these exchanges, the mother concludes (through her daughter's voice):

….her mother, undoubtedly irritated, gazed at her daughter, thinking, "Why does this child read

other people's minds all the time. She's like a mountain witch. I wonder if she will be hated as mountain witches are" (Ōba "Yamamba no Bishō" 464).

Gender roles associated with the norm are subverted here—since the young witch is psychic, she wants to resist the influences of those around her. However, she becomes conscious that her talent is disturbing to others, causing her to have a further experience of being an outsider within society because her psychic nature is not readily accepted. Despite (or because of) her abilities, she feels a self-admitted otherness of a mountain witch and yet is determined to live a normal life. Although her mother tells her to speak her mind, she instead retreats further into herself, conforming to the way others see her instead of the way she thinks she should be.

Modern laws in Japan provide for the equality of men and women (it is a constitutional right), especially with regard to married couples; they are meant to be free and independent beings that have come together out of love and mutual respect. Yet the protagonist in "Yamamba no Bishō" marries a selfish, self-centered man who does not subscribe to these values at all. She says nothing even when he makes utterly misogynistic assertions:

> Women are incorrigible things; they are deeply jealous, employ only shallow cleverness, tell small lies but are incapable of telling large ones, and are, furthermore, stupid and timid. Women are only capable of being human by clinging to men (*op. cit.*, 468).

She bears children who are only fleetingly grateful to her, mostly when they remember the love and care she showed them (this is especially true of her son, who does not even bother to visit her when she is dying). If one were to take an existentialist perspective, the interpersonal relationships in this story seem to lead to the conclusion that even psychic mountain witches feel fundamentally alone in this world—even though her inner nature is that of a powerful human-devouring witch, she is not taken seriously, is exploited by those around her, and often fantasizes in order to escape the essential loneliness she feels. These fantasies, according to Michiko Wilson, reflect her ability to identify with "a myth of female self-division" (Wilson *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* 61). She desires to simultaneously be an angry, vengeful demon and a patient, beloved mother. This dichotomy, by its focus on the fantastic, deconstructs the problematic gender inequality in the story.

Possessing of dual desires (demon and mother) and a dual personality (witch and human), it is unsurprising that Ōba's protagonist also has the innate inability to settle into any "properly" sanctioned role for women in society. Her psychic abilities prevent her from doing so; she cannot conform because she is naturally and constantly hearing the thoughts of others. However, she is also human, so she desires love and acceptance. This distinct inner-outer conflict demonstrates her "need to distance herself from this enclosure even

while staying within it" (Ramirez-Christensen 17). The mountain witch, who is meant to live outside of society (according to myth), possesses an inherently marginal nature. Human propriety, taught to her by society, clashes with that marginal nature and prevents her from expressing it. This situation may be read as a critique of women who allow themselves to dedicate their lives to deciphering the desires of others and allowing society to dictate their lives (Wilson *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* 62). Therefore, the concept of being a mountain witch unable to truly express her inner psychic nature may be read as a woman who has trouble embracing her own individuality. Moreover, the mountain witch remains nameless in the story, which renders her characteristics and talents the most important factors in defining her identity. As previously stated, she takes on the roles of mother and daughter in the story, so only her psychic abilities really set her apart from others. But instead of embracing her psychic abilities and inner mountain-witch-y nature in order to individualize herself and demonstrate her own uniqueness, she uses them to read the minds of others and try to meet their unspoken expectations. Her psychic abilities and inner witch spirit (unreal) threaten her human relationships (real); that is why she feels she must temper her true nature by remaining silent.

The mountain witch, by her very nature, blurs the "real" and the "unreal," forcing us to redefine how we perceive her predicament in terms of an inner-outer conflict. Her abilities function as a sort of *camera obscura* in the story, distorting the "real," translating the natural world and human relationships around her into something *more* than they should be (after all, normal people do not, or should not, expect others to perfectly live up to their expectations all the time by being mind-readers). While the spirit of the mountain witch inside her (object) and her human form (image) seem to be one and the same, what the other characters see is actually an ambiguous combination that does not differentiate between the two. This other-ly, fantastic cohesiveness is possibly best expressed by the witch's parting lines in the story:

> Although she had also thought about which would have been happier, to dwell in the mountains and be a human-eating witch or to dwell in a village,[11] in hindsight she felt that it would have been the same either way. It would have made little difference: if she lived in the mountains, she would have been labeled a mountain witch; if she lived in the village, they would have said she was a fox incarnate, or just a mediocre woman who lived out her life physically and mentally robust. But in the end, on the inside, she would have been the same (Ōba "Yamamba no Bishō" 477).

The protagonist herself tells us that her "otherness" is not a factor perceived by those around her based on where she decides to call home; she exists only as herself and on the inside, she must place her identity somewhere between mountain witch and ordinary woman.

