

Mind the Gender Gap: Kawakami Mieko, Murata Sayaka, Feminism and Literature in Japan

David McNeill

Compelling women's fiction in Japan hardly began with its two brightest contemporary stars, Kawakami Mieko and Murata Sayaka. Tawada Yoko won the Akutagawa Prize back in 1993 and her work is widely read outside Japan ([Tawada has long lived in Germany and writes in German and Japanese](#)). Ogawa Yoko won in 1990 for her novel *Pregnancy Diary* ([Ninshin karendaa](#), 妊娠 カレンダー). In 2004 the Akutagawa went to two young women, Wataya Risa (19) and Kanehara Hitomi (20). There have been [English translations](#) of fiction by Japanese women for decades.

Nevertheless, Kawakami and Murata are part of a gender shift in literature over the last few decades. Women make up half of the last 34 winners of the Akutagawa, and nearly half of the winners of the Naoki Prize (Japan's two most sought after prizes for literature). Many of the editors and prize judges are women too, reflecting broader workplace changes. Women make up more than half of all employees in Japan, though they have barely dented senior management. In journalism, the percentage of women reporters has doubled to 21.5% since 2001 when the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association began counting. But women occupy just [8.5% of managerial posts](#) in newspapers and wire services.

What makes Murata and Kawakami unusual, says Tamura Aya, culture critic with Kyodo News Agency, is their fearless treatment of the female body. "It is unusual for women to write about reproduction, periods, birth and sex in such explicit detail," she says. "That was

shocking for some." Their work resonates, particularly with women, because it comes amid a wrenching social transition. Japanese women have been pulled into the workforce in record numbers, amid a profound labor shortage and a fall in the earning power of men (particularly young men) since the 1990s. Yet, women are often still expected to reproduce and keep households running, in much the same way as their mothers and grandmothers. "It's a difficult society to have children in, but the desire and the push to have them comes in your thirties, that's when the pressure becomes more intense," says Tamura. That helps explain the popularity of writers who identify and write empathetically about those stresses.

Given the rising crop of female authors (including the acclaimed Oyamada Hiroko, and Natsuo Kirino, the queen of noir), it's possible, says Murata that a woman - and not the perennially tipped Murakami Haruki - may win the Nobel Prize for Literature (she tips Tawada and Ogawa). Indeed, one of the reasons why Murakami has never bagged the prize may be doubts about his representations of women.

The issue is "impossible to ignore," notes Kawakami, who otherwise praises his work as "overwhelmingly fantastic." "[Because we live in these bodies, we are desired, ascribed value and consumed. We are told who and what to be, and we internalize these things, often without realizing it,](#)" she wrote last year. "The world of stories ought to be a place where anything is possible, but more often than not we run into the same old pressures, reinforcing their effect." Fictional women "are almost always assigned supporting roles, sexualized and self-sacrificing. It doesn't matter how

young or old the woman is, it would seem she has no choice but to walk one of two paths: the mother or the whore.”



Kawakami Mieko in a 2014 lecture

Kawakami Mieko began writing partly to explore the “randomness and strangeness” of life, so it is oddly fitting that the global release of her novel, originally titled *Chichi to Ran* and revised as *Natsu no His* (*Breasts and Eggs* in the English translation by David Boyd and Sam Bett) has been upended by a virus. After over a decade building up a loyal following in Japan, Kawakami was all set to open her literary stall

in person at festivals in America and Europe this year when Covid-19 hit. Still, being stuck at home with her young son has provided plenty of grist for her feminist mill.

“It’s just assumed that mothers will accept the burden,” she says over tea at a café near her home in west Tokyo. “We’ll look after the children, teach them, prepare the *bento* and do all that extra work – even though many of us have jobs too.” The rot starts from the top, she explains, recalling a publicity photo of the government’s first all-male coronavirus task force. “I was sort of dumfounded,” she laughs. “Did the virus wipe out all the women? How could they know anything about what it is like to be a mother? They don’t even understand there’s a problem.”

Kawakami made her name articulating womanhood in Japan better than any other author. *Breasts and Eggs*, originally written as a blog in the punchy dialect of her native Osaka, won the Akutagawa Prize in 2008 and yanks working-class women off the literary sidelines: at its center is Makiko, an ageing bar hostess and single mother to Midoriko, her reproachful adolescent daughter, who will only communicate with her in writing. As younger women begin displacing Makiko in a workplace hierarchy policed by male desire, she begins to obsess over her nipples and sagging boobs. Maybe breast implants would give her the “kind of body that you see in girly magazines.”

