

## **How do the depictions of Japanese lesbian life in the short stories “Peony snowflakes of love” and “A strange tale from down by the river” correspond with accounts of lived experience?**

Heather Humphreys

*School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, UK*

heather177032@gmail.com

Heather Humphreys graduated from the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), University of London with a BA (Hons) Japanese in July 2009. She currently teaches English at Elementary and Junior High School level in Hokkaido, Japan on the Japanese Government run Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme.

### **Abstract:**

Depictions of homosexuality, particularly female homosexuality, are not yet widespread within Japanese modern literature. In this paper I intend to provide an analysis of two fictional texts which openly tackle the position and experiences of women who are, or have in the past, been involved in same-sex relationships. I will examine the extent to which “Peony snowflakes of love”, written in 1987 by Osamu Hashimoto and Banana Yoshimoto’s 1993 “A strange tale from down by the river” reflect the Japanese lesbian experience evidenced in academic research of the last twenty years, considering social attitudes towards marriage, conformity and the perceived importance of gender roles. Through consideration of the texts’ authorship, I will raise the question of “authenticity” within the stories and also consider who has the “right” to speak for another demographic group. I will then examine possible reasons why there are so few lesbian-authored texts within the Japanese literary canon and how discussion of existing texts may contribute towards changing this fact in the future.

In order to appreciate the context within which this discussion of addressing writing by marginal groups can occur, it must be acknowledged that, particularly when viewed in comparison to other countries, Japan is a nation with a rich and long-standing tradition of female-authored literature, with works written by women as early as the Heian period (794-1185), forming in integral part of the fundamental literary canon. However, despite this early blossoming it would be centuries before women’s literary works could be said to occupy a significant role within this canon, perhaps, as in many other countries, a reflection of a general social trend, within which both women’s creative voices and their lived experience were seen to be of secondary importance to those of their male social and economic peers. Indeed, until the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of literature published within Japan related predominantly to only one facet of the Japanese experience: that of ethnically Japanese, male, upper-middle class heterosexuals. In recent years, due in large part to feminist and other popular movements which strove to address numerous social inequalities, writing by those from groups which have historically been marginalized, has come to be seen as equal importance, and those within the literary academy have gone some way to redressing the balance and bias of previous generations.

However, the case of literature depicting same-sex relationships is perhaps an exceptional one. In many cultures around the world, homosexuality is still taboo, if

not actually illegal, and literature which depicts such relationships is vulnerable to attack, and in some cases to censorship. Likewise, much as marginalisation is still subconsciously manifested by the constant usage of, for example, the prefaces “women’s” or “black” rather than just including work by these groups within the wider definition of “literature”, such writing is still often seen either as a “niche” form of writing with a uniquely homosexual audience and appeal, or else disregarded entirely. However, just as “women’s writing” could never be said to reflect *only* the female experience, so “gay and lesbian literature” often explores not only the relationship of marginalised groups and individuals to society at large, but also themes of alienation, self-identity and the necessity of political recognition, which are applicable and essential explorations across the board of human experience.

Yet even within Japan, both anecdotal and academic evidence reveal that, although homosexuality is not illegal, nor is homophobia and its resulting discrimination actively addressed. In many communities, particularly those outside of urban areas, there is often a “lack of public space for exclusive homosexuality and a coherent public gay identity” (Stone 2004, p.6) and complete acceptance of those who choose to be “out” is rare. Rather, inherent conditioned homophobia is visible in widespread societal assumptions of heterosexuality. It is certainly the case that an understanding of Japanese lesbian experiences and the depiction of such through literary means is still in its infancy, due in large part to the double marginalisation faced by those in Japan who self-define both as female, and as homosexual. As one critic has succinctly and accurately stated, “lesbians have faced a double oppression in Japan – as lesbians and as women.” (Summerhawk *et al* 1998, p.6). Equally, prevailing Japanese attitudes towards marriage, and more generally with regards to women’s freedom, impinge upon both the actions of and attitudes towards lesbian and bisexual women.

In many areas of Japanese society, the institution of marriage still reigns supreme “as a means to achieve social adulthood and normality” (Robertson 2005, p.6) and, despite advances in women’s rights, the pressure to find a partner and thereby fit into a society which even today strongly identifies characteristics of womanhood with those of homemaking and child-rearing, is immense. This is a fact reflected in real-life statistical surveys of lesbians. Within a culture in which “it is often said that marriage is not just between a couple, but between villages, families, companies, and groups” (Summerhawk *et al* 2005, p.5), those with something non-conformist to hide within their personal lives naturally feel the most strain. Cherry, in her analysis of Japanese lesbian life in the eighties, writes that, among women over 30 who would define as “lesbians”, of those polled “a quarter were married” (Cherry 1992, p.407) and with regard to the future, “even among unmarried lesbians, only 71% didn’t expect to wed” (Cherry 1992, p. 409). Equally, within both the short stories under consideration, homophobic prejudices are not in fact as evident as, for example, societal expectations regarding marriage.

