

# Women in Contemporary Anglo-American and Japanese Literature: Of Cherry-blossoms, and of Weeds

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Woman's life has all too short a date  
Full of sorrow and suffering

—Fumiko Hayashi—

This study on women in Anglo-American and Japanese literature has evolved out of the lecture notes prepared for an English course I taught during the winter term 1981 at Michigan State University, where I spent a year as an exchange professor from March 1980 through March 1981. The course, "Women and Literature" as it is called, has now become part of the core curriculum in the Women's Studies Program in American universities; the course is designed to meet the changing views on women (and men) in life and in literature. As Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes in the afterword to the twentieth anniversary edition of her book, *The Gift from the Sea* (1955; 75), in the past two decades a great progress, humanly speaking, is in the growth of consciousness—"a new consciousness of the dignity and the rights of an individual, regardless of race, class, or sex."<sup>1</sup> There has been noted a significant change in our consciousness about ourselves: our relation to men and to other women, to family and to society. This has necessitated, in turn, a new approach to the way women are treated in literature. The popularity of "Women and Literature" courses is a manifestation of such recent development registered in scholarly as well as in creative works.

What I offered to do in the course was to see different cultural perspectives on woman and her problems through an examination of uniquely female experiences as expressed in the writings of some representative Anglo-American and Japanese writers of the 20th century: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927); Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973); Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* (1955; 1975); Joyce Carol Oates' *Them* (1969); Fumiko Hayashi's "Late Chrysanthemum" (1956); Aya Koda's "The Black Kimono" (1956); Fumiko Enchi's "Enchantress" (1958); and Sawako Ariyoshi's *The Doctor's Wife* (1966; trans. 1978). We were severely restricted in the selection of Japanese novels, as we had to depend on books available in English translation, which is still meagre especially in the field of modern Japanese fiction written by women. Despite the handicap, however, our selections have turned out to be adequately various and illustrative of female experiences in Japan.

In the epigraph Fumiko Hayashi compares woman's destiny in life to that of cherry-blossoms, whose prime is short-lived. She moanfully sings that woman's life is

full of sorrow and suffering—a life of long servitude to the opposite sex: father, husband, and son. The place of woman at home and in society was so decreed in Confucianism. Also the Buddhist notion that woman is a sinful and unclean creature had long deprived Japanese women of their birthrights. Likewise, in the West there exist what Betty Friedan called “the feminine mystique” and misogyny comparable with the Buddhist idea of woman. Both Confucian teaching and feminine mystique regard woman not only different from but also inferior to man, exhorting that the nurturing of husbands and children is woman’s sole aim in life. In what follows I would like to examine how these ideas find expression in the works of the aforementioned writers.

## I

I will fondle each  
but it will come to nothing.  
They will not nest  
for they are the Christs  
and each will wave good-bye.<sup>2</sup>

What Betty Friedan defined in 1963 as the feminine mystique is an ethic which holds that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their femininity: sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. The mystique is so deeply ingrained in the culture that it has hindered the natural development of woman as an individual being. “All her instinct as a woman—the eternal nourisher of children, of men, of society—demands that she give.”<sup>3</sup> For women heard over and over in voices of tradition that “they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, literature has collaborated in the perpetuation of the mystique, praising the feminine beauty and glorifying the motherhood as symbolized in the icons of Venus and Virgin Mary. In this scheme of things beauty and maternal love become the two cardinal female traits. Only in recent years have women started to question the validity of such mystique.

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf creates a psychic drama of her own divided self. Mrs. Ramsay exemplifies the quintessential feminine nature, which is a source of power. Mrs. Ramsay is the superwife of Mr. Ramsay, philosopher and author of books. He is a demanding male who always wants sympathy from his wife. Mrs. Ramsay is maternal, gracious, intuitive, and subtly power-seeking. She is beautiful beyond description, like a goddess who claims everyone’s admiration. Yet she has no name except that of Mrs. Ramsay—her first name is mentioned only once in the novel.<sup>5</sup>

She is in great demand, tending their eight children and a houseful of guests at their summer house on the island. This “general server of the world” gives freely, spilling herself out in little charities of visiting the sick and the old, or of taking a basket of small consolations to the family of the lighthouse keeper, which expedition is postponed because of the bad weather, an intrusion of masculine rationality, metaphorically

speaking. For Mr. Ramsay's "it won't be fine tomorrow" does bring on rain. Amidst the domestic distractions Mrs. Ramsay often finds herself looking immeasurably exhausted and sad: "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent. . . ."6 She is reduced to "a sponge sopped full of human emotions," to "a collection of functions,"7 however invaluable such functions are to keep the household. Unlike Mr. Ramsay who has "his work to fall back on,"8 Mrs. Ramsay is giving herself purposelessly.

