

The Relationship Between Girls as the Relationship Between Japan and the West: A Study of *Wasurenagusa* by Yoshiya Nobuko

Daniele Durante

Postdoctoral Researcher, Ca' Foscari University, Italy

Visiting Researcher, Kanagawa University, Japan

The 8th EU-Japan Young Scholars Workshop on Transnational Japan
'Revisiting' Transnational Relations between Japan and the West,
Hosei University, November 28th-30th 2025



**Funded by
the European Union**

Introduction

Wasurenagusa, in English “Forget-Me-Not,” is a short novel that Yoshiya Nobuko published in 1932 in the magazine *Shōjo no tomo*, “A Girl’s Friend.” The text tells the story of Makiko and Yōko, two middle school students who are opposite and complementary to each other: Makiko is a generous, feminine, and quintessentially Japanese girl, while Yōko is an individualistic, masculine, and Westernised girl. Yōko is in love with Makiko and tries to win her over by drawing her to her Westernised way of life. Because of Yōko, Makiko undergoes a process of degradation which risks to annihilate her until, in a final turn of events, she reverses the bad influence Yōko has on her and exerts on Yōko a positive influence that makes her, too, a generous, feminine, and quintessentially Japanese girl.

Paper Contribution

With this paper, I would like to achieve two objectives:

- firstly, I aim to describe the relationship Yoshiya establishes between Japan and the West through the main characters;
- secondly, I aim to contribute to the study of Yoshiya's extensive body of work: while many of her novels have been meticulously analysed and discussed, in particular *Hana monogatari*, her first major publication, *Wasurenagusa* has only been discussed by Deborah Shamoon in *Passionate Friendship*, where the researcher has debated the break up of the two characters to prove that Yoshiya was probably more conservative than other scholars, for example Jennifer Robertson who has defined her as "radical," have supposed so far. With my intervention, I would like to offer a more exhaustive analysis of the text and thus make *Wasurenagusa* more known to the academic community.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is structured in three parts:

the first part presents a series of categories of girls/women which Yoshiya uses to build her narrative: these categories are:

- the *shōjo*
- the *ryōsai kenbo*
- the *nanpa*
- the *furyō shōjo*

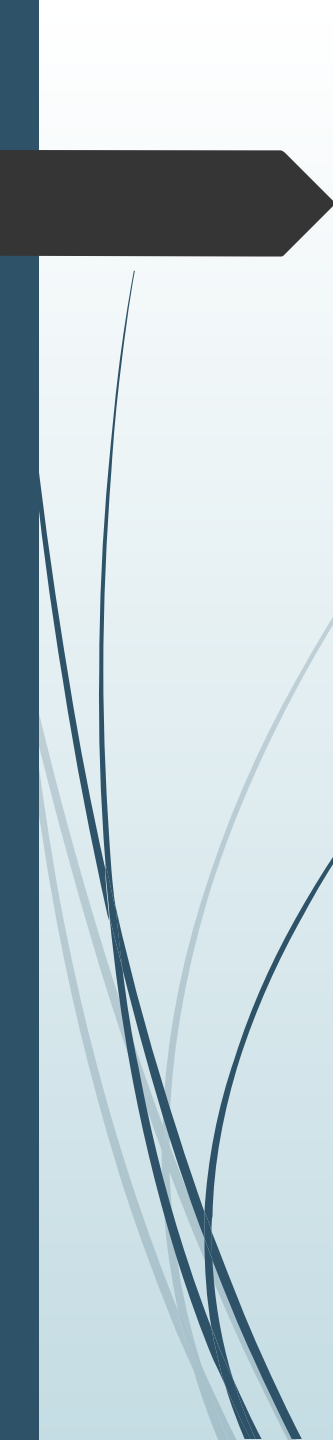
this part explains the cultural context behind the text and how these categories referred to Japan or the West and how Yoshiya uses them in relation to Makiko and Yōko;

- the second part shows how these discursive categories interact in the logic of the novel;
- the third part recapitulates the main points of the argumentation and concludes the presentation.

First Part

Presenting the *Shōjo*

The term *shōjo* indicates girls who are in a life phase comprised between childhood and adulthood. In the period between the second half of the Meiji period and World War II, girls delayed marriage, childbearing, and/or entering the work force with the objective of receiving higher education so to become more socially and intellectually prepared to marry, have children, and/or work once they turned of age. In other words, the *shōjo* as a life phase became a liminal space wherein girls received guidance on how to be responsible adults.



As we will see, female adolescence as a liminal space inspired hope in the future of Japan among politicians and educators, whereas it raised concerns among social critics, journalists, and policemen. Politicians and educators set an appropriate course to shape teenage girls into proper citizens who could contribute to the strength and the wealth of the nation: that course was the school system. On the other hand, social critics, journalists, and policemen worried that *shōjo* would deviate from their path and cause problems for the stability and prosperity of Japan.

Enter the *jogakusei*

Given the strong link between female adolescence and school, the quintessential teenage girl in prewar Japan was the “girl student” or *jogakusei*, i.e. girls who attended the “all-girls middle schools” or *jogakkō*. Girls’ higher education was established in Japan with the promulgation of the Imperial Girls’ Higher School Order (*Kōtō jogakkō rei*) in February 1899. In July of the same year, the Minister of Education Kabayama Sukenori (1837-1922) explained in the course of a public conference the aims of girls’ higher education. According to Kabayama, girls’ middle schools served to nourish “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*). *Ryōsai kenbo* was an ideology that allocated work within the household on a gendered basis, with men being breadwinners and pursuing public careers outside the home and women carrying out housework and childbearing within the home.



In the Minister's opinion, the formation of good wives and wise mothers was necessary for the stability and wellbeing of the nation and girls' higher education aimed to condition and train teenage girls to marry and become wives and mothers.

For the politicians of prewar Japan, the usefulness of the *ryōsai kenbo* was not limited to the wellbeing of the Japanese households, but it guaranteed the stability of the country as a whole. Especially in the late Meiji period during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Russo Japanese War of 1904-1905, the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology formed the backbone of two crucial national policies, namely the “prosperous and powerful nation” (*kokka fukyō*) and “rich country, strong military” (*fukoku kyōhei*). To help Japan win the wars, women were expected to reproduce many baby boys who would later serve in the national army. Women thus served as assets for the strength and power of the nation.

