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## Embodiment and Its Violence in Kawakami Mieko's *Chichi to ran*: Menstruation, Beauty Ideals, and Mothering

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### Introduction

Kawakami Mieko's (川上未映子 b.1976) *Chichi to ran* (乳と卵 Breasts and eggs, 2007/2008) received the 138th Akutagawa Prize in 2008, which marked the start of her growing presence within the Japanese literary scene.<sup>1</sup> The novella explores female subjectivity and embodiment through the relationship of three women characters from Osaka: Midoriko, Makiko, and Natsuko. Set in the 2000s in Japan, the plot develops around breast augmentation surgery, and it tackles the role of a single, working mother, body changes, and body image. Kawakami's oeuvre has caught the attention of social and literary critics and scholars, such as Matsumoto Kazuya, Fuse Kaoru, Kurumisawa Ken, Abe Auestad Reiko, Fujita Hiroshi, Yoshio Hitomi, and Gitte Marianne Hansen, to name a few, and the number is already rising as her works become increasingly available in translation.<sup>2</sup> I join these discussions by reading Kawakami's work via concepts in feminist critique, particularly in relation to embodiment and its violence. This article examines how Kawakami problematizes agency vis-à-vis cultural and economic mechanisms that enact violence on the female body, and fix gender roles in a male-dominated, neoliberal society through an analysis of the portrayal of menstruation, reproduction, beauty ideals, and mothering from a feminist perspective.

Literary works' titles are promises of meaning; they hint at the work's central purpose, tell us something about the work, or perhaps attempt to capture its essence. *Chichi to ran* (乳と卵) is a peculiar title because the kanji 乳 (*chichi*) denotes both "breasts," and also "milk," so at a first glance it is possible to read it as *Milk and Eggs*. This subtle double



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meaning may trick a potential reader into believing that it may be a pastry or a cooking book, yet after a second look, the reader knows it is about the female body and sexuality. Yoshio has pointed out that this work, including its title, challenges language conventions through parody and play, and that it could also be read as “father and battle,” *chichi to ran* 父と乱.<sup>3</sup> Fujita has also suggested that it might imply a twofold relationship to the “father”: as being “caught or chosen by the father,” *chichi, toran* 父、採らん (suggesting female passivity), or as “the absence of the father,” *chichi to oran* 父と居らん (suggesting a sort of longing for the father).<sup>4</sup> Fujita’s search for hidden meanings, albeit ingenious, disregards this novella’s main focus: women’s lives and their bodies. Thus, in opposition, I contend that the patriarchal is not secretly being summoned, but rather explicitly ignored and challenged.

The entire narration is limited to a three-day visit from Osaka by Makiko and Midoriko. The novella unfolds from the perspective of the first-person narrator, Natsuko, whose name only appears towards the very end of the book as Natsu; but in Kawakami’s recent novel, its extended version *Natsu monogatari* (Natsu’s story, or Summer Stories 2019; trans. *Breasts and Eggs* 2020) her name is confirmed as Natsuko. The reader knows her as “I” (*watashi*): a single woman in her early thirties living on her own in Tokyo. Makiko, her sister, a thirty-nine-year-old single mother who works as a hostess, has decided to get breast implants and is having a hard time being a mother of a teenager. And, Midoriko, Makiko’s daughter, is around twelve years old and refuses to speak, so she communicates through memos and keeps a journal. Midoriko struggles to accept the physical changes in puberty, and worries about becoming as obsessed with her appearance as her mother is. The title of this novella also alludes to the mother-daughter dynamic or relationship because “breasts” are Makiko’s main concern, and could symbolize the “nurturing mother,” and “eggs”—standing for menstruation and pregnancy—are Midoriko’s cause of distress, and could symbolize a child in terms of “new life,” like chicks come out of eggs.<sup>5</sup> Kawakami shows a sharp awareness of gender and the politics of naming; the polyvalent title and the lack of the narrator’s full name seem to refuse determination, while her playful naming deliberately evokes Higuchi Ichiyō.

### Echoing Higuchi Ichiyō

Kawakami has pointed out that *Chichi to ran* is influenced by Higuchi Ichiyō’s “Takekurabe” (1895–1896; “Childs Play” trans. 1993; “Growing

Up” trans. 1956), and this connection has been explored by literature scholars such as Fuse, Abe Auestad, Kurumisawa, and Yoshio.<sup>6</sup> Kawakami’s characters’ struggle against bodily and sociocultural determination resonates with one of the main points conveyed by Ichiyō’s “Takekurabe.” Kawakami demonstrates that Ichiyō’s narrative and concerns from Meiji Japan are still relevant in a contemporary, neoliberal society. In other words, Kawakami reconfigures Ichiyō’s concerns about the female body in connection to women’s ability or freedom to choose and decide over their own life, or how they face an unknown future.

Despite her early death, Ichiyō (1872–1896) has been considered one of, if not the greatest, woman writer of the Meiji period (1868–1912) and the precursor to modern women writers.<sup>7</sup> “Takekurabe” is concerned with what is it like for Midori, a young girl (also around twelve years old), to grow up in Daionji-mae, next to Yoshiwara, a licensed prostitution district of the time. By the end of the story, Midori goes from being an active, defiant child to a silent, sad young girl dressed up like an adult.<sup>8</sup> There has been much debate over the reason underlying this transformation: is it due to Midori’s first menstruation or to a first unwanted sexual experience? Until the 1980s there was a scholarly consensus about it being a coming of age story through Midori’s menarche and attire.<sup>9</sup> Some of the voices that represent the different positions of this debate within Ichiyō’s scholarship are writer Sata Ineko (1904–1998) and literary critic Maeda Ai (1932–1987).<sup>10</sup> Sata argues that the dominant interpretation trivializes Ichiyō’s story and that, in the end, Midori has become a courtesan and has had her first unwanted sexual experience.<sup>11</sup> For Sata, menstruation is a common experience and not all girls react in such an extreme way. Therefore, Midori’s depression can be better explained by acknowledging that Midori has been “sold” and has been sexually abused. In opposition, Maeda argues that Midori has experienced menarche, and that far from being trivial, this event foreshadows Midori’s fate as a courtesan.<sup>12</sup>

In any case, Midori does not seem aware of her destiny until the very end of the story, when she notices that she is being displayed and gazed at as an object of desire. The story is thus about fulfilling both familial and societal expectations, and how these expectations often set a predetermined life path even without one’s awareness. Similarly, Kawakami’s story explores the theme of bodily and social determination; yet in this case, Midoriko shows an awareness of the interplay between sex/gender, sexuality and society, and their defining role regarding personal body image, identity, and agency.<sup>13</sup>

The special kanji *iya* 厭 written by Midoriko in the very beginning of the novella also evokes Ichiyō's presence.<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of "Takekurabe," Midori expresses that she *hates* the changes entailed by having to grow up. Kawakami's Midoriko embodies Midori's resistance against growing up. Midoriko chooses the kanji *iya* 厭 meaning something "unpleasant" or "disgusting," "hate," over the more common *iya* 嫌 "dislike," and says that it is because it captures a truly "hateful" feeling, thus representing the violence of her feelings. Midoriko uses this old-fashioned kanji repeatedly; hence, there is a subtle constant reference to Ichiyō's work. In Kawakami's translation of "Takekurabe" into modern Japanese published by Kawade Shobō (2015), she adds the same kanji in the opening passage; consequently, readers can appreciate a two-pronged inter-textual connection with Ichiyō.<sup>15</sup>

In *Chichi to ran*, Midoriko says that the shape of Ichiyō's face—as it is printed in the 5,000-yen note—looks like an egg, a calculated simile given that eggs are a powerful motif in the novella.<sup>16</sup> Also, when Midoriko returns to Osaka with her mother, she keeps a 5,000-yen note she received from Natsuko as if it were a lucky charm.<sup>17</sup> The location of Natsuko's apartment, from which Midoriko can see Minowa station in the Minowa district (previously Yoshiwara), is yet another inter-textual link with Ichiyō.<sup>18</sup> This is close to Kasuga, the area where it is presumed Ichiyō lived, and where there is currently a memorial in her honor.<sup>19</sup>

In this particular story, Kawakami's writing style, like that of Ichiyō, includes the narration of surroundings, sounds and the inner emotional state of her characters in long descriptive passages with almost no punctuation marks or quotes.<sup>20</sup> One of the distinctive features of *Chichi to ran* is that it is written in a strong Osaka dialect and has a particular gendered narrative power.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned, Natsuko is the main first-person narrator, but both Makiko and Midoriko have special narrative privileges: Makiko talks and Midoriko writes. The whole narration is interrupted by Midoriko's journal. Thus, the narrative structure alternates between spoken and written language. Natsuko relates both to Makiko and Midoriko, and brings them together in her narration. Also, there is a scene in which Makiko recreates the words of Midoriko's father in standard Tokyo accent, which the author Kawakami has addressed as a deliberate choice for symbolic consistency regarding gender and language; thus her use of Osaka dialect is limited to "women in a primitive state of existence."<sup>22</sup>

The very opening of this novella is an entry of Midoriko's journal about eggs and sperm. Midoriko, choosing writing as her medium of expression, says: "with just a pen and a paper one can write for free, anywhere and anything, and this is a very good method."<sup>23</sup> By giving Midoriko the opening statement, by writing about writing, and by meditating in ways that are rather mature for a girl her age, I suggest that Kawakami borrows Midoriko's voice to challenge society and culture, and positions her novella within a larger legacy of women's writings.