Yet, her capacity "to surround and protect" is also a source of power. As the stage manager of the Ramsay household, she radiates. When she presides at table, time stands still there; she thereby creates a harmony among the people who gather around her. At such moments she becomes queenly, subtly despotic, and expects an absolute attention from her "audience." Ironically, the *raison d'être* of her life is others: her husband, children, and old bachelors who need her care and her home, of which she is the center. Mrs. Ramsay thrives on the masculine egotism which converts her into a flattering mirror. Therefore, she resents Mr. Carmichael who alone refuses her "interference." It hurts her tremendously to think that "all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity"9: "For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, 'O Mrs. Ramsay! dear Mrs. Ramsay . . . Mrs. Ramsay, of course!'" and need her and send for her and admire her?"10 In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed both as a superb illustration of the feminine mystique and as a critique of that myth. She is an ideal Victorian woman, maternal and gracious; at the same time self-seeking, possessive of her children, especially of little James.

Mrs. Ramsay is filtered to us through the eyes of Lily Briscoe, an admirer of the Ramsays. Much as Lily adores Mrs. Ramsay, however, she is not blind to some unpleasant aspect of this queenly woman. Lily is offended by her high-handedness: Mrs. Ramsay delights in the fulfillment of her own femininity and she imposes the same sex role on everyone. She thus becomes an instrument in perpetuating the feminine mystique; she is a natural match-maker. But the irony is she utterly fails in this: the young couple, whose engagement constitutes the central drama in the novel, find their marriage a failure. Likewise, her own daughter, Prue, dies in childbirth, an eloquent illustration of unfulfilled motherhood, as if to say that unless woman lives for herself as well as for others, her life will come to nothing. Curiously enough, Lily Briscoe cannot finish a picture of Mrs. Ramsay with little James framed in the window—an image of a mother and a child. Her composition is instead a triangular purple shape—a female symbol, nevertheless.

Lily Briscoe, an independent girl, materializes the other half of Mrs. Ramsay's destiny: to make time stand still, not in life bringing people together, but to give immortality to the flux of life, an image on canvas. Thus considered, *To the Lighthouse* is a challenge to that Victorianism which Mrs. Ramsay so beautifully embodies, and a challenge to the culture that sanctions the feminine mystique. Lily whom Mrs. Ramsay

pities, because with her "little Chinese eyes" she will never marry, comes out as a victor as self-sufficient as Augustus Carmichael who dispenses with Mrs. Ramsay. Lily overcomes the voices of tradition that woman has no greater desire than the fulfillment of her nature, and that "Woman cannot paint. Woman cannot write."<sup>11</sup>

Granting that physical beauty is of paramount importance in female psychology, because the virtue of sexual passivity presupposes that woman be attractive and desirable, to say (as Mrs. Ramsay does) that Lily is unmarrigeable because she is homely is misleading. For Lily would have married William Bankes who liked her<sup>12</sup>—if she could. Lily chooses a single life with clear-sightedness, for an artist demands self-indulgence, which is not compatible with motherhood.

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf has demonstrated that there are more than one destiny for woman, alternatives to marriage and motherhood, which point has seldom been discussed in literature nor in life. This Woolf accomplished in the time when Hemingways and Faulkners continued to produce female stereotypes: Lena Groves, or Margaret Macomers. Lily is overshadowed by Mrs. Ramsay and by great—in the sense that Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* is "great"—heroines of Hemingways and Faulkners. Lily Briscoe has earned her own name, which is not Mrs. Ramsay's; Mrs. Ramsay is an artist of life creating harmony among people, Lily becomes an artist of different order. Hers is as good a life as Mrs. Ramsay's. Lily's rejection of the conventional sexual role imposed on her by Mrs. Ramsay is a kind of exorcism.<sup>13</sup>

Kate Brown, the heroine of Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*, is another portrayal of a nurturing mother. More self-conscious than Mrs. Ramsay, Lessing's woman, in her pursuit of autonomy, identifies, challenges and transcends the psychological and economic dependencies inherent in this culturally determined sex role.<sup>14</sup> "A woman stood on her back steps, arms folded waiting"<sup>15</sup> begins the novel. This woman can be any woman past fifty, looking back on "twenty-odd years of being a mother and a wife," waiting for the dark which besets on any human being.

Lessing confronts head on the predicament of the middle-aged woman who outlives motherhood. (Mrs. Ramsay is past fifty, like Kate, but she is still engaged in nurturing *small* children.) Kate Brown, on the other hand, suddenly discovers that being a wife and a mother is over, as every one leaves *her* home for the summer. She finds herself "dismissed, belittled, because the problem of the house was being considered so unimportant."<sup>16</sup> Call the real estate agent—he will take care of the business. For Michael the question is that simple, but not for Kate, since she *is* the house. Well educated and naturally talented, Kate would have sought the professorship of Portuguese literature, if she could, but "women did not seem often to become professors."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, she quite easily has chosen a life of "passivity, adaptability to others."<sup>18</sup> She is the wife of Michael Brown, a noted scientist. She keeps the house neat and clean; she dresses properly as Mrs. Brown living in the white house in the suburbs.

