

# Japanese Language and Literature

*Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese*

jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 58 | Number 2 | October 2024 | DOI: 10.5195/jll.2024.324

ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

## **Narrating Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Breastfeeding in Contemporary Japanese Literature**

**Juliana Buriticá Alzate and Letizia Guarini**

This special section titled “Narrating Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Breastfeeding in Contemporary Japanese Literature” examines constructions of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding in contemporary Japanese fiction in a selection of texts from the 2010s to the 2020s. How do pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding act as metaphors for the division of gender roles within the family in contemporary society? How are they connected to the reproduction and subversion of the myth of motherhood? How can these narratives change stereotypical views of gender roles and heteronormative constructions of family? These are some of the questions addressed by the four essays included in this special section, while also considering the socio-cultural contexts operating in contemporary Japanese society.

The inspiration for organizing this collection is a symposium organized by the Center for Gender Studies (CGS) at International Christian University (ICU), Tokyo, which discussed the representation of the continuum of corporeal experiences from pregnancy to childbirth, and breastfeeding in Japanese literature.<sup>1</sup> The papers in this special section focus on depictions of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding in terms of narrating bodies to articulate women’s experiences of physical and psychological oppression within Japanese society, and redefine new forms of mothering and fathering. Together, they explore the ambivalence and complexity around motherhood and embodiment in fiction by a wide range of contemporary authors: Kawakami Mieko (b. 1976), Amakasu Ririko (b. 1964), Saki Hinako, Yagi Emi (b. 1988), Oyamada Hiroko (b. 1983), Matsuda Aoko (b. 1979), and Fukazawa Ushio (b. 1966). Furthermore, they tackle the connections between literary studies and contemporary sociocultural dynamics of gender and family. Thus, they join ongoing conversations and existing studies concerned with the representation of



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reproduction and motherhood in modern and contemporary Japanese culture.

Pregnancy and motherhood are at the center of many literary studies. *Ninshin shōsetsu* (Pregnancy literature, 1994), Saitō Minako's pioneering research on the representation of pregnancy in modern and contemporary Japanese literature, sheds light on the oppression embedded in the literary treatment of women's bodies in "pregnancy novels" narrated from a male point of view.<sup>2</sup> In her analysis, ranging from Shimazaki Tōson's *Shinsei* (New life, 1918) to Murakami Haruki's *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979, translated as *Hear the Wind Sing*, 1987), Saitō explores stories in which the woman's revelation to her lover of her pregnancy, always an unwanted one, is usually followed by an abortion or miscarriage, and the subsequent death of the female character. The pregnant woman is dismissed in order to leave space for the male character's expression of his ambivalent feelings vis-à-vis the crisis that occurs in his life. It is worth noting that Matsuda Aoko, in her short story "Onna ga shinu" (2016, translated as "The Woman Dies," 2018), emphasizes that the theme of pregnancy has often been used in fiction "when things are getting a bit stuck plot-wise," in order to "to move the action forward."<sup>3</sup> As Amanda C. Seaman points out, in Saitō's analysis of pregnancy literature "the pregnancy becomes the object of the male gaze, rather than the subject of a female life."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the term "pregnancy literature" may be misleading, as it refers to texts that use it as a pretext rather than a central experience within the text.

Pregnancy literature written by women writers as a category to study has been left unexplored for a long time. Seaman's monograph *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan* (2016) filled this gap by focusing on narratives by women writers from the Meiji period (1868–1912) to the present: her analysis, which includes poetry, novels, manga, and essays, explores the embodied experience of pregnancy not as something to be "revealed" to the male character to provide a plot twist, but as "a personal and transformative experience" for the woman herself.<sup>5</sup>

Motherhood, expressed throughout the embodied experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing, has been also used to creatively investigate women's oppression within society. In "Unstable Mothers: Redefining Motherhood in Contemporary Japan," Megan McKinlay explores Tsushima Yūko's (1947–2016) depiction of mothers whose instability is multifaceted—emotional, psychological, financial, and practical.<sup>6</sup> Her analysis stresses that fiction about pregnancy and childrearing can be understood as a means to "reject the notion of motherhood as stable and homogenous."<sup>7</sup> Julia C. Bullock's *The Other*

*Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction* offers a feminist analysis of fiction written in the 1960s and early 1970s by Kōno Taeko (1926–2015), Takahashi Takako (1932–2013), and Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–2005). Bullock argues that these writers challenged normative femininity and created characters who were “unapologetically bad wives and even worse mothers.”<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Castellini’s analysis of filicide in 1970s Japan also discusses the rejection of normative notions of femininity and motherhood, focusing in particular on Takahashi Takako’s literary production of mothers who killed their children. He argues that Takahashi’s depiction of violent mothers contributed to challenging widely shared assumptions about motherhood and maternal love, disrupting gender stereotypes and ideas of appropriate femininity.<sup>9</sup> More recently, work by Juliana Buriticá Alzate and Letizia Guarini can be added to the conversation on mothers who kill and fantasies of infanticide. In “Shocking Readers and Shaking Taboos: Maternal Body and Affects in Itō Hiromi’s Work,” Buriticá Alzate analyzes one of Itō Hiromi’s (b. 1955) most famous poems, “Kanoko-goroshi” (1985, translated as “Killing Kanoko,” 2009), and reads it as “a way to shake patriarchal taboos and ideals” on motherhood.<sup>10</sup> Guarini’s analysis of Kakuta Mitsuyo’s (b. 1967) *Mori ni nemuru sakana* (The fishes sleeping in the forest, 2008) and *Saka no tochū no ie* (The house on the slope, 2016), both narratives of infanticide, focuses on motherhood in relation to loneliness and violence and emphasizes how Kakuta’s fiction exposes the role played by society in the creation of the myth of maternal love and the gendered division of labor.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Doug Slaymaker’s “Pregnant Violence in Post-3.11 Fiction” pays attention to another aspect of the relationship between motherhood and the threat of violence, that is, the way in which pregnancy and childbirth become metaphors for trauma and fears within Japanese society.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, narratives of parenting find new spaces when literature and queer/feminist critique merge in their fight against patriarchal and heteronormative notions of family. Recent scholarship that explores female-authored prose fiction and manga that subvert normative images of reproductive bodies, motherhood, and the family include Seaman’s “‘The Mommy Trap’: Childless Women Write Motherhood—Kōno Taeko, Takahashi Takako, and Murata Sayaka,”<sup>13</sup> Anna Specchio’s “Women and Queer Kinships: Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka,”<sup>14</sup> Kazue Harada’s monograph, *Sexuality, Maternity, and (Re)productive Futures. Women’s Speculative Fiction in Contemporary Japan*,<sup>15</sup> and Juliana Buriticá Alzate and Hitomi Yoshio’s “Reimagining the Past,

Present, and the Future of Reproductive Bodies in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction: Mieko Kawakami’s *Breasts and Eggs* and Sayaka Murata’s *Vanishing World*.”<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between the body and sociocultural constructions of femininity, motherhood, and the family is of the utmost importance in this special section. The essays that follow can be placed in conversation with one another because of their collective focus on the confluence of politics, culture, and maternal bodies. We begin with Amanda Seaman’s “Financing Fertility: Pregnancy and Precarity in Contemporary Japanese Literature,” an examination of five stories that focus on the cost associated with seeking pregnancy, being pregnant, and giving birth in Japan: Kawakami Mieko’s memoir *Kimi wa akachan* (You are a baby, 2014), novel *Natsu monogatari* (2019, translated as *Breasts and Eggs*, 2020), and the short story “Wisuteria to sannin no onnatachi” (2017, translated as “Wisteria,” 2022), as well as Amakasu Ririko’s “Koin tosu” (Coin toss, 2014), and Saki Hinako’s manga *Hinako no 39 sai kara hajimeru funin chiriyō nikki* (Hinako’s diary of starting infertility treatments at 39, 2016). Seaman focuses on the role of money within these pregnancy narratives, exploring in particular the financial implications and consequences that women face if they choose to define their bodily experience by doing something that falls outside of what the State and the medical profession consider “natural,” such as pursuing a pain-free delivery or seeking treatment for infertility.

Seaman’s essay opens with an analysis of the bestseller *Kimi wa akachan*, Kawakami’s account of her pregnancy and birth, in which she describes her experiences of pain and bodily suffering, as well as the financial struggles that she endured in order to have an epidural, a practice that in Japan is not considered “standard” and whose costs are not covered by the local government or the national health insurance. As Seaman explains, Kawakami forces her readers to consider why childbirth is the only medical procedure routinely performed without anesthetic, and why a pain-free birth is still understood as a luxurious “extra” women must pay for. Kawakami also addresses the financial burden of pregnancy in her fiction too: *Natsu monogatari* reveals the difficulties and expenses that come with the path to procreation, especially when pursued outside of the “traditional” family model—limited to a heterosexual relationship within the heteronormative institution of marriage. In Kawakami’s novel, as well as in Seaman’s analysis, infertility treatments in relation to a woman’s ability to control her own body constitute a crucial theme. As Seaman explains, while *Natsu monogatari*’s protagonist manages to have children