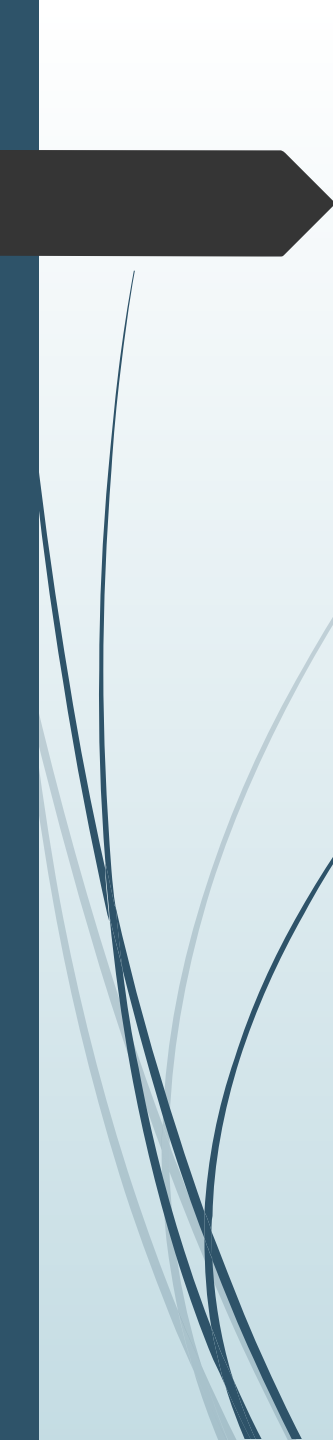
To become good wives and wise mothers, girls were conditioned to be:

- feminine;
- in male-female relationships;
- subservient to others, in particular to their birth family and future family, for the sake of social harmony.

It is important to note that these characteristics were associated, in various discourses developed at the time, with a last, crucial quality: Japaneseness. The girl and future woman who was feminine, tied a male partner, and who prioritised the wellbeing of her family and the nation was considered to be quintessentially Japanese.

Makiko as the Perfect “Good Wife and Wise Mother” in Training

How does the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology emerge in the pages of *Wasurenagusa*? In the narrative, Makiko is the embodiment of the teenage schoolgirl who is on the path to become a good wife and wise mother. To be more precise, Makiko is already a good wife and wise mother as a girl, during the present time of the narration. Makiko is in fact completely devoted to her birth family: she is nurturing toward her mother, who is afflicted by a chronic disease, she is protective of her younger brother, and towards the conclusion of the book, after the mother has passed away, it is Makiko who assists him when he's sick, and she obeys her father's commands, even when, or maybe especially when, he asks her to do something she does not want to do. In summary, she is subservient to her family, as a *ryōsai kenbo* should be.



In the text, the qualities of femininity and Japaneseness are symbolised by clothing, and in particular a *kimono* which appears towards the end of the story. To sum up, Makiko is feminine, subservient, and quintessentially Japanese. Makiko is thus a “good” girl, that is, a girl who follows the pathway that politicians and educators laid down for the *shōjo*.

Enter the Bad Girls

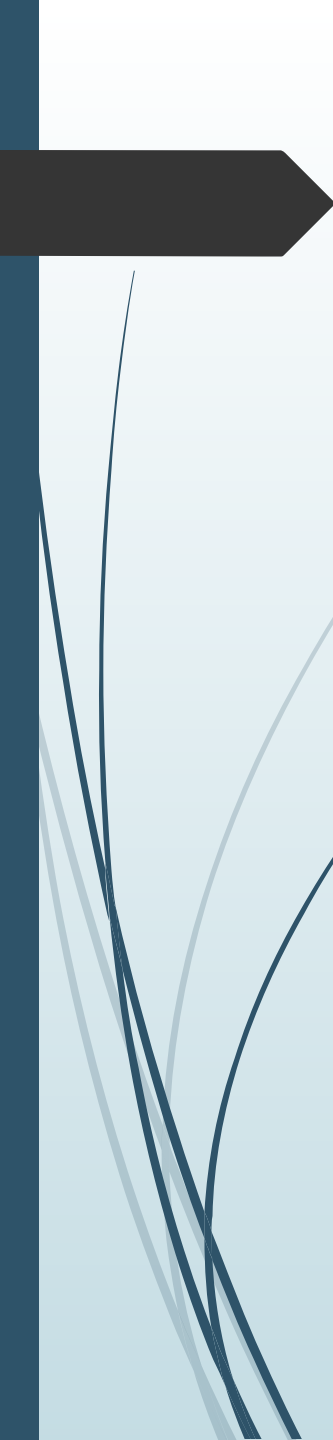
A dark grey arrow points to the right, and several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

As said, in prewar Japan the shōjo occupied a liminal space that was like a butterfly cocoon, leading to infinite, transformative possibilities. We have seen that politicians and educators established the all girls' higher school system to shape the shōjo into a contributing member of her community. However, different actors, such as social critics, police, and journalists were concerned that the shōjo might deviate from the path set for them and thus become dangerous for themselves and society.

Who were these 'bad girls'?

While there was a specific category of good girl, the *jogakusei* ready to become a good wife and wise mother, various discourses at the time identified a wide number of dangerous girls. In this paper, we will see only two categories who are relevant for the analysis of *Wasurenagusa*: the so-called "softie" (*nanpa*) and the "delinquent girl" (*furyō shōjo*).

Nanpa were groups of girls who were interested in two things: Flirting with boys and, more rarely, girls; Fashion, i.e. an interest in buying clothes, accessories, and furniture, often of Western import. If a *nanpa* were knowledgeable about Western fashion, she would also attend Western establishments such as dance halls and restaurants.