In the now expanded novel, Makiko’s sister, Natsuko, who narrates, later struggles with her own dilemma: Should she, too, have a child and if so, how? A series of more self-assured characters are introduced as literary avatars in the debate on motherhood: an editor who has gladly sacrificed children for her career; a friend mired in an unhappy marriage and “Yuriko Zen,” the product of a sperm donor. None of Natsuko’s choices seem especially

attractive, but at least Kawakami's characters have options, she points out.

"We're put down from birth and pushed into roles that we may not want," she says, explaining how women often have children for the sake of their parents or family name. "I think we have to ask what are we going to do about reproduction and the family as capitalism becomes harsher. But the government cannot ask those questions because it's full of men who have probably never even washed their own clothes," she says laughing. "Single mothers might make 250,000 yen a month – how can people like Abe (Shinzo) understand this? And the women who understand cannot become politicians. If you have children you are ruled out."

Gritty and real, the original novella detonated like a bomb in the heavily male world of Japanese fiction, smuggling weighty questions into its breezy, discursive style: What are women's choices once they become mothers? What makes them want kids anyway? Why are they chained to unreasonable expectations of their bodies? Traditionalists despised it. Ishihara Shintaro, then Tokyo's governor and himself a former novelist, called it "unpleasant and intolerable". Such criticism, from one of the grandees of conservative Japanese politics, didn't stop it from selling 250,000 copies.

Kawakami has since scooped up prizes for fiction, poetry and short stories. Foreign readers are about to discover what all the fuss is about. Over a dozen translations of *Breasts and Eggs* are in the works, including Italian and German (the English version was released in the UK on August 20th). "Heaven", her first full-length novel, will be published in English next year, followed by *The Night Belongs to Lovers* in 2022 (all by Picador). She has won a tribute from Murakami Haruki, Japan's most famous living novelist. Like a tree that can be counted on to reach for the sky or a river to

flow towards the sea, he said, Kawakami "is always ceaselessly growing and evolving," he gushed.

Kawakami was of course delighted at this hat-tip from one of the icons of Japanese fiction, but she didn't play entirely nice when the two met in 2017 for a series of interviews. A highlight was her respectful but firm probing into the sexism that she saw lurking within Murakami's fiction. "I'm talking about the large number of female characters who exist solely to fulfill a sexual function," **she said**, complimenting how "boundlessly imaginative" his work was while lamenting the persistent tendency for his women "to be sacrificed" for the sake of the male leads.

Murakami may have been a bit taken aback by this charge, replying defensively that he was not terribly interested in individualistic characters of either sex. It was hard to avoid the impression of a changing of the guard – the ground shifting under the Japanese literary landscape in a way that was going to make some men squirm. Kawakami insists she loves Murakami's work, but stoutly defended her line of interrogation. "I believed it was absolutely my job to ask about it," she later said.

Her other job, she says, is to help dispatch the orientalist clichés that have riddled fiction about Japan for decades. Murakami excepted, the published canon – she cites Mishima Yukio, Tanizaki Junichiro and Kawabata Yasunari as examples – is full of stock imagery of "geisha and Mt Fuji". "We thought all that was gone 20 years ago but it wasn't at all." Japan's literary universe is "still odd, cute and a bit mysterious", she says and its concerns minor. "But we're not like that at all. I don't want to write books that perpetuate that image. I want to write about real people." She adds; "Our culture is different but we have the same problems."

Kawakami grew up poor in Osaka and had what she describes as a "difficult" relationship with

her largely absent father. She began working in a factory to support her family when she was 14, making heaters and electric fans. “But I was always a philosophical child, asking odd questions and in a hurry to grow up.” Later, like Makiko, she worked as a hostess, a temporary route for some working-class girls out of poverty and dead-end jobs. It was a far cry from the lives of her contemporaries in publishing, many graduates from Japan’s top universities.

“Everyone around me in the publishing industry seemed rich and very well educated,” she says. “I’m still amazed by the gap.” From a very early age, she says, she was drawn to existential questions. “I was asking myself, even as a girl, ‘why are we born?’ ‘What are we supposed to do when we’re here?’ And I began to be aware of people who asked those sorts of questions, which is what led me to writers and philosophers.” Lacking the money to go to university she applied for a cheap correspondence course. “I was just so happy to be studying.”

In a different life she could have been a professional singer – she was several albums into a short career when she quit after learning how little control she had. “I was not even allowed to write my own lyrics,” she says. Decamping to the fusty literary world might not have seemed the best idea. Yet, her first blogs, delving frankly into sex, family and womanhood, were devoured by fans hungry for an unsentimental new female voice that didn’t condescend. And blogging gave her the freedom to reach her readers directly, bypassing the male-run industry.

