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WOMAN AND THE BODY IN MODERN JAPANESE POETRY

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The article focuses on the three contemporary Japanese poets Yosano Akiko, Sagawa Chika and Ito Hiromi as examples of women who break away from the conventions of “women’s poetry” and subvert the image of femininity which has been traditionally portrayed in poems written by Japanese women, at the same time that they preserve in their works themes related to the female sex. Taking as connecting point the female body and the way it is positioned in relation to the outside world, the article analyzes how Yosano, Sagawa and Ito –each in her own subversive way– use different languages to explore the female body itself, as well as themes such as female sexuality, love, motherhood and death.

KEY WORDS: Japanese poetry, “women’s poetry”, subversion, Yosano Akiko, Sagawa Chika, Ito Hiromi, female body, sexuality, desire.

Just as the leading figures in the making of the modern Japanese novel were men, so too did male poets play a central role in the history of modern Japanese poetry, giving birth to a new form set apart from the traditional Japanese poetry. The thirty-one syllable *tanka* and the seventeen syllable *haiku* survived, too, although they underwent major innovations to adapt to the modern demands of poetic expression. The leaders of the modernization movements of these traditional poetic forms also tended to be men. Although the number of women was most significant among *tanka* poets, still, overall, women were poorly represented in modern Japanese poetry.

The scarcity of novels penned by women until the 1960s has often been discussed in relation to the “genderization” of modern Japanese literature, which is inseparable from the way in which literature was institutionalized in modern Japan. Particularly after the rise of naturalism, when male writers began taking up literature as a vocational activity, women who were, by and large, socially confined to the domestic realm were structurally excluded

from mainstream literary activities (Iida, 2004: 22-24). Consequently, a new genre, the so-called “women’s literature”, emerged. It was originally promoted by women novelists, their point being that women writers, who were not receiving proper attention from the reading public, were presenting works written from a unique women’s point of view. This categorical separation of women’s writing from that written by men increased the recognition of women writers and also helped secure a market of both men and women readers for them. At the same time, however, this resulted in reinforcing the idea that women’s writing was inherently different. The expectation was that women’s prose would deal with particular “womanly” themes, generally focusing on domestic affairs such as family life, housework, childbearing and so on. There were, of course, many exceptions to this, and a number of women writers challenged the notion of “women’s literature” itself, trying to write outside the genre. Yet the term “women’s literature” persisted, and it was only in 2006 that the “Women’s Literature Association” was officially dissolved¹.

A similar situation existed in the field of poetry. Women’s work was set outside the poetic “mainstream”, which belonged to men. The works of female poets were pigeonholed as “women’s poetry”, a sub-category of “women’s literature”. Correspondingly, their works dealt with themes suitable to the genre.

Still, we find amidst the works by female poets, subtle challenges to the reader’s expectations, and works that invalidate generic distinctions because of their sheer originality and powerfulness of expression. In this article I wish to introduce some of these works, centring on three women poets of the modern period, Yosano Akiko, Sagawa Chika and Ito Hiromi². They dealt with themes that are related to their female sex; yet their works are in no way ingratiating. The three of them broke away from the conventional role of being a woman in their own womanly way. Most significantly, the commonality I see in these three poets is the way they position their body as a reference point for relating themselves to the external world.

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) was a representative “new woman” in Japan at the turn of the century, whose first collection of *tanka* poetry, *Midaregami* (*Tangled Hair*, 1901) caused a sensation among her contemporaries for its newness of theme and style, characterized by direct expressions of passion in an uninhibited, sensual language. Sagawa Chika (1911-1936), though little known by literary historians, evoked a unique world seen through the eyes of a physically frail woman who devoted her limited energy to tackle the

¹ A symposium to announce the dissolution of “The Women’s Literature Association” was held in October, 2007. Tsushima Yuko, the last president of the association, declared that “the age when women had to get together to support women’s literature has come to an end” (“Joryu Bungakusha-kai, 70-nen de Maku” [Women’s Literature Association Puts an End to Its 70 Years’ History], asahi com., 3/2/2010. <http://www.asahi.com/culture/news_culture/TKY200709130094.html>).

² Japanese names are written in the conventional Japanese order, surname followed by given name.

external world that threatened to take her life away. Although she worked with the “esprit-nouveau” modernists of the 1920s, her works demonstrate a sensibility distinctly different from that of her fellow male poets, particularly in the way she relates her body to the surrounding world. A collection of her poetic works was published posthumously. Ito Hiromi (1955~) is a contemporary poet whose poetic debut shocked readers with her challenging, unbinding expressions of sexuality, which are intelligently constructed and radically subversive.

