

# When her Home is no Longer a Home: *Out* by Natsuo Kirino

[Rio Otomo](#)

The role of a writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.

Anais Nin<sup>[1]</sup>

You may wonder why the story needs to go that far. But unless it went that far, you wouldn't know that it was that far.

Yoko Sano<sup>[2]</sup>

## Hardboiled women in crime stories

1. Many detective dramas begin with the scene of a dead body, more often than not that of a young woman, which is then examined and discussed. The language used to describe the corpse is medical and legal, reminding the audience that the purpose of our looking is confined to nothing more than finding the murderer. Naturally, the sight of a dead body evokes fear, disgust and even eroticism. But since we are engaged in a mission to uncover the truth, we cannot permit such emotions to rise to the surface. In this context, hardboiled protagonists who demonstrate emotional detachment play a functional role in positioning the audience. They offer a guilt-free and therefore safe standpoint that viewers can automatically take as their own. When the hard-boiled detecting protagonist is a woman, this function is even more critical.
2. One example of the hard-boiled detecting protagonist woman is found in the mid-90s BBC TV series *Silent Witness*.<sup>[3]</sup> Sam Ryan, a pathologist played by Amanda Burton, examines stomach contents and cuts open skulls without the slightest display of emotion. On the contrary, throughout these scenes, she demonstrates a faultless work ethic and professionalism. Despite the grisly nature of what is being viewed, we, the audience, feel almost comfortable by her side, listening to her controlled, stoic voice as she records an autopsy procedure. Her Scottish accent adds an unfeigned, almost ritualistic air, as if she were a medium who conveys the voice of the Truth, which tells us not just *who's done it*, but also provides information about the life of the deceased that is inscribed on the lifeless form laid out before her. Knowing that, in the names of science and justice, she has already overcome the fear of touching the dead body, we, too, can overcome our squeamishness and make our way through the autopsy process beside her. Her gaze implements a fixed distance for the audience, thereby controlling the camera eye and preventing the sexualisation of the dead body.
3. Working with the deceased in this way, Sam Ryan appeals to viewers as spontaneous and caring or, we might even say, as motherly. The same thing can be said about the younger woman who replaced her in several later series of *Silent Witness*. Despite what they do, these women never appear invasive. Being described as motherly, however, is often a risky business for a woman. Not only is she made to seem to be a self-effacing giver, she also becomes associated with what Julia Kristeva calls 'abjection,' a state that concerns the 'margins of the body.'<sup>[4]</sup> While women's biological particularities, such as the ability to give birth and menstruate, have been used to create this association, the social roles imposed on them, such as caregiving for infants, the elderly and the sick, validate and reinforce such an association. Although the character profile of Sam Ryan does not relate directly to these imposed roles, viewers cannot dissociate her from the set of meanings that she carries on her gendered body. By the same

token, the semiotic association between women and abjection has a stake in normalising the relentless parade of women in crime stories who are not merely killed, but covered with blood, raped, tortured and dismembered. So pervasive are these images that we can argue that the victimised woman's body is formulaic not only to the 'noir thriller' genre but also the detective drama in general in both television and film.[5]

4. The function of the Sam Ryan-type hardboiled woman protagonist in this formula is twofold. She is not simply a stronger, wiser and alive counterpart of the dead woman; she is also the other side of the same coin. Although her capacity to suppress fear and thereby be free of abjection defines and highlights her place as a gatekeeper, with just a flip of a coin she could quickly become a woman on the other side, that is, become one of the weak and powerless. The imagined vulnerability attached to her by virtue of her being a woman is the subterranean element that makes her role particularly attractive. While on one hand she is an aspirational hero, on the other she is constructed as somehow vulnerable. For, although being unmarried, childless and dedicated to a cause should fully qualify her as a hardboiled detecting hero, importantly she is only almost so and not quite.[6] We must remember that while she might appear to be placed against the assumed *normality* of womanhood, that so-called *normal* woman is merely an ideological construct, a phantom woman who does not exist.[7]
5. The hardboiled woman protagonist (or 'fighting girl' as she would be referred to in other contexts) is found in a wide range of contemporary popular media, including TV drama, film, animation and computer games.[8] In this essay I discuss a written narrative, the crime story, *Out* (1997),[9] by Japanese novelist Natsuo Kirino (b. 1951). While there are a number of women crime/mystery writers who are highly regarded in the Japanese literary scene. Kirino is one of the most prolific and also political. Her gripping stories often highlight the subaltern position given to women in crime stories while, at the same time, presenting alternative models that subvert established power relations at large.