*The Summer before the Dark* is a dramatization of Kate Brown's pilgrimage to realize "the essential Kate," which is simultaneously narrated in her dream—a story of Kate carrying an injured and stranded seal (a symbol of the state of her mind that summer)

back to water. Kate sheds the culturally defined role and values in order to achieve an inner growth, by deliberately performing the masquerade of being a nourisher of others—a tribal mother to the delegates at the Global Food Conference. She makes plans, organizes meetings and sightseeing trips. Everyone praises her competence in Portuguese, seeks her assistance in personal affairs as well. Kate Brown repeats the assigned part; the difference is that she is paid liberally for the job. After the Conference she still has the whole summer to herself, so she agrees to go to Spain with a young American, Jeffery. This escapade ends, however, in a mockery of an affair. Jeffery picks up Kate because she is attractive, to be sure, but mainly because she is safe. Ironically, Kate is to nurse him when he becomes seriously ill in a god-forsaken village. Jeffery's illness is indicative of his refusal to grow up, to take responsibility as man. Their love-making ends in nausea and sickness. Kate abandons him, thereby escapes the cycle of being a nurse to the man-child—the role she has to break free of to further her self-realization.

Kate comes back to London to spend the rest of the long summer until she reclaims her house in the suburbs. She rents a flat in Bloomsbury and plays house with Maureen, a sort of hippy-girl, who eats only the canned baby food, another example of the arrested maturity. Acting a surrogate mother to Maureen finally relieves Kate of that role. Maureen's decision against a marriage which promises her all the comforts attendant a conventional family life completely cures Kate of playing the culturally fixed sex role. She gains strength to resist the pull of her habitual duty and lets her family reclaim the house without her as stage-manager.<sup>19</sup> Her daughter can replace her; the fact won't make her feel dismissed, nor belittled, for she now can define the emotional center of her self.

Kate understands the full meaning of aging and is reconciled to the natural course things will take, which is evidenced in the way she lets her hair grow out. During the summer Kate learns for the first time that sex is a commodity and that the clothes and the hair styles—women's extrinsic values—are what attract male attention. Without proper clothes and a right hairdo woman is invisible. But to her this naked entity is all that matters. "What on earth did it matter to the girl, or to herself, what she looked like?"<sup>20</sup> Kate wonders and she gives up dying her hair.

Some may regard the *denouement* of the novel as self-defeating: that Kate's awakening is only skin-deep because she goes back to the family which does not need her, and that Kate is a caricature of the feminine mystique. Yet, her implied return should be understood as a notable expression of her new self-definition. If she decides to join her family again, she does so because that is what she wants, and not because such course of action is expected of a Mrs. Brown. She learns the value of that life with its comforts and its limitations, and she chooses to be by her husband for a while yet before she will go into the dark. The Kate who departs from Maureen's flat with a suitcase is the transformed Kate Brown immune to the judgment the others pass on her. To borrow Mrs. Lindbergh's phrase, Kate "has come of age alone"<sup>21</sup>; she learns to be alone outside "a cocoon of comfort"<sup>22</sup> which houses and protects her as Mrs. Michael

Brown. Thus Kate identifies and transcends the psychological and economical dependencies of being a wife and a mother.

Virginia Woolf once asked for “a room of one’s own” for woman so that she could secure her privacy amidst the clatter and chaos of domestic distractions. However, the room has its function being part of the larger structure, that is, the house. Kate’s journey during the summer, graphically, shows that she leaves the white house in the suburbs, and moves into a hotel room which gives her an illusion of anonymity and of freedom. She then rents a flat in Maureen’s apartment, and goes back to her house in the suburbs, which should *not* be taken as a regression nor as an undoing of what she has learned that particular summer before the dark.

In the scheme of the feminine mystique, woman’s physical attractiveness is invaluable. Mrs. Ramsay is divinely beautiful; hence she deserves people’s worship, which Kate realizes, however, is not of lasting kind, nor of intrinsically woman’s virtue. All the same, like the queen in “The Snow White,” woman has consulted a mirror with great expectation as well as with fear—fear of aging and becoming ugly and invisible. Joyce Carol Oates’ *Them* begins with a mirror scene.

*Them* deals with the generations of the two women—mother and daughter, who live from the 1930’s through 1968. Loretta (Botsford) Wendall is a strong and healthy girl, in love with her own reflection in the mirror. She is fond of that face; anything can happen to that pretty face. This healthy and hopeful girl is, however, tricked by life; at sixteen she is stuck to the kitchen, when there is all the world to roam in, taking care of her brother and her widowed father.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, on her first date Loretta finds Bernie lying dead beside her in her bedroom. Loretta marries Howard Wendall—the first man who comes to her rescue. Her desire to get free of the strictures of the family and poverty results in an early marriage, which is the end (the goal) of her life. “She had come to the end of her life, Loretta thought, and it was a solid good feeling to think that she would probably live here forever, watching the kids in the neighborhood growing up, . . . Everything was fixed and settled, good.”<sup>24</sup>

Loretta easily accommodates herself to a life of sexual passivity of “waiting for man to come home.” Woman makes what she can of the situation she finds herself in; this enables her to endure and survive. If woman’s life is vulnerable, like cherry-blossoms, it is also endowed with something like the resilience of the weeds. Loretta’s sheer energy of adaptability is amazing; her coarseness, insensitivity, and her selfishness are almost redeemed by her capacity to make promises. “‘Yes, people are really good, deep inside their hearts,’ she would say, almost crying, thinking of what her life would have been if Howard had not come along.”<sup>25</sup> Her frequent explosions into anger and tears usually end in a reconciliation of the past and a renewed hopefulness for the future. And for her children home is where Loretta *is*, as she is the base of their home. Jules keeps writing letters home while he is away in the South; even Betty, a street child, regularly inquires after her mother.