Kawakami says when she was started out (she has just turned 44) her image of feminism was “hysterical old women on TV.” “But as you get older it just seems so obvious for women to be feminist.” Men struggle to understand women’s bodies, she accepts. “They don’t experience pregnancy or post-natal depression,

for one.”

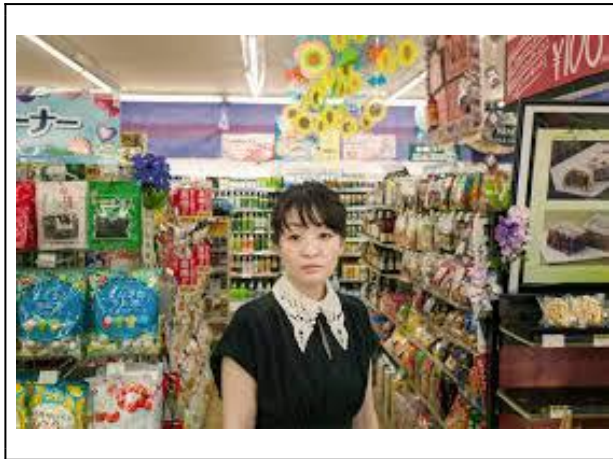
Battling patriarchy can be exhausting, and begins at home; she laughingly compares her marriage to another author to a “war”. “But the thing is, men are the victims of patriarchy too. They’re brainwashed: ‘be strong don’t cry’. But everyone gets old and understands what it is to be weak.”

If her main narrative preoccupation is the lives of women, her other is children. She calls childhood “hell” and says that families are “complicated.” Kids often become the victims of struggling, unhappy or just selfish parents in her work; their lonely confessional voice resonates throughout. In her novella *Ms Ice Sandwich*, published recently in English (translated by Manchester native Louise Heal Kawai), the young narrator’s father is dead and his self-obsessed mother is oblivious to her son’s first sexual crush on a young woman behind the counter of his local supermarket.

“I try to write from the child’s perspective – how they see the world,” says Kawakami. “Coming to the realization that you’re alive is such a shock. One day, we’re thrown into life with no warning. And at some point, every one of us will die. It’s very hard to comprehend.” She has said that the shock and fear and resignation created by this incomprehensibility are at the core of her writing. “We often talk about death being absolute, but I can’t help but think that being born is no less final.”

Motherhood only deepens the mystery at the core of our existence. “There’s beauty and violence to making another human being,” she says, sipping the last of her tea. “You’re creating a life but you know it ends in death.” She ponders this more as she watches her child growing up. “When I see him in his sleep and think of his future, if he gets sick and has to go through pain, I realize that I’m the person who actually began his life. I started this – it was solely done through my desire.”

Parenting has dented her productivity – she now writes just three hours a day – but not her passion for women’s causes. Change is coming, she believes. “Women are no longer content to shut up,” she says, citing recent protests over workplace rules **forcing them to wear high heels** and banning eyewear because it gave customers a ‘cold impression’. “Young women in their twenties are much freer than we were to speak up.” Yet, there’s a long way to go, **she laments**. “I notice that women in their forties with a certain status like me don’t get attacked but women in their twenties do. The lesson is that men won’t give up their privileges easily. But we’re at the point where all that old stuff must be questioned. If we don’t change, we won’t survive.”



Murata Sayaka

Murata Sayaka’s unconventional lifestyle attracts almost as much attention as her strikingly idiosyncratic books. Until she joined Japan’s literary hall of fame in 2016 by winning the Akutagawa Prize, Murata had toiled away in convenience stores for half her life. She wrote most of her 11 novels and two non-fiction

books on her time off. Even after becoming a bestselling author (*Konbini ningen*, or *Convenience Store Woman in English*, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori, sold 1.4 million copies and has been translated into 30 languages), she continued to slog behind the store counter until the attentions of an obsessive fan forced her to quit. “I was so used to the rhythm of working that I found it hard to hang around all day writing,” she explains.

The novel’s oddball title character, Furukura Keiko, also relishes the predictable rhythms of her workplace. Japan’s chain of 55,000 nearly identical convenience stores are considered stopgap employers for job-hoppers, students, housewives and immigrants, “all losers”, says one of the characters in her book contemptuously. But Keiko, who is 36, a virgin and uninterested in the bourgeois lives of her married peers, excels at the pliant, robotic service demanded by the industry’s manuals, suggesting (as one reviewer pointed out) that “she has no soul.” So unsettled is she by questions about her lack of a husband and children that she takes in a lazy, abusive man just to deflect them.

