

# Women in Love and Hate in 1960s Japan: Re-reading Ariyoshi Sawako's *The Doctor's Wife*

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## Introduction

1. Throughout much of the twentieth century, in both the prewar and postwar eras, the perfect family in Japan was hegemonically posited on the presence of a woman who—either as wife or mother—was required to suppress or erase her desire. For the male, on the contrary, taking a 'concubine'—or entering into a similar relationship with a woman who was not his legal wife—was *de rigueur* in that it announced to the world not merely sexual potency, but, also economic and social masculine success.<sup>[1]</sup>
2. Women's desire, however, did not dissipate at the whim of dominant male ideology. Modern Japanese narrative, for example, is replete with accounts of women who defy that whim. Considerable attention has been given to post-war women writers, including Kono Taeko (1926–2015), Yamada Eimi (b. 1959) and, more recently, Kanehara Hitomi (b. 1983), who provide explicit accounts of women expressing their sexual desire. Nevertheless, even less overt texts provide insights into the desires of women and the expression of passions that flagrantly violate masculinist norms. Ariyoshi Sawako (1931–1984), one of the most popular writers of 1960s and 1970s Japan, retreats from the explicit narrative strategies preferred by Kono Taeko who was Ariyoshi's senior by five years. The younger woman, nevertheless, also provides an unequivocal representation of what is hegemonically regarded as 'illegitimate' feminine desire in her work. I will argue that this desire, which we might regard as an expression of Judith Butler's 'trouble,'<sup>[2]</sup> the discord that arises when women resist mainstream norms, contributes to the fragmentation of the hegemonic Japanese family. This is a family constructed through the morbid dehumanisation of women who are subject to savage punishment for aspiring to construct a sexual identity for themselves.
3. The discussion that follows specifically probes alternate economies of desire in relations between women in one 'perfect' Japanese family through a revisionist reading of Ariyoshi's 1966 best-seller, *Hanaoka Seishu no tsuma* (The Wife of Hanaoka Seishu).<sup>[3]</sup> This narrative features the conflict that arises between a mother-in-law, Otsugi, and daughter-in-law, Kae, both of whom strive for the attention of the eponymous husband and son. This husband and son is Hanaoka Seishu, a historical figure who, in 1802, was the first medical practitioner in the world successfully to administer a general anaesthetic. In Ariyoshi's novel, this procedure is developed through trials that leave the health of those involved significantly compromised. These fictional trial patients are the doctor's mother and wife, both of whom offer their bodies so that the untested anaesthesia compound can be administered to human subjects.

## Mothers- and daughters-in-law

4. *The Wife of Hanaoka Seishu* is often read as a *bidan*, a beautiful moral tale, of women's sacrifice and devotion and there is a certain justification for this. Drawing on the work of Stephen Dodd and his discussion of *Kokoro* (1914; tr. *Kokoro: A Novel*, 1967) by Natsume Soseki (1867–1916),<sup>[4]</sup> I will focus

instead on the triangular relationship that operates in Ariyoshi's novel between two women, Otsugi and Kae, and one man, Hanaoka. Common interpretations regard the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflict narrated by Ariyoshi as the 'natural' outcome, featured also in Zhang Yimou's 1991 film, *Raise the Red Lantern*, of women living in close domestic quarters. I reject this approach, to adopt, instead, a similar analytic position to that taken by Dodd who, rather than interpreting the often discussed K/Sensei/Ojosan relationship in Soseki's *Kokoro* as two men—K and Sensei—competing for the same women—Ojosan—invokes Rene Girard's theory of homoerotic triangular relations,<sup>[5]</sup> as interpreted by Eve Sedgwick.<sup>[6]</sup> In doing so, Dodd reads the threesome as a homoerotic attraction between the two men that is merely facilitated by the woman. My discussion will introduce a gender inversion to Dodd's interpretation of Girard that permits me to investigate Ariyoshi's novel as a relationship primarily between the two women, Kae and Otsugi, mediated by the male, Seishu. In the discussion that follows, I will adopt the practice often taken in the text of referring to Seishu by his childhood name of Umpei. In examining the relations between the two women in Umpei's life, I will argue that the interaction between Kae and Otsugi is informed by suggestions of homoerotic desire as much as by the popular interpretation of mother- and daughter-in-law rivalry.

5. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflict reading of the text is one of a gentle and virtuous young woman, Kae, who marries into a family where she is constrained by the unreasonable behaviour of her beautiful yet domineering mother-in-law.<sup>[7]</sup> Close reading reveals, however, that far from being dominated, Kae repeatedly transgresses in her relationship with the older woman. As fantasy writer Ken Liu notes, 'historical fiction certainly has been used to comment on contemporary issues,'<sup>[8]</sup> and we can read *Hanaoka Seishu*, too, as having relevance to 1960s Japan. Ikeuchi Osamu, for example, notes that 1966, the publication year of *Hanaoka Seishu no tsuma*, was the year during which young women in miniskirts took to the streets of Japan to reveal in public for the first time parts of the body only previously seen 'by mothers or lovers.'<sup>[9]</sup> The year 1966 was also a Year of the Fire Horse (*hinoeuma*), an event that occurs on a 60-year cycle. Since it is said that girls born during this year will never marry, Japanese families did their best to avoid pregnancies in 1966, leading to a dramatic fall in the birth rate.<sup>[10]</sup> From the early 1950s, however, Japan had experienced an accelerating birth-rate decline.<sup>[11]</sup> This was irrefutable evidence that young Japanese women were collectively resisting compliance with the hegemonic norms of *ryosai kenbo*, good wife and wise mother, the paradigm that was the sole normative role for prewar women and which, Koyama Shizuko explains, continued to operate well into the postwar era.<sup>[12]</sup> The falling birth rate signalled an overt interrogation by young postwar women of the absurd masculinist demand made by the good wife and wise mother paradigm that they give their all for the family. In this respect, Kae's Edo-era transgressions and her questioning of her role gives her much more in common with her mini-skirted descendants of the 1960s than a cursory glance at the text might suggest. Rather than reading her as a girl dominated by her unreasonable mother-in-law, I support Omoto Izumi's reading of Kae as a rather aggressive, self-centred and self-indulgent young woman.<sup>[13]</sup> In a world that restrains women, these are not necessarily negative traits and we might applaud this 'bad girl,' to borrow Jan Bardsley's and Laura Miller's term,<sup>[14]</sup> for her determination to assert her desires, excessive though these occasionally are.
6. Both Kae and Otsugi are married and superficially 'perform' as good wives and wise mothers. There is nothing contradictory about Kae's aggressiveness in this context, however, for the subterranean theme of *The Wife of Hanaoka Seishu* (hereafter, *Hanaoka Seishu*) is one of women resisting, while appearing to comply with, the dominant narrative of passive, asexual femininity. In contrast to this narrative, and although unable to completely free themselves of the constraints of the social order of the day, both Kae and Otsugi actively construct gender and sexual identities—which, as we will see, display homoerotic overtones—that contest the hegemonic role of either mother or wife. From this perspective we might note that while Kae displays an admirable devotion to her genius medical-researcher husband, her expressions of affection towards this man fall far short of the unrestrained intoxication she displays upon seeing the beauty of his mother, Otsugi. Before further discussing these matters, however, I will provide some background on Ariyoshi Sawako and on the *Hanaoka Seishu* narrative itself.

