

SLEUTHING WOMEN: GENDER IN THE ART OF JAPANESE DETECTIVE FICTION AND FILM

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ABSTRACT

Although it remains one of the most popular genres worldwide, detective fiction is usually regarded as a purely commercial form. Because of this, detective novels, short stories, and films are rarely subjected to the same critical scrutiny and attention as other, more respected modes of writing and representation. Nevertheless, because of its attention to the character of everyday life, detective fiction is a perfect case study for determining national attitudes towards gender. Generally speaking, women perform three different functions in Japanese detective fiction. They are either hapless victims, minor plot devices, or (on rare occasions) agents of detection themselves. This paper surveys several works of detective fiction, ranging from the early- to mid-twentieth century, to demonstrate the evolving function that women have played, both in the genre and in the society that the genre reflects.

KEYWORDS

Japanese Literature, Japanese Film, Women, Detective Fiction

Traditionally, detective fiction is regarded as a purely commercial form that lacks the substance of other genres. In accordance with this perception, many critics and readers alike believe that detective fiction merely follows a standard template: discussing crime and then describing the detective process (Hühm, 1987). However, even though it is a popular genre, detective fiction has often been a vehicle through which societies can express essential cultural ideas about race, gender, history, and more. In the case of Japanese detection, which includes both film and literature, the genre's history includes representations of women that reflect their evolving place in society. Using two books, *The Lady Killer* by Masako Togawa and *Devils in Daylight* by Junichiro Tanizaki, along with the film *High and Low* directed by Akira Kurosawa, this paper will discuss how Japanese women are represented in Japanese detective literature. According to each author's unique background, intentions of creating the work, and the era of creation, their descriptions of women either reinforce existing ideological assumptions about women or propose modifications to the existing social order.

In Akira Kurosawa's 1963 film *High and Low*, Reiko Gondo is a prototype for the "traditional" Japanese woman. The film's plot centers on Kingo Gondo, a millionaire, who is faced with a moral dilemma when his driver's son is mistakenly kidnapped. The true target of the kidnapping plot is Gondo's own son. Even though he has accidentally taken the wrong child, the criminal demands Gondo pay a ransom of thirty million yen. Mr. Gondo, who is in the middle of trying to secure enough shares to run the shoe company he has spent his life work for, faces confrontation from his colleagues. Finally, agonizing internal debate, he compromises and saves the boy with help from chief inspector Tokura.

Reiko Gondo, the wife of Kingo Gondo, is portrayed as a good wife and mother. Born into a rich household, her dowery has provided the wealth Mr. Gondo needed to enter business. Reiko Gondo plays a huge role in persuading Mr. Gondo to pay the ransom for his driver's son. While

Mr. Gondo paces anxiously around the room, Mrs. Gondo consoles the driver by saying, "I will ask on your behalf. Put your mind at ease." Her moral purity is indicated in her willingness to forgo the life of luxury she has always known in order to save someone else's child. For Gondo himself, who sees his identity bound up with his business success, this decision is much harder to arrive at.

Reiko Gondo displays characteristics of an educated and ideal woman in Japan. She is always dressed properly in kimono, and her speech remains soft and kind. Even in anxious situations and moments of contention, she often stands to the side, holding her son's shoulders in her arms and letting the men in the room make the decisions. As a moral center, she ironically occupies a peripheral role. Her idealism is a backdrop against which the moral struggle of the male character, Gondo, can take place. Reiko is also portrayed as sensitive and sympathetic. She cries when the driver cries. She is worried for the boy, even though he is not her son.

Throughout East Asia, the phrase "Wise Wife, Good Mother" illustrates the cultural prescription for correct female behavior. This phrase has been popular in countries including Japan, China, and Korea from the late 1800s to today. This standard became prevalent during the Meiji Restoration in Japan when the emperors wanted to stabilize society and increase the economy by emphasizing the role of wives and mothers. As the phrase "Wise Wife, Good Mother" succinctly suggests, women in Japan have historically been expected to master domestic skills, such as cooking and sewing, as well as take on the task of educating and training their children properly. This later work has long been seen as a necessary responsibility for the good of the family and the nation. People have debated this standard for many years: some have asserted that the phrase illustrates the highest compliment women can receive, while others argue that the phrase and its supporting ideology merely define and restrict women's position in society.

In many respects, Reiko embodies this phrase and the ideology that supports its construction. She accepts her husband's decision to mortgage their property at the risk of losing their fortune. Even though her own money has been instrumental in helping her husband achieve his financial position, she stands by and, like a "wise wife," does not interfere. She is also a good mother. By constructing her in such a way that she can exert her moral force from the periphery, Kurosawa utilizes Reiko Gondo to portray an ideal woman in the 1960s.

