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# Review: Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Oba Minako by Michiko Niikuni Wilson

Susanna Fessler PhD

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

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sense of morality—the way he grew up with it or learned it or acted on it—the force of Sōseki's alleged “change” would be all the more strongly felt. Further, the note of freedom connoted by the “dance” of his thoughts to the movements within “language” seems jarring against what Yiu will go on to reveal about the torment and loneliness that suffuse the late novels, as well as against Sōseki's seeming lifelong addiction to decadence—“his undying fondness of the baroque luxuriance of language” (p. 192). There are differences, no doubt, between a “moral rhetoric” and a more flowing, fictional “language.” But both are states of linguistic order, and either one can court chaos should its rules be systematically violated. At any rate, so much else in Yiu's analysis suggests that freedom, artistic or ethical license, is something Sōseki forbid to himself, particularly as he grew older and his fictional themes grew darker and more nearly confronted psychological or social chaos.

But such questioning of the aptness of certain terms or the encompassing logic of the argument should not deflect from the value of this critique. Angela Yiu has provided us with a humane and thought-provoking study of Sōseki, especially of several of his lesser studied novels. She sketches, too, with admirable grace and respect for the full complexity of the man, a portrait of this troubled artist, as he struggled to maintain order in the face of a massive force about to overtake himself and his society, and before which he and many others felt lost and estranged. Whether we call that force chaos, or modernity, or just history, Sōseki summoned all his energies to make it intelligible and to measure its consequences, in human terms, so that even today we read his fiction for its revelation of life and the culture that sustains it.

*Gender Is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako.* By Michiko Niiikuni Wilson. M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 1998. xii, 207 pages. \$48.95.

*Reviewed by*

SUSANNA FESSLER

State University of New York at Albany

*Gender Is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Ōba Minako* by Michiko Niiikuni Wilson is part of the “Japanese Women Writing” series edited also by Wilson. The two other books in this series to date, *The Woman with the Flying Head and Other Stories* by Kurahashi Yumiko and *Funeral of a Giraffe: Seven Stories* by Tomioka Taeko, are both anthologies of short stories. *Gender Is Fair Game* contains six chapters of literary

criticism on the works of Ōba Minako, plus an interview with the author. One of the chapters, “Becoming and (Un)Becoming: The Female Destiny Reconsidered,” is a revised version of an essay of the same title in *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Stanford University Press, 1996). The chapters can easily be read independently of one another.

In her introduction (chapter 1), Wilson briskly describes the state of feminist literary criticism in Japan, then gives an abbreviated biography of Ōba Minako. She notes that feminist theory of Japanese literature has burgeoned in the past ten years and defends her own application of it by saying that “the problematization of the issue of gender is crucial in light of the lack of interest in, worse yet, the dismissal of, gender politics as a proper subject, even among the ‘most radical social critics,’ who ‘always fail to expand their analysis or critique of a problem into the area of gender’” (p. 9). I quote this passage to demonstrate two common characteristics of this book. First, Wilson liberally inserts quotations from other critics (in this case, from an interview with the poet and critic Kōra Rumiko published in Sandra Buckley’s *Broken Silence*) in order to assert some universal fact without substantive support: the assertion is that because Kōra said it off the top of her head in a candid interview, it must be fact. Second, Wilson is prone to quote such sources when her own point (here, that a feminist perspective on Minako’s works is new and helpful in understanding the literature) is much more meaningful. Kōra’s statement dissected simply says that gender issues should be problematized because they presently are not, which is a weak justification by itself, if it amounts to one at all.