## Ariyoshi and her text

7. Ariyoshi Sawako was born in Wakayama City on 10 January 1931. After leaving Tokyo Christian Women's University, she became active in a coterie group with future literary figures Sono Ayako (b. 1931), Miura Shumon (b. 1926), and Yoshiyuki Jun'nosuke (1924–1994). Her 1956 text, 'Jiuta' (The Ballad), was nominated for a number of awards, including a 1956 Akutagawa Prize.<sup>[15]</sup> Her literary activity, however, extended well beyond novelistic narrative. She produced non-fiction works and reportage, in addition to a plethora of dramatic material.
8. Ariyoshi Sawako was one of the first of the new postwar generation of university-educated young women to gain publication success and was lauded as a 'young woman writer of talent.' While the title is innocuous enough, Miyauchi Atsuko has wryly observed that no emerging young male writer was ever labelled this way.<sup>[16]</sup> The *bundan*, the highly masculinised literary community of the time, nevertheless had reservations about Ariyoshi that did not necessarily result from perceptions of individual inadequacy on her part. Unprepared for the emergence of a cohort of postwar educated young women writers, of whom Ariyoshi was one of the first representatives, the male-centric literary world found it difficult to acknowledge the talents of this group. Often 'at the mercy of' the mass media of the time,<sup>[17]</sup> young women such as Ariyoshi could be the subject of reporting strategies which, in 1972, were assessed even by the relatively conservative commentator, Miyoshi Yukio, as 'journalistically trite.'<sup>[18]</sup> This is not to say that critical reception was without recognition of Ariyoshi's extraordinary capacities. Yamamoto Kenkichi, Shinoda Hajime, Okuno Takeo, Senuma Shigeki and Thomas J. Rimer all acknowledged her literary prowess.<sup>[19]</sup> Translator, Mildred Tahara, could even provocatively suggest that Ariyoshi's texts surpassed those of woman writers of the stature of Kurahashi Yumiko (b. 1935), Oba Minako (b. 1930), and Kono Takeo.<sup>[20]</sup> There is no doubt that Ariyoshi's writing lacks overt signals of sexual expression, such as the slabs of meat that feature in Kono's 'Ari takaru' (1964, *Ants Swarm*) and which are used to salve the wounds that result from the fishing-rod facilitated (sado)-masochistic sexual encounters that ensue between the husband and wife in that text. Nevertheless, *Hanaoka Seishu* most certainly demonstrates Ariyoshi's capacity to probe the visceral depths of women's desires. In spite of the ambivalence of commentators towards her work, Ariyoshi had a devoted reading public from the time of the 1959 publication of *Ki no Kawa* (1959, *The River Ki*), her first long novel. This was evidenced by the outpouring of grief when she died in her sleep at the relatively young age of 53.<sup>[21]</sup> She is arguably one of postwar Japan's most important literary figures.
9. In 1959, Ariyoshi accepted a Rockefeller scholarship to study for a year at Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers, New York. While in New York, she was told of the achievements of the Japanese doctor, Hanaoka Seishu, the first medical practitioner, as noted, successfully to administer a general anaesthetic. Hanaoka was a native of Wakayama, Ariyoshi's home prefecture. Surprised that she had never heard of the man who had clearly achieved fame among the global medical community, Ariyoshi applied her characteristically meticulous research skills upon her return to Japan in order to discover what she could about Hanaoka and his life.<sup>[22]</sup> The result is a book which demonstrates that, far from being a perfect model, even the feudal era Japanese family could be characterised by conflict and fragmentation.

## Unauthorised desires in *The Wife of Hanaoka Seishu*

10. As noted, *Hanaoka Seishu* concerns the mother, Otsugi, and Kae, the eponymous wife. We have seen that, in terms of 1960s' discourse, Ikeda identified Kae as the Edo-era equivalent of the miniskirted girl. Similarly, then, Otsugi is surely a late-Edo era version of the postwar *kyoiku mama* (education mother), obsessed with her child's success in the world. Kae's marriage to Hanaoka is result of strategic

manoeuvring by Otsugi, eager to connect her low status son, who has been despatched to Osaka for several years to study medicine, with the relative prestige of the young woman's family. Kae marries Umpei in his absence, a not uncommon practice of the time. While other young women may or may not have found this unpalatable, for Kae, separation from the groom is largely irrelevant. For, rather than Umpei, it is his mother Otsugi, whom she adores. In fact, the text opens with the child Kae in a relationship of *kaimami*, literally 'peeking through the fence,' ~~to~~ at the beautiful wife of the uncouth local doctor, Umpei's father. This expression of the devoted gaze of the female child is the beginning of a complex relationship between the girl and the older woman, one that we might divide into two distinct stages. The first occupies the time between Kae's initial sighting of Otsugi and the three years that Kae is resident in the household as the bride of the absent son. The second occupies the remainder of her married life until the death of the once worshipped mother-in-law whom she eventually comes to loathe.

