

Rebellious With Grace¹: The Subtle Charisma of Selected Contemporary Authors and What Japanese Women Owe to Them

—The case of Setouchi Jakuchô (瀬戸内寂聴), Kirishima Yôko (桐島洋子) and Yû Miri (柳美里)—

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The three authors I have chosen to present seem to have nothing in common, yet they do share a few characteristics. Although at first they seem to have paid dearly for going against the tide and for living outside the social norms, they have consciously used the scandal aroused by their unconventional way of life, showing Japanese women that they have a way out and a possibility to control their lives.

Setouchi Harumi (瀬戸内晴美) alias Setouchi Jakuchô (瀬戸内寂聴)

Setouchi Harumi's sexual awakening meant leaving a secure but unhappy marriage, something which also turned out to be the only path for her talent to bloom. She stepped out of her home with barely any clothes on, leaving her purse and her coat behind —as requested by her husband— for an affair that was doomed to be a one night stand.

When she took the robe at 51, some were quick to impute her decision to “menopausal hysteria”. Eventually she decided that this interpretation spared her tedious explanations, while she did acknowledge that *to take the robe means to die to the world* [出家とは生きながら死ぬこと].

Although a number of fortune-tellers predicted that she would never be able to stick to her vows for more than two years at most, not only has she remained faithful for over 40 years, but her charisma has made her the most popular buddhist nun in Japan.

One could say that she has lived three lives in the space of one. She conformed to traditional expectations in the first one, contracting an arranged marriage, becoming a mother and following her husband to Beijing, where he was sent as an exchange student by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹ The title of my presentation was inspired by Chieko Mulhern's book, *Heroic With Grace*, Sharpe, 1997.

Her second life (which one could label as that of Setouchi Harumi, after her pen name), started when she left her husband and daughter, following her affair with one of her husband's former students. After publishing *Kashin*『花芯』², an erotically charged story, male-dominated and conservative literary circles labelled her a “womb writer” (子宮作家). She fought back, commenting stingingly that her critics must be impotent and/or their wives frigid, an answer which banned her for five years from the literary circles. In 1963, her talent was recognized after she won the Women's Literature Prize for *The End of Summer* (『夏の終り』). This semi-autobiographical novel about the quadrangular relationship with her boyfriend, her lover and his wife, sold over a million copies and inspired a number of films. About the last version, launched in August 2013, her comment was:

“I was 40 when I wrote The End of Summer, yet it still remains my favorite novel. I have always strived to do better, but have to admit at 90 that I never managed to. This “I novel” is based on my own experience. The inability of the heroine to choose between her two lovers has never faded away, even half a century later. This story was made into a number of films or TV dramas, but it is the latest version directed by Kumakiri Kazuyoshi which I find to be the most faithful to the text. He even managed to give me goosebumps.”

Her life was again reset after taking her vows in 1973 at the age of 51, changing her name Harumi (晴美) to Jakuchô (寂聴), which means ‘to quieten one's mind to listen to the voice of Buddha’³. She is as strongly opposed to capital punishment as to war⁴. Not only did she go on a hunger strike to protest against the Gulf War, but she brought humanitarian supplies to Iraq⁵ to protest against the invasion of the country. At 90 she went on another hunger strike to protest against the reopening of nuclear plants following the Fukushima disaster.

² Sometimes translated as “The Stamen”, 「花芯」 is in fact an euphemism for “womb” in Chinese.

³ In, 『仏教塾』 (*Bukkyô juku*), Global Standard Buddhism, Shûeisha International, 2000, p.16.

⁴ Cf, coauthored by Setouchi Jakuchô, 『NO WAR!—ザ・反戦メッセージ』, ed.社会批評社, 2003.

⁵ 瀬戸内 寂聴、芳賀 明夫 『寂聴 イラクをゆく』—殺スナカレ 殺サセルナカレ(Jakuchô heads for Iraq : don't kill and don't let yourself be killed—(1991/11).

In 1992, she won the Tanizaki prize (one of Japan's most prestigious literary awards) for her novel, *Ask the Flowers* (『花に問え』) and her translation in 1998 of the Tale of Genji in ten volumes sold over two million copies. When she was granted the Japanese Order of Culture in 2006, aged 84, she stated with her usual wit: “*I never expected that I would receive the award, as most of my works’ themes are against the establishment including the imperial system*⁶ (...) Yet “*Times have changed. The authorities can no longer ignore diversity in ideas and thought. I accepted the award for women who will follow the same path in life as I did.*”

Kirishima Yôko (桐島洋子)

Although Kirishima Yôko, an award-winning non-fiction writer, was not a single mother by choice, her popularity stems from the fact that she paved the way by showing that single mothers could not only thrive with three children, but could also make the most of life, writing best-sellers and traveling around the world.

Her grandfather was a very wealthy Mitsubishi Head Manager, but her father, a womanizer, soon squandered his fortune. The family was ruined when they returned from Shanghai where Kirishima had enjoyed a luxurious life from age 3 to 7.