Yosano Akiko wrote both *tanka* and free verse, but it is in her *tanka* that we see the most striking expressions of the “new woman” asserting her self, her sexuality and her body: “She is twenty/ The pride of her spring/ In her black hair/ Cascading over her comb/ How lovely!” (Morton, 2007: 21)³.

Included in *Tangled Hair*, this is one of Yosano’s best known works. The young woman in her prime, admiring the shining beauty of her black hair can be easily associated with the image of Yosano herself. One can imagine a young woman standing in front of a mirror, probably naked, putting the comb through her hair and entranced by the sexuality of her own body.

Traditionally, in Japanese *tanka* poetry, woman’s hair had a strong sexual association, as seen in the following poem by Izumi Shikibu from the late eighth century: “Not even aware of my tangled black hair/ I lie face down/ Longing for him who put his fingers through it” (Shimizu, 1956: 245)⁴. The image of a woman’s tangled hair was also used metaphorically to reflect the “tangled” thoughts of a woman longing for the visit of her lover. Taikenmon’in Horikawa, from the twelfth century, wrote: “Whether your thoughts will last I do not know;/ My black hair is entangled this morning,/ And so are my thoughts as I immerse myself in yearning” (Kubota, 1986: 187)⁵.

Yosano was well aware of the specific metaphorical function given to women’s hair in traditional Japanese poetry, thus the title of her first collection, *Tangled Hair*. The following poem, for example, draws directly upon the familiar image of black hair in *tanka*: “My black hair/ A thousand strands of my hair/ My hair all-a-tangle/ And my heart all-a-tangle/ My heart all-a-tangle” (Morton, 2007: 173).

Yosano goes much further, though, in expressing her emotions and her desire. One of the most characteristic aspects of Yosano’s poetry is the presence of a self gazing at her own body, admiring it and cherishing it, as we saw in the first poem quoted above. Here is another example, in which she compares her young body to a “graceful lily”: “In my bath –/ Submerged like some graceful lily/ At the bottom of a spring/ How beautiful/ This body of twenty summers” (Goldstein and Shimoda, 1987: 34)⁶.

³ Translation by Leith Morton (2007).

⁴ My translation. All translations of the quoted texts are mine unless specified.

⁵ This poem is also included in *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets)* edited by Fujiwara no Teika in the thirteenth century.

⁶ Translation by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shimoda (1987).

A narcissistic vision, indeed, yet how much courage it took for a woman to openly declare that she was a woman whose “beautiful body” was not only an object of the male gaze but a body to be gazed at by her own self, a desirous body that is waiting to be “kicked” open. “Clasping my hands to my breasts/ The curtain of mystery/ I kicked gently aside/ How crimson is my flower/ And how dark!” (Morton, 2007: 57).

And in the following poems, she seduces her partner to “feel” and “explore” it.

Beneath soft skin
A hot surge of blood
That you have never felt
Are you not lonely?
You who teach the way? (Morton, 2007: 37)

Spring is brief
Who can live forever?
I let his hands
Explore
My firm breasts. (Morton, 2007: 189)

The publication of *Tangled Hair* was groundbreaking in its straight-forward expression of passion and desire, voiced by a self-affirming woman who had the pride and confidence to present her own body as a beautiful object. Yosano opened a path for succeeding women poets to treat their body as a poetic theme, and to assert their feminine identity, the locus of which is the womanly body.

Okamoto Kanoko (1889-1939) is one such poet. She, too, gazes at her own body and admires its charm, as in the following *tanka*: “Like little seashells drifting/ My toenails shine/ At the bottom of the warm bath/ Early afternoon” (Okamoto, 1976: 10). Then, she looks at her body and wishes it had less excess fat: “Why, to my regret/ I have put on weight/ Again, hoping in vain to fall ill” (Okamoto, 1976: 108). But she is too healthy and full of life, as she stands naked, bathing in sunlight, uninhibited, and appreciating the joy of being alive and being a woman: “On my wanton body, all naked/ Sunlight seeps through, dripping/ Am I not grateful?” (Okamoto, 1976: 139).