In fact, the very first lines include a linguistic meditation on the name for "eggs" and "sperm," in Japanese *ranshi* 卵子 and *seishi* 精子 respectively. The common ideogram in both words is *shi/ko* 子 (children). One of the most evident links between *Chichi to ran* and "Takekurabe" is, in fact, the names of the characters. In "Takekurabe," Ōmaki and Midori are sisters; in *Chichi to ran* Makiko and Midoriko are mother and daughter. Kawakami also added the same ideogram for child (*shi/ko*) to both names. The inter-textual echo goes beyond naming: Ōmaki is a courtesan and Makiko a hostess, so there is an association between the two in terms of social status and occupation. However, the main protagonist in "Takekurabe" is Midori, hence the primary literary emulation is through Midoriko, as both girls may be considered parallel characters. Also, Natsuko is named after Ichiyō herself, referring to her birth name, Natsu.<sup>24</sup> *Ko* is a rather common termination for female Japanese names, yet it is my view that Kawakami's attention to the ideogram for child (*shi/ko*) plays a dual role: on the one hand, it refers to the possibility of uniting eggs and sperm, thus suggesting the themes of sexuality, reproduction, and parenting. On the other hand, Kawakami pays a meta-level literary tribute to Ichiyō, and seems to establish a literary mother-daughter relationship with her work.

### **Menstruation and the Possibility of Becoming a Mother**

*Chichi to ran* is one of the few literary works that contribute to the creation of a new imagery of menstruation favoring healthier menstrual socialization in puberty, an awareness of stigmas and preconceptions, and an inclusion of the menstrual experience in the accounts of embodied experiences. Menstruation is central to its narrative, and its references span from menarche to menopause. Importantly, Kawakami moves away from traditional depictions of menstruation as that moment in which one becomes an adult, then marries and becomes a mother. Also, Kawakami refrains from appealing to metaphors and euphemisms, and instead names

menstruation, thus recognizing its existence. As an embodied experience it can also be explored in relation to emotional or symbolic violence enacted upon the body in terms of “menstrual etiquette,” “menstrual closet,” or “failure.”

### **Menstruation in puberty**

Midoriko writes that most of her classmates have already had their first periods, and that she wants to think about the meaning of the term.<sup>25</sup> In Japanese, the term for menarche is *shochō* 初潮 composed of two characters, the first one, *hatsu* meaning “first” or “start,” and the second one *shio* meaning “tide,” “current,” or “salty sea water.” Midoriko looks up this word in some books and finds that it means “first menstruation” (*hajimete no gekkei*).<sup>26</sup>

*Gekkei* 月経 is the standard and direct Japanese expression for menstruation. The first character means “moon” and the second one has several meanings including “passing” and “sutra.” However, *gekkei* is used almost exclusively in a medical or official setting, shown by how Midoriko finds it in the definition of “menarche” in the dictionary. She understands the meaning of the character “first” in the word, but struggles with the understanding of the second character, “tide” (*shio*), and thus, looks it up and continues to look up words that are associated to it, like “charm” (*aikyō*) or “pulling customers into a shop.”<sup>27</sup> Midoriko’s etymological search highlights the deep interaction between language and culture: the words for “menarche” and “menstruation” are not directly related to anything negative or shameful; they are linked to nature, and are something we can potentially like. In addition, if we read this passage in connection to “Takekurabe,” this word search also reveals a link between getting one’s period and becoming a courtesan, and Midoriko’s discomfort, rejection, and lack of understanding may be read as an attempt to articulate her counterpart Midori’s feelings.

Midoriko and her mother Makiko have a complicated relationship, so even if Midoriko is concerned about her period, her mother is not a guiding figure. In addition, Makiko seems to be entering menopause, which creates a contrast and points to the cyclic nature of menstruation. The conventional ideas about talking about menstruation with your mother and celebrating your first period are far from the reality in this story: “Besides, there are no pads at home, and that bums me out, and even if it comes, I’m not telling mom, and I’ll hide everything from her.”<sup>28</sup> Midoriko is self-conscious and wants absolute privacy, whereas Makiko is so absorbed

with her own breast surgery that she does not seem to be aware of Midoriko's upcoming menarche.

Instead of talking to her mother, Midoriko goes to her school friend Kuni-chan. Kawakami brings the experience of learning about menstruation closer to reality in a humorous scene between the two friends. Kuni-chan's amusing anecdote regarding the misuse of the sanitary napkin reveals the difficulties and lack of knowledge young people face when interacting with these products. By putting it upside-down, Kuni-chan experienced menstruation in an "incorrect" way, since it is not being absorbed, as it "should" be. Also, from Midoriko's point of view, putting the sanitary napkin upside-down is a stupid mistake; so it is clear that the experience differs from menstruator to menstruator.

The whole scene addressing the use of sanitary napkins is an example of what Sophie Laws calls "menstrual etiquette" and how it governs menstruators' behavior. Despite her research being focused on British secular culture, it still offers a useful category to understand common attitudes and beliefs about menstruation across cultures. According to Laws, menstrual etiquette is part of a larger behavioral code that regulates who can talk about menstruation, what can be said, and when and where.<sup>29</sup> Menstruation implies the use of certain products that should be acquired, carried, stored, disposed of, and referred to in conversation in special ways.<sup>30</sup> Both Laws and Iris Marion Young explain the difference between menstrual etiquette and taboos associated with menstruation, which are often inscribed in cultures by making a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane.<sup>31</sup> Kawakami does not portray menstruation from the taboo viewpoint, that is, as something impure or spiritually defiling.

By comparison, in "Takekurabe" there is no direct reference to menstruation; it remains nameless, and the readers can only guess that Midori experiences her first period towards the end of the story. In addition, Ichiyō connects Midori's menarche with becoming a courtesan, or with becoming sexually available, and both sexuality and prostitution are somehow portrayed as defiling: for example, Chōkichi calls Midori a "whore" (*gorō* 女郎) and throws a dirty sandal at her forehead.<sup>32</sup> This act traumatizes her and makes her feel dirty throughout the rest of the story, which suggests that Ichiyō is alluding to notions of impurity. Moreover, the impossibility of the love between Midori and the son of a Buddhist priest, Nobu, also indicates that Midori's upcoming menarche and forthcoming future as a courtesan is somehow impure, dirty, and spiritually defiling. For her time, Ichiyō's texts are revolutionary in the

sense that through her silence and style, she sheds light on tabooed subjects that had not yet been discussed openly.<sup>33</sup>

In a more contemporary setting, Kawakami's explicit treatment of menstruation moves away from tackling it as a taboo, and instead, depicts a series of practices (regarding language and hygiene products) that create an emotional and physical burden for menstruators. For example, at one point Kuni-chan tears open a pad to look for the unfertilized egg, and when Midoriko asks her what she did find she said that "inside the pad were tiny little lumps, each one was like blood that had been ground up and turned into jelly, so she couldn't tell if there was an unfertilized egg in there or not."<sup>34</sup> The narrative pays special attention to the materiality of menstruation (its appearance, texture, color) and to one's interaction with menstrual products, in this case a sanitary napkin, which serve to ground the menstrual experience in everyday life.

Both scenes between Kuni-chan and Midoriko show how the emphasis on the absorbency of sanitary napkins implies a lack of direct contact with the menstrual blood—it is impossible to see the real color, the volume, or the texture—because it is trapped into super-absorbent gels. Also, the dialogue shows menstruation being described in terms of unfertilized eggs, and also as reproductive failure. That textbook explanation regarding the reason for menstruation needs to be challenged: the purpose of the menstrual cycle is not solely the implantation of a fertilized egg—especially during puberty. Fertilization is not the aim of every fertile woman, especially those actively using contraceptives, for instance.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, even though menstruation has been presumed to be exclusively a women's issue, in fact, as Chris Bobel states in *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, "not all women menstruate, and not only women menstruate."<sup>36</sup>

Emily Martin explains that menstruation has been defined not only as a failure in production, but also as "production gone awry," which is "an image that fills us with dismay and horror."<sup>37</sup> Martin refers mainly to the medical discourses of the nineteenth century in Western societies, hence the meaning of failure pinned to menstruation has a history that, to some extent, persists in present society, as it still appears in certain textbooks and dictionaries, as Midoriko and Kuni-chan discuss. However, it is worth noticing that Kawakami portrays a variety of ways to experience menstruation: horror in Midoriko and excitement in Kuni-chan. Naturally, these attitudes towards menstruation are susceptible to change throughout the cycle, and throughout the years.



Both girls are curiosity-driven but Kuni-chan is excited and willing to share her experience with her friend. In opposition, Midoriko is slightly disgusted, and in other parts of the story, she expresses feelings of dismay and horror. The following sentence is the most effective expression of her feelings about menstruation and about the body, in general: “Most girls in books welcome their first periods (“welcome?” It just invites itself).”<sup>38</sup> In other words, how can they embrace something that comes despite their will? This question displays the tension between agency and the lack of control over bodily processes that have shaped the female body as passive and negative.

