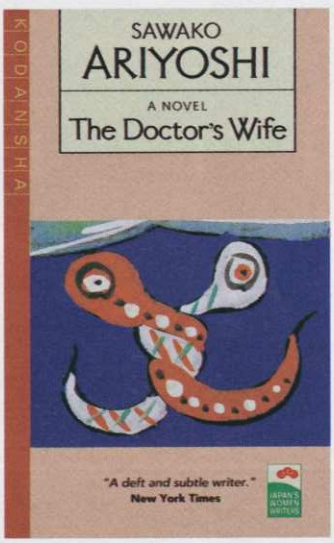
The Doctor's Wife

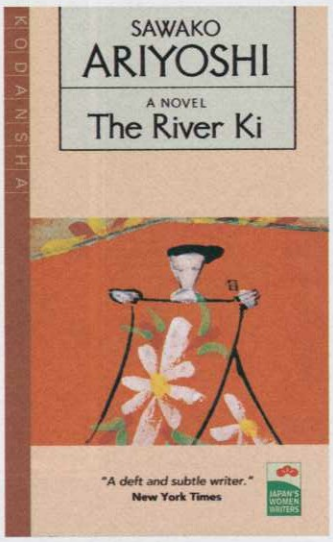
Ariyoshi Sawako, Translated by Hironaka Wakako and Ann Siller Kostant,
Paperback edition published by Kodansha International in 1981, 174 pages, US$12.

The River Ki

Ariyoshi Sawako, Translated by Mildred Tahara,
Paperback edition published by Kodansha International in 1981, 243 pages, US$12.

By Charlotte S. Pfeiffer





Japanese women intrigue me. I marvel at the strong, independent spirits underlying their quiet, humble demeanors. In the central characters of the novels *The Doctor's Wife* and *The River Ki*, Ariyoshi Sawako, in her beautiful compressed prose, captures this mysterious blend and reveals the remarkable ability of Japanese women to meet the demands they and other members of the society make on them.

In the novel *The Doctor's Wife*, Ariyoshi tells the story of the two women behind Hanaoka Seishu, the Japanese doctor who developed an anesthesia that made surgery possible and who in 1805 performed the first known operation under anesthesia, 37 years before the use of ether in the United States and 42 years before the use of chloroform in England. At the beginning of the novel eight-year-old Kae gets a glimpse of Otsugi, the woman reputed to be the most beautiful in the region and immediately falls in love with her and anyone connected to her, including her loquacious, unkempt husband who serves as the country doctor of Kae's grandfather. Thirteen years later Otsugi visits Kae's father to request his daughter's hand in marriage for her son, Seishu, who has just begun his medical training in Kyoto. The father is shocked. After all, Kae is from a prominent, affluent family, and Seishu, the son of a doctor and a student of medicine himself, does not enjoy as high a social status. Kae, on the other hand, is thrilled at the prospect of becoming the daughter-in-law of the woman she adores. When the father rebuts the offer with the explanation that his daughter cannot possibly wait to marry until Seishu returns home from medical school because she will then be 24 years old, Otsugi calls for an immediate marriage with the groom in absentia.

The wedding ceremony at the groom's house takes place with a famous medical book sitting in the chair of the groom, and Kae becomes a member of the Hanaoka family without ever having seen her husband. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law get along well – until Seishu returns home from Kyoto. As soon as he reenters the household, however, everyone's attention turns to him and his medical pursuits. Kae begins to feel like an outsider, and jealousy takes over. "So it came to pass," the reader learns, "that the beautiful intimacy between the two – the bride and the mother-in-law who had sought her – terminated upon the arrival of the loved one they had to share" (58).

The young doctor collects stray cats and dogs. The animal's strange behaviors and subsequent deaths soon reveal that Seishu is experimenting on them with different substances that might serve as an anesthesia. After determining the ingredients and dosage that work on animals without ill effects, he faces another challenge: finding the proper dosage for a human. Otsugi proposes that her son experiment on her. Kae then immediately counters with the offer of herself. After much contention between the two women, Seishu agrees to experiment with both of them. After the first experiment on Kae, she begins to have headaches and trouble with her eyes. She remains silent about these problems, however, and her husband, absorbed in his work, fails to notice them. After the second experiment, Kae loses her sight completely.