Why were flirting and fashion considered bad? Because they deviated from the characteristics of the good girl. As we have seen, the good girl was committed to a relationship with a man who would later become her husband and the father of her children. Flirting with boys and girls diverted girls' sexuality from marriage, the family, and reproduction. An interest for fashion was similarly not part of the qualities of a good girl, especially if it was for Western fashion. Social critics were worried that, through the import of clothing, furniture, and attending dance halls and restaurants, the Japanese would lose their way of life. Furthermore, they were concerned that the importation of the Western ways of life brought with it Western values, in particular individualism. According to these social critics, individualism posed a threat to Japanese society because it was anti-social: that is, by giving priority to their own desires, *nanpa* girls could behave in a way that was detrimental to the wellbeing of their community and of Japan as a whole.

In other words, the *nanpa* was the antithesis of the *ryōsai kenbo*: while the good girl was supposed to be:

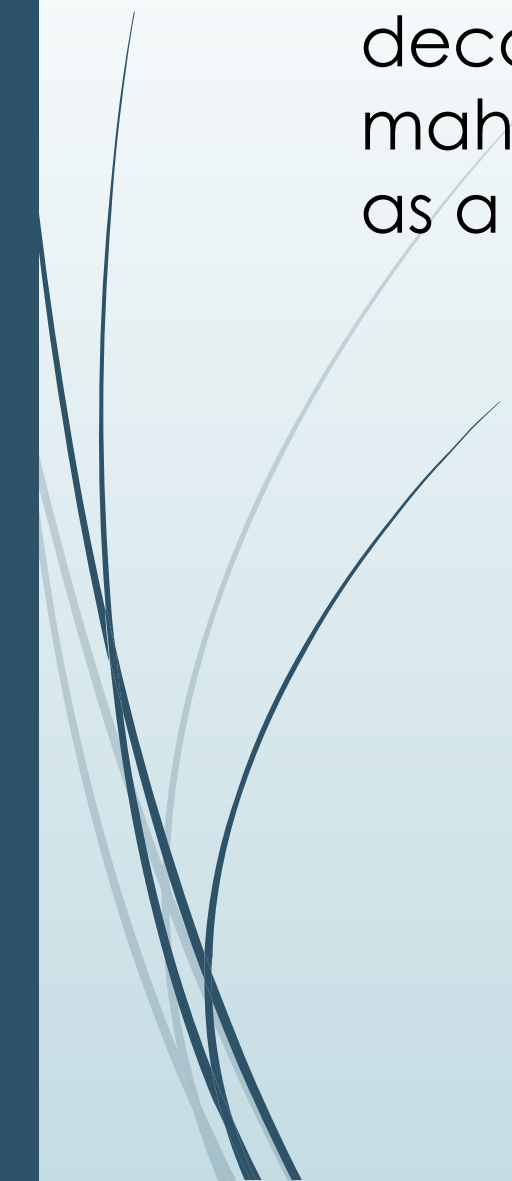
- subservient to her family by putting her desires aside for the sake of the family and by using her sexuality for marriage and reproduction;
- feminine;

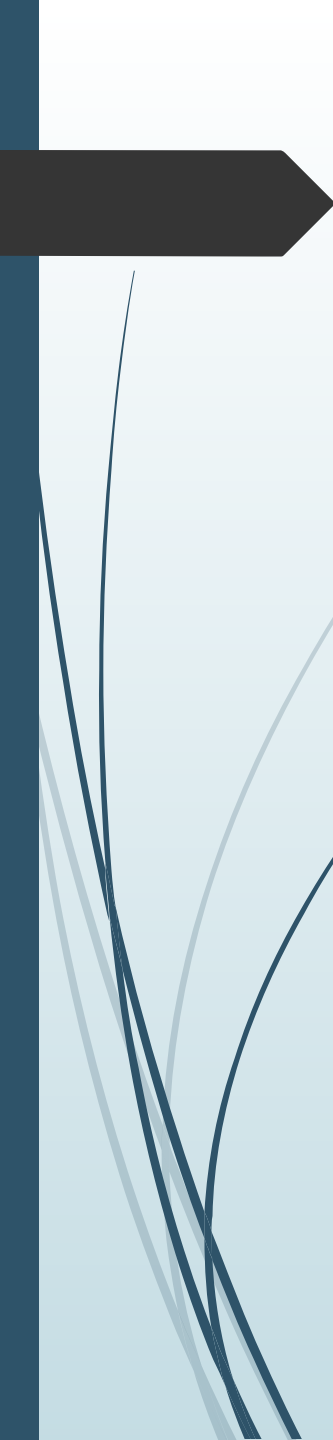
the *nanpa* was:

- Western;
- gave priorities to her desires and this could be detrimental to others; in particular, she used her sexuality for recreational purposes and not for the sake of establishing and supporting a family.



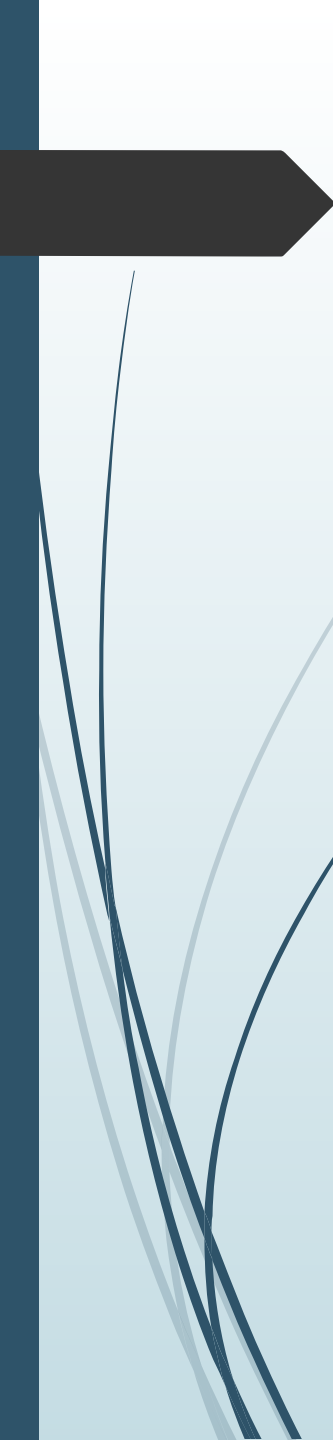
In *Wasurenagusa*, Yōko proudly identifies herself as a *nanpa*: she is interested in flirting, particularly with Makiko, and has a penchant for Western fashion: her house and room are decorated with Western furniture and items, such as a mahogany desk and a French doll Yōko cherishes and cuddles as a surrogate for Makiko.