In chapter 2, Wilson creates a classification of style she calls the “lyric mode” and claims that this style, although *de rigueur* in Heian literature and “transformed into male prerogatives” in the modern era, is “no longer the right stuff for literary production and inquiry [in modern Japanese women’s writings]” (p. 26). Wilson quotes three critics here, all of whom complain that women writers have been ignored or summarily dismissed by the *bundan* because of their lyrical style, their gender, or both. Then Wilson conflates lyricism with the *shōsetsu* style, segueing into a discussion of Minako’s style, which “diverges from [*shōsetsu-shishōsetsu* features] in crucial ways.” The “most prominent deviation” is from the notion of the “privileged self”—in *Yōbaidō monogatari* (1984), Wilson tells us, Minako “employ[s] an episodic and anecdotal structure” (p. 31). This brought many questions to my mind: is this in any way a uniquely female perspective? Does not Inoue Yasushi do the same thing in *Ryōjū* (1949)? And if Minako is deviating so much from the lyric and/or *shōsetsu* mode, what does she still have in common with her Heian-period predecessors? Finally, if she deviates so much from the *shōsetsu* style, of what relevance is the opening accusation that the feminine “lyric mode” is wrongfully belittled by mod-

ern male critics? In the end, Wilson's attempt to depict Minako's style as denigrated by a greater patriarchal conspiracy against women's writing fails to be convincing.

Chapter 3, "Artist as Cultural Critic as Woman," explores Minako's role as a social critic. Wilson does this in two venues: first, in a comparison of the Meiji female educator Tsuda Umeko (of whom Minako wrote a biography) and Minako; second, in an examination of Minako's attitudes toward marriage. Wilson prefers to use grandiloquent statements—most of them appropriated from postmodernist criticism—to make her points, as if the reader would be bored with anything simpler. She tells us that "Minako . . . turns the notion of power and authority on its head" by advocating a democratic process (p. 46). She says that "Minako articulates her deconstructionist, postmodern views on nationality and power" when one of her characters states that one should have the right to choose one's country, not be relegated to citizenship where one is born (p. 55). These ideas, of course, were characteristic of such unpostmodern men as Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill.

Chapter 4 begins with an idea first articulated by Susan Fraiman: the concept of "unbecoming." Wilson tells us that Yurie, the protagonist in *Kiri no tabi* (1980), has the duty not "to 'become,' but for her 'not to become' the woman required by conventional female destiny. It is [the story of] unlearning and undoing, of 'unbecoming' a woman, and thereby becoming an 'unbecoming' woman" (p. 77). The pun is catchy, but the idea falls short of defining what Yurie must do. To state that one must "unbecome" something is to state something of no content, and to give the thing one is "unbecoming" (in this case, a conventional female) more attention than one gives to the object of one's aspirations reduces a noble goal to a trivialization. Indeed, Wilson ends up in this chapter describing the behavior and psychology of the male characters more than the female characters; we know what the men do, but we are left wondering about the women.

Chapter 5 unites a number of Minako's short stories by the theme, appropriated from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist reading of the fairy tale *Snow White*, of two feminine archetypes: the good, obedient daughter (Snow White in her glass coffin) and the rebellious matriarch (Snow White's evil stepmother, loose and ready to impose herself on the world). Wilson's points are usually well made, albeit predictable. We already know that Minako dislikes the idea of a reticent, obedient wife and mother, so it is no surprise that the protagonists in "Sanbiki no kani" (1968), *Funakui-mushi* (1969), "Yamamba no bishō" (1976), and other works resist being such a woman.

Chapter 6 argues that much of Minako's work is influenced by *Genji monogatari*. Wilson's supports for this argument are both Minako's own claims that she has been influenced by *Genji* and textual evidence, specifi-

cally an “omission of direct quotation marks” and the “fluidity of narrative voice, coupled with a poetic narrative rhythm that creates a sense of perpetual movement between the present and the past” (pp. 126–27). But specific examples are omitted, again leaving one to wonder how Minako’s writing differs from other works such as Yokomitsu Riichi’s *Kikai* (1930) (which omits quotation marks) or Uno Kōji’s *Kura no naka* (1919) (which moves repeatedly between present and past). Wilson’s thesis could very well be true, but she does not allow us to judge.

Chapter 7, “Gender Is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male,” discusses the “female gaze,” the objectification of men by women, as depicted in Minako’s works. Wilson demonstrates that Minako is unafraid to focus on men’s physical and psychological characteristics in a way that is rarely seen in other fiction. She also discusses at length Minako’s parody of *Ise monogatari*, *Mukashi onna ga ita* (1994), a work that addresses various gender issues. Thanks to extensive quotations from Minako’s work, this chapter is perhaps the best at demonstrating Wilson’s points.

