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## **An Imitation of Life: The Strength and Struggle of Women in Murakami Ryū**

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**AN IMITATION OF LIFE: THE STRENGTH AND STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN  
MURAKAMI RYŪ**

A Thesis Presented  
by  
JOSEPH NIKOLAS EROBHA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2020

Japanese

AN IMITATION OF LIFE: THE STRENGTH AND STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN  
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I finally wish to thank the two Murakamis, whose works led me by the hand into the fantastical world of Japanese literature.

I can only hope that after all the generosity which has been given to me, that I can present a work which has been worth half of their investment.

ABSTRACT

AN IMITATION OF LIFE: THE STRENGTH AND STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN  
MURAKAMI RYŪ

SEPTEMBER 2020

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This thesis argues that the following texts by Murakami Ryū: “Topaz” (1988), *Piercing* (1997), *Audition* (1997), and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* (1997), are works of transgressive fiction in which the female protagonists respond to the hurtful restrictions and expectations of their gender roles by expressing a dissatisfaction with their “bodies” within these systems, or exacting personal vengeance against the actors of their oppression. It is through such analysis of these characters that the problems faced by women in modern Japan are scrutinized and brought to attention. Even though Murakami himself has written essays that can appear contrary to the complete liberation of Japanese women, his texts are nevertheless significant in drawing attention and sympathy to their problems.

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## INTRODUCTION

### AN ALMOST TRANSPARENT LIFE

Through fiction, readers can more clearly come to understand different realities, even their own. While fiction is imaginative, it hardly ever exists within an insular vacuum, void of any outside influence. I believe that when analyzing a work of fiction, the aim should be not only to understand what the story itself is attempting to say, but also to decipher how it fits in within the wider societal, cultural, and historical contexts under which it was written. I do not mean to say here that fiction provides the most accurate or objective lens for doing this, as it filtered through the author's perspective. What I want to say here is fiction can provide a picture of these contexts. This picture is neither the complete picture nor the only picture, but that this picture can highlight real subjects of importance to these varied contexts. It is this type of analysis that I plan to undertake with the works of Murakami Ryū.

The purpose of this thesis will be to examine the gender roles of women in the stories of Murakami Ryū, and how their depiction in these roles scrutinizes misogynistic attitudes and systems in Japanese society. "Topaz" (1988) and *Piercing* (1997) feature sex workers who attempt to escape the oppression of their situation through either personal fantasy or piercing of the body. Through the perspective of these women, Murakami reveals that they have desires, but that such aspirations are often stifled under the objectification brought about by their material conditions. *Audition* (1997) and *Popular Hits of Showa Era* (1997) feature women who have been objectified and disrespected in ways similar to women in prostitution, and, as a result, seek violent revenge against the men who wronged them. Murakami highlights the sexist treatment that many Japanese women suffer through by portraying these acts of violent retribution. To

Murakami, the restriction of individual will by societal tradition and prejudice demands not only skepticism, but destruction.

Murakami Ryū, (originally Ryūnosuke) was born in 1952 at Sasebo, Japan near an American military base.<sup>1</sup> Being the son of a music teacher, Murakami wrote songs and started a rock band while in high school.<sup>2</sup> Murakami came of age in the 1960s, amidst a wave of youth protests across Japan. From April to June 1960, hundreds of thousands protested the revised Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which would solidify a Cold War alliance between Japan and the United States. The protests came out of a desire for neutrality in the Cold War, which many progressives believed was necessary for peace, autonomy, and freedom from its semi-colonial status to the United States.<sup>3</sup> In the latter half of the 1960s, the Vietnam War became a target of protest by Japanese students and leftists, in particular socialists, communists, and trade unions who organized meetings and demonstrations against the Vietnam policies of Japan and the United States.<sup>4</sup> While a senior in high school, he barricaded himself atop the school's rooftop in support of the country's anti-Vietnam War movement and became sympathetic towards the hippies.<sup>5</sup> In 1975, Murakami's debut novel, *Almost Transparent Blue*, was entered into a "new writer" contest for the literary monthly *Gunzo*, while he attended Tokyo's Musashino College of Art, and it won Japan's prestigious Akutagawa Prize in the following year.<sup>6</sup> Sakurai Emiko has

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Snyder. "Murakami Ryu," in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. by Joshua S. Mostow, Kirk A. Denton, Bruce Felton, and Sharalyn Orbaugh (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). 233.

<sup>2</sup> Emiko Sakurai. "Japan's New Generation of Writers." *World Literature Today* 62, no. 3, Contemporary Japanese Literature (Summer 1988). 405.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Bronson. "Conclusion. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty Protests and Their Aftermath," in *One Million Philosophers: Science of Thought and the Culture of Democracy in Postwar Japan*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016). 196.

<sup>4</sup> Masaya Shirashi. "The Period Prior To 1973," in *Japanese Relations With Vietnam 1951—1987* (Cornell University Press, Southeast Asia Program Publications At Cornell, 1990). 33.

<sup>5</sup> "Ryu Murakami," Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/05a447e8-263e-11e3-8ef6-00144feab7de>

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Snyder. "Extreme Imagination: The Fiction of Murakami Ryu," in *Oe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). 199.

argued that *Almost Transparent Blue*'s success was mostly due to its pornographic nature, even though she found the narrative to be more grotesque than titillating or erotic.<sup>7</sup> Sakurai also wrote that Murakami emerged from a group of young writers from 1976 to 1978, who were raised under the American occupation of Japan, were influenced by American popular culture, and had direct contact with many Americans.<sup>8</sup> Christopher Perwein has made note of this trend in Murakami's works, arguing that they take a look at the complicated relationship between Japan and the United States, "Murakami's works offer a perfect vantage point from which to examine certain facets of the American influence on Japan and its citizens."<sup>9</sup> From *Blue* onwards, shocking and explicit scenes of violence and sex have marked much of Murakami's literature, especially the novels *Coin Locker Babies* (1980), *Piercing* (1997), *Audition* (1997), and *In The Miso Soup* (1997). For Murakami's success in the 1990s, with such works as *Love & Pop / Topaz II* (1997), Yoshihiko Fukushima includes him alongside Murakami Haruki, Yoshimoto Banana, and Kawakami Hiromi, among others, as among the best writers of so-called "J-Literature", or popular Japanese literature of that decade.<sup>10</sup> On the surface, much of Murakami's violent and sexual content may make it easy for the average reader to dismiss him as a mere pulp fiction writer or a shameless pornographer, but to do so would be to miss the richer meanings hidden within the pages. M.A. Orthover has written of Murakami's works, particularly *Piercing* and *In The Miso Soup*, that they "explore the duality in Japanese society of a surface that is formal, orderly, and polite, contrasted with a dark underbelly to which many just turn a blind eye. Murakami's fiction shows that underbelly as particularly dark and violent, with characters

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<sup>7</sup> Emiko Sakurai. "Japan's New Generation of Writers." *World Literature Today* 62, no. 3, Contemporary Japanese Literature (Summer 1988). 405.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Perwein. "Transnational Japanese-American Ambiguities in Select Works of Murakami Ryu." *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 40 (2018). 4.

<sup>10</sup> Yoshihiko Fukushima. "Japanese Literature of 'J-Literature' of the 1990s." *World Literature Today* 77, no. 1. (Apr. – Jun. 2003). 41.

who find themselves caught up in more than they ever bargained for.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, underpinning much of Murakami’s writings is a societal critique of Japan, one which often uses violent radicals or oppressed outsiders to strike back against unjust systems. As journalist Funabashi Yoichi once said of Murakami’s literature, “In one of his novels, he wrote something like, ‘This country has everything. You can find whatever you want here. The only thing missing is hope.’ That really captured the angst and fears of young people in this country.”<sup>12</sup> It is for these reasons that I think Murakami’s work falls within the scope of “transgressive fiction.”

Transgressive fiction was most clearly defined by the *Atlantic Monthly*:

a literary genre that graphically explores such topics as incest and other aberrant sexual practices, mutilation, the sprouting of sexual organs in various places on the human body, urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and highly dysfunctional family relationships, and that is based on the premises that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge<sup>13</sup>

K. Anis Ahmed writes of this transgressive nature as the usage of societal taboo to expose societal hypocrisy, “In places with a freedom deficit, the taboo is often political, and the writing is what in shorthand we still call ‘dissident.’ In freer societies, the focus is often on matters of morals or social mores, especially in the areas of sexual practice.”<sup>14</sup> Also on the matter of taboo, Michael Silverblatt referred to transgressive writing as having “violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body.”<sup>15</sup> Silverblatt makes note of an

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<sup>11</sup> M.A. Orthofer. “Japan” in *The Complete Review Guide To Contemporary World Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 355.

<sup>12</sup> “Ryu Murakami,” Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/05a447e8-263e-11e3-8ef6-00144feab7de>

<sup>13</sup> Anne H. Soukhanov. “Word Watch.” *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1996).

<sup>14</sup> K. Anis Ahmed. “Fiction: A Transgressive Art.” *World Literature Today* 90, no. 1 (January/February 2016). 44, doi:10.7588/worllitetoda.90.1.0042.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Silverblatt. “Shock Appeal/Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression.” *Los Angeles Times* (August 1, 1993). <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-01-bk-21466-story.html>

imaginative element to transgressive fiction, which creates new means rebellion against oppression, “When the world is all chains and fetters, the imagination survives by ignoring the world, disowning the body, and constructing hypothetical systems. This imagination requires the defeat of the physical world, and the virtual obliteration of the body.”<sup>16</sup> However, in comparing the works of Anne Rice to those of Bret Easton Ellis, Silverblatt makes a distinction between transgressive fiction that allows the reader to *forget* reality, and transgressive fiction that reminds them of its brutality.

A handy guideline: the false transgressor wants to give us an experience of virtual reality--but the author underlines the fantasy element of the experience. The real transgressor will not feed our yearning for fantasy and distance. “American Psycho” is no more “real” than Anne Rice’s Witch-Mummy-Vampire sado-sagas, but its stylizations are more real and immediate.

Rice turns desire into fantasy. The transgressive writer is more honest, knowing that all desire is unsafe, that all fantasy is trumped up style, that all transgression is a mixture of violations of style and personal risk.<sup>17</sup>

When it comes to naming writers whose works fall into this criteria, Silverblatt names contemporaries such as the aforementioned Ellis, David Foster Wallace, and A.M. Holmes, as well as past authors like William S. Burroughs, Joan Didion, and Marquis de Sade.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Ahmed lists writers in this genre as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gustav Flaubert, and Vladimir Nabokov.<sup>19</sup> I for my part, would list Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger In A Strange Land*, Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* as other modern examples of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> K. Anis Ahmed. “Fiction: A Transgressive Art.” *World Literature Today* 90, no. 1 (January/February 2016). 44, doi:10.7588/worllitetoda.90.1.0042.

transgressive fiction. These stories all bring to light the problems of the status quo through unorthodox or even criminal characters.<sup>20</sup> For purposes of this thesis, the term “transgressive fiction”, with regards to Murakami, will be my own, based upon the definitions previously provided: *a work of fiction where the problems of societal restriction are raised through characters that violate society’s taboos through acts of violence against others, or by changing their own bodies.*

Under this definition, much of Murakami’s fiction can be described as transgressive. The boundaries of the body, in particular, are broken, as Sekii Mitsuo once wrote, “Murakami Ryū overturns the realism of the ‘modern’ Japanese novel through the body’s phenomenology and reconstructs that divided world.”<sup>21</sup> In most of the texts of this thesis (*Piercing, Audition, Popular Hits of the Showa Era*), the transgression occurs through his female characters, their bodies as well as their acts. Sanada Chiaki of *Piercing* uses a nipple piercing to rekindle a sexuality which has long been discouraged by misogynistic experiences. *Audition*’s Yamasaki Asami is a serial killer who uses violence to strike back against her abuse and objectification by men. In *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, a group of older divorcees known as the Midori Society, become engaged in a war with some lawless boys who have assaulted and slain one of their own. It is evident in the text that the violence is a result of the cultural misogyny that both informs these boys and hurts these women. “Topaz” isn’t quite as transgressive as the previous three stories, as the narrator does not any point try to resist her dour condition. The story is still transgressive in the

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<sup>20</sup> In *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), a human raised on Mars, Valentine Michael Smith, comes to Earth and subverts traditions about monogamy by starting sex cult, eventually becoming a Christ-figure. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), it is through the eyes of the gangster and rapist, Alex DeLarge, that we see how both the political right and left exploit criminals for their own purposes. In *Fight Club* (1996), Tyler Durden starts a fight club for disillusioned men who feel emasculated by modern society, which eventually devolves into a terror group that takes aim at materialism through Project Mayhem.

<sup>21</sup> Mitsuo Sekii. “Murakami Ryū —Supotsu,shintai,onna no imeeji” [Murakami ryū —sports, body, and the woman’s image]. trans Joseph Erobha. *Sugiyama kokubungaku* 38, no. 3 (March 1993)

sense that the narrator imagines a better life for herself outside of her occupation as a sex worker. It should also be noted that these stories were released during the 1990s, a decade that brought about new questions about the direction of the Japanese, and whether or not it was succeeding in providing a good life for its citizens. Fukushima wrote that the period, which included the burst of the economic bubble, the bribery scandal at Recruit, the devastating Hanshin/Awaji earthquakes, and the killings by the Aum Shinrikyo cult, brought a number of problems for Japanese writers to confront.<sup>22</sup>

This apparent breakdown of society and an attempt to voice the problems that precede it is very much a central theme of Murakami's oeuvre. Murakami himself has said about as much in many articles and interviews. He has a particularly pessimistic view of modern Japan and has little faith in the government's ability to address human problems. Murakami sees many of these problems as starting during Japan's postwar period. He has stated that by the 1970s, Japan had already achieved the aim of raising the country up from the destruction of World War II and that once this goal had been reached, the Japanese people the lost motivation that had earlier motivated them. He sees the growth of the socially withdrawn hikikomoris as an inevitable result of this lack of direction.<sup>23</sup> To Murakami, the Japanese people too often see success in economic development and not in the prosperity of its citizens, "Japan became rich, but in the meantime we never really discussed what kind of Japan we wanted to build."<sup>24</sup> When the Democratic Party of Japan unseated the long-standing Liberal Democratic Party in the 2009 elections, Murakami was pessimistic that a change in the old guard could truly fix the problems facing Japanese citizens,

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<sup>22</sup> Yoshiko Fukushima. "Japanese Literature of 'J-Literature' of the 1990s." *World Literature Today* 77, no. 1. (Apr. – Jun. 2003). 41.

<sup>23</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Japan's Lost Generation." *AsiaNow – TimeAsia*, May 1, 2000. <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/time/magazine/2000/0501/japan.essaymurakami.html>

<sup>24</sup> "Ryu Murakami," Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/05a447e8-263e-11e3-8ef6-00144feab7de>

and further, believed that many shared in his pessimism: “The Japanese people are realizing that no government has the power to fix their problems. But this is a good thing. Japan is finally growing up.”<sup>25</sup> Murakami also adds that due to the aging population and the pension system that the Japanese government no longer has the ability to fix the nation’s problems with money.<sup>26</sup> Murakami has also said that young people growing up in Japan have fewer prospects to look forward to, “There are people surviving on meager wages, so even though they might wish for a spouse and a home, it’s hard to have hope under these circumstances.”<sup>27</sup> For Murakami, the result of all of this is that many Japanese are “dissatisfied and frustrated. But they are not good at expressing those feelings so they tend to wall themselves off. And because they have this pent-up anger, they are very unstable.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the reason that Murakami’s characters are often outsiders, radicals, and eccentrics is because of his strong identification with protecting minorities in society. He believes that a nation’s living standard should not be based on whether they pursue the utilitarian aim of maximum happiness for the maximum number of people, but whether or not they can take care of its own minorities, stressing the importance of listening to their voices and ending discrimination against them.<sup>29</sup> When Murakami refers to “minorities”, he does not necessarily mean those who are of a different race, religion, or sexual orientation than the majority, but are people trying to exist as individuals in a society where that is not possible. He sees his purpose as a writer to highlight the struggle of realizing that desire,

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<sup>25</sup> Ryū Murakami. “Japan Comes of Age.” *New York Times*, September 7, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “A Conversation with Ryu Murakami.” Interview by Annemarie Luck, *Tokyo Weekender*, January 2, 2017. <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2017/01/a-conversation-with-ryu-murakami/>

<sup>28</sup> “Ryu Murakami,” Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/05a447e8-263e-11e3-8ef6-00144feab7de>

<sup>29</sup> “Ryu Murakami: Straight-talking wordsmith wields his pen like a sword.” Interview by Tomoko Otake. *Japan Times*, April 3, 2005, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2005/04/03/people/ryu-murakami/#.XnJgZnIpC01>

A lot of people do want to live as individuals, and that goes for me too. You can do that by opting not to go into traditional companies or not doing what might be expected of you as a member of society. In most cases, that makes life harder. By using people who are forcefully excluded from society by history or circumstance in my writing, it's easier for me to show how hard it is to live like that.<sup>30</sup>

Another reason he creates such transgressive characters is due to his belief that novels can explore the darker levels of human consciousness which rarely come to the surface, “We try to control the dark parts with laws, morals, common sense, and so on, but human beings are too deep, diverse, and free to be contained by such things. Novels can sometimes depict the struggle between reason and the darker regions of the heart.”<sup>31</sup> It should also be noted, however, that the effects of transgression in his stories can be quite limited. In neither “Topaz”, *Piercing*, nor *Audition*, does transgression against society or one’s own body change the repressive systems that sparked the transgression to start with. While *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* and *Coin Locker Babies* both feature widespread societal destruction, neither go so far as to create a better alternative to what existed before. Murakami exhausts all of his energy on critiquing society but refuses to present an answer outside of it. Murakami has been quite explicit, in fact, that he does not think that it’s his duty as a novelist to make the world a better place, with his goal instead to offer catharsis for the anger of his readers, “I believe that young people should be more angry, indeed that every Japanese should be more angry. But, as with horses, it’s really difficult to force people to get angry, so I’m just...what I’m doing with my novels is just showing people that it’s possible.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “The Future of Japan is Very Dark,” Interviewed by Joseph George, *VICE*, May 3, 2013. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/vdyw9d/ryu-murakami-about-north-korea-and-the-future-of-japan](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdyw9d/ryu-murakami-about-north-korea-and-the-future-of-japan)

<sup>31</sup> “Ryu and Me.” Interview by Ralph McCarthy, *Kyoto Journal*, October 30, 2011. <https://kyotojournal.org/conversations/ryu-and-me-2/>

<sup>32</sup> “Ryu Murakami,” Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/vdyw9d/ryu-murakami-about-north-korea-and-the-future-of-japan](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdyw9d/ryu-murakami-about-north-korea-and-the-future-of-japan)

Since this thesis deals with the matter of women's roles in Murakami's work, and how they relate to Japanese society at large, it only feels appropriate to provide a background on women's movements at the time. I should also like to conclude the thesis with an examination of some of Murakami's views on women, as expressed in his essay collection *Sex Is Better Than Suicide*. Some of these opinions can be rather patriarchal, and indeed, he even theorizes on the proper roles for women in Japanese society. These opinions, I believe, present an interesting contradiction between his sympathetic and complex female characters and his more restrictive views on actual Japanese women. I have two aims in doing this. The first is to contrast Murakami's views on women to those of actual Japanese feminists, and the second is to still defend his female characterizations as transgressive and socially conscious in their own right. I will put forward the argument that women could still find his storylines relatable to their own personal struggles.

In closing, I want to be clear and honest about the limitations of this thesis, and it is very much related to Murakami's success as a writer. As late as 2013, Murakami had claimed that his writings were still are not embraced by most Japanese readers, and that he is still very much a niche author, "Though I'm famous in Japan and have achieved some status as an author, my works are by no means mainstream. They aren't really accepted by the majority, and I don't imagine that most people here understand them. And that motivates me to keep on writing."<sup>33</sup> This lack of mainstream attention in Japan may be a reason for a lack of translated works in English. As Perwein once noted, "While Murakami has written and published close to forty novels and several short stories, articles, and essays in his native Japan, only a small percentage

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<sup>33</sup> "Q&A With Murakami Ryu." *Pushkin Press* (2013) <https://medium.com/pushkin-press/q-a-with-ryu-murakami-51dad5a26700>

of them have been translated into English.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, I have limited amount of materials to work with and while I do believe that my argument is plausible and persuasive, I cannot call it a definitive or complete. Given how little of Murakami’s work is available in English, especially with regards to his views on women, my conclusions should be taken as the starting point for further understanding Murakami and not the final word. It would be a shame indeed if readers were to make sweeping generalizations of Murakami and his work on the basis of small a sample size. Murakami’s other untranslated novels, short stories, and essays may well affect the conclusions made by me in this thesis. It is, in fact, my greatest hope that this thesis inspires further analysis into the numerous original sources written by Murakami, especially with regards to women. Following such analyses, I imagine that many conclusions in this thesis will probably be subject to some addition and revision. All of this being said, I remain confident that the analyses I have put forth are representative of certain gender trends in Murakami’s works. I have drawn from four major works written in the same period (“Topaz”, *Piercing*, *Audition*, and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*) as well as from an essay collection (*Sex Is Better Than Suicide*) which reflects his views during that same era. In this thesis, I have synthesized the common threads across these various works into a plausible reading, one which, I hope, will invite deeper analysis of Murakami’s writings.

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher Perwein. “Transnational Japanese-American Ambiguities in Select Works of Murakami Ryu.” *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 40 (2018). 5.

## CHAPTER 1

### SEX WORKERS AND THEIR FANTASIES

“Sexuality is a domain of pleasure and danger.”