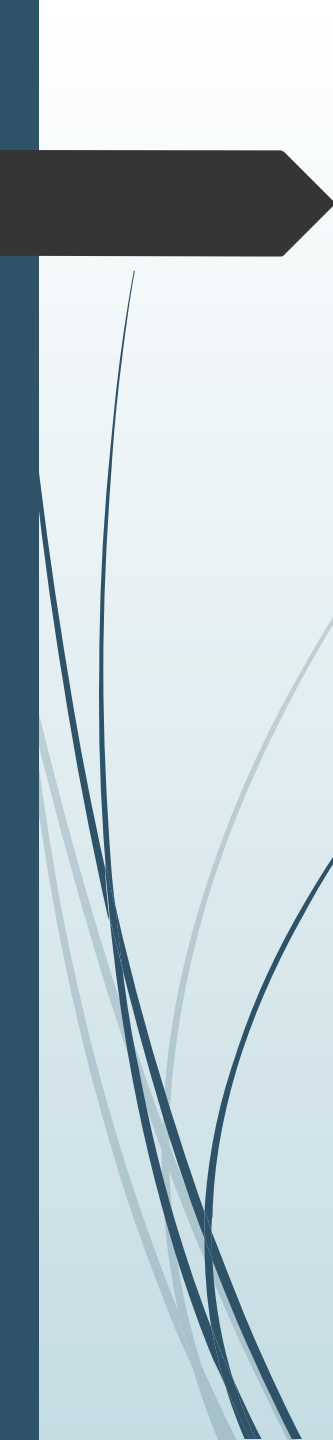


A second category of bad girl is the “delinquent girl” (*furyō shōjo*). Compared to the *nanpa*, the main characteristic of the delinquent girl is her violence. Newspaper articles of the day frequently commented on girls who formed gangs, called *shōjo gyangu*, and went to public places where they destroyed shops. Often, they fought with other rival gangs. Many newspaper articles reported on girls who held guns and shot and killed rival girls. The violence those delinquent girls caused was often seen as the nefarious influence of Western values and ways of life. If not for nothing else, such senseless violence was discursively connected to the Western world via the guns, which were often imported from the United States.

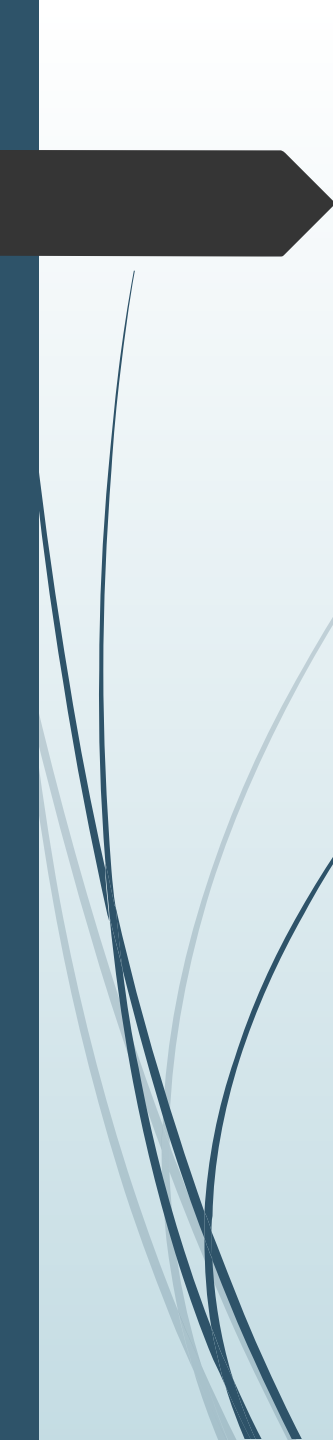
According to a police report released in 1933, the main causes for the anti-social behaviour of the *furyō shōjo* were a dysfunctional family environment and the influence of other dangerous girls.



In *Wasurenagusa*, Yōko does not come from a close-knit family: she is an only child and her mother is never mentioned nor appears in the text; only her father is mentioned in the prologue, but he doesn't appear, and the only information the reader learns about him is that he is a very rich man and uses his money to fund his daughter's hedonistic way of life. If this way of life is what conditions her, he might be deemed responsible for Yōko's individualistic behaviour. Moreover, Yōko has a bad influence on Makiko and in two scenes puts herself and Makiko in danger by driving recklessly; in these scenes, Makiko is scared they might be stopped by the police and labeled as *furyō shōjo* and part of a *shōjo gyangu*.



Sometimes, the girls who were part of a gang wore men's clothes; in these cases, the gangs were called *dansō gyangu* or “gangs of cross-dressing girls.” According to journalists and social critics, cross-dressing was a custom practiced by couples of two girls/women known as *ome*. The etymology of this word is not clear, but apparently it is formed by *o-* as in man and *-me* as in woman. In other words, these couples were formed by a masculine woman and a feminine woman. In the opinion of social critics of the time, *ome* relationships were dangerous for women because they could corrupt their femininity, their sexuality, and their purity. Such relationships, and the masculinisation of women, were seen as due to the influence of Western values and lifestyles. On a societal level, *ome* couples were deemed as posing a threat for Japan and Japanese society as they could lead to antisocial behaviours in women and to the decline of the birth rate.



In *Wasurenagusa*, Yōko is masculine and is associated with cross-dressing. The first character of the name Yōko is the character for Yang in the Yin-Yang duality: when applied to human sexuality and gender, Yang was considered the male element, the energy that courses through men and shapes their body and gendered behaviour. Furthermore, in a pivotal scene of the novel Yōko has Makiko wear male Western clothes.



