

2010

# Review: Becoming Modern Women: Love & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature & Culture by Michiko Suzuki

Susanna Fessler PhD

*University at Albany, State University of New York, sfessler@albany.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/eas\\_fac\\_scholar](http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/eas_fac_scholar)



Part of the [Japanese Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fessler, Susanna PhD, "Review: Becoming Modern Women: Love & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature & Culture by Michiko Suzuki" (2010). *East Asian Studies Faculty Scholarship*. 17.  
[http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/eas\\_fac\\_scholar/17](http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/eas_fac_scholar/17)

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the East Asian Studies at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Asian Studies Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@albany.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@albany.edu).

to the concept of inviting (or summoning) spirits (pp. 152–54) is reminiscent of this term. As Staemmler notes, “Honda, thus, interpreted *chinkon* as centering around the word ‘invite’ albeit with somewhat idiosyncratic philology” (p. 154). Perhaps the etymology will not appear as curious if we suppose that Honda may have had the term *shōkon* in mind. We can also note the modern usage of the term in the context of the memorialization of the war dead at Yasukuni Jinja (called the Tōkyō Shōkonsha before 1879) and the prefectural *gokoku jinja* (called Shōkonsha before 1939), of which Honda and others must have been aware—if he was not already aware of Ban’s scholarship through his Nativist connections.

Staemmler’s conviction that mediated spirit possession is a central practice in the religions of Japan is absolutely correct. Her monograph serves as a welcome reminder to take better note of this practice, which is often marginalized in society and in scholarship. Even though she largely leaves it up to the reader to make sense of the plethora of details, her monograph provides a useful encyclopedic resource for *chinkon kishin*’s various manifestations. For this reason, beefing up the sparse index/glossary would have made the work more user friendly. Nevertheless, the manuscript makes several valuable contributions, such as the lengthy translations of *chinkon kishin* sessions in the introduction and in chapter 3.3.3. The monograph also yields overviews of several new religious movements, such as Shindō Tenkōkyo and Ananaiyō, which have received little prior scholarly attention. There is no doubt that Staemmler’s study of *chinkon kishin* was carefully researched and that with additional editing it would have made an excellent book, but the present work is too narrowly focused on *chinkon kishin*, while broader issues and bigger questions end up falling by the wayside.

*Becoming Modern Women: Love & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature & Culture.* By Michiko Suzuki. Stanford University Press, 2010. 248 pages. Hardcover \$60; softcover \$21.95.

SUSANNA FESSLER

State University of New York at Albany

Women, identity, and modernity have been hot topics in Japanese studies for two decades now. *Becoming Modern Women: Love & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature & Culture*, nominally in the field of literature but also covering cultural history, joins the growing list of works on women, women’s movements, and the literature of prewar Japan. Michiko Suzuki uses “love” as a theme bringing together her examination of three female authors—Yoshiya Nobuko (1896–1973), Miyamoto Yuriko (1899–1951), and Okamoto Kanoko (1889–1939); she “analyzes these writers’ works in relation to discourses that pertain to same-sex love, love marriage, and maternal love” (p. 16).

Within these three larger categories, Suzuki also examines sexology discourse, the Bluestocking movement, and Hiratsuka Raichō and her role in feminist Japan. The book is divided into three parts (for each type of “love”); each part begins by establishing the context surrounding all three writers and then ends with a closer study of each author and her works. That’s a lot to fit into a relatively short book (150 pages of main text, plus 84 pages of endnotes, bibliography, and index), and although I would be the

first to say that this is a very carefully researched book, at times it suffers from a break-neck pace through material that deserves a little more time.