During the Detroit riot of 1968, Loretta plans to go to a nursing school to become a nurse, now that her children are gone from her. At forty-six, Loretta dreams of “a

life without children dragging her down.”<sup>26</sup> Loretta’s strength lies in her capacity to begin all over again: she is “always ready for the next day, always curious, cheerful, even in her complaints anxious to see what was going to happen next— . . . Loretta was always ready to begin all over again.”<sup>27</sup> But what she would become is intrinsically her “natural” role, that is, a caretaker of other people.

Maureen, Loretta’s daughter, is disgusted with her noisy, disorderly home. She is instilled a fear of life by her mother who tells her: Don’t let them push you around.<sup>28</sup> Maureen grows up to be a sullen and passive girl who is extremely afraid of life’s unpredictability. She begins her life by rebelling against her mother’s way—a life of ever “waiting for man to come home.” She even criticizes, tacitly, her mother’s insensitivity and sloppiness. She keeps home neat and clean; she is naturally trained to do domestic work, unlike Jules who dreams of getting away on the road. At the end of the novel, Jules lights out for the West. Such mobility as Jules’ is denied to Maureen because of her sex. What a girl in her station of life can do is limited. Maureen is led to prostitution by accident, and beaten almost to death by her step-father who discovers her savings hidden in a book.

The last section of the novel begins with the same mirror scene portrayed in the first section of the book. Maureen is a single girl working as a secretary and lives in a single room. Like her mother before her, Maureen brings her face up close to the mirror: “Doomed to be Maureen all her life? It seems to her a mystery that she would always be herself, this particular person; there is no way out.”<sup>29</sup> Desperately Maureen attempts to immerse herself into marriage, which she hopes will obliterate most of “what was Maureen.” She must marry Jim Randolph, who will desert his wife and children, to marry her; she will be provided with a house and children, be safe from the life’s unpredictability. As Friedman suggests, for a survivor love is not important.<sup>30</sup> And it is too much to ask of this spiritually sterile and frigid woman more than a mere survival.

The great irony of Oates’ novel resides in the fact that Maureen’s salvation lies in a submission to the very life she dreaded once—a life of “waiting for man to come home.” Maureen was self-conscious that she was different from her mother; yet she chose the similar destiny. She has to break up the marriage in order to secure it; this may be taken for her conscious or unconscious protest against the culturally defined sex role and woman’s place in society. Maureen does not regard the institution of family and marriage as permanent and absolute.

## II

she sighs again  
thinking of her life  
was it wasted?  
living for her husband and children?  
no, it wasn’t wasted, she thinks

I have had a good life  
to have a good husband  
such good children

Throughout history woman as the eternal nourisher of life has given herself freely, because it has been decreed as her sole function in life—to give. More than two decades ago Lindbergh posed the question: but is it a purposeful giving? In the poem quoted above, an old Japanese woman asks the same question, and answers in the affirmative. The old woman forgets the passing of time and ages, “As she sits alone/ With the water/ singing *koto* strings in her ears.”<sup>31</sup> This is a twilight world of serenity and pseudo-contentment, far removed from the world of Mrs. Ramsays, Kate Browns, or Loretas. A Japanese woman in the Anglo-American imagination may be summed up in the following exchange I had with my students at Michigan State University:

“She [the Japanese woman] is a threat.”

“A threat? You mean a threat like a Toyota?”

“Yeah—that’s right.”

“Tell me how she can be that to you.”

“Well . . . for the American male she is petite and exotic. She is not self-assertive. No, she is not aggressive.”

“Like any other myth, she is a fiction, I am afraid. A Japanese woman in flesh and blood will easily disappoint you . . . .”

It is no surprise that the West has fostered such “romanticized” vision of the Japanese woman, who was made to suit the requirements of the male imagination. She was—to a certain extent *is*—a product of ethical forces inherent in Japanese society. Like misogyny in Anglo-American society, the Buddhist notion that woman is an unclean and sinful creature has deterred a natural development of woman as an individual being.

