

SEARCHING FOR FEMALE IDENTITY IN OKAMOTO KANOKO'S *BOSHIJOJOYŌ*

Duantem Krisdathanont¹

Abstract

According to feminist critics, the “Images of Women” in literature created by most female writers lack “authenticity” and “real experience.” Susan Koppelman Cornillon, for example, states in “Images of Women in Fiction” (1972) that both male and female authors come in for harsh criticism for their creation of unreal female characters, and female writers are accused of being worse in this respect since they are betraying their own sex (Moi 2002: 42). However, Okamoto Kanoko² was a feminist writer who shared her real experiences and provided a role model for a positive female identity in the form of main characters who are independent of men. In this study, I analyze *Boshijyojyō* 『母子叙情』 (‘The Relationship between Mother and Son’) by Okamoto Kanoko (1937) to find out how her portrayal of the main character incorporates her own experiences describing the melancholy of a mother longing for her son. I also examine the question of whether “authenticity” and a “positive sense of female identity” truly exist in her work or not.

¹ Assistant Professor, Dr. Department of Eastern Languages, Japanese Section, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

² Japanese names, as well as the authors’ names usually consist of a family name, followed by a given name. Therefore, all of the Japanese names in this article are ordered by putting the family name first and followed by the given name.

Okamoto Kanoko and *Boshijyojyō*

Okamoto Kanoko, the famous female novelist, poet, and scholar of Buddhism, was born in Tokyo in 1889. Her maiden name was Onuki Kanoko, and her husband was Okamoto Ippei, the cartoonist. Her son, Okamoto Taro, is a famous avant-garde painter. From early childhood, Okamoto Kanoko was fond of classical literature, especially *Genji monogatari* 『源氏物語』 and *Kokin-wakashu* 『古今和歌集』. She was very much influenced by her older brother, who studied at the First High School and Tokyo University. After publishing five Tanka anthologies, Okamoto decided to try her hand at writing novels. To complete her literary studies, she took her whole family to Europe. They travelled to Paris, London, Berlin and, finally, America, returning to Japan in 1932. On arriving home, Okamoto was overwhelmed by her work as a researcher of Buddhism; nevertheless, she found time to write *Tsuru wa yamiki* 『鶴は病みき』 (‘The Dying Crane,’ 1936)—a novel about the last days of the writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke—for the magazine *Bungakukai* 『文学界』, and this brought her recognition in the literary world. After this, she published many more works, such as *Boshijyojyō*, *Kingyo ryoran* 『金魚撩乱』 (‘The Riot of Goldfish’ 1937), and *Rogishō* 『老妓抄』 (‘The Aging Geisha’ 1938), before dying of a brain disorder in 1939 at the age of 49.

As mentioned earlier, the publication of *Boshijyojyō* in March 1937 was a turning point in Okamoto’s career. The novel, which describes a woman’s intense yearning for her son who lives abroad, created a sensation with its exploration of the erotic side of maternal affection. The main character, Kanojyo, was modeled on

herself and the experiences Okamoto relates in the novel were likewise modeled on her own. Okamoto expresses her yearning for her son, Okamoto Taro who was left in Paris after Kanoko and Ippei returned to Japan. Kanojyo is described sitting at a table in the Mon Ami Café in Ginza, recalling the memory of sitting at a table in the Café Cupol in Paris with her son. As Okamoto's family's trip to Europe had become the talk of the town at that time, the novel, which was influenced by her real experiences, quickly became famous, as well.

Okamoto's use of her personal experience of melancholic feelings for her son made this story seem "authentic" to her readers, although Okamoto Taro's recollections of life with his parents reveal a considerable gap between Okamoto's actual performance as a mother and her view of herself as an incarnation of the Great Mother archetype, which will be discussed later. According to Maryellen T. Mori (1995: 84), as Okamoto Taro's account of his childhood makes clear, Okamoto Kanoko's authorial viewpoint differed sharply from that of the typical *shishosetsuka*³ of her time. According to *Haha no tegami* 'Letters from a mother' (1993b: 67). Okamoto Taro's early memories range from being left alone for days at a time when he was ill to being tied to furniture by his mother so that she could write and study undisturbed. This desperate behaviour of Okamoto Kanoko

as a mother that Okamoto Taro presents in his memoirs contrasts markedly with the images of mothers appearing in many of her works, such as the short story "Sushi." However, Okamoto seems to have used her real experiences in developing the characters and story with relatively few creative inventions. Although Okamoto indeed saw herself as a loving, caring mother and portrayed Kanojyo as devoted, this was not because Okamoto Kanoko was trying to distort the facts. Rather, it was due to her "narcissistic" way of thinking, to use the word most often employed by Japanese critics to describe both Okamoto herself and her female characters. Okamoto's heroines typically demonstrate many tendencies that are consistent with Okamoto's sense of her own specialness. Hence, it would appear that she saw and thought of herself in a way that was somehow different from reality. Her novel as a *shishousetsu* is, in consequence, authentic in its own special narcissistic way.

