

## **FRAMING THE SENSUAL: JAPANESE SEXUALITY IN LADIES' COMICS**

*Kinko Ito*  
*University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

### **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, Japanese ladies' comics comprise a significant part of the popular culture material enjoyed by women readers. This genre of manga, or comics, for young and mature adult females offers a wide range of categories ranging from romantic fantasy to stories grounded in perverted lust. As popular texts, the comics provide ample opportunity for hermeneutic analysis. The world of ladies' comics supplies provocative images alternative to stereotypical representations of Japanese women as geisha and fantastic girls like Sailor Moon.

Ladies' comics reflect the complexity of readers' lives, experiences, and sexuality. This article will provide a brief overview of this genre, discussing the various categories of ladies' comics as visual, informative, and imaginative texts. The second half will analyze the contents of ladies' comics in terms of the general theoretical tropes of sexuality, modernity, and their individualistic focus on carnal pleasure and the self. This article also takes up the cathartic function of ladies' comics as a vehicle for solitary entertainment and for the sexual expression of women readers. Ladies' comics are a genre that provides a frame through which the sensual desire of one audience of Japanese readers can be freely explored. I argue that rather than interpreting ladies' comics as pornography, we can understand them as erotica that many women find pleasurable and empowering.

### **What are Japanese ladies' comics?**

*Redisu komikku*, or *redikomi* for short, are understood as comics for young and adult women. The term adult here does not necessarily connote pornography as in, for example, "adult movies." *Redisu* can be translated into English literally as "ladies," but does not carry the association of women of high social status or refined femininity. Rather *redisu* simply denotes adult women.

Japanese ladies' comics emerged in the 1980s as a distinctively different genre of manga from girls' comics or *shōjo manga*. Girls' comics

arose in the 1950s, blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, and are still very popular in the twenty-first century. When readers of girls' comics became young adults, however, and wanted to keep reading comics that were appropriate for their age and social status, the time was ripe for the development of manga aimed to them. The 1980s was the time when manga in general gained more popularity and legitimacy as entertainment. This occurred at the same time that women were gaining more rights in the workplace. After Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was enacted in 1986, the media took interest in what was viewed as women's growing independence. In fact, one can say that issues such as women's social and financial status as well as their sexual behavior became hot topics in the mass media in the late 1980s. Such interests dovetailed with the rise of ladies' comics. In the early years of the genre, ladies' comics were characterized by freedom of sexual expression, and the pictures displayed within their pages were equivalent to an R-rated or X-rated movie in terms of nudity, violence, and sexually explicit scenes.

The readers of ladies' comic magazines are mainly women in their 20s and 30s who are already married or close to getting married, but the readership also includes women as young as fifteen and those in their 40s.<sup>1</sup> Publishers of these comics divide into two main groups and are distinguished by their willingness to print sexually explicit manga. Ladies' comics published by Shueisha, Futabasha, and Kodansha, all major publishers in Tokyo, have few or no sexual scenes. Sexually explicit ladies' comics are published by smaller companies. Both groups of comics, however, are sold in the same bookstores and convenience stores in Japan.

Ladies' comics cover an extraordinary range of themes. They include love, romance, partner selection, female friendships, life-styles, sexless marriage, divorce, adultery, abortion, and dieting. The themes also deal with careers, finances, bosses and male coworkers in the office, independence, and codependence. Social problems such as sexism, domestic violence, injustice, aging and senility appear very often. The stories always entail marriage or family situations and relations that women encounter in their everyday lives. The ladies' comic artists<sup>2</sup> whom I interviewed in Tokyo,

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<sup>1</sup> Erino Miya, *Rediisu komikku no joseigaku* [Gender Studies through Ladies' Comics] (Tokyo: Kosaido shuppan, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> They are Chikae Ide, Midori Kawabata, Hiroko Kazama, Akiko Miyazaki,

Yokohama, and Osaka between 2007 and 2009 told me that they all read newspapers, watch TV, and check the internet in order to get hints for their stories. Simply put, the world of ladies' comics shows us a great deal about what is going on in contemporary Japan in regard to women's lives and issues.

By the end of the 1990s many stories from ladies' comics were made into popular movies and TV series. This is a clear indication that the stories and issues covered in the ladies' comics have legitimacy and a wider appeal not only to their women readers but to a general audience.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Romantic Category**

The ladies' comic stories catering to young adults suggest that a woman's ultimate dream is to find her Prince Charming, marry him, and have an easy, rich life.<sup>4</sup> Most of the stories in this category conclude with a happy ending like the classic Cinderella story. Romance and love are the focus, and sex takes place only as an expression of love. Most protagonists of these comics do find the ultimate Prince Charming and marry, but others look for rewarding relationships outside of marriage. A typical ladies' comic heroine falls in love, encounters some difficult struggles, and sees problems emerge in the relationship with her loved one. In the end, however, the characters develop positive solutions and enjoy happy endings. The stories are constructive because the protagonists always end up with solutions to their problems, and of course, following the narrative of most melodramas, their marriages always have to be hypergamous, which means that they marry men who are higher in socioeconomic status.<sup>5</sup>

This pattern of finding a handsome, high-status man, falling in love, and consummating this love is obviously very familiar to the readers who enjoyed reading girls' comics when they were younger. However, ladies'

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Fumie Noguchi, Asako Shiomi, and Masako Watanabe.

