



JAPANESE WOMEN WRITERS

Twentieth Century Short Fiction

Translated and Edited by

NORIKO MIZUTA LIPPIT

KYOKO IRIYE SELDEN



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An East Gate Book

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Introduction

Noriko Mizuta Lippit
and Kyoko Iriye Selden

Readers newly introduced to Japanese literature are often surprised by the extent to which the major classical literary works are the products of women writers. *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*, two of the most famous prose works of the classical period, were written by women, as were the majority of the poetic diaries, one of the major genres in classical literature.

The prominent position held by women in classical literature is not limited to prose. The writings of more than one hundred thirty women poets, including many who epitomize the creative voice of the era, appear in Japan's earliest poetry anthology, the *Manyōshū*, which was compiled in the eighth century and includes works by people of widely varying education and class background. The second oldest anthology, *Kokinshū*, which appeared a century later, contains in contrast to the *Manyōshū* only carefully selected works by well-trained poets, works able to meet the clearly stated aesthetic and critical criteria of the editors. Yet here too the works of the women poets match those of their male counterparts in every respect. In fact, such women poets as Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu are generally regarded as the most able and popular poets of the era.

Virginia Woolf once said that traditionally poetry was not a form of expression suitable for women since they could not aspire to place themselves at the center of the universe and to reinterpret it accordingly. The poetic expressiveness of Japanese women poets in the classical period, however, belies this perceptive observation in Japan's case.

The striking creativity of Japanese women in the *Manyōshū* era is

undoubtedly associated with the freedom and relatively high political and economic position they enjoyed. Yet in the Heian period (A.D. 794–1185), when women were increasingly relegated to domestic roles under the growing influence of Buddhism and Confucianism, which excluded women from the political and economic sphere, they continued to excel in, and play a central role in the development of, classical poetry.

A reason for this was that poetry came to be defined solely as short lyrical poetry (*waka* or *tanka*), and became the accepted social means of expressing love. Perhaps the most significant factor, however, was that poetry was written in *kana*, the Japanese phonetic alphabet, rather than the Chinese language required for official documents. The *kana* system, which was commonly identified as *onna moji*, “women’s letters,” was considered too lacking in sophistication for men to use except in *waka* poetry. Although men continued to write Chinese poetry in Chinese characters, this poetry became increasingly an intellectual pastime or a means for expressing religious thought, and ultimately it gave way to *waka* poetry as the mainstream of Japanese poetry.

The development of Japanese prose fiction is closely related to poetry; the major sources of fiction are to be found in the lengthy prefaces to poems and poetic diaries together with the storytelling tradition in the folk and oral literature. The private, lyrical nature of classical poetry was in large measure carried over to prose fiction. Poetic fiction (*uta monogatari*) and poetic diaries, both of which excelled in psychological analysis of the inner world and both of which were written by women in *kana*, became the major fictional genres in classical literature. Thus Japanese women came to take a leading role in fiction as well as in poetry.

Virginia Woolf’s observation that the novel is an appropriate form for women, whom she regarded as especially keen observers of life, is certainly true with regard to Japanese women writers, especially as they became more confined to the private spheres of domestic life, closing the channels for participation in social activities and expression. Yet women’s role in storytelling goes back to the ancient period when the mediums, usually women in Japan, were the central transmitters of folk legends and oral literature. In preparing *Kojiki* (712), the first book to appear in Japan (or the earliest which is preserved), a medium named Hieda no Are, who is believed to have been a woman, was assigned to narrate the historical stories of the nation from the mythical period on, while Ōno Yasumaro, a distinguished male Chinese scholar, wrote them down.

In the emergence and development of *monogatari*, a unique fictional

genre of storytelling akin to the novel, women writers took a decisive role. In the Heian period, education was the major means of social advancement for aristocrats, and low- and middle-ranking aristocrats in particular placed tremendous emphasis on the education of their children. Although women were excluded from the court examination system, and were therefore exempt from the rigorous studies of Chinese language, history, and literature that men undertook, they too benefited from the emphasis on education.