In summary, the *nanpa* and *furyō shōjo* were the antithesis of the *shōjo/jogakusei* and the *ryōsai kenbo*, because whereas the latter were characterised as:

- subservient to the family and nation;
- in male-female relationships;
- feminine;
- Japanese;

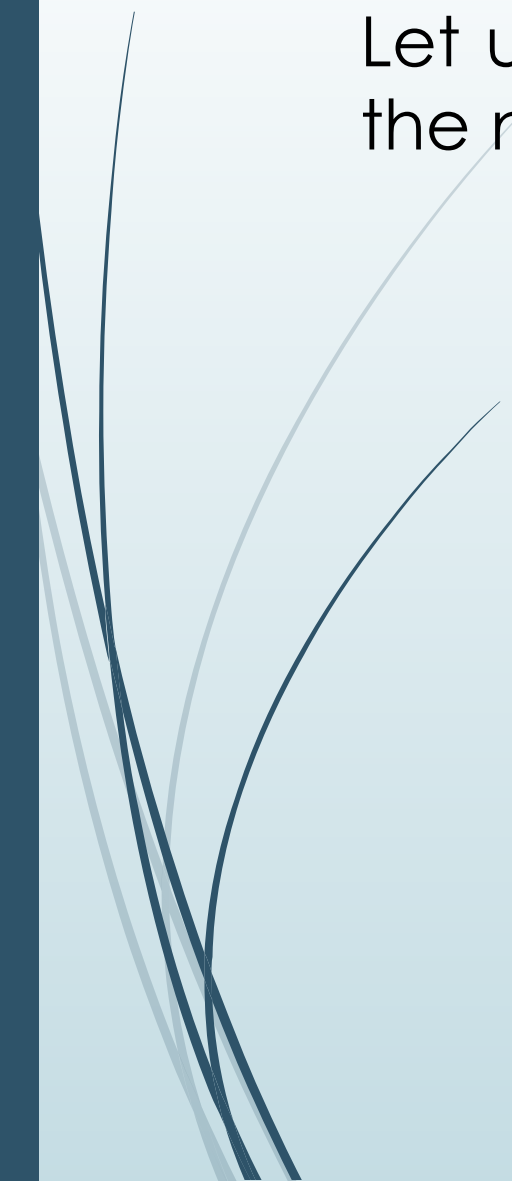
the former were:

- disruptive to the family and nation;
- in female-female relationships;
- masculine;
- Westernised.



In *Wasurenagusa*, Makiko and Yōko represent these opposites: Makiko is the girl who will become a good wife and wise mother, while Yōko is the softie and delinquent girl.

Let us now see how this opposition works on a closer reading of the novel.



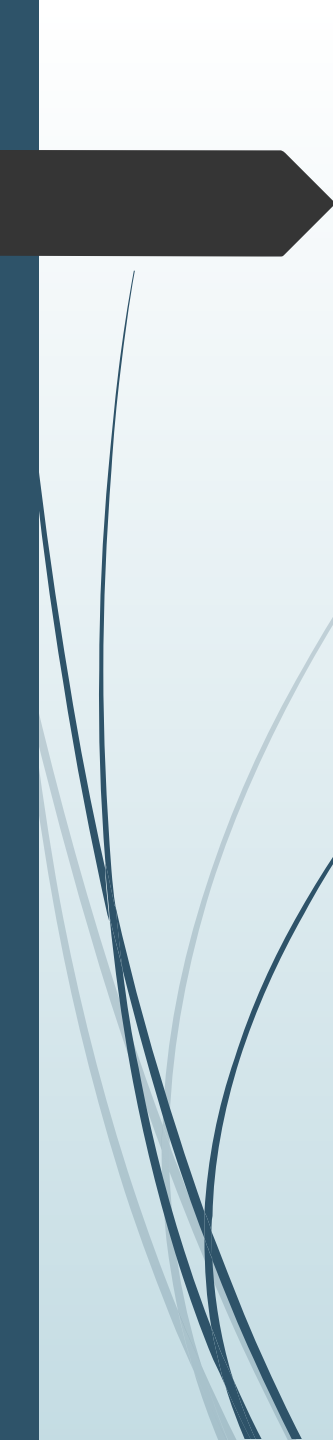
Second Part

The Opposition between Makiko and Yōko

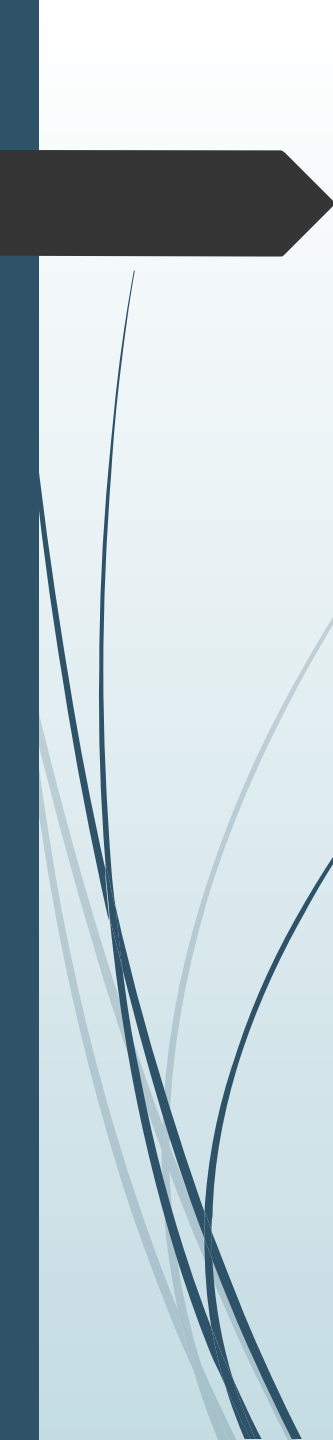
At the start of the novel, Yōko tries to get close to Makiko, for whom she has fallen in love. To describe the feelings Yōko has for Makiko, Yoshiya often uses the word for romantic love, *ai*. To draw Makiko to her, Yōko invites her to her birthday party. At first, Makiko turns down the invitation because, to her, Yōko is a friend but not so close enough to go to her birthday party. To describe the feeling Makiko has for Yōko, Yoshiya uses the word for Platonic friendship, *yūjo*.