### Three women and their homes

6. In the novel *Out*, Kirino Natuso explores the potential power of a woman protagonist who comes face to face with fear and abjection. *Out* is the story of a woman who is expelled from the normality of womanhood, a concept that Kirino interrogates and problematises in all her works.
7. In *Out*, we are made to confront the scene of a woman cutting up a dead body. Unlike the vast majority of detective fiction, the body in this case is that of a man and our gaze is focused on how to dispose of it. Since we know from the start how and why it is there, this body, lying dead in the bathroom of one of his wife's friends, does not hold a 'Truth' to be uncovered. In the opening stages of the novel we learn that the man was strangled by Yayoi, his wife, as the result of a situation that was an act of his own making—certainly, much more of his making than of his wife's. Yayoi, who worked the nightshift at a *bento* (boxed-lunch) factory to supplement her husband's income, felt she could no longer suffer the emotional, physical and financial torment he inflicted on her.[10] This torment arose from the fact that Yayoi's husband was obsessed with Anna, a beautiful young nightclub hostess from Shanghai, China. Anna, however, was never going to reciprocate this devotion and the husband, at the end of his tether having used up all the family savings on Anna only to face the prospect of never seeing her again, directed his frustration towards his wife. One night Yayoi felt something snap within her. 'With lightning speed she slipped off her belt and wrapped it around his neck.' [11] Her own action surprised her, but she felt no regret. Yayoi called Masako, a co-worker at the *bento* factory, who subsequently decided to help dispose of the body in order to save Yayoi, and her small children from losing their mother. Masako, with the help of another woman, a colleague called Yoshie, carried the body home in her car boot and laid it on the bathroom floor.
8. Though only a suburban housewife with no professional credits, this decisive, cool-headed Masako is

our hardboiled protagonist, an infallible hero just like Sam Ryan. Solitude is one of the qualifications necessary to be a hard-boiled protagonist. Masako qualifies first by having an experience of being isolated at her former work place, a bank where the career path that led to promotion and a high salary was open only to men with university degrees, while women who did not comply with expected feminine roles were marginalised. Second and more importantly, her spirits are being crushed by the slow internal corrosion, as it were, taking place within her own family home where there are few points of contact between herself, her husband and her son.

9. Although Masako once felt by turns sad, angry and helpless at this isolating collapse of her family, she is now merely numb.

Masako knew that there was more than a little resemblance between her husband, who hated the business world and who spent his free time shut away in this little room like some mountain hermit, and her son who had given up communicating with the world altogether. For her part she had decided that there was very little she could do or say to either of them. They were quite a trio.[\[12\]](#)

In emphasising the barriers that exist between Masako, her husband and her son, Kirino uses the metaphor of a cocoon, telling readers that Masako's husband began to build one to 'inhabit his own solitary realities.' This he does under the roof of the same house that the couple built for their shared future. Masako cannot penetrate this cocoon, as her husband pushes away both herself and their son.

Her husband's hands, which no longer reached out to touch her, were busy at work now constructing a shell. Both she and their son were somehow tainted by the outside world and so they had to be rejected along with everything else, no matter how much it hurt them.[\[13\]](#)

Masako instead finds solace in nightshift work at a *bento* factory, where the physically taxing work temporarily fills the void, and women co-workers give her a sense of connectedness. But now we find her, a suburban housewife, putting on gloves and an apron similar to those worn by pathologists and confronting the task of dismembering a body, that of the husband of a friend, that now lies lifeless on her family's bathroom floor. This she does with an assumed professionalism, and, like Sam Ryan, in the name of justice and pragmatism. Nonetheless, the scene, which takes place in the supposedly clean-and-proper everyday family space of the bathroom, is chilling and hard to stomach.