***Boshijyojyō* and Kanojyo's identity as a woman**

The main characters in *Boshijyojyō* are Kanojyo, who was modeled on Okamoto herself; Issaku, Kanojyo's husband, who was modeled on Okamoto's husband, Okamoto Ippei; and Ichiro, Kanojyo's son, who was modeled on Okamoto's own son, Okamoto Taro. Another important character is Kasuga Kikuo, a young man whom Kanojyo identifies with her beloved son. This character was similarly created from Okamoto's real-life experience of being attracted to a young man who resembled her son. In his memoirs of his parents, Okamoto Taro mentions a letter from his mother in which she wrote the following:

³ Shishosetsu 「私小説」 or "I-novel" is a literary genre in Japanese literature used to describe a type of novel which based on the author's own life. The events in the story are invented from the events in the author's life. Shishosetsu was founded based on the Japanese reception of Naturalism in Meiji period. Ka 「家」 means an author.

太郎にじかに逢い度くってもう
手紙なんか書くのうんざりだ。
じかに逢い度いんだよ。太郎を
想うところがのりうつるんだろ
うか、お前に似た青年や、年頃
の男の人にこの頃親愛を感じて
仕方がない。(Okamoto 1993b:
145)

I want to meet Taro in person and
I'm sick of writing letters to him. I
really want to meet him in person.
My mind is possessed by thoughts
of him. I cannot help myself feeling
affection for men of your age and
men who look like you.⁴

As many critics have said, *Boshijyojyō* is actually not all that interesting as a story in itself; the really interesting part is Okamoto's description of a mother's melancholic feelings for her son and the erotic tone of her maternal love.

The story starts with the scene of Kanojyo walking out into the garden in front of her home and waiting for her husband, Issaku, to join her. She feels flutters of nostalgia as she remembers the evening skies of Europe, where her beloved son has been left behind. Issaku notices how depressed she is and he and Kanojyo take a bus out to Mon Ami Café in Ginza because Issaku thinks that the academic atmosphere of the coffee shop will be enough to revive his wife's spirits. Okamoto describes Kanojyo's feelings toward her son as follows:

しばらく、バスは、官庁街の広
い通りを揺れて行く。夜更けの
ような濃い闇の色は、硝子窓を
鏡にして、かの女の顔を向側に

映し出す。派手な童女型と寂し
い母の顔の交った顔である。む
す子が青年期に達した二三年
来、一にも二にもむす子を通し
て世の中を眺めて来た母の顔で
ある。かの女は、向側の窓硝子
に映った自分の姿を見るのが嫌
になって、寒そうに外套の襟を
掻き合せ、くると首を振り向
けた。(Okamoto 1993: 70–71)

For a while, the bus jolted along the wide street of government offices. A colour of thick darkness, like the late hour of the night, sent a reflection of her face on to the other side. At times, she saw the face of a flashy young girl; at others, the face of a lonely mother who had been viewing the world through her son for the past two or three years since her son had reached adulthood. She was tired of staring at her own reflection in the window opposite, so she drew her coat collar up against the cold and turned around.

Kanojyo sees herself alternately as a flashy young girl and a lonely mother who has been living vicariously through her son since he reached adulthood. Therefore, leaving her son behind is like abandoning a part of her spirit as well.