The final chapter is an interview between Wilson and Minako, in which the reader gets to see firsthand how elusive and self-deprecating Minako can be. Wilson alludes to this in the body of her book, but there it is not so evident as it is here. When Wilson evaluates a confrontation Minako had with a teacher, saying, “The teacher denied you an opinion,” Minako replies, “Well, I didn’t feel I was denied anything at all.” Praised for her unrepentant strength, Minako says, “You’re probably right about me. It may not be a good thing, though.” The interview is an excellent addition to the text; it would be refreshing if more scholars of living writers followed Wilson’s example.

In sum, Wilson’s propensity for making or quoting categorical statements without definitions or supporting data undermines the legitimacy of her literary arguments, many of which could be really quite convincing. She wants not only to examine the works of Ōba Minako, but to examine the role of women in Japan (both ancient and modern) and to show how women have been marginalized over the centuries. This is a tall order for a 200-page book. Too often, it results in broad patronizing statements that the reader is meant to accept without question. For example, she writes, “Being a woman requires a particular kind of sensitivity to environment and to social interactions. Being a female and an intellectual compounds the issue” (p. 4). The underlying implication is, of course, that being male *does not* require a particular kind of sensitivity to environment and that men are free of all societal influences, an assertion that most would concede is false.

In another passage, Wilson writes, “Japanese literary women know, as all women know, that the woman’s role is to be seen, but not heard” (p. 8). This statement is not only hackneyed, but so general as to lose all meaning. In discussing the “lyric mode,” Wilson cites eight works—four from the Heian period and four from the Showa period—and concludes, “the su-

premacY of the lyric mode is unmistakable in the Japanese literary canon” (p. 25). What of the works written in the centuries in between? In her discussion of *shishōsetsu*, she says we should “[keep] in mind that both selfhood and sexuality are the main concerns of female writers,” but evidence to support this stereotype is not given, nor can the underlying implication—that *no* female writer is primarily concerned with anything but selfhood and sexuality—be assumed without an exhaustive and universal study of *all* female writers (p. 28). Similarly, her statement that “*Once There Was a Woman* [*Mukashi onna ga ita*] confronts and parodies questions of gender more than any other work in modern Japanese literature” both tries to quantify something unquantifiable and encompasses an impossibly large sample (p. 148).

In their worst form, these general statements become metaphorical and rhapsodic, such as when Wilson quotes Adrienne Rich: “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (p. 8). Here “text” is used as a metaphor for “the patriarchal notion of gender, power, and sexuality,” and with this one deft movement we have left literature behind and entered the realm of social punditry.

There are many schools in the world of literary criticism—new criticism, structuralism, hermeneutics, semiotics, postmodernism, and deconstructionism, to name a few—all of which advocate a particular approach to the text. These approaches ask and answer questions such as “what is the author trying to accomplish?” “how does the use of symbol and metaphor convey deeper meaning?” and “can we read this text differently than it has been traditionally read?” These questions are valid and, in most cases, intriguing. However, an overarching trend has developed among literary critics in the past few decades to designate themselves not simply critics of text, but critics of economics, society, and politics. Unfortunately, literary critics are good at armchair reveries but bad at collecting empirical data. In the end, they propound social theories based on personal experience, others’ anecdotal evidence, or, worse, other critics’ social theories. Sadly, such is often the case in *Gender Is Fair Game*, a book that shows a tremendous amount of secondary reading on the author’s part. By leaving behind, as much as possible, the cacophony of voices quoted in this work and focusing on that of Wilson herself, one can find kernels of insight on Minako. Through her synopses and translations of key passages, Wilson demonstrates that Minako is an iconoclast of the first order. Her rebellion, however, seems not solely to stand against the patriarchy but against the status quo as a whole. Even by Wilson’s own account, Minako expresses her social criticisms just as effectively through a male voice as through a female voice. Ironically, Wilson’s feminism seems to hinder her attempt to assess Minako’s distinctiveness as a writer.