11. The first stage of the relationship between Kae and Otsugi has a mutually affectionate, consolatory element of physical attraction. Intimations of such an attraction are apparent from the opening pages of the text. Kae is a self-willed child who insists as an eight-year-old that her nurse take her to see Otsugi, the provincial doctor's wife whose astonishing beauty is feted far and wide. As Kae grows older, she develops an obsessive interest in Otsugi whom she worships from afar. The girl's joy knows no bounds when a marriage proposal comes from the Hanaoka family, for her dream is to become the hand-maiden of the captivating older woman. While her father initially rejects the proposal, readers are told that it is 'largely owing to Kae's determination' that the intricacies of the arrangement are finally resolved and that Kae gets to have her own way.[\[23\]](#)
12. So highly charged is Kae's girlhood adulation of the beautiful wife of the rather coarse local physician that in Otsugi's presence she feels transfixed by the perfection of the older woman. In a manner not unlike that of the great literary amorist, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro (1886–1965), giving an account of an object of sexual desire, Ariyoshi narrates the girl's feelings as follows:

To Kae, [Otsugi] seemed divine, like the Kannon Bosatsu with an azure halo over her head. Kae's gaze was fixed on her alone and could not be diverted. She also thought that Otsugi's dignity was a manifestation of her superior intelligence.[\[24\]](#)

There is a clear intimation of sexual energy between the pair for, as Otsugi turns towards Kae, the younger woman feels as though 'the tip of a sword [has] been pointed at her forehead.'[\[25\]](#) Once she leaves her own family to become the bride of the absent son, the object of Kae's desire remains her future husband's mother. Ariyoshi tells the reader that at the 'first crossroad of womanhood [Kae] was still possessed by Otsugi's beauty. The bridegroom, Umpei, never came into her consideration.'[\[26\]](#) Sleeping beside her mother-in-law on her first night in the unfamiliar household, she feels neither 'estranged' nor 'unhappy.' On the contrary, in an almost post-coital state, 'she was completely tranquil.'[\[27\]](#)

13. The sense of tranquillity felt by the young bride suggests that, following Kae's marriage, she is accepted fully as a member of the Hanaoka household where she is gradually initiated by Otsugi into the family and its customs. There is no doubt that Kae is admired by Otsugi. It was the older woman who sought the younger to be the wife of her son, and there are a number of occasions in the text in which Hanaoka's mother demonstrates a deep affection for the girl.

I am called 'Mother' by you though you are not really my child. Yet I feel you are as dear to me as my own daughters. Our relationship has deep roots. It was probably decreed by fate.[\[28\]](#)

In other words, in spite of her superior position in the household hierarchy, Otsugi is not necessarily a woman to exercise self-indulgent power against her daughter-in-law. And, indeed, the relationship between the two remains harmonious, ominously Utopian even, until the return of Otsugi's eldest son, now also Kae's husband.



14. The affection that characterises this early stage of the relationship between Otsugi and Kae partly results from Kae's initial compliance with the *Oraimono* teachings that were still the principal source of behavioural instruction for daughters of the educated classes.<sup>[29]</sup> It was a time when the well-tutored bride clearly understood that she was subject firstly to the instructions of her father-in-law and husband, and also to the mother of her husband. The ineffectualness of the father and the absence of the husband in this case leaves the bride more than happy to follow the lead of her adored mother-in-law. With respect to education, Ariyoshi explains that in addition to her household duties, 'Kae learnt etiquette, reading and writing, and the Japanese customs that were part of her family heritage.'<sup>[30]</sup> Such a regime undoubtedly schooled Kae in the submissiveness appropriate to the wife and daughter-in-law that she would become. With Umpei nowhere in sight, the self-centred Kae was happy to defer and there was little friction between the pair.

### The home-coming

15. The young doctor's homecoming, however, immediately disrupts this harmonious state of affairs. In physical proximity to Umpei, the egotistical tendencies that enabled Kae to push her reluctant father into agreeing to a marriage that does not necessarily benefit her own family come into play once more. As a result, almost overnight, the idyllic bond that nurtured both women is severed.
16. The young man's appearance is predictably met with celebration among his parents and siblings, including the sisters whose lives are bound to weaving the cloth that funds Umpei's education expenses. This exultant rejoicing leaves the new family member, Kae, feeling slighted and forlorn. Her sense of alienation, however, quickly becomes a simmering rage which appears to derive as much from the loss of her revered mother-in-law's attention as it does from being unable to fully join the family welcome for the home-coming son with whom she is not yet acquainted. The tension generated by Umpei's return heightens as night falls and Kae is excluded entirely from the company of her husband on his first evening home. While it is true that Otsugi does, intentionally or otherwise, close Kae out of the intimacies that transpire that night, it is perhaps to be expected that the appearance of the son upon whom she dotes would reactivate memories of the family as it was before the entry of the bride. An obedient daughter-in-law, one less self-centred than Kae, would indeed have some expectation of excitement on the mother's part and accordingly demonstrate a modicum of restraint.
17. Kae, however, reacts to the family's and particularly to Otsugi's joy with a highly unseemly display. Even leaving aside her hegemonically subordinate position in the Tokugawa-era family hierarchy, the inappropriateness of her behaviour far outweighs that of the older woman. Her petulant ego dented and adamant that she is wronged, Kae regards Otsugi's request that mother and son spend the night in the same room—without herself as the bride—as a full-scale declaration of war. Refusing to concede the older woman private time with her long-gone first-born, Kae responds with smouldering fury when Otsugi, after despatching her daughter-in-law to bed, remains chatting with her son. The intensity of Kae's response is palpable:

In the silence of the night [Otsugi's] low-pitched tittering could be heard from where Kae sat on her cold bed. It was certainly the laughter of a happy mother who could not restrain her joy on the return of dearest son. But to Kae the sounds were lascivious.