Given that literature depicting same-sex relationships within Japan, and research relating to the lives of Japanese women appear to be gaining in prevalence as social attitudes towards homosexuality gradually shift, it seems appropriate to consider an analysis of the ways in which fiction depicting female same-sex relationships may potentially reflect or expose the lived experience of lesbians who have told their stories to academic researchers. The texts chosen for consideration within this paper each raise a number of points of interest and of potential controversy in their depictions of lesbian experience and same-sex relationships within Japan.

They are interesting precisely because they appear, in a number of ways, to corroborate the statistical and anecdotal information presented within research undertaken over the last 20 years, whilst simultaneously calling into question who is writing lesbians into their fiction and for what reasons, as well as feeding into a broader discussion on the role of literature as a vehicle through which those who can historically been marginalised may be empowered to make their voices heard.

Akemi, the narrator of Banana Yoshimoto's "A strange tale from down by the river" (original 1993) tells a piecemeal narrative of her earlier life, within which the past lesbian relationship she references is somewhat incidental, portrayed as merely one of many misdemeanours and sexual extravagancies in which she engaged: they are the "abnormal" from which she has emerged into the "normal". Although she has already rejected the "wild" (Yoshimoto 1995, p.123) sexual exploits of her past, the pivot on which the normality of her future life rests is her impending marriage. Osamu Hashimoto waits until the final few paragraphs of "Peony snowflakes of love" (1987)<sup>1</sup> to call into question the legitimacy of the lesbian relationship depicted. The story centres on the emerging bond between Tomeko, a gloriously stereotypical butch lesbian truck driver and Yae, a painfully awkward older woman, who eventually leaves her husband and adult children to move in with her new lover. As they share dinner, Yae tells Tomeko, characterised throughout as the epitome of the stock lesbian character, with no desire for a heterosexual relationship, "until you get married...I'll always be here" (Hashimoto 1991, p.237). Tomeko is as shocked to hear such a statement as the reader, yet, as already discussed, such ideas regarding marriage are the reality for many gay Japanese, particularly women.

It is also a seemingly faithful portrayal of "real life" Japan, a nation which McLeeland, Suganuma and Welker term "a society based on 'compulsory heterosexuality'" (McLelland *et al* 2007, p.196) which we find within the two distinct works by Yoshimoto and Hashimoto. In the former story, when her boyfriend proposes, Akemi answers "yes, of course" (Yoshimoto 1995, p.129), as though nothing could be more natural than conceding to a heterosexual, monogamous relationship, despite the fact that, sexually in the past, she has "tried absolutely everything...with women...with men" (Yoshimoto 1995, p.123). Such an answer mirrors true social attitudes which seem, essentially, to allow "dalliances", even homosexual ones, provided that they neither take place in the public sphere, nor constitute a *lasting* subversion of sexual norms. Despite her own growing affection for another woman, within "Peony snowflakes of love", Yae, as well as those around her, feels that her 26 year old daughter "might want to think about marriage" (Hashimoto 1991, p.214). Equally, Akemi's former partner, whose name we never learn, is "a well-to-do married woman" (Yoshimoto 1995, p. 139) who seems, like Akemi, and as Yae expects of Tomeko, to have merely been indulging in relationships with other women until she elects to integrate "properly" into Japanese society. Akemi is told by her ex-lover, that her rejection of her past life and her choice to embrace a normalizing, heterosexual relationship is the right thing to do because she is "not a child anymore" (Yoshimkoto 1995, p.139). Through marriage, she does nothing more than fulfil her social obligations. This perception of homosexuality as some kind of passing "phase" reveals again not only the notion that everyone is, essentially, heterosexual, but also that "the concept of 'Japanese womanhood' is achieved through the representation of women's activities as concerned solely with 'the family'"

<sup>1</sup> The dates given in the references refer to the English translation from the Japanese.

(Chalmers 2002, p.44) As Chalmers correctly asserts, despite the huge shift in prevailing attitudes of a post-feminist, post-modern Japan:

There is one over-arching assumption that still remains firmly in place and overwhelmingly unchallenged in academic and popular discourse. That is, that all Japanese are heterosexual, or, at the very least require a heterosexual guise in which to operate as full members...of Japanese society. (Chalmers 2002, pp.1-2).