### ***Menstruation in adulthood***

In addition to addressing menstruation in puberty and from the perspective of two young girls, *Chichi to ran* also includes a depiction of menstruation during adulthood through the experiences of Natsuko. Natsuko wakes up in the middle of the night because her period has come, and the scene implies that menstruation is an experience that requires doing monotonous and mundane actions in an endless cycle. In spite of being an ordinary event, Kawakami also emphasizes its importance in terms of life-renewal.

Natsuko’s scene also includes certain elements from menstrual etiquette: mundane aspects that have conventionally been treated as secrets. It is useful to think of this secrecy around menstruation in terms of the “menstrual closet,” a concept developed by Young that has been extended from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thoughts on the homosexual experience of the closet. The menstrual closet basically indicates “the imperative to conceal our menstrual processes.”<sup>39</sup> Natsuko’s narration of her menstrual experience can be read as an act of resistance and empowerment, a sort of “coming out of the menstrual closet” by sharing and paying attention to this particular body process.

Natsuko says: “It’s a pain that I got it dirty, it’s a pain that I have to do laundry and it’s a pain that I have to soak them in water.... I wonder if it’s true that antibiotics get rid of the smell of menstruation. I take a whiff.... I take another piece of toilet paper and fold it in a square so that it soaks up the blood, pressing it into my crotch with my fingers.”<sup>40</sup> This description is part of a larger narration of Natsuko’s actions and thoughts that are written without a clear logic in her train of thought. In this quote, menstruation is grounded on the character’s everyday life, and it focuses on the practical problems and uncomfortable aspects of menstruation. Additionally, the first-person narrative underlines the particular and

subjective dimensions of menstruation, and how each person has their own distinctive way of dealing with it. For example, Natsuko understands that the twenty-eight day cycle is not constant throughout her life; that the period can be irregular for unclear reasons; and that, in her case, wearing a sanitary napkin feels like having a futon in between her legs. Due to the stream-of-consciousness style together with its detailed description, Kawakami conveys a sense of honesty that allows the reader to relate to and even identify with Natsuko's experience.

In this dream-like state, Natsuko wonders how many periods she has left. So far, each one has ended without fertilization and she has to explain to a speech bubble floating in space (to an imagined voice that is not hers) that she has no plans of getting pregnant. When this is the case, although it is emotionally demanding and to some extent troublesome, "the arrival of menstruation could be seen as a welcome sign."<sup>41</sup> Yet, the words "another unfertilized egg this month" (*kongetsu mo jusei wa kanaimasen deshita*) appear from somewhere exterior to her own mind, hence it can be interpreted as a materialization of the social norms and pressures demanding pregnancy at a certain age.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, from these words we can elicit a kind of emptiness, since the expression *kanaimasen deshita* means something that one had been hoping for was not fulfilled—that is, pregnancy. Therefore, this passage does point out how society expects that a woman in her thirties, like Natsuko, "should" feel certain emptiness every time her period comes because there "must" be a hidden desire of wanting to become pregnant. Kawakami uses the word "fertilization" (*jusei*), denoting a biological process that is outside of our control.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, she problematizes the very possibility of agency against biological realities that are out of one's control. The sense of helplessness and emptiness also emanates from the image of Natsuko checking another mark on a giant piece of paper with a giant red pen, like yet another month has gone by of her life, like another milestone in her life had been passed. In this sense, menstruation can also be considered as a way to count the moments in our life, punctuating our lives.<sup>44</sup> This image also brings to mind one of the questions at stake in Kawakami's work: the affects (feelings) and effects of time on the female body.

On the second day of the visit, niece and aunt have a meaningful interaction regarding periods. In the morning, Natsuko notices a big bloodstain on the sheets from the previous night, and Midoriko watches her clean them. This scene shows more practical rules menstruators usually follow, leaving no bloodstains being a fundamental one. In

general, body fluids are considered dirty, biohazards even, and private, and thus, we clean them. There is nothing wrong with this social convention per se, but as Young points out: “in everyday life these requirements of concealment create enormous anxiety and practical difficulties for women, and are a major source of our annoyance with the monthly event.”<sup>45</sup> This annoyance is certainly present in Natsuko’s attitude towards leaking, and the way she refers to it as “troublesome” or a “failure” when having to clean “last night’s disaster.”<sup>46</sup>

Although Midoriko remains silent throughout this scene, the reader feels how she cherishes this moment; clearly, learning from her aunt is better than from the amateur Kuni-chan. For this reason, when Natsuko asks her to come with her to hang the sheets on the roof, Midoriko joins at once. This is one of the few moments of personal bonding between the two of them, thus menstruation can also be viewed as a space of sharing and connection. The recommendation to wash menstrual blood with cold water is also a useful tip that can be interpreted as a contribution from Kawakami to menstrual literacy.

#### ***Against the imperative of motherhood***

Menstruation is often reduced to the capability of fertility and reproduction. The next episode conveys the way Midoriko feels about periods and the notion of “becoming a woman,” but it is also a commentary on how society is discursively constructed. By mentioning other books—without naming any particular book—Kawakami puts into focus the construction of the culture of embodiment and its violence by those works belonging to literary canons. Midoriko writes: “In books, when a girl gets her first period, everyone is happy for her, she talks with her mother, who says something like: ‘congratulations, you are a woman now.’ Actually, I have some friends whose parents organized a celebratory meal for them. They even had *sekihan*. That’s just too much.”<sup>47</sup> *Sekihan* is usually served on special occasions, it is known as “red rice” or rice with red beans, and it is traditionally served by Japanese families to commemorate a daughter’s menarche.<sup>48</sup>

Midoriko resists this tradition by questioning the reason behind this celebration. Midoriko’s voice stands out in opposition to the majority of people around her, who seem to take for granted a correlation between fertility and desire of mothering without even questioning it. Midoriko reveals that the image in books represents the ideal of motherhood and womanhood—an oppressive, thus violent ideal—and in doing so,

Kawakami masterfully shows how it has been (re)produced by other discourses. Furthermore, Midoriko continues to criticize such depiction:

I feel as if I'm locked up in this body that feels hunger and has periods all on its own. Once we're born all the way until we die, we have to keep eating to live, and earn money to live—these things are exhausting all on their own. Just looking at my mother: she works every day of the week and exhausts herself day in and day out. This should be more than enough. But on top of it, I can't even imagine what is to release another body. I wonder if everyone honestly thinks that it's wonderful and great. 'Cause when I think about it on my own I get so depressed. One thing I know for sure, it's not for me. And getting your period means you can be fertilized, you can get pregnant, and that means the number of humans who eat and think will increase. When I think about that, I feel hopeless and overdramatic. I will never, ever have children.<sup>49</sup>

The very first line of this quote refers to experiencing the body as “*confinement and limitation*: a ‘prison,’ a ‘swamp,’ a ‘cage,’ a ‘fog’—all images that occur in Plato, Descartes and Augustine—from which the soul, will, or mind struggles to escape.”<sup>50</sup> This image disassociates self, mind and body, thus building a negative image of the body as Midoriko struggles against biological and social determination. Midoriko also highlights the pressures to work that subject the body to violence in today’s neoliberal society. Hence, the feelings of confinement and limitation are not only attached to the physical body, but to the socioeconomic one too. Midoriko does not idealize motherhood as the sole reason for women to exist; she does not want to be a mother herself, but moreover, she does not want to be like her mother. Hence, all these meditations are related to her own relationship with her own mother. Midoriko worries about the biological and social dimensions to pregnancy and mothering: she struggles with having female reproductive organs, and this determining her gender identity as a woman, and then, being expected to embrace pregnancy and motherhood. Midoriko reveals how these causal associations are naturalized and thus, taken for granted, and she rebels against the expectation of wanting children.

In yet another entry of her journal, Midoriko refers again to the existing literature on the subject of menstruation. In this case, it is not about literary novels but medical texts, and expresses her lack of understanding of the whole process. Midoriko’s concerns begin at the physiological, material level: she wonders what happens inside the body in order to

become pregnant. This reflection points to the tension between biological and social determination, and personal agency. The source of discomfort with her body is having a body that *can* make babies when she does not *want* to. Midoriko writes: “When I think about the fact that whatever is going to be born is in an unborn state inside me I feel like plucking it out and tearing it to bits completely.”<sup>51</sup> Midoriko’s contemplations about menstruation and reproduction reveal her fear at the possibility of bearing a child, and for her, a child is a burden, just like she feels she is to her own mother.<sup>52</sup> Hence, the use of imagery of abortion hints to a pressing existential question at the bottom of all other questions: Why was I born? Why am I here?<sup>53</sup>

A first answer to this question may be “because of her mother,” but then again, Midoriko realizes that her mother did not choose to be born either. It is this quest for reason and meaning of life that lie at the heart of Midoriko’s struggles to express, and that result in a rejection of her own body. Hansen uses Ueno Chizuko’s insights on the unconscious pervasiveness of misogyny to interpret Midoriko’s body issue. For Ueno, misogyny is an intrinsic part of Japanese patriarchal culture, and as such, neither men nor women are exempt from it.<sup>54</sup> Everyone experiences misogyny—hatred against women—differently: “men hate ‘woman’ as ‘other’ whereas women hate ‘woman’ as self.”<sup>55</sup> This hatred fuels violence and operates at an abstract level—as it is about “woman” as a category—in terms of the cultural meanings ascribed to what is deemed as “female” or “feminine.” According to Hansen, Midoriko’s rejection of her female body can be understood as an internalized “hatred of being allocated to the category ‘woman.’ Only by ridding her physical body of its female markers—eggs, breasts and menstrual blood—can she avoid becoming included in the group ‘women’ and escape the destiny of ‘woman.’”<sup>56</sup> This interpretation discloses an intimate connection between the biological body and gender, and how it has been used to evaluate femaleness, femininity and womanhood negatively.