At that moment Kae conceived an intense hatred for Otsugi.<sup>[31]</sup>

An inversion perhaps of her own desire, Kae's anger furthermore reads Otsugi's devotion to Umpei not merely as the reasonable affection of a loving mother, but as a perversely incestuous sexual attraction to the young man.

18. The irrational nature of Kae's response is clearly implied in Ariyoshi's narratorial acknowledgement of

'the laughter of a happy mother' united with her child, a joy accentuated in terms of the masculine discourses of the time by the fact that the child is male. Interestingly, 'to Kae,' Otsugi's voice is 'lascivious.' This is not an authorial comment. Ariyoshi clearly ascribes this response to Kae alone. In other words, Kae regards the older woman as a sexual rival, a highly transgressive declaration for an unblemished virgin bride. On that point, there is a veiled suggestion in the *Hanaoka Seishu* text of sexual experience on Kae's part. As a provincial samurai, her father was obligated to provide hospitality for travelling *daimyo*, or lord/s, who passed through the area, hospitality that included sexual relief. Although not explicitly stated, the possibility is canvassed that it was the girl, Kae, who provided that relief and who thus has prior knowledge of heterosexual physical relations.

19. Although the declaration of battle comes from Kae, Otsugi herself is not without enmity. For each woman has misjudged the other. Kae's initial devotion results in Otsugi's misreading the girl's tenacious ego. Thus, if Kae mistakenly thought that she would forever remain the focus of her mother-in-law's attention, Otsugi, too, incorrectly believed that she could depend on the unquestioning devotion of her son's bride. The demonstration of personal determinations and unauthorised desires outside the parameters each has established for the other unsettles both parties equally and quickly leads to a total relationship breakdown. And while both appear to wish to monopolise Umpei, this desire comes as much from the desire of the discarded lover to wound the other party as it does from genuine feeling for Umpei himself.
20. The intensity of Kae's ego results in her renouncing her affiliation with her mother-in-law in less than twenty-four hours. Her hatred of Otsugi, comparable as noted to the wrath of an abandoned lover, is not the result of a series of insufferable slights that accumulate over time. This hatred arises as an immediate and visceral response. It also features a strong element of narcissism. Having experienced financial decline, the Hanaoka family are unable to publicly celebrate the marriage of the son. In spite of her awareness of the difficulties that have prevented this, Kae makes the irrational claim 'that only Otsugi's malice prevented a wedding reception from taking place.'[\[32\]](#)
21. The Tokugawa era was characterised by the observance of didactic Confucian concepts such as *kanzen cho'aku* (reward virtue, punish vice). In his famous critique of these and similar principles, Tsubouchi Shoyo (1859–1935) ensured that the modern reader would regard the Confucian obligations that characterised the Tokugawa era with disdain.[\[33\]](#) And there is no doubt that works such as *Nanso Satomi Hakkenden* (1812–1842; *The Eight Dog Chronicle*),[\[34\]](#) a key text that Shoyo had in his sights, are replete with characters who sacrifice individual desire for the greater benefit of the family, lord or state in a manner that contemporary readers find irrationally oppressive. Nevertheless, a degree of compromise is necessary to ensure cohesion in any group and it would not have been unreasonable for Kae, especially given her adoration of and devotion to Otsugi, to demonstrate some patience upon Umpei's return. In fact, there is an almost sado-masochistic element to her focused disregard of duty that generates a perverse desire to completely break with and visit absolute punishment on Otsugi for abandoning her for the son. In doing so, of course, she also punishes herself in the sense that the relationship that was so important to her and which gave her such satisfaction is eventually, through her own actions as much as Otsugi's, irreparably damaged. I argue that the intensity of passion expended in this respect is a deflection of the sexual desire that neither woman is legitimately permitted to express. We can regard this suppression of desire as the fountainhead of a certain variety of family fragmentation.
22. The consummation of the marriage of Kae and Umpei occurs when Otsugi directs the younger woman to go to Umpei's room. Recalling this, Kae reflects that 'it would have been proper for Otsugi to give her own room over to the couple and to have spent the night with her daughters.'[\[35\]](#) The implications of Kae's logic are quite startling. Not only does she require the mother-in-law to vacate her quarters to facilitate the couple's sexual exchange, there is an expectation that Umpei will come, in a manner similar to the *yobai*—night crawling—of a Heian era (894–1185) lover, to the boudoir that Kae aspires to appropriate. The only person undisturbed in this innovative plan is Kae herself. This is in spite of the fact that, as the daughter-in-law, she has the least status of any member of the household. There is a

wilfulness informing Kae's mindset here that is totally at odds with the discourses that operate upon daughters-in-law of the time, discourses that Kae appears determined to subvert.

23. The animosity that develops between Kae and Otsugi may well be partially the result of traditional rivalries between the woman whose body brings the son into the world and the woman with whom that son will sexually couple. The physical proximity which is an inevitable consequence of the two women and one man living under the same small roof cannot but generate a tension involving a range of passions, including occasional acrimony and rancour. However, the unsullied and ostensibly mutually supportive nature of the association that existed prior to Umpei's entry to the household suggests that other elemental processes are generating the ferocious animosity that consumes the women following the appearance of the male into their collective lives. The bride's immediate and passionate denial of her mother-in-law, after the devotion she has previously shown towards the older woman, suggests motives that transcend the usual internecine rivalry of the mother and daughter-in-law. Insights concerning the cause of the rivalry that comes to plague Kae and Otsugi are provided in Stephen Dodd's discussion of the triangular relationship featured in Natsume Soseki's iconic novel, *Kokoro*.