Before moving on to examine the modernist approach to the “feminine” theme, I will briefly touch on another woman *tanka* poet, Nakajo Fumiko (1922-1954), who dealt with the theme of the deprivation of the womanly body. Suffering from cancer, she had her breasts surgically removed. She died at the age of thirty-one, one month after the publication of her first *tanka* collection, *Chibusa Soshitsu (Breasts Deprived)*. “I see the hills/ Looking like the breasts I have lost/ In winter, let them be decorated/ By withered flowers” (Nakajo, 1981: 53). Nakajo wrote not only of the physical loss of her

womanly body but also dealt with the pain and remorse of an experience particular to women: "I have a past/ To be opened by a surgical knife/ My fetuses/ Are kicking each other in darkness" (Nakajo, 1981: 52).

These women's *tanka* illustrate how the discovery of the poet's womanly body and the willingness to positively uphold it, declaring that it is "hers", opened up a new arena of poetic expression. While following the conventional style of *tanka* poetry, these poets stepped out of the conventional manner of *tanka* making, which relied heavily on associations and connotations that elicited familiar sensibilities and visions nurtured through centuries of interconnected set images. Admittedly, for centuries *tanka* was one of the genres, together with prose writing and poetic diaries, in which women had a voice. But their expressions were restricted, largely due to the conventions of *tanka* itself in which women were expected to play the passive role of waiting, longing for and lamenting. There were some exceptions, such as the works by Izumi Shikibu, which boldly expressed the ecstatic experiences of love and sex. Still, the language was indirect, and reference to women's bodily parts was almost nil, apart from references to hair, and at times, soft, scented skin. Yosano, then, was the first woman to stand in front of a mirror, gaze at her own body, and declare that it was hers. Her own gaze at her physical self obliterated the male gaze, or rather overwhelmed it, forcing the man to appreciate and admire it as the woman herself does.

While Yosano Akiko and other "new" *tanka* poets contributed greatly to the awakening of self-consciousness among modern Japanese women poets, overall the number of female poets remained few, particularly those writing in free-verse. There were some women poets in the proletarian stream who expressed their resentment against the discriminatory treatment of women in the work environment. There were also poets, like Takamura Itsue and Fukao Sumako, who expressed in free language the predicament of being a woman. Others wrote of women's "unique" experiences revolving around domestic chores and caring for the family. Rather than look at poets who directly deal with women's issues in the broader socio-cultural context, this essay will now turn to a few works by Sagawa Chika, a minor modernist poet, who struggled to come to terms with life, and her impending death expressed through the sensibilities of the diminishing body.

Sagawa does not make direct reference to the body in the way the *tanka* poets introduced above did. In fact, in her case, the body is on the verge of extinction, and therefore, hardly present. Yet, paradoxically, because of its absence, Sagawa's verses evoke the image of a woman desperately clinging to her ailing body, as she forced to confront the possibility of losing it. Below is a section from one of her representative works, "Green Flames" ("Midori no Honoo").

First I see
Those that lively approach me
Coming down flights of green stairs

Passing there
Looking at the other side
Crushed together in a small space
Halfway through, gradually forming a mountain
Moving, rays of light forming continuous waves along the wheat
fields
[...]
All is revolving, turning from green to deep green
They are in the milk bottle on the dining table
Their faces squashed, bending over their bodies, reflecting on the
bottle
[...]
I hurriedly close the window
The danger is coming towards me
There is fire outside
The green flame, beautifully burning, spreading into the air, circling
the earth
Then at last, joining the horizon to disappear

My weight leaves me
And brings me back into the hole of oblivion
[...]

Who is it that blindfolds me from the back?
Throw me into sleep. (Sagawa, 1983: 26-27)

“Green flame” refers to the sprouting green of the spring season that quickly grows and spreads. The poem opens with the dynamic image of the green rolling down the hills, covering the fields and coming towards the poet, who is looking out the window feeling threatened by its overwhelming power. It is easy to read “green” as the symbol of life, which, for the poet, is far too powerful to cope with. It invades through the window, and the poet, unable to bear seeing it reflected in the milk bottle on the dining table, quickly shuts the window to protect herself –in vain though, as she feels her physical self, “her weight”, leaving her.