10. Occasionally overwhelmed by disgust and panic, Masako and Yoshie manage to complete the task of cutting the body into smaller pieces in order to dispose of it as household rubbish. During this task—it is felt as a task, since they did not commit murder themselves—the women persevere just as they do when they clean the bathroom, do laundry, or change diapers for toddlers or the elderly under their care. This is not to say that they have no psychological difficulty performing this unusual task; the women in fact feel constantly threatened by a sense that they are being sacrilegious, defiling, unethical, improper, illegal and unclean. They overcome this by convincing themselves that the dead body has been transformed into an inanimate, disposable object which, while it once belonged to a home no longer has that capacity.[\[14\]](#)
11. As they undertake the disposal task that confronts them, the women begin, in a way that they have never been able before, to articulate their own desires. It is significant that, rather than these women crossing the boundaries of taboo in order to fulfill their desires, it is their boundary crossing that triggers their access to an awareness of what they really want. In other words, until this experience, they have never explored their own psychological landscape with a view to locating a piece of desire that could be called their own. Once they undergo this experience, however, they find in themselves an acute desire to change, principally by leaving—by getting 'out' of—the homes they have worked so hard to create and sustain up until that moment. This is because they now realise that their homes no longer provide comfort, freedom of self-expression or safe communication.

12. Even though both men and women (and also children) can be disappointed by their own unfulfilled lives, women—mothers in particular—feel more trapped by the duty-of-care roles imposed on them. Yayoi, who killed her husband, has two young children to support. Yoshie, who helps Masako with the bathroom dismemberment task in return for money, has unruly teenage daughters, a baby grandson and an incapacitated mother-in-law, each of whom she cares for single-handedly. Of Yoshie and her family, readers are told:

None of them could get along without her – when you thought about it, that was her reason for living.... The role kept her going, helped her survive the dreary work; it was her one source of pride.... Yoshie had wrapped up everything personal that mattered in a tight package and stored it away somewhere far out of sight, and in its place she had developed a single obsession: diligence. This was a trick for getting by.[15]

As for Masako, night shift work gives her a reason to get out of the house when both her husband and her son are in the home. Mentally cocooned and having shut down communication with her and with each other, the two men nevertheless somehow dutifully come home to her dinner table every night at which time she is expected to feed them, come rain or shine before she leaves for work.

### **Kitchen, bathroom and bodily margins**

13. Along with the multifunction toilet seat, boxed lunches (*bento*) are often mentioned by foreign visitors as emblematic of Japanese culture. The fact that these two are connected in this novel must be noted: the text fundamentally deals with kitchen and bathroom, eating and excreting, or what goes into the body and what is expelled from it. Women are assigned to social roles which involve looking after both ends of the body. This strong link to corporeality also functions to coopt the category of 'maternal' women, that is, women who are universally self-sacrificial and unconditionally giving. In most cultural discourses, such an image of the Mother remains untouchable, permitting no questions about its credibility. Almost all Kirino's works, however, interrogate the existence of this phantom Woman and stress that 'She' should not be confused with real women.[16]
14. Food is something that, in Kristeva's terms, crosses the boundaries of the body—getting inside the body, becoming the body, and exiting to the outside of the body. Bodily margins are an ambivalent field that we carry around to sustain our existence, and women are allotted the task of monitoring them closely. In most cultures, feeding is the woman's duty of care, just as it is she who gives life to other human beings. Feeding is also associated with maternal expressions of love. Why, then, might not Japanese housewives make themselves proud by creating elaborate *o-bento* in order to indulge in the illusory power of being acknowledged for this by others, such as friends of their children and colleagues of their husbands?[17] Most women, however, know deep at heart that the respect they receive as a result of this task is temporary, or even illusory. If they do not know immediately, then they quickly find out and are eventually forced to realise that their proud boxed-lunch, like Masako's work at the bank before her marriage, is simply more unpaid overtime with no promise whatsoever of promotion to a better position.
15. What, then, might improve the circumstances for women in the home and in the society at large? Kirino grapples squarely in her novel with this very basic question and the answer she gives comes out in the scream, '*Out!*' The term 'out' can connote, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, similar but different scenarios—away from home; displaced; missing; exhausted; lost; defeated; into public circulation. It can mean both to be defeated in a family game, as in 'You are out,' but also to physically walk away from something by one's own volition, as in 'I am out.' Either way, the real woman, as opposed to the imaginary 'Woman' of the discourses that Kirino critiques, must absent herself from the ideology of Family and Home because she is both 'exhausted' and 'displaced.' By the end of the novel there is no doubt that Kirino is implying that getting out is the solution for women.
16. Kirino's *Out* narrative begins in the desolate car park of a *bento* factory in the outer suburbs of northwest