### Woman's desire mediated by the man

24. In his article entitled 'The Significance of Bodies in Soseki's *Kokoro*', [36] Dodd examines the valorisation of homoeroticism and the new libidinal economy that emerged in Meiji-era Japan (1968–1912). Moving from this point, Dodd reads *Kokoro* through the body philosophy of Elizabeth Grosz, bringing this reading to bear on the triangular relationship which is a feature of many Soseki texts. Dodd cites Eve Sedgwick's summary of René Girard's 'influential inquiry into triangular desire' in Miguel de Cervantes' (1547–1616) *Don Quixote*, which 'locates a pattern of dependency between the desiring subject, the object of desire, and the all-important mediator without whose presence the other two cannot properly be said to exist.' [37] The *Hanaoka Seishu* text also features a triangular relationship. While Dodd's interest is in relationships featuring a woman, Ojosan, and two homoerotically attracted men, Sensei and K, I read the relationship presented in Ariyoshi's text as one involving a man, Umpei, and two homoerotically attracted women, Otsugi and Kae.
25. By transferring the Girard analysis to the threesome in the Hanaoka household, we can see Kae as the desiring subject, Otsugi as the desired object, and Umpei as the mediator without whose presence, or absence, the other two are unable to maintain a relationship. Where *Kokoro* presents, as Dodd argues, a case of 'two males working out strong emotions for each other through the mediation of the female,' [38] the triangle in the Hanaoka household involves Kae and Otsugi working out strong emotions for each other through the mediation of Umpei. We have noted that the nature of the bond shared between the two women prior to Umpei's return points to the presence, even if rather coyly expressed, of a homoerotic element. Borrowing from Dodd's analysis, we are then able to read the dissonant passions that consume the two women following Umpei's arrival in the household as a kind of homoerotic antagonism, as much as enmity invoked by competition around a desired male.
26. The use of oblique or even misleading markers of the nature of human relationships is a strategy evident in other Ariyoshi texts. In her discussion of 'Jiuta' (The Ballad), for example, Suzuki Hideko points out that in this early Akutagawa Prize-nominated work Ariyoshi's depiction of one human emotion in a character can often mean the existence of the opposition emotion. [39] 'The Ballad' tells the story of a *samisen* playing father who becomes estranged from his recently married daughter, also his former apprentice, when she informs him of her intention to leave Japan for America with her new husband. Suzuki argues that the daughter's expression of independence from her father is, in fact, a sign of her dependence on the old man, while the father's refusal to acknowledge the girl provides insights into the depth of his affection for his daughter. Kae and Otsugi's bitter enmity is similarly capable of being interpreted as a powerful attraction. While the conflict between the two women may not be an openly

homoerotic dispute, like the tension between Sensei and K, it is certainly informed by intimations of same sex desire.

27. The bitterness that arises between Kae and Otsugi, thus, is redolent of the rancour felt by former lovers. Such rancour explains, for example, the 180-degree turn we witness in the relationship at the time of the initial meeting between the two women and Umpei. Kae is on the verandah and is the last to realise that her husband has returned to the family home. By the time she enters the house, Umpei is already surrounded by other members of his family. Otsugi, who until this point has given nothing but positive support to Kae, gives the girl a 'quick piercing look,'<sup>[40]</sup> and peremptorily dismisses the young wife when she belatedly brings hot water for her husband to warm his rain-chilled feet. It is this rejection, in addition to Otsugi's monopolisation tactics, that motivates Kae's initial antagonism and leads to the bitter enmity that marks the relationship for the remainder of Otsugi's life. The overt justification of Kae's jealousy is Otsugi's attempt to establish her ascendancy with her son. However, her anger at being peremptorily rejected by the woman to whom she has been so devoted, and whose focus of attention is now abruptly returned to the son who had been absent for so long, is also a factor operating in the development of the poisonous relations that result between the pair.
28. Otsugi, too, feels betrayed at being abandoned by the girl who once adored her so. While the older woman had previously declared that the couple's relationship was 'decreed' by fate, she must now endure the ordeal of the young woman in whom she put her trust being revealed as unfaithful and disloyal, promiscuous even. In the beginning, Kae acknowledges that 'Umpei had not occupied an important place in her heart.'<sup>[41]</sup> Nevertheless, although not conventionally good-looking, her husband has a youthfulness and virility to which she responds with her body, so that 'now that his presence was real, he looked like the husband for whom she had been longing.'<sup>[42]</sup> Lodged beneath Otsugi's desire to intervene in the development of a relationship between her son and his new wife is a sense of betrayal that the devotee once so adoring has found another figure to venerate. And this mutual sense of rejection brings a desire for revenge on the part of both parties.

### **Suppressed desire, modes of destruction and revenge**

29. We might pause for a moment to contemplate the consequences of the absurd situation whereby adult women in Japan and in other places were once hegemonically required to be asexual and condemned as promiscuous for displays of desire. The novels of English writer, Jane Austen (1775–1817), for example, are as much as anything else marriage advice manuals accompanied by calls for caution in the face of lust. Peculiarly, Austen's novels manage to perform this function without any reference whatsoever to sex. In Ariyoshi's novel, the oppressive attitude towards women which results in the discursive inability of either Kae or Otsugi to articulate desire, generates, in fact, a kind of abject destructiveness. In addition to driving each woman to inflict emotional and psychological suffering upon the other, this results in their also engaging in bizarre acts of psychological self-destruction that inflicts considerable suffering upon themselves. Eventually this emotional self-destructiveness intensifies to become physical self-destruction. When Umpei's experiments proceed to the stage at which he requires human trial subjects to test the anaesthetic properties of the chemical compounds that he has thus far only tested on family pets, each woman willingly volunteers. In other words, each stakes her life in a deadly game of one-up[wo]manship rivalry. I would argue that it is the denial of the right to express legitimate desire that drives these women both to inflict suffering on the one whom they had previously adored and to engage in a masochistic form of self-harm that inflicts suffering on themselves.
30. The suggestion of the two women donating their live bodies for use by Umpei comes after the doctor has successfully sedated a cat. His perceptive mother reads his thoughts as he ponders the possibility of a similar experiment on a human subject. Approaching the couple in the intimacy of their bedchamber, Otsugi offers her own body to her son's research. Kae, unsettled by her mother-in-law's superior



perspicacity in matters relating to Umpei's desires, falsely declares that she had 'decided long ago'[43] to offer herself for research purposes. The pair enter into a sparring match in which each attempts to humiliate the other by calling attention to various signs of the other's discursive abjection, that is, to the way in which the masculinist society of the time held the woman's body in contempt. In Kae's case, this is the failure to produce an heir, a boy child. In Otsugi's case, the issue is age, as 'under the guise of self-debasement, Kae daringly called her an old woman, a calculated challenge to Otsugi's pride in her youthful looks.'[44] We might point out that, until relatively recently Kae had been the greatest admirer of these looks.

