

The Fragmented Family in Modern Japan

Barbara Hartley

1. In the modern era, the obsessive need for powerful men to construct a social institution, an institution that is labelled 'the family' and used to constrain women and children under masculine control, was a phenomenon not merely confined to Japan. Industrial societies around the globe have been characterised by such structures that are often discursively promoted as the social 'foundation' of these sites. In Japan, nonetheless, the insistence on the irrefutable inviolability of the patriarchal family was particularly vociferous following Japan's emergence as a nation state led by a benevolent father emperor whose subjects were constructed as the patriarch monarch's obedient family members. The Japanese *ie*, or family, featured a father or other male as the household head whose legal possessions included the women and children registered in his name. As Sharon H. Nolte and Sally Ann Hastings point out, this family did where necessary permit a public role for women.^[1] This was particularly the case, Nolte and Hastings explain, during the two decades until 1910, a period marked by a 'cult of productivity'^[2] that relied on women's work outside the home to assist in generating the capital that fuelled Japan's rise as a world power. Even then, however, the public role permitted for women almost always required suppression of personal desire and a demeanour that was 'modest, courageous, and frugal.'^[3] Eventually, the *ie* stipulated the wife who was a mother in the home, the so-called 'good wife and wise mother,' as the sole normative role for the women.^[4] This, of course, was a norm that in no way represented the lived experience of the vast majority of women in Japan. The image of the good wife and wise mother was nonetheless entrenched by certain sectors of the conservative popular press that assailed readers with endless and often seductive images of demure young women passively preparing for or taking pleasure in these roles. This was in spite of the fact that, except for elite women who could pay for other less-privileged women to do their drudge work, the role of the wife and mother in pre-war Japan was an onerous one that took a considerable physical toll on even the strongest women.
2. For many prewar women, family obligations were always accompanied by the need to undertake paid work. Highlighting the cruel parody that the home-bound good wife, wise mother paradigm made of the lived experience of many women, Vera Mackie refers to those working mothers who took their own lives and those of their children in order to save themselves and their dependent offspring from grinding poverty.^[5] Other girls and young women worked alongside men and boys at back-breaking tasks such as loading coal onto ships in Nagasaki harbour. This was an activity, incidentally, that one blogger on an 'Old Photos of Japan' website featuring a photograph of a US Army transport taking coal in Nagasaki, probably in the 1910s, noted as 'popular entertainment' for those with the financial wherewithal to pay for passage on a ship.^[6]
3. In spite of the fact that the Japanese economy depended on the arduous labour of women and in spite of the fact that with some limited exception, very little was done to address the burden imposed on the women undertaking work of this nature,^[7] the notion of the patriarchal family with women and children happily confined to the home was promoted—although modified in ways that met the specifics of any particular time during the life of the empire—by the authorities throughout the prewar and even into the postwar era. Koyama Shizuko argues, in fact, that this paradigm impinged on the lives of women in Japan until the end of the twentieth century.^[8] In the postwar era, the labour-saving domestic

appliances that became widely available in tandem with Japan's high-speed economic growth to some extent alleviated the pressure on women sequestered in this way. Nevertheless, the famous 'm-curve' of women's employment history which saw postwar women in paid employment before marriage, in the home during their child-bearing years, and then often seeking paid employment again once their children had left home, [9] suggests that few women were prepared to remain confined to the space of the family dwelling once their childcare responsibilities came to an end.