One of the most perplexing moments in a girl’s life is the transition from childhood into puberty. It is a time of physical and emotional changes that greatly affect the relationship one has with oneself, one’s own body, and society. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, the development of breasts and arrival of menstruation confronts girls with an inherent, reproductive capacity or reality, and thus for girls, puberty is not a symbol of self-discovery or sexual maturity, but rather negotiation.<sup>57</sup> In a fragment of Midoriko’s journal there are two main attitudes towards breasts in puberty;

one is rejection and disgust (her own), and the other is joy and pride (experienced by other girls in her class). In some cases girls experience a sense of power due to the growing of their breasts, and in other cases, they may fear a mocking gaze, and thus reject and hide the process.<sup>58</sup> Even if Midoriko's journal centers on the anxiety over these particular developments in puberty—menstruation and breasts—her commentary also speaks to a broader audience. For example, she speaks to the fact that not all fertile women want to have children, and that not all women who want children can have them.

### **Breasts and Beauty Myths**

Besides menstruation, breasts are a major theme in *Chichi to ran*, and its exploration reveals that they have been subjected to violence in terms of gendered cultural and economical mechanisms of body control. Midoriko's journal is concerned with breasts in puberty, but breasts in adulthood and in connection to body image, beauty myths, and mothering are tackled through Makiko, and her interaction with Natsuko. Kawakami's portrayal of breasts show how they have been objectified and commodified by beauty standards, subjected to invasive procedures, and also, considered disruptive of the borders between mothering and sexuality.

#### ***Ideal breasts***

A powerful and memorable episode in this novella is when Makiko and Natsuko go together to the local public bathhouse on the first day of their visit. Nowadays, bathhouses in Japan are usually divided into men's and women's sections.<sup>59</sup> In this space, women of all ages and young children develop a familiarity with a wide variety of naked bodies. Young argues that in lesbian dominated spaces for women, characterized by the absence of the male gaze, breasts are not objectified: "A woman not used to such a womanspace might at first stare, treating the breasts like objects. But the everydayness, the constant engagement of this bare-breasted body in activity dereifies them."<sup>60</sup> Even if the local bathhouse is not necessarily a lesbian dominated space, it is also characterized by the lack of the male gaze. When Makiko visits, however, she impersonates aspects of the male gaze—and Natsuko joins her—as they both stare and scrutinize bodies, treating breasts like mere objects.<sup>61</sup> Their attitudes contrast with those of everyone else's, as the rest seem to be taking part in this everyday activity

naturally and without judgment. For instance, Makiko comments on breast size, color, nipples, and age:

From the entrance, an elderly woman walks in slowly. It's as if her body is under a different law of gravity. Makiko secretly points at her and whispers: "Look at her pink nipples." "Don't you think they're too pink? Why did they get that pink?"—"Mmm, maybe the color faded with age, or maybe she was born like that."—"You can't even see the areola around her nipples. There's no distinct line at all."—"Yeah."—"Sometimes that happens to young girls too. But usually if they have an unnatural color loss, they're using hydro."—"What's hydro?"—"Hydroquinone, it's a kind of bleach," Makiko explains briefly. "Or could be Tret."—"Tret?"—"Tretinoin. Large pieces of your skin peel off. Those two are the strongest. But they are also expensive." After adding this, she stays quiet for a bit. "That girl is still young but she's got a pair of socks"—"What?"—"It's great when they're big but in the end they're just fat, and sometimes, depending on the case, they can become like that girl's. There are different ways of losing your boobs, I mean, they're like water balloons, they're great when full, but depending on the person, they can end up just like a pair of socks. Look at hers, they look just like a pair of men's socks dangling without feet in them," Makiko says this with an even lower voice while sliding her chin under the milk bath's water. Now that she mentions it, I notice that when this woman leans over, her breasts swing forward and backwards. Lengthwise, they're full, but they have no thickness to them, and as a result, they look exactly like a pair of socks. Now that Makiko has said it, I can't see them as anything else but socks.<sup>62</sup>

Natsuko and Makiko do seem to agree on the fact that the older woman's color is natural, whereas younger women engage in bleaching practices, shifting the attention to a younger woman's breasts, which also get criticized by Makiko at the bathhouse. This exemplifies what Laura Miller calls attention to: that "in the struggle against natural and unworked flesh, the entire geography of the body, including the pigmentation of the nipples, comes under the control of new beauty regimes."<sup>63</sup> The areola and nipple colors vary from person to person. During pregnancy, the color usually darkens, and additional factors may cause a change in the color, including hormonal changes, medication, and aging, among others. The industry behind bleaching products creates and reproduces insecurities and worries, thus women who are eager to buy them want to project a "pure, innocent or naive image."<sup>64</sup> All these elements work together to create an ideal beauty standard for nipples, and in order to attain it, a new

commercial need is created. Nipple bleaching can be interpreted as a violent, discriminatory, race-biased, homogenizing practice that reinforces the problematic idea of “the lighter, the prettier.”

In this scene, despite the internalization of the male gaze and their objectification of breasts, the sisters’ gaze is still nuanced: because of the comedic undertone in their descriptions they do not sexualize breasts. Actually, they manage to express both the great corporeal diversity as well as the importance of the body to every action, gesture and intention. Also, Natsuko’s gaze is twofold: she looks *at* Makiko, but also looks *with* Makiko. The recognition of these two aspects—heterogeneity and centrality of the body to one’s own subjectivity—together with looking *with* and not only *at*, can be considered a model of the female gaze that dereifies the female body.

Ideal standards are also evident in the previous passage, regarding shape, size, and texture of breasts. The use of adjectives such as “a pair of socks,” “pointy cones,” “pancakes,” and “big breasts” puts in evidence that there is no neutral way of describing different types of breasts, but rather, an ideal, desirable type of breasts is exposed. In Makiko’s imaginary, the ideal breast seems to be aligned with the one Dr. Ikeda told the readers of a young women’s magazine: “the objective of a beautiful bust is not only that they are bigger, but that they face upwards.”<sup>65</sup> Makiko’s remarks also agree with big breasts being preferable, but they have to be sitting high on the chest with a look of firmness. However, this norm is contradictory because large and round breasts are heavy, so they tend to be saggy and soft. Even Makiko’s remarks emphasize the materiality of the breasts as fatty, soft, and not muscular. Thus, the norm that prescribes breasts as a solid object: large, round, and firm, goes against its very materiality. In a capitalist, patriarchal context that objectifies and idealizes breasts, they become objects, thus they must be solid, easy to handle and measured, like any other commodity.<sup>66</sup>

The idea of measuring breasts in cup sizes dates from the 1930s, a method promoted by the American Warner lingerie company.<sup>67</sup> Prior to that, the use of camisoles and waists meant that breasts were much lower, and that was acceptable. However, the use of bras encouraged the uplift as a new fashion for breasts. In Japan, the dominant view also follows this model: even, round breasts sitting high on the chest. However, as Miller explains, traditionally, “the body shape thought best suited to the kimono is slender with a willow-shaped waist. Large breasts are said to disrupt the flow of a kimono’s lines.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, the relatively new view on round and



uplifted larger breasts was possible because of the numerous campaigns around the 1920s that attempted to socialize Japanese women into the habit of wearing Western-style underwear and clothing—which disguised another form of violence to women’s bodies, as women are expected to endure pain and discomfort for the sake of an ideal.

Mass media culture plays a significant role in creating and spreading this ideal, as media images homogenize and normalize ideals regarding beauty.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the fact that there is a dominant type of desired breasts, including nipple pigmentation—creating models against which women evaluate themselves—makes it necessary to address the notion of normalcy. This theme is exposed in a dialogue between Makiko and Natsuko as they are about to leave the bath. Makiko confronts Natsuko and asks her for her honest opinion about her breasts:

“I don’t care about size, just tell me about the color. Do they look black to you? Tell me honestly,” Makiko asks seriously with a face that looks like a plant, free of her usual makeup.—“Well, not black,” I say instinctively.—“Are they in the normal range?”—“Well... what’s your idea of normal?”—“It’s fine, whatever you’d call normal.”—“Ok, regardless of the meaning of normal, there’s no such thing, so that type of thinking...” and Makiko interrupts me saying in a flat voice: “Just forget all of that and tell me.” So I say: “Well, they aren’t pink.”—“Of course I know they’re not pink.”—“Oh, right.”—“Yeah.” The conversation faded away just like that.<sup>70</sup>

Makiko is concerned about the look of her own breasts, and that is why she decided to transform their appearance. She knows she has small breasts, and wants to change that, but seems insecure about whether her nipples’ color and size are within the range of normal. For Makiko, the notion of normality is associated with an ideal of beauty. By contrast, Natsuko believes there is no such thing as normal, appealing to its constructed nature, and pointing to a notion of beauty that is relative, subjective and diverse.

