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## Subtlety & Subversion: The Role of the Masculine in Taeko Kono's *Toddler Hunting & Other Stories*

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I vaguely knew from the time I first picked up *Toddler Hunting and Other Stories* that I would be intrigued by the Taeko Kono's writing. Kono's unnerving descriptions of seemingly regular women and their various relationships fascinated me. I feel I've had enough exposure to a wide variety of literature to understand how typical characters and plots develop, but I was consistently surprised by Taeko Kono. JPN 103 has been only class to require me to read a book about sadomasochism, so I feel an odd gratitude for it introducing me to Taeko Kono. When the term paper came around, I knew that the simplest topic was to write about the female protagonists since they are the primary lenses through which Kono writes. However, a part of me felt that that was too predictable, uninteresting even. Instead, I was intrigued by the influence that Kono's minor male characters had on her female protagonists, prompting me to explore their role in her stories.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Christian wrote this essay for JPN 103, a survey of modern Japanese literature in translation. He focuses on the short stories of Taeko Kono (1926-2015), whose long career and stature in the world of Japanese letters contrast starkly with the scant availability of her works in English translation. A member of the generation (which included Yukio Mishima) that experienced the Second World War as an adolescent, Kono's often unsettling vision of postwar Japan deftly interfuses the quotidian with the perverse. Christian explores with great insight how Kono's female protagonists creatively disrupt an entire constellation of societal and gender norms. His attention to the representations of femininity leads him to address the co-constructive roles played by masculinity, implicitly arguing against the continued ghettoization of women's literature. The essay serves as an excellent introduction to the writings of this author and the complexity of her storyworlds.*

– Kevin Singleton, Department of East Asian Languages and Culture

Post World War II Japan created a strange time of paradoxicality for young women; World War II offered various advancement opportunities, but traditional norms continued to restrict women to the household. Taeko Kono makes a staunch challenge to this suffocating atmosphere in *Toddler Hunting and Other Short Stories*.

The juxtaposition of Kono's deceptively submissive women with their underlying deviancy strikes at the notion of the traditional Japanese *shufu* or housewife. Many of the women across Kono's stories share similar subversive personality traits, just as her men share correspondingly similar roles throughout. Although most of Kono's protagonists are women, their associations with the male figures in their lives, particularly with lovers and children, heavily influence their dark characterizations. Men in Kono's stories drive women to subtly challenge gender expectations and reassert their self-determination. These driving forces manifest themselves as methods of manipulation and control of female behavior that beget feelings of resentment and unhappiness.

Adult males within Taeko's stories represent the patriarchal paradigm of traditional Japanese society. The set of expectations these men impose on women fuels the female dissent in *Toddler Hunting and Other Stories*. Many are lovers or husbands, such as Sasaki from "Toddler Hunting" or Matsuda from "Ants Swarm." These males control life-altering decisions for women, such as surgery and use of birth control, that exasperate their female partners and drive their non-traditional psychologies. Poignantly, women never make demands of this magnitude from men. This disjoint between the two genders' liberty is highlighted in "Ants Swarm," in which Fumiko gives Matsuda full authority over when they will conceive a child. Yuko from "Crabs" notes that her husband compelled her to opt out of a potentially life saving surgery, stating, "though she made no mention of this to her doctors, that surgery would leave her with a large scar across her back, something Kajii, in particular, was opposed to" (138). In both examples, these women rationalize their husbands' demands and blame themselves for wrongdoing, despite circumstances implying otherwise. This cognitive dissonance creates inner turmoil in these protagonists that causes them to reject the unjust expectations set upon them. In "Toddler Hunting," Akiko is revolted at the idea of bearing a child and thus rejects motherhood, the foundation of traditional female gender roles. In "Crabs," Yuko prolongs a futile search with her nephew because it enables her to act on her own accord, without

the overbearing demands of her husband. These passive acts of resistance span Kono's stories, and all demonstrate attempts to escape masculine means of control. Thus, men, with their assumed dominance, are the catalyst of psychological change in their partners.

