

# The Mother of Dreams and Other Short Stories: Portrayals of Women in Modern Japanese Fiction

Ueda Makoto, ed., Kodansha International, Tokyo, paperback, 279 pages, U.S. \$12

By Charlotte S. Pfeiffer

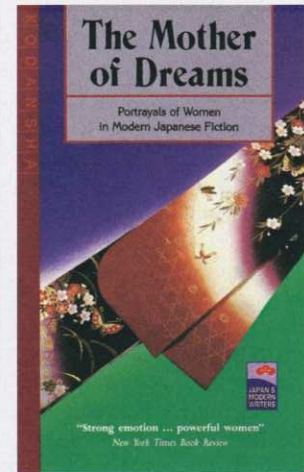
Mihoko fascinated me when I first met her. This reserved yet gregarious woman combined the grace and beauty of old Japan with the progressive spirit of her present-day country. She possessed humility yet confidence. She worked with intensity and played with passion. She studied and practiced the traditional arts of calligraphy and *ikebana* and played the *koto*, yet she lived her life as a happy single woman.

A friendship developed, and over the past six and a half years I have gradually learned more and more about my charming friend. My fascination with Japanese women remains, however, so I was delighted when someone gave me a copy of *The Mother of Dreams and Other Short Stories: Portrayals of Women in Modern Japanese Fiction*. The stories – which the editor Ueda Makoto groups into the five categories of maiden, wife, mistress, mother and working woman – show Japanese women “breaking out of the types and roles traditionally assigned to them,” (16) yet retaining the widely acknowledged charm of the Japanese female.

The first section begins with three short stories by Kawabata Yasunari that present the “purity, innocence, and virginal beauty” (8) of the Japanese maiden of traditional literature. The image of young unmarried women changes in the next two stories, however. The protagonist of Inoue Yasushi’s “A Marriage Interview” determines not to accept an arranged marriage partner yet falls in love with him in spite of her resolution. The narrator of Harada Yasuko’s “Evening Bells” remembers the unhappy love affairs of both her mother – now dead – and her father – now financially ruined – and realizes that she wishes, in her words, to “love someone with all my might, in joy, in conflict, fear and sorrow” (68) and “to confirm and lay hold of my own existence” (68).

The first story in the section on the wife, Dazai Osamu’s “The Lady who Entertained,” presents the traditional wife. When the protagonist’s husband does not return home after the war, his spouse continues to welcome into her home all who claim friendship with her husband. In the process of fulfilling the duties she believes the role of the obedient and submissive wife demand, she sacrifices both her financial security and her health. In contrast, the protagonists in the other stories focused on the Japanese wife present women with independent spirits and strong wills. In Tsuboi Sakae’s “Umbrella on a Moonlit Night,” the wife dares to go out with three women friends, leave her husband to care for their children in her absence, and even side with the children against her spouse. The industrious, intelligent protagonist of Matsumoto Seicho’s “Wait a Year and a Half” receives a probationary sentence for the murder of her worthless husband – an act deemed justifiable; later the woman’s attorney learns from the woman’s lover that the murder had been a calculated deed. In Mori Yoko’s “Two Bedtime Stories,” the reader meets more liberated wives. In “Be It Ever So Humble,” a bored, restless wife finds satisfaction in illicit love affairs. In “Spring Storm,” the wife and husband confront the fact that their relationship must end when the husband cannot accept his wife’s professional success.

Traditionally, the editor explains, Japanese literature has depicted the mistress as having a beauty “touched by sadness and loneliness” (12). Modern mistresses, however, he reports, “have learned to try finding some positive value for what they do” (12-13). One such woman, the protagonist in “Nude” by Nagai Kafu, appears driven to the life of lust. She basks in “the pleasures and the delights of hav-



ing been born a woman” (143) and has a “pride and confidence in her own body” (147). The mistresses in “A Certain Voice” by Kaiko Takeshi and “Blind Man’s Buff” by Enchi Fumiko give significance to relationships they have with men. The protagonist of Kaiko’s story and her lover – an American soldier named Henry – save money for their marriage; when Henry does not return from the war in Korea and no longer supplies her with money, she faces the necessary life of prostitution. Her love remains strong, however, as the words to her now absent sweetheart reveal: “‘Henry, come back. . . . I want you!’” (162). The mistress in Enchi’s story commits suicide to prevent bringing unhappiness to a man she loves.