4. Given the all-encompassing nature of the familial discourses that bore down upon women in Japan, it is perhaps not surprising that any movement away from the prescribed norm caused panic. Margit Nagy, for example, notes how 'the phenomenon of middle-class working women' during the interwar years in Japan 'created profound anxieties about the future of family life and national unity.' [10] In the post-war era, directors such as Ozu Yasujiro (1903–1963) virtually sustained an entire industry with the depiction of what was regarded as 'the slow fracturing of the Japanese family,' [11] or at least with filmic representations of the inevitable social changes that occurred following the cataclysmic upheaval of the war and, as Jennifer Coates notes in this collection, the Allied Occupation. And yet, as with the other 'invented' traditions of modern Japan, [12] the notion of some authentic, harmonious Japanese family was always ephemeral.
5. The current collection brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to consider hegemonic claims of the fragmented family in Japan. Four contributions provide close readings of narrative texts, one examines a filmic representation of the postwar family, while the final paper investigates the impact of conservative women's magazines on the capacity of readers to imagine their future lives. This last investigation is accompanied by an analysis of contemporary data on young people's attitudes to marriage collected by means of questionnaires conducted with university students in Japan. In spite of the differing perspectives offered, each article contributes a valuable analysis particularly of cultural representations of aspects of family life in Japan and how women depicted in these representations struggled to express legitimate desires within the confines of what largely remains even today the patriarchal institution of the family. The collection should not, however, be read as any cultural romanticisation of women. Indeed, a number of the discussions featured here specifically draw attention to the absence of any agenda in the narratives considered of women working together to create a utopic future for themselves or other oppressed members of society.
6. The collection commences with Linda Flores' provocative probing of a visceral narrative, entitled *To the Far Reaches of the Sky* (*Sore no hate made*), by Takahashi Takako (1932–1914), a key writer in the postwar boom in women's narrative that followed the Occupation expansion of higher education opportunities for Japanese women. Takahashi's textual production, furthermore, directly challenged masculinist ideas of good wife and, above all, wisely nurturing mother. Rather, her work appears to take grim delight in exploding this normative paradigm often in a violent or even sadistic way. While there is some English language scholarship in circulation on Takahashi's material, Flores makes a very powerful and original contribution to existing analysis of this writer's work. Drawing particularly on Dominick LaCapra's theory of trauma and memory, Flores skilfully dismantles the surface elements of Takahashi's narratives, elements which deliver a hegemonic judgment of perversity on the mothering skills—or lack thereof—of Hisao, the protagonist of *To the Far Reaches of the Sky*. Yet, while Hisako overtly rejects conventional family norms, Flores points out that the novel's troubled protagonist nonetheless creates her own unique family unit by successfully inverting the patriarchal reliance on the father, on consanguinity and—in spite of the fact that the narrative is set in the postwar era—on an *ie*-like family structure. Nevertheless, given the failure of the narrative to conclude with any sense of justice, there can be no 'romantic closure.' Rather, Flores argues, Hisao's new family 'perpetuates' a 'fiction' which, posited as it is on both 'violence and deception,' must call into question 'the very nature of memory and of history.' In this sense Flores implies that the family of Hisao's creation may, in fact, be as ephemeral as the hegemonic *ie* itself.

7. Jennifer Coates' article considers the Kinoshita Keisuke film, *A Japanese Tragedy* (Nippon no higeki), released in 1953, the year following the end of the Allied Occupation of Japan. By intentionally identifying itself with the famous Kamei Hideo 1946 documentary of the same name, this film, Coates suggests, sought to provide a representation of the real-life struggles facing many during the era. In this way, the family featured in *A Japanese Tragedy* became an 'allegory for postwar Japan as a whole.' Introducing Kinoshita as a director who was highly skilled at representing the everyday, Coates notes how *A Japanese Tragedy* is a modification of the *hahamono*, or mother film, a melodramatic genre that enjoyed widespread popularity during and immediately after the war. Arguing that Kinoshita's film is fundamentally structured around the generational difference between those who experienced the war and those whose formative experiences were largely confined to the after-effects of the conflict, Coates concludes that the film demonstrates the inefficacy of putative Occupation reforms relating to gender. Noting the harsh manner in which the *apure*, post-war, children are impervious to the suffering of their war-wearied mother, Haruko, Coates nonetheless points out that these children revert to prewar paradigms—dependence on a married man for the daughter and adoption into a wealthy family for the son—to guarantee success in the new postwar world. Ultimately, Coates insightfully concludes, Kinoshita's representation of the Occupation-era family on film can be seen as a 'point of fragmentation in itself, dividing the image of the perfect family from the experiential realities of the families of everyday life.'
8. Barbara Hartley's 'Women in Love and Hate in 1960s Japan: Re-reading Ariyoshi Sawako's *The Doctor's Wife*' provides an analysis of a 1967 narrative by prominent postwar woman writer, Ariyoshi Sawako (1931–1984). Unlike some writing women of her generation, Ariyoshi did not produce sexually explicit material. Nevertheless, argues Hartley, her narrative is grounded in the acknowledgement of powerful and often illicit, in hegemonic terms, desire on the part of the women characters that she creates. *The Doctor's Wife* is often read as a *bidan*, a beautiful moral tale, of two women—a mother and a wife—who sacrifice themselves to become experimental subjects for their respective son and husband, Hanaoka, the first medical practitioner in the world to successfully administer a general anaesthetic. Drawing on the work of Stephen Dodd, however, and of Dodd's reading of Rene Giraud's triangular relationship between two men and a woman as an expression of same-sex bonds between the males, Hartley reads Ariyoshi's tale as an expression of same-sex desire between the mother-in-law, Kae, and Otsugi, the wife of Kae's son. Ultimately, concludes Hartley, it is the suppression by powerful male structures of women's desire—a desire which, as much as the approved desire of the male, must find an outlet—that is a key cause of family fragmentation. Hartley also notes how, contrary to panicked claims that family fragmentation is a phenomenon of the modern era, Ariyoshi's narrative suggests that the family in pre-Meiji times was as riven by fault lines as any family of the present day.
9. In her discussion of Kirino Natsuo's *Out*, Rio Otomo invokes the image of the woman pathologist in a TV series to introduce the novel's hardboiled protagonist, Masako, who dismembers a murdered body in the bathroom of her family home. Providing an in-depth reading of this classic Kirino narrative, Otomo notes that the gruelling monotony of the lives of the women whose lowly paid work during the midnight to dawn graveyard shift in a *bento* (boxed lunch) factory in suburban Tokyo provides bitter compensation for the erasure of desire demanded by their lives as mothers and wives. As the title of Kirino's novel suggests, the only option for these women is to get 'out' of the domestic circumstances that constrain them. The protagonist, Masako, does this by leaving to join a former *bento* factory colleague in Brazil. The film adaptation of the novel features the classic 'road narrative' of women who, in achieving that goal, have formed a mutual supportive community. Otomo nonetheless points out that, in the novel itself, Kirino refuses to romanticise the plight of the women whom she creates. In addition to discussing the literal fragmentation of the family through the physical dismemberment of the male who, in previous times, would have been the indomitable and all-powerful family head, Otomo notes that Kirino's novel depicts the seductive power of eroticism which 'goes beyond ethical judgment.'
10. Emerald King's contribution reads family fragmentation through the absence of the mother in the