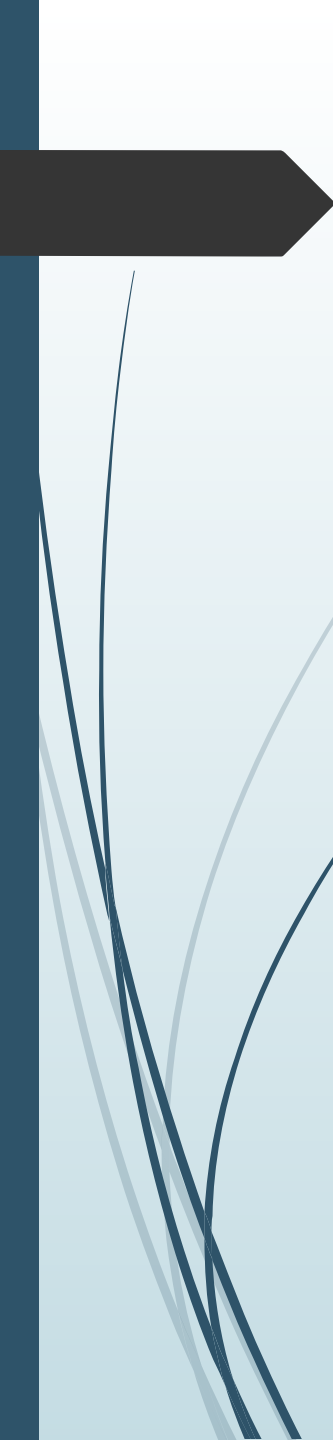
Back at her house, Yōko asks her French doll to help her make Makiko go to the party. Just then, she receives a phone call from Makiko, who tells her she will go to the party. Overjoyed, Yōko thanks the doll and then throws it on the floor. The doll symbolises the interest and the influence Yōko has on Makiko: for the most part of the story, Yōko is able to make Makiko do whatever she wants, an ability that Makiko often compares to “sorcery,” in Japanese *majutsu*.



On the day of the birthday party, Yōko has two dresses ready for her and Makiko. Yōko wears a pink dress with a skirt, a dress that is feminine and of Western import. On the other hand, she makes Makiko wear a Spanish *pantalon*, a type of trousers, generally worn by men. Yōko compliments Makiko saying she looks like a “cross-dresser” (*dansō*), a “beautiful boy” (*bishōnen*), and an *otokoyaku*, a category of actresses in Takarazuka theatre who specialise in male roles. By wearing a feminine dress and having Makiko wear masculine garments, Yōko tries to establish with Makiko an *ome* relationship.

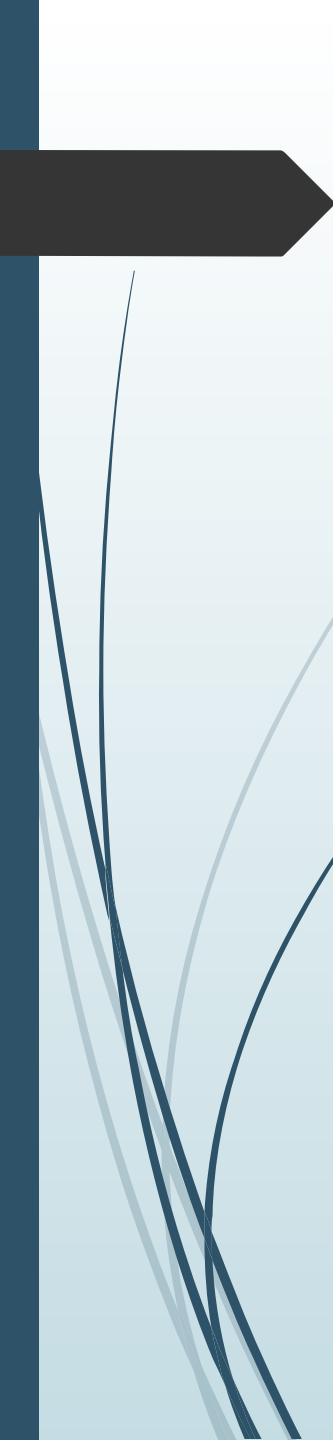


However, Makiko feels an intense guilt about the relationship Yōko tries to establish with her. Yoshiya describes this feeling as *tsumi*, “guilt,” a word originally used in Shintō to refer to the break of a ritual norm. In an important scene, Makiko feels guilty about what she has done when in the presence of her mother, whose love and understanding of Makiko Yoshiya terms as *jiiai*, “compassion,” a word used in Buddhism to explain the feeling that compels buddhas and bodhisattvas to help humankind achieve enlightenment. The guilt that plagues Makiko has thus a strong religious connotation.



In the rest of the novel, Yoshiya describes the slow but steady degradation that Makiko goes through because of Yōko. Yōko, the individualistic, masculine, and Westernised girl, corrupts the generous, feminine, and Japanese Makiko. The bad influence Yōko has on Makiko hits Makiko's family: in a shocking turn of event, Makiko's mother dies. Her death symbolises the death of Makiko's goodness, her devotion to her family, and her being a potential good wife and wise mother. By writing this narrative, Yoshiya seems to side with the social critics who were worried that the delinquent and masculine girls could destroy from within the Japanese family.