In a similar vein, playing with the idea of marriage politics, Hashimoto's lesbian love story employs the idea of the stereotypical "roles" within a lesbian relationship, presenting a clear "male" and "female", mirroring the heterosexual framework. Yae rejects her abusive, alcoholic husband and then settles down into a parallel "husband" and wife relationship. Tomeko is the proud, "well-muscled" (Hashimoto 1991, p.216) possessor of a "swagger" (p.230), a "crewcut" (p.207) and plays *pachinko* (p.229) on her way home from work. In contrast, Yae is a permanently apologetic, hesitant, picture of Japanese womanhood. Like "a naïve Cinderella" (p.212) she is "defenceless" (p.220) in the face of Tomeko's advances. When the two part one evening and Tomeko leaves, Hashimoto describes Yae as "like a child letting go of a parent's hand for the first time" (p.213). The overt portrayal of Tomeko as the "man" of the couple is perhaps best summarised in the line: "Yae...still couldn't reconcile herself to the fact that Tomeko Kasahagi was a woman." (p.218) Given such a presentation of heterosexualised roles within the relationship, it is pertinent to consider who it is that presents such an image of a marital situation which is so evidently only a different manifestation of "the system" which Tomeko "had vowed to never join". (p.224)

Indeed, within Japanese literature which depicts lesbian sexuality, several aspects regarding authorship demand attention. Primarily interesting is the fact that a number of the texts depicting homosexual women which are better known, certainly in the West, are not in fact lesbian-authored. This is exemplified in the cases both of "Peony snowflakes of love", written by a man, and of "A strange tale from down by the river", written by a heterosexual woman. Indeed, anyone attempting to find any Japanese literary works depicting lesbians will notice that such material is conspicuous in its relative absence. The reason for this is perhaps twofold. Primarily, as such authorship demonstrates, many lesbians within Japan still feel great difficulty in addressing and publicizing their own sexuality. This ties in to the other key point highlighted by such a lack of stories addressing lesbian themes: the relative visibility of Japanese lesbian lives within the public domain and the way in which this therefore affects the legibility of lesbian bodies within Japanese literary discourses. Chalmers writes that "the silences that surround Japanese self-identified lesbians' daily reality are both socially and self-enforced from the inside" (Chalmers 2002, p. 137). In a society where the propagation of a myth of homogeneity and the idea of shared group mentality is vital to the construction of national identity, it is hardly surprising that Japanese lesbians often choose to remain hidden, rather than leaving themselves vulnerable to prejudice. In a culture within which conformity is often perceived as fundamentally important, the situation of this group, whose "existence is largely hidden from the public" (Cherry 1992, p.207), is interesting in that it can be, and often is, kept secret. Homosexuals, as a community of practice rather than of identifiable, physical characteristics, can choose not to "come out" and thereby conceal their identity as a member of a marginalised group in a way that those of other minority populations cannot. Within the literary and cultural world, this leads to the omission of an entire group, as described by Klinger:

If lesbians have historically been “hidden from history,” then their books, papers and artwork – the records of their existence and resistance – have been no more secure. (Klinger 2005, p.74).

That is to say, lesbians are often hidden not only within actual society, but also through the absence of their stories in the realm of the written word. In Hashimoto’s tale, Yae, in the midst of her own confusing feelings for another woman, suggests to her co-worker that Tomeko “must really be popular with women” and is rebuked with the exclamation: “What do you mean? She *is* a woman!” (Hashimoto 1991, p. 217). The very concept of lesbianism seems completely outside of her sphere of experience.

Equally, although in many literary traditions, the acceptance and inclusion of literature with homosexual themes has aided in encouraging the existence of a queer counter-narrative, empowering those who would once have been marginalised for their lifestyle to not only discuss, but also celebrate it; the nuance of and content of “gay” literature written by “straight” authors is necessarily different in its connotations, and problematizes the entire concept of the genre. Moreover, it leads to a perpetuation of the heterosexual male image of lesbians which has become socially and culturally ingrained. Many of Japan’s best known male authors have written lesbian characters or scenes into their work. This list includes Yukio Mishima, Junichirō Tanizaki and the Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata. Until very recently, such male-authored works were the predominant medium through which lesbian relationships (or, more frequently, lesbian sex scenes) were presented. When the concept of lesbian sexuality was first publicly addressed in print media within Japan it was predominantly in male authored, male read magazines (McLelland 2005, p.168) as a result of which, even now within Japan, “the image evoked by the word “lesbian”...is perverted, like porno movies, especially to men.” (Cherry 1992, p.408) This in turn makes it immensely difficult to find “authentic” depictions of the Japanese lesbian experience, especially within older literature. It was not until the late 1980s that the genre of lesbian writing was launched by the first publications of “coming out” stories and, most particularly in 1986, of “*onna wo ai suru onnatachi no monogatari*” (Welker 2004, p.131), a text which became fundamental for Japanese lesbian women in their construction of an identity and a community. Before this point, as McLelland states:

It is difficult to distinguish between fantasy writing in which lesbian desire was scripted...and that which was written by women themselves who experienced same-sex desire. (McLelland 2005, p.84)

Not only do male depictions of lesbianism often fall into such a category, but Hashimoto, for example, could easily also be said to be less than sympathetic in his portrayal of what could have been a very positive portrait of lesbianism. Instead he depicts Tomeko, towards the end of the story, starting “to regret that she was only a woman” (Hashimoto 1991, p. 236), leaving the reader with the impression that both she and the author feel that the very fact of her gender undermines the entire validity of her same-sex relationship with Yae. Equally, once the action of the story has become entirely focused on the romantic life and physical space which the two women now share, he describes “Tomeko’s broad and, *from a man’s point of view*, shapely shoulders” (Hashimoto 1991, p.234 *emphasis added*), even as Yae is touching and commenting upon her breasts. Along with his somewhat negative exploration of Yae’s view of her sexual relationship with Tomeko, such authorial choices in narration challenge the reader’s potential perception of such a lesbian relationship as either successful or desirable.

The choice of non-lesbian authors to address lesbian themes within their works may well also lead us to question their motivations for doing so, especially if the depictions are, in some cases, less than idealistic. It is therefore not only through the “facts” of lesbian characters’ lives that we can attempt to gain an insight into the status of homosexuals within Japan. The very way in which an author such as Hashimoto, as a representative of the non-marginalised, conventionally privileged group, betrays his society’s prejudices and expectations is highly informative in itself. Although we can never entirely know an author’s intentions, “Peony snowflakes” does appear to demonstrate a male view of lesbianism that is still prevalent because, through the very fact that it still privileges the male gaze and patriarchal hierarchy, it does not threaten the status quo in a way that widespread acceptance of true lesbian sexuality might. As Wieringa et al comment:

Potentially the presence of women’s same-sex pleasure can expose the spurious stability of the family/nation nexus upon which the Japanese earthquake-proof temple is built. (Wieringa *et al*, 2007 p.41).

These two texts raise a number of other questions relating to the role of literature in relation to “real” life experience. Even if both texts had been lesbian-authored, we can never state that literature has any duty to reflect social realities. Equally, we cannot simply superimpose fictionalised narratives over the experiences of Japanese women who identify as “lesbian” in an attempt to match up the effect that their lives and “true” social attitudes towards them may have on the depiction of female same-sex relationships within the literary sphere. However broadly research is conducted on actual lesbian lifestyles within Japan, any account will always be subject to individual bias and idiosyncrasies: one person’s experience will never entirely reflect that of another and “the Japanese lesbian experience” cannot be neatly parcelled up as one coherent whole.

However, it remains the case that these two fictional works and their characters can nevertheless be seen as important, creative responses to the society of their authors. No writer can create literature in isolation, shut off from the social discourses which surround them, and both Yoshimoto and Hashimoto appear to address, through their short stories, a number of social pressures, expectations and attitudes which are also evidenced in the personally narrated experiences of lesbian women within modern Japanese society.

It is clear that many literary depictions of Japanese lesbian life may be far from the reality faced every day by homosexual women in a society which often seeks to normalize their relationships through its emphasis on marriage, and its still existent culture of relative silence surrounding marginalised groups. Yet, the very presence of depictions of lesbianism within any literature is perhaps a step in the direction of openness and liberation for an historically neglected demographic group. Equally, the growth of same-sex literature both as a genre within Japan, and within wider literary study, can have positive implications for the visibility and representation of those who identify as gay or bisexual. As Robertson writes:

Over the past five to ten years, the diversity and pluralities that in dynamic tension with dominant singularities constitute gendered and sexual identities, experiences and discourses in contemporary Japan have finally become increasingly important fields of academic enquiry, interpretation and representation. (Robertson 2006)

Texts such as the two discussed merit analysis not only as literary works in their own right, but also as documents which can shed much light on both prevailing social attitudes towards lesbianism within Japan and the continuing relative absence

of queer, female voices in the written tradition. It is perhaps through criticism of the male gaze within texts such as Hashimoto's, and engagement with the ideas surrounding marriage within Japanese society visible in Yoshimoto's work that future female homosexual authors of lesbian texts might become empowered to tell their stories.

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