- Ayako Kano<sup>35</sup>

#### 1.1. Murakami and Japan’s Prostitution Debate

Sex workers have been a presence in the life Murakami Ryū’s life since his earliest years. Stephen Snyder writes that the author had childhood memories of “a nearby brothel patronized by American sailors and the shame and fascination he associated with the women who worked there.”<sup>36</sup> This shame and fascination has carried over into many of his literary works. In his debut semi-autobiographical novel, *An Almost Transparent Blue*, drew from his life growing up at Sasebo’s military base. Sakurai Emiko describes the life of Murakami’s aptly named protagonist, Ryū, in this way,

The locale of this work is a town by the Yokota Air Base partly populated by American airmen and their dependents, Amerasians, bar girls, prostitutes, and pimps. Ryu, nineteen, earns money and drugs by supplying women to black soldiers for "parties" featuring rock music, drugs, and group sex. A passive participant at those orgies, Ryu dons makeup as a woman, dances, and lets the racially mixed partners abuse him sexually.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ayako Kano. “Sex For Sale, Sex As Self: Debates on Sexuality,” in *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention of Sex, Love, and Labor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 29.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Snyder. “Murakami Ryu” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 233.

<sup>37</sup> Emiko Sakurai, “Japan’s New Generation of Writers,” *World Literature Today* 62, no. 3, *Contemporary Japanese Literature* (Summer 1988). 405, doi:10.2307/40144288.

Prostitution, especially that of women, has since become a recurring presence in Murakami's literary works, from his novels *Topaz II: Love & Pop* (1996), *Piercing* (1997), and *In The Miso Soup* (1997), to his many short stories, like "Topaz" (1988) and "Penlight" (1988). The purpose of this chapter is to show that prostitutes in many of these stories, specifically "Topaz" and *Piercing*, are transgressive insofar that they imagine desires for themselves outside of their occupation. The misogyny that they endure under the sex industry is shown as a natural extension of the subservience demanded of women by much of Japanese society. By going through the perspectives of these women, Murakami wants to evoke the reader's sympathy for their situation. While Murakami's characters are fictional, they reflect not only the difficult lives of real prostitutes, but also embody a winding and complex debate regarding how the Japanese people should morally view their occupation.

It is not the aim of this chapter to make an argument for or against sex work from either a legal or moral perspective in Japan or elsewhere. I do recognize, however, that readers could well draw from the points made in this chapter to make those arguments. This is not to say that I do not think such debates are unimportant, but that I think they go beyond the limited scope of this chapter. While I will certainly touch upon moral problems of how the women in these occupations are treated, I limit myself only to articulating these evils, and not to prescribing remedies to them. There is much that I do not know about sex work, especially as it exists in Japan. The amount of research that would require me to go into this matter and properly air the perspectives of both sides would be so extensive that I fear it would overshadow the original focus on Murakami. My feelings on this might be different, however, if Murakami had spent some time advocating for either for the decriminalization or suppression of prostitution. A section of this chapter would then be dedicated towards investigating that position and how it

relates to his stories. I could find no such positions in either translation or his original writings, so I will refrain from presuming too much about Murakami's opinions on this matter. The only opinion on this issue that I present is that prostitution, as it exists in Murakami's works, often perpetuates the misogynistic abuse of those who participate in it. I will not argue that this image is representative of the sex industry everywhere, but that it does reflect certain unfortunate realities about it. Nor is it my intention to single out the Japanese sex industry as uniquely terrible when compared to other countries. It would not surprise me to see these problems reproduced outside of Japan. The texts examined in this chapter, however, focus on prostitution in Japan, and so it is that which I must explore. This being the case, I reference aspects of Japan's sex industry wherever relevant, because they are the backdrop of much of Murakami's fiction. To offer the reader proper context for this, I will briefly summarize the history.

The history of organized prostitution in Japan began with the decision of Toyotomi Hideyoshi to establish a brothel quarter in Kyoto during the 1580s, which by 1608 had accumulated around 50,000 licensed workers. Hideyoshi himself saw prostitution as a bad custom but believed that regulation was preferable to suppression.<sup>38</sup> The high-class courtesans of Edo's Yoshiwara quarter had so captivated the popular imagination, that their hairstyles influenced local fashions, and their images sold on woodblock prints at numbers comparable to kabuki actors.<sup>39</sup> The legal term for these women was *yūjo*, which literally meant "women at play."<sup>40</sup> These *yūjo* were often sold to brothers by their "owners", known as the *hitonushi*, and labored under the rules of a fixed term service known as *miuri-boko*. At the conclusion of this

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<sup>38</sup> Gary Leupp. "Capitalism and Homosexuality in 18th Century Japan," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 1, *Eighteenth-Century Homosexuality in Global Perspective*. (Spring 2007): 140, [www.jstor.org/stable/41299405](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41299405).

<sup>39</sup> Timothy J. Van Compernelle. "Subjection in the Yoshiwara" in *The Uses of Memory: The Critique of Modernity in the Fiction of Higuchi Ichiyo*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia, 2006), 143.

<sup>40</sup> Julie Nelson Davis, "Picturing Beauties: Print Designers, Publishers, and a Mirror of the Yoshiwara," in *Partners in Print: Artistic Collaboration and the Ukiyo-e Market* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 63.

contract, a ransom was paid to the *hitonushi* and the *yūjo* had to repay the ransom with the earnings from their prostitution.<sup>41</sup> Further, the lives of these women could be quite dour. The difficult living and working conditions of the *yūjo* have been well demonstrated through the fact that many of them died in their twenties due to syphilis, and at least one by double suicide.<sup>42</sup> With the coming modernization of the Meiji Era, the Yujo Release Act was passed in 1872, which emancipated the *yūjo* from their servitude as prostitutes under the *miuri-boko*.<sup>43</sup> Prostitution was further critiqued with the growth of women's rights in the Taisho Period. Socialist feminists such as Yamakawa Kikue, criticized capitalism for turning women into wage slaves and prostitutes.<sup>44</sup> During the Pacific War, prostitution infamously took on a militarized form, as the Japanese military forced women in colonized Korea to service Japanese soldiers as prostitutes.<sup>45</sup> In the post-war period, the Prostitution Prevention Law was passed in 1956, which prohibited prostitution and penalized those involved with it. Many women's groups who supported the passage of the law, saw the prostitutes unions who opposed it as blackmailed pawns, blindly manipulated by their employers.<sup>46</sup> At same time, women who worked within the industry were concerned about their economic prospects if the law was passed, as the prostitutes union wrote in a statement to the Japanese government, "Our opposition to the proposed ban on

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<sup>41</sup> Yuriko Yokoyama. "The Yūjo Release Act as Emancipation of Slaves in Mid-19th-Century Japan" in *Abolitions as a Global Experience* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016) 167.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Molony. "Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism in Japan, 1870-1925," *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 4, *Woman Suffrage: The View from the Pacific* (November 2000). 653, doi:10.2307/3641228.

<sup>45</sup> John Lie. "The State as Pimp: Prostitution and the Patriarchal State in Japan in the 1940s," *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 2, *Taylor and Francis, Ltd* (Spring 1997): 255, [www.jstor.org/stable/4120735](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4120735).

<sup>46</sup> Shiga-Fujime Yuki and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko. "The Prostitutes' Union and the Impact of the 1956 Anti-Prostitution Law in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 5 (University of Hawai'i Press, 1993) 3, [www.jstor.org/stable/42772058](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772058).

prostitution is not based on emotions. Instead we are concerned with how we are going to make a living if the measure passes.”<sup>47</sup>

These debates continued up until the 1980s and 1990s among Japanese feminists. These debates centered on the level of personal freedom that these women had and how severely it may be restricted. Ayako Kano has said that the argument among feminists was split between the idea that women should do with their sexuality what they please and the idea that such an inherent part of the human personality should not be up for sale:

If one argues that sexuality ought to be controlled by the individual person, for example, then it becomes difficult to argue against the individual’s freedom to manage sexuality as she or he wishes, including the freedom to exchange sexual services for compensation. This would then challenge any attempt to define sexuality as equivalent to personality rather than as a commodity. On the other hand, if one argues that sexuality is inseparable from personality and should not be sold like a commodity, then this seems to call for an entity prohibiting such a sale. Most often the entity called in is the state, in the form of laws and regulations against prostitution and pornography. It could also be the family, moral codes, community standards, religious worldviews, or international norms.<sup>48</sup>

For Kano, the modern debate over sex work in Japan evolved with the growth of women’s lib movements and the sexual revolution in the 1970s. As a result of wider access to contraception and abortion, enabled the separation of women’s sexual behavior and the consequence of childbirth. Sexual intercourse now could no longer determine the course of a woman’s life, and sexuality was now perceived as being under greater individual control.<sup>49</sup> These freedoms, however, existed within the framework of capitalism, where anything can be bought and sold, or as Kano writes, “ ‘Commodification’ was a word to capture what was

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ayako Kano. “Sex For Sale, Sex As Self: Debates on Sexuality” in *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention of Sex, Love, and Labor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016) 34.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 48.

happening to sexuality, as individuals could increasingly claim control over it, but in a system also understood as a ‘free market.’”<sup>50</sup> Male sociologist and feminist scholar Katō Shūichi, has gone further with this idea, and argued that the concept of “sexuality” itself, is a product of capitalism, “ ‘Sexuality’ was born as a phenomenon particular to modern capitalist-patriarchal society, and was by its nature a ‘commodity’ from the very beginning.”<sup>51</sup> In response to this commodification, many feminists in the 1990s took on a position that Kano refers to as “sexual sovereignty”, which she defines as not only the right of control over one’s sexuality, but also the right not to have it commodified.<sup>52</sup>

However, “sexual sovereignty”, especially as it regards assessments of prostitution, has proved to be quite complex for Japanese feminists. Aoyama Kaoru, an ethnographer of Asian migrant sex workers, who made a distinction between women forced into sex slavery, which she calls “prostitution”, and women who voluntarily choose the occupation, which she refers to as “sex work.” She observes that most women in the sex industry are somewhere in between those two poles, and where they sit on this spectrum can change over the course of their lives. She also points out that a woman’s reasons for entering into the industry are complex, and that agency cannot be completely denied to the sex worker, even under the worst conditions.<sup>53</sup> On the topic of women’s self-determination, sociologist Ehara Yumiko has argued that this right is not that of women to assert complete and total control over their bodies, but the right to have decisions about her body valued in spaces where they have traditionally not been valued.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 58.

It seems to me that these Japanese debates about sex work revolve around two important concepts: *objectification*. This concept will also be relevant to the examination of Murakami's female protagonists in "Topaz" and *Piercing* going forward. For this thesis, the concept of "objectification" will go by the definition which was provided by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who defines the term as "One is treating *as an object* what is not really an object, what is, in fact, a human being."<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum then identifies seven features of objectification:

- 1) *instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
- 2) *denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
- 3) *inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
- 4) *fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
- 5) *violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
- 6) *ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
- 7) *denial of subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.<sup>56</sup>

These notions will be helpful in determining the ways in which ways the protagonists are objectified, and the ways in which they are not. It is arguable that sex work in and of itself is an objectifying practice, due to possibly meeting criterion of ownership, as their bodies are briefly purchased for sexual gratification. The next question to face is the matter of choice. What

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<sup>55</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum. "Objectification," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 257, [www.jstor.org/stable/2961930](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2961930).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

choices do these women have, and under what circumstances are they making them? I should also note that Nussbaum views prostitution as little different from other forms of work. While she opposes forced prostitution, she argues that if people make their decisions freely, they are entitled as individuals to employ their bodies however they want and take money for their use. Stating that very few people in the world have the option of using their bodies for work that is truly human.<sup>57</sup> It is true that the sex workers in “Topaz” and *Piercing* have, as far as we know, chosen their professions, but what I want to get across is that they made these choices within a culture where women are expected to be subservient. Their choices and desires are shaped by or in reaction to the institutions which attitudes which make up their environment. This comprehensive conception of bodily integrity was taken by Drucilla Cornell, who has argued that a person is continually reimagining who they want to be. In this view, the personality is a process dependent on others, and that the state and legal systems should be understood as involved in the construction of one’s personality.<sup>58</sup> As a result, it must be understood that agency to select the profession and agency within it are not without real limitations. Even so, these characters still make use of what agency they have. This is why I call them transgressive, because they imagine for themselves lives and desires superior to that which they must accept as prostitutes.

## **1.2. The Poverty of “Topaz”**

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<sup>57</sup> Mervi Patoslani. “Bodily Integrity and Conceptions of Subjectivity.” *Hypatia* 24, no. 2. (Spring, 2009): 127, [www.jstor.org/stable/20618150](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20618150).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

“Topaz” is a short story Murakami wrote in 1988 as a part of his short story collection of the same name. It was translated into English by Ralph McCarthy for short story collection *Tokyo Decadence* (2016). “Topaz” also received a sequel, *Topaz II: Love & Pop* (1996), which featured different characters, but continued with the theme of sex work, focusing specifically on *enjo kōsai*, or “compensated dating”, among high schoolers. “Topaz” is about an unnamed female narrator who works as a prostitute in the sex industry and describes the humiliation she suffers from clients and outsiders alike. Throughout all of this, the narrator clings to her desire for a famous artist. She buys a topaz ring as a representation of him, because its expense reminds her of his high status. The artist eventually purchases her services and they spend one night together. Even though the experience is brief, the narrator comes out of it with a greater appreciation of her topaz ring and seems content to gaze at a picture of him she has on her wall.

Throughout the story of “Topaz”, the narrator is routinely subjected to the desires of others while having little room for her own. This primarily takes the form of satisfying the sexual desires of her clients. She described one encounter with a client as “having his way with my body, leaving it covered with sweat and other sticky fluids.”<sup>59</sup> This description makes her sound like a passive participant who is worse for wear by the end of her services. A later encounter with another client is far more humiliating. He tells her to “Shake your ass and peel off your panties like an office girl who’s really shy and ashamed of herself but dying to be fucked.”<sup>60</sup> When she laughs at his request, he is personally offended and pinches her nipples. He berates her for not submitting completely to his will, and reminds the Narrator that, in his eyes, she’s more an object than an individual, “You’re nobody, understand? You have no identity.”<sup>61</sup> Her identity,

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<sup>59</sup> Ryū Murakami. “Topaz.” *Tokyo Decadence: 15 Stories by Ryu Murakami*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2018). 72.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

to him, is solely defined by her occupation as a prostitute. When the client grabs her breast and vagina, he tells her “When you think, you think with *this* and *this*, you understand?”<sup>62</sup>

These actions quite clearly fall under the violability aspect of objectification, as her client views her as little more than body parts to use as he pleases. Since he believes that he briefly has ownership over her, he does not see her as a human being with boundaries to be respected. In this space, Murakami is showing what the sex industry does to people. It reduces prostitutes to receptacles of male lust and encourages men to think only of their own desires. The implications of this scene also harken back to the state-sponsored prostitution of the late Meiji and early Taisho periods of Japanese history. Mark McClelland has observed that the Japanese government justified sponsoring prostitution by arguing that the male body was a machine that needed proper management to maintain proper functioning. He adds that a Bureau of Health official even once compared male bodies to steam trains that would stop if they did not burn coal, while others described brothels as breakwaters or public latrines that prevented male sexuality from bursting out in inappropriate ways.<sup>63</sup> These ideas persisted into American occupation of Japan following the end of the Pacific War, the foundations for Murakami’s youth. Robert Kramm notes that in the immediate aftermath of Japan’s surrender to the United States, there was widespread fear that American soldiers would commit mass rape against Japanese women. This fear was so palpable that Japanese women and children were encouraged to hide far from metropolitan areas where occupation forces would be.<sup>64</sup> In August 28, 1945, Miyazawa Hamajirō, the director of the Recreation and Amusement Association, spoke of the need to comfort the occupying forces by

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>63</sup> Mark McClelland. “Heteronormativity on the Road to War” in *Queer Japan From The Pacific War to The Internet Age* (United States of America: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005). 34.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Kramm. “Comforting the Occupiers: Prostitution as Administrative Practice in Japan at the End of World War II” in *Sanitized Sex: Regulating Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Intimacy in Occupied Japan, 1945-1952* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017). 29.

building a metaphorical floodwall to defend the purity of the Japanese race.<sup>65</sup> The stones and sandbags of this “floodwall” would be Japanese prostitutes. In fact, just one day after Miyazawa’s speech, a representative from the Home Ministry visited a brothel in Yokosuka and told all of the sex workers that they must henceforth partner with Americans. He emphasized that their sacrifice would save Japan’s women from American soldiers: “Although this is truly painful for you, in the gods’ great will, for the country, and for the dignified imperial family’s princesses, we urge you to shed your tears. You carry the destiny of all Japanese women as a burden upon your shoulders.”<sup>66</sup>

Murakami, intentionally or not, disabuses readers of the illusion that contemporary society is far and away from such mindsets. For even though the state no longer sponsors prostitution in Japan, the underlying ideology that promoted it is still very much at work today. The only difference is that the justification is stripped of any higher national purpose. An institution that was once sponsored by the state is left reduced to its most naked form. If I may be so bold, I would even suggest that this crude presentation of prostitution is a microcosm of Murakami’s ethos in and of itself. Chiefly, exposing the more unpleasant areas of Japanese society which it would rather hide by tearing away any pretensions. For Murakami’s stories are intimate ones, where what happens in private put at the forefront for all to see, and he will not let you turn away.

Such instances of private cruelty are best exhibited through the Narrator’s humiliation by those who are not her clients. There’s an incident in the public bathroom, where the Narrator drops her wax dildo and it is picked by a group of young women. When the Narrator tries to

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 48.

retrieve her dildo, one of the women holds the Narrator back to mock her.<sup>67</sup> The Narrator is very insecure around these women:

The other girls are telling her to let me go, that I'm not right in the head, which is even more humiliating, and I'm not right in the head, which is even more humiliating, and I'm thinking that these are the kinds of women who really do dine with that artist at Italian restaurants and get him to buy them jewelry and things, and I notice that the velvet girl is wearing a ring with a green stone in a really lovely design. I'm feeling kind of panicky and try to pull my arm free but can't, and she sneers at me and at the wax dildo in my other hand and says, 'You're one of those disgusting women, aren't you, who make money doing filthy things.'<sup>68</sup>

What stands out about this scene is the Narrator's jealousy. To her, these girls appear to have achieved in real life what the Narrator can only fantasize about. The Narrator's life is but an imitation of that which others can easily afford. She specifically mentions that "the velvet girl is wearing a ring with a green stone in a really lovely design."<sup>69</sup> In this passage it is brought to the reader's attention how conscious the Narrator is of her lower class. The girls are also aware of the difference in class between them and the Narrator, particularly with regard to her position as a sex worker. This is evident in the fact that she was insulted as "one of those disgusting women" who earns her income "doing filthy things."<sup>70</sup> In this scene, Murakami not only reveals that prostitutes are viewed with disdain by many in Japan, but that this prejudice against these women is so ingrained in society that even women will exhibit it. Since Murakami places such detail on the material wealth of these women relative to the protagonist, he is demonstrating that this hatred is not only a matter of gender, but also a matter of class.

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<sup>67</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Topaz." *Tokyo Decadence: 15 Stories by Ryu Murakami*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2018). 77.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

The class dimension has long been significant to understanding Japanese prostitution. In the introduction to this chapter, I briefly wrote about how grim and impoverished the lives of *yūjo* could be in the Meiji Period. What I did not make mention of was the extent to which many believed that the brothel was fit for lower class women. McClelland notes that during the Meiji Period, lower-class women were seen as morally and intellectually inferior by the ruling classes, but their sexual labor was willingly exploited as they drained men's sexual energies and provided the poor rural women an income. While women from more privileged backgrounds were idealized as good wives and wise mothers.<sup>71</sup> In fact, a great deal of the reasoning behind support of prostitution came from the notion of protecting the chastity of women with good names. As McClelland has written, one of the prime reasons for official endorsement of prostitution was "the protection of 'daughters of good families' by ensuring that men's natural sexual needs were satisfied by women of lower orders."<sup>72</sup> Kramm has observed that the police often used labor brokers to recruit women from poor regions of the countryside into Japanese brothels, and that while it is difficult to prove, such trafficking networks were probably still active after Japan's surrender. Kramm points to evidence of the police issuing special travel documents for labor brokers to go through the countryside where many women and children had gone to find food, escape bombed cities, or avoid occupiers. The labor brokers would offer food, clothing and shelter to women in exchange for their participation in the comfort centers.<sup>73</sup>

Even though women of privileged backgrounds also suffered from their own forms of misogyny, they held some value to the patriarchal order, and thus, were shown a level of concern

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<sup>71</sup> Mark McLelland. "Heteronormativity on the Road to War" in *Queer Japan From The Pacific War to The Internet Age* (United States of America: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005). 36.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Kramm. "Comforting the Occupiers: Prostitution as Administrative Practice in Japan at the End of World War II" in *Sanitized Sex: Regulating Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Intimacy in Occupied Japan, 1945-1952* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017). 49-50.

that women who become prostitutes did not. Venereal disease must have been rampant among the women of the brothel, but since they were from poor families, the government had little issue with subjecting them to this fate. This is objectification by the state. These women are fungible instruments to be exploited by the government to pacify its male citizens. In the Narrator's interaction with the women in the bathroom, Murakami is showing the reader that these classist attitudes remain, and that yet another unfortunate aspect of Japan's history still thrives under the surface. Given Murakami's past excursions with brothels in his youth, it is not inconceivable to think of him knowing prostitutes that came from poor backgrounds. He may know all too well that for many women, prostitution is the only economic choice.

The Narrator's poor treatment is hardly limited only to those who know that she is a sex worker. After her ordeal in the restroom she runs in search of a taxi. When she enters one, the driver appears concerned and asks if she is doing well. He then goes on to talk about his daughter while seemingly oblivious to the fact that she does not want to be spoken to. The Narrator, quite irritated with hearing him talk, shouts at him to be quiet, and he immediately insults her and kicks her out of his taxi.<sup>74</sup> His earlier concern for her notably disappears the moment she decides to stop listening to him. Even when the Narrator is not serving clients, she is still expected to be of service. This may be a service different than providing sexual favors to clients, but it still falls in line with prioritizing someone else's desires over her own. This, too, is objectification, specifically, *instrumentality*. The taxi driver views the Narrator as an instrument for his own desire to be listened to, and further, he also denies her subjectivity. Her feelings are only relevant insofar that they are palatable to his ego. The moment she reveals any upset or resistance to his

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 78.

speaking, he cuts her off. Prostitution, in this story, is merely on a spectrum of male entitlement, in which the inevitable end point is offering the body whole.