on her own terms, i.e., without needing to have unwanted sex, the short story “Wisteria to sannin no onnatachi” sheds light on another aspect of the financial implications and consequences that women face when seeking treatment for infertility, that is, the husband’s refusal to cooperate and his dismissal of fertility treatments as something unnatural, unreliable, and expensive. This theme echoes Amakasu Ririsu’s short story “Koin tosu.” According to Seaman, these stories highlight how reproductive choices are in fact controlled by and embedded within late capitalist economics in contemporary Japan, where for those who have to resort to so-called “unnatural” reproductive methods, pregnancy and parenthood become a gamble in which both partners are implicated. In the final part of her piece, Seaman explores the representation of infertility and pregnancy in Saki Hinako’s manga *Hinako no 39 sai kara hajimeru funin chiryō nikki*, a work that aims to educate and entertain its intended female readers. As Seaman points out, the graphic elements of Saki’s work emphasize the financial implications of infertility treatments: the protagonist is often depicted on her knees surrounded by flying banknotes or crushed by numbers falling from the sky to indicate the (low) probability of getting pregnant. Seaman holds that pregnancy narratives not only stress women’s rejection of social expectations surrounding marriage, childbirth, and family obligations, but also draw attention to the necessity of discussing bodily autonomy. Most of all, these stories reveal that too often having a child is not only a matter of choice, but it forces both women and men to endure emotional costs and material sacrifice, thus it is often only possible for those with profound material privilege.

In Anna Specchio’s contribution to the special section, she presents a reading of author Yagi Emi’s *Kūshin techō* (2020, translated as *Diary of a Void*, 2022) from a gender perspective. Specchio instructs us that, with its provocative tones, the novel addresses maternal issues during a crucial moment for literature. Indeed, contemporary women’s writing from all over the world is increasingly engaging with issues such as illness, disease, healthcare, medical practice, and clinical institutions, as well as with the topic of “care” at large, usually depicted as a woman’s responsibility. In her essay, Specchio holds that, through the parody of the *Maternal and Child Health Handbook*, Yagi Emi advances a critique of the condition of Japanese women in contemporary Japan. More specifically, the use of the fake pregnancy and the diary as a narrative strategy serves as a means to explore the contradictions and gender gaps women face during pregnancy in the workplace and at home, such as *sekuhara* (sexual harassment) and *matahara* (maternal harassment), social pressure, prejudice and stigma,

and economic inequality. At the same time, Specchio emphasizes social issues and symbolic possibilities related to the absence of fathers in Yagi's novel: on the one hand, the narrative reveals the prejudice and stigma surrounding unmarried pregnant women in Japan, and on the other hand, the absence of a male partner allows for reading *Kūshin techō* as an example of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Therefore, Specchio reads the protagonist's diary as a uniquely "feminine" space, as a form of writing free from male-dominated cultural inscriptions with a style of expression that brings women's bodily experiences into language. Specchio explains that since the protagonist starts writing her diary, her everyday life changes "as if to underline her birth as a new woman."

As pointed out, Kawakami Mieko, Amakasu Ririko, and Saki Hinako's turn the spotlight on precarity via the connections between pregnancy and money. So, too, does Yagi's fiction. From the beginning of the story, the protagonist defines pregnancy as a "luxury." Specchio points out that, as a single pregnant woman, *Kūshin techō*'s protagonist is concerned about her rights to the financial support the company gives to mothers-to-be, and she wonders how she will be able to survive during maternity leave as she will not be able to receive any bonus. At this point in the story, readers are aware that this might be a fake pregnancy; nevertheless, they are forced to consider the real struggles single mothers in Japan endure. Finally, Specchio explores the theme of care. In contemporary Japan, those who subscribe to the culture of female service or dominant sociocultural norms of motherhood would expect mothers to be responsible for every aspect of their children's lives. Essentialist beliefs about motherhood and the conventional view of women's bodies as being biologically predisposed to provide care shape a mystified representation of the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare; and as a result, the "dark sides" of maternity have often been ignored. As Specchio states, within such a care system fathers, and men in general, are exempt or play only a marginal role.

Even though Yagi tackles issues that are crucial for women's well-being and some of the characters in her story are depicted as being on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she does so with irony and humor. Specchio demonstrates that the ironic narrative of *Kūshin techō* reveals societal pressures and women's suffering, and at the same time suggests the need for a radical change in the treatment of women across multiple levels of society. Thus, while Yagi presents motherhood as a dramatic life-changing event, in which women often find themselves facing difficulties alone, it

can also be read as an invitation to the readers to explore it as a potential site for emancipation and empowerment.