The first section, on same-sex love, examines both adolescent and adult love. At first, however, there is an implicit divide between the two categories that goes beyond age; the former is platonic while the latter is physical. I say “implicit” because the distinction, while supported by Suzuki’s examples, is not clearly stated. In one example, Suzuki quotes Yoshiya in her 1923 essay *Dōsei o aisuru saiwai* (The happiness of loving one of the same sex) as follows: “At this time, the girl experiences an extremely close romantic friendship during her schooldays, and this develops into a huge force. . . . What a pure and dear episode this is in a girl’s life! . . . When this romantic friendship occurs between an older girl and a younger one, or between a teacher and her student, it is extremely positive in terms of educational value, and its worth is immeasurable” (p. 36). Later, again referring to Yoshiya, Suzuki writes, “Just as pure love and carnal love are often discussed in terms of sexual difference (with females associated with spiritual love and males associated with physical love), same-sex love becomes, through this logic, a part of female virtue and even a manifestation of spirituality and innocence” (p. 37). At this point in the text, the reader might be forgiven for imagining that for Yoshiya, “same-sex love” is always “pure” and a product of adolescence, never “carnal” and continued into adulthood. But a few pages later we read about Yoshiya’s novel, *Two Virgins in the Attic*, in which the adult heroines are lesbian lovers. The reader then has what are really two topics: platonic, adolescent love and carnal, adult love. Yoshiya is not so easily categorized, however. Suzuki tells us that in the 1930s Yoshiya “represented adult same-sex love not as an *alternative* to heterosexuality but as a kind of sisterhood, an integral part of female identity that *complements* heterosexuality. Here the love between women is a pure and permanent bond that can be sustained throughout the female life cycle” (p. 60; italics Suzuki’s). How does this type of same-sex love overlap with or fit in with the two earlier examples? Yoshiya does not tell us, and Suzuki concludes that “Yoshiya’s prewar works revisit modern love ideology [defined on page 13 as the “notion that true love is an amalgamation of spiritual and sexual love, and that this love is the basis for female development”], interrogating the connection between female self-discovery and the promise of heterosexual romance. Despite (or because of) the silences in these texts, Yoshiya is able to champion eloquently the importance of female-female love” (p. 62). This seems to me a fancy way of saying that females have friendships, some of which are platonic and some of which are sexual, and those friendships are an important part of their lives. Can we not say this about males, also? The bases for these women’s friendships occupy a wide range; can all of them be categorized as “love”?

Structurally, this book is a mix of both previously published and new material. Part 1, “Girls and Virgins,” is largely based on an article Suzuki published in 2006 in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (vol. 65, no. 3), titled “Writing Same-Sex Love: Sexology and Literary Representation in Yoshiya Nobuko’s Early Fiction,” which is itself largely based on a chapter from Suzuki’s 2002 Ph.D. dissertation, “Developing the Female Self: Same-Sex Love, Love Marriage and Maternal Love in Modern Japanese Literature, 1910–1939” (Stanford University). Part 3, “Reinventing Motherhood,” is based on another chapter of that dissertation, titled “Reinventing Motherhood: Mythologizing Maternal Love in Okamoto Kanoko’s *Shōjō ruten*.” Part 2, “The Wife’s Progress,” consists of new material arranged in two chapters, one on Miyamoto Yuriko and the other on love marriage. The introduction is also new material and has a notably different style from the rest of the book. Here, Suzuki lays out the theory and theoretical supports of her arguments, citing, among others, Karatani

Kōjin and Michel Foucault, in a presentation that is cumbersome in places. One sentence, for example, reads, "Literature is a heterogeneous and porous site that is in conversation with a range of ideologies, texts, and discourses." Thankfully, such prose mostly disappears after the introduction, making the book much more undergraduate friendly than many secondary resources on literature.

In the end I wasn't sure if the theme of "love" really held this book together. One could easily substitute "interpersonal relationships" and it would all still work. In fact, the use of such a broad and multifaceted concept struck me as a cause for concern from the moment I opened the book, so I was relieved at first to see a section titled, "A Brief History of Love." The operative word here, though, is "brief," as the section is only two pages long. Similarly, some chapters are too short to serve their purpose. Chapter 6 ("Maternal Love"), for example, covers only eleven pages yet contains an introduction followed by three sections: "Hiratsuka Raichō and Takamura Itsue," "Nationalism and Feminism," and "Maternal Love, Women Writers, and Okamoto Kanoko." These are all valid, interesting topics, but Suzuki does not allow herself to give them their due. The copious and complete footnotes suggest that she has done all the research, but neglected to put the details into the text. This one book wants to be three books. Suzuki's subtitle is symptomatic of her broad, unmet ambitions. Even if she had subtitled her work "Relationships & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture," this still would not have reflected the true content of the book. Perhaps better would have been "Relationships & Female Identity in the Writings of Three Japanese Women."

One smaller quibble is that I wish Stanford (and many other English-language publishers) would enter the twenty-first century and use software that allowed authors to include kanji and kana in their books more easily. Suzuki's text did not suffer much from homonyms in the romanization, but the bibliography would have been much more navigable if it had included Japanese characters.

These complaints aside, Suzuki has pulled together a tremendous amount of information and documented it precisely and clearly. If I were to resituate my expectations based on the suggested subtitles above, my quibbles would be largely silenced. All in all, this study is a solid work, and the bibliography and footnotes alone make it worth one's attention.

*Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film.* Edited by David Stahl and Mark Williams. Brill, 2010. 375 pages. Hardcover €126.00/\$179.00.

RICHARD TORRANCE  
Ohio State University

This anthology is as incisive and demanding of consideration as any that I have read. The central question reframed again and again in each of the essays in *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film* is how the literary arts, narrative and film in particular, deal with cruelty, atrocity, and brutality on an unimaginable scale. The basic premise underlying the anthology, as expressed in David Stahl's and Mark Williams's fine introductory essay, is that "the moment [the author] calls