Tokyo, an area where the gentrification of the southwestern suburbs, often called the New Town projects, never quite reached completion even at the height of the 1980s' bubble economy. [18] Part-time workers on the nightshift consist of hardworking housewives and young Brazilian migrant workers of Japanese descent. Their work begins just before midnight and ends at 5:30 am. The description of the way the workers go through the factory's fastidious hygiene clearance regime is reminiscent of Orwellian surveillance and control. Finishing twelve hundred curry lunches, the women on the line 'quickly move to another station for their next assignment: two thousand special 'Lunch of Champions' boxes.' [19] Yoshie, the skipper, controls the start and speed of the conveyer belt, exhorting the workers on the line to keep up the speed that she sets as the women produce, one by one, these lunch boxes of identical quality. There is no room for human emotion, such as a mother's love, in this process.

17. A *New York Times* review of Kirino's novel describes the work as 'a scathing allegory about the subjugation of women in Japanese society.' [20] A *Village Voice* review sees the characters as living 'on society's bottom.' [21] And yet, looking more closely, readers soon realise that the difficulties facing the novel's protagonist women are not confined to a certain social group, either economic or cultural. Focusing on such cultural specifics when reading a foreign novel can run the risk of missing the central theme, the more universal message that a literary work aims to convey.
18. To recapitulate, so far three women have been introduced in connection with the crime in question: Yayoi, who, as rage overwhelms her in a moment of despair, strangles her husband; Masako, who impulsively takes responsibility for the disposal of the body to save Yayoi and her children; and Yoshie, a hardworking widow who singlehandedly supports two daughters, a grandson and a bed-ridden mother-in-law. Yoshie, the leader of the food output at the factory, is also an expert in managing bodily fluids. Her small, overcrowded house is described as having the constant smell of urine and excrement mixed with disinfectant. She lives in this abject space, thriving in the role of Mother without allowing herself, at least at the outset of the story, to know what she really wants. Yoshie, regarded as the best worker at the factory, cherishes the camaraderie she shares with Masako and others in her group. It must be noted, however, that feminist though it is, this novel is not about women's solidarity. On the contrary, Kirino carefully depicts irreconcilable differences among women and underscores the unstable nature of any solidarity that might emerge.
19. In addition to Masako and Yoshie, there is a fourth woman involved in the crime. This is Kuniko, a young coworker at the factory, described as helplessly frivolous and untrustworthy. Her case is tragic, because she is someone who lacks the means to help herself, turning instead to food for solace:

She knew how things worked. A woman who wasn't attractive could not expect to get a high-paying job. Why else would she be working the night shift in a factory like this? But the stress of the job made her eat more. And the more she ate, the fatter she got. [22]

Kuniko wishes that she were a 'different woman living a different life in a different place with a different man.' [23] This, however, is merely her daydream and does not necessarily mean that she knows what she wants. Her high life fantasy merely depicts the imaginary life of an imaginary woman projected by the popular media, which in her case is found in women's magazines. Kuniko is, in this sense, severely infected by the disease of consumerism, most prevalent among women. In creating this character, flippant and undesirable, Kirino is relentless. In the end Kuniko digs her own grave, as it feels in the mind of readers, and falls victim to a man called Satake, a professional criminal and killer. When events take an awful turn, Kuniko is killed by Satake and her body carried into Masako's bathroom to be dismembered by her three work colleagues, who are by now forced into a clandestine business operation of body disposal. A romantic rendition of human relations, including women's solidarity, is thus something that Kirino adamantly rejects.