There is a book called *The Greater Learning for Women* written more than three hundred years ago, of which a copy was a common item in a bride’s trousseau. The book had a lasting impression on the minds of innocent girls. An obedient, forbearing woman who figures in the Western imagination was deliberately manufactured according to the precepts given in the booklet:

[A woman] must look to her husband as her lord, and must serve him with all worship and reverence, not despising or thinking lightly of him. The great life-long duty of a woman is obedience. . . . Should the husband be roused at any time to anger, she must obey him with fear and trembling, and not set herself up against him in anger and [forwardness.] A woman should look on her husband as if he were Heaven itself, and never weary of thinking how she may yield to her husband, and thus escape celestial castigation.<sup>32</sup>

Women were required to live a life of self-effacement, and they were never to question its validity. They would go to great lengths of submission and endurance rather than



invite "celestial castigation," not to say marriage rupture, the stigma they could never hope to redress. Conversely, the Japanese man was endowed with something like "the divine rights of kings." How could she learn to assert herself when there are various daily practices which naturally teach a girl "how necessary it is for her in everything to yield to her husband the first, and to be herself content with the second place. . . ."33? The old woman in the poem thinks her life was not wasted: living for her husband and children is her life; she has had no other life.

In 1966 Sawako Ariyoshi wrote a novel based on the life of Kae Hanaoka, wife of the doctor who first succeeded, in 1805, in the operation of breast cancer under general anesthesia.<sup>34</sup> In those days marriage meant marriage into the husband's household rather than simply to the husband; the bride's place in the new family was not secure until she produced a male heir to the family. Besides the duties of the household, she had to serve the father-in-law, and the mother-in-law who would take revenge on her first helpless victim for the life-long injustice *she* suffered. Woman wielded power through such unnatural channel, her second self, that is, whom she should assist and love. The situation is still the case to a certain degree in today's Japan,<sup>35</sup> for our uniquely perpendicular social structure encourages the preservation of the strict family system. Ariyoshi's intention is, therefore, to expose how deeply the feudalistic idea is inbedded in the culture by a dramatization of the rivalry and jealousy which consume the two women in the novel.

Since woman has power only as the mother of the heir, we have a strange variation of the Divine Mother. (Motherhood is sacred in Japan as it is in the West.) She is the eternal provider of men, of family, and of life. The eternal nourisher of "the feminine mystique" here assumes a socially vital function in that she is a producer of the next generation. Otsugi, Seishu's mother, thus lives for and in her son. This beautiful, clever Otsugi is powerful and assertive, because she is acting for the good of the family not for herself. Through her initiative her son studies medicine in Kyoto, and by her arrangement Seishu obtains a suitable wife. Otsugi is an admirable mother, and a competent manager of the Hanaoka household. Just as Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is the model Victorian woman, she is an ideal model of Japanese women in the traditional setting of the feudal period.

Otsugi and Kae contend for the attention and approval of one man, in whom they both seek the fulfillment of their own destiny. Hence they become convenient instruments of his life as man and doctor. Kae loses her eyesight because of the poison she willingly takes to vie with her mother-in-law in facilitating Seishu's experiment. Moreover, their rivalry carries a subtly sexual innuendo. The care Otsugi takes of her appearance is somewhat abnormal. Like Mrs. Ramsay she is strikingly beautiful. She even impresses little Kae as the statue of the Kannon Bosatsu. Otsugi constantly looks into the mirror and her thinning hair terrifies her, as if that fact would deprive her of her sway over Seishu. Otsugi chooses Kae, a rather plain girl past the marriageable age, mostly for utilitarian values. Since Otsugi lives with her husband, Seishu's father, without love, she assumes that Seishu and Kae could live decently

together as husband and wife without love. In the novel *Seishu* does show his love and tender care for the disabled wife and amply rewards her in her old age, building a house for her—but only after his mother's death.

The over-indulgent, dependent, and distorted relationship between Otsugi and her son, and the fierce feuds between Otsugi and her daughter-in-law are some of the absurdities involved in the family system in Japan,<sup>36</sup> where man as well as woman is the victim of rigid codes and rules. Otsugi and Kae should have been friends and collaborators in the family project rather than mortal enemies. Rather, it may be argued that their rivalry facilitated *Seishu's* experiment. Koriku, a doomed outsider of the family gives a penetrating observation of the abnormal relationship among the three. Her remarks may be understood for the crystalization of Ariyoshi's own view of male-female relation in Japanese society:

It seems . . . that an intelligent person like my brother . . . would have noticed the friction between you and Mother. . . . But throughout he shrewdly pretended he didn't see anything. . . . which resulted in both you and Mother drinking the medicine . . . Well, ins't it so? I think this sort of tension among females . . . is . . . to the advantage . . . of . . . every male. And I doubt that any man would volunteer to mediate in their struggles.<sup>37</sup>

Koriku's criticism is addressed to man and to the social mechanism, whose victim Koriku becomes. Koriku and Okatsu, *Seishu's* sisters, are sacrificed as workforce; they waste their youth in weaving so that the eldest son could go to school in Kyoto. They are forced to live a single life, unlike Lily Briscoe or Maureen in Lessing's novel who chooses such a life for herself. Paradoxically, however, they are spared of the tragic fates of Kae and Otsugi, who spend their energies in a futile competition, which according to Koriku is to "the advantage of every male." With her intelligence and will power Otsugi would have made an excellent doctor herself, instead of being content with the subsidiary place, that of wifehood and motherhood. For the glory of the first successful operation of breast cancer goes to *Seishu*; the novel closes with an ironic touch: "If you stand directly in front of *Seishu's* tomb, the two behind him, those of Kae and Otsugi, are completely obscured."<sup>38</sup>