The experience of breastfeeding significantly affects Makiko’s conception of her breasts. Breasts undergo a visible transformation during pregnancy, birth, and lactation periods. Here, Makiko expresses her feelings about her breastfeeding breasts and warns Natsuko about those drastic changes:

Everything left from my nipples. This is what happens when you have children. Well, for some people it's not like this, or they get theirs back, but for others, this is what happens and nothing comes back. I don't know if you want to have children or not, but yours aren't going to be as they're now; gradually the shape changes. Everything left out of my nipples and where have they gone? This is what is left. Shrunken, only nipples, look at this, all empty and flat. There's nothing. They're no longer here.<sup>71</sup>

This quote reflects a typical characteristic of Kawakami's writing in *Chichi to ran*; that is, the awareness of micro and macro levels in her characters' opinions and conclusions. Makiko, at a personal level, feels a strong dissatisfaction with her breasts, even nostalgia at their absence, and this triggers her desire to get breast enhancement surgery. Yet, she also refers to a shared experience (without making universal claims either): when mothers have children and breastfeed, their bodies undergo significant transformations, and the body, as they knew it, disappears. The connection between micro and macro levels shows that roles and attitudes in the personal level mirror or re-contextualize models that are happening at the level of society at large.<sup>72</sup>

The image of Makiko being emptied by her own daughter can be read as an example of self-denial: as a self-sacrificing mother, who has given up her body for her child, thus complying partially with the requirements of an ideal mother. Yet, through her thoughts and feelings she rejects it, as she challenges "the notion that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing *others*, not themselves."<sup>73</sup>

### ***The slender ideal***

In addition to Makiko's pursuit of a specific type of breasts, she is also interested in losing weight and pursuing a slender body type. At the local bathhouse, Natsuko describes different types of baths, including a high-powered Jacuzzi that is supposed to help burn fat. This insignificant detail in terms of driving the narrative, illustrates the availability of technologies that reinforce the ideal slender body, and encourage women to take action and transform their physical appearance—even if it hurts.

Midoriko also documents in her journal her mother's weight loss. Fuse explains that Makiko drinks codeine and metformin as if it was cough medicine.<sup>74</sup> This self-destructive behavior is an example of self-inflicted violence, it makes her thinner and worsens her self-esteem; this can also be interpreted as a rejection of mothering. Miller explains that a pursuit of

a thin body can also be viewed as an act of “resistance to gender roles through dieting and food refusal that counters the other-directed Japanese model of femininity. Dieting by Japanese women is an expression, therefore, of rejection of the social roles of domestic food preparer, family nurturer, and fertile progenitor of future salary men.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, extremely thin bodies reject symbols of fertility and nurturance as well as sociocultural expectations of marriage and motherhood. Susie Orbach has expounded on the links between anorexia and social gender expectations, and has explained that anorexia disrupts feminization as it both rejects and exaggerates the feminine image.<sup>76</sup> Makiko’s pursuit of slimness can be read as a result of, and resistance to, oppressive social conditions regarding femininity and mothering. Natsuko describes Makiko’s body at the bathhouse:

I take off my clothes and put them into a locker and take a peek at Makiko from the back. I’m astonished to see that she looks twice as skinny without her clothes on. Even from the back, your thighs are supposed to touch at the top. But hers are separated, and when she bends down you can see her backbone....<sup>77</sup>

This is a description of the type of body certain models in fashion catwalks or anorexic women aspire to have. In the fashion industry, a domain in which beauty standards verge on the impossible, a “thigh gap” is a well-known guideline to evaluate and measure bodies. A thigh gap refers to the gap that emerges between the upper inner thighs when standing up with the knees together. The “thigh gap” (*futomomo no sukima*) seems to have gained popularity in Japan too. For example, *Womagazine* shows an article compiling different photos of the thigh gap from a variety of social media outlets, and there are multiple diet and exercise webpages geared towards achieving a thigh gap.<sup>78</sup> In this context, Natsuko’s voice represents a stand against the demand of extreme, unhealthy slenderness, and its violence.

***Embodied agency: Makiko’s choice***

What is the motivation for Makiko’s obsession with breast enlargement surgery and what does it mean? I would like to articulate Makiko’s choice in terms of embodied agency. Fujita claims, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that Makiko’s desire for augmentation, her uncontained speech, and the symbolism of eggs in the novella, are all signs of female decapitation or castration complex.<sup>79</sup> In opposition, Abe Auestad refuses to find an unconscious symptom to be unveiled or debunked in the text,

and rather articulates Makiko's obsession as a "nonhuman actor"—a term elaborated by Bruno Latour and understood as something that makes a difference and thus, alters a given situation—that elicits emotions and mediates the mother/daughter relationship.<sup>80</sup>

My interpretation elucidates the complexity of Makiko's choice, and I claim that it cannot be reduced to Freudian symbolism (like Fujita does), because it is completely disconnected from women's embodied lives. On the contrary, I contend Kawakami's portrayal of the female body is nuanced; while addressing body dissatisfaction and the pains of gendered embodiment and agency, it goes beyond a simple negative depiction in terms of lack. Also, in agreement with Abe Auestad, the desire for surgery shapes and is shaped by the relationship between Makiko and Midoriko, but I maintain that in so doing, Kawakami also problematizes the themes of female agency and bodily commodification, which are feminist concerns and thus worth exploring within feminist frameworks.

Makiko's perception of her own breasts and her decision to change them revolve around the theme of body control, and are certainly connected to the links between cultural norms, normalization of beauty practices, and the "normal" or ideal body. When Natsuko is confronted by Makiko and asked to say whether the size and color of her breasts were normal, she recalls a conversation she heard in a train in which one woman expresses her wish for breast enlargement surgery and argues that she does it for herself and that her decision is not a manifestation of male chauvinism. The other woman criticizes her for reproducing phallogocentric ideals. Natsuko herself regards this conversation as being "boring" and "old-fashioned," which Abe Auestad then reads "as an implicit 'snub' at 'feminism' (an ideological critique of phallogocentrism) as it was preached back in the 1970s when women still had faith in their cause."<sup>81</sup> Unlike this view, I contend this novella does not hold post-feminist views, but rather, through the problematization of the feminist stance, Kawakami directly engages with feminist debates and recognizes their contradictions. Post-feminism captures a resistance to identify as feminist, represents a diminishing support for women's movements, or considers the feminist cause irrelevant.<sup>82</sup> At heart, *Chichi to ran* is concerned with cisgender female embodiment, agency, and the survival of women in precarious positions in current society, thus, its feminist overtones.

Via Shelly Budgeon's insights on "successful femininity" we can approach these tensions and contradictions that the novella addresses. Achieving success and maintaining a narrative of empowerment and

personal choice denies the effects of external influences, such as class and race, and leads to a misrecognition of the causes of inequality, as it places the responsibility on the individual to make the “right choices.” Budgeon explains that: “the struggle to incorporate the new cultural ideal of feminine success is particularly complex for young working-class women for whom the limits to doing so are attributed to individualized failure and borne at inordinate psychic cost.”<sup>83</sup> With this in mind, Makiko’s “choice” can be understood not only in terms of an autonomous, individual choice, but also as part of a classed, raced, and gendered context. Makiko belongs to a social and economically disadvantaged group, and she is struggling to make the “right choices.” Makiko’s attempts at success come at high psychological and emotional costs: her negative body image, low self-esteem, and flawed relationship with her daughter. Furthermore, Budgeon also points out that younger generations of women tend to disavow feminism because they associate it with women’s disadvantage, hence identifying as a feminist may be at odds with the notion of self-determination. In her words, it is difficult to recognize “that gender inequality does not cancel out but exists in tension with female success.”<sup>84</sup> In *Chichi to ran*, Kawakami portrays gender inequality as it intersects with socioeconomic inequalities too, and exposes different sides of violence and femininity; but in its narrative a hope for female success coexists.

Makiko’s sense of self-worth emerges from pursuing dominant cultural body ideals regarding breasts and body shape. Breast enlargement surgery presents a paradox regarding agency and choice: on the one hand, it exemplifies how breasts have been subjected to normalizing beauty practices, and on the other hand, in the subject’s desire to transform one’s body, there is also a sense of self-determination and empowerment. Miller highlights the role of media and cultural influx in the process of naturalization and normalization of ideal breasts in Japan, but she also points out that: “American images of huge breasted women have been in Japan for decades, so something else must be contributing to the new trend. A general focus on the accomplishment of desired bodies, including idealized breasts, may therefore reflect a certain degree of female agency and empowerment.”<sup>85</sup> The key words in her statement are “to a certain degree,” which render choice as a complex issue. In some cases, the achievement of the idealized and desired body constitutes an exercise of willpower and has a potentially positive effect on one’s life. However, there are also problems that arise from seeking unattainable, elusive ideals, and negative, painful consequences that come along.

