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## **Liberation Through a Different Kind of Love: Same-Sex Relationships in the New Woman's Movement**

**Julia Shaffer**

The late nineteenth century saw many noteworthy disruptions in Japan's social structure as the nation began to modernize and westernize. In particular, the patriarchal rule that was traditional in Japan was challenged by the emergence of a new feminist movement known as the New Woman movement. It envisioned a more expansive role for women in society and questioned the hierarchical structures and traditional gender roles that had dominated Japan for centuries. As the movement gathered steam, New Women fought for and won many newfound freedoms and practices that had once been taboo in Japan. One of these practices was female, same-sex romantic relations, especially among Japanese school girls. These relationships were about more than breaking old taboos; they became an important way to develop one's identity as a New Woman. In fact, the New Woman's movement was at its core a redefining of female sexuality. Moreover, it was sexual freedom more than anything else that created space for the economic and social gains that women made in prewar Japan.

Japan has a long tradition of women's subordination to men. Throughout the Tokugawa period, Confucian ideals shaped the country's ethical and political philosophies. Confucian and Neo-Confucian ethics appealed especially to the warrior class and the governing elite because of its emphasis on male power and secular society. Indeed, "Confucianism and the 'traditional' submissiveness of women make the political suppression [of women] in the early years of Japan's industrialization seem an obvious continuation of the practices of previous era."<sup>43</sup> Confucian thought laid out The Three Obediences, or moral rules, that women were to abide by, and they provide key insights into the status of women which was generally subordinate to men. The fact that female morality was defined by the word "obedience" suggests that good women were, above all, submissive to male authority. In fact, The Three Obediences state that young women must obey their

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<sup>43</sup> Sharon Nolte and Sally Hastings, "The Meiji State's Policy Toward Women, 1890-1910," in *Recreating Japanese Women 1600-1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

fathers, married women, their husbands, and widowed women, their sons; therefore, there is no stage during a woman's life where she is free of subordination to men.<sup>44</sup> The Three Obediences, then, are a striking articulation of Japanese women's status as second-class citizens.

Even as Japan modernized, the influence of Confucian values was demonstrated through the roles Japanese officials defined for men and women in their effort to reshape Japan's national identity. The Civil Code of 1898 established a family system which "emphasized the authority of the household over the individual and firmly entrenched women in a subordinate position within the family."<sup>45</sup> The familial system, coupled with the ideology of "good wife, wise mother," both defined women's place in society and became the primary focus of women's education. Behind the good wife, wise mother philosophy was the idea that a woman would "publicly serve her nation through her private, and now respected, roles within the family."<sup>46</sup>

Some women saw "good wife, wise mother" as modern progress because women now had a part to play within the community. However, this role was narrowly defined and ultimately remained subordinate to the man's role. Furthermore, while the notion of "good wife, wise mother" was publicly supported by the government, "wife" and "mother" were private role, to be played out in the confines of the household, where the husband was still king. Many feminists, both male and female, rejected the idea of "good wife, wise mother" and began to seek a new role for women. It was from this effort that the idea of New Women arose. In a scholarly setting, New Women are defined primarily by their belief that "women should be given the same opportunities as men in order to reach their full potential."<sup>47</sup> This idea, of course, represented a significant break from Japanese tradition.

While New Women certainly represented change, the movement did not emerge out of thin air. The early Meiji period proved to be a time of great change and upheaval. The centuries old, semi feudal, Tokugawa military government

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Lipman and Barbara Molony and Michael Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History* (New York: Pearson Press, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Dina Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman": Images of Gender and Modernity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

collapsed and Japanese trade was reopened to the West. Japanese women's activism rose during the Meiji period as Japan evolved into a modern nation. The Meiji period, therefore, provided a legacy of feminist activity. An emphasis on equality, rights, and political participation drew women to the Freedom and People's Rights movement in the 1880s.<sup>48</sup> The class system that previously divided the citizens was abolished and a new emphasis on education was established and supported by the government. Newly educated and empowered women began to demand rights and equality within society.<sup>49</sup> The changing social environment set the stage for the New Woman movement to sweep through Japan and disrupt the old patriarchal system.

