

Yūko Tsushima (1947-2016)

Gale Database: Feminist Writers

Tsushima Yuko is one of the most important women writers of contemporary Japan whose fiction challenges established social customs, especially regarding women's sexuality and family relationships, and proposes alternatives to stifling conventions. As do other highly praised contemporary women writers such as Kono Taeko and Oba Minako, Tsushima explores sociocultural taboos like incest and violent expressions of human sexuality. Tsushima's insightful descriptions of everyday details, combined with her tactful allusions to mythological landscape and use of dreams, brings home the "reality" of her characters' lives, sensations, and emotions.

Born in post-World War II Tokyo as second daughter to renowned writer Dazai Osamu, Tsushima grew up with virtually no memory of her father, who committed double suicide with his lover when Tsushima was only one year old. She attended a Catholic girls' school for her middle and high school and university education, earning a bachelor's degree in English. In 1969 Tsushima enrolled in graduate school at Meiji University, but her attendance was sporadic and she never finished her studies, partly due to the student strikes that overtook many Japanese university campuses at that time.

While in college Tsushima kept herself busy with numerous extracurricular activities, which all represented her search for a means of self-discovery and self-expression: she initiated student-designed seminars, founded a folk song group that mainly sang protest songs, and traveled frequently. An ideal venue seems to have been finally provided by writing, as she started a hand-printed journal for creative writing and simultaneously joined another, more established group of aspiring young writers in 1966. During this formative period, she was an avid reader of both Japanese and western writers, including Tanizaki Junichiro, Okamoto Kanoko, Izumi Kyoka, Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Edgar Allan Poe. Tsushima began her career as professional writer relatively early with her fiction, "Requiem-- For Dog and Adult," published in *Mita Bungaku* to critical acclaim in 1969.

The haunting spiritual and literary presence of her untimely deceased novelist father, along with her experience of growing up with a brother who had been born with Down Syndrome, has been a major source of inspiration for Tsushima's fiction. She started reading her father's works at a precociously young age, in an effort to understand her absentee parent, and much of her writing recreated father-



daughter relationships that never existed in real life. For example, in the short story "Water City" the father, who like Tsushima's own has drowned himself, is living in an underwater world, which allows the daughter to have an ongoing relationship with the deceased parent. In contrast to such surrealistic existence that her fiction often assigns to father fixtures, Tsushima's memory of her older brother is that of a person of substantial presence who could not count or walk normally but who could genuinely love others without taint of envy or resentment, a person who embodied the joy of living and "wisdom of love." He reappears as the mentally and physically handicapped brother of the protagonist Koko in *Child of Fortune*. Koko's memory of this dead brother, who loved her deeply and protected her fiercely whenever he sensed danger, continues to support her in her unorthodox choice of lifestyle that includes affairs with married or otherwise non-committal men while raising a daughter from a previous marriage. In contrast, her conservative sister relentlessly criticizes Koko's "immoral" behavior, a rejection by a family member that symbolizes the protagonist's ostracized position in Japanese society at large. Tsushima's novel purposefully contrasts the late brother's unconditional acceptance of Koko with her sister's overt disapproval.

True to the tradition of the "private" or autobiographical novel (*shi-shosetsu*) that has long been the central genre of Japanese literature (in which her father also excelled), Tsushima's fiction reflects the author's other life experiences, such as marriage and motherhood. A fatherless daughter, Tsushima herself became a single mother of two when she divorced her husband in the same year she gave birth to an illegitimate son. This experience of being an unmarried mother informs many of her short stories and novels. For instance, *Woman Running in the Mountains* (1980) and *The Light of Night Runs After Me* (1986) both feature an unwed mother, and *By the River of Fire* (1983) portrays the life of an illegitimate daughter.

What these works do, in focusing on the lives of socially marginalized women characters, is to dissect existing human/family relationships and to challenge conventional social expectations and moral beliefs. Tsushima openly defies the norm of monogamous marriage with her portrayal of women who raise children without the help of the biological fathers. Pregnancy, child bearing, and child rearing, for Tsushima, is a fundamentally natural process that ensures continuation of the species and does not need to be sustained by social customs and mundane moral codes. In this basic cycle of life and death, men are given neither social nor familial roles to play, much like the situation of most animals, domestic or wild. Tsushima's use of animal imagery, of dogs and cats, for example, is a fictional device to highlight the radical meaning of motherhood that is untrammelled by social conventions. In several of the stories collected in *Phantom Stories*, boundaries between humans and animals are blurred, and in an extreme case ("Princess Fuse"), the protagonist dreams that she has given birth to six children at once, some human and others puppies (as happens in the mystical legend after which the story is titled), and is nursing all of them on her six nipples. Women and women's bodies, in Tsushima's fiction, are viewed as a source of all life, and the sense of the body, of such immediate physicality as exemplified by pregnancy and childbirth, dominates much of her prose.

In creating women characters who are forced to, or choose to, embrace marginalized existence, Tsushima successfully points out the deficiencies of rigid social strictures that cripple people's ability to connect to each other and to live true to themselves. At the same time she draws attention to women's energy and powers that are deeply rooted in their sexual and physical existence, while never neglecting the sense of desolation and loneliness that inevitably accompanies the life of a woman who elects to lead a life of her own.

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Pseudonym for Tsushima Satoko. **Nationality:** Japanese. **Born:** Tokyo, 30 March 1947. **Education:** Shirayuri Women's University, B.A. in English, 1969; Meiji University Graduate School, 1969-71. **Family:** Married in 1970 (divorced, 1976); one daughter, one son. **Career:** Writer. Lecturer in Japanese literature, Institute of Occidental Languages, University of Paris, 1991-92. Contributor of short stories and essays to periodicals, including *Mita Bungaku*, *Bungei*, *Gunzo*, *Umi*, and *Bungakukai*. **Awards:** Kawabata Yasunari Prize, 1974, for *Danmari Ichi*; Tamura Toshiko Prize, 1975, for *Mugura no Haha*; Izumi Kyoka Prize, 1977, for *Kusa no Fushido*; Women's Literature Prize, 1978, for *Choji*; Noma Bungei New Writer Prize, 1979, for *Hikari no Ryobun*; Yomiuri Prize, 1986, for *Yoru no Hikari ni Owarete*; Hirabashi Taiko Prize, 1989, for *Mhiru e*; Ito Sei Prize, 1995, for *Kaze yo, Sora Kakeru Kaze yo*. **Member:** Nihon Bungei Kyokai (Japanese literary association)