Since the court hired educated women as governesses and companions to empresses and women courtiers, the demand for educated women provided a considerable incentive for middle- and low-ranking aristocratic families to educate their daughters. The salons of ladies in the court centered around outstanding women poets and musicians who competed among themselves and thus perfected their mastery of art and literature. Yet for the development of monogatari, as for that of waka poetry, the use of the native language of daily life, kana, was the single most significant element. Just as Chaucer's writing in English rather than the Latin of contemporary intellectuals established a new tradition in English literature, the works of women writing in kana became the core of the Japanese literary tradition.

Despite the literary prominence of women, however, their status declined steadily throughout the Heian period, reaching finally the state of complete deprivation of political and economic power and rights which characterized the succeeding feudal era. Women became confined to the domestic sphere and suffered particularly from widespread polygamy. Highly educated in literature and art, sophisticated in understanding the intricacies of human emotions and relations, yet deprived of other social channels for expression, upper-class women recorded in seclusion their sufferings and observations of the life around them.

One of the generic origins of the monogatari, which combines the romance's idealistic vision of love and life with the novel's realistic, critical portrayal of human affairs in society, was the poetic diary, which was typically kept by women. While men kept official, public diaries and historical records in Chinese, women wrote their private thoughts, feelings, and observations of the people around them, developing inner worlds of emotion and psychology in the language of their own daily life. Private, autobiographical writing, profound in psychological understanding, was one significant generic basis of the modern novel in general, but was particularly so in the development of Japanese fiction.

The Tale of Genji, which incorporates elements of epic, tragedy, and lyrical poetry, reveals that women writers had attained a high degree of consciousness of their predicament and confidence in their works. In-

deed, the first and among the most influential theories of fiction were developed by its author, Murasaki Shikibu, and by the author of the poetic diary *Kagerō Nikki*, who is identified only as the mother of Michitsuna, a high-ranking court official.

Distinguishing the monogatari from history, Murasaki said that the monogatari deals with human experiences of victors and great people, but also those of weak and socially insignificant people. Dismissing the romances written previously as rank fabrications, the author of *Kagerō Nikki* declared that she was attempting to present her life as it was, to show what the life of the well-to-do woman in Heian society was really like. In this way she made psychological realism the basis of the literary diary as a genre.

The dual structure of Japanese literature, divided between *kanbun* (Chinese writings) and kana writings, is clearly based on the division between the literature of men and that of women. Men did write waka poetry and eventually other literary forms in kana, especially when the aristocracy fell from political power and became nostalgically attached to the Heian literary tradition. Ironically, their copying of the classical works, a reflection of this, helped to maintain the distinct female literary tradition of the Heian period. In the Edo period (1603–1868), when the merchant class became a significant patron of literature, fiction was written in kana; but overall, the male-style literature written in Chinese and in Chinese style never ceased to dominate literary and intellectual writings until the modern period, when Japan turned to the West as a source of learning and freed itself from the influence of Chinese literature.

The recognition of female-school literature as a separate category of writing made the participation of women in literary expression more readily acceptable, creating a situation quite different from that prevailing in the West. Throughout the classical period, educated women continued to write poetry, monogatari, and diaries and confessional memoirs; by the medieval period, and even more so in the Edo period, however, the social system, shaped by neo-Confucianism, confined women absolutely to the home and to the roles of wife and mother. When feudalism was established, women ceased to write, and there ensued a long period of silence in which women lost a major voice in literature. As the *bushi* (samurai) class established its political supremacy based on “masculine” principles, classical female-style literature and expression virtually vanished, and it was not revived *until* the national literature movement in the late Edo period, a movement led by scholars who were dissatisfied with and critical of the Confucian paradigm that stifled literary imagination.

Female-school literature revived fully in the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho (1912–26) periods as the pursuit of modernization and the human rights movement stirred in women an awareness of themselves and a desire for expression. Although the modern legal system which replaced feudalism in the Meiji period continued to deny women almost all significant human rights, the introduction of Christian education by missionaries, the arrival of Western feminist thought, and the development of the human rights movement gradually gave rise to outstanding women intellectuals deeply concerned with their status and identity in modern society.