Years later as Kae sits by the bed of her sister-in-law who is dying from an incurable illness, Kae expresses her regret that Seishu's sister did not marry because of assuming so many responsi-

bilities in the home, and the sister replies that she feels fortunate not to have married. She asks Kae, "'Don't you think men are incredible? It seems ... that an intelligent person like my brother ... would have noticed the friction between you and Mother.... But throughout he shrewdly pretended he didn't see anything ... which resulted in both you and Mother drinking the medicine.... Well, isn't it so? .... I think this sort of tension among females ... is ... to the advantage ... of ... every male'" (163). The sister recognizes that Seishu's medical success has come only through the sacrifice of the women devoted to him and his work.

Seishu has his wife buried in front of his mother. Kae's tombstone is larger than Otsugi's. Larger than both, however, is the tombstone of Seishu. Ariyoshi closes the novel with the short yet powerful statement which seems to express her view of the fate of women: "If you stand directly in front of Seishu's tomb, the two behind him, those of Kae and Otsugi, are completely obscured" (174). The final resting places of the two women echo the positions they consciously chose in life.

The novel *The River Ki* chronicles the lives of three women of successive generations as they accept or reject the traditional role of women in their society. Hana, whose mother died when she was a baby, grows up under the guidance of her grandmother, who sees that Hana gets a good academic education as well as the training in the arts that was "expected of a daughter of a distinguished family" (11). Hana does not question her grandmother's decision for her to marry into the Matani family, even though their family status is far inferior to that of the Kimoto family, nor does she question the tradition that, once married, she owes her loyalty and devotion to her husband's family. She dutifully supports her husband, a successful politician and a husband known for his "scandalous record of amorous dallyings" (148); she births and nurtures five children, including the much-desired eldest son; she serves as a submissive and loving daughter-in-law; and she gains the respect of the village people. In her eyes, however, her failure to instill a respect for the traditional female role in her daughter, Fumio, her second child, clouds all of her accomplishments.

Encouraged by a radical teacher to be "modern in every respect" (94), Fumio has no interest in the traditional arts of the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and the *koto* (Japanese zither) and favors such activities as discussing modern fiction with friends who share that interest; writing articles attacking the men and women who accept a male-dominated society; taking part in marathon races and going fishing; and visiting her uncle, a second son who shuns society and spends his time reading and thinking. Fumio finds both her mother, Hana, and the home Hana makes for her "old-fashioned" (109, 113).

Fumio marries a man of her own choosing in a Western-style wedding ceremony. After the birth of a son, Fumio's husband is sent to China by the bank who employs him. His family goes with him and for a while prospers. A second son is born in China, becomes sick, and dies. When Fumio becomes pregnant again, she decides to return to her family's home in Japan to have her third child. During this time she begins to submit to some of the Japanese traditions that are important to her mother.

Fumio's third child, Hanako, carries on the line of strong women in the family. She chooses a less rebellious path than her mother, however, and has, to her grandmother's delight, "a genuine affection for things of the past" as well as a respect for the present and the future. At the end of the novel, as Hanako journeys from her grandmother's home back to Tokyo, she looks "at the vast, mysterious ocean whose color changed as the sunlight played upon the waves" (243). She knows that life is not static but moves forward. She accepts the Japanese-honored art of compromise and achieves the beautiful sense of balance that graces so many Japanese women.

Ariyoshi writes in a tight, lyrical prose. She tells her stories through action and dialogue rather than lengthy prose. Her vivid female characters show their indomitable spirits through their deeds and words, and the author develops the inner life of these women as much by what they leave unsaid and undone as by what they say and do.

The author intensifies the impact of her words by the use of metaphor. In the novel *The Doctor's Wife*, Kae sees herself, like the animals, as useful to the family only in what she can contribute to Seishu's success. She believes that in her pregnancy "the Hanaokas would stuff her for nine months until the baby arrived, and then expect her to die" (77). In *The River Ki*, Hana loses her taste for the fruit of the persimmon tree grafted from a tree in her home region as she establishes herself in her husband's family and region, and she realizes that "the loneliness experienced by a mother who had given her daughter away in marriage was like the bittersweet but dry taste of tangerines that were no longer at their best but were still pleasing to the palate" (151). Fumio's uncle compares Hana to the River Ki, whose "blue waters, flowing leisurely, appear tranquil and gentle" but which "swallows up all the weak rivers flowing in the same direction" (111), and at the end of the novel the ever-changing ocean reminds Hanako of life in its constant state of flux.

In *The Doctor's Wife* and *The River Ki* Ariyoshi Sawako exposes the demands made on Japanese women – both by others and themselves – and reveals their strengths. In a forceful yet quiet voice she develops vivid female characters who make their marks in a male-dominated world, just as Ariyoshi herself makes her mark on the Japanese literary world by combining her terse, graceful writing style with poignant social criticism. JJTI

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