

**Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan  
Through the Lens of Yoshiya Nobuko's *Hanamonogatari***

**Elena Paulsen**  
University of Minnesota

It is puzzling that the schoolgirl is not more often part of scholarly conversation about gender and sexuality in prewar Japan, despite the significant role that girls' education played in shaping modern Japanese gender roles. *Shōjo* (adolescent girl) popular culture, which evolved in response to increasing female literacy in the early twentieth century, has also had a lasting influence that continues into the present day, particularly in the form of *shōjo manga* (girls' comics).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the lack of attention to schoolgirls is because they are often subsumed under the umbrella of *ryōsai kenbo* ("Good Wife, Wise Mother"), which was, after all, the guiding principle of girls' education starting in 1899. However, while certainly *shōjo* magazines contained didactic and moralizing content to model proper feminine behaviour, to stop the analysis there is to only scratch the surface of what schoolgirls and *shōjo* popular culture can tell us about gender and sexuality in modern Japan. A *shōjo* was by definition not yet a wife or a mother, and many girls who attended secondary school lived in dormitories away from their parents' supervision. As a result, a *shōjo*'s identity extended beyond her duties to her parents or future husband and children. In *shōjo* magazines, girl readers found a space to identify with other girls as individuals and to explore their relationships with them. Consequently, *shōjo* magazines played a crucial role in the construction of an imagined, virtual community of girlhood in prewar Japan.<sup>2</sup> I present below my translation of "Pear Blossoms" (*Nashi no hana*, 1919) by Yoshiya Nobuko (1896-1973) in order to provide a glimpse into the kind of Taishō-period *shōjo* culture fostered between the pages of such girl's magazines.

The genre of *shōjo* magazines was spearheaded by the publication of *Shōjo Kai* in 1902, followed by *Shōjo Sekai* in 1906, *Shōjo no Tomo* in 1908, *Shōjo Gahō* in 1912, and *Shōjo Club* in 1923, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup> These magazines tried to differentiate themselves from each other so as to stand out in the competitive market. They also evolved over time to meet new demands and gain new readership. For instance, *Shōjo no Tomo* was initially a rather straight-laced example of the genre, designed to appeal to parents and educators more than girls; but in the 1930s, under the leadership of Uchiyama Motoi, the magazine developed into a handbook for sophisticated, stylish urbanite girl readers. At the same time, it is possible to identify common features among the numerous *shōjo* magazines. The exaggeratedly large eyes that one sees in *shōjo* manga today were first developed by illustrators of these magazines, Yumeji Takehisa and Nakahara Jun'ichi in particular. Other prominent motifs are drifting flower petals, sparkles, and fluttering ribbons.

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<sup>1</sup> See Deborah M. Shamoan, *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), for a detailed examination of the genealogy of *shōjo* popular culture from the Meiji period to the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> See Miyako Inoue, *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the evolution of early girls' magazines from "for girls" columns in boys' magazines to their own genre, see Imada Erika, "*Shōjo*" *no shakaishi* (Keisō Shobō, 2022).



Image 1 and Image 2. Covers of *Shōjo Gahō*. Left: September, 1916. Right: September, 1926. Cover art by Takabatake Kashō (1888 - 1966). Wikimedia commons.

Yoshiya Nobuko's *Hanamonogatari* (Flower Tales), a series of more than fifty short stories published mainly in *Shōjo Gahō* between 1914 and 1926, were instrumental in defining what made a shōjo story *feel* like a shōjo story. The longevity of the series is a testament to its explosive popularity. *Hanamonogatari* marked an important turning point in Japanese literature: as poet and critic Satō Michimasa describes, earlier stories published in girls' magazines were either didactic and moralizing, clearly written to satisfy the tastes of adults, or they were transparent adaptations of stories that had first appeared in boys' magazines. *Hanamonogatari* heralded the advent of a literary culture that was uniquely "for girls."<sup>4</sup>

What then were the features that enabled the success of this genre? The most notable feature is excess. Yoshiya's prose is filled with extravagant metaphors to describe hair, clothing, scenery, and, above all, emotions. In the story "Night-Blooming Flowers," for example, the tender, girlish feelings of the heroine Tamaki are described variously as being like the breast of a dove caught in spring rain, like the plucked string of a broken violin, like a golden fan abandoned on the shore, and like a "small pink vessel" out of which "beautiful, milk-coloured tears" are apt to spill — all within a single paragraph. The urgency of emotion is further conveyed through her enthusiastic use of punctuation, either slowing the reader down with the use of ellipses or speeding them up with a well-placed em dash. Tense is also used in service of emotion: Yoshiya is apt to move freely between tenses in a given scene, switching from past to present to move the reader closer to the characters' experience. Another prominent feature in Yoshiya's stories is a preoccupation with all things exotic – sometimes Chinese but more often Western – which is in keeping with the missionary school setting of many of her stories. Since familiarity with European languages was a mark of sophistication, Yoshiya is wont to sprinkle occasional English words into her stories as a nod to her readers.