The modernization effort in the Meiji period emphasized the utilitarian aspects of life, relegating literature to play a marginal role, with writers and artists considered basically good-for-nothings. Because writers and artists were ignored and isolated from society, they created a small, closed world of their own, a studio, where they could carry out artistic experiments and live according to their ideas, unhampered by the old conventions and utilitarian concerns. Although they suffered from their isolation from society, it enabled them to pursue and adopt the most radical and avant-garde ideas in the world. Because writers and artists were always in the forefront of the “pure” pursuit of new ideas, and because literature and art were outside the main social activities of Meiji society, these were the most appropriate fields—indeed virtually the only fields—in which ambitious and talented women could seek to achieve self-expression and fame. It was only natural that Seitō (*The Bluestockings*), which was founded in 1911 and became Japan’s foremost feminist group, started as a literary group, publishing the first women’s literary journal. Seitō attracted many women whose primary interest was self-expression, and its journal soon became a forum for dealing with all issues related to women and feminism.

During the Meiji-Taisho period, women intellectuals and artists were as preoccupied with the question of the modern self as their male counterparts. Under the influence of writers like Ibsen, the “new woman” gained recognition as a legitimate intellectual subject, although in actuality those women who tried to shed the traditional roles assigned to them and to live freely met social ostracism. Especially characteristic of the literary works written by women during this period is the struggle of the female ego in its pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-expression.

In the modern period too, women writers have been placed in their own group isolated from the main activities of the literary world, and their works have been treated as belonging to a separate category not always regarded as an integral part of Japanese literary development.

This unique phenomenon itself helped encourage women to write because it secured readers and a market for their works. Although Japanese women had historically maintained a relatively high literacy rate, the universal education of women was certainly one of the most remarkable achievements of the Meiji reformation. The recognition of the female school of literature as a separate and legitimate school backed by a long, brilliant tradition and the existence of educated women readers contributed to the flourishing of women's literature by exempting women writers from full-scale competition with men writers and from being subjected to the more acute sexist prejudices in literary criticism which such competition would have engendered. In the same way that separate colleges for women helped promote women's education, the existence and recognition of the separate female-school literature worked as decidedly positive factors in encouraging women to express themselves in literary form.

Yet as more women found the means to express themselves and participate fully in modern life, the tradition of autobiographical, psychological writing associated with the female school became a heavy burden. Limited to dealing with a narrow range of themes and subjects in their private lives, women writers found female-school literature increasingly restrictive. Critics continued to expect women writers to write within their female-school traditions and were prepared to accept only those writers who wrote on such typical "female" subjects as psychology, the mysterious female psyche, motherhood, and female eroticism, subjects which men could not claim as areas of their own expertise. The fact that Japanese literary criticism to this day has been largely a male monopoly must be one of the factors responsible for this.

Okamoto Kanoko, for example, whose writing is characterized by a narcissistic preoccupation with her own female sexuality and her own image as the embodiment of motherhood, virginity, and erotic beauty, is the woman writer most enthusiastically hailed by male critics. Interpretations of her life and works are saturated with the mysticism of female principles, obviously reflecting the aspirations of her male admirers. Furthermore, such general prejudices as the belief that women are not equipped to think originally and in abstraction, that they are too subjective and emotional to deal with broad socio-political issues, and that they are too incapable of comprehending theory to be concerned with aesthetic questions tended to discourage women from addressing themselves fully to these issues.

In addition to the sociological factors that affected the literary assessment of women writers' works, fundamental ideas about women, especially the idea that "female principles" determine the nature of the

imagination and thinking of women, exercised a decisive influence in shaping their works. In particular, the "maternal principle," according to which women are supposed to be close to nature and life, has had a great impact on women's imagination and concept of themselves. According to such ideas, women are the transmitters of life, the life-nurturing force in society, and in touch with the mysterious natural and supernatural forces which govern human life.

The mysterious quality of "female nature" or "maternity" has long attracted and fascinated both men and women in Japan. An emphasis on motherhood was only natural in view of the fact that Confucian ethics considered motherhood to be the sole legitimate *raison d'être* for women, but maternity as a female principle had more than a social dimension. In the modern period, too, the more men and women became wounded and battered from the psyche-damaging struggle of the ego, the more they considered maternity as a refuge, celebrating women with maternal feminine principles as mother-goddesses. The concept of the mother-goddess, however, is only the other side of the concept of women as "witches."