20. While a hardboiled male hero would not be expected to dirty his hands with the blood and flesh of a dead body, Kirino's realism, which draws on women's experiences, goes beyond the established comfort zone

of that genre. [24] Woman and abjection go hand in hand in this novel, which does risk pushing the woman back into the semiotic, the zone outside language as delineated in Kristeva's theory of abjection, and the theorisation of which incidentally led to accusations against Kristeva of further marginalising women. To define abjection as the presymbolic, or as something bodily to discard in constituting the clean-and-proper speaking subject, and to relate it to the archaic mother, naturally risks an undermining of feminist efforts to reaffirm women's subjectivity. In the case of Kirino, however, this risk-taking is strategic. By demonstrating in a provocative way a number of binary constructs—woman/man, body/mind, emotional/rational and object/subject—she strives to incite the reader to participate actively in the deconstruction of these.

21. Ankle deep in blood in her bathroom, where the women have brought the corpse, Masako discusses with Yoshie how they can most efficiently cut the body of their friend's husband into small pieces. This is the bathroom, Masako notes, which her husband insisted on making spacious when they designed the house. She now finds it *ironic* that because of this the bathroom is wide enough to fit a man's body on the floor next to the tub. Although her dreams of family and home have turned sour, she cannot articulate her anger and frustration. Instead, Masako turns to irony, which can appear when a straightforward criticism is not possible. As is the case with other hardboiled heroes, this inability to express her emotions underscores Masako's sadness. Yet, while she is unable to find words to articulate her feelings, her emotions are clearly illustrated by the series of actions she takes, actions that begin in this bathroom.
22. It was only a decade before this novel's publication that Yoshimoto Banana's image of a grandmother's well-used kitchen symbolised close-knit human relations and the home that provides them. [25] While the family Yoshimoto proposed was unconventional, with a transgendered mother in the middle, it was nonetheless built on a romantic rendition of human connections. Kirino's bathroom is also symbolic, but on a very different level. Apart from being intended to be a restful and rejuvenating space for the family, the bathroom is a place where one washes off the outside world to become, say, free of infection; in this context cleanness has a particular connotation. Masako desecrates this place by using it to cut up a dead body; there is a subtext in this act of a ritual defilement of the sacred space of the Home. Like any ritual, the bathroom scene is uncanny; it captures the moment of transition from the homely to the non-homely, or, in Sigmund Freud's words, from the *Heimlich* to the *Unheimlich* exactly in the literal sense. [26] Hence, there was never any option in this story for the body to be discarded, for example, in faraway woods. The uncanny transition scene of dismemberment is crucial to Kirino's text.

### Sexual deviancy and human decency

23. Equally uncanny is the depiction in the novel of the *bento* factory. Here, wearing a uniform that covers them from head to toe to prevent their being smeared with one speck of dust, women with problems at home and Brazilian migrants work together through the night to produce *haha no aji* (the taste of home cooking). In this factory, the bodies of workers with visible skin aberrations are considered potential agents of infection and are barred from being near the production line. Each time Masako goes to work, she hesitates for a moment to enter this uninviting place, reflecting that, 'I would rather go home, but where is home?' [27] Miyamori, a young Brazilian who is unable to speak Japanese and feels rejected by his mother's home country, Japan, also wonders whether he should go home to Brazil. His ability to sense Masako's subtle change of emotion, displayed in heartfelt efforts to communicate with her, is in stark contrast to the sterile relations she has with her family. Miyamori is the dark horse, so to speak, representing in this novel the scarce possibility of romance. Although he appears at first as a sexual pervert who jumps upon and embraces women in the dark, Miyamori is slowly revealed to embody both human decency and hope.
24. If human decency can be explained as the tendency in a person to respect other human beings and their

desires, Satake, who strangled Kuniko, has none of that. Even after serving a long prison sentence, he is obsessed by a single incident from the past, during which he tortured and raped a strong-willed woman. He is another hard-boiled protagonist of *Out*, and his *tragedy*, as it is put forward to the readers, lies in the fact that he gained the utmost pleasure at the very moment of the woman dying with his member inside her. Satake can no longer be aroused by other women, including the beautiful Chinese nightclub hostess, Anna, whom he regards as nothing more than a favourite pet. Anna, the girl from Shanghai, came to Japan to make money and plans to start her own business when she returns home. When Satake's secret past becomes known, however, Anna makes a decisive exit, when she connects the hidden dark nature of Satake to the horrible displays she saw as a child at a war memorial in Nanjing. [28]