Indeed, the movement carved out a space where Japanese feminists could unite and discuss their ideas and beliefs about women's role within Japanese society. Prominent female literary scholars advocated for women's rights under the New Woman's movement. For instance, Yasano Akiko advocated for a feminism grounded in equal legal, education, and social rights/responsibilities for women. Hiratsuka Raicho propounded a doctrine of motherhood that called for state protection of mothers and special privileges for them. Scholar Yamakawa Kikue embraced a socialist view of history that traced women's subordination to the system of private property and so set the destruction of the system as her goal. Other feminists, such as Yamada Waka, even embraced a revamped version of the traditional view of women as "good wives, and wise mothers."<sup>50</sup>

As the movement grew, however, a split emerged between feminists that wanted to maintain a version of good wife, wise mother, and those who rejected it. One branch asserted that motherhood was a woman's heavenly ordained occupation. For them, a woman's world was the family, and for a woman to leave the family and compete with men not only degraded the woman but also damaged the family. Thinkers in this camp progressed beyond the government's notion of good wife, wise mother, but did not progress far enough to appease other New Women. For them, the notion of the "good wife, wise mother" was created to give women a role within Japanese society. However, the reality behind the idealized

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<sup>48</sup> Roger, Bowen, *Rebellion and Democracy in Meiji Japan: A Study of Commoners in the Popular Rights Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 76.

<sup>49</sup> Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman,"* 3.

<sup>50</sup> Nolte and Hastings, "The Meiji State's Policy Toward Women, 1890-1910," 176.

concept of “home” was that domesticity still existed under an absolute patriarchal sphere in which there was no freedom for women.

This conception of New Womanhood clashed with the rival branch, promoted by Yasano Akiko, Hiratsuka Raicho, and others, which held that a true New Woman knew who she was as a person and had developed her identity both inside and outside the home. For these thinkers, the traditional Japanese family had failed to produce a true “home” because it venerated family hierarchy and history over the individual.<sup>51</sup>

The two perspectives of New Womanhood seem less divergent when we realize that both sought to give women the freedom to find self-fulfillment through love. While the New Woman ideology encompassed more than merely the freedom to love, this lens demonstrates how both branches of the movement stemmed from a common core.

Both branches for example were concerned with the issues of marriage and divorce. Traditionally, marriages were arranged. They were business deals which allowed families to gain higher social status and a woman’s feelings were rarely part of the equation. Furthermore, the ability to divorce was a right solely restricted to men. While men could divorce their wives for any reason, women were unable to divorce their husbands, even in cases of infidelity. These were central issues for the New Women. Perhaps due to women’s lack of political or legal recourse, internal transformation was highly valued in the New Women’s movement and love was considered an important “technology of self” which enabled women to grow and attain their true selves.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, while New Women certainly aimed to change economic and social traditions and laws, they also emphasized the discovery of one’s self. This is because they felt that in order to have the power to spark change surrounding women’s inequality and subordination in the public sphere, a woman needed to know who she was. Selfhood, as both a place of departure and a coveted goal, was “increasingly emphasized as integral to the modern experience along with the rise

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<sup>51</sup> Hiromi Dollase, “Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories: Examining Shōjo Voice in Hanamonogatari (Flower Tales),” *The Journal of Popular Culture* Volume 36, Issue 4 (2003), 726.

<sup>52</sup> Michiko Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women: Love and Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 7.

of democracy, liberal humanism, and key concepts such as culturalism, personalism, and self-cultivation."<sup>53</sup> Love was the vehicle of self-discovery which enabled women to visualize a new way to become female—to become New Women. In fact, during the prewar period, “the extent to which discourses about different forms of love pervaded society was truly remarkable; they shaped ideas about the modern self, about sex and gender difference, and even about national identity.”<sup>54</sup> For feminists, love became something of an ideologue, or an important building block in their greater ideology,<sup>55</sup> and “a range of ideologies about modernity, gender, and progress were produced and reproduced around the concept of love.”<sup>56</sup>

Same-sex, female love was seen by the New Women as a key experience in the development and discovery of a woman’s identity. In fact, it was part of a progression of love that was considered not only normal but also essential for the development of female selfhood. First a girl would experience “‘innocent’ same-sex love romance. Then, as she matured, she would move on to “real” [heterosexual] love, to be consummated in a love based marriage. Finally, she would become a mother and attain maternal love, the highest love of all.”<sup>57</sup> Though the idea of love based (rather than arranged) marriages represented a deviation from traditional values, the real deviation of the New Woman’s movement was the idea of same sex romance. Although same sex love seems to be at the bottom of the love hierarchy here, it was seen as one of the most important steps for women in their path to self-fulfillment. This is because heterosexual and motherly love, though they were sometimes seen as “higher” or more “real” forms, were tangled up with a system of Japanese traditions and norms that made women subordinate to men.