In a culture where Buddhist influence was strong, the socially oppressed sought salvation in the belief in reincarnation and the perpetuation of karma. Ghost stories, including the Noh plays, which form the core of the rich Japanese tradition of the grotesque, gave expression and poetic justice to the silenced, mistreated women. Furthermore, the confessional revelation of the secret self, as in the tradition of *Kagerō Nikki* and in the character of Lady Rokujō in *The Tale of Genji*, tended to reveal the hatred and vengeful desire of the mistreated woman, creating a type of *femme fatale*. In antithesis to the good wife and mother, there has always been an established image of vicious women, of women as devouring, vengeful, manipulating witches.

Like their Western counterparts, modern Japanese women writers have found the subconscious realm of the female psyche to be a vital area to explore in their attempt to redefine "female principles" and female identity. Writers like Enchi Fumiko and Ohba Minako consider it essential to delve into that area to restore their lost expression. The deliberate use of gothic conventions and the linking of the modern female psyche to the psyches of the mistreated women in the classical period is one of the characteristic features of modern works.

It is true that women writers tended to continue to write in the tradition of female-school literature in the prewar period and even in the contemporary period, expertly exploring the psychology of love, female sexuality, and the emotional intricacies of complex human social relations. Women still are controlled somewhat by the ideal image

of women celebrated for so long in the East Asian tradition and even now pervading popular novels and television.

Yet as the work of writers represented in this collection illustrates, affected by and concerned about the events of the age, women did live in history and were subject to the influence of the contemporary political, philosophic, and aesthetic ideas sweeping the nation. Women writers presented a strong voice against war, the atomic bomb atrocities, and class and sexual exploitation. They also wrote about the common predicament of poor, working-class men and women in the capitalist-imperialist period, envisioning ways to liberate them despite the fact that they did not, for the most part, belong to that class. Some committed to socialist revolution debated with utmost seriousness the social function of literature and art and contributed to widening the scope of realism. The works of Miyamoto Yuriko, Hirabayashi Taiko, Sata Ineko, Hayashi Fumiko, Ōta Yōko, and Hayashi Kyōko attest clearly to the social consciousness of women writers.

Other writers write about the possibilities for women in the new life-style, seeing it as a means of freeing themselves from the confines of the traditional socio-sexual roles assigned to women. Questioning fundamentally the conventional ideas about maternity and female principles, these writers risk social ostracism by committing themselves to the pursuit of untraditional ways of living. For some, liberation from traditional social roles and shedding the posture of dependent heroine inevitably bring a confrontation, unmediated by society, with the ultimate meaning of life. Characters in the works of Uno Chiyo, Hayashi Fumiko, Tomioka Taeko, and Murata Kiyoko, for example, face existential questions of the meaning of life as a consequence of their pursuit of a new identity and life-style for their modern female selves.

On the other hand, several writers, including Takahashi Takako and Kōno Taeko, venture into the world of abnormal psychology, violence, and evil in their attempt to fathom the loneliness of modern existence, to explore metaphysically the ultimate meaning of human life. Their world sometimes becomes highly abstract, sometimes fantastic and subterranean—akin to the world of surrealism—and many of their works represent interesting attempts to develop the novel of ideas.

Except for the authors of popular literature, in which traditional women are definitely the most celebrated central female characters, most modern women writers pursue the fulfillment of self and the self-expression which they consider essential to attain identity. Their protagonists emerge consequently as modern female heroes rather than as heroines who are appendages to heroes. They are female heroes who are able and prepared to bear the intellectual and moral burden of reinterpreting the modern world.

In this sense, modern Japanese women writers are not the novelists in Virginia Woolf's definition: novelists who, placing themselves a distance away from full participation in life, write down their observations of people and life. Above all, in their indefatigable pursuit of the ego, they are legitimate and committed participants in the world of modern literature; they emerge from their pursuit sometimes as confident new women, sometimes wounded and battered. Some envision a new social system and an ideal future, while others present a fundamental skepticism toward the fulfillment of the ego in their attempts to transcend the self through religion, madness, or suicide. Their works reveal fully the depth and limitations of modern literature, which has centered on the search for the modern self as its major theme. Their place is assured in modernism and modern literary history.