The drama of the two women in *The Doctor's Wife* set in the 18th century Japan is filtered through the conscious eyes of the author, which calls the reader's attention to the absurdity of woman's destiny in life. Koriku's self-vindication has a ring of truth: "The only luck I've had in my entire life time is that I didn't get married. . . ."<sup>39</sup> For what meagre experience, suffering, sorrow, and satisfaction of whatever worth is her own, nobody else's.

The awakening of women in Japan began with the Westernization of the country which happened in the latter half of the 19th century, when Japan was forced to open her ports to the world. In the *New Greater Learning for Women* (1875), Yukichi Fukusawa recognized the fundamental equality for man and woman, and the importance of educa-

tion for women. Likewise, the introduction of Christianity has greatly contributed to women's liberation in Japan. An American missionary records in her report how Christianity had influenced Japanese women in their efforts to correct the distorted ideas of women's role at home and in society. Those enlightened women work as "the leaven in Japan."<sup>40</sup>

However, the evolution of consciousness is a gradual process; it takes a painfully long time for women to become what they learn. As we have witnessed in the survey of Anglo-American writers, the feminine mystique is still deeply ingrained in the subconscious of the people. Kate Brown sees with a shock of recognition that what Maureen's suitor wants to share with her is exactly the kind of life she has had with Michael, "obedient to the necessities of work and the family."<sup>41</sup> It is after all "the home" which Maureen Wendall craves as the last and only place where she can establish her selfhood. The old Japanese woman taking a bath sighs deeply, but content with the life she has lived: "I have had a good husband, such good children." Many women in Japan enjoy the security and authenticity of the family life, sanctioned by the very system which exploits them for life.

Uniquely female experiences dramatized in the writings hitherto considered are rehearsed in the stories set in the post-war Japan. Chiyo, the heroine of Aya Koda's "The Black Kimono," is a reticent woman who simply endures. As in Hayashi's poem, Chiyo's youth is short and her life is full of suffering. At the funeral she attends as her mother's representative, Chiyo learns early in life "to be where she was needed."<sup>42</sup> Her life is accentuated by a number of funerals she attends from sixteen to fifty. At her first funeral, Chiyo meets Ko, the only man she ever cares for; they become "funeral friends" who meet when there is a death. The fact that a man and a woman could see each other only at funerals shows what the age had been for Japanese women.<sup>43</sup> At one of such funeral meetings Chiyo hears of Ko's wedding. Chiyo never confesses her love and time simply passes her by.

Sexual passivity and male domination which result from the feminine mystique is clearly stated in the following observation made by one of the funeral guests: "Aren't women lucky. All the capital they need is a black kimono. Go to a funeral and find someone who's susceptible, you're taken care of for life."<sup>44</sup> Women are a commodity tradable on the marriage market; their capital is a black kimono which enhances their beauty. Provided that woman dispenses with personal freedom and autonomy, life could be easy for her—"to be taken care of for life," to be provided with a house and food and to become a provider of children and of the family. In this respect there is no fundamental difference between wifedom and being "a kept woman."

With an aging mother and a daughter Chiyo bears to a weak, ineffectual man she marries, the widowed Chiyo rises up to a challenge of being a bread-winner. The only keepsake of her dark unhappy married life is the black kimono. In this manner Chiyo ages and forgets "the habit of looking closely at herself in the mirror."<sup>45</sup> Kate Brown loses interest in her appearance, because she has become immune to any external infringement. Chiyo's lack of interest in her face and hair, however, shows that her

desire for life has weakened. She dresses herself for perhaps the last (except her own) funeral "with a vague lack of interest."<sup>46</sup> The black kimono Chiyo wears to funerals from sixteen to fifty symbolizes her life (or that of any ordinary woman for that matter). She has not lived for herself; she has lived a life of "adaptability to others": husband, parents, and children. And this "self-sufficient child reared by one parent" is not easily comforted with such form of life, unlike the old woman in the poem who listens to the koto music.

Fumiko Hayashi's "Late Chrysanthemum" presents an interesting case of a single woman, and the story is told definitely from a female point of view. Kin is a retired geisha—a professional entertainer—a phenomenon peculiar to Japanese culture, which has not generally provided "opportunities for a healthy, recreational, mixed social life."<sup>47</sup> Men used to meet women socially through geishas. In this ancient profession for women physical beauty is the sole capital. Kin became a geisha of her own accord when she was nineteen: "Her beauty alone has won her acceptance."<sup>48</sup>

Kin never troubles herself to feed her "customers," the important men of the world who seek her favor. She asks "no more than to live the life of the kept women."<sup>49</sup> Ironically, the life of the kept woman liberates Kin; she need not accommodate herself to men: "Domesticity had no appeal to her. What need had she, who had not the faintest intention of getting married, to put on a show of domesticity for men?"<sup>50</sup> Kin's life is governed by the iron rule of self-interest and the lust for money. She can entertain those she chooses, as she is very expensive. Thus the life of the mistress frees her from one kind of male domination, whereas in the name of motherhood and wifehood, ordinary women are "taken care of for life" in exchange for being the providers of homes.