Breast augmentation is often referred to as breast enhancement, and the word itself already shows how this procedure is thought of as an improvement or increase in quality or value. In Japan, this has not always been the case, yet as Miller exposes there has been a shift in beauty standards that displays a linkage between breast fashion and the spread of Euroamerican beauty ideals.<sup>86</sup> Susan Bordo argues that the advanced capitalist, consumer-driven culture of the twentieth century, in connection to the great variety of alternatives offered by current technology and science, have created a postmodern understanding of the body: that of freedom from bodily determination. Challenging the very materiality of the body, “plastic bodies” are defined in terms of changeability and control as a result of “an ideology fueled by fantasies of rearranging, transforming and correcting.”<sup>87</sup> This ideology is reflected in the idea of choosing the body one wants to have.

Makiko embodies the tensions around agency: “I’ve already decided the place. Since I started to think about getting them bigger, I’ve been to many different places, I’ve picked up several different pamphlets and I’ve heard a lot about it. In the end, this is a huge deal. They cut you, you know, they cut you. But, I’ve made up my mind, it’s decided.”<sup>88</sup> So, Makiko feels that after some deliberation she has finally taken the decision, and perhaps believes that she is actively choosing the body she wants to have. However, her choice is not out of a wide selection of diverse, real, possible bodies, but rather one projected by the beauty myth.<sup>89</sup> Makiko emphasizes the different places and research she did while making her decision, and it is precisely the wide variety of offers that reinforce the notion of an ideal, perfect type of body that *should* be, and *can* be pursued. Hence, cosmetic surgery can be viewed as a service—that “cuts,” hurts, and heals—offered by an industry that merges health and beauty discourses, a by-product of current consumer-driven, neoliberal societies.

One way to persuade oneself about something is by repetition. Makiko says she wants to get the breast augmentation surgery over and over, hence, the reader wonders if this is *really* what she desires. Following Abe Auestad, Makiko’s desire for breast enlargement can be interpreted as a response to Midoriko’s decision to refuse oral communication, as a “desperate attempt, if not conscious, at attracting attention from Midoriko.”<sup>90</sup> Midoriko’s position against her mother’s decision may be read both as a personal rejection, but also as a rejection of the “cultural plastic,” at a larger societal level:

My mom spends every day researching about her breast surgery, and I pretend not to notice. But putting fake stuff in your breasts to make them bigger? Unbelievable! And for what? Is it for her job? I just don't get it. It makes me sick, this is sick, sick, sick, sick, sick! I have seen it on TV and in photos too, they cut you right open and then they shove in something. It's so painful. Mom doesn't understand anything. She's stupid, she's a stupid idiot, completely stupid. I heard something about a screening. That means if you agree to show your face in a magazine, you'll get the surgery for free, which is really stupid too.<sup>91</sup>

In this passage, the surgery represents an abyss between mother and daughter, which supports reading it as a call for connection. The surgery elicits a strong affective response in Midoriko, a response that Makiko might have been craving for. Through Midoriko's angry and upset words, Kawakami questions the real purpose of the breast surgery. When Midoriko questions if the reason behind the surgery is for her job as a hostess, breasts are conceived as sexual objects for the male gaze. Also, when Midoriko calls out the role of the media (TV and photos), breasts are conceived as commodities that belong to a larger business and capitalist culture, and reduce a woman's value to her looks. As Angela McRobbie elaborates, participants in make-over TV programmes can be conceived as "victims" who partake in forms of symbolic violence to conform to current demands of employment, consumer culture, and gender and sexuality.<sup>92</sup>

Midoriko also worries about the risks of the surgery and opens up a discussion about breast augmentation procedures in terms of a sociocultural, economic and transnational phenomena: "Somewhere in North or South America, fathers give their daughters boob jobs as a birthday present when they turn fifteen. I just don't get any of that crap. They say that also over there, the risk of committing suicide is three times higher in women who go through breast enlargement surgery than in women who don't. Is mom aware of this?"<sup>93</sup> Midoriko cares about her mother, which also displays an underlying desire for connection with her. In this entry, Midoriko places the issues around cosmetic surgery and physical appearance vis-à-vis success and self-esteem in a global scale, denoting that it is a problematic that includes, but is certainly not limited to, Japanese society.

Midoriko also touches briefly upon suicide in relation to cosmetic surgeries, or rather, in relation to the fears and insecurities that are often at the basis of deciding to change one's looks. Fuse also points out that Midoriko is worried about the risk of suicide, and there may be certain suicidal indicators in Makiko's behavior.<sup>94</sup> Ishihara Shintaro—governor

of Tokyo in 2008 and one of the members of the Akutagawa prize committee who was critical of this novella—claims that the characters are selfish, and that Makiko coming all the way to Tokyo, to do a surgery that can be done elsewhere, cannot be explained only through a metaphor of her breasts.<sup>95</sup> In opposition to Ishihara, I suggest that the meaning of the surgery is deeper as it symbolizes more than a response to feeling dissatisfied with one's breasts, but her attempt to overcome her struggles, survive, and find meaning in her life. Thus, the surgery is linked with her role as a single mother, separated from her partner, having an unfulfilling job, and facing risk of suicide. Issues concerning physical appearance are not trivial or selfish, and beauty myths should not be taken lightly because the question about how we value our own bodies, and our sense of self-worth is, ultimately, a matter of life and death.

On the last evening of their visit, instead of being at the clinic for her appointment, or instead of coming back early from the appointment to her daughter, Makiko apparently meets with her former partner for drinks. In this situation, Makiko displays a new desire, or perhaps another facet of her already existing desire for intimacy and connection. One of the motivations for the surgery may be connected to Makiko's desire to be sexual again. Yet, there seems to be a sharp distinction between motherhood and sexuality given that the mother cannot erase the child's mark on her body except through surgery.

Aoyama Tomoko points out that the year 2008—the year following Kawakami's *Chichi to ran*'s publication—seems to mark a time of increased interest in narratives concerned with mother-daughter bonds.<sup>96</sup> Aoyama draws attention to the negative image associated with the mother-daughter dyad, as problematic and conflictive, yet also stresses the importance of alternative, creative works on the subject that enable solutions and new possibilities.<sup>97</sup> Aoyama analyzes Shōno Yoriko's *Haha no hattatsu* (The development of mother, 1996), and Sano Yōko's *Shizuko-san* (2010) in terms of “powerful and innovative representations of mother-daughter reconciliation” and concludes that they appeal to readers “because the fierce battles, apathy and guilt they depict are real and recognizable.”<sup>98</sup> Likewise, *Chichi to ran* offers an appealing, nuanced depiction of the mother-daughter dyad, mediated by the narrator, displaying intense conflict and reconciliation.

### **Conclusions: Smashing Eggs, Connection and Bodies**

The final, climactic scene is a powerful portrayal of confrontation—a conflation of symbolic and physical violence—followed by reconciliation.



It represents Midoriko's shift from writing to speaking, from exploding inwardly to doing so outwardly. Eggs operate both literally and metaphorically: at the climax of the story, Midoriko, while expressing her dissatisfaction with the world, smashes eggs with Makiko, and those "eggs" are written with the kanji *tamago* 玉子 instead of 卵.<sup>99</sup> Kawakami's choice of ideogram draws a symbolic link to the "eggs" that were subject of analysis in the beginning of the novella, *ranshi* "ovum," hence, in this episode, eggs are not just unfertilized chicken eggs but symbolize both the reproductive female cells as well as menstruation. In the end, both Makiko and Midoriko are covered in eggs all over their faces and hair. This powerful and highly symbolic scene remains grounded on the materiality of the body through the evident emphasis on fluids: egg yolks and whites get mixed up with tears and snot.

By smashing eggs they are smashing the necessary conditions to become pregnant, as they evoke "a metonymic association with numerous 'egg cells' going to waste every month, and with the constraints and potentials of the female body that they embody."<sup>100</sup> This may be read as a subversive act in the context of Japan's declining birth rate, which reached a record low of 1.26 in 2005; and even if it seemed to slightly increase afterwards, it dropped again to 1.43 in 2017.<sup>101</sup> In the face of this demographic trend, the promotion of motherhood has permeated the political and national discourses, placing responsibility on individual women to make the "right choice" for the nation. For example, in 1989, when Japan's fertility rate dropped to 1.57, it was treated as a public crisis and there were several expressions that encouraged motherhood, including a famous statement by finance minister Hashimoto Ryutaro at the time, about women prioritizing having children over their education.<sup>102</sup> Almost twenty years later, in 2007—the same year of the publication of *Chichi to ran*—"birth-giving machines" (*kodomo o umu kikai*) was the expression used by the Minister of Health Yanagisawa Hakuo to refer to Japanese women and their role to aid with the low birthrate.<sup>103</sup> In this context, when Makiko and Midoriko smash eggs Kawakami "bestows the participating female characters with the awareness, subjectivity and agency to refuse to be birth machines for the nation."<sup>104</sup> Makiko and Midoriko are smashing patriarchy, as they smash all the physical conditions and sociocultural rules oppressing the female body; in this scene, the female body is leaking.