25. It is significant that Anna is given a voice here, unlike the silence imposed upon Guo Dong Lee, the girl from Manchuria who was physically assaulted at a Tokyo love hotel in Haruki Murakami's 2004 novel, *After Dark*. [29] It is interesting to make a general comparison between *Out* and *After Dark*, since the latter work focuses on inner city Tokyo sites such as Shinjuku or Shibuya in the hours between just before midnight until the first morning train. This is exactly the duration of time when the women in *Out* are at work in the *bento* factory in the city's northwest.
26. Mari, the main protagonist of *After Dark*, is a girl from Hiyoshi, one of the clean, leafy, middle-class New Towns in Tokyo's southwest suburban expanse. Murakami's novel indicates that danger hovers over Mari's sister, Eri, who cannot wake from sleep in her bedroom in their supposedly safe home in the supposedly safe suburb where she is guarded by a faceless man whose identity is never revealed. Since the novel is set in the Murakami-esque fantasy space, Eri's precise circumstances are unclear. Some, nevertheless, read her situation as the depiction of a *hikikomori* youth, who is in a state of burnout after having lived all her life trying to meet her middle-class parents' expectations. [30]
27. Since her home in a genteel suburb fails to provide security, nineteen-year-old Mari seeks refuge in the staff room of an inner city 'love hotel' where three women who work together create a safe space for each other while also protecting other women in need of help. They are able to do this because, once the trains stop running at midnight, inner city Tokyo becomes a secluded island space. Mari's adventures and sense of security in that space covertly highlight the implied danger of the other space, her home in the clean-and-proper suburban town. From this perspective, *After Dark* critiques, just as *Out* does, the idea of Home.
28. In *After Dark* much is implied, including justice meted out *off stage* to Guo Dong Lee's assailant by the Chinese Mafia whose method of revenge is to 'cut one's ear off.' [31] Kirino, in contrast, depicts acts of revenge *on stage*. Taken hostage by Satake, Masako is tortured and raped. Only by going this far is Kirino able to give voice to the dead woman, the woman with whom Satake had long believed he shared the most blissful orgasm just before she drew her last breath. In the midst of the violent intercourse he forces upon her, Masako understands the meaning of Satake's unusual eroticism but disrupts his planned *jouissance* by soberly rejecting his fantasy. She furthermore cuts deeply into his face with a scalpel hidden in her pocket. There is, however, no romantic narrative of prevailing justice here. Instead, a weeping Masako holds Satake at his dying moment, implying a certain connection she had with him. She even mourns his death in the days that follow.
29. The image of Satake at the height of sexual pleasure has a lingering effect on the reader. As disturbing as it is, the initial moment of *jouissance* he describes is acutely seductive. Eroticism itself goes beyond ethical judgment, something that novels, along with other forms of art, provide with an incentive to the readers to explore on their own desires. [32]