31. I have argued above for a homoerotic attraction between Otsugi and Kae. This attraction, however, can only be expressed through the mediation of Umpei who expects the women to comply with the roles assigned to them by a society that privileges the male. When they argue, he intervenes. This intervention regrettably is unrelated to any anxiety that involvement in his trials might result in permanent disability or death to one or both of the women. Rather it is to express his anger at their implied lack of confidence in his efficacy as a medical practitioner. He registers no concern at the serious risks which, as a man of science, he is undoubtedly aware are associated with the project. Eventually, his professional pride appeased by their overt devotion, he agrees to engage both for experimentation purposes. (Umpei ultimately declines, however, to administer an effective dose to his mother.)
32. The novel makes clear that, even in terms of the masculine discourses of the day, Umpei's disinterest in the welfare of his enthusiastic subjects, an expression of the personal obsessions that drive his project, is extreme. In *The Waiting Years* (*Onna zaka*, 1949–1957; trans 1971), by Enchi Fumiko (1905–1986), for example, the excesses of Yukitomo, the protagonist's sexually profligate husband, draw the condemnation of his colleagues. Similarly, in this novel, the doctor's former student, Ryoan, is horrified by news that the doctor's wife and mother have been engaged as subjects for Umpei's experiments. It seems, however, that the intense nature of the triangular relationship between himself, the woman who bore him, and the woman who bore his child, has desensitised the doctor to the extent that he is incapable of responding to their humanity. On the contrary, he appears to regard both his mother and his wife as expendable. It is this attitude which leads to what is perhaps the novel's most famous scene in which Umpei is condemned by his sister who, referring to the conflict between Kae and Otsugi, declares that 'this sort of tension among females is to the advantage of every male.'[45]
33. I have noted Stephen Dodd's invocation of Eve Sedgwick in his discussion of the homoerotic attraction between K and Sensei in the novel, *Kokoro*. Sedgwick, of course, is known for her theory of homosociality.[46] This is the affiliation of individual males with other males in order to profile themselves as active 'men' in a society that greatly privileges men over women. As a result, through a process that Sedgwick refers to as 'the traffic in women,' women become objects with no purpose other than to satisfy male desire. Umpei's sister made her fictional comment over a century and a half before Sedgwick's theory became known. Given the way that both Kae and Otsugi become little more than ciphers through which Umpei seeks to perfect his scientific technique, it is likely that, had she been familiar with Sedgwick's ideas, she would have couched her comments in terms of the paradigm of homosociality.
34. The site of Hanaoka's project invokes a strong sense of corporal menace. The experiment is conducted in the recovery room for the various animals used by Umpei in his quest for knowledge of the anaesthesia process. These past experiments have left traces of morbidity and putrefaction, for the room is filled with:

[a] variety of odours: animal, medicinal, fishy, and the stench of vomit, blood, and decay – a suffocating combination, like the reek of dead bodies.[47]

The sacrificial tendencies of the two women, and their desire to martyr themselves to Umpei's cause give them an oblique association with the atmosphere of the room. Kae is moved to wonder if the flesh of

Otsugi, the first experimental subject, 'would soon be mingled with the other odours.'<sup>[48]</sup>

35. This presence of thanatos nonetheless heightens the eros between the women. During experiments, Umpei regularly checks the patients to ascertain their level of consciousness, an act that further debases the women involved. On one occasion when Kae observes Umpei's experiment on her mother-in-law, her husband applies pressure to 'the most sensitive part'<sup>[49]</sup> of his mother's body. The Hironaka and Kostant English translation of *Hanaoka Seishu* does not state directly which body part is involved. However, the original Japanese text cites the *uchimata* or *uchimomo*, both meaning inner thigh,<sup>[50]</sup> an expression which in 1967 Japan may well have been a euphemism for more intimate sites. The inner thigh, previously modestly concealed and only known by the mothers and lovers of young women before—recalling Ikeda's words cited above—being revealed by the miniskirt two centuries later, is nonetheless intimate enough.<sup>[51]</sup>
36. The knowledge of her husband's investigation of this area of Otsugi's body becomes the catalyst for another irrational attack from Kae. Convinced that her mother-in-law is aware of her son's actions and is feigning sleep the better to enjoy the experience, Kae once more imputes a sexual motive to her mother-in-law which better explains her own desires and thus denies any opportunity for reconciliation between the pair. Where there could be collaboration there is only conflict that leaves both women vulnerable to the abjectifying power of the masculinist discursive forces in which each is enmeshed. It is significant that, following her participation in Umpei's experiment, Kae gradually loses her sight.<sup>[52]</sup> This is perhaps the expected outcome in the case of a young woman who has been unable to recognise opportunities for alliances into which she might have entered and that might have promoted some form of relationship other than the jarring fragmentation that marks the Hanaoka household. We cannot, however, attribute blame solely to Kae for this. Given the tightly controlled masculine social structures within which both women must operate, their actions—including Kae's failure to 'see'—should not come as any surprise.