With the emphasis on self-development in the New Women’s ideology, the importance of same-sex love becomes apparent because it undermined the traditional concept of love, as traditional relationships were not considered conducive to female fulfillment. We see this idea illustrated in the feminist novel, *Nobuko* (1924-1926), by Myamoto Yuriko, which tells the story of a

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 3.

female-female friendship between Sassa Nobuko and Motoko. Nobuko, a twenty year old woman living in New York City, meets and falls in love with Tsukuda Ichiro, a thirty five year old man studying ancient languages. Despite Ichiro's lower class and poverty, Nobuko marries him and they return to Japan. Their marriage is based on love. Nobuko has defied societal norms by disregarding the lack of social gain or economic stability when she enters the marriage. She soon realizes, however, that she has made a mistake in marrying Ichiro, as their "relationship is lacking as a true love marriage because it fails to provide satisfactory female development and self-completion."<sup>58</sup> Later, Nobuko meets Motoko, a single woman, and they soon develop a close friendship. It is through her friendship with Motoko that Nobuko realizes that she is more fulfilled by the friendship than she is by her marriage.<sup>59</sup> Even though Nobuko had a love-based marriage with the best intentions, because she did not have a sufficient grasp on her selfhood, her judgement regarding marriage was impaired. Nobuko was unable to find fulfillment despite having the freedom to choose who she married. Female-female relationships are truly the key to the discovery of selfhood and therefore, the discovery of fulfillment.

New Woman author Yoshiya Nobuko also praised same-sex love in her collection of short stories called *Flower Tales*. Nobuko was one of the most successful Japanese authors during the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> While she never explicitly identified as lesbian, she openly lived with her lifelong partner, Monma Chiyo, for 47 years giving her personal insight into same-sex relationships. Yoshiya's work often features same-sex love and explores the meaning of these relationships.<sup>61</sup> While never explicitly writing about intercourse in her works, Yoshiya instead uses flowery descriptions and distance to convey the notion of physical connection, presenting the relationships in terms of distance rather than intimacy. This allows the love to be associated with the sense of purity and idealism in contrast to the physical pleasure of the actual act of sex, which was more closely associated with heterosexual relationship.<sup>62</sup> The depiction of

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<sup>58</sup> Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women*, 82.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Michiko Suzuki, "Writing Same-Sex Love: Sexology and Literary Representation in Yoshiya Nobuko's Early Fiction," *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 65, no. 3 (August 2006), 575.

<sup>61</sup> Suzuki, "Writing Same-Sex Love," 575.

<sup>62</sup> Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women*, 36.

same-sex love as pure and ideal creates the connotation of superiority to a heterosexual relationship. By expressing same sex-love without presenting it in terms of intimacy, Yoshiya creates an atmosphere where same sex-love transcends physical intercourse and fosters the development of selfhood and thus into a New Woman. Yoshiya Nobuko “inserted same-sex love into the ideal course of female maturity, reworking sexual and early feminist notions about this love.”<sup>63</sup>

Often Yoshiya’s work took place in schools for girls and young women. Girls’ schools fostered a conducive environment for the development of one’s identity and selfhood. Girls were able to focus on themselves and their identity because school allowed girls to temporarily ignore social expectations and enjoy their girlhood. During this time, girls were able to experience life without male presence, dominance, and judgement.<sup>64</sup> School created a world free of pressures of the patriarchal society, which gave girls the necessary freedom to develop their true selves.

Same-sex love among adolescents could be accepted as normal, largely because it was seen as a rehearsal for entry into heterosexuality and motherhood. Yoshiya expresses this idea in her works by portraying same-sex love as normal and purer than traditional heterosexual relationships. Additionally, female-female romance in youth should not be viewed as a cause of worry for it was part of a greater trajectory of love which ultimately culminated in motherhood.<sup>65</sup> In fact, “in order to discern true love in the future, to avoid being led astray by false men and their shallow promises of romantic love, all girls should experience same-sex romance.”<sup>66</sup> H. T. Dollase, a historian of Japanese women’s literature and popular culture, states that “once girls leave the school, they can no longer maintain the identity of *Shojo* (a term that Dollase uses for girlhood). They are destined to enter society, transforming into real women.”<sup>67</sup> The purpose of the New Women’s movement was to redefine the constricting factors of the traditional ‘real’ woman. The real woman that Dollase is referring to is still a woman defined by the traditional notions of the patriarchal Japanese society. Becoming an adult is “simply a physical metamorphosis for girls. They have selfhood which they have

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>64</sup> Dollase, “Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories,” 730.