In terms of plot, most *Hanamonogatari* stories are a variation of the same: A schoolgirl develops intense, passionate feelings for another girl, or occasionally a teacher, but, due to

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<sup>4</sup> Satō Michimasa, *Nihon Jidō Bungaku no Seiritsu/Josetu* (Daiwa Shobō, 1985), 136. Despite their seminal importance, few of the *Hanamonogatari* have been translated into English. At the time of this writing, the only such publication is "Yellow Rose," translated by Sarah Frederick (Expanded Editions, 2016). Translations of "Lily of the Valley" and "Evening Primrose," can be accessed on the edenstranslations Wordpress blog.

various forces outside of her control, such as graduation, marriage, or death, the two are separated forever. Only a handful of *Hanamonogatari* stories have happy endings. Indeed, the appeal of the stories is the pathos conjured by the end of the heroine's girlhood. *Hanamonogatari* uses flowers as a metaphor for girls. Each instalment takes a different flower as its title, and over the course of the story it is revealed which character corresponds to that flower. Like flowers, girlhood is fragile, waiting only to be scattered by the wind.

Short and dreamlike, "Pear Blossoms" is a story that brings together many of the themes discussed above. The first half of the story describes a happy afternoon in which two girls climb a tower together and admire a pear orchard in the distance. One year later, only one of the pair climbs the tower: her friend, we are told, is "no longer on this earth." Through tears, she thinks she sees her friend's red *obi* (the sash worn with a kimono) in the distance, and, in her desperation to be reunited, throws herself from the tower. Not only does the story showcase the distinctive features of Yoshiya's sentimentalism and "girly" aesthetic, it also touches upon questions of sexuality (how do we interpret the relationship between the characters?) and suicide (what narrative purpose does death serve in the story?).

"Pear Blossoms" can be effectively used in the classroom, especially with these two articles that offer contrasting frameworks for how to analyze the story: 1) Deborah Shamoan, "Prewar girls' culture (shōjo bunka), 1910-1937," in *Passionate Friendships: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 29-57; and 2) Jennifer Robertson, "Dying to tell: Sexuality and suicide in imperial Japan," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 1 (1999): 1-35. Shamoan warns against an anachronistic reading of "S" culture as queer, when it was in fact normative at the time. Robertson, on the other hand, examines the phenomenon of female double suicide in the 1920s and '30s as unambiguous evidence of lesbianism. One might even experiment with assigning half the class the Shamoan reading and the other half the article by Robertson to compare the different interpretations of the story that are likely to result.

As a follow-up, students could be tasked with reading Chapter 3 of Michiko Suzuki's (2020) *Becoming Modern Women*, entitled "Yoshiya Nobuko and the romance of sisterhood." The information Suzuki provides in that chapter will allow students to rethink their assumptions by eliding a simple yes or no to the question of homosexuality. Instead, Suzuki points to the historical constructedness of sexuality by describing how early twentieth century sexology informed Yoshiya's depiction of "romantic friendship" as an important developmental phase. At the same time, Suzuki reads potential resistance into the excessive melancholy of *Hanamonogatari* and the conspicuous silences of Yoshiya's breathless, "stuttering" prose. Her detailed analysis will allow students to access the subtext of these carefully crafted stories.

### **Pear Blossoms**

(*Nashi no hana*)

Yoshiya Nobuko 1919

An old tower, and within, two girls ascending—— inside the gloomy tower——.  
They climb the narrow, rickety ladder, tentatively placing their feet..  
“.....”

The dark blue sleeves of the girl in front are long, and her red *obi* is eye-catching——  
—. As for the girl climbing behind, her flannel kimono is olive, the color of a Japanese

nightingale, tied with an *obi* the same shade as the breast feathers of that bird. Both wear *zōri* sandals over white tabi socks, with fashionable red thongs, certainly with red thongs.....

“It’s dangerous, here, hold my hand.”

The girl in front with the crimson *obi* looked back as she spoke.

“No, that’s alright.”

The girl with the cream-colored *obi* flashed a smile.

“But what if you fall from all the way up here, that wouldn’t do at all.....”

Half-smiling, the girl with the crimson *obi* intently held out her hand.

What a beautiful hand, those arms, pure white like ivory, but warm with pulsing blood——.

“It’s fine, I won’t fall!”

The girl below lightly shook her head. She had blithely cut her glossy black hair in a bob, which now gently brushed her collar..

“But—— just in case—— it really wouldn’t do——”

In the end, the beautiful arm reaches out, and slender fingertips firmly grip the hand of the girl in the cream-colored *obi*.

The spring day was coming to an end.

The languid air—— it stagnates, inside the old tower that light from outside slowly trickles into——. The two girls, their clasped hands somewhat hot, in their hearts they hold a feeling of gentle perspiration.

The two of them finally arrived at the top of the tower.

“My, it’s a lot taller than it looked from the outside.”

“It is.”