## Conclusion

37. Ariyoshi's text is conventionally read by male critics as a *bidan* of feminine duty, while also evoking interpretations of mother/daughter-in-law rivalry. While such an interpretation conforms to discursive masculinist expectations regarding this particular older woman/younger woman relationship, I have argued that this reading does not sufficiently explain the intensity of either the initial adoration or the later hatred that binds the two women, Kae and Otsugi. Inspired by Dodd's interpretation of *Kokoro*, I argue that the intensity that marks the relationship between the two women is rather informed by homoerotic attraction and thwarted love.
38. Kae and Otsugi functioned in a society in which, as Saeki Junko points out, there was no legitimate avenue of expression for the desire of 'respectable' women.<sup>[53]</sup> This was especially the case regarding sexual desire, which created a situation that necessitated women finding outlets for the pent-up emotions that characterised their lives. In the case of Kae and Otsugi, that outlet was the playing out of homoerotic attraction mediated through the absence/presence of the male, Umpei.
39. From her childhood, Kae adored Otsugi, firstly from a distance and then at close range when she went as a bride to Otsugi's own home. During that time a bond developed between the women which, while perhaps not consummated physically, nevertheless had an intensity and mutual devotion well beyond that of any regular mother- and daughter-in-law bond. Paradoxically, it was Umpei's absence that gave their relationship legitimacy and which permitted the bond between the pair to intensify. Once Umpei returned, what had been a mutually consolatory relationship swiftly deteriorated to become instead one beset by the mutual rancour that characterises the perverse link that binds those forsaken in love. The two women then set out on a course of mutual destruction and self-destruction as each vied for the coolly detached attention of the man of science who was their respective husband and son. In the case

of Soseki's trio, the outcome was the suicide of K, an act that cast a pall of guilt over Sensei, the man who betrayed K. In Ariyoshi's novel, there is no sense of guilt on the part of any party. All progress through the text without gaining insight. In the case of Ariyoshi's women, rather than suicide, the tragic outcome is permanent physical damage—Kae being rendered blind—of one of the women involved. As implied above, we might see Kae's blindness as a statement on her inability to 'see' any possibility for a productive rather than bitterly destructive partnership with the other significant woman in Umpei's life. We can also see the actions of both Kae and Otsugi as the inevitable outcome of the weight of the social forces that bore down upon them.

40. In twentieth-century Japan, much energy has been spent by conservative forces lamenting the fragmentation of the family and the collapse of this once putatively unassailable social institution. Ariyoshi's text nevertheless makes clear that any notion of a harmonious family has always been chimeric. In the past the all-encompassing dominance of masculine discourses concerning women and the family has successfully silenced voices that might have interrogated these discourses. The emergence at the beginning of the twentieth century of the 'new' Japanese woman, in the form of the Bluestocking (Seito) collective formed by Hiratsuka Raicho (1886–1971) and her colleagues,<sup>[54]</sup> however, and even prior to that with the activism of women such as Fukuda (Kageyama) Hideko (1865–1927), saw a consistent public contestation of masculine myths. This contestation came at great personal cost to the women involved who could be imprisoned and/or publically condemned and humiliated for their campaigns. Rather than regarding the fragmented family as a recent phenomenon, we might argue that family fragmentation has long operated as a result of the hegemonic discourses that impose unreasonable standards on all family members, especially upon women but also on men. It was these unreasonable standards which saw the Hanaoka family riven by multiple fault lines and charged with destructive tensions that created internal disorder and complete collapse of relations between the two key women in the household. Only when all family members have legitimate outlets for the expression of desire will the fault lines that mark the modern Japanese family cleave and fragmentation become a thing of the past.

## Notes

[1] This behaviour is far from being some relic from a premodern past that refers only to men such as the Kyushu-born, Meiji era (1868–1912) samurai husband from *Onna zaka* (1949–1957; trans 1971 *The Waiting Years*), Enchi Fumiko's classic novel based loosely on the experiences of her maternal grandmother. See Enchi Fumiko, *The Waiting Years*, translated by John Bestor, Tokyo and Palo Alto, California: Kodansha International, 1971. As recently as 1989, the political career of former Prime Minister, Uno Sosuke (1922–1998), was brought undone by claims made by the geisha who was his mistress that he failed to provide her with adequate support. The general consensus was that it was not the issue of his having a relationship with a geisha per se that led to his spectacular demise, but rather the fact that he failed to provide for her in the manner which she—and the members of elite society—expected. See, for example, Mark D. West, *Secrets, Sex and Spectacle: The Rules of Scandal in Japan and the United States*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 276.

[2] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

[3] Ariyoshi Sawako, *Hanaoka Seishu no tsuma* (lit. trans. *The Wife of Hanaoka Seishu*; trans. 1978 Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Kostant as *The Doctor's Wife*), Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1967. (NB: The very original version was in one edition (very unusual as the novel is quite long)—of a literary magazine—in November 1966. So the novel's date of original publication is definitely 1966. Nevertheless, the first actual book version was 1967). The marking of long Japanese vowels is retained when Japanese names are given as Japanese expressions. However, where names have been published, for example in the English translation of Ariyoshi's novel, without marking a long vowel, that format is retained throughout the current discussion.

[4] Natsume Soseki, *Kokoro*, Tokyo: Shueisha bunko, 1991.

[5] René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Leominster, Hertfordshire: Gracewing, 2000.

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University

Press, 1985.

[7] The author herself would have contested this reading. In material she consulted compiled by the Ki Province prefectural residents association, the story of Kae and Otsugi was presented as a *bidan*, story of moral virtue. Ariyoshi commented that she immediately thought to herself, 'I can't imagine that this would have been a tale of moral virtue.' She also noted that she carried the idea for the story in her head for several years before it took form. See Ariyoshi Sawako and Iwaya Daishi, 'Ariyoshi bungaku o kataru,' *Shinkan nyuusu*, 129 (April 1968): 5–11, p. 9.

[8] [Jessica May Lin](http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/q-and-a-ken-liu-on-science-fiction-and-chinese-history/?_r=2), 'Ken Liu on science fiction and Chinese history,' *New York Times*, 2 August 2015. Online: [http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/q-and-a-ken-liu-on-science-fiction-and-chinese-history/?\\_r=2](http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/q-and-a-ken-liu-on-science-fiction-and-chinese-history/?_r=2) (accessed 30 March 2016).

[9] Ikeuchi Osamu, 'Ariyoshi Sawako to "fujokun" o yominaoso: Onna no tame jidai shosetsu,' *Shincho* 45, 17(8) (August 1998): 124–33, p. 133.

[10] Hashimoto Masanori, 'Economics of postwar fertility in Japan,' in *Economics of the Family: Marriage, Children, and Human Capital*, ed. Theodore W. Schultz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 225–54, p. 226.