Brené Brown explains that shame can be understood as a fear of disconnection. Midoriko feels ashamed of her mother in front of her classmates—fearing disconnection from them—and then amplifies this

initial shame by feeling ashamed for feeling ashamed—fearing disconnection from her mother. Similarly, Natsuko feels ashamed of Makiko at the bathhouse while worrying about her. Brown also claims that in order to achieve connection, we have to be vulnerable: allow ourselves to be touched, talked to, and seen.<sup>105</sup> The climactic kitchen scene exemplifies this moment of vulnerability and connection; it can thus be interpreted as a transition from shame to empathy. Abe Auestad refers to Sedgwick’s understanding of shame—as being based on “identification and empathy”—to argue that empathy dominates this scene through an “automatic mimicry” of each other.<sup>106</sup> This affective transition represents a catharsis, a reconnection between mother and daughter, and a rebirth of their relationship. Yet, its open-endedness suggests a continuation of their conflicts.

Kawakami’s literary representation of the female body experience (albeit cisgendered) offers a direct consideration of breasts, menstruation, and reproduction, which is still rare in contemporary literature and is worth our attention from a gender perspective. *Chichi to ran* displays “precarity” (uncertain and precarious living) in neoliberalist, contemporary Japan and problematizes female agency through depicting the hardships of a single mother, a mother/daughter conflict rooted in their bodies, while simultaneously producing a rich literary text in conversation with a tradition of Japanese literature.

In *Chichi to ran*, the connection between mother and daughter is mediated by the narrator, and is affected by their own body image and personal sources of discomfort and pain. In the short span of a three day visit, we witness the interaction between Midoriko and Makiko from the narrator’s perspective, and from the aunt’s and sister’s points of view, respectively. It, thus, presents an alternative narrative to those relying exclusively on either daughterly or maternal perspectives. Yet, the reader is left with big question marks regarding our almost nameless narrator, so Kawakami’s extended novel *Natsu monogatari* (trans. *Breasts and Eggs* 2020) that focuses on Natsuko’s life choices seems like an exciting continuation.

Midoriko and Makiko feel dissatisfaction with their bodies and share a sense of strangeness and incongruity. In other words, they do not feel comfortable in their own skin. Kawakami says in an interview that: “‘even if we take off our clothes, we can’t take off our bodies.’ This became my catchphrase at some point in my life, regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, no matter what, you can’t change your body, and that feels

kind of weird.”<sup>107</sup> This “motto” can be found in *Chichi to ran* when looking at Midoriko’s and Makiko’s relationship with their bodies. Midoriko’s source of discomfort relates to not being able to “take off her body,” as she feels somehow condemned or imprisoned by her own body and its reproductive capabilities, in particular. Makiko also attempts to “take off her body” both through her pursuit of a slender ideal and “perfect” breasts. Both of them seem to want to free themselves from their bodies, or better said, free their bodies from physical, sociocultural, and economical determination.

Finally, Natsuko takes Makiko and Midoriko to Tokyo station, where they board a bullet train back to Osaka. The ending of the novella is circular because that is the place where they begin, but there is no sense of closure, no real resolution. The reader does not know what will happen next in the lives of any of the characters; it is an open-ended story. There are conflicts and changes, but not a drastic transformation or solution to their problems. Even though Midoriko breaks her silence towards the end, her feelings of anxiety and discomfort are not gone. Makiko is going back to her work, and we do not know whether she is going to get breast augmentation surgery or not. We do not even know if she really met with Midoriko’s father and if so, what happened there. We are left in uncertainty—in this sense, the reader is also left in a precarious position.

The only image left is Natsuko or “I,” reflecting about her body while looking in the mirror, perhaps an invitation for the reader to do the same. Natsuko, in the end, epitomizes the motto “we can take off our clothes but not our bodies,” as she takes off her clothes and looks at her naked body in the mirror and notices that her period is almost gone. The final attention to her menstruation symbolizes the point in life in which she is. Fuse suggests that it indicates that “the period of moratorium, not being a virgin nor a mother, is getting longer in contemporary times.”<sup>108</sup> The idea of Natsuko being in a moratorium phase denotes a search for her role, a definition by negation: she is not a virgin, like Midoriko, nor a mother, like Makiko. She does not fit social roles traditionally assigned to adult women (wife and mother) in Japan, and as she does not represent a fixed identity or role, she embodies a hope for an alternative future.

We are first and foremost embodied subjects and our agency will always be caught up in bodily and sociocultural issues. Menstruation, beauty practices, reproduction, and mothering are collective experiences that have too often remained invisible. Kawakami’s masterwork puts them in the spotlight, invests body experiences with a voice, and tells a relevant

story not only to Japan, but also to the world. By doing so, Kawakami challenges fixed gender roles, problematizes mechanisms of body control, and reveals the violence of the culture of embodiment.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Chichi to ran* has not been published in English yet, but has been translated into Chinese, French, Norwegian, Korean, Vietnamese, and Spanish. An extended version of this novella has been published in Japanese as *Natsu monogatari* 夏物語 (Natsu's story or Summer stories, 2019), and also in English as *Breasts and Eggs*, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd, in 2020 by Europa editions (U. S. A.) and Picador (U. K.). The novel includes the three-day visit covered in the novella, and picks up the story by focusing on the life of the narrator Natsuko a decade later. Now, it is Natsuko's time to make a choice as she explores the prospects of becoming a single mother through artificial insemination by donor (AID). This novel continues to deal with issues regarding the female body experience, but also expands its focus, as it deals with larger issues regarding reproductive justice and gender roles.
- <sup>2</sup> See Matsumoto Kazuya, *Gendai josei sakkaron* (Suiseisha, 2011); Fuse Kaoru, "Kawakami Mieko Chichi to ran: 'nugenai karada' o megutte," in *Tokushū puroretarian bungaku to purekariāto bungaku no aida, kokubungaku: kaishaku to kanshō* 75.4 (2010): 165–171; Kurumisawa Ken, "Meiji to heisei ga 'ito' de kasaneru 'Chichi to ran,'" *Kanagawa daigaku hyōron* 61 (2008): 117–123; Reiko Abe Auestad, "Invoking Affect in Kawakami Mieko's Chichi to ran (Breast and Eggs, 2008): Higuchi Ichiyō, Playful Words and Ludic Gestures," *Japan Forum* 28.4 (2016): 530–548; Fujita Hiroshi, "Kawakami Mieko: Chichi to ran: Inpei kioki toshite no shōsetsu, izen toshite kusuburi tsuzuketeiru kyosei yōkyū," *Shukan dokushojin* (March 28, 2008); Yoshio Hitomi, "Writing the Body: Gender, Language and Cultural Memory in Kawakami Mieko's 'Breasts and Eggs'" (Presentation, Association for Asian Studies 2015 Annual Conference, Chicago, March 29, 2015); Gitte Marianne Hansen, *Femininity, Self-Harm and Eating Disorders in Japan: Navigating Contradiction in Narrative and Visual Culture* (New York: Nissan Institute/ Routledge Japanese Studies Series, 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Yoshio, "Writing."
- <sup>4</sup> Fujita, "Inpei."
- <sup>5</sup> "Intabyū Akutagawashō sakka no Kawakami Mieko san 'Chichi to ran' kankoku shuppan e," *Chūō nippō*, (October 24, 2008).
- <sup>6</sup> Kawakami Mieko, "Akutagawajushōsha intabyū: 'Ie ni wa hon ga issatsu nakatta,'" *Bungei shunjū* (March 2008): 349; Kawakami Mieko, "Washa ato gaki: 'Takekurabe' ni sawaru," in *Higuchi Ichiyō Takekurabe/Natsume*

*Sōseki/Mori Ōgai: Nihon bungaku zenshū*, vol. 13, edited by Ikezawa Natsuki (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō, 2015), 525–527; Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 65; Abe Auestad, “Invoking” 3; Yoshio, “Writing.”