Since physical beauty is of paramount importance in her profession, Kin takes a thorough, deliberate care to keep herself well, and she feels no scruples about that, either; whereas married women should make themselves more or less invisible—that is, unattractive to men (their husbands not excepting.) For Kin to keep her beauty indefinitely is her life: "She could still attract man: while that was true, Kin felt, life still had some meaning."<sup>51</sup> "Late Chrysanthemum" is about Kin's last attempt to revive the romantic love Kin had with Tabe during the war. After a whole year of absence, Kin receives a call from her former lover. Contrary to Kin's expectation, the war has changed her lover. Tabe has become coarse and vulgar, the fact which utterly disappoints her: their romantic love was not love at all, only the relationship of two animals drawn together by lust. Tabe is expressly interested in Kin's money. Kin has nothing but contempt for the man who has lost self-respect that he dares to come to his former sweetheart to borrow money to keep a woman.

On the other hand, Kin strikes Tabe as intractable: "...however rough the going is outside you seem to stay the same as ever . . . I can't make it out. . . . Lucky devils, women."<sup>52</sup> This sounds like man's grudge that life is easy for woman, who "is taken care of for life." Woman's life is short and frail as that of cherry-blossoms; at the same time she acquires out of necessity a certain adaptability through endurance

and suffering. Kin is a contented woman, knows her value, and what she wants. Since she is independent of man, she has to protect herself. And she is tough-minded enough to ignore that man too is vulnerable. She would not let Tabe take advantage of her; she refuses to give herself purposelessly. Also Kin's enthusiasm for living overwhelms Tabe: "I am going to blossom out and enjoy life from now on. I'm alive like anybody else."<sup>53</sup> Like Loretta in Oates' *Them*, Kin has become impenetrable.

Fumiko Enchi's "Enchantress" is a comedy concerning an elderly couple who eventually learn to be reconciled to each other. They live a separate life in the same house: the husband occupies the upstairs with his precious collection of curios; Chigako lives downstairs. Later she even moves into an annex and sleeps in "a coffin-like bed." Their silent cold war starts way back in the days soon after the end of the second world war. Keisaku refuses to sell his favorite Ming vase so that they could obtain the medicine for their younger daughter. Resolved to earn money for the medicine herself, Chigako reluctantly accepts the offer of translation work—to put Japanese pornographic stories into English for American customers. The experience brings her a more significant work—to do the translation of classical Japanese literature. Thus Chigako is given an opportunity to utilize her talent, and becomes independent of her husband financially as well as psychologically.

Change comes to their cold war when their elder daughter leaves home for America with her husband. The elderly couple are at their wits end to fill up the spiritual void left by their daughter.<sup>54</sup> For the first time in a long while Keisaku shows a certain interest in his wife, whom he has so far slighted due to his passion for the collection of curios. Reminded of her thinning hair by her husband, Chigako is terrified by this harbinger of aging. On long afternoons when she finishes her translation on *Tales of Ise*, she applies herself to "her solitary, aimless toilet,"<sup>55</sup> as if to stay the approaching old age. Obsession with the physical beauty and youth consumes the psychic energy of women characters in the Japanese stories, which may explain the fact that the objectification of woman in Japan is more wide spread and complete than in Anglo-American society. Chigako is no more concerned with Keisaku than he with her. Nevertheless, she dons like armor spectacles, false teeth, false locks "in her hungry craving to appear young, to be beautiful."<sup>56</sup>

At the same time Chigako begins to daydream, as compensatory act, and to write an imaginary romance of herself and a young music student who passes by her house singing. Like Kate Brown, Chigako tries her best to come of age alone, to learn the fact of aging and of the fundamental solitude of human existence. By portraying a woman's feelings about introducing another man into the house unbeknown to her husband, Chigako, who had never herself done any such thing, could enjoy in the story a kind of revenge on Keisaku. The breaking of the vase, was itself a formalization of this revenge.<sup>57</sup> Chigako's daydreaming and writing of the romance have the same function as Kate Brown's dream story in Lessing's novel. Chigako sublimates thus her hatred of her husband, and she comes to realize that they must make peace and grow old together. For "their taste in food, hitherto different, similarly began to

grow more alike since they both had to select things that would match the same conditions."<sup>58</sup>

"Enchantress" ends on a comic note. Roused in the middle of the night by the pealing sound of their door bell pressed by the two young lovers leaning against it without their knowledge, the couple start to smile at the folly of living a separate life when nature insists that they should be together: "What surprised Chigako . . . was that when she was alone at table with Keisaku she could click-clack her teeth without any embarrassment."<sup>59</sup> Past middle years, they make peace; they learn to live with the fact of growing old together, eating the same food which would match their false teeth. At the end of Lessing's novel Kate recognizes her emotional dependency on Michael for whom she has lost respect; she is told in her dream that she still needs him. Kate determines to live her life to the full, into the dark, together with Michael. Likewise, Chigako is made aware of the necessity of sharing life for a while yet with her companion.