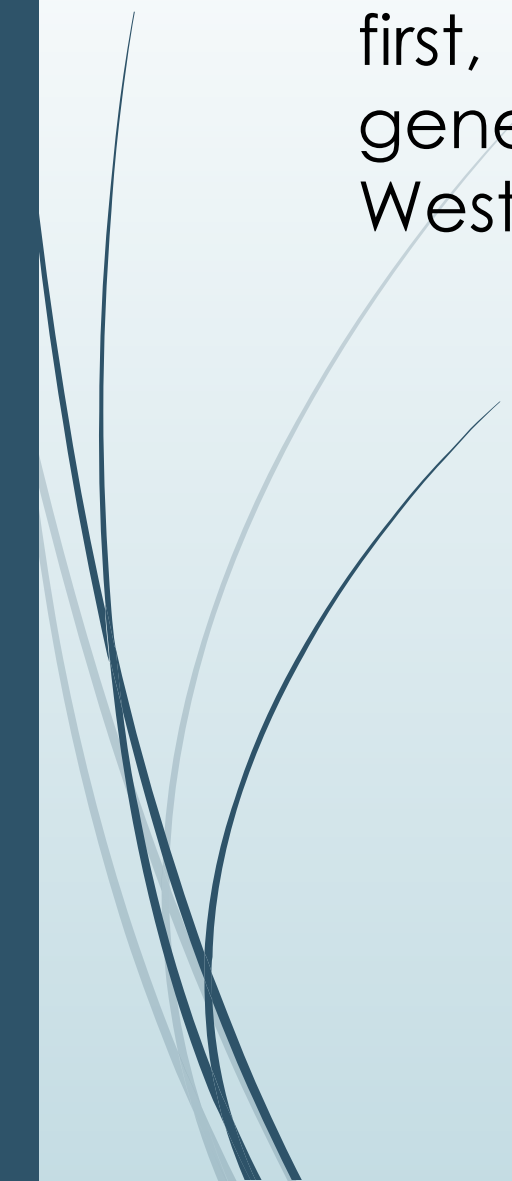
Makiko's degradation at the hand of Yōko continues on until Makiko's brother falls ill. This is a turning point: Makiko, who could not cure her mother, now assists her brother until he recovers. In this manner, Makiko dedicates herself to her family once again. Now, she finds the courage to confront Yōko and break their relationship up.



It is now Yōko's turn to fall ill because of the pain Makiko has caused her. She exits the narrative: the reader may expect her to die just like Makiko's mother did as a consequence of her daughter's corruption. However, Yōko survives. In the final scene, Makiko visits her at the hospital. She meets a new Yōko: she acts very modestly now and her feeling for Makiko is of friendship, *yūjo*. If we consider the frequent association of same-sex relationships with mental and physical illnesses, Yōko seems to have been cured of the unhealthy love for Makiko. To show how Yōko has been reformed, she now wears a *kimono*, the quintessentially feminine and Japanese cloth. In short, Makiko has reversed the bad influence Yōko had on her: if earlier Yōko, the Westernised, individualistic, bad girl corrupted Makiko, now it's Makiko who exerts a positive influence on Yōko, making her feminine and Japanese again.



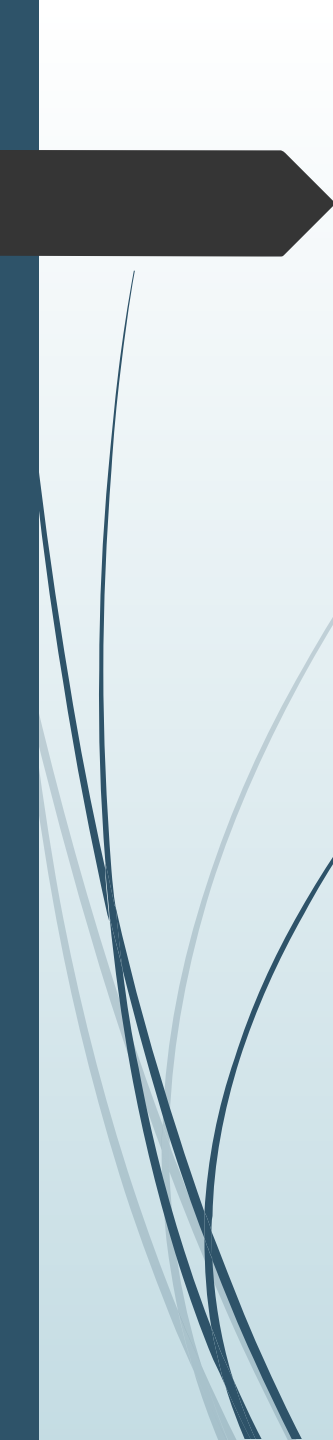
Wasurenagusa dramatises the relationship of the two girls via the association with Japaneseness and the Western world: the latter is individualistic and detrimental and at first seems to destroy the first, but in a turn of events it is the Japaneseness, with its generosity, devotion to family, and femininity that redeems the West.



Third Part

Conclusion

In *Wasurenagusa*, Yoshiya deals with the topic of female same-sex love, a topic that was very dear to Yoshiya in her personal life and which has been abundantly studied by contemporary researchers. In this text, Yoshiya introduces the possibility of a romantic relationship between girls as coming from the West and being foreign to Japanese culture and society. In describing Makiko and Yōko's love/friendship, Yoshiya writes between the lines about the relationship between Japan and the West. In the story, Japan is associated with the categories of the *shōjo/jogakusei* and the *ryōsai kenbo*, the good girl who puts the needs of others, and especially her family, her male partner, and her nation, before her own.



On the contrary, the West is associated with the *nanpa* and the *furyō shōjo*, categories of girls who prioritise their desires above those of the others' and therefore pose a threat to the social cohesion of the country. In *Wasurenagusa*, the love the Westernised Yōko has for Makiko is detrimental for the Japanese girl. Makiko risks losing herself because of the bewitching influence Yōko has on her. In the end, however, Makiko breaks the spell and exerts a positive influence on Yōko, who is now reformed and described as modest, feminine, and Japanese. In *Wasurenagusa*, the influence of the Western world is toxic for Japan, but Japan manages to reverse the influence and cure the West.