“Topaz” ends with the Narrator sleeping with the artist of her dreams when he purchases her services for one night. Even though they must separate, for the Narrator, their brief connection is enough for her to cherish with greater, and more personal ardor than before,

When I get back to my place the first thing I do is take the magazine the pale-faced man gave me and cut out the artist’s photo and tape it on the wall and say, “I love you,” very quietly, and kiss the photo, and it’s a very nice feeling, like having a doll you really like, and I call a friend from my high school days and tell her I heard his voice, and then, for almost an hour, I just gaze and gaze at my topaz.<sup>75</sup>

This is a rather dreary end for the Narrator. Her material condition has not improved. She will still be trapped in an occupation that permits her abuse and exploitation. To return to Cornell’s definition of bodily integrity, her agency is still very much tied to the institution of the sex industry. Her dreams may satisfy her, briefly, but they will not free her from misogyny. Through her story, Murakami has brought light to the casual violence and terror faced by prostitutes in modern Japan. The story may end with the Narrator satisfied with her topaz, but the reader comes away depressed that a topaz is all she has to show for her suffering.

## **1.2. The Double Meaning of *Piercing***

Murakami’s novel, *Piercing* was written in 1994 and translated into English by Ralph McCarthy in 2007. *Piercing* tells the story of two characters, a disturbed father named Kawashima Masayumi, and a sensitive prostitute named Sanada Chiaki. Kawashima suffers from

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 81.

the strange desire to stab someone in the navel with an ice pick, and to avoid stabbing his own infant son, he opts instead to murder a prostitute. It is implied that this impulse is rooted in the trauma he still suffers from his mother's abusive treatment of him when he was a child. Chiaki is in the process of reclaiming her sexual desire, as she often feels degraded and humiliated by interactions with her clientele. She also suffers from the trauma of being molested by her father, which often manifests in the form of what she calls the "Nightmare", which shuts down most control of her own body. Her primary object of personal autonomy is the piercing she has over her nipple. It gives her pain, but since she can control it, it is a pain that comforts her. When Kawashima hires her services, Chiaki tries to arouse him, but he laughs at her, which triggers the "Nightmare." With her nipple piercing unable to bring her any pain in that moment, Chiaki starts to stab herself into the leg with a knife. When Kawashima finds her in this delirious state, he takes care of her, and she mistakes his actions for genuine concern. In reality, he wants to her in more conscious state when he stabs her, so he can properly see her anguish. Whenever Chiaki falls into her "Nightmare" state, she goes into a delusion where she sees her clients as savior figures who will aid her through her crisis. She similarly views Kawashima as one such savior who loves only her, but when he cries out the name of his wife in a moment of fear, she retaliates with violence. Kawashima attempts to resist her, but ultimately succumbs to the traumatic memories of his mother and later finds himself tied up while Chiaki pierces her other nipple.

As sex worker, Chiaki's everyday life is similar to that of "Topaz's" Narrator, although Chiaki is far more explicit in *Piercing* about her lack of sexual desire. She states that what torments her now is the fact that "she couldn't detect so much as zero point one milligram of sexual desire anywhere in her body."<sup>76</sup> Murakami reveals that Chiaki has arrived at this state due

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<sup>76</sup> Ryū Murakami, *Piercing*, trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York: Penguin Group, 2007) 66.

to her past sexual experiences with men. She found that whenever she tried to initiate sex, it failed to excite men, which in turn failed to excite her:

...the sex you have with a men at your own suggestion is just never that good. After all, if you have to ask for sex, it means the man isn't really into it, right? And guys are never sweet or gentle or thoughtful in bed if they're not really into it. There's nothing cute about their faces when they come, either, and you wonder what's the point of rubbing your flesh and organs together like that, having this thing flopping around inside you. It makes you feel even lonelier than if you were alone. And then, after he comes, the man makes an even worse face. *What am I doing with a slut like this?* That's what the expression on his face says.<sup>77</sup>

In order to sexually satisfy men, Chiaki had to deny desire to herself. In her experience, whenever she readily expressed her desire, men valued her less as a partner. The attitude that women are less desirable when they express their own desires is one that degrades them to the level of objects. This is the denial of autonomy, where a woman's self-determination is ignored altogether. Murakami assigns to Chiaki some personal autonomy in the form of her own nipple piercing. For though the piercing is painful, the pain is hers to control, and therefore, it gives her some sense of power over herself: "To be able to choose your own pain – it's a little scary, she thought, but it's wonderful, too."<sup>78</sup> While the pain may be wonderful for her, it can be quite disturbing to her clients. Chiaki recalls that her customers often asked if she was crazy when they saw the piercing and wondered why she would do that to herself. Chiaki knows that piercings scare them, and she wears it, in part, because she enjoys watching her them squirm in fear.<sup>79</sup> The nipple piercing then gives Chiaki some degree of sexual power over her body, but also over men. This piercing also serves as the preeminent symbol of transgression in the novel.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 69.

In defining transgressive fiction, Michael Silverblatt writes that manipulating the body itself is an essential part of this new self-knowledge:

The underlying idea of transgressive thinking (as derived from Foucault) is that knowledge is no longer to be found through the oppositions of dialectical reasoning. Instead, knowledge is found at the limits of experience. The body becomes the locus for the possibility of knowledge. This may be true, but I would suggest that the leather, the piercings and the body markings indicate a desire to escape from our bodies.<sup>80</sup>

Through piercing her own flesh, Chiaki acquires a deeper understanding of herself. She comes to know better her own intimate desires. Further, if we accept Cornell's conception of bodily integrity where, the body is connected to wider systems and institutions, then the person known as "Chiaki" is not only her physical body, but also her occupation as a prostitute. Since this occupation often leads to the repression of her sexual desire, she uses the piercing to briefly escape from her "body" which is attached to such repression. The connection between piercing and bodily discontent was observed by Karen Aubrey in her study of practice during the 1990s, noting that body piercings "create a new body appearance" and imply a "dissatisfaction with the old."<sup>81</sup> As a result, I think that it is reasonable to interpret Chiaki's piercing as a form of personal power. By reclaiming this aspect of her body, she also reclaims a part of her herself that is subservient to the sex industry.

Chiaki, however, is not the only protagonist in this story. *Piercing* also follows Kawashima, who suffers from an irrepressible desire to pierce people, and plans to impale Chiaki

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Silverblatt. "Shock Appeal / Who Are These Writers And Why Do They Want To Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression." *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 1, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-01-bk-21466-story.html>

<sup>81</sup> Karen Aubrey. "Body Piercing: Gender Nihilism in the 90s." *Studies in Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (1995): 31, [www.jstor.org/stable/23413700](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23413700).

with an ice pick. For him, choosing a prostitute as a victim was “the only logical choice”<sup>82</sup> and that she would need “to be a freelancer, with no pimp or office or syndicate to report to.”<sup>83</sup> It is in Kawashima’s selection of Chiaki, that Murakami shows how disposable society see prostitutes. He would never think of murdering women who are wives, mothers, or in any other line of work. They have a spouse, a child, or a superior to return to. He not only needs a woman who will serve his desires, but also an untethered woman that few would miss. These women are viewed as easy to replace and that is what makes them most vulnerable. I also want to highlight the specific detail of Kawashima not simply choosing a prostitute, but a freelancer without larger connections. The class divisions I mentioned overserved in “Topaz” still exist here, but they have extended so deep as to create a hierarchy even among fellow prostitutes.

As cruel as one may find Kawashima, Murakami shows that he is only one among many cruel actors. As in “Topaz”, Kawashima exists within an environment where men pervasively abuse and exploit women like Chiaki. He is merely the extreme endpoint to this behavior. As the plot unfolds, Murakami details how Chiaki has suffered abuse from the men in her life since she was very young. The trauma from these experiences manifests as the “Nightmare”, and it often exists as a detriment to her autonomy and her sexual desires, in which she is in the constant process of reclaiming:

First she needed to reclaim her sex drive. Not that being horny made you brave, but the total absence of lust frightened her because it always been the first stage of that awful cycle, the one she’d never been able to tell anyone about. The cycle of terror that took hold with the sudden realisation that she alone was to blame for all the bad things happening around her. Once the Nightmare began, she wouldn’t be choosing her own pain any longer – it would be choosing her – and courage would be the last thing she’d be capable of.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

The “Nightmare” can also be brought about by misogyny. Her defense against such trauma is her nipple piercing. Since it is her own pain, it exists as a representation of her own autonomy and desire when those ideas are under threat. If misogyny, at its core, is the dehumanization of women, then an effective means of countering it is to center of women’s humanity. This unique type of defense first occurs when Chiaki is on her way to meet Kawashima. She notices a man leering at her and grinning from the public phone, but not too long after this, he starts shouting at the woman on the other line, calling her a “bitch.” This rattles Chiaki so greatly that she needs to tense all the muscles in her body to keep from screaming.<sup>85</sup> Her reaction to this is described in the following way, “She closed her eyes and tried to chase away the image of the man on the phone by touching her dress where it covered the nipple ring.”<sup>86</sup> The nipple piercing returns when she goes to meet Kawashima, who has purchased her services for the discreet purpose of killing her. Chiaki has no suspicions of his true intents and even plans to satisfy some of her own desires in this encounter.

Earlier on in the text, Chiaki refers to a customer who cut an elastic band out of a shower cap and tied it around her clitoris. Ever since that encounter, the elastic band, along with the nipple piercing, becomes tool of retrieving her sexual desire, “Maybe if she tried it again, her libido would have no choice but to come rushing back.”<sup>87</sup> She wants to teach Kawashima about the use of the elastic band in order to receive sexual gratification: “how exciting it could be for the both of them if they used an elastic band down there, just with her clitoris sticking out for him to look at and lick and touch.”<sup>88</sup> Her desire, however, is stunted by memories of the past,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 86.

which are triggered by her failure to sexually excite Kawashima. It is a failure for which she blames herself, “She’d been trying to arouse him, but had only succeeded in making him angry. It was all her fault, and she found herself unable to fight the eddying panic.”<sup>89</sup> One reason she may so terribly affected is because an inability to arouse him will leave small possibility that he will arouse her. The memories that are triggered are those of her childhood molestation by her father. She goes on to describe the nature of this “Nightmare”, and in a wider sense, how traumatic memories can continue to cripple someone long after their occurrence,

Memories aren’t like words; they’re soft and gooey. Covered with a sticky slime, like a penis after sex, or your vagina when you menstruate, and shaped like tadpoles or tiny water snakes. When these sleeping memories are awakened, they begin to squirm and then to swim, slowly at first but gradually faster, up to the surface. And once they get there, your senses shut down. The first wave hits you in the lips, then the palms of the hands, the toes, and under the arms. Some of the memories escape through the pores of your skin to hang about your body like a mist, waiting for the rest to swim up and join them. Once they’re all there, they come together to form an image, and it’s like a television screen being switched on before your eyes.<sup>90</sup>

It is evident from this passage is that Murakami is sensitive and sympathetic to the trauma of Chiaki. He gives the concept of memories three dimensions. They are not merely images that replay in one’s mind, but also living things that reside in the flesh. It is here where Chiaki differs from the Narrator in “Topaz”, as while the two are sex workers with unfulfilled desire, it is only with Chiaki that Murakami makes such emphasis on the terrible memories from her past. These terrors do not only affect her mood, but they also affect her body. She loses control of her body, which mimics the fashion in which her own autonomy was stripped from her by father. Murakami clearly wants the reader to have sympathy for what Chiaki is going through,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 96.

and by extension, what many women go through. The “Nightmare” is his way of bringing form to the trauma that women live with after misogyny or abuse. Such experiences cannot always be so easily cast away as bad memories but can unexpectedly strike the senses on a moment’s notice.

Chiaki reliably responds to the “Nightmare’s” resurgence by tugging at her nipple ring. This time, however, she feels no pain at all. She pulls harder, to the point where blood starts to flow from her nipple, but still nothing.<sup>91</sup> In order to reclaim her own pain, she escalates the self-mutilation, to the point where Kawashima finds her in the bathroom “completely nude, stabbing herself with a Swiss Army knife.”<sup>92</sup> This too is a method of *piercing*, i.e., piercing through the flesh. It is a means which is quite similar to Kawashima’s twisted desire, which is to impale her navel with an ice pick. Kawashima, however, will not be pleased by such actions and this is because he is not in control of them. His thrill in the impalement comes from the fact that he is taking the initiative and that he can watch her suffer. What’s happening here is quite the opposite, with Chiaki stabbing herself and deriving no visible anguish from the attempt.

What happens next ties into a dependency that Chiaki has on men. Kawashima is able to calm down Chiaki through deception. He still intends to murder her, but now feigns compassion and understanding. Kawashima remembers how he was mistreated by the adults who took care of him as a child and how deeply he feared them, but that his need to rely on them ultimately outweighed his fear, “the thought of being completely abandoned by them was scarier than the unpredictable attacks. All he’d learned for certain in his few years on earth was that he was powerless, incapable of surviving on his own, and that the people he came into contact with all

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 98.

seemed to despise him.”<sup>93</sup> It is due to his own past trauma that he is able to see a kindred spirit in Chiaki, and ultimately seduce her into viewing him as a helper. He is only able to succeed to due Chiaki’s own delusions for a male savior. Murakami reveals that whenever Chiaki goes into one of her episodes, she is often taken to the safety of the hospital by whichever man she happens to be with. Chiaki has, in her mind, put these men together into a composite savior, whom she refers to as “you-know-who.”<sup>94</sup> The man may even take sexual advantage of her, but he also recognizes her as distinct by calling her by her name, “She didn’t know who she was. But she knew what her name was, because You-know-who kept whispering it in her face. Chiaki. My name is Chiaki. I’m someone they call Chiaki. He calls me that, and he’s licking me down there, so there’s no doubt about it – Chiaki is me.”<sup>95</sup> The Nightmare comes whenever Chiaki feels threatened, but her recovery from such a state is not to rely on *herself*, but on another man. She is Chiaki believes that Kawashima is this man because he appears to respect her as a human being, and not merely a sex object,

He’d reserved her for six hours but never even touched her in a sexual way. And he’d paid her for six even though she said she’d only charge him for four. He was nothing like all her other clients – *Hurry up and take it off, hurry up and show it to me, hurry up and lick it, hurry up and suck it* – he was different, in every way. And even though her leg had been hurting really bad, she’d got wet when he put her panties on for her.<sup>96</sup>

Many of Chiaki’s bad interactions with men throughout *Piercing* are with men who present themselves as good, either to her or to society. The prime example of this is Chiaki’s own father. Her father is at the root of much of her trauma in the “Nightmare”, since he molested

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 120.

her repeatedly when she was a child. Chiaki says of her father that “Everybody thinks he’s a good man, a nice, respectable gentleman.”<sup>97</sup> Then there was the man at the phone booth who smiled and leered at her before shouting sexist insults into the phone. Her father was a figure well-respected by society, while the stranger at the phone booth, in his own way, tried to appeal to her. Chiaki, however, is just as guilty as anyone else in society for being deceived by bad men who present themselves as decent, with the composite savior being a prime example. Chiaki even admits in the text that she often projects her ideals onto men who could easily prove themselves otherwise, “How could anyone know what sort of man she was really waiting for? Up until now, she’d simply accepted whoever showed interest in her and put up with her and sacrificed for her and wanted her body.”<sup>98</sup> She makes herself dependent on these men because they appear to acknowledge her as an individual and not simply another object. This is what draws her to Kawashima, the fact that he calls her by her name. It naturally follows then that what would cause her to reject him is for him not to call her name, and this is exactly what occurs.

Chiaki has drugged Kawashima with Halicon in attempt to calm him down, but not knowing this, he panics, and cries out for help. Chiaki expects to hear her name, but instead hears that of his wife, Yoko.<sup>99</sup> Chiaki, of course, does not know that Yoko is his wife, or if he is even married, so to her, he could have just as easily forgotten her name. It is this sense of neglect and betrayal that triggers a great rage in Chiaki, one that she had suppressing for some time, and one that has often come at the hands of presumably sexist insults: “She needed it to contend with all the insults. Insults were the calling cards of hostility. And only violent rage gave her the courage it took to stand up to the hostility around her. Rage alone could show you the way to

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 165.

action.”<sup>100</sup> It is in this moment of rage that Chiaki becomes more than her occupation, but an individual. She is not servile or dependent, as she is expected to be before her clients, but rather, she lashes out in defense of her own dignity. Murakami is quite explicit; it is her *rage* that gives her courage. Her anger is a source of power, and ultimately, allows her to fight back against his plans to kill her. This anger, however, is brief, as she reverts back to her more docile self, but the vanishing of this anger does not mean that she has regressed completely into servility.

While Kawashima is tied up on the floor, she pierces her other nipple, with Murakami writing that, “Chiaki believed that if you chose something painful, accepted the pain and left something beautiful behind on your body as a result, you got stronger.”<sup>101</sup> Chiaki believes that she can become stronger by transforming her pain into beauty. The nipple piercing is painful, but it reminds her of what she has experienced and what she has accepted. Her clients may use her body, but they cannot affect what she may do with her own body. The nipple piercing is an object of personal autonomy for Chiaki, and by adding another one after her ordeal, she becomes a stronger individual as a result.

#### **1.4. The Banality of Prostitution**

As I said in the thesis introduction, a common theme in Murakami’s work is to bring to light the disturbing areas of Japanese society, which many would rather not acknowledge. This is a theme that carries over into his writings about sex workers in “Topaz” and *Piercing*. This is not to say that Murakami explicitly finds sex work to be an irredeemable evil, but that the prevalence of the sex industry and experiences of women who are a part of it, are not always openly

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 183.

acknowledged. In “Topaz” and *Piercing*, Murakami implicates ordinary citizens as complicit in a system which allows for acts that are cruel and grotesque. Indeed, the sex industry is still widely popular in Japan, as Mark D. West noted in *Lovesick Japan: Sex \* Marriage \* Romance*

\* *Law*:

A 1997 survey found that 51.7 percent of men over the age of twenty-five had paid for sex or sex-related acts such as manual stimulation. (Unlike the survey of sexless spouses, it's unlikely that these numbers are over-stated.) The survey asked that 51.7 percent why they paid for sex. More than half said they did so for one of four reasons: ‘seeking stimulation’ (16.4%), ‘because physical desire is only natural’ (15.0%), ‘because someone is selling it’ (13.4%), and the remarkable ‘because I don’t want to destroy my family’ (9.4%), which suggests that some kinds of extramarital sex differ from others.<sup>102</sup>

I do not cite this study to say that Japanese men alone participate in prostitution at high levels. In fact, Murakami’s thriller novel *In The Miso Soup*, is all about Westerners, specifically Americans, who travel to Japan for sex tourism purposes. I only refer to this study to show that the solicitation of prostitutes, at least around the time when many of these texts were published, is far from fringe or obscure behavior in Japan. For the record, I do not think that most of these men are would-be serial killers like Kawashima. In fact, I would venture that many of them probably see themselves as decent men. For all I know they very well could be, as it is not my aim to suggest that all men who solicit from prostitutes are evil. I want to suggest something a little more insidious. As I wrote in the introduction to this chapter, the sex industry, at least as it exists in Murakami, is an institution that often permits and promotes the abuse of its workers. Clients for sex work, in both Murakami and in real life, are ordinary people, most of whom are seen as decent by their peers or think of themselves as such. The abuses of the sex industry are

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<sup>102</sup> Mark D. West. “Commodified Sex” in *Lovesick Japan: Sex \* Marriage \* Romance \* Law*, (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 147.

indirectly, and sometimes, directly scaffolded by the average man. I will not conclude from this that the average man is evil, but that the average man is complicit in evil. Kawashima himself is also, to all outside appearances, a normal man. Indeed, his extreme behavior is not an aberrance, but an extension of Japan's cultural environment. Stephen Snyder has noted that in the afterword to *Piercing*, Murakami described his characters as ordinary people, and what has happened to them could just as easily happen to anyone.<sup>103</sup> Snyder then analyzes the actions of Kawashima as stemming from what his position in Japan: "here is a 'normal' salaryman, a good family man who happens to use his hard-earned vacation days to plan the brutal stabbing of a call girl; moreover, the same skills that make him a success at work—attention to detail, a creative imagination—can conveniently be put to good use in this 'hobby.'"<sup>104</sup>

For Murakami, "evil" is the suppression of the individual, in particular, that of his minorities, who in Murakami's texts, everyone is complicit in this evil, and no one emerges untainted. Snyder has noted that evil is everywhere in Murakami, and absent of any good, "While earlier writers invoke 'evil' in opposition to some sort of 'good' (which they, in some sense, affirm by the act of negation), Murakami lives in an age when 'evil' no longer exists in any conventional sense, at least not as the opposite of anything that can be labeled 'good'."<sup>105</sup> In "Topaz" and *Piercing*, it is less the case that we see a concrete "good" achieve absolute triumph over a concrete "evil", and more the case that human beings have to work with what they can in a world suffused with evil.

