

Caroline Lachanski

CIMS 151

Short Paper

19 February 2018

The Flattening of Kin in *Late Chrysanthemums*

Fumiko Hayashi's writing captures the female perspective with such specificity and believability that there was no possible way it could be fully translated to the medium of film. Even accounting for this, the changes made to Hayashi's characters in Mikio Naruse's film *Late Chrysanthemums* further detract from the characters' plausibility and relatability. Naruse's *Late Chrysanthemums* reduces most of its characters to flat husks of their dynamic literature counterparts. This reduction is especially problematic because Hayashi's writing is so successful in communicating the female perspective as something both sympathetic and deeply flawed, a feat which is rare in critically acclaimed literature and film. The perspective of the character Kin, the protagonist of "A Late Chrysanthemum," is particularly detestable yet relatable, and it is only Hayashi's writing that fully humanizes Kin. Naruse's film is unable to properly portray the distinctly female story of Kin, and she is in turn reduced to a more typical female archetype seen in Japanese media of the time.

Hayashi's "A Late Chrysanthemum" opens with an extended description of the protagonist, Kin, performing her elaborate beauty routine as she prepares for a visit from a young former lover, Tabe. As Kin paints her face with a mix of cream and

glycerin and chooses her outfit for the evening, the audience is treated to her constant stream of thoughts and memories. Kin's thoughts are dynamic and complex and present her unique view of life to the audience. Kin shares her opinions on her own appearance, on women's fashion, on the men currently and previously in her life, and much more. In one such instance, Hayashi writes: "For perfume, she rubbed a sweetish scent over her shoulders and fleshy arms. Never, even by mistake, did she dab any her earlobes. Kin did not want to forget that she was a woman. Rather than the dirtiness of an old lady of the world, it would be better to be dead." From just these few sentences, the audience learns that Kin deeply values feminine youth and beauty, and has harsh opinions on those who cannot maintain them. Hayashi builds Kin up to be a real person, one that is both problematic and sympathetic. The audience learns she is obsessed with appearances, cares deeply about the opinions of the men in her life, makes wise financial decisions, is somewhat of a homebody, and so much more. While many of Kin's thoughts or descriptions might be considered extraneous or irrelevant to the rest of the story, they all accumulate to create the three-dimensional character that is Kin.

One of the most essential features of Hayashi's writing is its feminine perspective. Kin's beauty routine is distinctly female in its components and its purpose. Kin only performs such a routine because she (and the rest of society) values beauty and youth in women; to live as an old, ugly woman is a fate worse than death. Kin makes specific choices in her routine, such as wearing lipstick, but not wearing nail polish, based on her opinions of what makes a woman her age look beautiful and sophisticated. Furthermore, Kin only performs this elaborate routine because she is

awaiting a visit from a former male lover. Male affections are also incredibly valuable to women her age, as indicated by Kin, who, while taking a bath, thinks, “She could still get a man. That alone, she felt, was a source of strength for living.”

An important aspect of this scene is that Kin does her entire beauty routine before Tabe arrives. Thus, when he sees her, she is the same perfect woman he saw for the first time years ago, and she was successfully able to preserve her beauty and youth in his eyes. However, in the film, Kin is still adjusting herself and her makeup when Tabe arrives, and he sees her before and after her ablutions. The Kin of Hayashi’s story would never have let Tabe see her mid-routine, as this shatters the illusion that has remained effortlessly beautiful despite the passage of time. This effort put into presenting oneself as incredibly beautiful with little effort is arguably a very feminine action.

This lengthy scene of her preparations, which reveals so much about Kin in both its descriptions of her actions and its revelations of her thoughts, is severely truncated in the film to less than a minute long. This curtailing of the beauty routine parallels the changes to Kin’s character made by the film. In the film, Kin’s role as a businesswoman is heavily emphasized. Instead of her introductory scene featuring her beautification process, in the film she is shown making plans with her business partner and talking about kicking a widow out of a property she wishes to sell. She spends a good portion of her film scenes talking about money and reminding characters to repay their loans. She is generally shrewd and unsympathetic, and seems to bully the less wealthy protagonists. The audience only sees a softer, more vulnerable side of Kin when she

hears Tabe is coming to visit. However, this meeting ends unhappily for both of them, as it does in the short story. Kin ends the film searching for more property to buy with her business partner, showing a return to her former cold, shrewd ways.

It could be argued that Kin's character in "A Late Chrysanthemum" is anti-feminist due to Kin's obsession with physical beauty and male attention, traits for which women are often negatively stereotyped. Following this line of thinking, the film's Kin, whose most accentuated trait is her business acumen, a skill generally considered desirable and masculine, would seem more progressive. However, Kin's depiction in the literature is so engaging because it is so problematic. Kin is a deeply flawed character who is the way she is because of her complicated past and because of the culture in which she was raised. Erasing (or even mitigating) these facets of her would be erasing the perspective of the aging woman in post-war Japan. The flattening of Kin in *Late Chrysanthemums* is representative of the erasure of female perspectives from history.

It remains unclear why the film made such drastic changes to Kin's character. Perhaps emphasizing her role as a businesswoman made her more interesting or more palatable to a male moviegoing audience. Despite this, Kin is a much less likable and compelling character in the film than in Hayashi's story. The difference is that in "A Late Chrysanthemum," Kin is fully realized as a character from her introduction to her final actions. When she burns the old photograph of Tabe, creating a smoky odor in the house, she covers it up by placing a slice of cheese in the fire, telling Tabe she was curious as what it would taste like (in the film, she simply tells him it is the smell of cigarettes). To the end, this Kin is obsessed with appearances, and is willing to lie and

put on a show to maintain these appearances, just as she is willing to spend hours beautifying herself in order to maintain the facade of youthful beauty. The Kin of the film is rewritten to be an archetypical former geisha turned savvy businesswoman, which, while not inaccurate to Hayashi's story, fails to capture the humanity, and specifically the female humanity, of her character.