In 1879 Nora caused a controversy among the European audience, when Japan was undergoing its modernization in all walks of life. The problems that confront women seem not entirely peculiar to one culture. The feminine mystique is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the people in Anglo-American society; Confucian teachings have produced obedient and self-effacing Japanese women. Misogyny exists in the West as well as in the East. The discussion has been to stress the similarities rather than to accentuate the differences between the two cultural perspectives on woman and her problems.

Here I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the grant awarded to me in 1976 by the United Church Board for World Ministries. The endowment facilitated my investigation into a comparative study of female characters in American and Japanese literature. Charlotte B. DeForest's book, *The Woman and the Leaven in Japan* mentioned in the discussion was one of the factors that led to my initial exploration of the subject, because the introduction of Christianity had radically changed the consciousness of our leaders and educators in the formative years of modern Japan. It was a great privilege for me to use some of the investigations for the Women and Literature course I taught at Michigan State University during the winter term 1981.

The students have shown much interest in the materials covered; they have found some significant difference as well as similarity between the Anglo-American and Japanese women characters. Women are cherry-blossoms: their prime is short, but the long summer and fall are also part of their natural cycle. Women are fragile and beautiful as cherry-blossoms, and at the same time they are resilient, impenetrable, like weeds. They can endure more than men, because they are witnesses to both birth and death of life.

## NOTES

1. *Gift from the Sea* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 136.
2. Anne Sexton, "Mary's Song," *The Death Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
3. *Gift from the Sea*, p. 45.
4. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 13.
5. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 149.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
7. *Gift from the Sea*, p. 55.
8. *To the Lighthouse*, p. 95.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 68-69.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
13. Jane Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1975), p. 135.
14. Roberta Rubeinstein, *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 66.
15. Doris Lessing, *The Summer before the Dark* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
19. Rubeinstein, p. 180.
20. *The Summer before the Dark*, p. 185.
21. *Gift from the Sea*, p. 96.
22. *The Summer before the Dark*, p. 190.
23. Joyce Carol Oates, *Them* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1969), p. 24, p. 118.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 411-412.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
30. Ellen G. Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Ungar, 1980), p. 128.
31. Yuri Kageyama, "My Mother Takes a Bath," *Off Our Back*, March 1981.
32. Ekiken Kaibara, "*The Greater Learning for Women*," *Things Japanese*, trans. Basil Hall Chamberlain (Tokyo: Hakubunsha, 1890), p. 370.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
34. Sawako Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, trans. Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Kostant (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1978), p. 165-166. Ariyoshi's investigation of the historical documents concerning the event is thorough and authentic.
35. Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Kostant, "Introduction," *The Doctor's Wife* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1978), p. vii.
36. *Ibid.*, viii.
37. *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 163-164.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
40. Charlotte B. De Forest, *The Woman and the Leaven in Japan* (West Medford, Mass.: The Central Committee for United Study of Foreign Missions, 1923)
41. *The Summer before the Dark*, p. 217.
42. Aya Koda, "The Black Kimono," *Modern Japanese Short Stories* trans. F. G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Trading Co., 1960), p. 121.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *The Woman and the Leaven in Japan*, p. 191.
48. Fumiko Hayashi, "Late Chrysanthemum," trans. John Bester. *Modern Japanese Short Stories*,

- p. 241.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
  50. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
  51. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
  52. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
  54. Fumiko Enchi, "Enchantress," trans. John Bester. *Modern Japanese Short Stories*, p. 92.
  55. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
  56. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
  57. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
  58. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
  59. *Ibid.* pp. 111-112.

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Summary

## Women in Contemporary Anglo-American and Japanese Literature: Of Cherry-blossoms, and of Weeds

Keiko Beppu

This study on women characters in contemporary Anglo-American and Japanese literature is based on the lecture notes prepared for an English course I taught during the winter term 1981 at Michigan State University, where I spent a year as an exchange professor from March 1980 through March 1981. The objective of the course (as it is of this paper) is to see the two different cultural perspectives on woman and her problems through an examination of uniquely female experiences as dramatized in the novels and stories of some representative Anglo-American and Japanese writers of the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and Joyce Carol Oates; Fumiko Hayashi, Aya Koda, Fumiko Enchi, and Sawako Ariyoshi.

Here I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the grant awarded to me in 1976 by the United Church Board for World Ministries. With the grant I first ventured into comparative studies of women characters in American and Japanese literature; this is the first resultant essay of the researches on the subject. I also would like to express my thanks to the students at MSU who participated in class discussions during the term.