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<sup>103</sup> Stephen Snyder, "Extreme Imagination: The Fiction of Murakami Ryū." In *Oe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan*, edited by Stephen Snyder and Gabriel Philip (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 207.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

This progress is visualized through Chiaki's character growth throughout *Piercing*, when she comes to know this truth: that ordinary men can do despicably evil things. Earlier in the story, the reader gets a sense that she is vaguely aware of this truth, with her past experiences being molested by her father and the gym teacher, but that she has failed to truly internalize it. This is fairly evident in her reliance on a male savior in times of distress, and that savior role being thrust upon any man who shows her any care, regardless of how they may otherwise take advantage of her. After having seen Kawashima's darker motives, as well as his preoccupation with his wife, Chiaki has a brief moment of reflection about how she has seen him:

But one thing was for sure – the man sleeping over there was not some prince who'd worshipped her from afar and come galloping to her rescue. Maybe he was a murderer or maybe he was just some pervert who got off on playing one, but either way she was nothing more to him than a body to rent.<sup>106</sup>

She comes to understand that men can be just kind as they are cruel. The Kawashima who took care of her and the Kawashima who tried to kill are indeed one and the same man. This revelation does not stay restricted to Kawashima alone, in fact, the experience makes her rethink her relations with men throughout her life:

The man who'd whispered softly in her ear as she bit his finger and the man who'd waited for her outside the hospital in the freezing cold and the man who'd bound her wrists so tightly and wanted to cut her Achilles tendons, were all the same person. That was the thought that had occurred to her, and she let it sink in now. You didn't get the sense that this man was two or more different people. And that made him unique. Unlike any other man she'd ever known. He wasn't at all like her father, of course, but he wasn't like Kazuki or Atsushi or Hisao or Yoshiaki or Yutaka either. All of them were capable or turning from the ideal man into the very worst sort of man in zero point one seconds. Whenever the dark side of a man revealed itself, it always felt to Chiaki as if he'd turned

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<sup>106</sup> Murakami Ryū. *Piercing*, trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York: Penguin Group, 2007) 179.

into someone else entirely, and only sex seemed to counteract the disillusionment and despair. Which was one reason losing her sex drive made her so anxious.<sup>107</sup>

This passage adds another layer to Chiaki's fraught sexuality, as for her, sex was a means for her to avoid confronting the cruelty of men. She feared losing her sex drive, in part, because she feared confronting this reality. Through this new understanding of Chiaki, Murakami may want to convey that these women find greater comfort in fantasy men than in real ones, because real men are far too disappointing. The Narrator of "Topaz", who has sexual intercourse with the artist she loves, afterward contents herself with a topaz ring and his photo, while Chiaki had her "savior." That some of the strongest desires of these women remain relegated to realm of fantasy is fitting, as while much changes for these characters internally, their material condition remains the same. The Narrator does not run away with the artist and join the ranks of higher classes, but rather, continues on with her sex work. Chiaki gets angry enough to briefly resist Kawashima, but that outrage never carries over into resisting her conditions as a sex worker. While Murakami has had characters that have resisted oppression to the point of widespread destruction (e.g., *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, *Coin Locker Babies*), he leaves the problems of sex industry mostly intact. By the end of these stories there is no structural change in their occupation which would lead them to avoid further abuse. This fits in well with what I have observed about Murakami in the introduction. As he once told the *Financial Times*, "I'm not trying to make the world a better place."<sup>108</sup> He has little interest in crafting an alternate world for his protagonists because he may not believe that one exists. For him, it is enough that they have a means to express their discontent, be it through the imagination or a piercing.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>108</sup> "Ryu Murakami," Interview by David Pilling, *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013.  
<https://www.ft.com/content/05a447e8-263e-11e3-8ef6-00144feab7de>

It is difficult to reconcile this lack of material change and how deeply engrossing these stories are in the interior emotions of their characters. The reader understands that evil exists and how it affects the lives of these sex workers. While Murakami does not call for an end to sex industry in these stories, they do demand a greater attention to the lives of sex workers. The reader must understand with greater sensitivity and nuance the difficult lives of these women. Murakami may also want to reader to rethink their place in relation to the sex industry. To think about the ways in which they treat sex workers, and how similar that may be to their general treatment of women. Murakami does not provide a clear or obvious solution to matters of misogyny or objectification raised in “Topaz” and *Piercing*. Nor may he even be the best individual to put such a proposal forward. The only consistency in many of his texts, which also re-appears here, is the persistence of human beings who find inventive ways to survive under societal pressure. He did so, in this case, through the lens of sex work, and so doing, has highlighted their own humanity, and in his own way, added to the debate.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVENGE OF THE WOMAN

“The basis of social policy in modern Japan is the assumption that all women are potential wives and mothers”<sup>109</sup>

- Kano Ayako

#### 2.1. When Women Strike Back

In the previous chapter, I observed that the prejudice faced by Japanese sex workers was indicative of a wider culture of misogyny. The specific form of misogyny that these women faced emerged from a state ideology that saw them as little more than latrines from men’s excess sexual energy. They also served to protect women from high-born families from having extramarital or premarital sex that could lead to pregnancy or venereal disease. While sex workers were seen as outlets for male lust, what of the well-to-do Japanese women who were not wrapped in prostitution? While more consideration was given to their humanity, idealized by the state to be good wives and wise mothers, they were no less subject to the same culture of misogyny that had so terribly exploited Japan’s sex workers. In the Taisho Era, these women were often raised into the role of child-bearers for the good of the nation. McClelland notes that

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<sup>109</sup> Ayako Kano. “Debates? Feminist? Japanese?” in *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016). 8.

even women's rights activists, like Hiratsuka Raichō, argued that “the purpose of sexuality was to bear children and that the sexual activities of the population should be correctly managed.”<sup>110</sup>

The traditional gender roles that are sometimes expected of women in Japan, usually take on natures that are subservient and productive to the lives and desires of men. Carol Fischer Sorgenfrei has detailed that imagery of nurturing, self-sacrificing, and saintly mothers and wives are common in Japanese literature and art, with many being either abandoned treated despicably by Japanese or Western men. In spite of this treatment, these women remain faithful, devoted, and perfect.<sup>111</sup> While the economic boom of the postwar period offered women more income and opportunities, Ayako Kano has noted that more docile roles, such as the housewife, have continued to symbolize femininity in Japan, “The cultural dominance of housewife femininity in Japan even extends to the workplace, where it is manifested in the roles of caretaker, helper, and assistant.”<sup>112</sup> Such expectations on women continue to thrive in both the public and private spheres. Mark D. West notes that in Japanese popular culture, the female themes of *enka* ballads are “beauty, passivity, and longing”, while female manga characters are said to be “kind, cute, cooperative, and shy.”<sup>113</sup> Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda have noticed that in Japanese social studies textbooks women were often portrayed as homemakers, while the occupational roles for women were often limited to female-dominated jobs like nurses, teachers, and waitresses. In English textbooks, the female pronoun “she” or a female proper name was

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<sup>110</sup> Mark McClelland. “Homonormativity on the Road to War” in *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* (United States of America: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005). 37.

<sup>111</sup> Carol Fischer Sorgenfrei. “Deadly Love: Mothers, Whores, and Other Demonic Females in Japanese Theatre.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 1, no. 2. (1994) 77.

<sup>112</sup> Kumiko Nemoto. “Production and Navigation of Gender Bias: Heroic Masculinity, Female Misogyny, and Queen Bees” in *Two Few On Top: The Persistence of Inequality in Japan* (Ithaca; London: Cornell Press, 2016). 132.

<sup>113</sup> Mark D. West. “Love” in *Lovesick Japan: Sex, Marriage, Romance, Law* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2011). 31.

used in activities like baking or washing dishes.<sup>114</sup> Kano has argued that Japan's government policy pressures women into accepting traditional gender roles:

Japanese welfare and social policy enforces gender norms: it makes it easier for a girl to grow up to be a wife and mother, and makes it more difficult for her to reject those roles or to combine those roles with demanding careers. Japanese welfare policy had always stressed support for the most economically "productive" members of society— that is, the full-time workers, assumed to be male, whose workday is not interrupted by care work of any kind.<sup>115</sup>

Murakami, of course, is no stranger to having female characters who fail to meet these standards. In many instances they are negative figures who abuse or abandon the men in their lives. In *Piercing*, for example, Kawashima remembers the abuse of his own mother as a child, while the premise of *Coin Locker Babies* deals with mothers who abandon their infants into coin lockers. These figures may certainly be Murakami's way of criticizing dysfunctional families, but they are not model for critiquing the restricting of gender norms and cultural misogyny. It is for that end that I have selected the texts *Audition* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*.

This chapter continues the thesis that through the transgressive characters, Murakami highlights his problems with modern Japanese society. In his novels, *Audition* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, the female protagonists commit acts of vengeance against the men who have wronged them. The aim of this violence is to materialize the pain and frustration that Japanese women feel from the ways in which they are objectified and abused by not only men, but also by the wider culture that permits their actions.

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<sup>114</sup> Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda. "Women's Education and Gender Roles in Japan" in *Women Of Japan & Korea: Continuity and Change*, edited by Gelb Toyce and Marian Lief Palley. Temple University Press (1994). 53.

<sup>115</sup> Ayako Kano. "Debates? Feminist? Japanese?" in *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Love, Sex, and Labor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016). 11.

In *Audition*, Murakami introduces the reader to Yamasaki Asami who Aoyama seeks as his new girlfriend. He expects her to fill the same role that his late wife, Ryoko, did as a submissive and supportive spouse. He not only wants her to love him, but also his son, something that he assumes but never attempts to clarify with her. Asami, who feels profoundly disrespected by this gesture, and tries to murder him. Asami not only rejects the gender role that is expected of her, but she also ties Aoyama's disrespect of her to the abuse that she had suffered from men throughout her life.

In *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, Murakami introduces the Midori Society, middle-aged women, or "Oba-sans", all named Midori, who have been left disillusioned by their uneventful marriages. Even though marriage is promoted as positive role for women, it has brought these women little benefit. The very existence of the Oba-san in this text demystifies the romanticism of the wife. When one of the Midoris is brutally sexually assaulted and murdered in cold blood, the others take revenge by killing the boys responsible. The murders of these boys become a liberating force for the Oba-sans, who not only feel that they are striking back against an oppressive culture, but also that they are finally taking initiative over their own lives.

Before going forward, I feel I must make the intentions of this chapter clear, lest there be any misunderstandings from the reader. It is not the intention of this chapter to state that Japan is the only nation where women are restricted through the rigid gender roles or face misogyny by men. After all, the President of the United States has been credibly accused of sexual misconduct by no less than two dozen women. Nor is the intention of this chapter to imply that the unfulfilled lives of these women are representative of Japanese women who decide to take on traditional gender roles. There are many Japanese women who choose to be housewives or maids and lead complete and fulfilling lives. I do not mean to suggest otherwise. What this chapter does

intend to claim, however, is that these gender roles do not always serve women the best, and that they should not be pressured and abused by men into the mold they cannot fit.

## 2.2. Asami's Performance

The novel *Audition* is, like *Piercing*, it is a psychosexual thriller. *Audition*, and by extension, Murakami, achieved international fame after the release of Miike Takashi's 1999 film adaptation. More so than any other film adaptations of Murakami's texts, such as *Tokyo Decadence*, *Love and Pop*, and *Piercing*, it was this film that served as an introduction to Murakami for many people outside of Japan. As such, most of the analyses and reviews of *Audition* in English that I read to prepare for this chapter primarily cover the film adaptation. The film's international popularity may also be due to the timing of its release, as it came out during a wave of Japanese horror films, such as *Ringu* (1999) and *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002). As Daniel Martin wrote about the releases of *Audition* and *Ringu* in the UK, "These two films would later come to be regarded as the vanguard of a new wave of cult film, a cycle of Japanese horror movies that became significantly visible in the UK."<sup>116</sup> I will occasionally cite analyses of Miike's adaptation for this section, because while it does differ in some minor ways from the text, it is similar enough to the source material that analyses of the film can also reasonably apply to characters and themes in the novel.

Although *Audition* might be Murakami's most famous work outside of Japan, it is also among his least violent. In comparison to the outpouring of blood in *Coin Locker Babies*, *Piercing*, and *In The Miso Soup*, Murakami's *Audition* plays like a romantic drama until the

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<sup>116</sup> Daniel Martin. "Cinema of Cruelty: The Birth of Asia Extreme and Miike Takashi's *Audition*" in *Extreme Asia: The Rise of Cult Cinema from the Far East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). 41.

outbreak of horror in the final few pages. The violence itself is also quite minimal, restricted mainly to torture of Aoyama. Instead of being spread out over the book, the violence serves as a climax to much of the tension that has accumulated during Aoyama and Asami's relationship. I believe that to properly decipher the meaning behind the violence, the relationship that Aoyama and Asami have must be thoroughly analyzed.

*Audition* is the story of Aoyama, who becomes a widower after the passing of his wife Ryoko and is left to raise his son, Shige, alone. Aoyama starts to think about finding a new wife but is concerned about how to go about doing so. He selects the unorthodox approach of having women audition for the role of his wife but does this under the guise of having them audition as actresses for a film. Out the many women who audition, the only one who draws his interest is the mysterious Yamasaki Asami. Aoyama ignores warnings from his friend Yoshikawa that Asami may be hiding things about her past and proceeds to date her. Asami's only demand is that Aoyama only love her and no one else. He agrees to this without telling her about his son. As soon as she finds out about Shige, she invades his home and cuts off one of his feet with a wire saw. Asami is eventually inadvertently killed by Shige after a fall down the stairs. The novel ends right there with him calling the police.

Aoyama's search begins not only for a woman who can be a proper wife, but also for a woman who can be proper mother to his son. The standard for "proper" has already been set by his late wife, Ryoko. Murakami never allows the reader to see Ryoko alive, but only through the filter of how Aoyama remembers her. Through this filter, the reader comes to understand that Ryoko was very supportive of Aoyama throughout all of his endeavors, recalling that, "as a wife she'd been quietly supportive of Aoyama in every aspect of his life and career. He would never forget that it was only because of her help and understanding that he's succeeded in his Great

Adventure.”<sup>117</sup> By using the word “Great Adventure”, Aoyama is clearly presenting himself as the hero of his own story, while Ryoko is relegated to the supporting role. If she had desires of her own apart from Aoyama’s goals, Murakami is not interested in revealing them to the reader. What is most important about Ryoko is that she gave herself completely to Aoyama and Shige, even when Aoyama was unfaithful to her:

Many wives might have made a point of dangling something like that over their husbands’ heads, but not the ever-modest and self-effacing Ryoko. Naturally, Aoyama had nothing but love, respect, and gratitude for this remarkable wife of his, and yet it is also true that ever since his days at the agency he’d been rather extravagantly unfaithful to her. The most critical instance had occurred just after the Jesus video took off, when he got entangled with a nightclub hostess to the tune of millions of yen. But even then Ryoko had maintained her cool and her quiet dignity, and no serious fights ever occurred in the home. Her main priorities—first, last, and always—were Shige’s well-being and education.<sup>118</sup>

Aoyama is engaging in a softer objectification than the more explicit abuses described in “Topaz” and *Piercing*, but it is still objectification, regardless. If I can return to the criteria offered by Nussbaum for objectification in the previous chapter, she lists both *instrumentality* and *denial of subjectivity* as possible criterion. With “instrumentality” referring to the treatment of an object as a tool of the objectifier’s purposes and “denial of subjectivity” meaning treating an object as something whose experience and feelings need not be taken into account.<sup>119</sup> Aoyama’s relationship with his wife is that of instrumentality. In his mind, she existed only to scaffold his ambitions and to raise their son, and while he claims to have had nothing but “love, respect, and gratitude”<sup>120</sup> for his late wife, this did not stop him from having an affair with

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<sup>117</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 7.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum. “Objectification.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, No. 4 (Autumn 1995). 257, [www.jstor.org/stable/2961930](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2961930).

<sup>120</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 8.

another woman. During the moment at which he committed that act, he denied his wife her subjectivity and did not consider her feelings on the matter. In spite of this grave violation of their marriage vows, Ryoko continues to support him, not once arguing with him on the matter. Even in reflecting on her death, Aoyama finds it a relief that she died without too much disruption, “Her gentle resignation in the face of such pain and fear had been a wonderful parting gift to those who loved her.”<sup>121</sup> There lies an implicit prioritization of Aoyama’s feelings over Ryoko’s in this statement, that for the sake of his feelings of discomfort, Ryoko had to resist appearing undignified, even on her deathbed.

It is for these reasons that Ryoko feels less like a real human being and more like an ideal created in Aoyama’s mind. The reader might even be tempted to doubt Aoyama’s version of events and there are hints that he may well be an unreliable narrator. For all throughout Aoyama’s courtship of Asami, it becomes clear to the reader that his romantic feelings have overridden any concerns about the mysteries of her past. A similar romanticism may be affecting his presentation of Ryoko. If she ever had any private reservations or problems with her marriage, the reader can only but speculate. Ryoko’s lasting legacy is that she laid down the standard for a good wife in Aoyama’s eyes. Ryoko’s unending support, however, had the consequence of making Aoyama haplessly dependent on her:

What husband has never speculated how free he might feel if his wife were suddenly out of the picture? And how many count the days till she takes the kids off for a week with her folks? Let these men actually lose their wives, however, and few can even summon the will or energy to run wild; it’s only then that they recognize the support system they’ve been taking for granted. When Aoyama lost Ryoko he became mired in feelings of utter powerlessness.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 8.

Even though Ryoko lived mainly to support her husband, it is her husband who cannot live independently without her. Murakami is making the observation that even though many wives have subordinate roles in marriage, they are also the pillars that keep their husbands afloat. Aoyama observes that this path can only lead to despair, “A person without self-confidence is incapable of being independent, and people who are dependent on their partners always create unhappiness.”<sup>123</sup> Aoyama recognizes this flaw within himself, but does not seek to live more independently, instead defaulting to finding another wife who can support him as Ryoko once did. This kind of mindset is hardly uncommon among many Japanese men, and the women are cognizant of it. Japanese feminist Kumiko Nemoto interviewed many working women and men for their perspectives on gender roles and results were disheartening:

The women I interviewed expressed a desire to marry and have children. However, most associated marriage with the woman's shouldering all of the responsibilities related to running the house and rearing children. Indeed, in my interviews with unmarried men, nine mentioned that they wanted women to do all the housework. Marriage emerges, therefore, as the antithesis to women's financial and individual autonomy and to career ambition.<sup>124</sup>

The main revelation from Nemoto's interviews is that the marriage institution can become a cage which traps and stifles the desires of women. The scheme of a fake audition is, in fact, planned by Aoyama's friend Yoshikawa, and while Aoyama goes along with the audition plan, he has some clear reservations about the ethics of his actions. In a moment of self-reflection, he comes to see the female participants as selling themselves to him like products that he can enjoy:

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>124</sup> Kumiko Nemoto. “Postponed Marriage: Exploring Women's Views of Matrimony and Work in Japan.” *Gender and Society* Vol. 22, No. 2, (April 2008) 226, [www.jstor.org/stable/27821634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27821634).

Sitting in a studio, sizing up a row of fifteen or twenty swimsuit-clad hopefuls, he'd always found words like "slave-trade" and "auction block" popping into his mind. Of course they weren't slaves, but there was no denying that the women lined up on that little platform, posing in their bikinis, were trying to sell themselves. Buying and selling was the basis of all social intercourse, and the commodity an actor or model offered for the sale was nothing less than her own being. Was it really all right, Aoyama wondered, to take advantage of such a system in searching for a wife?<sup>125</sup>

It is of particular interest that Aoyama refers "buying and selling" the basis of all social intercourse, and that he recognizes that actors and models sell their own bodies in the process of auditioning. If Aoyama allows his future wife to sell herself in such a way, did he metaphorically purchase her on the auction block, or is he simply participating in an already existing system of exchange? If we take Aoyama's assertion that buying and selling are the basis for all social interactions, then it isn't only actors, but everyone objectifies themselves or parts of themselves in order to participate effectively in society. Nussbaum has made an interesting note that "all types of objectification are not equally objectionable" and that "the evaluation of any of them requires a careful evaluation of context and circumstance."<sup>126</sup> I think that the same is true here. The fact that objectification is common does not always make it benign. While Aoyama's aim behind the audition is to find a spouse, he withholds this information from those auditioning, so while they may be willing participants, they are not fully informed ones. He does not trust them enough to be honest with them. If we take the process of the "audition" to be representative of relationships between men and women, then Murakami might be implying that these relationships are based on male deception.

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<sup>125</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 27.

<sup>126</sup> Martha Nussbaum. "Objectification." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, No. 4 (Autumn 1995). 256, [www.jstor.org/stable/2961930](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2961930)

Murakami foreshadows Aoyama's torture towards the novel's end by tying it to the way in which he is holding the audition. It permits him to indulge in a fantasy of a harem, where a dozen or so young women offer themselves to him:

...in spite of his reservations he couldn't help imagining himself surrounded by ten or twelve lovely, intelligent, refined young ladies. What man, if not homosexual or mentally ill, wouldn't take pleasure in a fantasy like that? The male imagination is a powerful thing, and it was enough to tip the balance. And to seal his fate. He had no way of knowing the unspeakable horrors that awaited him.<sup>127</sup>

Here, Murakami offers clear authorial support to my earlier interpretation that there lies a relationship between Aoyama's troubling views on women and Asami's violent reaction. Aoyama has engaged in sexist behavior and his suffering towards the novel's end is his retribution. As Kasia Boddy noted in her review of the novel for the *Telegraph*, "The fact that he agrees to the audition makes him culpable."<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, Aoyama's own imagination appears to be a strong factor in his perception of Asami. It can be inferred from his depiction of Ryoko, for instance, that Aoyama might not be a reliable narrator. That unreliability continues as he starts his relationship with Asami.

When Aoyama first sees her, his mind runs wild, conjuring up music as though his life were a romantic film, "He felt like a deaf man whose ears had been healed with exquisite music and it almost struck him as odd that music didn't begin playing: in a movie, this was where the poignant love theme would have swelled."<sup>129</sup> Aoyama has a fantasy about Asami gaining the favor of his dog, Gangsta, while in a domestic scene, "Aoyama imagined Gangsta barking at

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<sup>127</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 30.

<sup>128</sup> Kasia Boddy. "Audition by Ryu Murakami – review." *Telegraph*, January 12, 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/4209490/Audition-by-Ryu-Murakami-review.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 57.

