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Kanai Mieko

Oh, Tama!

translated by
Tomoko Aoyama and Paul McCarthy

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reviewed by Flora Roussel

Getting the ball rolling: Genealogy and 'kiterature'

Part of the Mejiro tetralogy, later expanded into the Mejiro series, *Oh, Tama!* was originally published in 1987 as a paperback.[1] In the novel, Kanai Mieko presents us with a freelance photographer, Natsuyuki, who one day is given the responsibility for Tsuneko's female cat, Tama. The loosely defined relationships among the characters of the novel—from the protagonist Natsuyuki to his half-brother Fuyuhiko to his past lover Tsuneko and her half-brother Alexandre—are balanced by the frequent presence of Tama, who is the nexus for these characters. Tsuneko, Tama's owner, never herself appears in the novel. Less an *animal farm* than a *human comedy,* Kanai's fiction delivers a humorous critique of gender and sexuality, a critique that was acknowledged with her being awarded the 27th Women's Literature Prize.

Its belated translation into English could not render the wordplay with 'tama' in the chapter's titles (viii, 175–76); yet translators Tomoko Aoyama and Paul McCarthy propose an insightful introduction that places *Oh, Tama!* in the genealogy of 'kiterature' (xii). While drawing mostly on Uchida Hyakken's *Nora ya!* (Oh, Nora!) (1957), Kanai inscribes her novel in a tradition containing countless works about cats, whose 'canonical' texts range from Baudelaire's poem 'Le chat (Viens, mon beau chat, sur mon coeur amoureux …)' (The Cat (Come resting on my heart, in love, my beautiful cat …)) in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) to Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I Am a Cat) (1905) to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Sometimes protagonists, sometimes companions, sometimes side characters, cats feed (on) literature. *Oh, Tama!*'s intertextuality enables Kanai to get the ball rolling: a critique of neglected issues and topics in this 'kiterature'. The following does not intend to draw the concise portrait of all the cats in the novel (intratextual, intertextual, supratextual, etc.)—that could become an article by itself. Rather it aims to provide a critical review of Kanai's work with regard to gender and sexuality.

Belly ball: Motherhood and fatherhood

As is pointed out in the introduction of the novel, Kanai addresses the themes of motherhood and pregnancy—themes which have not been considered in classical 'kiterature' (ix–x). The author

provides a humorous parallel between the cat Tama and her owner, Tsuneko, a parallel illustrated by the meaning of their names ('tama-chan' is often used for cats and 'Tsuneko' comprises 'neko' meaning 'cat'). Further, Tama is having five kittens and Tsuneko has a list of five so-called lovers as potential fathers of her child, (Natsuyuki; a psychiatrist Fuyuhiko; an ikebana master Ezaki; the owner of a building Morita; and her half-brother Alexandre—although his candidacy is based on a rumour). This mirroring effect duplicates Kanai's critique of motherhood and pregnancy in relation to fatherhood. When Natsuyuki welcomes his friend Alexandre, apparently visiting—and later on, staying—without notice, he lets the pregnant female cat in his apartment in too. Alexandre 'persuades' Natsuyuki to take care of Tama by pointing to his friend's lack of responsibility in assisting with Tsuneko's pregnancy (2). The author offers a displaced fatherhood, for Natsuyuki, who is one of the potential fathers of Tsuneko's not-yet-born child, comes to take care not of her, but of her cat. Kanai seems here to denounce the too hasty reduction of womanhood to motherhood, as if to be a woman means to be a mother. In her describing only fathers and men in her novel, with almost no women and mothers around, she reveals the absence of fathers in current Japanese society. In effect, *Oh, Tama!* displays only single fathers, which Kanai ironically depicts as lost and bereft, and single women that do not exist as mothers, as the relatively sparse information about them illustrates. For example, Natsuyuki's mother forgets about her other son, Fuyuhiko, and gets married three times, leaving her children behind (13, 115), and Alexandre's mother is not even interested in who Alexandre's father is (4). Tsuneko, for her part, just disappears while being apparently pregnant. These 'non-mothers' might be 'femme[s] fatale[s]' (77), yet they are less 'easy' women who enjoy sex than antiheroes of the social his/story. The shift of attention from mothers to fathers serves Kanai's deconstruction of gender expectations, and points to the still problematic work/life balance from which women suffer more than men due to this too hasty association of womanhood with motherhood.

However, toward the end of the novel, Natsuyuki gives away Tama's kittens (121)—although one of them, Nora, stays in the same building: the cat becomes Natsuyuki's landlady's, as an allusion to Hyakken (122). With this twist, Kanai does not turn the displaced fatherhood into a mere lack of responsibility again, for the ikebana master takes two cats with him (122); rather, she seems to criticise the control over women's sexuality. After having neglecting contraception during his sexual intercourse with Tsuneko (3), Natsuyuki might have understood the weight of fatherhood and refuses it: he goes as far as having Tama spayed (133–35), thereby making more explicit the sexual connotation of the word 'cat'. Interestingly, only Fuyuhiko is desperately looking for Tsuneko, ready to take care of her and the child—financially and emotionally (31–34), while the other ex-lovers gave her money before her disappearance (29–30). If, in the first part of the novel, Kanai focuses on the burden of motherhood for women, she now addresses control over women's bodies with regard to sexuality. In fact, as Alexandre underlines to Natsuyuki, Tama's operation might be the 'egoism of human beings, ignoring the importance of the animal life' (131). The author makes two points here: contraception has to be assumed by women; sexuality has been assumed by men. 'Animal life' could be a metaphor for the hysterical—from the Greek *hystera* (uterus) —an assertion of a sexist perspective on women's apparent hypersexuality. This view is reinforced by the growing sexism of the male characters in the novel, culminating in Alexandre calling two girls who live next door to Natsuyuki's apartment 'dish girls', that is, 'shallow down there' (139). With humour, Kanai inverts this insult by presenting the men themselves as being superficial (be it through their money or through their *freeter*-position), enjoying cleaning (Alexander and Fuyuhiko) and selling their sex (Alexandre), that is, serving themselves as dishes for free women, absent mothers.

A ball and chain: Invisibility and boys' club

Oh, Tama! succeeds in criticising motherhood, pregnancy and fatherhood, and delivers a humorous message concerning gender expectations while calling into question the conception of sexuality in Japanese society. One could even suggest that Kanai portrays herself in the 'lady novelist', acquaintance of Natsuyuki (139–40), who ironically points out, in a discussion with Natsuyuki and Alexandre about the names Tamao and Tama that 'some critics can't seem to distinguish between testicles and a penis. Just as some novelists can't seem to distinguish among a uterus, ovaries, and a vagina' (146). It is possible to infer a *mise en abyme* of the novel: by rounding off the edges of a patriarchal society, Kanai implies a critique of so-called classical literature, which talks about 'tama' (ball)/(jewell)/(globe) from their 'tama' (lens).

This *mise en abyme* further highlights the invisibility of women—not only in literature, but also in the novel itself. The main characters are male and form a sort of boys' club, even living together for a long time (53–120). This predominance of men might be understood as a vehicle for Kanai's critique, yet it also reiterates the invisibility of women, who seem to have no voice in *Oh, Tama!* and exist mostly through the male characters' memories and perspectives. Perhaps this picture should be read as a warning of the dis/illusion that comes from trying to fight norms with norms.

[1] A newer and slightly revised edition of the translation, with additional notes in the introduction, is available in Stone Bridge Press. See Mieko Kanai, *Oh, Tama! A Mejiro novel*, translated by Tomoko Aoyama and Paul McCarthy, Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2019.

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