

Portrayal of Women in Japanese Children's Literature

My name is Akiko Sueyoshi.

I am an author of children's literature in Japan.

I've been writing for nearly 40 years and have published almost 200 books, since my first book "*The Girl who Became a Monster*" was published in 1975.

Since 1996, I have been writing a script of puppet drama for NHK Educational TV which is titled "*Zawazawa-mori no Gankochan*" (or "*Rocky and her Friends*" in English), which is very popular among Japanese children.

So, I am better known as a writer of "*Gankochan*" than as an author of children's books.

However, my main profession is writing children's literature.

I don't think there is such a big difference between writing TV scripts and writing books for children, because the most important thing is how to create an interesting story.

I didn't plan to be a writer in the beginning.

In 1963, I started to work for a publisher where I specialized in editing children's literature.

In those days, lots of splendid Japanese children's literature was being published.

As an editor of children's books, I encountered many wonderful stories for children.

This experience guided me to become a writer after I resigned from the publishing company.

Luckily, my first book sold many copies, and my second book was awarded two newcomer prizes.

This gave me the opportunity to become a full time writer.

In 1987, I was requested to write a report about the portrayal of women in children's books in Japan by "UNESCO COURIE" magazine.

As I was interested in the subject, I happily accepted the offer.

I started by re-reading the works of Kenji Miyazawa who is one of the most popular Japanese authors ever.

I wanted to know how he described women in his books.

I'd like to begin with his works, though as I am not a professional critic however, I have to say first that this presentation will present my personal opinions.

Kenji Miyazawa, (male: 1896-1933) was a poet, a writer of children's literature, a devout Buddhist, a teacher of high school and a leader of local farmers in Iwate Prefecture, in north-east Japan.

He created many beautiful stories and poems which were very original from a religious and cosmopolitan point of view.

I am a great fan of his work, of course.

But, to my surprise, on re-reading his works, I couldn't find any strong female characters in his stories and books.

The first was his famous book, "*Night Train in the Milky Way*" (Ginga Tetsudou no Yoru, in Japanese, around 1930).

This story is about a young boy's experience with unusual passengers in a night train, and the friendship of two boys.

On the night of the Galaxy Festival, the main character Giovanni is walking to buy milk for his sick mother.

Suddenly, he finds himself boarding a night train, where he meets his best friend Campanella.

Traveling on the train along with Campanella, he comes to know that the train is heading toward heaven. He also realizes that Campanella has died when he tried to save another friend drowning in a river.

In this story, the main characters are all male; there are only a few minor female characters in the story.

In his another famous story "*Matasaburo the Wind*" (Kaze no Matasaburo, in Japanese, published in 1931), the main character is a little boy.

One stormy day, a strange looking boy with red hair transfers to a small primary school in the countryside

Whenever he does something strange, a strong wind would always blow.

His classmates think that he must be the legendary Wind Boy.

Then, after one windy day, he moves out of the village with his family.

In this story, his father is featured but the mother never appears, and although the teacher is never identified, it is obvious that he is a man by the way he talks.

Moreover, almost all the schoolchildren's names are boys.

In another of his books, "*Life story of "Gusuko Budori"*" ("Gusuko Budori no Denki" in Japanese 1932), there is a similar preponderance of male character.

This imbalance is understandable in view of the fact that, at that time, Japanese women had neither real position in society nor employment.

In that age, there was another famous author of children's literature in Japan, Nankichi Niimi (male:1913-1943).

He was born in Aichi Prefecture, central Japan.

After graduating from a University in Tokyo, he got back to his hometown where he taught at a girl's high school as a teacher, and died at 29.

His works are still popular among children and adults alike.

Although most of his works are emotional stories based on communication of animals and human beings, I found an interesting story about a wife and her mother-in-law in the story "*Watarou and the Cow*" (*Watarou-san to Ushi* in Japanese in 1942).

The main character, Watarou is a good sort of fellow, who lives with his old mother and equally old cow.

When he was young, he had a beautiful hard-working wife, and they loved each other.

The young wife has a strange habit of facing the wall when she eats, she doesn't face her family.

When asked why she does this by husband, she answers.

"I feel so sick when I look at mother-in-law's collapsed eye, that I can't eat my meal".

Watarou's mother has lost her eye when a piece of hay accidentally pricked it while she was weeding on the farm.

Upon hearing this answer, his mother says she will leave home, however, Watarou unhesitatingly separates from his wife, sending her back to her family.

He then looks after his mother.

I guess most of the readers at that time, had accepted his choice and thought of him as a dutiful son.

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There were no female writers of children's literature until Momoko Ishii published "*Nonchan on the Clouds*" (Non-chan Kumo ni Noru in Japanese in 1947).

Momoko Ishii (female:1907~2008)gave a bright dream to the people who were recovering from the damage of World War II .

In this story, a little girl misunderstands that her mother has cheated her.

She runs away from home in tears, and falls into a pond which has the clouds reflected on the surface.

She is knocked unconscious.

When she comes to, she finds she is on a cloud, where she meets the old "guardian of the clouds".

The author describes a typical Japanese middle class family of that age.

Nonchan's father is a white collar worker and her mother, though a housewife, an educated woman with a talent for singing.

She would have liked to go to a school of music, hoping to be a professional singer, but she is quite happy with the roles of housewife and mother.

This depiction of a mother who enjoys singing as a hobby, must have given a fresh and inspiring image to Japanese women of the time, even though she never has tried to have her own job outside.

In the 1960's, there was an unprecedented boom of children's literature.