Born in 1937, Kirishima will turn 77 in July 2014. One can easily imagine how difficult it must have been to raise three children out of wedlock half a century ago. She was 26 when she bore her first child Karen. Her lover, a US Navy officer, 25 years her senior, had already been married three times. She knew that she had to take full responsibility for her child and managed to hide her pregnancy from the prestigious publishing firm (Bungei Shunjû) where she was working as an editor after graduating from high school. Pleading an acute nephritis⁷, she asked for a two-month sick leave before fleeing to Hayama, far enough to prevent her colleagues from paying her a visit. A week after giving birth to Karen, she was back at work as though nothing had happened... When she was expecting her second child, she

⁶ Japanese nun looks back on life of love, Things Asian, 4/20/07.

⁷ 『わたしが家族について語るなら』 (If I May Talk about my family), Poplar ed, 2010, p.86.

couldn't decently come up with a similar argument, so she asked to be allowed to sail on a cruise for two months at her own expense. At first her boss agreed but later refused, imputing the workload. She was forced to resign but decided to have her baby on board because deliveries were free of charge. Her pregnancy did not prevent her from enjoying camel rides during the stopovers. The boat was due to come back on the 25th, but as the baby was not yet born on Christmas Eve she panicked and started walking up and down the stairs of the deck to speed up the delivery. Thanks to the child's cooperation, she was granted a "Christmas baby" she called Noëlle. She gave birth almost by herself, briefing the doctor —who was fairly drunk and who had never delivered a baby before— how to cut the umbilical cord.

She broke up with her lover —who tied the knot with another mistress— after the birth of Rowland, her third and last child, who was conceived in Vietnam where she served as a war correspondent in 1967. Although Kirishima had a number of affairs, more often than not with married men, she always longed to be happily married. One may gather that the reason why she spent a couple of years in the States was to find a suitable father for her children to live with, as she calculated that her prospects of finding a partner in Japan were doomed to fail. She did end up marrying once at 45, after the end of another romance, but her Japanese husband did not fulfill her expectations and they split up shortly afterwards.

Among the forty books she wrote, *Lonely Americans* 『淋しいアメリカ人』 won the Ota Sôichi non-fiction prize in 1997. It is an interesting essay in which she quotes the dating ads she answered or posted.

Another bestseller, *Smart Women Are Good Cooks* 『聡明な女は料理がうまい』⁸ granted her enough royalties to spend a year with her children in East Hampton, the inspiration for another essay, *Mother Goose and Her Three Little Pigs* 『マザー.グースと三匹の子豚たち』⁹.

Yû Miri (柳美里) or Yû vs Yanagi

In displaying the family dysfunction which was her lot, Yû Miri —another single mother and "I-novelist"—showed that the "happy family" was not always the norm and could lead to "living hell" instead. She is yet another living example that one can be a victim without automatically being doomed.

⁸ 主婦の生活社, 1976.

⁹ 文藝春秋 1978

She is considered one of the most prominent contemporary authors, and the third author of Korean origin to have won the Akutagawa award¹⁰.

She is a typical example of the concept of 'Psychological resilience' developed by the French psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik¹¹. Ostracized at school because of her Korean origins, she ended up being expelled from high school for her numerous suicide attempts. Her family was so dysfunctional that the only Korean words she memorized are the curses her parents used to throw at each other. Testimonies of what she endured can be found in *The Waterside Cradle* 『水辺のゆりかご』¹², *Full House* 『フルハウス』¹³ (Noma literary prize) and *Family Cinema* 『家族シネマ』¹⁴ (Akutagawa Prize, 1997), not to mention the more recent *Family Secret* 『ファミリー・シークレット』¹⁵. Higashi Yutaka (東由多加), director of the Tokyo Kid Brothers, a music group, she joined at 18, is the one who gave her the incentive to put down on paper what became a catharsis. Soon enough an intimate relation started with her teacher and benefactor (then 39 years old). He helped her to acknowledge her Korean origins in choosing to be called Yû and not Yanagi, the former being the Korean pronunciation of 「柳」 and the latter the Japanese one. They lived together for ten chaotic years, and when he suffered from cancer of the esophagus Yû was devastated and returned to his side to nurse him. What prevented her from following Higashi in death was the little life she felt growing inside her. Although Higashi was not the father of her child, who was the fruit of an affair she had had with a married man, she promised Higashi she would keep and raise the baby. The beautiful novel, *Life* 『命』¹⁶ was inspired by the devastating pain of losing her soul mate, followed by the acceptance of the new life within, which was yearning to live. This moving story was made into an eponymous movie in 2002 directed by Shinohara Tetsuo. *Inochi* was followed by three other essays: *Spirit* 『魂』¹⁷, *Alive* 『生』

¹⁰ Lee Hoesung (or Yi Hui-Song) was the first in 1972 and Lee Yangji was the second in 1988.

¹¹ Cf, Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free from the Past Published by Tarcher, , 2011, Les Vilains Petits Canards, éd. Odile Jacob, 2001, The Whispering of Ghosts: Trauma and Resilience (2005), etc.

¹² 角川書店、1997

¹³ 文藝春秋、1996

¹⁴ 講談社、1997

¹⁵ 講談社、2010

¹⁶ 小学館、2000

¹⁷ 小学館、2001

¹⁸ and *Voice* 『声』 ¹⁹.

These three strong women stirred up a hornet's nest, refusing to conform to what was considered to be the path to women's happiness, yet enabling them to play a leading role in challenging what was perceived as "appropriate".

This work in progress, soon to be published in French, is based on research documented by interviews with the three authors in Kyôto, Tokyo and Kamakura.

¹⁸ 小学館、2001

¹⁹ 小学館、2002