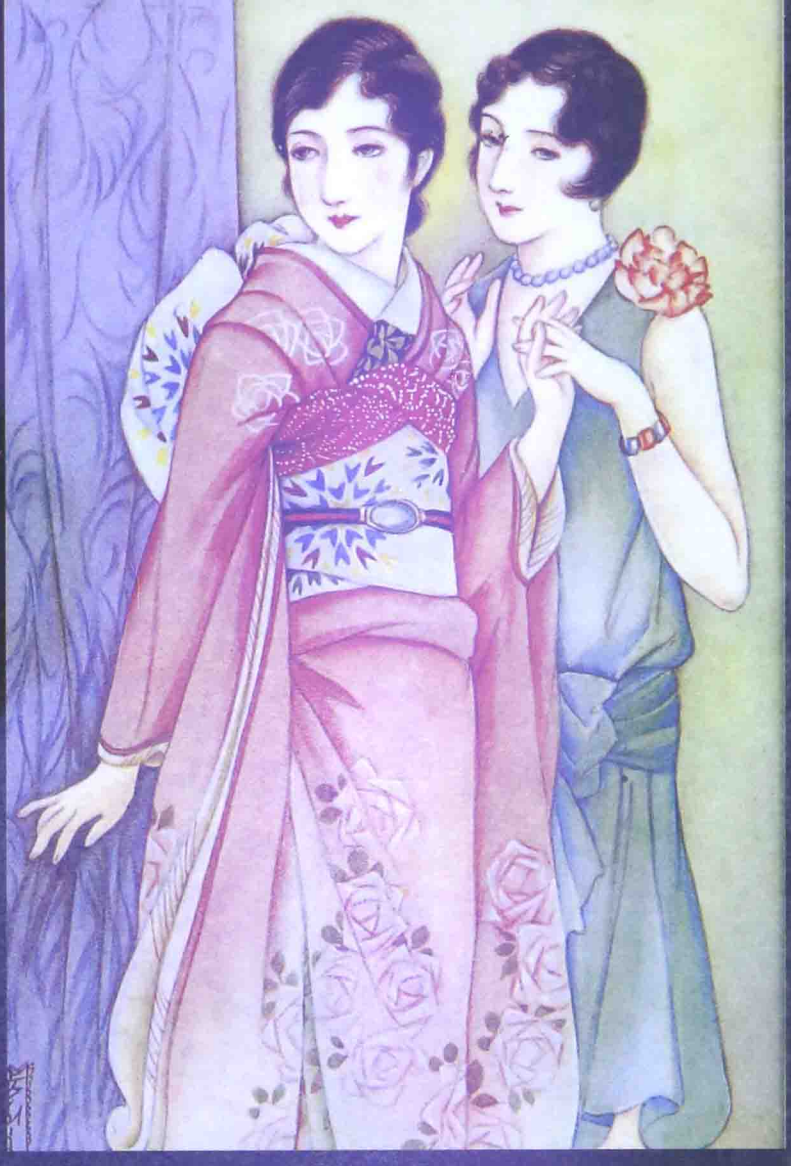

BECOMING MODERN WOMEN

Love & Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature & Culture

MICHIKO SUZUKI

Becoming Modern Women

LOVE AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN PREWAR JAPANESE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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For My Parents

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Note on Names and Terms

Throughout this book I use the Japanese order for proper names (family name first). In referring to individuals, I use the family name, except in the case of Yanagihara Byakuren, whom I call Byakuren (her penname) to avoid confusion. I do not use macrons for place names that are in standard English-language dictionaries, such as Tokyo. All other Japanese terms are italicized and use macrons or double vowels to indicate long vowels (ō, ū, aa, ee, ii). In Buddhist names and terms I use macrons not used elsewhere (ā, ī). All cited Japanese publications are published in Tokyo unless otherwise noted. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Becoming Modern Women

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Introduction

In a 1903 work titled *The Evolution of the Japanese*, American missionary Sidney Gulick (1860–1945) praises Japan as a model nation that is making dynamic progress. His sentiments reflect the early twentieth-century worldview in which evolutionary progress and development were key notions. From a Social Darwinist perspective, both individual and nation were to follow a trajectory of maturation, moving toward a better future and a higher state of existence. Gulick writes:

> New Japan is in a state of rapid growth. She is in a critical period, resembling a youth, just coming to manhood, when all the powers of growth are most vigorous. . . . In the course of four or five short years the green boy develops into a refined and noble man; the thoughtless girl ripens into the full maturity of womanhood and of motherhood. These are the years of special interest to those who would observe nature in her time of most critical activity.
>
> Not otherwise is it in the life of nations. There are times when their growth is phenomenally rapid; when their latent qualities are developed; when their growth can be watched with special ease and delight, because so rapid. . . . Such, I take it, is the condition of Japan to-day. . . . Her intellect, hitherto largely dormant, is but now awaking. Her ambition is equaled only

by her self-reliance. . . . The growth of the past half-century is only the beginning of what we may expect to see.

Gulick, who later became an important Japan specialist, highlights the nation's rapid development by emphasizing the advancement of Japanese women. In "Old Japan," he notes, a woman was not given "such liberty as is essential to the full development of her powers." He suggests that the condition and position of Japanese women have improved, and that this change can be considered one exemplary feature of progress for "New Japan."[1] This close association of woman and nation is typical of civilization discourse; the woman's status reflects the level of the nation's enlightenment and becomes a gauge for assessing its process of growth.[2] Ultimately, however, even though it invokes Japanese women as an important means for measuring national progress, Gulick's work does not present the women's own perspectives, self-reflections, or narratives.

When I set out to write *Becoming Modern Women*, I began with the desire to understand how Japanese women imagined their growth and changing identities within modernity. How did they negotiate their national and gendered identities and strategize in creating narratives of self-representation? In the early to mid-twentieth century, which was shaped by visions of progress and faith in evolutionary transformation, how did Japanese women articulate themselves as mirroring modernity, as dynamic sites of coming-into-being in time and space? In the Western literary context, the *bildungsroman*, a fictional narrative of self-development and self-discovery, is often described as the "symbolic form" of modernity.[3] Yet even when writing in the dominant genre of the semiautobiographical I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu*, *shishōsetsu*), Japanese women writers did not always use straightforward coming-of-age narratives to explore the connection of modernity and gender. Instead, they often used a particular concept—love—to talk about woman as modern process. Regardless of its representation—as success, failure, promise, or disillusionment—the experience of love led to the attainment of an identity resonant with a changing Japan. Although it was not the only notion through which women explored their evolving, modern identities, love was a critical concept within the cultural imaginary and vital for the construction of both woman and nation.

With this in mind, *Becoming Modern Women* examines narratives by women in conjunction with various discourses about love in order to interrogate the process of becoming a modern female in Japan from the

1910s through the 1930s, the "prewar period" that preceded the Pacific War (1941–1945).[4] Since the mid-nineteenth century, love had been viewed as a Western ideal with which to measure individual and national advancements. This is not to say that in Japan there were no expressions of physical and emotional attachment in human relationships prior to its opening to the West, but this new understanding of love, associated with Christianity, was a radical departure from the Confucian ideals of traditional Japanese society. Heterosexual romantic love in particular quickly became valued, in secular terms, as a necessary experience for the modern Japanese self. The nation and its people were to progress not only through modernization in the public sphere but also in their private emotions and personal experiences. Notions of modernity and progress were thus embedded in discussions of love, literary and otherwise, from the very beginning of Japan's modern period.

During the first half of the twentieth century in Japan, I suggest, various ideas about love coalesced to create a modern image of the process of growth and development for women. This ideal process was conceptualized as an evolutionary trajectory. The girl would first experience "innocent" same-sex love romance; then, as she matured, she would move on to "real" (heterosexual) love, to be consummated in a love-based marriage; finally, she would become a mother and attain maternal love, the highest love of all. Although traditional idealized identities for women, such as "Good Wife, Wise Mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*), had been promulgated before, they were set, distinct identities. It was only after the early feminist movement of the 1910s and the blossoming of media culture that female identity came to be widely understood as a dynamic *process* reflecting the progress of modernity and shaped by experiences of love.