More and more books were written by women and they contained more female characters.

They also described how young children were easily involved in events such as divorce or death.

"*Little Momochan*" (Chiisai Momo-chan in Japanese, 1964) was written by Miyoko Matsutani (female: born in 1926) who is one of the most popular female authors in Japan.

This story was the first one in Japan to feature a working woman.

Momo-chan's mother has chosen to go out to work and put her daughter in a nursery school. It means that she is a determined woman, because at that time, only children of a single parent or poor families were sent to such institutions.

Since the first Momo-chan's book was widely accepted by children, the author kept writing sequels reflecting her own life and featuring such topics as divorce and a death of the spouse. But the most important thing is that she wrote these stories for entertainment.

Momo-chan's adventures have remained popular with children and women ever since.

In "*The Hungry Pot*" (Harapeko onabe, 1970) written by Toshiko Kanzawa (female: born in 1924), the main character is an old cooking pot.

She has been tired of feeding other people, and decides to walk out, though the other kitchen utensils try to stop her.

The cooking pot eats everything she meets in her way, and becomes bigger and bigger and finally goes up to the sky to become the Big Dipper.

Thus the shape of the Big Dipper resembles a pot with a handle.

In the post-script, the author explains that she wanted to describe the "sudden feeling of emptiness that may come over a housewife, who spends all of her time working for her husband and children".

She describes the pot as a symbol of typical housewives at that time.

As this is an imaginary story, it might be easier for the author to express a housewife's dreams and longings.

In the 1970's, it was still difficult for women to combine housekeeping and a career, and people still distrusted single career women.

"*The Summer of my thirteenth year*" ("Jusan-sai no natsu", 1974) by Yoshiko Okkotsu (female: 1929-1984) uses a frigid bluestocking to represent a stereotypical image of an unmarried woman.

Little Rie's mother died during in childbirth, and her father is an irresponsible drunk.

Rie is taken care of by her old aunt, an unmarried English teacher.

She spends most of her time reading weighty books written in English and never gives any kind words to Rie.

Finally, Rie can no longer bear the icy atmosphere she lives in, and runs away to live with her father's current mistress.

She is a fat, vulgar, uneducated hairdresser living in a working-class suburb, but she nevertheless welcomes Rie with open arms.

The author describes two opposite types of women.

From the 1980s onward, it became normal for women to go out to work and they no longer had to make the choice between their jobs and their families.

The fathers, who appear in children's books of this period, all fit the stereotype of career-obsessed men.

They spend all their time at work and their relationships and have no time for their homes and families.

More and more divorce stories started to appear from this time.

In my book titled "*Mummy's little yellow elephant*" (Mama no kiiroii Kozou, 1985), I described the collapse of a family from the viewpoint of children.

The couple split up because of the husband's infidelity.

The mother, then, tries to obtain the driving license after making great efforts and buys an old car to broaden her horizons.

She does her best to get along without her husband, but it's not easy.

She has many small incidents, and even causes a car accident.

Her adventures are presented as comedy, but nevertheless she is shown as trying to win her independence.

This is an almost true story that happened to my best friend, and I was really impressed by her effort to create a new life and to have never-give-up spirit, no matter how many mistakes she made.

For this book, I was awarded "*Noma Award for Children's Literature*", one of the most prestigious prizes in Japan.

In "*Constant murmurs*" ("Zawameki Yamanaï" 1989), Keiko Takada (female: born in 1945) describes a housewife who is tormented by doubts about the validity of the life she is leading. She is a conscientious mother who dutifully runs the household and raises her children. She follows her husband as he was posted from one place to another, taking charge of the move each time and making great efforts to adapt to the new environment. Her husband doesn't help her around the house. They had two children, but the younger had died of an illness brought on by pollution and she feels guilty about the child's death. One day, she walks out leaving a note explaining to her husband that she wants to be on her own for three months to try and sort herself out. The husband, finding himself alone and incapable of looking after the home, calls in his mother-in-law. Three months later, the wife returns as promised. As a result of this escapade, the husband finally realizes importance of family life.

In the 1970s and 1980s, nearly all of the children's books which dealt with women facing problems in society were written by women. But the situation has changed since the early 1990s, when some male authors started to take an interest in women's issues. One of them is Hiko Tanaka (male: born in 1953). His "*Calendar*" ("Karenda" 1992) contrasts the women of his grand parent's generation with those of the younger generation. The older generation only knows the life of "daughters, wives and mothers", while the younger generation believes "a different life exists". Nowadays, more and more stories about women's issue are appearing, and they show the diversity of life style not only for women but also for men.

Takako Satoh (female: born in 1962) describes the reversal of gender roles in her novel "*Handsome Girl*" (1993).

Futaba is an 11 year old girl whose father used to be a baseball player on a farm team, and whose mother is an executive career woman working at a company far away from her home. Housework is therefore the father's role.

He has no job but occasionally babysits for other families.

Futaba is a good player on her school's baseball team.

On one hand she wants him to be a normal father, but on the other hand she likes having such a father as him.

However, her mother's situation changes, as her boss resigns due to illness and the new boss begins to bully her.

This makes her suffer from depression.

In this story, although women shown as becoming more independent, it is still tough for even capable women to get along well in society without the support of strong people.

Through studying many children's books, I realized that the portrayal of women in children's books in Japan truly reflects the history of women's role in Japan.

Our society is changing, and the diversity of values is accepted by more people. I am looking forward to seeing amore and more variety in the portrayal of women appearing in children's books in Japan from now on.

Thank you for listening.