

Takako Takahashi (1932-2013)

The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature

Takahashi Takako is yet another author whose fiction “has continued to enchant and alarm readers with its hallucinatory explorations of women’s secret subversive proclivities” (Mori 1996:29). Takahashi Takako was born in Kyoto in 1932. After attending Kyoto University and studying French literature, she graduated and soon thereafter married Takahashi Kazumi, a well-known literary figure. In the 1960s, Takahashi Kazumi became an ideological leader in the student protest movement; he died in 1971 of cancer. After her husband’s death, Takako’s career was firmly launched with a volume of her first short stories. In 1972, she received the first of many literary prizes for *To the End of the Sky* (Sora no hate made). In 1975 she converted to Catholicism and in 1986 entered a convent in Paris.



Much of Takahashi’s fiction denies the existence of a link between female sexuality and motherhood. For instance, “Congruent Figures” (Sōjikei, 1971), like Kōno’s “Toddler Hunting,” is a story of a woman’s profound ambivalence toward her own daughter. Takahashi frequently writes of women alone (her 1977 series of linked short stories is even titled *Lonely Woman* [Ronri ūman]) who engage in dream world fantasies that often take a violent turn. Many of her short story collections, such as *Lonely Women*, consist of linked stories that follow a similar theme or involve the same character and are intended to be read together.

from ***The Woman’s Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women’s Writing***

“The Quest for *Jouissance* in Takahashi Takako’s Texts”

By Maryellen Toman Mori

When Takahashi Takako’s surrealistic tales first began appearing in Japanese literary magazines in the late 1960’s, they captured attention for their shocking subject matter as well as for their stylistic elegance. By the 1970’s Takahashi was enjoying a successful career as a fiction writer; in the mid-

1980's she abandoned such worldly pursuits to lead a contemplative life. This shift in direction is not surprising in view of the spiritual sensibility that informs her fiction, for a mystical vein runs through even her most macabre tales.

The influence of Western literature and culture on Takahashi's writing can hardly be overestimated. As a student at Kyoto University, she majored in French literature, writing her senior thesis on Charles Baudelaire. She went on to complete a master's degree with a thesis on the novelist François Mauriac. During this time, she became intrigued by psychoanalytical theories of the subconscious. Christian concepts of the supernatural, and literary theories of the intrusions of the irrational or "demonic" into everyday life. In numerous essays she has revealed how her study of French literature nurtured her taste for the uncanny and perverse and led her to infuse elements from such diverse literary currents as *fin de siècle* decadence, Christianity, and surrealism into her own fiction. In "Furansu bungaku to watakushi" (French literature and myself; 1980), she writes:

I became acquainted with Christianity through Baudelaire's diabolical world.... What attracted me to Christian literature was its vivid depictions of demonic things rather than its evocations of divinity. Because human beings dwell amid the former.

I liked the Marquis de Sade for the same reason. The more lurid, grotesque, or frightening somethings was, the more powerfully it drew me...

After immersing myself in Christian literature for some time, I became sick of it and set it aside. I then became keenly interested in surrealism.... There is another reality that is different but not separate from our so-called reality and that is constantly invading it and mingling with it; as I read André Breton's works, I came to experience this, not just accept it as a theory....

After studying surrealism thoroughly, when I again turned to Christianity, what had baffled me before made perfect sense. The two had fused within me.... I have recently realized that what I had been seeking all along was release into an "inner world." (90-93)

[...]Takahashi's literature, although not written from an explicitly feminist perspective, shares considerable common ground with feminist literature written in the 1970's and 1980's, both in Japan and the West. Like most feminist fiction, her stories usually revolve around alienated female protagonists who oppose patriarchal society's values and its prescriptions for women's lives. These protagonists resent or reject marriage, reproduction, and child rearing, because they entail women's subordination to men and their confinement within the domestic sphere. They envision alternative selves through dreams, fantasies, and madness, or they create alternative worlds by adopting countercultural lifestyles.