The narratives I examine in this book use contemporary ideas about love and womanhood but at the same time criticize and challenge such normative trajectories of female development. Understandably, not all women accepted or praised this concept of love's "evolution"; ideas about love were treated in a variety of ways. In my analyses, I consider the rich and complex texts by women as part of the broader publication boom of the 1910s through 1930s. These narratives were shaped by early feminist writing as well as by discourses about love from a wide range of media—popular magazines, sexology books, newspapers, bestselling love treatises, and new academic fields such as native ethnology and women's history. Although I do not suggest

that love was the only means by which actual or fictional women became modern in prewar Japan, it was a critical idea and practice in the articulation of such a process. By investigating the interplay of women's writing and love discourses within the contexts of their production, *Becoming Modern Women* shows the ways in which modern Japanese female identity was constructed, questioned, and rewritten during the prewar period. This exploration illuminates the intersection of gender and modernity and opens a new window into Japanese culture in the seminal years before World War II.

Becoming Female in Modernity

How do we understand the woman in modernity? In both the West and Japan, the woman is a flexible symbol, malleable within the context of her representation. She is often depicted as the embodiment of modernity, but she is also used to signify its Other. She is a "modern" figure that mirrors seismic shifts in values and technologies; at the same time she is a "premodern" figure of innocence and nostalgia, providing stability in an unpredictable world. Often she is a representation of gendered "sites" that produce or interrogate the meaning of modernity, such as the non-West, popular culture, the everyday, the spectacle, language, the city or country, and consumption.[5]

In Japan, the woman became important as a sign of such ambivalent simultaneity during the Meiji period (1868–1912). It was, however, during the prewar decades of the 1910s through 1930s, the Taishō (1912–1926) and early Shōwa (1926–1989) periods, that the most dramatic changes occurred and the relationship between modernity and gender became increasingly complex. Indeed, the eclipse of Meiji civilization (*bunmei*) by Taishō culture (*bunka*) has been discussed as the emergence of a feminized culture; the idea of modernism (*modanizumu*) or the modern (*modan*) has also been gendered female, evoking the ephemerality of *modernité*, the fragmentary aspects of modernist art, the spread of mass culture, the disruptions of individualism, and the fantasy of consumerism.[6]

Such emphasis on the relationship between woman and the prewar period has been productive for feminist inquiry; scholars have illuminated the significant presence of female images and voices and the dramatic transformations of women in Japanese society and culture. These studies have often evoked modern female identity as representing change, a radical shift or decentering that challenges the social landscape. Although my own inquiry

emerges from such validations of the prewar woman, I focus on change that is directional and cumulative. The modern female I pursue inscribes herself as an intrinsic part of modernity, becoming a modern Japanese woman through progress and growth.

This becoming can be understood in relation to Miriam Silverberg's concept of Japanese modernity as "constructionist."[7] In my view, the awareness of modernity as a dynamic process of being-in-construction was an important part of female identity; prewar women fashioned themselves as active participants in modernity by taking part in the process of continual progress and change. This self-image is clearly articulated by Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971), one of the most influential feminists in Japan. In 1911 she wrote in *Seitō* (Bluestocking, 1911–1916), the first Japanese feminist journal:

> The flow of life progresses moment by moment. Now the people of the world have finally burst forth beyond known human boundaries and are making an intense effort day and night . . . to evolve beyond the humanity of today. We are no longer the set, unchanging beings conceived of by people of past ages. We are rich in changes, full of promise with the ability to evolve endlessly into the future, to become more beautiful, stronger, larger and superior day by day. The laws of nature cannot be so unfair as to say that only women are an exception to this rule of evolution, and are unable even now to become a part of humanity. It is clear that we must use our will to accelerate and strengthen the power of our progress.[8]

Hiratsuka describes "the women of today" as barely sentient beings "just newly awakened from a state . . . of infancy," who need to "move forward" resolutely with "an attitude that focuses on the self" (*shugateki taido*). She comments that she does not think the insistence on the "self" should always be the ultimate goal for a woman's journey forward, but she is convinced that for now it is a crucial stage in human life and a step that must be taken for "becoming a true person" (*honto no mono ni naru koto*).[9] Although "men" (*danshi*) are considered "human beings" (*hito*), "women" (*onna*) are still considered inferior. It is thus of the utmost importance for women to achieve true personhood.[10]