In 1946, following the Taisho period, suffrage without discrimination against sex emerged in Japan. As women's voices became more and more prominent, equality and diversity became more widespread in Japan. Made in 1963, after women in Japan had obtained a higher status, *High and Low's* Mrs. Gondo showcases different sides of women. She is a complete character: as a wealthy wife, she combines a spoiled childhood with courtesy and traditional "good wife" values.

At the same time, the film represents other forms of Japanese femininity. In particular, the drug addicts who appear in the film show a contrasting view of the feminine that divides along class lines. While Mrs. Gondo can restrain her need for wealth to enact her morality, the lower-class women in the film have little self-control and become easy victims. Towards the end of the movie, the kidnapper, Ginjirô Takeuchi, a medical intern, searching for the perfect victim to test the lethality of the heroin he plans to use to dispatch his accomplices, walks into an alley full of drug addicts. When Ginjirô Takeuchi first enters the alley, women with messy hair, black teeth, and scars on their faces approach him, as if he is invading their private land. Dressed in a white shirt and black sunglasses, Takeuchi contrasts sharply with the borderline, inhuman creatures that occupy the lowest level of Japanese society. Takeuchi's hair is clean and brushed back. His stony eyes swiftly sweep the alley, like a monster looking for its prey. His attention finally settles on one woman with curly hair and black teeth. She is scratching a piece of rotten wood when Takeuchi

approaches her, and her actions continue while Takeuchi stands behind her and watches her in silence. She finally leaves with Takeuchi after he whispers words into her ears. The woman departs with a satisfactory smile on her face as if Takeuchi is the savior of her drug addiction. The women who line the alley are portrayed as devils. The high contrast developed through the use of lighting and makeup removed their humanity, and while they remain steadfastly female, the women of Drug Alley operate at the farthest extreme from Mrs. Gondo. The particular woman that Takeuchi selects is no different from the rest. She simply has the bad fortune to be lured to her death because she exists for him only as an object of experiment. When the police, who have been trailing Takeuchi, finally enter the hotel room, the woman is dead. Her body lies on the floor of a cheap hotel, her eyes wide open, the injector still in her hands, white foam rolling from her mouth. In her, Takeuchi has found the perfect victim—vulnerable, gullible, and desperate.

A female drug addict character adds complexity to the crime film. Like other Japanese detective literature, *High and Low* need a character to display the "easy victim." This woman has been placed in the story, not only as a contrast with Mrs. Gondo's elegance but also as means for representing Takeuchi's own inhumanity. In both cases, the women in the film are peripheral to the central events. They are nonetheless central to its moral reckoning. In this scene, the full monstrousness of Takeuchi's character is revealed, but it can only be revealed at the expense of female life.

After World War II, during 1946-1954, drugs were constantly sold on the streets. As a result, stimulant addictions triggered social unrest in Japan, with increasing crimes and death due to health issues (NAGAHAMA, 1968). According to a study done by the Anti-Stimulant Drug Headquarters, from 1926 to 1954, 71.5% of males were abusing drugs, and 28.5% of females were using drugs (NAGAHAMA, 1968). Another group of statistics shows the trend of sex ratios in 1955-1962, just before when the movie was released in 1963. In this study, the percentage of males that used drugs increased to 75.5%, while women's percentage decreased to about 24.5% (NAGAHAMA, 1968). This statistic draws an interesting question into the film *High and Low*. With an increasing number of male drug addicts, why did the director Akira Kurosawa choose to feature mainly female drug addicts as victims? The answer lies in the thematic use the film makes of gender. The men in the film are active participants in the world. The female characters exert a magnetic force, but they are nevertheless inactive themselves. They are backdrops against which the drama of male heroism and depravity can be projected.

In contrast, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Devils in Daylight* portray women in a completely different manner. The protagonist Takahashi is a writer, and Sonomura is one of his best friends. Sonomura claims that he has cracked a secret code that tells him where a murder will take place. Worried for his friend's mental stability, Takahashi goes to Sonomura's house even though he doesn't believe in his friend's nonsense. Through peepholes in the side of a building, Takahashi and Sonomura witness a shivering crime. A man and a woman are in the room, manipulating a naked male body. After taking photos of the corpse from different angles, they drag the dead male and throw him into a bathtub. The man and the women then pour a chemical mixture into the bathtub. Foams gradually form and eventually swallow the corpse into nothing.

After witnessing the horrendous crime, Sonomura and Takahashi propose different explanations. Takahashi wants to leave the scene immediately and forget what he has just witnessed. On the other hand, Sonomura says, "the fun has only just begun." During the car ride home, Sonomura shares how he wants to meet the man and woman — the two "psychopath" killers. After a long period of persuading his friend, Takahashi gives up and leaves Sonomura to face this unnecessary

danger himself. Not surprisingly, Sonomura falls in love with the woman, Eiko. Takahashi is disappointed in Sonomura and decides not to be a part of his plan.