Bibliography

- Copeland, Rebecca, "Fashioning the Feminine: Images of the Modern Girl Student in Meiji Japan," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* no. 30/31, 2006, pag. 13-35.
- Czarnecki, Melanie, "Bad Girls from Good Families: The Degenerate Meiji Schoolgirl," in Miller, Laura, and Bardsley, Jan (eds.), *Bad Girls of Japan*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pag. 49-64.
- Dollase, Hiromi Tsuchiya, "Yoshiya Nobuko's "Yaneura no nishajo": In Search of Literary Possibilities in "Shōjo" Narratives," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement* vol. 20/21, 2001, pag. 151-178.
- Frederick, Sarah, "Not That Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko's Good Girls," in Miller, Laura, and Bardsley, Jan (eds.), *Bad Girls of Japan*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pag. 65-80.
- Inoue, Mariko, "Kiyokata's *Asasuzu*: The Emergence of the *Jogakusei* Image," in *Monumenta Nipponica* vol. 51 no. 4, 1996, pag. 431-460.
- Hiraishi, Noriko, *Hanmon seinen to jogakusei no bungakushi: 'seiyō' wo yomikaete*, Tokyo, Shin'yōsha, 2012.
- Hirayama, Asako, *Meiji Taishō Shōwa furyō shōjoden: bakureonna to shōjo gyangudan*, Tokyo, Kawade shobō, 2009.

Honda, Masuko, *Jogakusei no keifu zōhoban: saishiki sareru Meiji*, Tokyo, Seikyūsha, 2012.

Imai, Hisayo, Nakano, Takafumi, and Wada, Hirofumi (eds.), *Jogakusei to jendā - josei kyōyōshi "Murasaki" no kagami toshite*, Tokyo, Kasama shoin, 2019.

Inagaki, Kyōko, *Jogakkō to jogakusei: kyōiku tashinami modan bunka*, Tokyo, Chūōkōron shinsha, 2007.

Iwahori, Yōko, "Meiji chūki ōkashugi shisō ni miru shufu risōzō no keisei: 'Jogaku zasshi' no seikatsu risō ni tsuite," in Wakita, Haruko, Hanley, S. B. (eds.), *Jendā no Nihonshi ge: shutai to hyōgen shigoto to seikatsu*, Tokyo, Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1995, pag. 459-486.

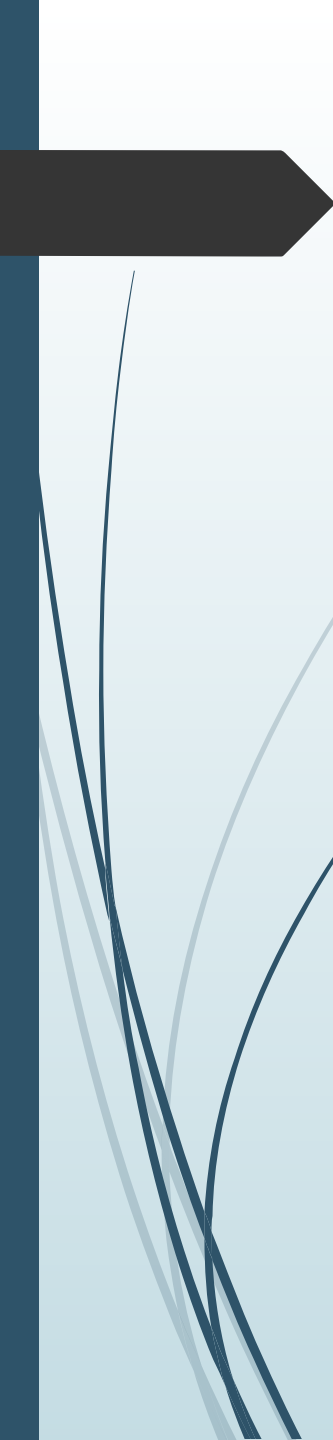
Koyama, Shizuko, and Filler, Stephen (trans.), *Ryōsai Kenbo: The Educational Ideal of "Good Wife, Wise Mother" in Modern Japan*, Leiden, Brill, 2013.

Matsuda, Saori, Nagai, Yoshikazu, and Yamamoto, Taketoshi (eds.), *Senryōki seikatsu sesōshi shiryō II: Fūzoku to ryūkō*, Tokyo, Shin'yōsha, 2015.

Minami, Hiroshi (ed.), *Kindai shomin seikatsushi 1 Ningen seken*, Tokyo, San'ichi shobō, 1985.

Murakami, Nobuhiko, *Taishō joseishi*, Tokyo, Rironsha, 1982.

Nolte, Sharon H., and Hastings, Sally Ann, "The Meiji State's Policy Toward Women, 1890-1910," in Bernstein, Gail Lee (ed.), *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1950*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, pag. 151-174.



Pflugfelder, Gregory M., "'S' is for Sister: Schoolgirl Intimacy and 'Same-Sex Love' in Early Twentieth-Century Japan," in Molony, Barbara, and Uno, Kathleen (eds.), *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Asia Center, 2005, pag. 133-190.

Robertson, Jennifer, "Yoshiya Nobuko: Out and Outspoken in Practice and Prose," in Robertson, Jennifer (ed.), *Same-Sex Cultures and Sexualities: An Anthropological Reader*, Hoboken, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pag. 196-211.

Robertson, Jennifer, "Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 25 no. 1, 1999, pag. 1-35.

Robertson, Jennifer, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan: Sexuality and Subversion in the Theater and Beyond," in *American Ethnologist* vol. 19 no. 3, 1992, pag. 419-442.

Roden, Donald, "Taishō Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence," in Rimer, J. Thomas (ed.), *Culture and Identity: Japanese Intellectuals during the Interwar Years*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, pag. 37-56.

Shamoon, Deborah, *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2012.

Suzuki, Michiko, "Writing Same-Sex Love: Sexology and Literary Representation in Yoshiya Nobuko's Early Fiction," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 65 no. 3, 2006, pag. 575-599.

Tsuchiya, Reiko, and Tsuganesawa, Toshihiro (eds.), *Taishō Shōwa no fūzoku hihyō to shakai tanbō Murashima Yoriyuki chosaku senshū: Sakariba to furyō shōnen shōjo*, Tokyo, Kashiwa shobō, 2004.

Uchida, Shizue, *Jogakusei techō: Taishō Shōwa otome raifu*, Tokyo, Kawade shobō shinsha, 2014, 2nd edition.

Williams, Yoko, Tsumi - *Offence and Retribution in Early Japan*, London, Routledge, 2013.

Yoshiya, Nobuko, *Wasurenagusa*, Tokyo, Kawade shobō shinsha, 2023, 3rd edition.