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Digital Modernisms

The Female Body: Power in Language and Space-Making with Yosano Akiko

Yosano Akiko's work actively subverted Japanese gender norms, which was at the heart of why she was considered a controversial figure. Akiko's work, particularly the poems she wrote earlier in her writing career, pioneered the field of Japanese literature for women; the manner in which she reconstructed how the feminine could be written, moving the feminine from the docile and obedient form to the freely sexual and passionate woman interrogated the prevalent patriarchal structure of the prior male-dominated literary canon. Japanese literature, which was typically used to uphold patriarchal and nationalist ideas, saw a flux of new writers during the rise of Japanese modernism. Still, Yosano's work in its radical rhetoric also engaged with a society that sought to keep women out of political spheres. Yosano's poetry and prose, according to scholar Noriko J. Horiguchi in *Women Adrift: The Literature of Japan's Imperial Body*, "both disconnects and reconnects women with the Japanese empire" (51). Yosano's early work, which was more feminist and pacifist in nature, engages with placing the feminine in sexual and desirable contexts. *Tangled Hair* drew focus to the female body, focusing on the treasured symbol of a Japanese woman's long black hair, conflating the state of the woman's hair with her sexuality. Her poetry also emphasized a woman's lips, breasts, and shoulders, taking the female body away from the elements of traditional motherhood and obedience to a sexualized and empowered body. Yosano is also known for using the tanka that was considered a piece of Japanese literature closely associated with prestigious and imperial circles to form her passionate, and highly controversial, poetry. Even in

form, Yosano's work sought to claim and manufacture space for women in traditionally male-dominated systems.

To further understand the driving discussion of Yosano's interrogations, I turn to Helene Cixous' essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa". Cixous discusses the importance of female writers to engage with decentering and deconstructing male-dominated discourses, in order to help develop the field for female writers. Cixous constructs the argument as a necessity for women, to either write in a way that engages with usurping the patriarchal dominances of the field or remain under oppression. Cixous also frames this argument from the point of desire, which closely relates to the writings of Yosano that are driven by themes of sexuality and desire. Cixous states: "I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs" (876). Yosano fulfills Cixous wish and call to action by writing her poetry that does not seek to discourage female sexuality, but rather seeks to introduce and normalize its power in the literary sphere. It is important to recognize the radicalist efforts behind this act, considering how little political and social power, and even mobility, Japanese women had during Yosano's lifetime. The article, "Japanese Women's Perceptions of Sexism in Language" discusses how present women being aware of their position below men was, through an analysis of Japanese language. Author Naoko Takemaru analyzes the phrase, "Onna sankai ni ie nashi", which translates to "women have no home for peaceful living in this world" and considers how the phrase reflects how women were expected to behave (Takemaru 43). The phrase further connects to translations of "three lives" for women – the life of the daughter, wife, and mother/widow. These titles, controlled by associations to men, suggest that women have no further freedom than from their dictations by patriarchal control. Cixous' essay, penned for

women, argues that readers and those in a position of power (arguably, during this point of time, men) do not like “female-sexed texts”. Yosano’s work, which can certainly be seen as “female-sexed text” in the way her poetry engages the female body in a sexual perspective, was considered highly controversial in this respect for taking the Japanese woman outside of these three identities previously determined for her.

Engaging Cixous and Yosano further amplifies the need that the field felt long after Yosano’s time (Cixous wrote the piece in 1975) and details how ahead of her time Yosano was in her writings. However, Cixous’ and Yosano’s works also uncover the prevailing need to bring to light the feminist figures that pioneered these movements, which is a particularly important mission for modernist studies. An examination of Japanese modernist studies can reveal just how crucial writers like Yosano, and possibly other understudied Japanese female artists, were to the feminist movement piloted in the modernist era.

Works Cited

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