While, as mentioned earlier, more than half of the story describes Kanojyo's melancholy feelings for her son, in the middle of the story, Kanojyo meets a beautiful young man, Kikuo, who looks very much like her son. In this scene, Kanojyo chases after Kikuo, symbolizing her constant wondering about her son in Paris. However, after chasing Kikuo, who looks just like her son when seen from the back, she discovers that he's actually not her son

⁴ All the English translations are my own.

as she had imagined, so she runs away from him. Kikuo is curious and becomes interested in Kanojyo, a beautiful and famous writer with a very childlike face. He keeps sending letters to her until, at Issaku's suggestion, she decides to meet him. Okamoto describes Kanojyo's feelings as follows:

急にかの女の眼底に、銀座の夜に見たむす子であり、美しい若ものである小ナポレオンの姿が、靨黴朦朧と魅力を帯びて泛び出して来た。かの女はその時、かの女の母性の陰からかの女の女性の顔が覗き出たようではとした。だが、さっさと面会を約束する手紙を青年に書きながら、そんな気持ちにこだわるのも何故かかの女は面倒だった。(Okamoto 1993:124)

Suddenly she recalls the figure of the Napoleon who, that night on the Ginza, was her son and at the same time a beautiful young man; his charm enveloped her with half consciousness. It was a surprising discovery when her female face emerged from the shadow of her motherhood. Yet why, as she was writing a letter to the boy arranging to meet him, was the persistence of that feeling troublesome to her?

"It was a surprising discovery when her female face emerged from the shadow of her motherhood" clearly shows that Kanojyo, who at first was attracted to this young man because of her motherly feelings, is becoming attracted to him now because of her womanly feelings. In this scene, Kanojyo identifies herself as a woman after discovering her erotic feelings towards the young man who looks

like her son. After Kanojyo and Kikuo have met, the relationship between these two characters has become stronger. Okamoto Kanoko describes Kanojyo's feelings for Kikuo as follows:

かの女はあの母を見たあとにこの規矩男を見、切ない自分の「母子情」を仲介にして自分に近づく運命を持ち、そして自分の心をこれほど捉え、これ程自分に馴れ甘える青年を、自分は今もう何処までも引き寄せて愛撫し続けてやり度い心が、胸の底からぐっとこみ上げて来るのを感じた。(Okamoto 1993: 154)

When she saw Yasuo now after seeing his mother, she felt great surges of emotion for Kikuo, whom fate had brought close to her through her love for her son, welling up from the depths of her heart. The young man, who had captured her heart, became used to her and demanded her attention this much—the young man whom her heart wanted to draw close and to caress continuously.

Kanojyo's affection for Kikuo reflects the writer's idea of creating a female protagonist who finds a way of creating an identity as the great mother of a son—which I will discuss later—and also as a woman who is liberated from social expectations.

According to Ragsdale (1991:41–42), by the late 1890s, the official view was that education ought to broaden a woman's outlook and that, in general, women should be more a part of the world and not be strictly confined to the home. However, the behaviour of Western women did not

provide an alternative ideal, because women in the West were deemed to be too involved in external social affairs. Therefore, Japanese society developed a position midway between these two ideals: *ryousei kenbo shugi* 'the good wife-wise mother ideology.' According to this ideology, a woman's main duty is to "tenderly and properly" serve her husband, resolutely and wisely protect her household, to attend to myriad domestic duties, and of course, be faithful to her husband. However, Mori (1995:84) argues that it seems that Okamoto shared the anxiety of many creative women that a comfortable, monogamous sexual relationship would undermine her creativity and literary ambitions just as surely as, if more subtly than, the demands of domestic chores and child-rearing. Therefore, presenting a female protagonist with a strong desire for a young man allowed her to liberate herself from her many domestic duties and was one way in which Okamoto created a positive female identity in her literary works—in this case, Kanojyo, who defines herself as a woman independent of both men and social expectations.

***Boshijyojyō* and Kanojyo's identity as a mother**

The intense bond between mother and child is celebrated in many of Okamoto's works. There are always maternal nuances in her female characters' romantic feelings and, conversely, erotic under tones in her treatment of maternal love. However, whereas the political feminist writers of that generation focused on the conflict between motherhood and individual desire, Eubanks (2001: 288) argues that Okamoto depicted the conflicting desires that exist within the maternal role itself. For example, in her short story "Kishimo,"

Okamoto uses the mythical Buddhist figure of Kishimo as the dominant image, revising the traditional tale in certain ways so as to depict Kishimo as an ambivalent mother. At the end of the story, even after a painful intervention by the Buddha himself, Kishimo still wants to devour children; she still needs the flesh-flavoured pomegranate to satiate her. In *Boshijyojyō*, Kanojyo shares the same conflict of desires as Kishimo: she feels a strong sexual desire for a young man who resembles her son. The main character's motherly feelings draw her close to Kikuo and their relationship develops as a direct result of Kanojyo's love for her son. However, she has to suppress that feeling because she feels guilty that she has betrayed her own beloved son, Ichiro. Okamoto depicts the main character's feeling as follows:

「…その済まなさも私の何処かに漠然と潜んでいたには違いないのよ。でもそれは単なる道徳上の済まなさになるんだから、そんなに強いもんじゃないでしょう。こっちはしんからびりびりッ和本能の皮膚にさわって来たのよ、もっともこの問題はむす子を仲介にして始まったんですから、むす子への済まなさが中心になったのがあたり前でしょうけど」(Okamoto 1993: 162)

"... My feeling of guilt there was definitely vaguely hidden somewhere but it was only a simple moral guilt which is not so strong. However, since this problem started through my son, the betrayal touches upon the quivering skin of my instincts. So, it's natural that my guilt regarding my son has become most central to me."