A similar theme is repeated in Sagawa’s other poems, too: for example, in “Green” (“Midori”), the poet feels suffocated by the overflowing green: “Pushing itself forward like waves/ It overflows everywhere, all around/ On the mountain path I am almost drowning/ I am suffocating, supporting myself as I keep pitching forward” (Sagawa, 1983: 55). The green foliage, symbolizing the life force, was not a source of energy but a threat for Sagawa, who suffered from ill health since childhood and also had weak eyesight. Apparently, her health actually deteriorated during the spring season. What is of concern in the context of the present discussion, however, is not so much the life experience of the poet herself but the way in which she relates to her environment, and how she positions her body in relation to nature.

In the texts quoted above, tension is created between the poet's body and the exterior world. The poet sees the world outside as hostile and aggressive. Regarding space as a vessel of one's existence, let alone as an extension of oneself, was an idea foreign to Sagawa. Traditionally, in *tanka*, images of the surrounding nature were used to represent the psychological state of the poet; that is, the scenes unfolding in front of the poet were presented as a psychological extension of the self. The familiar scenes of nature filled the literary space of *tanka* that constituted the poet's mental landscape. The discovery of the self, and together with it, the discovery of the landscape, is a modern invention⁷. The vision to place the natural landscape in opposition to the self is thus not particular to Sagawa, yet what is extraordinary is Sagawa's vision of surrounding nature as a menacing force that is about to intrude into the self and destroy it. What is under threat of destruction is her body.

In "The Ribbon in May" ("Gogatsu no Ribon"), we see a personified image of nature: "Outside the window, the air roars with laughter/ Behind its multi-coloured tongue/ The leaves cluster and blow in the wind" (Sagawa, 1983: 50). Following these lines is the image of a bewildered "I" inside the house, who stretches out her arms to grab what is out there, only to find in her hands "the long hair of the wind".

Sometimes, nature will directly come in to destroy. In "It is snowing" ("Yuki ga Futteiru"), death approaches her and chews her finger: "Death is among the leaves of the holly tree,/ Quietly crawling in the attic,/ And chewing my fingers" (Sagawa, 1983: 24). And in "The Phantom House" ("Maboroshi no Ie"), "Death slowly clings to my fingers/ Peeling the crust of night, layer by layer" (Sagawa, 1983: 41).

Such a personification of nature, although common in European poetry, is rare in the Japanese poetic tradition. In Sagawa's texts the focus is on the poet's body frozen in terror at the intimidating power of nature, in particular, death. Sagawa wrote many poems related to the theme of death, as she felt it draw near: she died of stomach cancer at the age of twenty-four.

The last poem I am quoting is from a piece entitled "Death's Beard" ("Shi no hige").

In order to touch the outside world, like the backside of a piece of embroidery,
I become a moth and crash against the window.
If the long, curly beard of death stops entangling me, just for a day,
We will jump on the miracle.

Death shakes off my crust. (Sagawa, 1983: 32-33)

⁷ For further discussion on "the discovery of the landscape" see Karatani Kojin (1980), "Chapter One, Fukei no Hakken" ("The Discovery of the Landscape").

The most striking image here is the view from the interior, looking out on the world as something resembling “the backside of a piece of embroidery”. Following this is an image of a moth trying to fly out only to collide with the window. Here again we see the window positioned between the poet and the outside world. Whereas in “Green Flames” external forces were invading through the window, threatening to take life away from the poet, in this poem the central image is that of life being trapped inside. The “interior” vision of this poem is highlighted by the unique image of “the backside of a piece of embroidery”. To be sure, this vision is particularly feminine, considering that embroidery was a task associated with women at the time. The originality of the poem, however, is in that it focuses on the “backside”, the hidden part of the fabric, where one would only see strands and bundles of coloured thread and knots instead of the beautifully woven patterns on the surface.

This image somehow resembles a cocoon. The body of the poet is caught inside a closed space. It reaches out in a vain attempt to “touch” the outside world; yet how can it if the space it is caught in is wrapped up by innumerable strands of thread? It is no coincidence, then, that the image of embroidery is followed by that of a “moth” trying to fly away. Moreover, a cocoon can be understood as a space in which the pupa goes through a quasi-death experience. The failed attempt of the moth to break through the window suggests that the pupa will not break the embroidered walls of the cocoon and fly off: only death awaits. Hence the image of “the long, curly beard of death”.

The last line of this poem is a strange one. It is not “I” that is shaking off the crust of death, as in common diction. Rather, “I” is “the crust”, which “death” is shaking off. “My crust”, in this context should be read as “the crust, which is me”. Thus “I” is shaken off by “death”, and the poem ends with the overwhelming image of death dominating the entire space.

