

After World War II, the role of women in Japanese society has evolved as Japan rebuilt and expanded their society. From the American occupation to the “lost decades,” the role of women and their romantic, sexual, and marital choices have evolved and have been tracked through Japanese culture. In the novels *The Shade of Blossoms* and *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, the respective female protagonists, Yoko and Tsukiko, reflect the romantic, sexual, and marital choices of Japanese women throughout their respective time periods which provide excellent commentary on the state of Japan throughout these historical periods.

The Shade of Blossoms by Shohei Ooka follows Yoko, a nightclub hostess in her late 30s living in Japan during the 1950s. Japan in the 1950s was defined by the end of the American occupation in 1952 followed by the beginning of the era of high speed growth. Many characters within the novel experience the wealth and growth that defined the era including Junko, the bar owner. Despite widespread economic growth, there were many in Japanese society during the 1950s who did not experience that growth and were somewhat left behind to struggle for themselves with Yoko falling into that category. Yoko’s struggle of finding a man to marry in order to advance through Japanese society highlights the limitations of women in Japan at the time. In Japan during the 1950s, economic opportunity for women was extremely limited and women could realistically only advance socially through marriage. This limitation meant that relationships and marriages were extremely important in Japanese society, especially for women. Due to her age and a lack of attractiveness to men, Yoko was only a sexual object as “men knew nothing about her” and she feels used consistently by men for her

body.¹ Yoko enters these relationships in hopes of marriage but nothing comes of them but sexual activity, a common occurrence for women at this time in Japan. The pressure of finding a relationship and marriage in this new postwar Japanese society spurs a sexual expectation and exploitation for women as “the Japanese ideal of feminine beauty is based on foreign movie stars.”² The pressure and constant disappointment leads Yoko to eventually commit suicide at the end of the book as it is revealed that Yoko “had made all the preparations long ago.”³ The limitation of options for Yoko and her love life created a pressure that builds up through the entire book and the expectation to fulfill the traditional role of a Japanese wife is what eventually leads to her committing suicide. The struggle to find purpose, especially for women, in an era of widespread economic growth and increased globalism is a prominent feature of Japan in the 1950s.

As Japan reached the 1980s, the era of high speed growth came to a halt which threw Japan into a period of stagnation. This era was defined by the evolving role of women in Japan which is reflected in the novel *Strange Weather in Tokyo* by Hiromi Kawakami. The novel follows the female protagonist Tsukiko living in Tokyo during the 1980s. Similar to Yoko, Tsukiko is in her 30s and is single as she acknowledges at the beginning of the book that “I had been alone. I rode the bus alone, I walked around the city alone, I did my shopping alone, and I drank alone.”⁴ *Strange Weather in Tokyo* documents the slow degradation of the standard gender stereotypes in Japan as many women like Tsukiko begin to break away from their expected roles in Japanese society.

¹ Ooka, Shohei, 48.

² Ooka, Shohei, 15.

³ Ooka, Shohei, 112.

⁴ Kawakami, Hiromi, 27.

This is consequential for not only Tsukiko, but all Japanese women as the importance of marriage and relationships in a woman's life begins to be less of a burden. Despite being single for a large portion of the novel, Tsukiko feels fairly contempt in her life and is able to live her life comfortably compared to Yoko. Tsukiko comments that "At this point, it wasn't about them telling me I ought to get married or quit my job. I had long ago gotten used to that particular kind of uneasiness. It was just dissatisfying in some way."⁵ A further rejection of traditional Japanese values is seen when Tsukiko rejects a relationship with Kojima, a salaryman who enjoys an ideal Japanese lifestyle in favor of the Sensei. Kojima reflects the traditional Japanese perspective on relationships and their eventual goal of marriage as he is seeking to re-marry after his divorce. Tsukiko, representing more modern Japanese women, rejects the pressure of marriage in Japanese culture and seeks to forge her own path. Through Kojima, the book highlights the rapidly increasing divorce rates in Japan due to economic stagnation as many salarymen had a harder time supporting their families, a core tenant of traditional marriages and what made men attractive to Japanese women initially. The rising divorce rate in Japan opens Japanese women back up to the dating pool and in a time where the traditional roles are softening, many Japanese women are exposed to the opportunity to follow their own desires. The dissolution of these expectations compounded by the influx of divorcees in Japanese society creates a more favorable situation for Tsukiko than Yoko due to the relative success in not only attracting and dating men like Kojima despite her traditionally unattractive qualities but the love that is shared between her and Sensei.

⁵ Kawakami, Hiromi, 57.

While both books focus on female protagonists and their struggles to find love, *Strange Weather in Tokyo* showcases a greater freedom for women in Japan in regards to their relationships and marriage. Despite the economic boom of the postwar economy waning, Japanese women in the 1980s felt less pressure due to decreased economic dependence upon men. *The Shade of Blossoms* is set in a Japanese society marked by traditionalism and standard gender roles compounded by the economic pressure for women to be in relationships and get married. It's the economic freedom and the ability to make personal choices that allows Tsukiko to have a much better outcome than Yuko, averting suicide and finding love through Sensei. While Yuko had more sexual relationships than Tsukiko, Yuko felt incomplete and wanted more out of a relationship, with the ultimate desire of marriage. Tsukiko took an opposite approach and ultimately felt contempt and eventually found love through a relationship. Yuko and Tsukiko are excellent representations of Japanese women throughout the postwar period. The immense pressure of Yuko was heavily felt among Japanese women, leading to marriages that would ultimately help contribute to the rising divorce rates of the late 20th century during the economic slowdown and the reduced pressures on women. Tsukiko represented Japanese women who experienced newfound economic freedom and a detachment from economic dependence, allowing for the opportunity to find true love.

While both Yuko and Tsukiko are in extremely similar situations at the beginning of their respective books, The limitations placed on Japanese women in the 1950s was what eventually led to Tsukiko finding love and Yuko committing suicide. Japanese society has evolved throughout the 20th century to allow women in identical situations to contribute to society in a meaningful way, and by being able to contribute, Japanese

women found a newfound sense of purpose which helped revolutionize Japan and push it through the “lost decades”.

Bibliography

Ooka, Shohei. *The Shade of Blossoms*. Translated by Dennis C. Washburn. Ann Arbor: Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, 1998.

Kawakami, Hiromi. *Strange Weather in Tokyo*. Translated by Allison Markin Powell. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012.