
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 interuses 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
ost 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 deceivingly 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 dark characterizations. 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 disillusions 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 argues 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 “superfluous role of a partner.” Despite the fact that both she and Sasaki are noncom-
the happy couple and compels her to commit suicide. In both cases, nei-
ther Hayako nor Hisako lash out at their husbands nor directly challenge
the circumstances forced upon them, but both come out psychologi-
cally burdened by their experiences with no avenue to express themselves
covocally. 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 mas-
culine control. On the surface, masochism seems to be another mani-
festation 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 tak-
ing 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, masoch-
ism 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 excel-
 lent 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