Whereas for Yosano the body was a point of reference for asserting her identity and affirming her feminine self, for Sagawa the recognition of the body was coupled with an awareness of its imminent annihilation. Yet, although these two perspectives are totally different, they both place the body as the crux of self-recognition, the central point from which the poet relates to the world. In the case of Yosano, the body extends outwards: the physical self, outlined by the contours of the body is the vessel of her emotion and desire, which she extends to her lover to gaze at and touch. The poet herself perceives the body from the outside, appreciates its form and texture, and feels its yearning to reach out to the object it desires. Her emotions flow out from and through the body. In contrast, Sagawa’s perception of the body is internalized. In Sagawa’s poems the body is not presented as a form, but we know that it is there, sensing the approaching death and struggling to hold on to itself, surrounded by forces too powerful for her to cope with. The sense of captivity and separation is there, too. Sagawa frequently uses the image of a window or a wall that separates her body from the exterior world. Sometimes she is frightened by the invasion from the outside; at other times she reaches out to grab what is out there, or

charges vainly at the wall to break it down. It is the internal landscape of the body that we see in many of Sagawa's poems. And it is the body in a cocoon, desiring, trembling, and dying.

Lastly, I will look at some works by Ito Hiromi, a poet crucial to any discussion of "the body" in post-1945 Japanese poetry. Ito played a truly groundbreaking role in freeing the womanly body from all kinds of social, cultural, psychological, literary and stylistic restrictions. With the gradual penetration of feminist thinking and the feminist approach to writing in the 1970s, Japan saw the emergence of a new breed of women poets who were radically outspoken and candid in their approach to sexuality. There had been women poets who prepared the grounds for them, like Tomioka Taeko, born exactly twenty years before Ito Hiromi, who dealt with the theme of "being a woman" in a rebellious, and often subversive, manner, as in the following:

Dad and Mum
 And midwife, too
 Any tipster or tout or whoever
 Bet it was going to be a boy
 So I desperately broke the placenta
 As a girl

Then
 Everybody was disappointed
 So I decided I would become a boy
 Then
 Everybody praised me
 So I became a girl
 Then
 Everybody was mean to me
 So I became a boy

Coming of age
 Because my lover was a boy
 I reluctantly became a girl. (Tomioka, 1968: 32)

This is the opening of a seventy-four line poem entitled "Story of my life" ("Minoue-banashi"), included in a poetry collection published in 1958. We can see Tomioka's intent to break away from the socially and culturally fixed expectations of what it means to be a girl or a woman by upholding her freedom to select her own identity and betray the expectations of family, lover and society. This is a verbal attack to neutralize, relativize, and finally overturn what until then had seemed to be the dominant view upholding the absolute distinction between genders.

Similarly, Shiraishi Kazuko, a poet of the same generation as Tomioka, shocked the reading public with her “penis poem”, entitled “«Penis», for Sumiko’s birthday” (“Penisu, Sumiko no tanjobi no tameni”), which starts with the following lines:

God is there even if he isn’t there
And he is humourous, so
He looks like a kind of man

This time
With a giant penis, he came
Above
The horizon of my dreams
For a picnic
I feel bad
Not having given anything for Sumiko’s birthday
At least I want to send
To the thin, little, cute voice of Sumiko’s
On the other end of the phone line
The seeds of the penis God brought along
Forgive me, Sumiko
The penis grows and grows day by day
Now standing in the middle of the cosmos fields
And won’t move, like a bus that’s broken down. (Shiraishi, 1969: 59)

Following this, we see an image of “numerous penises growing, and walking towards me”, which are “actually one, and all by himself, with no face and no words”. “I” then places it over “Sumiko’s entire existence”, whereby Sumiko becomes invisible, and turns into “the will of the penis itself”.

Is this female power overtaking the male spirit? Or is it the transformation of female into male, consequently annihilating the female self? The recognition of male power in the form of the “standing” and “growing” phallus is unmistakable: in contrast we see the female “Sumiko” with her “thin, little, cute voice”. Yet here is a woman playing with the phallic image, who amuses herself with the idea of giving the gigantic penis as a present for her friend. It is the woman gazing at the phallus, comically standing in the middle of the field of flowers, and not vice versa. This poem was included in Shiraishi’s 1965 collection. Time was ripe for the new generation of poets to emerge, who would be bolder, even more uninhibited, and willing to speak of their bodies, their sexuality and their desires.