One of the influences male characters have on Kono's female protagonists is how they alter female attitudes towards maternalism, one of the hallmarks of the traditional Japanese *shufu*. Both Akiko of "Toddler Hunting" and Fumiko of "Ants Swarm" vehemently detest childrearing, although various degrees of distaste can be observed in all of Kono's stories. This rejection of childrearing is a direct rejection of Japanese gender norms. Both Akiko and Fumiko operate under the assumption that their partners would have no interest in becoming a father. For example, Akiko speculates on her partner's aversion towards fatherhood, stating, "[...] if she told him she wanted a baby. Most likely, he'd pick a fight, storm off and never return" (58). Indeed, Akiko comments, "she began to greatly envy men, who could avoid parental tasks so easily" (58). Similarly, Fumiko emphasizes the regularity of her period and its connection to childlessness. When Fumiko's period comes off-schedule, she fears that a potential pregnancy would drive her husband Matsuda away. The perceived likelihood of an absentee father discourages these women from bearing the burden of childrearing alone. For Kono, the unwillingness of men to share responsibility leads their partners to reject childrearing on the grounds of equality. With no father, Akiko and Fumiko see little reason to become mothers themselves and give up their livelihood for a child. Thus, the rejection of childrearing and motherhood stems from the refusal to accept gender inequality and is a reassertion of equality and free will. Though Kono explores how men alienate women through their avoidance of fatherhood, she brings nuance to her analysis by also demonstrating how men might use fatherhood to their advantage.

Although many men in Kono's stories resist fatherhood, others entertain the idea. For example, Fumiko's husband Matsuda revels in the thought of spoiling and teaching a hypothetical son, "When he grows up, I'll make sure he can charge his drinks at bars. If he's a drinker, that is. I hope he will be" (174). For Kono, this passing of knowledge between father and son has negative consequences. Kono implies that sons learn not only skills from their fathers, but also their behaviors. Thus, a father can teach his son to control women and preserve the patriarchal culture that disillusioned the women in Kono's stories. Taken within the context

of the previous point, men can assert control over women whether they become fathers themselves or remain childless. In either case, there is a mechanism of masculine control that fuels female resentment.

While adult males represent forces of control and domination, Kono nuances this symbolism representing male children as an alternative, more liberating set of norms. Kono portrays male children as innocent whereas men are described as domineering. Kono uses boys' interactions with different adults to allow insight on the shifting dynamic between traditional and modern Japanese norms. Akiko has an "abnormal" obsession with young boys and seeing them dress and undress, to an implicit pedophilia. To Akiko, these boys have not been inculcated with ideas of male dominance, which makes them attractive to her. Likewise, her disgust of small girls signifies a disgust of how girls are raised and a scorn for female expectations. In "Crabs," Yuko prefers the company of her nephew to her own husband since she can avoid the corrosive influence she feels Kajii has on her health. Through the lens of these two characters, Kono argues that women can regain their livelihood by removing themselves from masculine shackles of control. The interaction between these women and young boys shows the possibility of a more favorable, control-free dynamic. Despite this, Kono is aware of how resilient the patriarchal system is to change. In Akiko's daydream, she imagines a father beating and eviscerating his son, under the supervision of the mother. On one hand, Kono imagines a woman who controls a man's actions, yet these commands directly harm an innocent child. Kono addresses that direct challenges to masculine control lead to an undesirable consequences, thus meriting alternative methods of female reassertion. Akiko revels in this "strange fantasy world" where women can control men, but because she knows she cannot physically do so, she is content with her refusal to become a mother herself as a way of resisting expectations set upon her. This passiveness does little to change the vicious cycle, but it is a resistance of ideals nonetheless. Likewise, Kono explores other forms of passive resistance in her literary protagonists, and these are reflected in their interactions with men.

Husbands or lovers throughout Taeko's stories help illuminate the covert defiance of their partners. While women were expected to be submissive wives to men, Kono subverts this norm by crafting women that resist commitment itself. From Akiko, men merely filled the "superficial role of a partner." Despite the fact that both she and Sasaki are noncom-

mittal to each other, Akiko's outlook would be considered unnatural by virtue of her being a woman. Akiko challenges the ideal of the doting *shufu* by remaining indifferent to the ideal of marriage and commitment, stating "how little she was committed to him, or, for that matter, any aspect of her life (55)." By refusing commitment, Akiko avoids the masculine control that it pertains to. As a character, Sasaki merely stands in to emphasize Akiko's rejection of the marriage ideal. Taken within the greater context of the book, men act as foils for the women, rather than stand as major characters themselves.