Later, Takahashi receives a letter from Sonomura. The letter begins with the following line: "Please consider this letter my last will and testament." In the letter, Sonomura describes how he has discovered that Eiko and the man are planning to kill him, using the same method they witnessed through the peepholes. Sonomura admits that his discovery results from his "insane love" for Eiko; he is ready to die for her entertainment. In the end, however, after Takahashi observes the death of Sonomura, he discovers the truth when he sees Sonomura's living figure in his house.

Eiko is a former actress in a theater troupe. Her theatrical success has been the product of her beauty and intelligence. However, due to her unusual and innate sexual drive, she has been expelled from the theater. Eiko proceeds to form an interest in exploiting rich men for money. A man called "S," who previously worked for Sonomura, meets Eiko and plans the entire crime scene in accordance with Sonomura's weird detective interests. Everything Sonomura has seen through the peepholes has been staged by "S," knowing that Sonomura's personality would lead him to meet the woman.

Throughout the majority of the novel, Eiko is portrayed as a goddess. At first sight, Sonomura falls in love with Eiko's body. Her beauty is like a drug to Sonomura: he cannot resist. On top of her beauty, she exhibits extreme intelligence and the ability to perform the "crime." She remains calm the entire time, and her intelligence functions on two levels. The first is in the fabrication of the crime (she does not really kill and dissolve a man with chemicals), and the second is her ability to lure Sonomura into her trap. He cannot help but fall into the trap of love with the image he has of her, even if that image is essentially a projection of his own fantasy about what a woman could be like. Furthermore, when he learns the truth about Eiko, namely that she is merely after his money and has been fooled by the staged crime, instead of feeling angry, he is even more intrigued by her. Sonomura gives Eiko all of his fortunes and asks her to perform the same crime that she did on the other man in the bathtub to him. Eiko's intelligence and beauty sexually attract Sonomura. Because of his narcotic feeling for Eiko, he cannot resist.

In contrast to the drug addict *High and Low*, Eiko is revered. Instead of serving as an easy victim in the story, she makes Sonomura and Takahashi victims by manipulating them with her feminine features and superior intelligence. *Devils in Daylight* was published in 1918 in Japan. Given its production in the early twentieth century, Eiko is even more intriguing. From 1920 to 1930 in Japan, detective fiction became a prevalent genre. However, despite its popularity, women remained absent from the industry (Kawana, 2010). During that time in Japan, women were fervent readers, but they were rarely writers. Women in Japan would read abundant detective fiction, passing books along to their daughters. This tradition of generational readership ensured women's place in detective fiction, but only as consumers, often of male fantasies about the role of women either as victims or devils. The absence of female detective writers, combined with large amounts of female readers, created interesting dynamics. It is reasonable to assume that male writers like Junichiro Tanizaki would intentionally portray "positive" women characters to appeal to his female audience. In addition, a lack of female writers at that time could also reinforce sexual representations of women in literature, especially detective literature, where crimes often take place against women.

Ideas like the "New Women" and the "Modern Girl" emerged in Japan at that time (Baran). The New Women were girls who were considered "liberal." They were advocates for love, including homosexual affection. They drank alcohol and even visited brothels. Like the New Woman, "Modern Girls" were usually young ladies who were "sexually liberated" (Baran). Both the

Modern Girl and New Woman in Japan were heavily influenced by western culture. Written in 1918, Eiko resembles the New Woman/Modern Girl. Although there are no detailed descriptions of her drinking, she definitely challenges traditional roles by being sexually active and performing for Sonomura to get his money.

Unlike Mrs. Gondo, Eiko contradicts the long-lasting Meiji ideology regarding wives and motherhood. According to Baran, New Women and Modern Girls were “highly criticized” during that time, mainly because they contradicted the traditional role that places male satisfaction before female fulfillment. So why did Tanizaki choose to glorify such a controversial female character, emphasizing her beauty and intelligence? In 1918, Junichiro Tanizaki traveled to many different places and was influenced by western and modern themes. His house was western-styled, and he lived a bohemian life. All these could possibly explain why he chose to conceive an unconventional, like Eiko.

In the novel *The Lady Killer* by Masako Togawa, the female characters are middle-class or middle upper-class women, and their traits are comparatively less distinct than what appears in *High and Low* and *Devils in Daylight*. The male protagonist in *The Lady Killer* is Ichiro Honda. Honda has two lives. During the daytime, he is a respectful, good-looking, and intelligent computer expert. On the weekends, he visits his wife, who lives in Osaka. At night, he hunts women to fulfill his sexual desires. He owns a small apartment where he changes into different identities and keeps a journal that describes each of his female victims.