In Hiratsuka's words, Japanese women have awakened and are evolving "endlessly into the future." This reframing of female identity as process highlights the hope that women will "catch up" to the state of normative (male) personhood—a desire for progress articulated through the notion of equality and later refined through the idea of difference. This identity is also

shaped by the time and space of nationhood. Progress is a goal not only for the nonnormative (female) sex but also for nations and races that need to evolve—the nonnormative (non-Western) spaces considered inferior to the West. Although we no longer conceive of it in this way, during the early twentieth century Japanese modernity was commonly seen as "spatially peripheral to, and temporally lagging behind, the West."[11] This perspective contributed to Japanese women's desire to progress, to mature and develop in tandem with Japanese men, but also with their more advanced sisters around the world. The goal and directionality of female progress were integral to prewar sexual politics and the contested meaning of a modern, developing Japan.

Woman, Selfhood, and Love

By rejecting the idea that women are inferior and unchanging, Hiratsuka validates demands for both external social progress (women's rights) and internal progress (realization of selfhood). Unable to participate in the political process and being without full legal rights, women under the 1898 Civil Code were subject to the authority of their fathers, husbands, and sons; but even with their lower status codified in this way, Japanese women were transforming themselves in the public sphere throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, not only in their writing but also in labor, in popular and consumer cultures, and in feminist and proletarian movements. Scholars of this period have shown that female identities such as New Woman (*atarashii onna*), Modern Girl (*modan gaaru*, *moga*), working woman (*shokugyō fujin*), factory worker (*jokō*), housewife (*shufu*), and café waitress (*jokyū*) rose to cultural prominence, thus highlighting the radical changes that were taking place in society.[12]

Along with the advent of such distinct identities for women, female identity itself was also changing, being reconfigured as a trajectory "continually in process, an identity that is performed and actualized over time within given social constraints."[13] Newly emergent discourses and social changes from the 1910s made concrete the idea of female identity as a developmental trajectory. Instead of a simple two-stage shift from girlhood to adulthood, the female lifecycle became more complex as a result of the new educational system, ideas of sexual development, delayed age for entry into marriage, and even the emergence of age-specific media such as magazines for adolescents.[14]

Most important for Hiratsuka's view of female progress, however, was the cultivation of interiority, the completion of true "self" (*jiga*).[15] As Karatani Kōjin has argued, the "discovery of the self" was made possible through *genbun itchi* (unification of written and spoken language), which created the idea of the "inner self."[16] Beginning in the Taishō period, "selfhood," as both a place of departure and a coveted goal, was increasingly emphasized as integral to the modern experience along with the rise of democracy, liberal humanism, and key concepts such as culturalism (*kyōyō shugi*), personalism (*jinkaku shugi*), and self-cultivation (*shūyō*).[17] The prominent literary group *Shirakaba ha* (White Birch School) is representative of this cultural milieu; it placed a premium value on selfhood, and believed that "the goal of life was to pursue, to develop, and to express one's self."[18]

For women, as for men, the discovery of a true self and the fulfillment of its potential was a significant way of constructing a modern identity. In creating the feminist journal *Bluestocking*, Hiratsuka Raichō used the White Birch School's publication, *Shirakaba* (White birch, 1910–1923), as a model and stressed the importance of self in becoming a legitimate part of modernity and the greater human race.[19] Despite, or perhaps because of, women's lack of political or legal authority, internal transformation was highly valued. Hiratsuka's 1911 statement about female agency and evolution is significant because it represents wide-ranging changes taking place in everyday life and thought. Women were recreating themselves, using what Foucault calls "technologies of the self," transforming their "bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" through "their own means or with the help of others" in order to attain a higher state of existence.[20] This notion of self-development remained crucial throughout the prewar period; even after the allure of liberal individualism waned and many turned to Marxism and later nationalism, the pursuit and establishment of true self continued to define the idea of the modern man and woman.[21]

During this time, love was considered an important "technology of the self" that enabled women to grow and attain their true selves. From a twenty-first-century perspective, the idea of love itself may seem clichéd, vague, or too subjective to be conceptualized as a critical means of identity formation. Yet during the prewar period, the extent to which discourses about different forms of love pervaded society was truly remarkable; they shaped ideas about the modern self, about sex and gender differences, and even about national identity. Although not always manifest as a "class discourse" per se, love in this context can be viewed as what Fredric Jameson