Reviewers were naturally intrigued by the similarities between character and author. Murata is also single and returns home to her apartment in the evenings to a laptop and her menagerie of what she calls “imaginary friends.” She, too, struggled to meet her family’s expectations, growing up in a conservative home outside Tokyo (her father was a district court judge) “lonely and terribly shy”. Keiko lives in a sort of Kafkaesque nightmare of standing out or causing offense, and mimics others to blend in, echoing Murata’s own detached childhood.

“I used to find ways to not anger my friends by trying to find the right words,” says Murata during an interview at her publisher’s office in Tokyo. “In some way I felt like I didn’t have a will until I began writing, aged 10. It was the

only place I could be selfish and express myself; where I could liberate myself emotionally.” While at university she went to work in a store near her home, finding her novelist’s voice later in prose that is as flat and unsparing as the fluorescent light of a nighttime *konbeni*. Yet, she is no Keiko, she insists. “She is strong-willed and doesn’t care what people think – that’s not me at all.” Murata says she admires Keiko’s ability to resist social pressures. “To me she is a hero.”

Expectations are high for Murata’s latest novel, *Earthlings*, translated by Takemori, tells the story of Natsuki, a girl on the cusp of puberty who believes she is a stranded alien in a society, or “factory”, where people are bred and become “components”. Her sole friend is a stuffed hedgehog. Abused by a teacher, she cannot turn to her family: her mother angrily dismisses her claims and calls her “ugly and useless”. It’s a very literal depiction of childhood alienation with the factory a metaphor for the social traps – work, marriage, motherhood – waiting in adulthood. But Natsuki finds a soulmate in her sensitive cousin Yuu, also 11, who is from a troubled home. They are caught making love during a family holiday after “marrying” and pledging to “survive” the factory – and their furious families ban them from meeting again.

Sex in Murata’s writing is seldom untroubled or pleasurable. Natsuki grows up and posts an advert for a marriage partner to “escape family surveillance”, stipulating “no physical contact beyond a handshake”. Her eventual “husband” is repelled even by the thought of female touch. *Shōmetsu sekai* (*Dwindling World*), written in 2015, posits a society where, like Woody Allen’s *Sleepers*, procreation is performed artificially – men and women win the right to reproduce by lottery. In “The Future of Sex Lives in All of Us”, translated by Takemori, a piece she wrote last year for *The New York Times*, she imagines a time when sex doesn’t exist at all, and where she might enjoy a sexual relationship with a

“fictitious being that lived within a story”. The character in one of her short stories has sex with a convenience store (the logical extension, perhaps, of Keiko’s pure love for her workplace).

Murata says her view of sexuality was shaped partly by finding her older brother’s collection of erotic books as a child. The objectification of women there shocked her. “It was all about male pleasure,” she recalls. Her brother was put under a lot of pressure to follow the family name, to be a doctor or judge, she says, while she was groomed for marriage. “It was a strict, old-fashioned house: I was told I was a girl so I should learn how to cook or something. It was just the way people thought in the countryside then. The expectations were all on my older brother. It looked really hard to be him – I’d have gone crazy.”

In her teens and twenties, she tried embracing conventional notions of womanhood just to avoid what she calls “social harassment” before abandoning it in disgust. “I pretended to act the way I thought a cute woman should act, with an excess of femininity, but it was a horrible experience. I felt like I’d lost my will,” she recalls. In a relationship with a convenience store manager 15 years her senior, she was expected to cook morning and evening and do his washing. “It felt like being physically and mentally exploited. I mean, I hate food and cooking – I keep a vase on top of my cooker,” she says laughing.

Japan has changed since Murata was in college (she is now 42). Over 3 million women have joined the workforce in the last decade, pulled in by the drum-tight labour market. More than two-thirds of women work and they are on the whole better educated than their male counterparts. A record 68% of both sexes see no need to marry. Yet, men still cling firmly to the citadels of economic and political power. Women make up just 1% of senior managers, about 4% of boardroom directors and 10% of

the politicians in Japan's lower house, ranking the nation 164th in the world. The government's new 20-strong cabinet, unveiled in September, includes just two women.

Murata's writing, poking at the smug platitudes of patriarchy in surrealistic, sometimes dystopian flights of fancy, exists on the fault-line of these social changes. In her 2014 novel *Satsujin shussan (Babies and Killers)*, bureaucrats have solved Japan's declining birthrate by giving men artificial uteri and allowing both sexes to kill one person if they successfully reproduce ten. Asexuality and celibacy are common, partly because sex is a trap: One reason why Murata is fascinated with convenience stores is because the unflattering uniform obliterates the differences in gender. "The line between men and women is very thin," she said. Love and gender in her work are portrayed as "extremely claustrophobic," notes the Japanese critic Iida Yuko. Yet, the success of *Convenience Store Woman* suggests that these themes clearly resonate beyond Japan. Birthrates are plummeting across the developed world and the struggle for control over fertility and birth (explored in the "reproductive dystopia" of, for example, Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*) is back with a vengeance in Trump's America. The malaise that descended on Murata's generation after the collapse of Japan's asset-price bubble in the early 1990s now looks pretty universal.