The two of them huddled close to the old handrail at the top of the tower, from which half the red paint was peeling.

The sunlight of late spring evening now shines aslant onto the tower, its long shadow stretches diagonally.

As if dazzled, the cream-colored girl raised a hand to her eyes.

“There—— a river..... a river.....”

The child in the crimson *obi* pointed her finger, there, over there.....

Gathered together like pure-white clouds——

“.....If I climb with you

Up to a high vantage point,

The country of spring,

And the distant white river,

And the ringing morning bell.....<sup>5</sup>

.....It’s just like that poem by Akiko-sama,<sup>6</sup> isn’t it.....”

The girl in the crimson *obi* said, as if in a dream.....

A sudden burst of laughter from the girl in the cream-colored *obi*.

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<sup>5</sup> My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Yosano Akiko (1878-1942). Considered one of the premier female poets of modern Japan, together with Higuchi Ichiyo (1872-1896).

“.....That’s not it! You’re nearsighted aren’t you..... Those are pear blossoms—— there’s an orchard over there, you know.”

When the girl in the crimson *obi* heard this, she turned pink and laughed.

“Well——”

“But..... it’s nice, isn’t it. Should I be near-sighted, too? Your blurry way of seeing things creates illusions, I’m jealous,” the girl in the cream-colored *obi* said, and laughed some more.

“Pear blossoms..... pear blossoms..... so pretty..... so pure-white and fuzzy.....” The girl in the crimson *obi* gazed at the distant cluster of flowers.

“Yes—— but they’re fleeting, those flowers—— the kind of flowers that seem likely to have disappeared by the time you’ve reached them,” said the cream-colored girl——

“Oh!—— The evening moon——”

The girl in the crimson *obi* cried out.

“The evening moon—— Ah... how fleeting the pear blossoms, but even more fleeting is the evening moon above those pear blossoms.....,” the girl in the cream-colored *obi*—— solemnly murmured.

“And us.....?”

“——I don’t know.....”

A year later.

The pear blossoms blooming as before——

A girl climbs the old tower alone.

Serge fabric the color of a Japanese nightingale, and an *obi* the color of breast feathers. —— One half of the pair that ascended these steps the year before. In the same attire as on that day—— However, the girl’s face has grown thin and haggard—— some sorrow has assailed the poor young thing——.

Gasping and gasping she climbs to the top of the tower, but no kind helping hand is extended to her.

The air in the tower on that day had been dim and languid, making one feel sweaty, but now it is slightly cool——. Finally the girl arrives at the top of the tower.

The red, peeling handrail, although exposed to wind and rain, remains.

She approaches the railing—— looks across, at what looks like an immense white floating cloud, the pure-white pear blossoms——. Just like the year before—— and again the same sunshine of late spring, which like last year the girl blocks with her small hand.

“Over there..... a river..... a river.....”

Today, the girl in the crimson *obi* who had called out those words is no longer beside her—— her small form is no longer on this earth.

“Over there—— the evening moon——”

And the person who had called that.

“The evening moon—— Ah..... how fleeting the pear blossoms, but even more fleeting is the evening moon above those pear blossoms.....”

“And us.....?”

“.....I don’t know.....”

The exchange atop the tower that day! A year later, the cream-colored girl stands all by herself on the tower. Looking across at the pear blossoms—— and at the same faint evening moon.....

The girl stared fixedly at it all, as if being drawn in. Her eyes became misty—— the outline of the pear blossoms at that time—— her deceased friend's face floated indistinctly in her mind's eye—— the fluttering of her light, navy blue sleeves as she pointed to the top of the tower, beckoning——.

“.....”

The girl on the tower raised her voice in a cry.

What did she call? Presumably it was that name.....

To the faint, distant beyond, her blue sleeves, the color of the shadows underneath the flowers, spread further, her white finger pointing to the tower, beckoning—— even now, her crimson *obi* standing out clearly from amongst the faint white flowers, like the kindling light of a fire.....

“.....”

When she called her friend's name a second time—— the body of the girl atop the tower grew light, almost weightless—— and dropped from the tower.

The cream-colored obi untangled, went flying in the wind, scattered in the air.

“Cursed tower.”

People called it that, and the door to the tower was firmly locked forever.

——An incident at dusk in late spring, when the pear blossoms bloomed.

A girl climbed the old tower and, in a fit of madness, fell from the top.

“Cursed tower.”

People feared the tower.

However, what was the spell to which the beautiful victim who fell from the tower lost her life?— That, there is no way of knowing.

fleeting          the pear blossoms  
still more  
the evening moon above the flowers  
alas    all the more  
fleeting          sorrowful  
the maiden of the tower, who,  
chasing the illusion of her lost friend,  
herself entered into the flowers' shadow

The old tower with the peeling, red-painted handrail remains unopened, the key to the gate rusts. Even now it is completely shut up. The pear blossoms yet glimmer below the sky of late spring..... Moreover, the evening moon, the twilight—— how very——.