

# I Am Not Pessimistic about the Future of Women (1989) By Yūko Tsushima (津島 佑子) (Japan)

My real name is Satoko Tsushima, but I never liked it. When my mother was pregnant, she did a lot of knitting for me. She is a very methodical woman and symmetry is essential for knitting. That is what inspired my mother to decide that name. However, the Chinese character's form is complete and closed, leaving no hint of an expansion. When the time came for me to think of my own pen name, every writer's privilege, I chose Yuko, a simple character, but one which suggests movement toward the outside. And it means happiness.

I have loved reading since I was little. I don't remember exactly when and how I got this horrible idea of becoming a novelist, but I shaped my future by entering an essay contest within my college: If I didn't win first prize, I would give up my dream. I was 19, a sophomore majoring in English literature. To my surprise, I won first prize. My title was "A Dream and The Modern Times." I emphasized the importance of imagination, a wonderful ability we all possess. And I have continued writing since then.

I loved to read. I read "Gone With The Wind" when I was in the 2d grade at junior high. It was fantastic. But as soon as I closed the book, all the excitement was gone and I felt so bored. My book-hunting started in an effort to encounter a book more thrilling than Scarlett's love story. I read all the books I could get, even mysteries and science fiction. But I soon became interested in novels that reflect the complexity of human beings. I realized that this interest-gaining factor is what determines the value of books. I still think so.

I like Tennessee Williams. His heroines are dissatisfied with the existing situation and are courageous enough to spring out into a new place no matter how dangerous it may appear from a common-sense judgment. They hate to be self-contained in everyday life. Self-destructive, maybe, but I feel close to their expansionism-- going outside to find happiness. Women figures I created in my novels also don't compromise with reality. They may appear stoic, but they are strong enough to search for their own happiness in their own ways.

My constant theme is love and solitude. We all want love, but love is entwined with solitude. I want to delve into these issues. I only write things familiar to me.

I'm a divorced mother. I was born in Tokyo and have lived here all my life. I don't know a woman's situation in the rural area, although I hear there is still a big difference in lifestyles and ways of thinking from Tokyo. I have been writing about the divorces, lost loves and pregnancies before and after the marriages of today's women living in a city.



I have never written about happy women. This is not because I like unhappiness, but it comes from my firm belief that misfortune is not always bad. Happiness can spoil people. Happy people can lose sensitivity, and as a result they become poor in terms of human qualities.

On the contrary, people can become rich by unhappiness. Unhappy people are given a chance to discover true human nature. It's like we realize a stone only after we stumble over it. I know it's hard, but people can grow through hardships.

Despite a strong chorus of want-to-be-happy in our society, that's the reason I am interested in unhappy women. A tragedy is more dramatic than a glamorous success story. At least to me.

All women are not unhappy, but women are more handicapped than men just because they are women. I don't think women are fully equal with men even in the United States. For instance, in private relations, women are victims of how they were taught to behave. As we share such a common problem, I believe American women will understand my fictional characters. Humanity is, after all, universal. So is literature. I had no problem in understanding heroines of T. Williams, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. It's like a test for me.

The majority of Japanese women still expect socio-economic and emotional security from marriage. So a woman chooses for her husband someone who seems most capable to protect her. There is an expression in Japan-- "to reach the goal"-- meaning to get married, as if there is no goal afterward. Many women seem to believe everything will be all right once they have "reached the goal."

However, despite such mainstream thoughts, an increasing number of women are getting divorced. This indicates to me that our society has opened up a little bit to accept divorced women; and hardships of life after divorce don't discourage women who really seek divorce.

Traditionally women still suffer more from divorce than men. It's like becoming an outcast. She (a divorced woman) has to confront the outside world all by herself having lost protection and privileges given by marriage. In my novel "Hikarino Ryobun" ("The Domain of Light"), I wrote about a woman suffering from loneliness in her marriage and her solitude with her 2-year-old daughter, in an urban setting following her divorce.

Later a woman writer published a comical story about a divorced woman. The book was well-received by male critics, which gave me mixed feelings. Is that because men don't feel guilty when divorce is described lightly by a woman as today's new lifestyle, I wonder?

My fictional characters struggle for love, which they believe exists somewhere outside their marriages. They are not satisfied with only being a good mother, a norm accepted so strongly in our society. I suppose most Japanese men are not ready to accept those women. Japan is a man's country, but emotionally it is a maternal society. Japanese men need so much moral support from women.

In Japan, love often is considered "amae" or dependence. Instead of complicated soul-searching, many couples depend on each other and feel comfortable about it. But I think the number of women who want to review such a type of relationship is increasing.

I don't think women can be satisfied only with children. Love for children and love for the opposite sex are different in nature. But there is a trade-off between the two. A divorced mother chooses to be a good mother not only to gain social recognition, but also to be appreciated by her own children for not having abandoned them. I think children are a heavy burden for divorced women.

I think most women have the illusion that someday an ideal man will rescue them. They wait for a knight on a white horse. In "The Shooting Gallery," such an illusion is symbolized by a golden dragon ascending to heaven. However, the heroine realizes at the end that as long as she is expecting such a dragon, she never will be satisfied. It may sound Zen-like, but a path toward rescue begins when we realize there is no rescue from outside. We need to help ourselves.

Mother-child and family problems are, after all, coming back to us like a boomerang, asking each of us who we are. What we are is a never-ending theme in literature and we still don't know who we are. I think spiritual aspects of love are becoming increasingly important today. There is a strong need to understand our own partners and to be understood by them. We want to confirm ourselves through our partners. But there is no one who accepts everything. And none of us can live all alone. Love has become such a difficult issue in our times.

I was curious about my father. As he died in such a way, people around me kept silent about him.<sup>1</sup> He was a taboo. There weren't many photos of him at home. I felt I had to find out who he was. I first read his novels when I was an elementary school pupil. Later when I was in my 10th-11th grade at high school, I read all his novels. (He wrote about 140 stories of various lengths). And since then I haven't opened his books. I couldn't judge his literature while reading his books. It was hard for me to be objective toward his novels.

Maybe when I become older, I probably can read them with different feelings, but I still cannot. If he were not my father, I could better understand what he had done to his family. But he was my father, and I can't be objective, for he abandoned us.

I usually sit at my desk and write all afternoon. I can't write fast. Writing is to me a way to confirm myself. If I stop writing, I will feel like a kite without string. I write fiction, but I experience the fiction I write. In that sense, they are not fiction anymore, but reality. That's frightening. Like other novelists, I live a real life and a life as a writer. At times I get confused which is which.

Writers make a great deal of sacrifice both physically and mentally. As I am not interested in happiness in a worldly sense, I can continue to write novels.

But the rewards are irreplaceable. I don't mean becoming rich and famous. It's invisible and more spiritual in nature. Once I knew what it was. I couldn't stop writing to feel it again.

What is of value to an ordinary human being is the biggest question to which I search for an answer. I don't know what is the meaning of my existence even now. When I was a child, I was desperate about myself twice and wanted to die. I felt I was worthless: stupid, ugly and bad-natured. I now think there must be some value in each person. My works are messages for those who want to know the value of their own self. Therefore, I don't write novels that make readers feel like dying after they read them. That's my ethic in writing.

I want to see the positive side in our life. So I am not pessimistic about the future of women. It may sound paradoxical, but Japanese women are, after all, in a better position than Japanese men. Men have to work in our society. But women have freedom not to become a company slave by getting married. It's not all that easy for women, but having a choice is better than nothing. There is no clear-cut answer for our happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> Tushima is the daughter of famed novelist Osamu Dazai, who committed suicide when she was one year old.