Kanojyo restrains herself from her strong desire for Kikuo not only because she's afraid to betray her husband and Kikuo's fiancée, which would be only a simple moral betrayal, but also because she feels that she would be betraying Ichiro, which "touches upon the very quivering skin" of her most fundamental instincts. Her feelings towards her son here are mixture of the true love of a mother for her own son with the strong feelings of a woman for her soulmate. As Okamoto indicates at the beginning of the story, Kanojyo and Ichiro, her son, are more like a "couple in adversity" than "a mother and son." When the whole family finally arrives in Europe, her son comments:

「おかあさん、とうとう巴里へ来ましたね」(Okamoto 1993: 71)

"Mother, we made it to Paris after all."

Ichiro's statement has a story behind it. When Issaku was still young he was fond of drinking and was constantly away from home. He left Kanojyo and their little son very little money, sometimes not even enough for food. Kanojyo tried to comfort her son by speaking words of comfort.

「あーあ、今に二人で巴里に行きましょうね、シャンゼリゼーで馬車に乗りましょうねえ」(Okamoto, 1993: 72)

"Ah, let's go to Paris right now, just the two of us. Let's take a ride on a horse drawn carriage at Champs Élysées."

The Paris that Kanojyo refers to here is not literally the true city of Paris but, rather,

metaphorically a Paradise itself. The happiness and sadness that this mother and son share create a tight bond that transcends the relationship she has with her own husband. For Kanojyo, her son is more of a soulmate than simply her son. Kanojyo writes about her son as follows:

母は女で、むす子は男、むす子は男、むす子は男、男、男、男——男だ男だと書いていると、其処に頼母しい男性という一領土が、むす子であるが為に無条件に自分という女性の前に提供された。凡そ女性の前に置かれる他の男性的領土——夫、恋人、友人、それらのどれ一つが母に与えられたむす子程の無条件で厳粛清澄な領土であり得ようか。かの女はそれを何に向けて感謝すべきか。(Okamoto, 1993: 172)

Mother is a female and her son is a male, son is a male, son is a male, male, male, male—a man, a man . . . when I write this, the territory of a man relying on his mother is offered up to a woman like myself unconditionally. Generally, other male territories are presented to a female—such as husband, lover, or friend. Can any of them be as deeply clear and unconditional a territory as that which a son receives from his mother? And what should she be grateful to for that?

Clearly, Kanojyo's decision to suppress her strong desire towards Kikuo is to be interpreted as follows: Firstly, Kanojyo as the mother of a son is trying to solve the quandary of her feelings and decides not to get involved with another mother's son,

just as Kishimo tried to stop devouring other people's children in order to protect her own. Secondly, Kanojyo feels that increasing her involvement with Kikuo will constitute a betrayal of her son, whom she considers her soul mate. For Kanojyo, whose character was based on the writer herself, her son is a man whom she created, raised, and educated; hence, he will never betray her. Unlike other men, who are the "others" and could betray or disappoint her (even her own husband), her son represents her own territory and is, thus, truly reliable.

Although one might think that Okamoto's idea of creating a protagonist who harbours erotic feelings for her son breaks the incest taboo, a forbidden theme, in actuality she created in Kanojyo a protagonist who exhibits a positive sense of female identity. Kanojyo reflects Okamoto's view of herself as an incarnation of the Great Mother archetype. Many articles have been written about the influence of Mahayana Buddhism on Kanoko's writings; however, her interpretation of Buddhism, like her feminism, is highly individual. According to Mori (1995: 87), one senses that at its core lies neither a sophisticated grasp of doctrine nor genuine religious piety but a worship of beauty and vitality. For Okamoto, the principle creating the energy of life is the liberation of desire and emotional feelings. Kawabata Yasunari call her view of life 「大母性」 'Great Motherhood' This Great Motherhood, however, far from being original to her, is actually a concept from the traditional thought of Japanese feminism ⁵

⁵ Hiratsuka Raicho (1886–1971) announced the publication of *Seito*, Japan's first literary journal created by women for women. Raicho was calling out to Japanese women to reclaim

(Yamashita1991: 222). Shortly after Kanoko graduated from high school in 1907, she met the Meiji poet and famous feminist, Hiratsuka Raicho, at a series of lectures on European literature to which she had been invited by Yosano Akiko. When Raicho founded the Seito Group in 1911 to provide a forum for women's literary self-expression, Okamoto immediately joined the group and began publishing poems and essays in the journal. She was moved by Raicho's emotional speech to women.

