

Tanizaki's Naomi: The Modern Girl in 1920s Japan

Females become women, not being born as women. This is a very prevalent consensus not only amongst feminism but also in psychology and sociology since the twentieth century. In traditional oriental ideology, women were usually an incarnation of family and kinship, which is alienated from their body and becomes an objectified servant of households. In the Tokugawa and the Meiji period in Japan, the value of women was majorly determined by how they served their husbands and handled the households. However, as Japan started accepting western ideology, the traditional values were challenged and influenced, so did the definition of women, resulting in the emergence of some young generation women with different values and living styles. This essay aims to study the group of the "Modern Girl"(moga) of 1920s Japan through the novel, *Naomi*, by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki with comparison to the other groups of women, such as "new women" who advocated gender equality. The modern girl, Naomi, depicted by Tanizaki's novel, though seemingly independent, still remained as whose value was determined by other men or luxuries, while the new women, unsatisfied with their traditional role, pursued gender equality on their own in various ways. The phenomenon of modern girls, in general, disclosed women to more social activities, even though they rejected not only the boundary between genders but the basic social structure, families. Tanizaki portrayed moga as a vain and decadent character in order to depict the aftermath of controversy between the conventional society and the new commercialized society.

To have a definition of gender will be very helpful when discussing gender relations which will be included in the latter part of the essay. As gender is culturally constructed, women

have to be culturally recognized as socialized before being women so that there can be some metaphoric representation of those women as they can be referred to as existing in a society.<sup>1</sup> Most women during the twenties in Japan were restricted by the traditional gender role while attempting to obtain better treatment and more power in workplaces, families, and society. However, modern girls, as they did not fit in any existing gender roles and their pursuit of sensual pleasure emerged from outside the society, were marginalized and not considered socialized as they challenged the idea that their sexuality should be possessed by men.

In *Naomi*, the heroine exploited the obsession with her sexuality of an electric engineer, Joji who raised her up,<sup>2</sup> to achieve a “mistress-slave” relationship with him.<sup>3</sup> She was an exaggerated prototype of modern girls who were similar to men both physically and spiritually. Naomi was completely opposite to the traditional women, by her egotism, aggressiveness, flauntings. She kept mocking others in public<sup>4</sup> and acted boyishly.<sup>5</sup> But she was not pursuing gender equality, instead, she was in the opposite. Let alone her exploitation of her body, she was attacking genders by sexualizing the gender relation and thus purifying the power between men and women. However, from the description of Theodore de Bary in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, there were also other groups of women approaching gender equality, such as “new women”. In the story of Shimizu Toyoko, she stopped being subversive to her husband under the family abuse but expressed her feelings and tried to encourage her husband to change. After she

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, Joan Wallach, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1068.

<sup>2</sup> Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *Naomi* (New York: Vintage International, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Gail Lee Bernstein, "The Modern Girl as Militant" in *Recreating Japanese Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Tanizaki, *Naomi*, 91-95.

<sup>5</sup> Tanizaki, *Naomi*, 139-142.

failed, she finally divorced and decided to work and live solely.<sup>6</sup> She was, though considered as a new woman, still restricted by conventions with the idea that she still had access to a good life as an individual without a complete family, which implied that she had to admit the significance of a family while incorporating other progressive values. Moga was different: they acted as and wanted to be the subject of society but they did not have a place in society as they did not have a doctrine. Naomi was a good example who was apparently manly<sup>7</sup> but seeking affections from men and fell into consumerism.<sup>8</sup>

The modern girls challenged the role of a woman in society and a mother in the household.<sup>9</sup> However, the presence of moga acted as a catalytic to merge females and males when there was still large segregation between genders. As those moga produced and consumed as individuals,<sup>10</sup> they became independent from families and marriages. Due to the rapid social metamorphism, there had not been a new standard and clear ethics for women yet. And as moga took off the shackle from families and marriages, they turned their attention into an immoderate sensual pleasure. Therefore, the conservative gender role disappeared in this context as the differentiation of sex seemed no longer needed. In the movie *Osaka Elegy*, the heroine was finally marked as delinquent(furyou shoujo) and abandoned by her family and firm.<sup>11</sup> The majority of people considered moga as the margin of society,<sup>12</sup> like criminals and hinin in the past. The gender relation, whether liberal or not, had to be a relation at first. But moga who cared

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<sup>6</sup> "Narrative Strategies in Shikin's 'The Broken Ring'" in Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 475-481.

<sup>7</sup> Tanizaki, *Naomi*, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Tanizaki, *Naomi*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating*, 246.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Osaka Elegy*, directed by Kenji Mizoguchi (Kyoto: Daiichi Eiga, 1936), online.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Gordon, "Economy and Society" in *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159.

only for sensual and material pleasure had no place to form a social relationship as there was no clear ethics supporting such culture. Nonetheless, moga proved that it was at least possible that women and men were not segregated, both physically and spiritually, simply by their existence. This could be a mark of potential liberation of new gender roles. But it was very hard to define what liberation that moga was contributing due to the complexity and ambiguity of the definition of the liberation of gender roles. At last, moga shortened the distance between genders by more straightforward interactions with males.

Tanizaki chose the narrative from a man who reared Naomi up and was exploited by Naomi who became vain and extravagant. Such caricature of the process about Joji became increasingly obsessed with Naomi's sexuality while he realized the actual character of Naomi was far away from grace,<sup>13</sup> implied another aspect of the "mistress-slave" relation.<sup>14</sup> Considering the authority as a male author in a patriarchal society as writing had been a muscular job in both Europe and Japan, women are usually portrayed as either sacred or vicious. But Naomi was distinct from previous characters, she showed the fact that sexuality was no longer a possession of men, and women, who used to be the object of sex, began to own and make use of their sexuality as they took over the control of their body from men, caused by the controversy between the conventional and the new commodity societies.

In conclusion, the modern girls, both written in Naomi and in reality shortened the gender inequality but tended to destroy the gender role<sup>15</sup>, while new women, though thought to change the situation in their traditional household, remained, to some extent, this thought romantic rather than in practice. And Tanizaki portrayed the heroine and the way people

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<sup>13</sup> Tanizaki, *Naomi*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating*, 246.

treated moga implied their loss of values and, in a psychoanalytical term, lack of castration under the absence of named social orders.