Despite the full participation of women writers in the main currents of modern Japanese literature, literary critics still tend to treat them separately. Perhaps the most serious shortcoming in the critical treatment of women writers has been the failure to explore the social, historical, and philosophic forces shaping their ideas, imagination, and expression. There has been little effort to evaluate individual authors in relation to naturalism, surrealism, or the other literary movements which are so vital in the case of male writers. Women in general are considered to live outside history, outside the strenuous effort for self-fulfillment that characterizes modern men. Women writers are still today treated separately as a group (with their own associations, literary awards, and so forth) and are evaluated according to criteria different from those applied to men writers. They form at best a separate, unintegrated chapter in the literary history of Japan.

In this volume, we have tried to select works that reveal the range and degree of women writers' participation in modern life and the intellectual and aesthetic development of the modern period in Japan. Our objective is to illuminate their place in the historical development of modern literature, and with this critical intention we have selected works which reveal consciousness and views characteristic of women writers.

Since literary journals constitute the major medium for Japanese writers, authors have generally developed their major themes in short fiction, which is much more significant as a form than in the West, where full-length novels typically occupy the central place in a writer's works. With the exceptions of Hayashi Fumiko and Hirabayashi Taiko, most of the writers in this collection have been extremely prolific and are still writing at a furious pace, in part because of the demand from the journals; this has made choosing stories from among their works

quite difficult. Although we have selected outstanding works, in some cases we have chosen representative works over masterpieces in order to illustrate important themes and critical intentions. Furthermore, regrettably we have had to omit many good and significant writers owing to the limitations of space.

Uno Chiyo and Hayashi Fumiko were contemporaries: the former is still writing in her mature years, and the latter died in 1951 at the age of forty-eight. They represent good examples of women writers for whom writing and the choice of life-style were inseparable. They loved and wrote, and many of their major works are autobiographical. Hayashi Fumiko was born in a lower-class family with a peddler as a father and a mother who was even more unconventional in her relations with men than Fumiko herself. Her works are often distinguished by their autobiographical portrayal of a woman equipped with a free spirit and great vitality. Her later short stories, however, including "Narcissus" which appears here, are pure fiction finished with artistic mastery. Uno Chiyo's life was also untraditional in her personal relations, which form materials on which she draws heavily in her works. Yet her treatment of them brings her works close to the phenomenological study of state of mind rather than the involved scrutiny of the self.

Uno's study of human psychology is supported by her stylistic consciousness, especially in non-autobiographical pieces. To quote her from 1977, she sometimes used the approach of "chiseling each letter rather than writing." Uno even invented a special language that would best suit the character by mixing her native dialect with Kansai flavor, most effectively in "Ohan" (1947-50) as well as in some more recent stories. As she is a stylist in literature, she has been a stylist in life as a kimono designer and essayist.

Nogami Yaeko, by contrast, lived a quiet, unspectacular life as the wife of a distinguished scholar of Noh plays who belonged to the literary group gathered around the novelist Natsume Sōseki. Despite her uneventful life, she delved into the central intellectual and moral questions of the day, including those raised by activist movements and by *tenko*, the public recantation of radical political views forced on intellectuals usually through jail and torture, and constantly enlarged the areas of her literary exploration throughout the long duration of her creative activity. She continued to write, mostly in essay form, until her death at one hundred in 1985. Her unfinished last novel, *Mori* (The Woods), a warmly nostalgic semi-autobiographical work portraying a girls' school in Meiji Tokyo, is a monument of the author's mental strength and ever-youthful sentiment.

Hirabayashi Taiko, Miyamoto Yuriko, and Sata Ineko were a vital part of Japan's prewar leftist movements, movements which fought against Japan's invasion of Asian countries and domestic class oppression. Miyamoto, one of the most talented proletarian writers, started writing as a humanist under the strong influence of Tolstoy, but her awareness of women's condition and her own experiences of marriage and divorce led her to become a feminist and communist. "The Family of Koiwai," a good example of socialist realism, traces the growth of a rural, uneducated young girl into a mature woman whose awareness of the general historical and social predicament of women and the proletariat enables her to live with confidence.