### Back to women's solidarity – the film adaptation of *Out*

30. In 2002, director Hideyuki Hirayama and scriptwriter Wishing Chong produced a film adaptation of Kirino's *Out*.<sup>[33]</sup> Since eroticism in terms of woman's own desire is a theme on its own, it strikes me as a wise decision that Hirayama and Chong excluded the sexual encounter between Masako and Satake and indeed toned down eroticism altogether in their 2002 adaptation.<sup>[34]</sup> Though this is regrettable in one sense, without Satake's obsession with his dead woman, or Masako's need to face her own sexual desire, the storyline becomes more focused.
31. The film depicts Masako as meticulous and conscientious, perhaps excessively so, in her housework. In this respect she appears more forbearing than hardboiled. This subtle difference is crucial, since the forbearing personality marks her as one of a network of women, rather than presenting her as a lone fighting girl. The film makes it clear that Masako is alienated in her own house, in which she nonetheless dutifully cooks and cleans for her uncommunicative husband and son. Thus viewers are drawn empathetically into her world early in the film, while the novel, as a good mystery narrative should, leaves the readers to slowly find out about Masako's world over the course of events. Nevertheless, the film has its own ingenious device that prepares the audience for the cathartic ending. In one scene repeated a number of times, Masako calls out to her *hikikomori* son through his closed door, giving him necessary daily messages despite knowing very well that there will be no reply. This scene appeals to viewers as even more excruciating and challenging than the gruesome bathroom scenes, which are peppered by comical interjections from the women to ease their anxiety.
32. On one hand, the film spells out for the audience the reasons for the women's diabolical actions, and in that sense does justice to the novel's major premise of what a woman's response should be 'when her home is no longer a home.' On the other hand, however, the film seeks to conclude at a different point. While I earlier stressed that Kirino's text does not highlight women's solidarity, the film brings this theme to the fore, with all four women supporting each other to the end. In the final scenes the group is on the run and heading for Alaska—playing out a romantic dream of going to see the northern lights. As they hitchhike along a snowy road in Hokkaido, the northern-most prefecture of Japan, they are picked up in a moment of despair by a woman truck driver who embraces them. The driver's earthy northern accent is both reassuring and forgiving. In addition to the communal emphasis, the film depicts a fleeting expression of homosexual desire between Masako and Yoshie who, when comforting each other, hold one another awkwardly but with obvious love. There is no suggestion of this in the original text.
33. With each of the male characters disappearing one after another, the film depicts the bleak reality that the home is no longer a home for men as well as for women. The difference is, however, women continue to seek verbal communication with other human beings, while men forsake that attempt. When her home is no longer a home, according to the film, a woman moves out of heterosexual institutions and finds other women.

## Conclusion

34. In comparison to the film, Kirino's narrative, has a much calmer ending, and is without either exhilaration or a sense of triumph. Each woman finds her own way, with Masako left to nurse her solitude alone. There is, however, a sense of overcoming and a glimpse of hope once she leaves the home that failed her. Hugely disappointed by the limited opportunity given to migrants in Japan, the supposedly clean and safe Home country of his mother, Miyamori has returned to Brazil. Nevertheless, it is he who remains to provide that sign of hope which suggests a new future. It is this sense of hope that eventually leads Masako to fly out of Japan towards him in Brazil. Unlike the women in the film, the protagonist of Kirino's novel remains discreet throughout. Even as the novel closes, she never verbalises her intentions or emotions. Rather, she continues to fight alone, looking closely into the eyes of her own demons. She is a hardboiled hero through to the end.



## Notes

- [1] Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 5*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, p. 171.
- [2] Sano Yoko, *Usu bakka: shinyaku sekai otogibanashi* (All Lies: A New Reading of World Fairy Tales), Tokyo: Kodansha, 1998, p. 206.
- [3] There is a popular Japanese TV series called *Kasoken no onna* (The Woman from Forensic Science, 1999 onwards, Asahi TV), but it does not exclusively focus on autopsy.
- [4] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. While Kristeva was criticised for underscoring this imaginary association, it is true that women are related to abjection in most cultures and religions. See Imogen Tyler's elaboration on the criticism made against Kristeva in her article, 'Against abjection,' *Feminist Theory* 10(1) (2009), 77–98. For more on the concept of abjection, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, 2002.
- [5] For an extensive study of this genre, see Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- [6] This is exactly the position of women at large that Gayatri Spivak describes in 'Can a subaltern speak?' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- [7] The phantom woman I mention here is the 'other woman' in Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985. I draw on this idea again later in this chapter.
- [8] For a further study on the Japanese 'fighting girl' in the popular media, see Tamaki Saito's analysis in *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- [9] The title is written in English in the original Japanese version (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997). The English hard cover edition published in 2003 by Kodansha International sold 18,000 copies in the United States and was nominated for The Edgar Awards, Best Novel, in the same year. The page references in this article are from the English version with the same title. Natsuo Kirino, *Out*, trans. Stephen Snyder, New York: Vintage International, 2005.
- [10] A *bento* is a single-portion meal packed in a disposable container, covering a wide range of Japanese cuisine, which are reasonably priced and readily available in convenience stores, supermarkets and railway stations throughout Japan. The contents range from regional specialties to home cooking. The factory in the novel produces the latter, and hence would be mainly sold for consumption by workers and students.
- [11] Kirino, *Out*, p. 48.
- [12] Kirino, *Out*, p. 51.
- [13] Kirino, *Out*, p. 51.
- [14] Kirino, *Out*, p. 75.
- [15] Kirino, *Out*, p. 23.
- [16] Irigaray elaborates in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) that the phallogocentric imagination has created a particular image of woman, which, like a ghost, hovers over living women. It is certainly, for women, a source of anxiety that urges them to switch on their relentless self-surveillance.
- [17] When the suffix 'o' is attached to a noun, it acquires the meaning of being precious as well as the speaker being polite. Young mothers of children in kindergarten have been feeling increasingly obliged to demonstrate their competence by making appealing boxed-lunches for their children.
- [18] For more information on the New Town projects and cultural divides in the Tokyo metropolitan districts, refer to Hiroki Azuma and Akihiro Kitada, *Tokyo kara kangaeru: kakusa, kogai, nashonarizumu* (Thinking in Tokyo: Class, Suburbs and Nationalism), Tokyo: NHK Shuppan Kyokai, 2007.