narratives of 2004 Akutagawa Literary Prize winner, Kanehara Hitomi (b. 1983). Defining motherhood in terms of the prewar paradigm of good wife and wise mother, King notes that even when Kanehara's material features women who give birth to and apparently care for children, these 'mothers' differ markedly from the asexual, nurturing women who accept the hegemonic erasure of their own desires. Focusing firstly on Kanehara's early narratives, King notes an uncanny connection between what might be read as the novelist's dismissive attitude towards her own mother and the representation of the mother figure in works such as the 2006 novel, *Autofiction* (*Otofikushon*). Kanehara is a writer who has been highly sensationalised by the press for her appearance as much as for her cultural production. In discussing this work, King also suggests that the novelist might enjoy playing—through the production of autofiction, fiction which can appear to be autobiographical—with her readers and especially with commentators who expect the lifestyles of the characters she creates to be based on her own experiences. King's analysis of Kanehara's early works notes the fraught existence of the writer's now well-known young women *gyaru*, rebellious girl, protagonists and the fact that none is part of a traditional family unit. Rather, explains King—recalling Linda Flores' discussion of Takahashi's protagonist, Hisao—each creates her own family unit from friends and often dubious male lovers. King notes that even the eponymous mothers of the 2011 narrative, *Mazaazu* (*Mothers*), which features four young women who care for the children to whom they have given birth, have strong links to previous Kanehara protagonists. That is to say, none are part of a traditional family structure and each struggles with her own demon such as substance abuse.

11. The final article in the collection is Eiko Osaka's account of the role of conservative women's magazines in the recent re-emergence in Japan of young women who choose to be stay-at-home mothers. Osaka notes the expectation that, following the ratification in the mid-1980s of Equal Opportunity Laws in Japan, increased numbers of married women would seek paid work. Pointing out that this was to some extent the case, she nonetheless notes the emergence of a cohort of young women who defied these expectations, preferring to be supported by husbands and to focus on a domestic child-carer role. This is in spite of the fact that, as Osaka makes clear, the reality of the life of the stay-at-home mother provides little hope or opportunity for personal development. The tendency for some young married women to reject the option of paid work, Osaka suggests, was at least partially the result of conservative women's magazines which greatly romanticised the lifestyle of the 'stay-at-home' mother and wife. As Osaka notes, the reconstruction of the figure of Jacqueline Kennedy in a way that profiled her 'Camelot' First Lady existence while eliding her career as an editor, played a significant role in this process. The article also presents data on the attitudes of contemporary university students towards marriage and future marriage partners. If 'Jackie' was a model for young Japanese women, the family of the Crown Prince of Japan and his much criticised wife, Masako, also drew the admiration of young women interviewees. Eager for husbands who would stand by them through any contingency in life, these young women greatly admired the Crown Prince's support for his wife in her time of need. In a turn that will undoubtedly alarm the conservative social elements that persist in regarding mother and wife as the woman's ultimate role, Osaka's data also indicated that some young women in contemporary Japan accept a future in which they remain unmarried and become neither wives nor mothers.
12. In this collection of articles examining family fragmentation in modern Japan, the emphasis has largely been on representations of women or, in the final paper, on the thoughts of young Japanese women. Throughout the modern era successive administrations have promoted various policies that encouraged women's workplace participation. These policies have ranged from support for women to work outside the home during the time of Nolte and Hasting's Meiji era 'cult of productivity' to, in more recent times, the putatively 'women-friendly' policies of the post-2012 second Abe Shinzo (b. 1954) administration. Regardless of these policies, however, women's lives have often of necessity been constrained by the need to do care work for other family members. These real-life demands are evident too in cultural production where, like Yoshie, one of the bento factory workers in Kirino Natsuo's *Out*, women can be depicted as having 'wrapped up everything personal that mattered in a tight package and stored it away somewhere far out of sight.' In place of this hermetically sealed, never-to-be-acknowledged set of