As the years roll by then, Murata's decision to reject the life of her friends seems prescient. "I was shocked when I was in university and people told me I had to search for a rich marriage partner and think about having children. If that's all university was for, what was the point of getting qualifications? I looked at my friends and wondered what to do. Society seemed against us." Her married friends now depend on their husbands because jobs for women rarely pay enough to raise children, she says. If the marriage falls apart, they are trapped. "I thought when I was that age,

women and men would be equal but that's not how it has worked out."

For someone who professes timidity, Murata's writing is unflinching when pitched against misogyny. The description of Natsuki's abuse is horrifyingly vivid (Mr. Igasaki, her cram school teacher, forces her to perform oral sex – using her head "as a tool" – which causes her to lose her sense of taste). There are patches of bone-dry humour: watching her sister try to soothe her baby, Keiko glances at a knife and muses: "If it were just a matter of making him quiet, it'd be easy enough." The NYT piece excavates memories of childhood masturbation. "When I was about 3, I remember exploring inside myself. When I explored certain places, the water inside me felt like it had turned into soda and fizzed, and then abruptly evaporated from all over me," she writes. These innocent discoveries are later destroyed by the reactions of others, particularly boys, who view such behaviour as "dirty and lewd".

Not surprisingly, perhaps, she says her parents don't read her writing. Equally unsurprisingly, she is hugely popular with young people, especially women (*Vogue Japan* made her its Woman of the Year in 2016). Many, she says, dread the thought of real relationships. Some write or approach her tearfully at book events, clearly unsettled by the graphic descriptions of abuse and the all-too-believable reaction of others. Later, in college, plucking up the courage to tell her few women friends, Natsuki is told to get over her experience with Mr Igasaki. "I hate to be the one to say this, but he didn't even force you to go all the way, did he?" says one.

Murata says she starts with her characters and doesn't know the ending of her novels until she writes them. That might explain why "Earthlings" turns from whimsy to horror. Its final act puts the three main characters – Natsuki, her first love Yuu, and her fake husband – together in the mountainous Nagano

countryside where their rejection of the “factory” becomes complete. Convinced they are aliens at war with the factory’s emissaries, they resort to murder and cannibalism. Munching on an “Earthling”, Natsuki finally recovers the sense of taste she lost to her teacher’s abuse. “I felt as though I was eating for the first time in twenty-three years.” Murata says she didn’t set out to write a shocking book, but her subconscious invaded the pages. “The people who know me through *Convenience Story Woman* are disappointed. But I was a cult writer before that success. People are saying the old Murata has returned.”

A shorter version of this article appeared in [The Guardian on August 18, 2020](#).

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Kawakami Mieko began writing partly to explore the “randomness and strangeness” of life, so it is oddly fitting that the global release of her novel *Natsu monogatari* (*Breasts and Eggs*), translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd] has been upended by a virus. After over a decade building up a loyal following in Japan, Kawakami was all set to open her literary stall in person at festivals in America and Europe this year when Covid-19 hit. Still, being stuck at home with her young son has provided plenty of grist for her feminist mill. *Breasts and Eggs* has been chosen as a book to read or a book of the year by many magazines including [Vogue](#). You can read more about her works on [her website](#).

Murata Sayaka’s latest novel, [Earthlings](#), translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori from the Japanese *Chikyu seijin*), tells the story of Natsuki, a girl on the cusp of puberty who believes she is a stranded alien in a society, or “factory”, where people are bred and become “components”. Her sole friend is a stuffed hedgehog. Abused by a teacher, she cannot turn to her family: her mother angrily dismisses her claims and calls her “ugly and useless”. It’s a very literal depiction of childhood alienation with the factory a metaphor for the social traps – work, marriage, motherhood – waiting in adulthood. But Natsuki finds a soulmate in her sensitive cousin Yuu, also 11, who is from a troubled home. They are caught making love during a family holiday after “marrying” and pledging to “survive” the factory – and their furious families ban them from meeting again. [Earthling](#) has recently been released in the UK

and appears on numerous "books of 2020" lists including BBC. You can read more about Murata Sayaka on [a webpage at Grove Atlantic](#).