Ito Hiromi made a sensational debut at the end of the 1970s and became the dauntless, audacious figure of the new women’s poetry in the 80s. In plain, colloquial, and candid language, Ito outplayed the role of being a woman, writing of love and sex, abortion and pregnancy, motherhood and

death. She presents her physiological self stripped of all myth. She could compare the experience of childbirth to defecating; bearing down is like straining at the toilet, the baby inside is like a big “tard”, and she wants to “fart” to let the baby out. She would speak of masturbation and of “coition”. The penis is no longer a symbol of manly power but simply an object, as is the vagina. Sexual intercourse is portrayed in graphic language. In one of her early works, she asks, “Am I a toilet bowl?”:

I gave him a tight hug and he squeezed me back
Bony fingers
When male fingers grab my breasts
I feel blurred
And want to strangle him
[...]
Am I a toilet?
From when
I didn't want to know but
I had doubts and my mouth
Asked to make it straight
I had to ask. (Ito, 1988: 9-11)

Then she later writes:

Joyous
Joyous is coition
Humans breeding, breeding
Humans dying, dying
Breeding, breeding
Dying dying
Breeding or dying
Joyous is coition
Coition is amusing. (Ito, 1988: 91-92)

Below is a part of another piece, “Good breasts, bad breasts” (“Yoi oppai warui oppai”), written around the same period as the one above.

Hot wind blowing
Plants thickly growing
Insects propagating
High temperature and high humidity
[...]
All parts of me bound up
Transform

Into breasts
Insects propagating
Breasts swollen in the morning and you can't drink all the milk
Because you keep sucking them
By night they're shriveled and dried-up
[...]
From good breasts to bad breasts
Against bad breasts
Babies are plotting revenge

It's raining so I'm eating up your breasts
The clouds are drifting so I'm eating up your breasts
The wind's whipping up so I'm eating up your breasts. (Ito, 1988: 80-81)

The image of the tropics is associated with the fertile mother. There is no question that Ito is fundamentally "healthy". At the same time, this healthy, outgoing, wholesome affirmation of life is almost always coupled with a sense of pain and harshness, and can become forceful and destructive. Turning conventions into jokes and breaking centuries-old taboos in casual and sometimes childish language, Ito challenges every conceivable socially and culturally determined notion of what a woman should be, what she should do and say and how she should feel, particularly while undergoing experiences regarded as belonging to the realm of the female sex.

Though Ito's poetry is largely based on her own experiences as a woman, wife, lover and mother, her poems are not meant to be read against the biographical details of her life. Instead, she presents woman's body going through its own stages of life: she named two of her poetry collections *Territory 2* (*Teritori-ron 2*, 1985) and *Territory 1* (*Teritori-ron 1*, 1987), the concept of territory being quite significant. The body itself is a territory to be explored by the poet. It has its borders but can expand and shrink, can be tramped on and overrun, but it can also bounce back and re-grow. It is a territory that can connect to the entire world, socially, culturally and physically, but it can also be completely left alone, sink into itself and merge with the unknown. It can be richly organic but also desolately barren. Ito also writes of territory in a broader spatial sense; it can create inter-body spaces, and link or separate bodies. She writes about the smell of armpits and other bodily odors that attract other bodies or drive them away, and compares this with dogs and cats that control their territory by sprinkling their urine.

Ito has consistently written as "a woman"; yet by exploiting her womanliness and her womanly body, paradoxically, her works can assume a radical invalidation of gender distinctions, destroying the barriers that have excluded women from mainstream, male-dominated modern Japanese poetry. Her approach is distinctly different from that of the women poets of the 50s and 60s, who challenged the mainstream either by neutralizing their sexuality or by proposing a woman's version of the socio-cultural landscape. As Arai

Toyomi notes, until the 80s a female poet could not help but struggle with her identity as a woman, a strategy which actually reinforced the idea of “difference” (Arai, 2007: 110). As noted earlier, this consequently reinforced the division of the sexes in modern Japanese poetry, and ironically worked to keep them in the “women’s literature” category. Once the 80s were underway, however, a paradigm shift took place, and Ito was in the centre of it, a poet who went beyond “being a woman” by talking about and playing with her body, presenting it to her reading public in all of its primeval power, and beauty.

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