Yamasaki Asami as she prepared dinner in this kitchen. He even pictured the design and color of the apron she'd be wearing. Gangsta would be wary of her at first, as he always was with strangers. But after two or three months his bark would change from one of distrust to one like this, imploring her to feed him."<sup>130</sup> It is telling that in this fantasy, Asami continues the role of Ryoko as a provider of the family. He imagines her serving meals not only to him, but also to their dog. As with Ryoko, it does not appear to cross his mind that Asami might not want the role of housewife. He not only expects that Asami will comply with this position, but also that she will comply with enthusiasm. He loves Asami less for her actual character, and more for the ideal that she represents to him. In fact, in a conversation with Yoshikawa, he remarks that he finds Asami so "modest and sweet and uncomplicated."<sup>131</sup> If only to further make her seem less human, when Aoyama describes her beauty, he often does so as if he were describing a beautiful statute. Upon seeing her naked body for the first time, Aoyama describes her body "like an idealized abstraction, a porcelain figure",<sup>132</sup> and later notes that it were "as if a sculptor from some other world had found a way to imbue his work with softness and moisture and warmth and bring it to life."<sup>133</sup> The resulting portrait we get of Asami is less of a three-dimensional human being, and more of a vessel into which Aoyama can pour in his ideals. Given this portrait, it should not be surprising that the focus of the audition was to attract "single girls living at home"<sup>134</sup> and not office ladies, since it is not as easy to deceive "a well-adjusted woman with a regular job."<sup>135</sup> In other words, women who could be more perceptive or independent in their

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 32.

own lives would be a threat to the whole project. In the pursuit for a wife, Aoyama does not uplift the individual characters of women, but takes advantage of their vulnerabilities.

Even though Murakami suggests that Aoyama's imagination will lead to his punishment, he does not depict his actions as overtly malicious. If anything, his attraction to Asami is shown in a sympathetic, if not naive light. As Boddy observed in her review, while Asami "may think all men are the same, the story tells us otherwise. Aoyama has his flaws, but he's a decent man, especially kind to his dog and to his son."<sup>136</sup> He may well be objectifying Asami, but he also appreciates her as a companion. In contrast to his fantasy about her preparing meals, Aoyama also has a fantasy about her going on a trip with him to Germany, where they walk through a small town while the skylarks sing and they gaze at the sunlight glittering over the river.<sup>137</sup> In most of her dialogue with Aoyama, we get the impression that she thinks he has treated her with more respect than most men in her life, going so far as to say that he's the first man to speak with her, "as if I had a brain."<sup>138</sup> Asami also tells him that most men "don't seem to take young women like me seriously."<sup>139</sup> It is possible that Asami is lying here but given her extreme feeling of betrayal by the novel's end, I am dubious of this suggestion. While we later learn that Asami is deceiving Aoyama about her past, her deception is only performed to the end of gaining his affection. This mask falls away, however, as soon as she realizes that Aoyama was dishonest with her, not respecting her like a complete partner.

This in turn makes Aoyama somewhat comparable to Kawashima in *Piercing*. While Kawashima is clearly the more immoral of the two, with his explicit intentions to murder Chiaki,

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<sup>136</sup> Kasia Boddy, "Audition by Ryu Murakami – review." *The Telegraph*, January 12, 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/4209490/Audition-by-Ryu-Murakami-review.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010) 62.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

they both present a certain duality to the women they meet. Kawashima, on the one hand, wants to impale Chiaki with an ice pick, but shows some concern for her as soon as she falls into a mental breakdown. Chiaki takes his concern as genuine and imagines him to be her male savior. Aoyama deceives Asami into dating him through the elaborate audition scheme and fantasizes about her taking up a more domestic role as a housewife. Asami, however, views him as the first man to take genuine interest in her personality. By the end of *Piercing*, Chiaki realizes that great acts of evil can come from men who present themselves as good. In her case, the acts were often extraordinarily cruel, but nothing so blatant as attempted murder is committed by Aoyama. He is a decent man who means well, but nevertheless dirties his hands through the dishonesty of Yoshikawa's audition process. Aoyama may not be a good man who does a terrible act, but he is a good man who is complicit in perpetuating a culture of sexism. He may be substantially different from Kawashima, but the two of them have no problem exploiting patriarchal systems in their own ways.

The pivotal twist of *Audition*'s plot is that while Aoyama may knowingly deceive Asami, he is also being deceived by her. He sees her as the ideal woman to replace his wife, and this ideal proves to be little more than an illusion of Asami's making. It is an illusion so sweet, however, that Aoyama easily allows himself to be seduced. As Colette Balmain wrote of the film adaptation, "Asami, a beautiful and seemingly demure young woman, seems to meet all of Aoyama's criteria; she appears to be the epitome of passive Japanese womanhood and respectability."<sup>140</sup> Aoyama's fantasies about Asami serve not only to show his extravagant feelings, but also to show that he is not the right frame of mind to judge her clearly. Asami is putting on a performance for him, which is fitting given that the "audition" itself was for aspiring

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<sup>140</sup> Colette Balmain. "The Rape-Revenge Film: From Violation To Vengeance" in *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 110.

actresses. Through Asami, Murakami is taking the concept of a “performance” and extending it to how prospective wives behave before their prospective husbands. I had already noted how Aoyama’s participation in the audition represents the lengths men will take to seduce women, then Asami deception represents the lengths women will take to please their male partners. In such relationships, women do not honestly present themselves as they are, but present themselves as who they think their husbands want them to be. As the lesbian feminist Ayako Hattori once argued, “Often people in the minority who are oppressed socially welcome or worship the attention of the majority or the oppressor, because expect the interest of the oppressor will lead to help. For women in Japan, heterosexuality and the worship of men join together to the detriment of women’s issues.”<sup>141</sup>

Throughout the text, Murakami lays out obvious clues that Asami is being untruthful. For example, when Aoyama first calls Asami after her audition, he notices that her voice is “deeper and thicker” than it had been before.<sup>142</sup> The moment that Aoyama answers that it’s him, she immediately switches back to the voice she used during the audition, a change so swift that, “had he been in a less agitated state of mind, it might have struck him as odd.”<sup>143</sup> There’s also the scene that occurs after he has been drugged by Asami with sleeping tablets. When he awakes, she is already long gone, having left nothing for him a cryptic note. Instead of coming to terms with the fact that Asami might not be everything that she appears to be, he rationalizes her actions in the best positive light:

She was a pure and innocent but spirited girl. She’d taken something the wrong way and gotten angry and left. Wanting to avoid a confrontation, she’d slipped him some of her own

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<sup>141</sup> Ayako Hattori. “Heterosexism and Women’s Lives in Japan.” *Off Our Backs* 29, no. 10 (November 1999). 1, [www.jstor.org/stable/20836484](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20836484)

<sup>142</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2010). 70.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

sleeping tablets so she could leave without having to explain. She would have brought sleeping tablets, he reasoned, because she was nervous and excited about their first trip together and afraid she wouldn't be able to sleep.<sup>144</sup>

This is very much in keeping with the irrationality of Aoyama's earlier fantasies about Asami. Murakami is showing how desperate Aoyama is to cling to his fantasy. The fantasy also serves to reassure Aoyama's ego. After all, if a girl as innocent as Asami is so invested in him, then this must mean that he is a good man. This self-assurance is aided by the fact that he can compare himself to a far worse offender: the slain womanizer Shibata Hiroshi. Shibata was Asami's music producer when she worked at Victor Records, and Yoshikawa discovered that he had died a year and a half before Aoyama had first met Asami.<sup>145</sup> Yoshikawa further details that once Shibata lost his power as a producer towards the end of his career, he used his mentorship exclusively for the purpose of having sex with women. He apparently did this to the point where it became a real problem for the record company.<sup>146</sup> Aoyama's overactive imagination immediately constructs an image of Shibata as an abusive man trying to take advantage of Asami: "Just to picture some arrogant, bloated, middle-aged record producer putting his arm around Yamasaki Asami's shoulder, whispering 'Unnerstand?' or 'That's a good girl,' had twisted his stomach into a knot."<sup>147</sup> Farther on in the novel, when Yoshikawa informs Aoyama about how Shibata was killed, Aoyama has no sympathy for the producer:

Hearing the name Shibata brought Aoyama crashing to earth. The womanizing producer who'd had an indirect connection to Yamasaki Asami. Or had there in fact been more to their relationship? Just to think of that possibility filled him with hatred for the man. Shibata had probably wined and dined beautiful women on a nightly basis. Someone of his ilk wouldn't have agonized, as Aoyama had, about holding Yamasaki Asami's hand. He'd

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 83.

have been all over her at the first opportunity. Aoyama felt as if he could murder a slimeball like that. Thankfully Shibata was already dead.<sup>148</sup>

Aoyama even goes so far as to say that even if Shibata was murdered in the way that Yoshikawa described, “the bastard only got what was coming to him.”<sup>149</sup> Shibata is a useful foil which Aoyama can use to excuse his more problematic behavior, because the late producer’s behavior of coercive womanizing is easier to condemn. This is made in contrast to Aoyama, the lonely widow who only wants to find another spouse. The reader might even be seduced by Aoyama’s perspective, but since he endured a fate similar to Shibata’s, we must question the assumptions behind such thinking. The two men both have a foot amputated by Asami, implying that the two were on a spectrum of poor behavior towards women. Aoyama’s treatment of Asami might not be as terrible as Shibata’s, but that is beside the larger point, as he is still complicit in treating her like an object to another extent. Asami is particularly sensitive to the way that men treat her due to the childhood abuse she suffered from her stepfather. Towards the end of the novel, Aoyama witnesses this abuse for himself in a surreal flashback:

The girl knows that the man is watching her and takes care not to give him more than brief glimpses through the opening. He peers down at the stubs of his legs for a moment, then inserts his right hand into his waistband. She’s practicing the few simple steps she’s mastered, her head tilted at an angle that best emphasizes the beauty of her face, as she’s been taught to do at ballet school. She knows what the man is doing with his right hand, and she’s seen the thing he’s holding. He’s been doing this almost every night for the past few weeks, whenever she practices. He doesn’t yell at her anymore when she’s dancing, or call her names. Instead he gets drunk and watches her out of the corner of his eye, fumbling in his underwear and looking as if he’s about to burst into tears. Whenever she senses him moving that hand and making that face, as if begging for mercy, something evaporates from her body, and something else enters to replace it—something dark and indelible...<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 159.

It is significant that this abuse occurs while Asami is practicing her ballet steps, because Asami had earlier described ballet to Aoyama as a form of catharsis. She credits it with having helped her deal with her turbulent childhood, “When I’d watch myself in the mirror after mastering a new *pas*, a new step, I’d feel, well, purified. To see that I was able to some extent to become one with something beautiful, with this graceful image I had in my head, was... Well, I can’t explain it. But it helped me forget my troubles, and I think that’s how I managed to overcome it all.”<sup>151</sup> Now this ballet, her purification, is inextricably tied to her stepfather’s abuse. Where else can Asami find her catharsis now? The fact that Asami has already murdered Shibata and attempts to murder Aoyama, implies that she is still holding some of that trauma inside of her. She presents herself as otherwise to Aoyama, and it is due to this performance that he is willing to believe that she *has* overcome. He contrasts her with other survivors of child abuse, whom he describes as “riddled with complexes and basically unpleasant to be around.”<sup>152</sup> Aoyama’s beliefs on child abuse survivors are a generalization, as there are many who can grow from their trauma without becoming unlikable, but the point in this generalization lies in how it affects his perspective of Asami. As opposed to other survivors of child abuse, Asami has not come away from the abuse “scarred by it all.”<sup>153</sup> While Aoyama appears to be genuinely sympathetic to Asami’s suffering, he seems to be a little too ready to accept that she has moved past this pain. Similar behavior was on display with regards to Aoyama’s feelings about the death of his wife. As I noted earlier, he expressed gratitude that during her state of dying, Ryoko quietly accepted her fate without making things too uncomfortable for him. It is plausible to infer from this that Aoyama lacks the will to confront disturbing or unpleasant matters. He has no

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 98.

problem acknowledging Asami's suffering, so long as it isn't something that he needs to confront himself. He seems to be the type who would rather that these things go smoothly and not upset him so terribly. There are hints of this when Asami uncovers herself before him and while he does assure her that, "nothing will change", the reader could get the impression that he is just saying this to move on to intercourse. When Asami shows him her scars from past abuse, his responses are bland and curt, and the narration even notes that he "nodded robotically."<sup>154</sup>

Murakami does not reveal to the reader all of Asami's victims but seeing that Aoyama was attacked in a way similar to Shibata, it is fair to assume that their profiles are representative of those previously slain. A common trait between Aoyama and Shibata is that they are both men who had intimate relationships with Asami. Her anger towards these men is rooted in her disgust for her stepfather, who treated her like a sexual object. Asami's violent actions are not in reply to the exact crime being committed against her again (being masturbated to without her consent), but in what that crime represents: being disrespected as a human being. Murakami never reveals exactly what it was Shibata did that angered Asami to the point of murder, but the reader *is* given details about Shibata's character. Yoshikawa refers to Shibata as a womanizer who used his mentoring position as a music producer solely to seduce women.<sup>155</sup> While specific acts are named, it is not that difficult for readers to imagine ways in which Shibata might have disrespected Asami or violated her boundaries. He might have been dishonest with her in a relationship or more forceful than he needed to be in pursuing his desires, but it's hard to imagine Aoyama the widower doing anything quite as repulsive. Even so, she feels disrespected by him in another major way, he did not tell her about his son Shige.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 82.

What Aoyama seeks in Asami is not simply a wife, but also as a mother. He does not only want someone who will love him, but also someone who will love and take care of his son. He expects that Asami will fill the maternal role as easily as Ryoko did, which is why he puts off telling her about Shige. The reader never knows if Asami would ever be open to the idea of raising Aoyama's son, because he never bothers to ask her. Murakami gives the reader a sense, however, that Asami is a selfish lover who will share his affection with no other. As she warns him before they have intercourse, "Only me. I'll give you everything, but I've got to be the only one you love."<sup>156</sup> It's only when Aoyama is drugged, with Asami preparing to torture him, that he realizes she still held to the trauma of child abuse:

Nor had Yamasaki Asami ever overcome, as Aoyama had believed, the trauma of being raised by a stepfather who beat and abused and reviled her. She still carried that trauma, still lived with it every day. Any man who betrayed or lied to her was the same as her stepfather; therefore, according to her reasoning, such men should have their feet severed to resemble him more closely. When not working at the part-time job that covered living expenses, she spent all her time preparing for the next operation. She would become intimate with a man and simultaneously begin forging a plan to cut off his feet should he prove to be just like her stepfather.<sup>157</sup>

It is here where Murakami explicitly lays out a connection between how Asami's stepfather treated her, and her treatment by men with whom she is intimate. It does not need to be the exact same behavior, but it needs to be rooted in a similar disrespect for her. She cuts her victims' feet off so that they may resemble her stepfather who also had no feet. Her amputation is thus akin to a scarlet letter of shame, marking every man she murders as complicit in the same range of objectification and abuse.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 170-171.

I see a thematic connection between Asami's revenge and how Aoyama has treated Ryoko. While Asami knows nothing about Ryoko's submissive life as a housewife, her violence against Aoyama could be viewed as a kind of thematic vengeance against him. Asami's violence comes not simply in response to Aoyama's lie, but in response to the objectification she suffers from men as a whole. As film critic Elvis Mitchell has observed of the film adaptation of *Audition*, the story's theme is "the objectification of women in Japanese society and the mirror-image horror of retribution it could create."<sup>158</sup> Indeed, these objectifying and disparaging views of women are common throughout the novel. Take for instance the sentiment of viewing women as prizes to be won. In a discussion with his son, Aoyama casually compares beautiful women to rare animals like the stag beetle, the black panther, and the coelacanth, adding that they can cost a fortune.<sup>159</sup> Akin to Aoyama's reservations about the audition process, commodity plays a role in how intimate relationships are shaped. In this case, beautiful women are seen as trophies to be hunted for in the woods.

Some reviewers, however, have interpreted the character of Asami *herself* as misogynistic. For example, Irvine Welsh of the *Guardian* has argued that while *Audition* contains thoughtful reflections on relationships in modern society, Asami's characterization is infected with sexism,

The main problem with *Audition*, though, is Yamasaki. It's difficult to take her seriously as a character, as she shows us only two faces - angel and monster - and we never get any real sense that the abuse she's suffered could have precipitated the extreme psychotic behaviour she'll eventually visit on Aoyama. In this respect, the novel becomes another parable of male fear of female sexuality. Feminism has obviously never penetrated Japanese society in the same manner it did in the west, and while we have to accept

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<sup>158</sup> Elvis Mitchell. "Film Review; Wife Hunting Sure Is a Sick and Frightful Business." *The New York Times*, August 8, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/08/movies/film-review-wife-hunting-sure-is-a-sick-and-frightful-business.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*. trans. Ralph McCarthy. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010). 13-14.

Audition as being of its cultural place, it would be almost unthinkable for a male English-speaking writer, in almost any genre, to offer up a major female character like Yamasaki.<sup>160</sup>  
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I would argue to the contrary. Welsh makes a fair observation that Asami is not a well-rounded character and has two outrageous sides. I believe that such a duality is the whole point. The most well-rounded character in the novel is the protagonist, Aoyama, and it must be reiterated that everything is filtered through his perspective. Asami is presented so innocently and pure at first because that is how Aoyama wants to see her. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, her revenge, while extreme, is in part a thematic parallel to his treatment of Ryoko. Indeed, there exists a strong contrast between Ryoko and Asami as prospective spouses. Ryoko is selfless with her love while Asami is selfish with hers. Ryoko devotes all of her love to her husband and child, whereas Asami wants only affection from her partner for herself. Her violent attacks are the outbursts of those pressured into fitting the mold of Ryoko and want to pursue their own desires. Given how little the reader knows about Ryoko, Asami's fury might also represent the late unsaid mother's frustrations as well. The frustrations of an oppressive marriage which were never given voice until well after her death. If *Audition*, however, is a parable for male fears of female sexuality, then what exactly are men afraid of? I have emphasized throughout this section that male relationships with women sometimes involve deception or objectification. If women take on a sexual initiative similar to that men, does it not also follow that they will objectify their male partners in a similar fashion. Balmain has said of *Audition*'s violent climax that it is a reversal of the objectification that men often do to women through

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<sup>160</sup> Irvine Welsh. "On the casting couch." *Guardian*, January 16, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/17/audition-ryu-murakami-irvine-welsh>

<sup>161</sup> Welsh's suggestion that no male English-speaking writer could imagine a female character as misogynistic as Yamasaki Asami, could be read as both dubious and problematic.

sadomasochistic pornography, “in which the violated and open body of the woman functioned as an object of sadistic pleasure, it is now the paralyzed, impotent and objectified male body that is now experimented on by Asami with her steel wire and sharp pins.”<sup>162</sup> Underlying this fear of an active female sexuality is the fear that women will start to treat men the way that too many men have treated women. Torture and amputation are extreme examples, but it is through these extreme examples that Murakami can most directly make his point to the reader.

### **2.3. Marriage and the Midoris**

Murakami takes a look at another side of marriage and motherhood in his novel *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. Instead of presenting a dichotomy between a man’s ideal and a man’s nightmare of the mother figure, he shows the reader divorced women and are spiritually drained by their marriages. The text is, at its simplest, a battle of the sexes between delinquent boys and aging women. The older women, referred to as “Oba-sans” in the text, are a part of a group known as the “Midori Society”, since they are all named Midori. The delinquent young men spend most of their time singing karaoke on the beach and peeping at women through their apartment window. The first interaction between these two comes when one of the men, Sugioka, sexually assaults and then murders one of them women, Yanagimoto Midori. Iwata Midori then avenges her friend by killing Sugioka. The violence between the two sides continues to escalate until two of the boys drop a thermobaric bomb on Tokyo. It is a scene that is every bit

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<sup>162</sup> Colette Balmain. “The Rape-Revenge Film: From Violation To Vengeance” in *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008). 110.

satirical as it is grotesque. Michael A. Morrison has said that through *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, Murakami aims to challenge the reader's views on modern society, arguing:

His settings and characters are Japanese; his challenge is global: To what extremes must we who live in modern First World societies go to find meaning, to connect with our true selves and with others? Can only rage awaken us from the deadening effects of a culture bereft of morality, authenticity, and hope for change? Have we created a society in which, as one character says, "murder's the only thing that has any meaning these days"?<sup>163</sup>

It is my intention to focus on the Midori Society, and attempt to analyze why its members are dejected to the point where revenge against the boys brings them self-validation. As Murakami narrates after one of their victories against their male enemies, "Strangely, all four of them were leading much more fulfilling lives than ever before and exuding newfound self-assurance."<sup>164</sup> This confidence stems from satisfaction having finally struck back against a misogynistic society that had long held back and demeaned them. These particular boys become a means to that end. There are three major reasons for the nihilism among the Midoris: dissatisfaction in their personal desires, being ignored by society, and suffering from misogyny.

As with Chiaki in *Piercing*, there is sexual frustration amongst the women of the Midori Society. Murakami explicitly lays out that "they were all strangers to Orgasmus."<sup>165</sup> In the novel, a special focus is put on the sexuality of Iwata Midori. Murakami first makes the reader aware of her situation when he writes, "Iwata Midori was thinking about her sex drive, or, rather, wondering why she didn't seem to have one."<sup>166</sup> Iwata holds out little hope of reclaiming this drive and attracting a man who can help her fulfill it. The fact that she has been divorced and is

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<sup>163</sup> Michael A. Morrison. *World Literature Today* 85, no. 5, (2011). 63-64.