personal aspirations and desires, the women so restricted have 'developed a single obsession: diligence.' Such diligence, the women try to convince themselves, is 'a trick for getting by.'^[13]

13. Yet, like the prewar *ie* family itself and its postwar remnants, diligence or any other 'trick' will always be chimeric. To deny desire by 'wrapping up everything personal in a tight package' places an unbearable pressure on women. This pressure might explode, as in the case of Hisao, the Takahashi Takako protagonist discussed by Linda Flores, in a violently deceptive conflation of history and memory, or it might merely degenerate, as Barbara Hartley notes, into the long-term smouldering conflict that marks the relationship between Otsugi and Kae, the two women from *The Doctor's Wife* whose devotion to each other can never be legitimately expressed within the structures of conventional family life.
14. Yes, while women may well be constrained intolerably by the parameters of discursive family norms, the bleak reality is that any dismantling of this institution offers little in the way of hope. As Jennifer Coates' discussion implies, *The Japanese Family's* long-suffering Haruko appears to have little option other than to take her own life following the failure of a stock market gamble. Rio Otomo explains how Masako, the protagonist of Kirino's *Out*, takes a different sort of gamble by leaving Japan to re-construct her future. Emerald King's contribution strongly suggests that, although Kanahara Hitomi's *gyaru* protagonists refuse to be corralled by traditional family structures, they nonetheless struggle to prevent the fragmentation of their own subjectivities. Arguably, each of the women who appears in these narratives is the hostage of a society that refuses to legitimate their desires. The expression of men's desire has long been accepted as valid. Perhaps, as Barbara Hartley concludes, it will only be when *all* family members, including women, have authorised outlets for their desires that the fault lines that mark the modern Japanese family will cleave and fragmentation become a thing of the past.

Notes

[1] Sharon H. Nolte and Sally Ann Hastings, 'The Meiji State's policy towards women, 1890–1910,' in *Recreating Japanese Women 1600–1945*, ed. and with introduction by Gail Lee Bernstein, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 151–74, p. 173.

[2] Nolte and Hastings, 'The Meiji State's policy towards women, 1890–1910,' p. 172.

[3] Nolte and Hastings, 'The Meiji State's policy towards women, 1890–1910,' p. 171.

[4] Koyama Shizuko, *Ryosai kenbo to iu kihan* (The Standard Norm of Good Wife and Wise Mother), Tokyo: Keisei Shobo, 1991.

[5] Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900–1937*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. For example, for the case of a mother-child suicide in 1917, see p. 86, and for reference to this issue in 1932, see p. 147.

[6] 'Nagasaki 1910s: Taking on coal,' Old Photos of Japan. Online: www.oldphotosjapan.com/photos/814/taking-on-coal#.VzVEIfI95aQ (accessed 20 November 2015).

[7] The irony was that attempts to improve the working conditions for women could lead to their exclusion from an industry and thus deprive them of income on which they depended. W. Donald Burton, for example, makes brief reference to this effect on the first page of his discussion of women in the coal industry in Japan. See W. Donald Burton, *Coal Mining Women in Japan: Heavy Burdens*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 1.

[8] Koyama Shizuko, *Ryosai kenbo to iu kihan*, p. 2.

[9] Junko Kumamoto-Healy, 'Women in the Japanese labour market, 1947–2003: A brief survey,' *International Labour Review*, 144(4) (2005): 451–71, pp. 451–52.

[10] Margit Nagy, 'Middle-class working women during the interwar years,' in *Recreating Japanese Women 1600–1945*, edited and with introduction by Gail Lee Bernstein, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 199–

216, p. 200.

[11] [Nick Wrigley](#), Yasujiro ozu, *senses of cinema*. Online: sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/ozu/ (accessed 3 January 2017).

[12] See, for example, Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998.

[13] Natsuo Kirino, *Out*, trans. Stephen Snyder, New York: Vintage International, 2005, p. 23.

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