Unlike Miyamoto, who experienced fully the censorship and political oppression of writers by being arrested many times yet heroically resisted the pressure for conversion, Hirabayashi was more an anarchist in temperament, and her relation to the movement and Communist Party was indirect, coming through her husband. Nonetheless, she too lived fully in an age of turmoil as a woman and independent thinker who would not be silenced or intimidated by the tenor of the age and the authorities who expressed it. "Blind Chinese Soldiers," because of its controlled realism, is a moving short protest against war; the work depicts not only the atrocities committed against the Chinese but also the victimization of common Japanese people who were thrown into a state of confusion and rendered unable to control their lives. Like Miyamoto, whose sequential autobiographical novels secure her position in modern literary history, Hirabayashi addressed herself more fully after the war to the autobiographical portrayal of her own life.

Sata Ineko also participated actively in the proletarian literary movement, yet after her arrest in 1935, which followed by three years her husband's arrest, she submitted to the pressure to give up her political views and activities. Moreover, she joined the group of writers organized by the military authorities to visit the military front to comfort the soldiers, for which activities she became a target of criticism after the war. Although she rejoined the Communist Party in 1946, several years later she was expelled. "Memory of a Night," written after her expulsion from the party, deals candidly with the theme of wartime collaboration and her disillusionment with the party. As with Uno Chiyo and Nogami Yaeko, Sata Ineko's literary career has spanned the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa eras, giving a special weight to her outstanding reminiscences of the last decade.

Although Enchi Fumiko also started her literary career under the influence of the leftist movement before the war, she went through a long period of silence until she reemerged in the mid-fifties as a writer

who delved deeply into the realm of the female psyche. Widely learned in classical Japanese literature, with a translation of *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese among her accomplishments, she created spectacular dramas of the female psychic world, connecting it to the one developed by the women writers of the classical period.

The unsublimated frustration of love and the grudges and sorrows experienced by women in polygamy create in Enchi Fumiko's writings a gothic world akin to the world of Noh plays, a world developed with penetrating insight into human emotion and psychology. Her interest in human sexuality is explored in "Love in Two Lives" through her excellent use of a classical work as the structural basis of her story. In "Love in Two Lives" the fictional space is expanded beyond present time and space to portray an archetypal human consciousness of sex.

Ōta Yōko belongs to the generation of Uno Chiyo, Sata Ineko, and Enchi Fumiko, but her achievement is that of a postwar author whose major works probed the world of the atomic bombing and its victims. She wrote both about the immediate disaster and enduring psychological scars from the bombing. She is particularly remembered for her battle against occupation censorship and against her mental illness, as detailed in "Half Human" (1954), caused by the threat of radiation disease and fears of impending world war. "Residues of Squalor" in this volume presents a powerful image of slugs swarming in a dilapidated temporary residence. The narrator sprinkles DDT thinking it will keep them away, but it melts them instantly, reminding her of the A-bomb victims and placing her by analogy in the position of an assailant. Although perhaps unintended, this view of the narrator as both the victim and the assailant, or of society as sharing responsibility for the tragedy, is striking, especially since it dates from the days when, less informed about their own war atrocities, many Japanese focused on themselves as victims. Ōta's effort to record the ravages of the bombing ended with her death in 1963.

Kōno Taeko and Takahashi Takako, writing in the postwar and contemporary periods, also delve into the world of the subconscious and the realm of the female psyche, but both of them develop their dramas in a highly abstract and metaphysical fashion. Kōno's writing is obviously based on subjects derived from her experience, particularly with regard to the inability to conceive, yet her treatment of women's complex feeling toward conception and motherhood, as seen in "Ants Swarm," presents a highly symbolic and metaphysical world in which the condition of human existence is portrayed. In her world, disease, sterility, and the shadow of death deprive people of essential life-energy, and her protagonists are drawn to abnormal psychology to attain a

sense of life. Developed under the extreme predicament of death and sterility, her world becomes an allegory of the modern person's quest for life.