On one hand, "Yamamba no Bishō" criticizes the institution of the family, especially the

essential isolation of women within the family unit. In the domestic sphere, even mothers and daughters find language and thought problematic when communicating with each other. On the other hand, this story "debunks the myth of the good mother and the obedient daughter," or the woman who follows all of the rules to society, reading the atmosphere of every situation perfectly (Wilson *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* 105). Ōba renounces this myth by utilizing her womanly perspective to subvert the social and cultural issues that men have traditionally ignored. The mountain witch, after all, knows that she would have been the same no matter where she lived; her obedience was not a factor of her surroundings, but of her reticence and defeatist attitude that perpetuated her circumstances. At the end of her recounting, the Ōba's mountain witch smiles—and it does not seem to be a happy smile. The problems she could not or would not solve have become the problems of her daughter's generation. Perhaps the smile represents hope for the future of women, that a younger generation could succeed where the mountain witch's generation was unable; but perhaps it also represents an irony that the younger generations of women have inherited the weight of many generations of women's wishes to live out their lives wholly in the open—to be mountain witches powerful yet in harmony with dominant societal structures, seen and appreciated for who they are instead of being feared, disliked, or even hated for their natural abilities.

Conclusion

Discussing subversions of gender in the power structure of the family sheds light on problems related to anxiety towards the family unit. That anxiety causes oppression from without in the form of societal pressure to conform and oppression from within due to the individuation process and the individual's desire to be unique. Through textual analysis, we have arrived at the conclusion that "Yamamba no Bishō" describes a protagonist who has deviated from assigned gender roles within the family unit. Nonconformity was expressed through fantastic elements that subverted those assigned roles, functioning as a translation of reality. It was also profoundly connected to the anxiety with regard to the family unit present in the text.

Finally, complicating the discussion about power and anxiety in the family further, resistance to culturally assigned gender roles in familial relationships can present a turning point in fictional works, especially with regard to the anxiety arising from the individuation process. In other words, the author seems to be telling us that there was a significant amount of choice involved, even if the characters chose to adhere to the expectations associated with socio-cultural constructs like "wife" and "mother." The fact that choice is involved is significant—it is certainly a deviation from the overtly oppressive patriarchal structures of the past. Moreover, the choices made in this story seem to be related to a dichotomy of devouring/destroying, or creating/loving. In Ōba Minako's "Yamamba no Bishō," the

mountain witch has a choice: to live alone in the mountains waiting to catch and eat male travelers, or to willingly give in to hegemony of patriarchy and succumb to the assigned roles of daughter, wife and mother. In the context of gender subversions, this duality may be related to a more overarching use of woman's image in literature. It merits further discussion because it may lead to important conclusions about the synthesis of this text and new arguments about the evidence regarding not only the relationship between women and men in the family but also parents and children.

Notes

1 For a lengthier discussion of the term and its various applications in Japanese literature, see Kuribayashi, xviii-xix.

2 All translations for the stories, interviews, and criticism by Ōba Minako are my own unless otherwise noted.

3 However, sometimes this argument is misused, as in Michiko Niikui Wilson, "Becoming, or (Un) Becoming: The Female Destiny Reconsidered in Ōba Minako's Narratives," 296. Although here Wilson uses this to make an argument for placing Ōba in conflict with her male peers and critics, which is certainly a valid argument, at the same time, she seems unable to grasp the concept that male authors seen as "dissenters" could be spat upon by the literary community, have their careers ruined, or even be arrested and murdered by the government for their ideas.

4 For more connections between women writers and non-mimetic, fantastic text that subvert the existing hegemony, see Mulhern, 131.

5 For examples of how women wrote exceptional works during otherwise "silent" centuries of Japanese women's literature, see Schalow and Walker, 4; see also Ericson, 74-115.

6 There are several very good studies discussing the way in which women's writing has simultaneously remained central to and left out of the Japanese canon; four books of particular interest are Victoria Vernon's *Daughters of the Moon*, the essay collection *The Woman's Hand*, edited by Schalow and Walker, *The Father-Daughter Plot*, edited by Copeland and Ramirez-Christensen, and *The Outsider Within*, edited by Kuribayashi and Terasawa.

7 Relics of the old system remain, such as a woman's inability to retain her surname upon marriage and the necessity for the newlywed couple to create a "family register" when they marry—however the married couple (and their offspring) form the cornerstone of this registry—it does not include either their parents or any extended family, and when their children marry, the children also leave that registry.

8 For Ōba's own discussion of her Heian influences, see Ōba Minako, "Special Address: Without Beginning, Without End," 19-40.

9 For details about the special relationship between her parents and her grandparents, which may have influenced her image of the family, see Wilson, *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako*, 11-18.

10 Specifically here, she thinks that she will no longer be a burden on her *daughter*, who is at her bedside when she dies. It echoes the earlier scenes between her and her mother, in which she felt herself a burden to her mother. But it is worth noting that upon her death, the mountain witch thinks that perhaps her own mother was also a mountain witch. This is significant to the discourse of the relationship between mothers and daughters in the works of Ōba and warrants further discussion.

11 The kanji used here, 里 (*sato*), refers not only to a village, but contains an implication of one's home or place of origin. Therefore, this reference is not to just any village, but to the place she lived while she was in human form in the story: her home.

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（サマンサ・ランダオ　英語コミュニケーション学科）