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Digital Modernisms

Success is Subjective: Yosano Akiko's Queering of the Ideal Japanese Woman

To examine the thematic elements that Akiko Yosano imbued into her writing, and why her poetry found itself to be so prolific during its time period, we must understand the effects of Yosano's poetry in context with the strict constructs of Japanese femininity during the Meiji and Taishō periods. Scholar Mara Patessio, in her book *Women and Public Life in Early Meiji Japan: The Development of the Feminist Movement* lays the framework for the Japanese Meiji era politics that likely influenced the periods in which Yosano's works were published. While her findings admit that the latter half of Yosano's life in Japan (the Taishō and Showa periods) was likely much more accepting to women's voices and oppositions, the Meiji era is largely known as the more conservative era – but one that also began chipping away at the structures that allowed Yosano, her privileges also inclined, to overstep social boundaries and create a reformation of sorts for those that followed her in the Japanese feminist literary canon. Similar to Patessio, scholar Gail Lee Bernstein in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* discusses how Japanese women of the early Taisho period “boldly explored the full range of possibilities for the “new woman” (Bernstein et al 9). Some of the ways these women, in particular Yosano, explored these new possibilities was by speaking openly about how despite her having ten children, she did not see her identity connected to motherhood. Motherhood, a cornerstone of Japanese life, was Yosano's way in failing heteronormative ideals that shaped the Japanese patriarchy.

To further deconstruct Yosano's notions of radical femininity, we turn to Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. While Halberstam's theories outline a proclivity for

analyses of “low theory” texts, as well as a denial of capitalist tendencies, which Yosano’s work does not interact with, the idea of choosing to fail (and choice is important here) to fulfill paradigms that determine social success heavily applies to the work of Yosano. Yosano’s admittance that her identity did not solely rely on her status as a wife and mother was an especially profound step in this direction of choice failure, since Japanese women were dictated by the Meiji code. Bernstein further explains this by recounting the history of the code, which relied on Meiji leaders attempting to ensure smooth familial dynamics (Bernstein et al 8). This code, present in Japanese society until after World War II, would have certainly determined how the public would respond to Yosano’s radicalist poetry that argued for the exact opposite to the behavioral codes for women. Yosano was not the only female Japanese author to do this, as the Japanese Modernist era saw a significant rise in women seeking to argue against the patriarchal social structure. Laurel Rasplica Rodd cites Hiratsuka Raicho, Yamakawa Kikue, and Yamada Waka as some of Yosano’s strongest contemporaries, despite their differing opinions on the subject of motherhood (Bernstein et al 176). Still, Yosano’s work was especially poignant in her efforts to reach social, political, philosophical, and educational agendas.

Yosano’s work, which engaged with femininity that was heavily sexual in undertone, redefined the scope of femininity for post-classical Japanese feminist writers. Halberstam states of such actions: “Through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2). Yosano’s active search for a “new way to be” in Meiji and Taishō era Japan focused heavily on her realigning female identity away from the quiet, conservative mother to a woman with sexual freedom and vocal pacifism, speaking out against patriarchal social and governing structures. Yosano herself did not heavily prescribe to the Japanese idea of motherhood,

despite having given birth thirteen times – her passionate relationship with her husband that inspired a number of her poems also influenced her sexual freedom she found in her writing. Such methods of “manifestoes”, such as her radically pacifist piece “Thou Shalt Not Die”, which could also be considered a political tactic, and her most famous body of work, *Tangled Hair*, both deeply deconstruct prevalent social structures of her era. By decentering these structures, Yosano puts in practice her reformed imagining of femininity and womanhood and how to also “fail” to meet patriarchal, heteronormativity defined rules of behavior and existence. While Yosano did, in her latter life, grow more conservative and began to actively uplift rhetorics of war, and did write from the privilege of her husband’s publishing company, Yosano’s work was regardless controversial in its content. Her willingness to write what she wished speaks to Halberstam’s theory of the art of failure, which Yosano frequently did in her writing, both in her poetry, essays, and in much of the work she dedicated her life to creating in a space that attempted to deny her of such ability.

Works Cited

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