Juliana Buriticá Alzate's "Breastfeeding, Folklore, and Nature: Reading Oyamada Hiroko's 'Spider Lilies' and Matsuda Aoko's 'Enoki'" continues the discussion of irony and humor in terms of feminist narrative strategies that problematize the limits between fiction and reality, and demand a radical, systemic societal change to free women from patriarchy. Buriticá Alzate's analysis of motherhood shifts from pregnancy towards another maternal embodied experience: breastfeeding. This essay is centered around the fictional representation of breastfeeding in two short stories: "Higanbana" (2014, translated as "Spider Lilies," 2014) by Oyamada Hiroko and "Enoki no isshō" (2019, translated as "Enoki," 2020) by Matsuda Aoko. Buriticá Alzate argues that here breastfeeding is not idealized or depicted in a way that elicits an empathic, relatable connection with the reader, but rather, through these authors' engagement with Japanese folklore and nature, they create the necessary distance to critically look at breastfeeding from a feminist perspective. Moreover, this essay suggests that both authors foreground storytelling in relation to reproductive justice and uses Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of "curing stones" to read these stories.

Oyamada's "Higanbana" uses the figure of spider lilies as a metaphor for breastfeeding but also as a response to the problems caused by the production of too much milk or not enough. Their polysemic nature as something useful, healing, harmful, and eerie adds to the portrayal of breastfeeding as a potential site of both pride and shame in a multilayered, deeply symbolic story. Oyamada's attention to family dramas reveals sociocultural pressures through the narrator's interactions with her mother-in-law and her grandmother-in-law. Buriticá Alzate's reading touches upon the following issues: the shame for not producing enough milk, engorgement, the tensions, benefits, and challenges of breastfeeding and formula feeding in relation to women's agency, the sexualization of breastfeeding breasts, the role of the gaze towards controlling the female body, and intergenerational breastfeeding patterns.

Matsuda's "Enoki no isshō" uses the figure of a huckleberry tree to problematize breastfeeding through a feminist critique of androcentrism. Buriticá Alzate suggests that Enoki can be a metonym for formula milk and for breastmilk too, and emphasizes its role as the main narrator, whose voice operates as a commentary on the rhetoric of choice and on the intersection between reproductive and environmental justice. Like other stories in the collection by Matsuda, it includes a revision and retelling of

an older tale, thus there is room to consider them as acts of “feminist revisionist mythmaking” that seek personal and systemic transformation.

Buriticá Alzate’s paper also mentions other works by both Oyamada and Matsuda and finds similarities between the two authors’ literary imaginations of breastfeeding. Both play with dominant beliefs and popular stories passed by word of mouth, show multiple truths, and personify flowers and trees bringing the human and non-human together, mixing fantasy and reality. In doing so, they unravel the shame and disgust, often associated to breastfeeding, and raise key questions within a reproductive justice framework.

In the last essay in this special section, Letizia Guarini’s “‘Breast-is-Best’ and Care in Fukazawa Ushio’s *Chibusa no kuni de*,” there is a similar attention to the representation of breastfeeding in contemporary literature by women authors. The “breast-is-best” ideology (*bonyū shinwa*), which is still firmly rooted in Japanese society, causes stress and pain, and can become a source of anxiety and even depression. Guarini points out that when used in fiction, it can be read as a *topos* that highlights the great pressure experienced by mothers as primary caregivers in contemporary Japanese society. Her analysis of *Chibusa no kuni de* (In the country of breasts, 2020) by Fukazawa Ushio investigates the representation of reproduction and breastfeeding as a means of articulating women’s physical and psychological oppression within Japanese society. Furthermore, she explores the connections between literature and contemporary sociocultural dynamics of gender and family, focusing on the possibilities of redefining dominant notions of femininity and masculinity. Fukazawa’s novel questions the conventional view of care as something that should be performed at the individual level in the intimate sphere. Guarini explains that *Chibusa no kuni de* reveals the link between breastfeeding, care, and power, while shedding light on the interdependence between caregivers and care-receivers; furthermore, it invites readers to consider how the dynamics of power involved in the practices of care are determined by the intersection of class and gender. Thus, care and intersectionality are crucial elements in Guarini’s analysis. She argues that by reading *Chibusa no kuni de* through the lens of intersectional feminism, we can understand the vulnerable condition of women in contemporary Japan, and, at the same time, imagine a more just future for Japanese society.