Within the span of a few months, two of the women Honda seduces are murdered. Gradually, even though it seems impossible, Honda begins to believe that the deaths of these women have something to do with him. His first prey is a woman called Kimiko Tsuda, a cashier at a supermarket. His second is Fusako Aikawa, an English typist. When he meets Aikawa, Honda presents himself as an Algerian student because he believes that being from a developing country will make Aikawa protective over him. Later that night, Aikawa invites Honda to her apartment, and they sleep together. Later, he learns that the woman has been murdered and that the body has been discovered by a milk boy. He is disgusted by the fact that the woman he has just kissed has died. The idea of connecting his affairs with the murder never occurs to him.

Honda then becomes a foreign journalist when he is talking with a student called Mitsuko. Later that day, almost routinely, Honda is invited to Mitsuko’s apartment. However, when Honda tries to kiss her, she resists firmly. This is not what Honda expects, so he leaves in disappointment and anger. Since Mitsuko does not work out for the night, he decides to visit his first victim, Fusako Aikawa, to fulfill his sexual needs. To his surprise, he discovers Aikawa strangled and dead. Honda then realizes how the death of Aikawa resembles the death of the cashier that he slept with several weeks before. Both were strangled to death at night, both were single women who lived alone, and both had slept with Honda. What is more interesting is that the cashier was killed on the night when Honda had sex with Aikawa, and Aikawa was murdered on the day when he had sex with Mitsuko, or at least he planned to have sex with Mitsuko that night.

Then, Honda goes back to Osaka to spend Christmas with his wife. She is a rich woman, but she cannot be intimate with Honda because of her fear of pregnancy. They dance and laugh and talk during Christmas. When Honda leaves Osaka, he decides to visit Mitsuko. Again, not surprisingly, she is found dead, like the previous two women. Honda is terrified. He realizes how, in each case, the person who can prove him non-guilty has been killed later on. The police investigation soon begins, and Honda’s connections with all three dead women are quickly established.

Kimiko Tsuda, Fusako Aikawa, and Mitsuko are essential in establishing the plot because they are seen as easy victims. As characters, they are stronger than the drug addict in *High and Low*. They are middle-class women who are single and gullible. They want to love and are easily attracted by Honda's fake foreign identities. By emphasizing the gender of these three characters, an emphasis affirmed by the title, Togawa underscores how women are vulnerable when facing people like Honda, who is good-looking, wealthy, and intelligent.

The novel was published in 1985, a time when Japan had won a relatively stable place on the world stage. Nevertheless, Honda's decision to dress like a foreigner to accomplish his conquests reveals a deeper attitude among Japanese women at the time. Togawa reveals that Japanese women are prone to romanticizing otherness as a stand-in for security. The women are easy victims because the relative luxury of their lives permits them to fall prey to the fantasy of the other. In some respects, the victimhood of the female characters does not serve simply to reinforce the stereotype of their social position or dispensability. Instead, their victimhood symbolizes a larger critique of modern bourgeois aspirations. The women are still vehicles, but the target of critique extends beyond the narrower dimension of gender.

Honda's wife, the actual murderer, is an intelligent, cold, and wealthy woman. In contrast to Honda's prey in the novel, she represents upper-class women. Honda's wife is like a combination of Mrs. Gondo and Eiko: she has Mrs. Gondo's prosperous family background and Eiko's level of intelligence. A more well-rounded and 3D character like Honda's wife shows how, by the 1980s, women's status in Japan had increased. Although women in 1985 were still expected to remain courteous and quiet, and although they were still expected to be dutiful housewives, society in 1980s in Japan allowed women to work and express their opinions and styles (Lebra, 1985).

The Lady Killer, unlike *High and Low* or *Devils in Daylight*, was written by a female author — Masako Togawa. As a woman, Togawa portrays women more realistically, often incorporating her own life experiences in them. As a result, the women protagonists in *The Lady Killer* are diverse and complete. The novel describes women of different occupations and classes. In addition, as *The Lady Killer* became a bestseller in Japan, the status of female Japanese detective novelists increased, and women became more involved in the industry.

In conclusion, detective literature in Japan portrays women in different ways. However, they mostly correspond to the reality, which includes the traditional women, the intelligent and upper-class women, the lower-class drug addicts, and the middle-class single women who are easy victims. Nevertheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that there are millions of Japanese detective fiction that incorporate women in different manners. The two books and one film discussed in this passage cannot possibly include all styles. Despite stereotypes of women portrayed in literature, these works have documented women's growth in Japanese society for centuries.

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