

# Taeko Kōno (1926-2015)

## Gale Database: Contemporary Authors

**Place of Birth:** Osaka, Japan

**Award(s):** Shinchosha Prize, 1962, for *Yojigari*; Akutagawa Literary Prize, 1963, for *Kani*; Women's Literary Prize, 1967, for *Saigo no koki*; Yomiuri Literary Prize, 1968, for *Fui no koe*, 1977, for *Ikanisite Tanizaki jun'ichiro o yomuka*; Tanizaki Literary Award, 1980; literary prize from Japanese Art Academy, 1984; Noma Literary Prize, 1991.

**Personal Information:** Family: Born April 30, 1926, in Osaka, Japan; daughter of Tameji and

Yone Kono; married Yasushi Ichikawa, April, 1965. Education: Osaka Women's University, B.A., 1947. Memberships: Japanese PEN, Japan Women Writers' Association, Japan Association for Writers (director), Nihon Bungeika Kyokai (member of board of directors).



**Career:** Novelist, short story writer, and critic. Member of Japanese Art Academy, 1984--. Director of Museum of Modern Japanese Literature.

Like a number of other modern Japanese women writers of fiction, Kono Taeko has chronicled the struggles of Japanese women to come to terms with their identity in a traditional patriarchal society. Most of her female characters are self-defining, and most reject traditional notions of what a woman's role should be. According to Van C. Gessel in *Japan Quarterly*, in Kono's fiction women are no longer trapped in "fixed roles," but still have an "existential rage" that leads them to violent, often antisocial or sadomasochistic ways of dealing with the world.

One of Kono's best-known stories, "Yojugari," explores the theme of one woman's dislike for children. The protagonist, Hayashi Akiko, is an independent woman who has no desire to have children. After contracting tuberculosis, she is actually relieved because the disease gives her the excuse she needs to make her anti-maternal feelings socially legitimate. Her aversion to girls in particular is pathological: in little girls, she sees unpleasant reminders of her unhappy childhood. Conversely, she takes an obsessive interest in little boys, including violent sexual fantasies about them.

Although Akiko engages in sadomasochistic sex with her adult partner, she continues to fantasize about a particular four-year-old boy. In her fantasy, she sees the boy being beaten by his father to the extent that his insides actually fall out. Critics have attempted to make sense out of such a violent scene in the context of Kono's beliefs about women. According to Gessel, "imagined violence seems

to be a desperate attempt to end [the] control” women feel from outside forces. Chieko M. Ariga, writing in *The Woman’s Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women’s Writing*, felt that this story “turn[s] the myth of motherhood on its head.” Ariga asserted that too many critics of Kono’s works have analyzed her works outside the context of “the problematic nature of the system within which men and women are gendered.” *Japan Quarterly* reviewer Rebecca L. Copeland said that “Yojugari” reveals the “mask of the demon woman, which is as much a construct of the patriarchy as is the nurturing woman.” Copeland pointed to the images of the evil, devouring women found in nearly every culture, including that of Eve in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Particularly because the object of Akiko’s fantasy is a male child, Copeland continued, “Kono creates a woman who threatens the very survival of the patriarchy.”

Similar themes are found in Kono’s other fictional works. In the novella *Fui no koe*, published in 1968, Kono presents what Gessel called a “modern woman’s *Hamlet*.” In this story, a woman named Ukiko, who is trying to deal with her stagnating life, experiences visitations from her dead father. The ghost tells her that in order to find herself she needs to go out and murder several people who have been in control of her life, including her mother, her lover’s son, and a character representing all of humanity. Near the end of the story, the reader realizes that all of this supposed violent activity has actually been happening only in the mind of the protagonist, who is trying in her twisted way to bring meaning to her everyday relationships.

Much critical attention came to Kono after several of her stories appeared in English translation as *Toddler-Hunting and Other Stories* in 1996. *Library Journal* critic Kitty Chen called attention to the “realistic, banal settings” of the stories and noted that they all show modern women attempting to deal with men, sexuality, and relationships “in bizarre and obsessive ways.” Susannah Hunnewell, writing for the *Boston Review* Web site, said that the book gives American readers “a voyeuristic peep” into the lives of the usually very private Japanese and that the convoluted relationships in the stories are “not only unexpectedly frank, but often genuinely shocking.” In *World Literature Today* Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel compared Kono’s stories with those of Flannery O’Connor and said that they “explore the dark, terrifying side of human nature that manifests itself in antisocial behavior.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *Toddler-Hunting* a “disturbing and exceptional collection of stories,” noting that Kono’s “consistently stunning prose and the deft translation help keep the collection from becoming a gallery of grotesquerie.”