<sup>164</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 158.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

now aging makes her all the more conscious of these insecurities. Murakami writes about how grateful she is for her jacket, because it “efficiently covered her soft, bulging tummy and love handles, her dark, oversized nipples, and three Pip Elekiban magnetic patches on her shoulders.”<sup>167</sup> Iwata’s dissatisfaction is hardly limited to her loneliness as a single woman, as Murakami makes clear that she also suffered a great deal in her marriage as well. Iwata refers to sex as an experience that gets “imprinted on your body”<sup>168</sup>, and that her former husband left no impression at all: “Three and a half years I was with that man, and he didn’t imprint anything at all on my body. He was like one of those dolls whose tummy you press to make them talk.”<sup>169</sup> Not only did he fail to imprint anything on her, but further, she saw him less as a mutual human being and more like a doll. Their emotional relationship had become a mechanical one. Murakami also uses the metaphor of prison to describe Iwata’s time with him, writing that was “locked” within the powerful institution of marriage.<sup>170</sup> When she is eventually killed by one of the boys, Iwata most pressing regret is that she should die before “she’d ever found an individual who could unlock her libido.”<sup>171</sup>

Marital dissatisfaction is also to be seen with the two other surviving Midoris, Suzuki and Tomiyama. Now that they are divorced, these Midoris have found more freedom to do what they truly want to do, as Murakami writes, “Until now, they’d never known what that was. Until now, there hadn’t *been* anything they really wanted to do.”<sup>172</sup> The two Midoris discuss how they felt during their past marriages, and it becomes evident that they felt more like observers than actors in their own relationships. Their minds were always drifting to other places because of their

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 107.

constriction within their marriages, as one of them notes, “Back when I was married, I was always somewhere else in my mind, thinking about all sort of things, and now I feel like I understand why.”<sup>173</sup> Suzuki also reveals to Tomiyama that a strong of frustration in her marriage was the fact that she had never told her husband any of her true thoughts.<sup>174</sup> That Suzuki cannot be honest with her own husband is not only an indictment of him, but also of how marriage, far from being a relationship of trust, can be a relationship of performance.

The Oba-sans suffer from what Betty Friedan called “the problem with no name” in her seminal feminist text, *The Feminist Mystique*. While Freidan’s observations are focused on women in 1950’s and 1960’s America, her description of the general malaise that many women suffered as housewives or mothers is a useful framework for understanding the conditions of the Midori Society in Japan:

If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself. For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about this problem than sex.<sup>175</sup>

Once one shifts the focus from Friedan to modern Japan, they will discover that the “problem that has no name” continues to restrict women and affect how they see marriage. For example, in Nemoto Kumiko’s interview with a woman named Misako, a reader will find that

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>175</sup> Betty Friedan. “The Problem That Has No Name.” *American Journal of Public Health* (September 2010).

Misako's disillusionment and frustration with the marriage mirrors well that of the Midori

Society:

For Misako, marriage also represented sacrifice, including loss of self and loss of financial control, both of which she had seen her mother endure. Misako said, "When you marry, you put up with everything" and "You won't be able to do what you want to do. You cannot be who you want to be." Misako often felt sorry for the wives of her male colleagues, who managed their houses alone.<sup>176</sup>

Murakami makes evident that the Midoris are surrounded on all sides in an ocean of misogyny. The subjects of this casual misogyny are the boys whom the Midoris fight against. Murakami lays out their sexist psychology when he writes, "Nobue and Ishihara were both the type of men who tend to regard all females, from toddlers to great-grandmothers, as being in some sense sexual objects."<sup>177</sup> One of them crudely remarks that he would like to "take all these Oba-sans and strip 'em all naked and, you know, do the sort of thing you always hear about—force a wooden pestle up their ass and piss on 'em and then rape 'em and kill 'em and shit."<sup>178</sup> Even ordinary men are written as relatively apathetic towards the Oba-sans. When the first Midori is killed, a man passes by her body, but not wanting to ruin his white shirt, moves right past her.<sup>179</sup> As a result, the Midoris appear to carry a disdain for the men all around them. This disdain is exemplified by a moment in the novel where the Midoris reflect on custom of pouring drinks for others, and how their positions in Japanese society have prevented them from ever expressing such genuine desire to do so for any man:

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<sup>176</sup> Kumiko Nemoto. "Postponed Marriage: Exploring Women's Views of Matrimony and Work in Japan." *Gender and Society* Vol 22, No 2 (April 2008). 227, [www.jstor.org/stable/27821634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27821634).

<sup>177</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 53.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

None of them had ever found, aside from their respective fathers, a man who made them feel from the bottom of their hearts that they wanted to pour his beer or have him pour their wine; and now that they were heading into their late thirties it was extremely doubtful whether any of them ever would find such a man. It wasn't a question of lonely or not lonely, however. Each was convinced that the fact that she'd never burned with passion for a man was due to various circumstances in her life that mitigated against such passion—circumstances in her family, for example, or in her social milieu or workplace or community. And they realized now that their mindless “You'll have some more, won't you?” had only served to obfuscate reality by keeping things vague and ambiguous.<sup>180</sup>

The Midoris, ultimately, are not saved from their dour lives by any man, but by their own community. When faced with men who either don't care or outright hate them, it is their mutual company that becomes a sanctuary. Ueno Chizuko has written about women's need for support groups to deal with the misogyny they encounter in their everyday lives:

Just as alcoholic men have formed a mutual assistance group named Alcoholics Anonymous, so their wives have formed a similar group for mutual support. Since violence often goes with alcoholism, they get beaten by their husbands, sometimes beaten to death. Despite repeated violence they rarely run away; when they do they usually come back home, by choice, not force, remaining in the vicious cycle. These women are aware of their problem and their need for help, yet cannot help themselves.<sup>181</sup>

Ueno also examined how the economic divisions between salaryman and housewife segregated the lives of many adult men and women. As a result, women in domestic life often end up grouping with each other in their own worlds, in which, they discover a community that they cannot gain from their husbands:

First, the traditional sexual segregation itself helps women to live in "sisterhood." Secondly, as long as women stay in the new "women's world," Japanese husbands do not interfere.'

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 99-100.

<sup>181</sup> Chizuko Ueno. “Collapse of ‘Japanese Mothers.’” *U.S.-Japan's Women's Journal. English Supplement* 10, University of Hawai'i Press (1996). 14, [www.jstor.org/stable/42772092](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772092).

This bond is strong enough to provide mutual aid, and, importantly, it is based neither on kinship nor on neighborhood relations but on shared tastes, feelings, activities, and orientations. Its strength is demonstrated by the nature of the resources that are mobilized in the event of a death, although commercial funeral service now replaces the traditional mutual aid based on kinship and neighborhood and women rely on their peer-group relationships to survive widowhood.<sup>182</sup>

Murakami also recognizes a resilience and strength of the Oba-sans. In the text, one of the boys remarks that “They always say that when human beings are extinct, the only living thing left will be the cockroach, but that’s bullshit. It’s the Oba-san.”<sup>183</sup> In “The Problem That Has No Name”, Freidan warned America that “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’”<sup>184</sup> A similar warning emerges from *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, that these women also have a voice that should not be ignored, and dignity that should be respected. This can be plausibly inferred from the death of Sugioka, who had earlier assaulted and murdered Yanagimoto Midori. At the start of the scene, his disrespect for women is made symbolically clear when he urinates in front of a junior women’s college dorm. He frequents this area often and is not intimidated by the women who frequent there. Iwata Midori warns him not to urinate there. He ignores and promptly has his throat impaled by her.<sup>185</sup> The consequences for mistreating these women are far-reaching, indeed.

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<sup>182</sup> Chizuko Ueno. “The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered.” *Current Anthropology* 4, Vol. 28 (Aug – Oct 1987) 82, [www.jstor.org/stable/2743442](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2743442)

<sup>183</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 77.

<sup>184</sup> Betty Freidan. “The Problem That Has No Name.” *American Journal of Public Health* (September 2010).

<sup>185</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 43-44.

## 2.4. Hell Hath No Fury

There's a very informative scene in *Audition* that occurs during one of Aoyama's dates with Asami. He is walking with her through one of the alleyways and reflects on how much better Asami's fate is than that of women who go the way of prostitution:

As he led her down the alley, carving a path through the prostitutes, he was aware of a certain sense of superiority—not in relation to them, personally, but to their fate. These were unfortunate men and women who were forced to sell their bodies and their pride. He, on the other hand, was with a beautiful lady, and he was in love. He felt truly blessed.<sup>186</sup>

This moment of reflection might well be the epitome of Aoyama's binary thinking with regards to his relationship with Asami. Prostitutes have lost their bodies and their pride, whereas Asami has her body and pride intact. In this scene, Aoyama conveniently glosses over the fact that he had Asami advertise herself to him through an audition. It is not exactly the same as prostitution, but it is on a spectrum of selling one's self to a client. It is in this passage wherein lies the crux of this entire chapter: women who work outside of prostitution can also be subject to similar levels of male entitlement, objectification, and contempt. Whether a woman's role in Japanese society is considered respectable or not, by many men she will nevertheless be treated woefully the same.

A significant difference between the women of this chapter and the women of the previous one is how they react to misogyny. The sex workers responded to their difficulties by using material objects (e.g. topaz ring and nipple piercing) as mediums for their private desires. Their transgression was a spiritual one that did more for their psyches than for their material

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<sup>186</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Audition*. trans. Ralph McCarthy. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010). 119.

conditions. Asami and the Midori Society, however, directly committed violence against those they felt were responsible. More than stories of transgression, *Audition* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* are stories of female vengeance.

In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote that Murakami has more interest in disruptive catharsis than in envisioning a better society. This may be why emphasizes personal vengeance over justice through the state. Teresa Godwin Phelps has written in present times, “Feeling any desire for personal vengeance is regarded as a character flaw.”<sup>187</sup> This, however, was not always the case, as she also notes that “In early societies, the taking of revenge was a sacred duty, a right, and a responsibility that was both individual and familial.”<sup>188</sup> Japan was no exception such tradition, in fact, Lafcadio Hearn once observed that in great deal of popular romance and drama “is dedicated to the vengeance taken by women.”<sup>189</sup> Consider the resentful Lady Rokujo from the *Tale of Genji*, who became so jealous of Genji’s lovers, that her evil spirit possessed and killed his wife, Lady Aoi. The eventual shift in the perception of vengeance from something righteous to something illicit came with the growing power of governments to enforce laws, Phelps again, “as central authority strengthens, personal crimes become matters of concern to the state, the state assumes the duty to punish the wrongdoer, and personal revenge is outlawed.”<sup>190</sup> This dichotomy between revenge and justice assumes, of course, that the state is more legitimate than the individual to determine who lives and who dies. Murakami makes no such assumptions. As I noted in the thesis introduction, he is pessimistic that the state can effectively solve any

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<sup>187</sup> Teresa Godwin Phelps. “The Demise of Paulina’s Good: From Personal Revenge to State Punishment,” in *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). 12.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>189</sup> Lafcadio Hearn. “The Call to Vengeance and the Code of Self-Sacrifice in Japan.” *New England Review* (1990) 28, no. 3 (2007): 200, [www.jstor.org/stable/40245003](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40245003).

<sup>190</sup> Teresa Godwin Phelps. “The Demise of Paulina’s Good: From Personal Revenge to State Punishment,” in *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 14.

problems. As Kano said earlier in this chapter, it is state policies that often pressure women into marriages where they rely on their husbands. Can a patriarchal state be trusted to drive out the excesses of patriarchy? No, for these women, revenge is the only solution in a world that has failed them. As Balmain has noted of vengeful female characters in modern Japanese rape-revenge drama, the injuries are so deep, and the world is so corrupt, that reconciliation will not suffice:

Chihiro and Asami are just one more face of the wronged women in Japanese culture. neither of these women can find solace in the present, as the traumas of their pasts (as connotative of the historical past) cannot be forgotten; nor can they be forgiven. They are victims of repression and oppression, and only death and loneliness remain for them.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Colette Balmain. "The Rape-Revenge Film: From Violation To Vengeance" in *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008): 112.

## CHAPTER 3

### MURAKAMI: FEMINIST OR ANTI-FEMINIST?

“Murakami Ryū’s novels flow with the material imaginative power of rejecting all meanings.”<sup>192</sup>

- Sekii Mitsuo

#### 3.1. Murakami’s Theory of Woman

If it is fair to argue the conditions of many women in Murakami Ryū’s texts are reflective of the real-life problems that women face in Japan, then should Murakami, and by extension his works, be labeled *feminist*? As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, Japanese feminists such as Ayako Kano and Ueno Chizuko, have also discussed the subjects of sex work and marriage, which parallel the themes in many of Murakami works. Their observations lend support to the purpose of this thesis, which is to show that through a proper analysis of these women’s transgressive actions, a plausible critique of misogyny in Japanese society is established. In order to more clearly distinguish how Murakami’s views on women differ from the aims of Japanese feminism, I believe that it is necessary to delve into his own essays on the subject.

This chapter will serve as an analysis of three essays in Murakami’s essay collection, *Sex Is Better Than Suicide* (2003). The purpose of this essay collection is to my mind quite Freudian, in the sense that Murakami, like Sigmund Freud, is attempting to diagnose the psychological roots of human problems, and by extension, those of society. The particular theme of this book is

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<sup>192</sup> Mitsuo Sekii. “Murakami Ryu—Supotsu,shintai,onna no imeeji” [Murakami ryu—sports, body, and the woman’s image]. trans by Joseph Erobha. Sugiyama kokubungaku 38, no. 3 (March 1993).

romance. In the introduction, entitled, “Why Are There So Many Requests About Love?”, Murakami confesses that “I do not mean to explain love, because I am uninterested in love as well as the love of others, but I will write depending on request.”<sup>193</sup> Given that he had received so many requests, Murakami not only wrote about love, but found that the term “disparity” became an important theme, “Since this recent collection of romantic essays that used the stimulating word ‘disparity’ sold unexpectedly well, I was considerably surprised.”<sup>194</sup> This contextualizes the collection as having the purpose of understanding why there is such disparity in Japan, as much as it is about deciphering romance. I would propose that Murakami extends this theme of “disparity” into the psychology of women. To be specific, I suggest that this the disparity between the desires of women and their ultimate levels of satisfaction.

I translated the three essays that I felt were, not only the most representative of his personal views regarding women, but also the most relevant to the subjects of this thesis. In the first essay, “Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman”, Murakami discusses the aesthetics of what makes women attractive. In the second essay, “Worthless Women Often Tell Lies. Not Only to Others, But Also to Themselves,” Murakami writes about the ways in which women lie to themselves. In the third essay, “The Definition of Neurotic Oba-sans,” Murakami describes what he sees as the dependent nature of Oba-sans. Through these three essays, I found that, while the themes of many Murakami texts parallel those of feminist causes, their views of women are ultimately different. In the words of Ayako Kano, feminism is often defined as “a movement promoting women’s interests that arises from the recognition that women have historically been

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<sup>193</sup> Ryū Murakami. “Doushite ‘Renai’ Ni Kansuru Juuyo Ga Ooi No Darou?” [Why are there so many requests about love?] in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide], trans. Joseph Erobha, (Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003: 16.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

disadvantaged as a group.”<sup>195</sup> While I do not doubt that Murakami is sympathetic to these causes, he believes that there are limitations on how women can properly express themselves due to their biology and psychology. As a result, he might not support women’s interests as fully as many feminist movements might demand. I do not mean to suggest that he does this out of any ill intent towards women as a whole, but rather, like Freud, he is attempting to uncover the psychological roots of wider, structural problems. In this sense, *Sex Is Better Than Suicide* is a societal critique in keeping with the earlier texts examined thus far, and like those texts, it draws a genealogical line between the personal and the political. Considering these differences, I do not find it appropriate to label Murakami’s works as *feminist*, but it is similarly inappropriate to label them as *anti-feminist*. While Murakami’s personal views on women, as well as how he depicts transgression, may not be satisfactory to the ideals of feminism, his texts can still function as effective critiques of how women are dehumanized in modern Japanese society.

Before going forward, I must clarify the scope of this chapter in providing a coherent analysis. I do not write this because I do not believe that Murakami’s views on women are impossible to know. On the contrary, I am confident that were we to survey all of Murakami’s writings for his statements on women, a clear portrait could be made, but given I have not access to the complete sum of these materials, I must remain humble. I have accepted the possibility that Murakami’s views on women have changed since the publication of *Sex Is Better Than Suicide*, but given that I lacked access to those materials, I cannot know this definitively. In other words, my presentation of Murakami’s perspective is an assumption based on a small sampling of his work. It is an informed assumption, but it could also prove to be the wrong one within the wider context of his writings. The reason I take such caution is because Murakami is a living

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<sup>195</sup> Ayako Kano. “Debates? Feminist? Japanese?” in *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016). 7.

man with a reputation. I have also translated the following essays myself, and while I am fairly confident in their basic faithfulness and accuracy, it is possible that not everything is exact. I have read the tone of these essays as sincere and unironic, but I grant that there could be a level of satire or obscene humor to his writings. Murakami's violent and sexual critiques of Japanese society in his literature do make him something of a provocateur. In that sense, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he is not literal about every word he writes in these essays. For instance, in "Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman", he states that "daughters raped by their fathers go down the dark path of either becoming lesbians or novelists."<sup>196</sup> Here, he may not *literally* mean that every woman raped by her father becomes a lesbian or a novelist, but rather, he may be using such an extreme statement to provoke thinking about the psychological relationship between women and their fathers. I would advise that Murakami's essays be read with a grain of salt, but that the underlying arguments of his words be taken as honest.

With all of this being said, readers of Japanese more adept in the source language than I, may find mistakes in how I have translated Murakami, and it is for this reason that I am open to criticism on my translations. I will not defend the translations as perfect, but I will stand by them as accurate and informative to the aims of this thesis. I very much doubt that the reception of this thesis will impact this wider reputation, but for any reader whose perception of Murakami may be colored by what is compiled here, I feel a responsibility to be frank with the reader and respectful towards the subject. This is not a definitive profile of his views of women, but a plausible profile based on the arguments that he has made here.

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<sup>196</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Kawaii onna, kawaikunai onna" [Pretty woman, ugly woman] in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide], trans. Joseph Erobha, (Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003): 206.

### 3.2. Murakami on Women's Beauty

In “Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman”, Murakami explains his personal theory on women's beauty. His main argument is that the presence of a good father is essential to the development of an attractive woman, writing, “parental presence is necessary in the raising of a pretty and pleasing woman.”<sup>197</sup> He sees this issue as both biological and societal, which begins in the DNA and extends into the universe, but is careful to acknowledge that because he is a novelist and not a specialist in these matters, his words might be messy.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, readers unfamiliar with Murakami's style may find the whole essay quite difficult to decipher, but I shall do my best to make things plain.

His first topic is on the matter of “ugly women”, whom he credits to having an “inner beauty”, but that this type of beauty usually “goes no further than a swell of brightness to the surface.”<sup>199</sup> He insists that it is a “great lie” for women's magazines to claim that an improvement of a woman's outer beauty will also lead to an improvement of their inner beauty.<sup>200</sup> He observes, however, that ugly women usually don't end up alone because, above anything else, a man will value a woman who will consent to have sex with him. As a result, these ugly women probably can't help if their spouse turns out to be unattractive.<sup>201</sup> The concept “beauty” itself, however, is a subjective one, and the reader may come into the essay with their own conceptions of what constitutes an ugly or beautiful woman. This ambiguity around what constitutes beauty places some pressure on Murakami to define the concept in his own terms.

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<sup>197</sup> Ryū Murakami. “Kawaii onna, kawaikunai onna” [Pretty woman, ugly woman] in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide], trans. Joseph Erobha, (Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003): 22.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 23.

Murakami's criterion of beauty is uniquely enlightening, because it is not reliant on physical looks, but on personal behaviors. It appears that physical standards might be too transient for him. He writes that beauty standards are often societal and institutional, going so far as to say that, "The beautiful ladies of the Heian court, for instance, would be ugly by our standards."<sup>202</sup> He then proceeds to look past the physical and, on a psychological basis, determine what makes women ugly or beautiful.

Despite ostensibly being an essay about women, Murakami's focus in this essay is really men, specifically fathers, whom he associates with creation and intelligence: "Men need their intelligence to create. They create stories, societies, architecture, and mathematics. No other animal creates. That's because, other than fucking, they don't know how to do anything else."<sup>203</sup> If intelligence is the domain of men, then what is the domain of women? Are there not also intelligent women who are capable of achieving the same triumphs as men? Murakami does not think so. In this essay, he does not believe that women are equally intelligent to men, in fact, he openly disparages cleverness in women:

Clever women lack the charm of decision-making. It is said that men never let them make the decisions. Since clever women are of shallow wit, men do not find them exhausting. They will abandon anything precious for their sake. 'Shallow wit' is phrase made for women. On a biological level, women are not very intelligent. 'Intelligence' is only for men who are burdened with the delusions of parenthood.<sup>204</sup>

Given what he said so far, it becomes clear that Murakami does associate a woman's beauty with her intelligence. He goes on to say that only stupid women are cute, which he defines as a woman who is simple and obedient. For him, stupidity is an unavoidable part of a

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 24.

woman's psychology. He even questions if children would still be born if a woman's psychology was based on logic or intelligence.<sup>205</sup> A woman's place, then, is to be a mother, in fact, he insists that "*biologically* they have no choice."<sup>206</sup> That Murakami, at least in this essay, considers motherhood to be a woman's natural state, puts him in direct conflict with the ideologies of many Japanese feminists. Ueno Chizuko, for instance, has insisted that "No person is born a mother, or even born to be a capital -M "Mother"; it is a role that is learned and then internalized in the process of gender socialization. Not all women give birth, so women have no absolute natural destiny to become mothers."<sup>207</sup> Perhaps it is wrong to conclude that the Midori's disillusionment with marriage reflects Murakami's skepticism towards equality in marriage, but rather, his diagnosis that Japanese society has failed to provide these women with suitable partners.

The key to raising such valued daughters, appears to be with fathers who take no fatherly responsibility. Murakami refers to fatherhood as an illusion in the essay, writing that "Men who work hard and become great fathers are also worthless men clinging to an old system. Their daughters see through that."<sup>208</sup> Instead fathers must do nothing for their daughters, because "The time when fathers display their masculine charms is the time when daughters discover their pride."<sup>209</sup> His model of masculinity will naturally influence her actions, because a woman is "shaped by the portrait she is shown."<sup>210</sup> Murakami warns that men who, on the other hand, cling to the institution of fatherhood who raise "worthless women" who find shallow wit more

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>207</sup> Chizuko Ueno, "Collapse of 'Japanese Mothers.'" *U.S.-Japan's Women's Journal. English Supplement* 10, University of Hawai'i Press (1996). 3-4, [www.jstor.org/stable/42772092](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772092).