The stories in the fourth section of the anthology reveal the tender spirit which lies underneath the sometimes tough exterior of the modern-day mother. Varying images of the mother in O’oka Shohei’s “The Mother of Dreams” appear to the son in his dreams and show the contrasting reactions he has to his former caregiver. He sees her both as a “dreadful old

crone" (183) chasing him and a gentle, nurturing figure bringing him a new book to read each day and feeding him meals when he is in the hospital as a child. The protagonist of Setouchi Harumi's "Pheasant" chooses her lover over her daughter and, for the most part, accepts the resulting separation from her child. She expresses her suppressed love for her child, though, by showering a lover's daughter – who is the same age and has the same name as her own daughter – with gifts. When she witnesses an abortion during an assignment she has as a journalist, her maternal instinct causes her to experience the pain of the woman having the abortion and to cry out for her daughter. In the final story in the section depicting mothers – Hirabayashi Taiko's "A Woman To Call Mother" – a dying woman checks herself into the hospital. After many efforts by medical personnel to get family members to respond to the woman, a daughter makes a perfunctory trip to the hospital, a visit which elicits no apparent emotional reaction from mother or daughter. The reader learns that the woman has three daughters but that years earlier she severed ties with them through her sexual advances to men with whom the daughters had relationships. As the end of the woman's life approaches, however, one teardrop escapes the hard exterior shell when another patient asks if she should call the daughter.

The 20th-century Japanese woman has more vocations open to her than that of *geisha* and other similar lines of work – though the new options often pose their risks and challenges. A spirit who had committed suicide to escape the utter despair of her life tells her story in "Song of a Dead Girl" by Abe Kobo. Forced to resign from her oppressive position at the factory, the young woman traveled to Tokyo to seek employment under a man to whom she had a letter of introduction. When he encouraged her to "take customers"



Works of some prominent novelists are included in this book; Kawabata Yasunari (top/left), Dazai Osamu (top/right), O'oka Shohei (bottom/left) and Abe Kobo (bottom/right)

in order for her to provide more money to her family back home, she chose, instead, to take sleeping pills and end her life. In "The Tomoshihi" by Ariyoshi Sawako, the bar owner *Mama-san* takes in Momoko-*chan*, an insecure cross-eyed woman, as a bar maid. *Mama-san* gets rid of the mirrors in the establishment, ignores Momoko-*chan*'s defect, and insists that the other bar maid and the customers also disregard it. In a matter of months a miracle takes place: Momoko-*chan*'s confidence grows as a result of the acceptance of others, and the young bar maid believes that her eyes are cured. Mieko, protagonist of Hiraiwa Yumie's "Lady of the Evening Faces," marries Ogata, whom she grows close to during visits to her mother's former lover as his health deteriorates. When she realizes that Ogata contributes nothing to their relationship and that she has trapped herself in an uneven alliance, she has the strength to make the choice her mother failed to make: Mieko decides "to live just for herself" (277).

Ueda's selection of stories is skillful. The protagonists come from a cross section of Japanese society: the reader meets both innocent youth and experi-

enced older women; the economically deprived and the financially secure; hesitant, reserved females and confident, aggressive ones. The stories represent a variety of literary styles, from vignettes of Kawabata to longer narratives ("Evening Bells" by Harada and "Wait a Year and a Half" by Matsumoto). The actions take place in illusory worlds ("The Mother of Dreams" by O'oka) and everyday settings ("The Tomoshihi" by Ariyoshi) or move between the two realms ("Song of a Dead Girl" by Abe). The writers speak in poetic word pictures, straightforward prose, and rhythmic dialogue. Always the stories are readable and powerful. I found myself longing to linger in the world of the story I was reading yet eager to enter the atmosphere of the next tale,

which promised to be equally as alluring.

The editor of the anthology Ueda Makoto accomplishes his goal to "shed light on Japanese women" (7). The reader sees maidens and wives who control their own lives and determine their own fates, mistresses and mothers who accept and celebrate their womanhood and sexuality, and women who have the courage and independence to enter the demanding and competitive work force of the 20th century. At the same time the characters retain their grace and charm, their love of beauty and the arts, and their joy in servanthood. As the stories in the collection reveal, Japanese women have kept the strengths of the past while seizing the energy of the present. Through their ability to merge the two forces their mystery and beauty remain. **UTJ**

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