[19] Kirino, *Out*, p. 11.

[20] Howard W. French, 'A Tokyo Novelist Mixes Felonies,' *New York Times*, 176 November 2003.

[21] Greg Tate, 'Bottom Feeders,' *Village Voice*, 16 September 2003. The Vintage International 2005 version carries extracts from various book reviews, most of which indicate that the story reads as pertaining to the universal human condition, while some marginalise it as an issue peculiar to Japanese women.

[22] Kirino, *Out*, p. 15.

[23] Kirino, *Out*, p. 15.

[24] According to Lee Horsley, being a cynical outsider is the definition of the hardboiled hero. The story should, in addition, mirror the social injustice of the time. Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2009.

[25] Banana Yoshimoto's novel, *Kicchin* (Kitchen), was first published in Japanese by Fukutake Shoten in 1988. The film version of *Kicchin* is further romanticised by the soft-focused, slow-moving world that director Yoshimitsu Morita created to highlight human kindness. He also moved the setting from Tokyo to Hakodate, Hokkaido, for this purpose. See Yoshimitsu Morita, *Kicchin* (Kitchen), Shochiku, 1989, DVD.

[26] See Sigmund Freud, 'The uncanny,' trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, London: Vintage Books, 1999, pp. 217–56.

[27] Kirino, *Out*, p. 27.

[28] Kirino, *Out*, p. 197.

[29] Murakami Haruki, *After Dark*, trans. Jay Rubin, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. The Japanese title is *Afuta daku*. Murakami Haruki, *Afuta daku*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004. The violence takes place in room 404, which is the internet code for 'a page not found.' Even though the novel employs a style of magic realism, it is controversial. Should this have an implication that the violence did not take place, considering its resonance to the wartime memory? I discuss related issues in Rio Otomo, 'Risk and home: *After Dark* by Murakami Haruki,' *Japanese Studies* 29(3) (2009): 358–66.

[30] *Hikikomori* is an act of withdrawing from social activities and the person who does so while often living under the care of his/her parental home. Yoshida points this out in his reading of *After Dark* (2004). See Tsukasa Yoshida, 'Murakami san, "mirai=kibo" ho kai jidai ni "hikikomori bungaku" wa furukunai?' (Isn't *hikikomori* literature out of date when 'future' no longer equals 'hope', Mr. Murakami?) in *enTaxi*, 9 (2004): 138–42.

[31] Murakami Haruki, *After Dark*, trans. Jay Rubin, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, p. 74.

[32] Kirino further interrogates the power of eroticism in terms of woman's sexuality in her novel, *In*. See Kirino Natsuo, *In*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 2009. No English version is available to this date.

[33] Hirayama Hideyuki (Dir.), *Out*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004, DVD.

[34] *Out* is available on DVD (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004). The film received nominations for the Japan Academy Prize for Best Director, Best Main Actress (Mieko Harada) and Best Supporting Actress (Mitsuko Baisho). Prior to the film it was a serialised TV drama (Fuji TV, 1999) and was also a theatre production directed by Yumi Suzuki (2000, 2002), which were both critically acclaimed adaptations.

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