<sup>208</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Kawaii onna, kawaikunai onna" [Pretty woman, ugly woman] in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide], trans. Joseph Erobha, (Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003): 25.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 26.

precious than an orgasm.<sup>211</sup> Murakami describes a worthless woman as one who devote themselves to their jobs. He compares these women to worthless drugs, which are ineffective at weakening the will to work.<sup>212</sup> In other words, while men are expected create, while doing the bare minimum for their daughters, it is the woman's job to be a narcotic for man's exhaustion and toil. According to this criterion, women have little value if they center on their own pursuits, and instead must be servants to their husbands. Murakami's frame of mind here is identical to Aoyama's from *Audition*, who wanted a simple and obedient wife to replace Ryoko. Now, in keeping with his past support for the individual, it is entirely possible that Murakami could still believe in the unfettered expression of the individual will, while also believing that for married women, this expression should not take priority over what is best for their husbands.

For Murakami, men are "consumable goods" in Japanese society, whereas women are the spoils for them to harvest:

I've always said that men are "consumable goods." Used and abandoned like disposable lighters. If our performance is poor and our engines are out of gas, we are thrown out without any complaint. Women, however, are the "spoils of war." If they are not dropped, they cannot be seized. Men drop many things in life, but women, at least, can be salvaged. The first thing to be abandoned should be the fathers of these women, then the foes who are so great that they too hide wonderful spoils.<sup>213</sup>

It is clear to me from this essay that Murakami has far more sympathy for men than he does for women. Since men are the workers in society, they are the consumable goods. Even though women prizes to be won by men, they are not men's consumable goods, but the valuable spoils of war. This is the fundamental difference in how Murakami sees men and how he sees

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 27.

women. The objectification of one is a tragedy while the objectification of the other is the natural course of things. Murakami's appeal for submissive and obedient women recalls the observations of Chiaki in *Piercing*, who found that men were the most upset when she showed the most sexual initiative. While in his novels, it is easy for the reader to identify with women's desires and their pain, in this essay, the reader is asked to identify with man's ego.

### 3.3. Murakami on Women's Lies

In his next essay, "Worthless Women Often Tell Lies. Not Only to Others, But Also to Themselves," Murakami expands on the concept of the "worthless woman." It begins with Murakami writing that worthless women have stopped appearing in recent films, noting that they are most common in high art films, while films for more general audiences prefer not to have them. He writes that two major traits of these women are hysteria and terrible inner psychology.<sup>214</sup>

For him, "hysteria" is tied to women in its very definition, which in the original Greek means "womb."<sup>215</sup> Murakami writes that for psychiatrists, hysteric personalities were those that behaved over-the-top, while others see these traits as relating to deceit, like women say they are sexually active when they are not. Women who show off beyond any personal talents.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Dame Na Onna Wa Yoku Usotsuku. Hokanin Ni Mo Tsuku Ga, Jibun Jishin Ni Mo Uso Wo Tsuku." [Worthless women often tell lies. Not only to others, but also to themselves.], in *SEX yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide.], trans. Joseph Erobha (Japan: KK besutoseraazu. 2003). 260.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

Murakami, however, does not women's hysteria as purely a negative phenomenon, going on to praise it for causing the advancement of women's rights in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

In other words, women who had, until then, been secluded in their homes began to become a part of the Industrial Revolution and civil society, and they received more opportunities on the outside to work. Female laborers who left the city and worked increased at a groundbreaking rate, while women who participated in political and social movements were born.<sup>217</sup>

Murakami further adds that though the hysteric personality decreased in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hysterical women still exist. These are the women who lie about themselves.<sup>218</sup> These lies often deal with marriage. Just like the Midoris of *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, Murakami is aware that the marriage institution can be unsatisfying for women, but they try to pretend otherwise: "These women are understanding on their own the truth that that their current selves are unsatisfied wherever their heart is."<sup>219</sup> Murakami writes that there are many women who are near marriage, even though their prospective spouses do not love them all that much. Such women are fearful not simply of marriage, but of the changes that marriage can bring. They do not want to vanish under these changes, so they lie to themselves.<sup>220</sup> Murakami believes that their fear of change causes women to settle for men who may not be the best for them. He sees this self-hatred as damaging, because women who are "are not used to loving themselves, they cannot come to love someone else."<sup>221</sup> He sees this problem as extending to children who are raised by these women, since he believes that women will thrust their anxieties and distortions

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 262.

onto them.<sup>222</sup> This is what causes Murakami to strangely see the eating disorders which plague modern women in a positive light, as women with anorexia or bulimia “they cannot lie to themselves all that well.”<sup>223</sup>

If we assume that Murakami’s definition of “worthless women” is the same as that expressed in “Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman”, then the worthless women he refers to throughout this essay are those who try to be intelligent. Women who try to lie to themselves the most are those who try to outsmart others. I find it interesting that Murakami ties hysteria to both women’s social progress and to their marital dissatisfaction. These are the women who are worthless. Murakami appears to genuinely sympathize with the frustration that women in unhappy marriages must endure. This may be why he was able to write so effectively from the perspective of the divorced Midoris in *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, but if we go by his prescription in “Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman”, then it would be more simple and obedient. In other words, the exact opposite of what the Midori Society did in that text. There exists an apparent gap between what Murakami has his women do in his novels, and what he expects women to do in real life. The essay, still, is a sincere attempt to help women recognize and overcome their self-hatred. Murakami also does not view this as purely a personal issue, but as one that has reverberating effects throughout all of society. In this sense, he is very concerned with women’s pain.

### 3.4. Murakami on Oba-sans

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 262.

The last essay I will look at is “The Definition of Neurotic Oba-sans,” in which Murakami lays his thoughts on what he views as the essential nature of the Oba-sans. The subject of this essay is of particular interest to this thesis because it brings to mind the Midori Society of *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, all of whom were “Oba-sans” or “aunties.” Much like the previous two essays, there is plenty that is contradictory here. The most obvious contradiction is that assaulted Oba-sans of *Popular Hits of the Show Era* find the courage to strike back against the boys that have hurt them, whereas Murakami seems to imply in this essay that the inherent nature of the Oba-sans is to be dependent on others and unassertive. I do not think that he writes this out of any personal malice towards these women, but he is merely describing what he believes is their essential personality.

Murakami opens his essay by lamenting the collapse of fatherhood and mockery of male romanticism, “Elementary school girls have recently burst with laughter at ideas like male romanticism. It’s a dead word.”<sup>224</sup> Now what qualities does Murakami associate with fatherhood and male romanticism? He would, first of all, prefer to use the word *general mobilization theory*, which he defines as the ability to “select the goal of your own limits, mobilize your potential, and compete for superiority.”<sup>225</sup> He adds, quite simply, that this is the “exact sort of thing that women don’t do.”<sup>226</sup> These statements continue a theme that Murakami explored in “Pretty Woman, Ugly Woman,” where he ascribed intelligent creation to men and childbirth to women. The labor of men is disposable whereas women are the spoils of war. This difference between the masculine role and feminine one is maintained in his essay about the Oba-sans. Murakami is careful to defend himself from claims of sexism, arguing, “I don’t mean to imply that women

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<sup>224</sup> Ryū Murakami. “Kyouhakushinkenshou Na, Obasan No Teigi Da.” [The definition of neurotic oba-sans], trans. by Joseph Erobha, in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide.]. Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003: 83.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 84.

who cannot do these things are inferior. Quite the opposite, in fact. The way of women who cannot do these things is a great way.”<sup>227</sup> For Murakami, the accomplishments of women are exclusively sexual, saying that he does not believe that women are too limited, because they created the orgasm.<sup>228</sup> He does not explain how women created the orgasm, calling it a puzzle that may have occurred spontaneously<sup>229</sup>, but the implication is clear: woman’s greatest achievement is what she can offer sexually.

Murakami proceeds to list the qualities that he associates with the character of Oba-sans through a number of short sentences. None of which exude personal agency or initiative of behalf of the Oba-sans, but rather implies that their natural state is to be weak and unhappy. He says that Oba-sans are subservient by writing that they depend on others, do not assert themselves, love unearned income, have no faith, and cannot be self-reliant.<sup>230</sup> He also says that Oba-sans are unsatisfied and struggle to be happy, writing, “To be ignorant like the Oba-san is to continue to tell lies and know no enjoyment. Even unto death, Oba-sans cannot come to say things like ‘Enjoy life.’ Women who say these sorts of things are not, for example, Oba-sans in their 30s, 40s, or 50s.”<sup>231</sup> Murakami appears to theorize that the unhappiness of the Oba-sans is rooted in the two things: their attraction to inconvenience and possible mental confusion. Murakami strongly associates the Oba-san with bad behaviors, writing that they can be counted on to chatter in loud voices, to be slow in whatever they do, and to disregard other people’s irritations.<sup>232</sup> As for mental confusion, he writes that Oba-sans can infinitely lie themselves, they don’t know themselves, and they are fearful to the point of neurosis.<sup>233</sup> Put together, these

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

qualities appear to create the portrait of an unstable and irritable people who are parasitic in their relationships to others, and are stunted in their ability to be truthful or happy. In Murakami's view, the Oba-san is very pathetic being.

While Murakami may want to defend himself from the accusation of sexism, but I do not find his defense to be very convincing. He might sound more egalitarian elsewhere, but in this essay, he sounds like the type of antagonist figure who would be slain in one of his novels. Now I should note, in fairness, that Murakami does not believe that this neurosis is restricted only to the Oba-sans, writing that "Oba-sans have no relationship to age or sex. Male Oba-sans are increasing."<sup>234</sup> Into this category of the Oba-san, he includes the Democratic Socialist Party, movie critics, Japanese poets, and supporters of fascism.<sup>235</sup> For him, men are just as victim to this behavior as older women, but I do not think that this absolves him. He has still associated the neurotic Oba-san with femininity and has contrasted this personal weakness with invigorating masculinity. This is clear through his earlier implication that women middle-aged and older are unlikely to enjoy life. The portrayal of women in this essay is consistent with that in the previous two, insofar that the actions of women are limited by their psychology.

With all of this being said, Murakami may also have some respect for the Oba-san in spite of his criticisms. In *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, one of the boys at war with the Midoris remarks, "They always say that when human beings are extinct, the only living thing left will be the cockroach, but that's bullshit. It's the Oba-san."<sup>236</sup> Echoing this, in his essay, Murakami acknowledges that while Oba-sans have no courage, they have durability.<sup>237</sup> He recognizes here

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>236</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 77.

<sup>237</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Kyouhakushinkenshou Na, Obasan No Teigi Da." [The definition of neurotic oba-sans], trans. Joseph Erobha, in *Sex yori jisatsu* [Sex is better than suicide.]. Japan: KK besutoseraazu, 2003: 86.

that the Oba-san is a resilient type of person, all the more reason that he may have made them the primary soldiers in his war of the sexes. In fact, Murakami may not even think that the neurosis of the Oba-san is a permanent condition. While he may well believe that older women have a tendency towards this neurosis, and that it could possibly be their default condition, it can be personally overcome, and there is no better evidence for this than the liberated Midoris of *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*.

### 3.5. Through A Glass Darkly

In an interview with Murakami by the *Tokyo Weekender*, he was asked for his thoughts on the presidential election of Donald Trump, and replied that the ultimate result was preferable to Hillary Clinton, “What I mean by this is that even though Hillary and her media supporters launched a smear campaign against Trump, American people weren’t really that affected by this strategy. I’m pretty impressed by this.”<sup>238</sup> While Murakami does not go into the details of why he supports Trump, I imagine that it is because he views him as a disruptive figure who can break up the corruption of the status quo. I should also add that Trump has been accused of sexual misconduct by over two dozen women.<sup>239</sup> This is not to say that everyone who supports Trump is a misogynist, but that if, based on his stories, were I to label Murakami as a *feminist*, his support for the American president would certainly bring that into question. Of course, it is entirely possible that Murakami is unaware of these allegations or believes them to be a part of the

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<sup>238</sup> “A Conversation with Ryu Murakami.” Interview by Annemarie Luck, *Tokyo Weekender*, January 2, 2017. <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2017/01/a-conversation-with-ryu-murakami/>

<sup>239</sup> Eliza Relman. “The 25 women who have accused Trump of sexual misconduct,” *Business Insider*, October 9, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/women-accused-trump-sexual-misconduct-list-2017-12>

aforementioned smear campaign. I am not arguing here that Murakami is an apologist for sexual assault, but rather, that his response is indicative of a trend I have noted in his writings thus far. Chiefly, it is that his revolutionary aspirations against oppressive taboos are not without their own chains and fetters.

It is difficult for me to work out a coherent view of how Murakami sees women, and indeed, perhaps Murakami's personal philosophy presents more contradictions than I might like to admit. In *Audition* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, he creates wounded avengers who would not exist were it not for their mistreatment by men. In "Topaz", *Piercing*, and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, we are witness to the unsatisfied and tortured lives of women who are left abandoned by an apathetic society. The sexual desires of Chiaki and the Midoris are suppressed by the cultural attitudes where they are trapped. My initial thoughts upon reading these stories was that he shared in the feminist outrage towards their misogynistic conditions and wants to see women liberated from their underclass status. His essays clearly complicate such a straightforward interpretation. There might well be some truth to the claim that *Audition* is a parable for the dangers of female sexuality, and that beneath all of Murakami's grotesque and explicit descriptions of sexual activities, his ultimate views on gender remain rather traditional.

At the start of this chapter, I had cautioned against taking every word of Murakami in *Sex is Better Than Suicide*, as literal. Perhaps the same could apply to his stories. In transgressive fiction, simply because the author is giving an unconventional voice to a certain type of frustration, doesn't necessarily mean that they want to see those actions reproduced in real life. Chuck Palahniuk wants to readers of *Fight Club* to come away with a greater sympathy for men's vulnerability, and how easily that can be exploited by charismatic leaders. He is not arguing for Project Mayhem to be enacted against real credit card companies. As I wrote in the

introduction to this thesis, Murakami does not want to make the world a better place, because that doesn't feel that this is a novelist's responsibility. Through his works, he simply wants to provide a catharsis for an individual's anger against conformity. This catharsis undoubtedly includes women's anger, but not necessarily because they are women. For Murakami, the minorities are those whose individual desires are restricted by societal norms and taboos. It is a definition that can include men as easily as it can include women. In so far that anyone is oppressed, he will critique that source of their oppression, and if that means attacking the intuitions of marriage or prostitution, then so be it. In these essays, however, Murakami will only allow women express themselves so far. He still thinks that women are best served as mothers and that female sexuality is most erotic when it is receptive. Women can be free from society's degeneracy so long as they return to their true biological impulses. Again, it is possible that, in other essays, Murakami's views may prove far more complicated than that, but as it stands, he does not appear to believe in the feminist ideal that women can do whatever they wish and remain satisfied.

If we assume that what I have written about Murakami's views on women is accurate, then does it not follow that the central argument of this thesis is soiled? In other words, how can I argue that Murakami's works bring attention to women's problems, while he himself has, to one degree or another, exemplified these problems? The unfortunate fact is that the writers behind many works of fiction, even works which many consider to be progressive and empathetic, can be far from perfect people in their personal lives. To support my point, I want to pivot briefly to the American writers Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, particularly their novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). For even though both Stowe and Twain were white people, their novels had the intent of bringing attention

to the injustice of racism, particularly with regards to slavery in the South. Stowe did this by crafting the slaves as sympathetic figures, especially the title character “Uncle Tom.” Through Uncle Tom’s mistreatment and eventual death, Stowe wants to show that no matter how kind he may be to his oppressors, that because he is a slave, he will always be treated less humanely than non-slaves. Twain did this by crafting a friendship between the white Huckleberry Finn and the escaped black slave Jim. Twain not only shows Jim’s humanity through this friendship with Huck Finn, but also suggests that race should not be a barrier to amiable relationships.

Despite their messages of racial justice, however, both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* trafficked in stereotypes of African Americans. Michele Wallace noted that the film historian, Donald Bogle, pointed out that the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* led to the formation of mammy, coon, mulatto, and Uncle Tom stereotypes of black people throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>240</sup> While *Invisible Man* author, Ralph Ellison, has written of Jim’s character in *Huckleberry Finn* that Twain “fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim’s dignity and human capacity—and Twain’s complexity—emerge.”<sup>241</sup> In spite of these issues however, many analytical readers have argued that these works have still succeeded not only in criticizing racial bigotry, but also as valuable literary works which portray the fraught racial relations of American life. Wallace writes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was credited with “having provided the first easily exportable image-text for immediate and popular consumption depicting the plight of the slave in the US South.”<sup>242</sup> The novelist Norman Mailer has argued that in *Huckleberry Finn*: “The

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<sup>240</sup> Michele Wallace. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Before and after the Jim Crow Era,” *TDR (1988-)* 44, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 146-147.

<sup>241</sup> Bernard W. Bell. “Twain’s ‘Nigger’ Jim: The Tragic Face Behind The Minstrel Mask,” *Mark Twain Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41641259>

<sup>242</sup> Michele Wallace. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Before and after the Jim Crow Era,” *TDR (1988-)* 44, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146824>.

growth of love and knowledge between the runaway white and the runaway black is a relation equal to the relation of the men to the river for it is also full of betrayal and nourishment, separation and return.”<sup>243</sup> From here, I would like to propose a similar argument regarding the interpretation of women in Murakami.

I want to return to what Ellison said of *Huckleberry Finn*, that through the character of Jim, Twain’s complexity emerges. Murakami is similarly complex, and *his* complexity emerges more from his essays than from his novels and short stories. The portrait is of a man who wants to offer women cathartic release through his writings, while also diagnosing what he sees as their psychological problems. His perspectives on what is best for women may differ from how some women may view themselves, but in spite of his own theories, the stories themselves stand as their own as testaments to women’s treatment, and thus, can potentially resonate with female readers. However much one may disagree with Murakami’s theories, the fact remains that he has written texts from the female perspective where women are given boundaries and transgress them in their own ways. The reader is put into their perspective and comes away their experience more cognizant of these issues than they might have been before. Any reader can take from texts whatever they may wish. Murakami himself once related that at least one female reader was moved by his texts:

You know, I once received a letter from a reader. She was a high school girl. She had fought with her parents, and ran out of the house to escape. She felt there were too many hardships and wanted to die. But she was reading one of my books at the bus stop, and said it made her realize there are many others who feel the same as her. So she thought twice about dying. I think it’s an honor that I can have this kind of influence on someone. To make them feel like they’re not alone. That even though life is not all about the good stuff,

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<sup>243</sup> Norman Mailer. “Huckleberry Finn, Alive at 100,” *New York Times*, December 9, 1984. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/09/books/huckleberry-finn-alive-at-100.html>

it's also never a good idea to commit suicide. There is always something good if you keep on living.<sup>244</sup>

Here we have an example of a girl who read of the transgression in Murakami and came away inspired. Murakami's strange psychological theories outside of the text did not stop her from empathizing with his characters and drawing her own conclusions. This is why I argue that his stories carry a persuasive power that the author, however distasteful, cannot completely diminish. The plights of Asami, Chiaki, and the Midoris go on untouched in their own literary spaces, bringing light to the hidden corners of modern Japanese society. If Murakami's primary end is catharsis for anger against taboo, then where they go with that anger is not for him to dictate. If his are works which empower the desires of the individual, then surely those desires, once enflamed, can transgress the fetters of any patriarchal ideology, even if it is expressed by Murakami himself.

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<sup>244</sup> "A Conversation with Ryu Murakami," interview by Annemarie Luck, *Tokyo Weekender*, January 7, 2017. <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2017/01/a-conversation-with-ryu-murakami/>

## CONCLUSION

### THE QUESTION OF POWER, CLASS, AND SOCIETY

Who has the power in these stories? Murakami has spoken of society's restrictions on individuals and how destructive that is. He identifies with the minorities who cannot live freely due to these norms, but a problem immediately arises in looking at Murakami through this lens. Is Murakami arguing that anything which restrains desire is wrong and to be opposed? If that's the case, then is everything in the realm of Murakami morally permitted? In *Piercing*, is the desire of Kawashima to impale Chiaki on equal footing with Chiaki's desire to reclaim her sexuality? In *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, is sexual assault and murder of Yanagimoto Midori as morally justified as the vengeance sought by the Midoris in response? To flatten all of the character interactions in this way would reduce, if not eliminate the careful nuances that Murakami imbues into the narratives. While there exists a great deal of immorality and ambiguity in Murakami's universe, I refuse to interpret it as a purely amoral one. While Murakami expresses sympathy for all of the characters in his stories, he clearly takes their intentions into account when judging their actions. It is wrong to conclude that simply because Murakami is sympathetic to problems of character, means that he is apologetic to their every action, and this can be demonstrated through a brief analysis of the characters.

In *Piercing*, the antagonist is Kawashima, who is driven by an irresistible desire to impale Chiaki with an ice pick. This desire is restricted by society's laws against murder. Murakami makes a connection between Kawashima's perverse bloodlust and how he was abused by his mother as a child. There's a point in the novel where Kawashima views himself as a representative for all the abused and neglected children, "A representative of all the children

who'd become insignificant dots in that dark diorama; a martyr armed with only an ice pick, facing down the enemy hordes."<sup>245</sup> Kawashima undoubtedly sees his cause as just, but this does not mean that the author does. By the end of the novel, Kawashima has not only failed to impale Chiaki, but is now tied up and under her mercy. If all transgressive desires were of equal value, then why has Murakami decided to stifle Kawashima's while satisfying Chiaki's? It is not because Murakami is the sentimental sort who does not wish to a woman murdered. His later novel, *In The Miso Soup*, opens with a massacre of innocent prostitutes. In *Piercing*, however, we learn the desires of the prostitute as well as that of the would-be murderer. Both of these desires have sprung from personal trauma, but Kawashima wanted to harm others while Chiaki wanted to reclaim her own flesh. With their disparate positions by the end of the novel, Murakami is placing a clear preference over taboos which elevate the individual than those which eliminate and degrade it.