Kōno Taeko's female protagonists occupy women's traditional space in a closed room or house, a space in which they pursue sado-masochistic illusions of pain-pleasure sex and child abuse. Their behavior can be understood as a desperate attempt to attain the subjectivity of the female self and sexuality by acting out the masochistic role traditionally assigned to women. In Kōno's works, the outside world exists only as scenery viewed from the window of this closed room.

Takahashi Takako also places her works in a general metaphysical atmosphere of sterility and extreme psychic tension. She has consistently explored the world of madness and evil, delving deeply into the realm of the subconscious, particularly of women. Her recent turning to Catholicism supplies the general philosophic framework for her protagonists' loneliness, fear of life, and the pursuit of the meaning of existence through "sinning." Takahashi consistently deals with the female psyche yet, like Kōno, she presents through her treatment the metaphysical condition in which men and women suffer equally from an inability to attain the sense of life. "Congruent Figures," undeniably a masterpiece, dismisses maternal love as an illusion created by men. It presents maternity, the archetypal fate of female sexuality, as narcissistic self-attachment as well as self-hatred. Both Kōno's and Takahashi's works are among the best examples of the novel of ideas in contemporary Japan.

Although both Tomioka Taeko and Ohba Minako have been writing fiction only in the past two decades, they have already developed their worlds of literature on a large scale. Tomioka, a prolific writer with numerous novels, short stories, dramas, screenplays, essays, and an autobiography to her credit, had established herself as one of the central figures in postwar poetry prior to turning to fiction. "Facing the Hills They Stand," Tomioka's first fictional work, recounts the lives of two generations of a family that settled by an Osaka river; it distinguished her instantly as a superb storyteller. Her attempt to search for the core of human existence, narrated crisply and with ingenious use of dialogue, reveals life's incomprehensible situations in which the only sure things are birth, appetite, and death.

Tomioka has consistently searched for the origins of life in the history of anonymous common people who, without intellectual sophistication and means to escape from life, have confronted life by living it. A deliberately anti-intellectual intellectual, Tomioka rejects overtly the egotistical interpretation of culture presented by intellectuals and artists

since the Meiji period, an interpretation which attributes tremendous significance to their own minds and the history of intellectual development. She tries instead to give expression to those silent common people who form the sure undercurrent of civilization. The method of expression she adopts in this story, sometimes referred to as Bunraku-style narration, has been hailed as a highly successful method of presenting the drama of common people. Yet underlying her drama is a feeling for the absurdity of life and an understanding that life must be and is lived by people because it is given to them.

In the 1980s, Tomioka wrote a series of long novels in which she dealt with women who search for a new form of "family," a new human bondage; some experiment with building a women's community, and others try to form a family not based on blood ties and sexual relations. All of them have seen or gone through the trauma of the traditional family and/or the modern nuclear family. Their sometimes comical and grotesque search for a new form of human bonding becomes symbolic of the predicament of contemporary women in the post-feminist era, women who have stepped out of the nuclear family in the hope of attaining their identity as free women, only to be disillusioned with the myth of the "liberated woman" and tortured by the fear of loneliness as well as anxiety over illness and death.

Unlike Tomioka, who has always been inside the literary arena as a modern poet and novelist, Ohba Minako had a long period of submergence as a housewife living in the United States, completely out of touch with Japanese literary circles. During those years, however, in the manner of Jane Austen, she stored observations of life as well as her own frustration, creating a rich reservoir of imagination on which her expression, once it was released, could draw heavily. "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" reveals a devastating perception of human psychology and the logic of people's inner world, presenting traditionally expressionless women as the actual centers of consciousness.

In her recent major novels she searches for the archetypal origins of life and of modern culture, exploring the nature of maternity. She has also written a series of autobiographical novels in which maternity and the search for female identity form the central theme, a theme pursued realistically as well as symbolically in the manner characteristic of her works.

Ohba Minako's search for an archetypal form of life takes her back to the Alaskan village where she had lived for twelve years before returning to Japan and emerging as a novelist. In that remote land's end she finds old friends and their offspring living and dying, remaining together or separated, loving and hating—living in ways common to all