「元始、女性は太陽であった。
真正の人であった。（中略）私
どもは隠されてしまった我が太
陽を今や取り戻さねばならぬ。
隠れたる我が太陽を、潜める天
才を発現せよ」(Yamashita 1991:
221)

In the beginning, woman was the sun, an authentic person. Today, woman is the moon, living through others, reflecting the brilliance of others, just like the pale moon. We have to regain the sun in ourselves that has disappeared.⁶

To her, the "sun" refers to the halo around the heads of the Buddha or Buddhist saints, which means 禪 'zen,' the source of lives as Yamashita Etsuko (1991: 222)

their sense of self-worth, reaffirm their creativity, and regain their human potential by invoking the image of a lost sun which refers to traditional beliefs of Japanese. In Japanese mythology, God, the Sun, "Amateratsu," is actually a goddess. She is the grandmother of Jimmu Tenno, first ruler of Japan, from whom the emperors claim to be descended. (Nihonkindai 1984: 1241)

⁶ The translation was taken from "Starting word of Seito"(Raicho 1911: 37–52)

described. In order to unveil their "hidden sun" and mine their "feminine genius," Okamoto portrays many heroines who sacrifice themselves to the arts and are free of social burdens. In her real life, Okamoto similarly threw herself into a worship of the arts and religion, which is Buddhism. Also, she thought that bringing back "the hidden sun" meant bringing back the lives and the creativity of women.

In *Boshijyojyō*, Okamoto also designed her protagonist Kanojyo as a representative of the Great Mother. Her strong desire and emotional feelings are 'zen' or the source of lives, and the creativity she shows in the story are Okamoto's way of revealing that "hidden sun." Kanojyo's suppression of her sexual desire for Kikuo confirms the image of the Great Mother who purifies the lives and souls of humans, while being at the same time a way for Okamoto Kanoko to purify herself.

To summarise, Okamoto Kanoko drew on her own experiences to depict the melancholy feelings of a mother for her son in the novel *Boshijyojyō*. She portrays the protagonist Kanojyo as a woman with a strong positive female identity as a Great Mother and independent woman. Although some parts of the story may contain Okamoto Kanoko's unique style of narcissistic *Shishyousetsu*, the story maintains its authenticity. This authenticity is doubtless not only the authenticity of the storyline 「内容」 but also the authenticity of a woman who can reveal herself in her hidden erotic desires and unfold her feminine genius by worshipping art and Buddhism: an authenticity which could only be created by Okamoto Kanoko.

References

- Eubanks, Charlotte. 2001. "Re-writing the Myth of Motherhood" in *Critical Asian Studies* 33.2. New York: Routledge.
- Moi, Toril. 2002. *Sexual Textual Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Mori, Maryellen T. 1995. "The Splendor of Self-Exaltation: The Life and Fiction of Okamoto Kanoko in *Monumenta Nipponica* 50.1. Tokyo: Komiyama Printing Co.
- Nihonkindai, Bungakukan, 1984. *Dictionary of Modern Japanese Literature* (日本近代文学大辞典), edited by Odagiri, Susumu. Tokyo: Kodansha. (In Japanese)
- Okamoto, Kanoko. 1993a. *Okamoto Kanoko's complete works* (岡本かの子全集). Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko. (In Japanese)
- Okamoto, Taro. 1993b. *Letters from a mother* (母の手紙) Tokyo: Chikumashuhoushya. (In Japanese)
- Raicho, Hiratsuka (ed.) 1911, "Starting word of Seitō" Seitō, 1(1). Reprinted in: Kitamura Masamitsu, ed., 1980, Seitō 1, Tokyo: Ryukoku Bookstore, pp. 37–52.
- Yamashita, Etsuko. 1991. *Literary theory in Mother complex* (マザコン文学論) Tokyo: Shinyoushya. (In Japanese)