*Audition's* Aoyama is easily the most sympathetic of the men in the texts so far. In fact, he is the only male protagonist out of the texts examined, whom I would not define as an antagonist. Murakami writes him as a decent, well-meaning man, who only wants to find another wife to ease his loneliness. Yet Aoyama courts these women through a deceptive audition process and expects his wife to fulfill a traditional domestic role. Murakami views these intentions as immoral, thus, he punishes Aoyama with the amputation of his foot. He sees some justification for Asami's anger, however cruel, as an inevitable response to the disrespect she has suffered from men. In spite of this sympathy, Murakami still sees Asami's plans to murder as excessive and has her killed by the end. Through their respective ends, Murakami demonstrates a

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<sup>245</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994). 57.

clear moral difference between their actions, despite his evident sympathies for them both. *Audition* may offer a complex morality, but an *amoral* novel, it is not.

With regards to crime and punishment, however, *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* is more morally ambiguous. The root of the escalating war between the young men and Oba-sans is in the indifference and prejudice by which they are treated by society. I already mentioned the casual misogyny with which the Midoris are treated, but Murakami also describes a similar malaise among the violent boys. He writes that they have lost any positive purpose in their lives due to “an oppressive value system based primarily upon the absolute certainty that nothing in this world was ever going to change.”<sup>246</sup> Their discontent parallels the very real emotional distress many Japanese young men face due to poor career prospects, such as the 31-year-old freeter, Tomohiro Akagi, who wrote “However, if society in the name of peace continues to force me into a position of weakness, if it continues to deride my wish for modest happiness, then I will not hesitate to hope for and choose the ‘equality in which the entire nation continues to suffer.’”<sup>247</sup> The novel ends with the two remaining boys, Nobue and Ishihara, achieving a final victory against the Midoris by killing three of them with the use of a thermobaric bomb. It is also unlikely that the boys will ever be caught, as Ishihara says, “We’ve been ignored all our lives, so nobody knows who we are.”<sup>248</sup> Is it right to conclude from this that Murakami viewed the cause of the boys just, and further, superior to the Midoris? To this I must object. If Murakami truly believed that the boys were beyond reproach, then why create the Midoris to fight with them? These boys may well be suffering from a society that does not care to help

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>247</sup> Akagi Tomohiro et. al., “War is the Only Solution. A 31-year-old freeter explains the plight and future of Japan’s Marginal Workers,” trans. Kyoko Selden, *Asia-Pacific Journal* (Japan Focus) 5, no. 6 (June 4, 2007). <https://apjjf.org/-Mori-Tatsuya/2452/article.html>

<sup>248</sup> Ryū Murakami. *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 192.

them, but this does not mean that their violence is without consequences. I do not think that Murakami views their actions as correct, but in some ways, as a natural consequence of how Japanese society has failed to provide their lives with meaning and direction. This is the higher evil that Murakami wants to reader to focus their scrutiny on, but before I can get to that, I must deal with yet another matter on the subject of transgression: it lies in the contrast between how the sex workers and the women were not in sex work transgressed their unique boundaries.

Even though “Topaz’s” Narrator has a positive sexual experience with her artist, and *Piercing’s* Chiaki has reclaimed more of her sexuality, the two are still very much trapped within the same repressive systems. As individuals, they are changed, but they have so far failed to change the sex industry as individuals. The reader is not given any other reason to believe that these characters will escape the prejudice and casual objectification of their profession, or that their difficult economic situations will improve. In fact, it’s highly probable that Chiaki will become unemployed once the authorities uncover the trouble she has caused. Things are rather different, however, for *Audition’s* Asami and the Midori Society for *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*. These women, who are not sex workers, and explicitly in the Midori’s case, middle class, are able to exact physical revenge against the men who have harmed them. Even though things arguably end up worse for these women, with Asami and two of the Midoris slain, they were able to achieve some catharsis in punishing the agents of their suffering. While these women have not restructured society or eliminated all oppression, they have succeeded in fighting back against some of its more rueful agents. To return to my earlier question, why are Murakami’s sex workers not afforded to liberty to transgress in the same manner as their middle-class counterparts? The answer lies in their roles.

As sex workers, the focus of Narrator and Chiaki's occupation is providing sexual pleasure to their clients. Their sexual desires are subservient to and often denied by the men whom they work for. I do not mean to imply that anyone who decides to work as a prostitute ends up sexually dissatisfied, but that these particular women are. In this space, where these women's bodies are tied to the systems that deny them agency, then perhaps most radical thing they can do is reclaim their selves. By orienting their reality towards their own desires, they are subverting the very system which entraps them. While Asami and the Midoris are not prostitutes, their roles as women in a patriarchal society pressures them into serving men as unequal partners. While sexual dissatisfaction is certainly a part of what the Midoris must endure, I do not think that it is at the center of their stories. What Asami and the Midoris have in common is that they are expected to fit a mold of the traditional housewife. Aoyama wants Asami to replace his selfless and docile Ryoko, while the Midoris have all been divorced from marriages where they felt less free as people. Their malaise goes deeper than a lack of good sex, but an expectation that they will devote their lives to the men in their lives, and further, not upset the patriarchal order. By seeking vengeance in response to the prejudice, instead of quietly enduring it, they are subverting their roles in Japan's patriarchal society.

A parallel can easily be drawn between the fissure between these sets of women, and the historical chasm between women of the hearth and women of the brothel in Japan. While both of these roles have been shaped to serve patriarchal systems, and indeed, imply a degree of sexual submission, one has the purpose of absorbing men's sexual energies, while the other carries the purpose of providing for male ambitions and desire as an unequal partner. The shape of their transgression differs based on the specific forces pressuring them. They seek to become the exact opposite of how they are defined. Even so, I can understand the frustration that sex workers

cannot express themselves as freely or as violently as the other women. Murakami may be implying that the transgressions of prostitutes will always be limited to self-discovery because of the limitations of their occupation. Whether he believes this to be a good or bad thing, I cannot say. I am more inclined to think that Murakami is plainly describing what he believes about our reality. His transgressions are not limitless but exist within the restraints of an imperfect society. Not even vengeance, cathartic though it may be, is ultimately successful in changing the systems which perpetuate their oppression.

Indeed, if there exists a consistent antagonist, a greater evil throughout all of Murakami's works, then that monster clearly is society. Japanese society, as depicted in his literature, is fictional, but it is based on reality. It is a place where the desires of the individual are suppressed by the life of the salaryman, where sex workers are abused and exploited by their clientele, and where wives cannot be complete women. Japan should not be defined solely by its weakest shortcomings or deepest prejudices, nor should any society, but those shortcomings and prejudices are essential to understanding the whole. There is much to appreciate and admire about Japan, but to truly care for a country is also to critique its greatest failings. In this sense, underneath his disdain for what Japan has become, Murakami at his heart carries a deep love for the Japanese people, and further believes that they can triumph the failures of their governments. In the aftermath of the 3/11 disaster, Murakami wrote that despite the shortages in food, water, medicine, and fuel, and despite the inadequacy of the government response, that "for all we've lost, hope is in fact one thing we Japanese have regained. The great earthquake and tsunami have robbed us of many lives and resources. But we who were so intoxicated with our own prosperity have once again planted the seed of hope. So I choose to believe."<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Ryū Murakami. "Amid Shortages, a Surplus of Hope." *New York Times*, March 16, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/opinion/17Murakami.html>

## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **PRETTY WOMAN, UGLY WOMAN**

I think that parental presence is necessary in the raising of a pretty and pleasing woman.

This refers not only to her decency and indecency, but also to other variations within the subject. In biological studies, for instance, molecules, cells, and all that comes from them, internal organs, bodily functions, metabolism, organism structure, and moreover, through birth, growth, and entanglement with disease, individual beings can, through a variety of species, seize society, nations, the world, the universe, and as much of the future as they desire. In a similar vein, the problems of men and women begin to speak at various levels from DNA to society to nations to the universe. I may, however, write about these things in a messy manner. This is because I am a novelist and not a specialist, but putting that aside, let us begin. The problems of fathers are on a psychological level because their influence is given from one individual to another.

Now this goes without saying, but there are many different women. In terms of beauty, ugly women are out of the question, but there are ugly women with inner beauty. It is a radiant inversion, but it goes no further than a swell of brightness to the surface.

Allow me to rephrase this in simpler terms. Inside each ugly woman is social butterfly, a helpful butterfly. However, more recent women's magazines often have special reports claiming that improving your inner beauty to improve your outer beauty is a great lie.

I've said that ugly women are out of the question, but in which era are they out of the question? We don't hear the stories of the ugly women that turned into spinsters. Take, for instance, when you're going to the department store or an amusement park. If you hear an ugly woman say "wow" in a loud voice, chances are she's married and bringing her child. Indeed, there are men who will have *sex* with these women. To men, women who will have sex with them are more precious than anything, so they probably can't help who they marry.

The beautiful ladies of the Heian court, for instance, would seem ugly by our standards. While the idea of beauty standards is societal and institutional, aren't men that are attracted to the Heian court ladies or the Papua women of the Highlands in short supply? That's why I want to understand, on a psychological level, why ugly women are so often neglected. Trying to understand this through zoology or even cultural anthropology is insufficient. So I think, excluding ugly women, that women are split into two types. (Men whose lovers are ugly women don't have to read what comes next)

Pretty women and ugly women. You could also say obedient women and meek women. Or if you wanted to say something more, pop girls and post-war girls would be all right. Clever women lack the charm of decision-making. It is said that men never let them make the decisions. Since clever women are of shallow wit, men do not find them exhausting. They will abandon anything precious for their sake. "Shallow wit" is phrase made for women. On a biological level, women are not very intelligent. "Intelligence" is only for men who are burdened with the delusions of parenthood.

Men need their intelligence to create. They create stories, societies, architecture, and mathematics. No other animal creates. That's because, other than fucking, they don't know how to do anything else. Fathers, what has been achieved by the animals in zoos? Just by their

domestication and further, their ownership by humans, shows that they don't understand too much.

Through the process of creation, men produce intelligence. Which is why women don't have any. Predictably, stupid women are cute. The definition of stupidity is debatable, but at the very least, it means simple and obedient. This is due to their unavoidable physiology. After all, if a woman's physiology were due to her logic or intelligence, would children still be born? Pretty women don't say much with their shallow wit. That is because they are the daughters of worthless fathers, but what sort of fathers are these?

Women who think they are pretty often tell this sort of story about their fathers:

*You know, he was terrible because he was possessive. He also drank, liked cars and other flashy things, and probably had his share of affairs. Mother cried a lot, but he was always very kind to me.*

These sorts of personal accounts are the best. Women who speak of these sorts of fathers are also the best. Whether they are a college professor, a salaryman, a painter, a pro-cyclist, or a transportation driver, any man can do well. Their occupation or social status has nothing to do with it.

I'd like to move on as to whether or not the word "man" contains any kind of inherent feeling. Whether or not it has a sexual feeling. I do not want to make anything filthy of it, but fatherhood, you mustn't forget, is an illusion. A strong system it may be, but still an illusion. As long as humans had fatherhood, they stood with importance on their own two feet like the two-legged animal in that eternally unsolvable riddle.

Socially, men have no choice but to be fathers. Women are similar, but a whole other animal. The difference is that *biologically* they have no choice but to be mothers. Men who work hard and become great fathers are also worthless men clinging to an old system. Their daughters see through that. Daughters (and admittedly sons as well) desire not only good fathers, but also good men.

No matter how many toys a father may present to his daughter as gifts, her gratitude will never turn into respect. The time when fathers display their masculine charms is the time when daughters discover their pride. To be honest, this doesn't only happen to daughters. Sons, wives, and grandchildren all behave the same.

Do not do anything for your daughters. She is shaped by the portrait she is shown. Men who cling to fatherhood, or to put it more bluntly, *worthless men*, will raise daughters who find shallow wit more precious than an orgasm. In other words, they become *worthless women*.

To date such women is indecent. They probably devote themselves only to their jobs. Worthless women are the same as worthless drugs. They are ineffective at weakening the will to work. A potentially low work ethic, however, has an unhealthy resemblance to modern literature. What shitty work.

If extremely worthless fathers are the inverse of fatherhood, doesn't that make them rather incestuous? This misunderstanding is a problem. A father's charm springs from his manhood, that means it's no longer sweet as it leaves it. But all animals, even humans, practice the taboo of incest. Incest, therefore, should be referred to as institutional, even though is not seen as such. Instead, the root of this instinct is restricted.

This is why daughters raped by their fathers go down the dark path of either becoming lesbians or novelists. To torment the rapist father and become a lesbian, or to curse oneself and become a novelist, is to truly be beyond hope.

Entirely like a man, there are situations that seem to depend on illusions. Ever since the news started to cover S&M clubs, half of the women have confessed to sex with their fathers. Now it seems as if S&M has changed into a worse fashion than ever before. They are bound because they are not violated, they are not coerced and neither are they ashamed. Women such as this cannot maintain a sexual identity. For that, creating a coercive relationship is more valuable than anything else.

I've always said that men are "consumable goods." Used and abandoned like disposable lighters. If our performance is poor and our engines are out of gas, we are thrown out without any complaint. Women, however, are the "spoils of war." If they are not dropped, they cannot be seized. Men drop many things in life, but women, at least, can be salvaged. The first thing to be abandoned should be the fathers of these women, then the foes who are so great that they too hide wonderful spoils.

## APPENDIX B

### WORTHLESS WOMEN OFTEN TELL LIES. NOT ONLY TO OTHERS, BUT ALSO TO THEMSELVES

Recently, worthless women have stopped appearing in American films. Well, it was also like that in the past, those who played worthless women in past American films were also few in number. The films that definitively introduced worthless women were the only films that could be called literary. These were the filmed versions of Tennessee Williams's plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, as well as the filmed version of Nelson Algren's original work, *The Man With The Golden Arm*.

This artistic family of "literary films" are the only pictures of high art that introduce characters like worthless women. On the other hand, movies for more general audiences did not introduce the worthless woman. It's often the case that those who most loudly pay to see the movies don't want to see things like worthless women in them. That's to be expected, of course. In horror films, disgusting women often appear, but are a little different from those worthless women. Such distasteful characters are put into the screenplay for the sake of killing them off.

In high art films, worthless women are usually hysterical and have terrible inner psychology. Come to think of it, the word hysteria has practically become an obsolete word. Did you know that there are many readers who don't even know what hysteria means? "Hysteria" is Greek for the womb. To psychiatrists, there were various categories of hysteric personalities, if a woman's attitude and way of speaking were always over-the-top, or in other words, *theatrical*. To other people, the warning signs pull themselves out, like women who present themselves as

sexual when in reality they're often frigid, and other such things. Whenever they try to show off, they show off themselves above any personal talents. Such women are like clumps of vanity.

From the viewpoint of social psychology, "hysteria" has a relationship with women's social progress in the 18th century. In other words, women who had, until then, been secluded in their homes began to become a part of the Industrial Revolution and civil society, and they received more opportunities on the outside to work. Female laborers who left the city and worked increased at a ground-breaking rate, while women who participated in political and social movements were born.

In the second half of the 20th century, while women's genuine participation in society materialized, the hysteria disorder rapidly decreased, but the hysteric personality did not necessarily vanish. In fact, there are plenty of hysterical women alive today. Those sorts of women often tell lies. Others also lie but, they tell lies with their own bodies.

For example, there are women who are quite near completing marriage, even though their men do not like them all that much. But then if they do marry, what do you call that way of thinking? To suffer frustration until marriage is a sort of living that I think is boring. As a frustration regarding the future, this anxiety, to me, probably doesn't take some kind of talent or ability. Women who are thinking these sorts of negative thoughts don't want to vanish due to the great changes of married life. These women are understanding on their own the truth that their current selves are unsatisfied wherever their heart is.

But those who recognize that are happy. A long and strenuous effort is probably necessary since, after all, nothing of note will ever be found. If this is the case, then I think that marriage probably isn't better for them, or at least, a life that changes. *Since those men neither*

*love nor hate me, myself as I currently am is probably a perfect fit.* It is in this way that women lie to themselves.

People who have lied to themselves will, before long, relish in tragic thoughts.

Since they are not used to loving themselves, they cannot come to love someone else.

It is also the fault of others that through this state, they cannot do and enjoy anything that they want. It can be difficult for the children who have been raised by these sorts of women. Those women's anxieties and distortions were forced on them.

Eating disorders appear to be the representative disease of modern women, but even women who get anorexia and bulimia are probably still honest. Since they cannot lie to themselves all that well, and are still having bitter thoughts, that part alone is still a relief.

Disease will not help women who lied throughout their whole lives. Around these women is an overflow of injury. How fearful.

## APPENDIX C

### THE DEFINITION OF NEUROTIC OBA-SANS

I will be acting in a commercial around the time that this manuscript becomes print.

I have long been a virgin with regard to TV commercials, but at last, I have made my debut.

The produce is New Suntory.

The words that will be on the final script are “Deep, thick, soft.”

I think that it’s a fine script for its simplicity. Since I also took responsibility of the narration, recently, I have been muttering greetings comparatively like “Deep, thick, soft” and have become curious.

There are women who say, “What are you saying? Since it’s you, there must be something unpleasant about it,” and I laugh.

Certainly, “deep, thick, soft” can bring about good feelings.

That does not necessarily make it a female phrase.

Cosmically-speaking, it is a magnanimous one.

Cosmically-speaking, it is a magnanimous thing, but as a feminine matter, it is of very deep interest.

Even here, fatherhood is falling to the ground.

Though ten years have passed since I first wrote that fatherhood has fallen to the ground, definite signs of recovery on even this matter have recently withered away.

The destruction of fatherhood is a great incident that has changed the history of mankind, there is surely nothing quite like it, and so far, the same foot-dragging has advanced on.

Since I live as an individual, I do what I want with regards to that whole trend.

Fundamentally, I think that the loss of fatherhood cannot be helped.

But regards to this loss, it is mistaken to, like a looter after a tsunami, deny a man his romanticism. No, there is certainly no mistaking that to do this is bad.

Perhaps male romanticism has been misunderstood.

Or perhaps it is laughed at.

Elementary school girls have recently burst with laughter at ideas like male romanticism. It's a dead word.

Even words have no role when language becomes obsolete. (Obviously)

Our worthless colleagues have let male romanticism carelessly pass from their lips and have made the language dead.

Some new word is necessary.

To say, for instance, "general mobilization theory."

The Formula One, for instance, is the epitome of this general mobilization theory.

You select the goal of your own limits, mobilize your potential, and compete for superiority.

This is a manly thing.

The exact sort of thing that women don't do.

By saying this, I don't mean to imply that women who cannot do these things are inferior. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The way of women who cannot do these things is a great way.

After all, when long ago, a great challenge opened up to woman with this sort of forceful strain, did mankind not suffer ruin?

Though this does not mean that women are necessarily limited, after all, they created the orgasm.

They have also demolished mating season.

Orgasms are probably something that is only limited to humans, and this emergence is considered a puzzle. I also choose to think of it as such.

I want to think that the orgasm naturally occurred spontaneously.

Did the monkeys that fell to the Earth's surface from high in the trees have a G-spot?

I would surely like to think so. (Also, due to this example, whatever I want to say becomes harder to understand.)

Now, where was I? Ah, that's right, the exploitation of fatherhood's collapse as a looter's tale! It was a tale that has even conceived of placing limits upon one's abilities, while at the same time was unable to repudiate the collapse of fatherhood. To put it simply, this sort of denial is very much like the Oba-san.

Why is it that Japan has come to hold onto power thinking like the Oba-san?

In the first place, what is the Oba-san anyway? (Good grief)

Oba-sans are stability.

Oba-sans settle down.

Oba-sans provide comfort.

Oba-sans depend on others.

Oba-sans prefer balance.

Oba-sans worry about other people's eyes.

Oba-sans do not assert themselves.

Oba-sans love unearned income.

Oba-sans have no faith.

Oba-sans can infinitely lie to themselves.

Oba-sans don't know themselves.

Oba-sans are inevitably calculating.

Oba-sans cannot be fashionable.

Oba-sans have no courage, but they do have durability.

Oba-sans cannot be self-reliant.

Oba-sans cannot perceive those things.

Oba-sans try to hinder other people's selves.

Oba-sans will chatter in loud voices, anytime and everywhere.

Oba-sans have slow legs.

Oba-sans, whatever they do, will be slow.

Oba-sans like lines.

These are normal things, but Oba-sans have no relationship to age or sex.

Male Oba-sans are increasing.

The Democratic Socialist Party is an Oba-san.

Movie and food critics are Oba-sans.

Modern Japanese poets are Oba-sans.

In general, they understand through the face.

I think that the change in male Oba-sans is the source of 99% of the irritation in young girls.

The supporters of fascism are Oba-sans.

Ah, I've grown tired, I must stop.

Oba-sans can make me tired.

Oba-sans have invented agricultural society.

In hunting spots, Oba-sans are unnecessary.

But we do not only hunt, we must also eat.

Oba-sans do not care about our irritations.

Oba-sans try to disregard types like me.

Oba-sans are fearful. (They've become a little neurotic.)

But, at any rate, even if you attack the Oba-san, you will only become tired.

We can only create targets for the limitations of our abilities.

Secretly, they cannot have fun.

To be ignorant like the Oba-san is to continue to tell lies and know no enjoyment.

Even unto death, Oba-sans cannot come to say things like "Enjoy life."

Women who say these sorts of things are not, for example, Oba-sans in their 30s, 40s, or  
50s.

"Deep, thick, soft" women are not Oba-sans.

Now please drink the New Suntory and carry on, dear readers.

The New Suntory, truly, is sweet.

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