- <sup>7</sup> Rebecca Copeland, “The Meiji Woman Writer: ‘Amidst a Forest of Beards,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57.2 (December 1997): 383; Jennifer Koch-Weser Cullen, “A Blank Page: The Canonization of Higuchi Ichiyō,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 16.4 (Fall 2014): 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Cullen, “Blank Page,” 16.
- <sup>9</sup> Timothy J. Van Compernelle, *The Uses of Memory: The Critique of Modernity in the Fiction of Higuchi Ichiyō* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 236.
- <sup>10</sup> Cullen, “Blank Page,” 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Sata Ineko, “Takekurabe kaishaku e no hitotsu no gimon,” *Gunzō* 40.2 (May 1985): 192–196; Van Compernelle, *Uses*, 236; Cullen, “Blank Page,” 16.
- <sup>12</sup> Maeda Ai, “Midori no tame ni,” in *Higuchi Ichiyō ‘Takekurabe’ Sakuhin ronshū* (Tokyo: Kress Shuppan, 2001), 286–296; Van Compernelle, *Uses*, 236; Cullen, “Blank Page,” 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Kawakami, “Te ni wa,” 350.
- <sup>14</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 534; Kurumisawa, “Meiji to Heisei,” 117.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 545; “Intabyū Akutagawashō.”
- <sup>16</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 166–167; Kawakami, “Te ni wa,” 349–350.
- <sup>17</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 542.
- <sup>18</sup> Hansen, *Femininity*, 69.
- <sup>19</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 166.
- <sup>20</sup> Kawakami, “Te ni wa,” 349.
- <sup>21</sup> There is certainly room to explore the significance of Kawakami’s use of Osaka dialect. See Hitomi Yoshio, “An Interview with Mieko Kawakami,” *Wasafiri* 35.2 (May 2020): 44. *Lit Hub* Executive Editor, John Freeman has written in a blurb that “the way she moves among her characters here will make clear why *Breasts and Eggs* is the *Makioka Sisters* of its time” (“*Lit Hub*’s Most Anticipated Books of 2020,” *Lit Hub*, January 14, 2020). Literature scholar Yoshio also points out that due to the prominent use of Osaka dialect, Kawakami’s works could be contextualized within Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s (1886–1965) tradition and his exemplary portrayal of family dynamics in *The Makioka Sisters* (*Sasameyuki*, 1942–48; trans. 1995), a classic of not only Japanese but also international literature. In addition, Nosaka Akiyuki’s (1930–1950) short story *American hijiki* (*Amerika hijiki* 1967; trans. 2017) also shows

a particular usage of Kansai dialect interspersed with standard Japanese, to emphasize comedic effects, which is perhaps closer to Kawakami's style (Yoshio, "Writing").

- <sup>22</sup> Kawakami, "Te ni wa," 350.
- <sup>23</sup> Kawakami Mieko, *Chichi to ran*, (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2008), 7–8. All translations are my own.
- <sup>24</sup> Fuse, "Nugenai karada," 166.
- <sup>25</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 15
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>29</sup> Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 211.
- <sup>30</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays"* (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 112.
- <sup>32</sup> Van Compernelle, *Uses*, 140
- <sup>33</sup> As Copeland explains: "Ichiyō could write of silences that spoke volumes. Her heroines are the perfect image of reticent rebellion.... They suggest a world of words without uttering a sound.... Her characters do not need to speak out excessively because the reader can discern everything from the author's very subtle and suggestive prose" ("Meiji Woman," 402).
- <sup>34</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 35
- <sup>36</sup> Bobel, *New Blood*, 11. This statement refers to non-binary and transgendered people.
- <sup>37</sup> Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 46.
- <sup>38</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 31.
- <sup>39</sup> Young, *Female Body*, 106.
- <sup>40</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 78.
- <sup>41</sup> Martin, *Woman*, 112.
- <sup>42</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 79–80.

- <sup>43</sup> There is potential for exploring the usage of “the egg” and its “fertilization” or lack of, as metaphors in contemporary Japanese literature by women writers. For example, here are a few works that employ the metaphor of eggs in relation to pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, and its societal pressures. Hasegawa Junko’s (b. 1966) “Museiran” (*The Unfertilized Egg*, 2004; trans. 2006); Tawada Yoko’s (b. 1960) “Museiran” (The unfertilized egg, 2005); Kirino Natsuo (b.1955)’s *Tokyo jima* (Tokyo island, 2007).
- <sup>44</sup> Young, *Female Body*, 104.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 107.
- <sup>46</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 84.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 31.
- <sup>48</sup> Eve Agee, *The Uterine Health Companion, a Holistic Guide to Lifelong Wellness, Self-Care Strategies for: Menstruation, PMS, Endometriosis, Fibroids, Infertility, Pregnancy, Menopause, Hysterectomy* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, Random House, 2010), 4.
- <sup>49</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 32–33.
- <sup>50</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 144.
- <sup>51</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 72.
- <sup>52</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 535.
- <sup>53</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 167–168.
- <sup>54</sup> Ueno Chizuko, *Onnagirai: Nippon no misojini* (Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 2010), 7–9, quoted in Hansen, *Femininity*, 70.
- <sup>55</sup> Hansen, *Femininity*, 70.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 70–71.
- <sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 205.
- <sup>58</sup> Young, *Female Body*, 77.
- <sup>59</sup> Kawakami has discussed the public bathhouse as more than a setting, but as a symbolic space filled with multiple meanings regarding class, nakedness, and the author’s childhood. See Yoshio, “An Interview,” 41.
- <sup>60</sup> Young, *Female Body*, 84.
- <sup>61</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 1999). Here, Mulvey coins the term “male gaze,” and explains that, “in a world

ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”(837). Within this framework, the female is viewed at, as an object for male pleasure, while the subject doing the looking is male.

<sup>62</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 56–57.

<sup>63</sup> Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> *Seventeen*, quoted in Miller, *Beauty Up*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Young, *Female Body*, 78

<sup>67</sup> Miller, *Beauty Up*, 94.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 254, 260.

<sup>70</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 58–59.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Anna De Fina, “Who Tells Which Story and Why? Micro and Macro Contexts in Narrative,” *Text & Talk* 28.3 (May 2008): 422.

<sup>73</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 118.

<sup>74</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 168

<sup>75</sup> Miller, *Beauty Up*, 174.

<sup>76</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti Diet Guide. Fat is a Feminist Issue II: Conquering Compulsive Eating* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), 154. In addition, Bordo has also written regarding hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia that “these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner, waiting at the horizon of ‘normal’ femininity” (*Unbearable Weight*, 175).

<sup>77</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 50.

<sup>78</sup> “Miwaku no futomomo sukima ga akogare ‘sai gyappu’ ga nihon demo ryūkō-suru kizashi?!” *Womazine*, <https://womazine.jp/70519>. Accessed December 8, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Fujita quoted in Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 545.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.



- <sup>81</sup> Ibid, 537.
- <sup>82</sup> For more on post-feminism see: Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, “The Myth of Postfeminism,” *Gender and Society* 17.6 (2003): 878–902.
- <sup>83</sup> Shelly Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and ‘New’ Femininities,” in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2011), 286.
- <sup>84</sup> Budgeon, “Successful Femininity,” 286.
- <sup>85</sup> Miller, *Beauty Up*, 98.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., 71–73.
- <sup>87</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 245.
- <sup>88</sup> Kawakami Mieko, *Chichi to ran*, 33–34.
- <sup>89</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (William Morrow, 1991). Here, Wolf develops the concept of “beauty myth” and states that beauty ideals are presented as being supposedly universal and objective, yet they remain unverifiable assumptions (20). Wolf writes that it is the “last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable,” and argues that there has been a “violent backlash against feminism” in the face of eating disorders and cosmetic surgeries (10–11).
- <sup>90</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 538.
- <sup>91</sup> Kawakami, *Chichi to ran*, 77–78.
- <sup>92</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Notes on ‘What Not to Wear’ and Post-Feminist Symbolic Violence,” *The Sociological Review* 52.2 (2004): 97–109.
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid., 88.
- <sup>94</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 168–169.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>96</sup> In 2008 the magazine *Yurika* (Eureka) published a special edition titled “*Haha to musume no monogatari: haha/musume to iu noroi*” (Mother and daughter stories: the mother/daughter curse), in which Kawakami contributed her poem “Izasaitei no kata e” (To the very lowest, 2008). This issue features academic essays, book reviews, literary poems and works, and dialogues between clinical psychologist and literary critic Saitō Tamaki (author of *Haha wa musume no jinsei o shihai-suru: naze 'haha goroshi' wa muzukashii no ka*, The mother controls the daughter’s life: why ‘matricide’ is difficult, 2008) and manga artist Hagio Moto, and also includes another conversation between psychologist Nobuta Sayoko (author of *Haha ga omokute tamaranai: haha-musume no nageki*, The unbearable weight of mother: the grave keeper daughter’s lament, 2008) and feminist sociologist Ueno Chizuko, among others. See: Aoyama, Tomoko, “Narratives of Mother-Daughter Reconciliation: New Possibilities in Ageing Japan,” in *Mothers at the Margins: Stories of Challenge, Resistance and Love*, ed. by Lisa Raith, (Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 246.

<sup>97</sup> Aoyama, “Narratives,” 248.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>99</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 167.

<sup>100</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 543.

<sup>101</sup> *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2018*. (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018), 16.

<sup>102</sup> Amanda Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017), 2–3.

<sup>103</sup> Hansen, *Femininity*, 71; Seaman, *Writing*, 2–3. This statement can be contextualized within a larger discourse and history of body politics and reproductive policies that have limited women’s roles to the production of children—or not—for the nation-state. For example, the pre-war slogan *ume yo fuyase yo* (procreate, multiply); the birth control and eugenics movements; or how during the Meiji period with its slogan *ryōsai kenbo* (good wives and wise mothers), and the *ie seido* (family/household system) in which women functioned as “borrowed wombs” (*karibara*). For more, see Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Gender, Family and Sexualities in Modern Literature,” in *The*

*Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 43–51.

<sup>104</sup> Hansen, *Femininity*, 71.

<sup>105</sup> Brene Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” filmed June 2010 at TEDxHouston, video.

<sup>106</sup> Abe Auestad, “Invoking Affect,” 541–542.

<sup>107</sup> Kawakami, “Ie ni wa,” 350.

<sup>108</sup> Fuse, “Nugenai karada,” 170.