[11] Ikeuchi Osamu, 'Ariyoshi Sawako to "fujokun" o yominaoso,' p. 226.

[12] Ikeuchi Osamu, 'Ariyoshi Sawako to "fujokun" o yominaoso,' p. 226.

[13] Omoto Izumi, '*Hanaoka Seishu no tsuma* (Ariyoshi Sawako) – Onna no sei no naka de okonawareru aidentiti no kakuritsu,' *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kansho* 52(10) (October, 1987): 149–52, p. 149.

[14] The title of Miller and Bardsley's collection is *Bad Girls of Japan*. See Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, *Bad Girls of Japan*, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[15] Ishihara Shintaro took the *Bungakukai* Prize for 'Taiyo no kisetsu' (Season of the Sun) which also won the 1956 autumn Akutagawa Award. In the round of Ariyoshi's nomination, the award went to 'Amabune' (The Boat of the Diving Women), by Kondo Keitaro.

[16] Miyauchi Atsuko, *Shincho Nihon bungaku arubamu: Ariyoshi Sawako*, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1995, p. 26.

[17] Miyauchi, *Shincho Nihon bungaku arubamu*, p. 42.

[18] Miyauchi, *Shincho Nihon bungaku arubamu*, p. 153.

[19] Yamamoto Kenkichi, 'Kaiketsu,' *Shinsen gendai Nihon bungaku no. 32–3: Sengo shosetsushu vol.2*, Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1960; Shinoda Hajime, 'Kaisetsu,' *Kasunomiyasama otome*, by Ariyoshi Sawako, Tokyo: Kodansha bunko, 1981, pp. 389–95; Okuno Taeko, *Joryu sakka ron: Shosetsu wa honshitsuteki ni josei no mono ka* (A Theory of Women Writers: Is Fiction Inherently the Realm of Women?), Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1974; Senuma Shigeki, 'Kaisetsu,' *Shin Nihon bungaku zenshu dai 4 kan: Ariyoshi Sawako shu*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 1962, pp. 437–42; and Thomas J. Rimer, *A Reader's Guide to Japanese Literature*, Tokyo, New York and London: Kodansha International, 1991.

[20] Mildred Tahara, 'Ariyoshi Sawako: The novelist,' *Heroic with Grace: Legendary Women of Japan*, ed. Chieko Irie Mulhern, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991: 297–322, p. 297.

[21] Umehara Takeshi, 'Ariyoshi o shinobu,' *Suburu* 37(8) (November 1984): 37–38. Umehara begins by noting the size of the media scrum that formed around Ariyoshi's home when news of her death was released.

[22] See Ariyoshi Sawako and Iwaya Daishi, 'Ariyoshi bungaku o kataru,' pp. 8–9.

[23] Ariyoshi Sawako, *The Doctor's Wife*, trans. Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Kostant, Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1978, p. 26.

[24] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, pp. 12–13.

[25] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 14.

[26] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 27.



[27] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 37.

[28] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 45.

[29] Mark Ruttermann, 'What does literature of correspondence mean? An examination of the Japanese genre term *Oraimono* and its history,' in *Listen, Copy, Read: Popular Learning in Early Modern Japan*, ed. Matthias Hayek and Annick Horiuchi. Leiden: Brill, 2014: 139–55. Here Ruttermann gives a detailed account of the origin and use of these instructional texts.

[30] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 6.

[31] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 58.

[32] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 62.

[33] Tsubouchi Shoyo, *Shosetsu shinzui*, Tokyo: Iwanami bunko, 2010.

[34] Takizawa Bakin, *Nanso Satomi hakkenden*, Tokyo: Kokuritsu gekijo, 1969.

[35] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 68.

[36] Stephen Dodd, 'The significance of bodies in Soseki's *Kokoro*,' *Monumenta Nipponica* 53(4) (Winter, 1998): 473–98.

[37] Dodd, 'The significance of bodies in soseki's *Kokoro*,' p. 485.

[38] Dodd, 'The significance of bodies in Soseki's *Kokoro*,' p. 486.

[39] Suzuki Hideko, 'Ariyoshi Sawako ron no kokoromi: Umigura o chushin toshite,' *Kikan sozo* 2 (Winter 1977): 60–79.

[40] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 48.

[41] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 49.

[42] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 50. We might be reminded here of the relationship between Chujo Yuriko (1899–1951), later Miyamoto Yuriko, and Yuasa Yoshiko (1896–1990). This relationship, which saw the two women spend several years together in Moscow from 1927–1930, came to an end when, after joining the Communist Party, Yuriko decided to marry its leader, Miyamoto Kenji (1908–2007). For a filmic version of the story of Yuriko and Yoshiko, see *Yuriko Dasvidaniya* (2011; dir. Hamano Sachi).

[43] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 105.

[44] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 107.

[45] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 162.

[46] Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick draws on a number of other gender theorists to develop this idea in many places throughout her discussion. For a discussion on the applicability of this idea to the writing of Nakagami Kenji, see Machiko Ishikawa, 'Nakagami Kenji: Paradox and the representation of the silenced voice,' PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, 2015.

[47] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 112.

[48] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 113.

[49] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 113.

[50] Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 136.

[51] Page 146 of the English translation does, in fact, use the term, 'thigh.' Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 146.

[52] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting that the Japanese Wikipedia entry for Hanaoka indicates that Otsugi

died as a result of her involvement in her son's experiments. The storyline of the novel, however, takes a different turn, suggesting that Umpei, while accepting his mother's offer of herself as an experimental subject, gave her little more than a strong sleeping potion. See, for example, Ariyoshi, *The Doctor's Wife*, p. 116.

[53] Saeki Junko, 'Erosu ka, bosei ka? Hahaoya genso no hikakubunkateki kosatsu,' *Nihon no haha: hokai to saisei*, ed. Hirakawa Sukehiro and Hagiwara Takao, Tokyo: Shinyosha, 1997: 369–90.

[54] Hiroko Tomida, *Hiratsuka Raicho and Early Japanese Feminism*, Leiden: Brill, 2004.

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