Kono writes many of these male characters' actions without intent to aggravate resentment, actions as indirect influences on female behavior. In light of this, Kono also explores how men actively antagonize women and intensify their unhappiness. Specifically, Kono uses male adultery as the means to push women to psychological extremes. Kono uses these betrayals to show how women channeled their anguish and frustration in a culture that discouraged speaking out. In "Snow," Hayako is led to believe she is her mother's child until she is revealed to actually be the daughter of her father's mistress; the woman she thought was her mother her whole life was actually her stepmother. When Hayako's stepmother learned about the mistress, she killed her own daughter in a fit of insanity. The reader learns that Hayako's father pressured her stepmother into raising Hayako disguised as the dead child in order to avoid further scandal. Despite the father's culpability, he shifted the brunt of responsibility onto Hayako's mother and forced her to care for an illegitimate child in silence. Hayako's tragic family situation demonstrates an injustice that women were forced and expected to shoulder. Although Hayako's mother was to blame for infanticide, the strain of her husband's demands still indisputably played a prominent role in destabilizing her mental condition.

On another symbolic level, infanticide represents the ultimate taboo for the Japanese *shufu*, the polar opposite to childbirth. Through Hayako's father, Kono shows that men could push women to such lengths that they would commit murder in protest of iniquitous cultural expectations. In "Conjurer," Hisako finds that her husband has an affair and a child with another woman, prompting her to constantly monitor her husband and his mistress' actions. Unsettled by Hisako's constant watch, her husband shames her for being "too suspicious" and demands a divorce. Through no fault of her own, she is made to blame for the deterioration of her marriage. The experience subverts Hisako's ideal of

the happy couple and compels her to commit suicide. In both cases, neither Hayako nor Hisako lash out at their husbands nor directly challenge the circumstances forced upon them, but both come out psychologically burdened by their experiences with no avenue to express themselves vocally. Within the context of a culture that looked down upon speaking out, these two women were forced to silently bear their problems. This bottled up frustration then turns to hatred of the norms that created their misfortune. Women must bear two forms of control over their lives: from the men around them and from society at large. Thus, Kono uses adultery to highlight the circumstances that Japanese women struggle with on a daily basis. Even as victims, women are put at fault by men, a situation that Kono harshly criticizes. For these women who bear the pain silently, Kono introduces a taboo escape for them to flesh out her discourse: masochism.

Kono uses masochism as a deceptive tool in her tirade against masculine control. On the surface, masochism seems to be another manifestation of female submission, where women can only seek satisfaction at the violent hands of their male partners. Yet, Kono's women do not fulfill this image. Instead, Kono's protagonists are generally everyday women with ordinary lives. It is only within the realm of their bedrooms that their masochistic tendencies come out. A common characteristic amongst the women is their comfortable attitude towards their sexual tendencies. Markedly, it is the women who demand compliance and participation from their partners, not the other way around. On one level, these women would be considered sexual deviants who would be certainly outcast in Japanese society, but on another, they are women taking control of their own desires and asserting themselves over men. The power dynamic is different in sadomasochism, a prospect that Kono takes advantage of in characterizing women. Masculine control of women in this context is a source of pleasure because ultimately the women direct it themselves. As bearers of pain, women look the part of the submissive, but in reality, Kono uses masochism to celebrate the idea that women can also command men, men who willingly oblige their tendencies. Akiko states that, "what had drawn her had been the ruthless streak she detected [...] Sasaki possessed just the predilections she liked (57)." Thus, masochism is a powerful tool for empowering women, while still letting them preserve the façade of demureness. Kono knows Japanese women cannot just simply stand up against their culture, but she is able to craft women

who can quietly challenge harmful norms and reassert themselves.

In a reflection on the Japanese household, one must analyze both genders to fully understand the underlying culture. Kono does an excellent job using men to explore the unsaid troubles and discontent of the average Japanese woman. Kono simultaneously rejects and respects her Japanese culture, while using her literature to subtly call for change where she deems fit. For her, readers must understand where the unhappiness of many Japanese women stems from: their culture and their partners. By understanding that, Kono suggests that we can move closer to a solution.

### Works Cited

Kono, Taeko. *Toddler Hunting & Other Stories*. Trans. Lucy North. New York: New Directions, 1996. Print.