

Representations of the “Wicked Woman” in modern Japanese literature: from the *qing cheng* to the *femme fatale*

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Literature has invented many “Wicked Women” both in the East and in the West; they lure men into danger, destruction, and sometimes even death, by means of their evil—mostly sexual—force. The Wicked Woman is the Other who offends against the gendered and sexual codes of her society. This paper aims to analyze representations of the “Wicked Woman” in modern Japanese literature, and to shed light on the relationship between the cultural Other and the gendered Other.

The Bestial Woman in medieval legends and folk tales

To begin with, I will examine two medieval figures of the evil woman taken from Japanese legends and folk tales. The legend of *Dôjôji* describes a remarkable metamorphosis of a woman. The monk Anchin meets an attractive young girl, Kiyohime, and they spend the night together. Afterwards, Anchin fears having broken the religious precepts; he flees from Kiyohime to the *Dôjôji* Temple and hides beneath its huge bell, which the abbot lowers over him. The rejected Kiyohime's passion for Anchin turns into a deep hatred. She is transformed into a fierce, fire-breathing serpent, and chases after Anchin to *Dôjôji* Temple. Tracking him to the huge bell, Kiyohime—the serpent—coils herself around it and spews fire from her mouth until the bell melts and the monk burns to death.

The *Dôjôji* legend was adapted to a didactic Buddhist tale in the 11th century. The heroine is now a widow who is possessed by an unrequited passion for the serious-minded monk. In this version, the *Dôjôji* legend has taken on various modifications; in *Konjyaku Monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*, compiled circa 1120), the heroine's spurned love is attributed to her karma: “That evil woman's passion for the young monk must also have come from a bond formed in a previous life (Ury, 96).” In the version of

the *Yamabushi Kagura* (Sacred Shinto music and dance performed by mountain ascetics), the theme turns on the perversity of women—their ability to distract men from the pursuit of enlightenment—and it emphasizes the sacred territory forbidden to women. These versions provide the framework for the Nô plays *Kanemaki* and *Dôjôji*, and the Kabuki piece *Kyoganoko Musume Dôjôji* (*The Dancing Girl at the Dôjôji Temple*).

The other tale is about a nine-tailed fox. In the 12th century, there was a beautiful court lady named Tamamo no Mae, dearly loved by Emperor Toba. She was actually an incarnation of a golden-furred nine-tailed devil-fox, who was responsible for the destruction of King Pan-Tsu in India and King Yu of the Chou Dynasty. As Tamamo no Mae, she weakens Emperor Toba. Her assumption of human form having been detected, she flees to the far-off Nasu Plain and transforms herself into the *Sesshoseki* (Death Stone). In this form, she fatally poisons anything that approaches by emitting a noxious vapor. The stone is finally destroyed by a priest with a magic hammer. This tale was also dramatized in the 18th century. Both tales represent the bestiality of the wicked woman; these women and the monsters both contain repulsive and predatory characteristics.

Prostitutes as Evils: *Qing cheng* and *Da ji* in the Japanese context

To examine the pre-modern image of the Japanese “Wicked Woman,” it is also imperative to refer to the *yûjo*, who worked both as prostitute and entertainer. Being the object of men’s sexual dreams, the *yûjo* was placed outside of the rigid gendered and sexual codes of her age; she was often expected to play the seductive role. Extravagance and cold-heartedness were her means of self-advertisement. The *yûjo* was a symbol of women’s corruptness. The Japanese context adds an exotic aura to emphasize her perversity, as Patrick Bade indicates:

The choice of subjects from distant places or historical periods enabled artists and writers to cast about their heroines an aura of mysterious remoteness and also provided an excuse for exotic and picturesque trappings. (Bade, 5)

To get this aura and exoticism, representations of Japanese evil women borrowed icons from China. In Japan, the *yûjo* was also called *keisei*, the Japanese reading of *Qing cheng*. The phrase “*Qing cheng qing guo* (one who ruins city and state)” and the story of Li Furen, the Emperor Xiaowu’s consort, were common in Japan. Although *keisei*

originally meant “a beautiful woman,” it was replaced by the derived meaning of an evil woman who ruins men.

Another example of the Chinese symbol of the evil woman is *Kamikakete Sango Taisetsu* (1825), a Kabuki play written by Tsuruya Namboku. One of the central characters, a Geisha named Koman, is portrayed as a wicked woman who squeezes money from men, and in this play, she is nicknamed *Dakki*, the Japanese reading of *Da ji*—the famous favorite of King Zhou of the Yin Dynasty.

Among many Chinese evil women, *Da ji* holds a special position in the Japanese context on account of the stories of her lust and cruelty. The Japanese reading of her name, *Dakki*, became to mean “Wicked Woman” itself, and many *Dakkis* appeared in the 19th century. For example, a Kodan (historical narrative) piece named *Dakki no Ohyaku* (*Ohyaku the Da ji*) was very popular in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime. The stories about *Dokufu*, which literally means “Poison-Woman,” had a strong hold on the mind of the public in the latter half of the 19th century. The Japanese *Da ji* was typical of the *Dokufu*, so *Dakki no Ohyaku* (*Ohyaku the Da ji*) became one of the canonical *Dokufu*-stories.

The rise of the *femme fatale*: the heroines in Natsume Sôseki's novels

Even after the Meiji Restoration in the 1860's, the popularity of the Wicked Women tales endured in the early days of modern Japanese literature. They contributed to the development of the Japanese modern newspaper, as pulp fiction often carried what were in reality, mythical, “True Stories.” In the 1870's, newspapers often carried stories about outcaste women, and sometimes reported their execution.