<sup>65</sup> Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women*, 27.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>67</sup> Dollase, “Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories,” 737.

nurtured a long time, yet when they enter womanhood, society expects them to discard it and to replace it with that of a woman."<sup>68</sup> The notion that womanhood and selfhood are two different entities is false. Even in the context of a heterosexual relationship, the New Woman's movement advocated self-discovery before all else. The implication of this is that one cannot be a good mother or partner if they did not know themselves. Thus it was wrong for society to expect women to fulfill personal or governmental roles—'good wife, wise mother'—and give up their selfhood that is cultivated through female, same-sex relationships.

Same-sex relationships in Yoshiya's work critiques Japanese society through the rejection of traditional societal norms. While Yoshiya depicts romantic relationships between girls in her writing, she also makes feminist observations and critiques of male dominance in society.<sup>69</sup> The New Woman movement was about gaining equality and freedom for women, especially through love-based marriages that defied traditional arranged marriages. Because arranged marriages served as social and economic interactions between two families, love-based marriages challenged the oppression of women in Japanese culture, which framed marriage in economic terms where women were treated as bargaining tools. These practices are critiqued in Yoshiya's writings. In an essay criticizing patriarchal society, Yoshiya depicts the reality of domination by patriarchal society and how the rigid ideal of Good Wife, Wise Mother restricts women. By setting girls free from the traditional path of becoming a Good Wife, Wise Mother, female-female relationships are a liberating way to become a New Woman.<sup>70</sup> Female-female relationships redefined sexuality by rejecting the societal and economic oppression of women. Rather than for tools of social mobility or economic transactions, these relationships stemmed from feelings of love. In her short story found in *The Flower Tales*, "Tsuyukusa," Yoshiya expresses this idea that the pure relationship was untouched by material needs or desires.

"Tsuyukusa" is a story about the love between two female students, Akitsu-san and Ryoko. As the story unfolds, Ryoko is forced to quit school due to her uncle's financial problems. Although Akitsu-san offers to support Ryoko

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 737.

<sup>69</sup> Hiromi Dollase, "Yoshiya Nobuko's "yaneura No Nishojo": In Search of Literary Possibilities in "shōjo" Narratives," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 20/21 (2001), 163.

<sup>70</sup> Dollase, "Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories," 736.

financially so that she can finish school, Ryoko disappears without a word. Later, Akitsu-san receives a letter from Ryoko explaining her sudden disappearance. Ryoko states that “she did not want to be a burden to Akitsu-san and did not want money involved in her pure love towards Akitsu-san.”<sup>71</sup> Yoshiya demonstrates that ideal female-female relationships are truly love based and free of any financial dependence.

Another episode in the *Flower Tales* contrasts the ideal, love-based relationship by demonstrating a case of traditional financial dependence and subjugation. “Moyuru Hana” “depicts the sadness and tragedy of a married woman who tries to escape from reality and her social roles.”<sup>72</sup> Omasu, the main character, is the wife of a rich husband. She rejects her fame and fortune and attempts to return to her early life at school and the world of Shojo and female-female love. While Mrs. Wagner, a teacher at the school, attempts to protect Omasu from her husband, he ultimately employs a messenger to kidnap Omasu and return her to him. In an act of desperation, Omasu sets fire to the school and kills herself.<sup>73</sup> The husband’s treatment of Omasu as property excoriates the heterosexual relationship and demonstrates the inequality and subordination women faced in traditional society. She would rather die than return to her wifely role in a loveless, heterosexual relationship. School provides a sanctuary from this oppression while her husband's attempts to get her back disrupt this security, resulting in her self-immolation.

Yoshiya victimizes the girls in her stories to reveal the power men hold over women.<sup>74</sup> In *Flower Tales*, she uses female-female relationships to reject not only traditional social norms, but also economic matters. Same-sex relationships are much more than a path of self-discovery. This type of sexual freedom that female-female relationships created forged space for both economic and social change in prewar Japan. Advocates for these social and economic changes were connected and unified under the New Woman’s Movement, and the movement ultimately helped redefine female sexuality.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 735.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 738.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 738.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 738.