Guarini’s analysis echoes the other essays included in this special section, in that *Chibusa no kuni de* tackles not only the issue of breastfeeding and, more at large, childcare, but also the theme of infertility



and so-called “unnatural” reproductive methods. Guarini states that “the myth of maternal love works throughout the whole embodied experience of motherhood, from the ‘active pursuit of pregnancy’ (妊活 *ninkatsu*), through pregnancy and childbirth, until breastfeeding.” In all its manifestations, motherhood is always understood as women’s responsibility, and even though the Japanese government has emphasized the need for men’s involvement in childcare, “gender roles are constantly constructed and reproduced in terms of women as primary caregivers.” Such division of roles within and outside of the intimate sphere has as its ultimate goal the country’s economic growth. In recent years the social atmosphere has shifted, and women are no longer forced to choose between family and work, but now they are expected to do both. In other words, women’s bodies are expected to produce *and* reproduce, while also performing the work of care in order to save the future of the country. Fukazawa’s novel criticizes the neoliberal approach to care practices and instead, applies ethics of feminist care into her fiction. By doing so, Fukazawa highlights the existence of inequalities, addresses the power imbalance inherent in practices of care, and offers new perspectives on overcoming the differences between women as the only way to end oppression. Finally, Guarini looks closely at the depiction of male characters who criticize the hegemonic model of masculinity and dominant notions of family, therefore addressing the role of men in changing stereotypical views of gender roles and heteronormative constructions of family.

The papers included in this special section explore a variety of “narrating bodies” and address the representations of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding from various perspectives. Nevertheless, many themes are left unexplored: the analysis of queer women, non-binary and trans people’s experiences of reproduction, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and childrearing, as well as the analysis of narratives about abortion, miscarriages, and obstetric violence. We hope this collection of essays serves as an inspiration for other scholars to join this conversation and expand the analysis to a multiplicity of bodies whose stories need to be told, so that we encounter more and more narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, and beyond.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The symposium was titled “Narrating Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Breastfeeding in Japanese Literature,” and took place in November 2021 at International Christian University, Tokyo.
- <sup>2</sup> Saitō Minako, *Ninshin shōsetsu* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Matsuda Aoko, “Onna ga shinu,” *Wairudo furawaa no mienai ichinen* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 2016), trans. Polly Barton, <https://granta.com/the-woman-dies/>. Accessed May 20, 2023.
- <sup>4</sup> Amanda C. Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Megan McKinlay, “Unstable Mothers: Redefining Motherhood in Contemporary Japan,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 7 (2002), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7/mckinlay.html>. Accessed May 24, 2023.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Julia C. Bullock, *The Other Women’s Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women’s Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Alessandro Castellini, *Translating Maternal Violence. The Discursive Construction of Maternal Filicide in 1970s Japan* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Juliana Buriticá Alzate, “Shocking Readers and Shaking Taboos: Maternal Body and Affects in Itō Hiromi’s Work,” in *Maternal Regret: Resistances, Renunciations, and Reflections*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2022), 75–92.
- <sup>11</sup> Letizia Guarini, “Madri che uccidono. Maternità e solitudine in *Mori ni nemuru sakana* e *Saka no tochū no ie* di Kakuta Mitsuyo,” *Il Giappone. Studi e Ricerche* 1 (2020): 85–110, <https://doi.org/10.6092/2724-4369>.
- <sup>12</sup> Doug Slaymaker, “Pregnant Violence in Post-3.11 Fiction,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 54.2 (2020): 477–492, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2020.93>.
- <sup>13</sup> Amanda C. Seaman, “‘The Mommy Trap,’: Childless Women Write Motherhood—Kōno Taeko, Takahashi Takako, and Murata Sayaka,” in *The Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women*, ed. Rebecca Copeland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 195–208.
- <sup>14</sup> Anna Specchio, “Women and Queer Kinships: Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka,” in *The Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese*

*Women*, ed. Rebecca Copeland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 209–224.

- <sup>15</sup> Harada Kazue, *Sexuality, Maternity, and (Re)productive Futures. Women's Speculative Fiction in Contemporary Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).
- <sup>16</sup> Juliana Buriticá Alzate and Hitomi Yoshio, “Reimagining the Past, Present, and the Future of Reproductive Bodies in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction: Mieko Kawakami’s *Breasts and Eggs* and Sayaka Murata’s *Vanishing World*,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Reproductive Justice and Literature*, eds. Beth Widmaier Capo and Laura Lazzari (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 465–486.

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