Meanwhile, a new type of the wicked woman was appearing. Ever since Japan opened its ports to foreign countries, the Japanese were strongly impressed and influenced by Western literature. They found an appealing feminine image in European fin-de-siècle literature: the *Femme Fatale*, which emerged as a central figure in European art and literature during the closing decades of the 19th century. The *femme fatale* is associated with the styles of Decadence, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau as well as with the attention to decoration and excessive detail linked to a persistent and popular Orientalism.

Natsume Sôseki left Tokyo Imperial University to join the staff of a newspaper company, *Asahi Shimbun*, in March 1907. As a writer under exclusive contract, he made his debut on that paper with a serialized novel named *Gubijinso* (*The Poppy*).

As many critics have indicated, this is an unconvincing work, “old-fashioned, harking back not merely to the Ken'yûsha novels but even to early nineteenth-century

Japanese fiction, and containing also echoes of the Victorian novelists, especially Georges Meredith" (Keene, 321).

Yet the portrait of the heroine of *The Poppy* is fascinating. Fujio—her name includes the name of a purple flower, *Fuji* (wisteria)—is heartless and vain; she is an evil woman who plots against the protagonist's half brother. She appears in the novel with an English version of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of Illustrious Greeks and Romans*, and her sensuous beauty and domineering personality is often depicted as "Cleopatra." Educated at a new Westernized school, Fujio distinctly belies the traditional feminine role of self-sacrifice and submissiveness to men:

Nothing is as miserable as a woman who is determined to serve a man; Fujio lamented inwardly. These eyes, these sleeves, these poems and songs, are not the equals of pots and pans. In time, described as "practical," a woman—a beautiful woman—disgraces herself and is dreadfully insulted. (*Gubijinso*, 101)

Instead of "serving men," Fujio makes men serve her. As the peremptory ruler, she takes all the expressions of the "Wicked Woman" on herself. Her long black hair is described as a "spider web" "waiting to entangle men." She says to her lover, "I'll run after you like Kiyohime." In addition, Fujio is a "fire-horse" woman. The Chinese astrological system (the twelve zodiac signs) is also in use in Japan, although Japan puts a slightly different interpretation on it. A representative example is the "fire-horse" woman; Japanese women who were born in this year (once every sixty years) are said to be dangerous, headstrong, and deadly to men. Fujio is a fusion of the Japanese (Kiyohime and Fire-Horse woman) and the Western (Cleopatra) versions of the evil woman. We should also note a change in the men's attitude. In this novel, Fujio's lover is described as a dapper but weak-willed man. He never resists Fujio while she trifles with his feelings. Here, the gender-based relationship of power is distorted just as in the fin-de-siècle European novels; whereas Japanese stories of the evil women had never depicted this inversion of power. Thus the Japanese "Wicked Woman" begins to take on certain aspects of the "Femme Fatale."

Sanshiro, another work of Sôseki, also features a mystifying young woman who wraps an unsophisticated young man around her little finger. Mineko is also the exemplar of the new generation. Sôseki told his disciple Morita Sôhei that the inspiration for Mineko came from the character Felicitas in Hermann Sudermann's novel *Es War* (*The Undying Past*, 1894); he called the characters "Unconscious Hypocrites." The young male protagonist of Soseki's novel, Sanshiro, compares Mineko to the female portraits by

the French painter Jean Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805).

A few days before, Sanshiro's aesthetics teacher had shown the class some portraits by Greuze. All women painted by this artist, he explained, wore richly voluptuous expressions. Voluptuous! There was no other way to describe her eyes at that moment. They were trying to tell him something, something voluptuous, something that appealed directly to the senses. (*Sanshiro*, 66)

Although Greuze's works are, if anything, sentimental, Sanshiro picks out the traits of the femme fatale in his portraits. Therefore, Mineko is perceived as a westernized femme fatale: her appearance also changes from that of the traditional Japanese beauty. A painter depicts Mineko as follows:

The usual Japanese woman has an Utamaro-style or some such face that's all right for woodblock prints but doesn't look good on canvas. Satomi's sister, though, and Nonomiya's, could be painted. I'm planning to do a life-size painting of Mineko holding up a round fan and facing into the sunlight with some woods in the background. A Western folding-fan would be an affectation, but a round Japanese fan will be novel and interesting. (*Sanshiro*, 127)

To close my paper, I will examine a short novel of Shiga Naoya's, *Kare to Muttsu Ue no Onna* (*The woman six years older*, 1909).

The girl in the book is described as a femme fatale: she knows well “*how to play a love scene*,” and tells the man “Don't fall in love with me seriously; I won't with you.” The author describes her “pointless cruelty” in letting the young boys fall for her. The male protagonist is aware of this character of hers, and yet is charmed by it. He decides to give her a decorative tobacco pipe, with inlaid works depicting Tamamo no Mae.

He watched the superb work in fascination for a while. And he thought that it would go well with the tall, big-eyed, long-nosed girl, whose cast of countenance was *rich*, rather than beautiful. (Shiga, 188)

Here again, the Japanese wicked woman (Tamamo no Mae) is westernized: the appearance of the heroine is far from the ideal Japanese beauty, but she represents a new idea of beauty: being *rich* (this English word is merely transliterated in the novel). For the protagonist, the girl's appeal is nothing else but her westernized, femme-fatale-like

behavior.

The representations of the Wicked Woman have thus had various forms in Japan . They are closely related with foreign literatures and cultures: Qing cheng, Da ji, and the Femme fatale. The Exoticism provided by the Cultural Other helps us to clarify the meaning of these figures. As the “Wicked Women” are the objects of the complicated male desire, these figures show us an ambivalent curiosity, longing for as well as fear of, Women, both the gendered Other, and the Cultural Other.

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