<sup>3</sup> Kinko Ito, "The *Manga* Culture in Japan," *Japan Studies Review* 4 (2000): 1–16; and Gretchen Jones, "'Ladies' Comics': Japan's Not-So-Underground Market in Pornography for Women," *U.S. – Japan Women's Journal English Supplement* 22 (2002): 3–31.

<sup>4</sup> Erino Miya, *Rediisu komikku no joseigaku*, pp. 40 and 165.

<sup>5</sup> Kinko Ito, "The World of Japanese Ladies' Comics: From Romantic Fantasy to Lustful Perversion," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36/1 (2002): 68–85.

comics are different from girls' comics in that the former is more realistic and pragmatic in depicting the protagonist's situation. For example, details of the female character's family, job, and financial situations in everyday life are portrayed. Girl's comics, on the other hand, emphasize the elements of dreams, fantasies, romances, and adventures.<sup>6</sup>

Relationships can become very complex in ladies' comics. Many heroines may find themselves in a love triangle with their sisters, best friends, and even their mothers. The male love interest could be the boyfriend of the heroine's sister or mother, a situation that makes all those involved uncomfortable, pushing them to agonize for some time. Some young women in ladies' comics find themselves in an affair with a married man, and others have to choose between their love life and their career. The latter plot mimics the real concern many working women have about keeping the balance between work life and love life.

### **The Lustful Perversion**

Pictures of a woman and a man engaging in uninhibited sexual acts are nothing new in Japan. During the Tokugawa Period (1600–1867) *shunga* or “spring drawings” were very popular as were *ukiyo-e*, the pictures of the floating world. *Shunga* are woodblock print pictures that showed uninhibited Japanese sexuality and erotic materials with exaggerated sexual organs. In *shunga* both sexes engage in the mutual pleasure of sexual acts that are similar to those found in *The Kama Sutra* of India. The purpose of *shunga* is to please the audience. The pictures are sexually stimulating and unrestrained, a pure entertainment where sexual acts are the main and only focus. *Shunga* has neither “a religious nor philosophical basis,”<sup>7</sup> and the Japanese do not have a Christian tradition of viewing sex as fundamentally sinful.<sup>8</sup> *Shinto* (“the Way of The Gods”), the indigenous and animistic religion of Japan, includes the cult of the phallus. Physical pleasures and carnal joys are “divine

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<sup>6</sup> Ide Chikae, interview by author, Osaka, Japan (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Glenn Wilson, *The Sensual Touch: A Guide to More Erotic Love Making* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1996), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Perper and Martha Conrog, “Sex, love, and women in Japanese Comics,” in Robert T. Francoeur and Raymond Noonan, eds., *The Comprehensive International Encyclopedia of Sexuality* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 663–671.

gifts to be enjoyed to the full.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, sexuality depicted in Japanese ladies’ comics is not full of guilt, shame, or bad feelings.<sup>10</sup> Japanese literary and art traditions also make frequent reference to the concept of *iro* (literally “color,” also “a lover,” “a mistress”). *Iro* is generally understood as sensuality with no feeling of guilt toward carnal pleasure.

Interestingly, the lovers depicted in *shunga* are rarely naked. They are often clad in sensuous, loose-fitting kimono. Moreover, it is the expectation that a sensual act will soon take place; this anticipation of the sex act, rather than its depiction, is what evokes sexual attraction and arousal. Although ultimate carnal pleasure and the joy of coitus are the focus of the pictures, they are not depicted as exploitative of the female sex.

*Shunga*, extremely explicit and sexually stimulating, depicted many kinds of love-making; ménage à trois (threesome sex), voyeurism, auto eroticism, lesbian sex (which was considered a perfectly natural coitus in those days), male homosexuality, and bestiality. Sexual intercourse is to be enjoyed by both partners, and women are often depicted as the subjects of coitus, not the objects. They seek their own carnal pleasure with or without men. Mutually enjoyable sexual intercourse does not entail inequality between the sexes, the subjugation of women or the superiority of men. *Shunga* also served as sex-education manuals for the new bride-to-be.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the *shunga*, sexually explicit ladies’ comic stories focus specifically on the heroine. It is her sexual experiences that are designed to excite readers. The heroines in ladies’ comics often need to overcome obstacles, whether social, psychological, or emotional, before having sexual intercourse. A heroine may have very low self-esteem, suffer from a trauma that took place in her girlhood (e.g., rape, incest, or domestic violence), or feel inadequate as a wife or mother, and this contributes to her inability to accept herself or to deal with her sexual dysfunction. Once the obstacle, whether it is the past traumatic experience, timidity, embarrassment, or inhibition, is removed, or the social taboos are violated, some heroines may become extremely active. Energy and desire are suddenly unleashed. Heroines may even become aggressive and violent toward the objects of their sexual desire. In revenge, some women even hurt and humiliate the men who

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *The Sensuous Touch*, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Ito, “The World of Japanese Ladies’ Comics,” p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, *The Sensuous Touch*, p. 63.

had originally violated them such as an abusive father or a rapist. Much violence that might be perpetrated by both men and women takes place in some of the ladies' comic stories: clothes get ripped off, women are forced to provide oral sex, they get raped or gang raped, or a huge plastic enema is inserted into the protagonist's anus.

Interestingly, women also seduce men and rape them in certain comic stories. These protagonists are often depicted as intelligent, confident, and cunning. However, it seems that the level of violence is much less than that found in weekly comic magazines for men where hard core violence such as kidnapping, lynching, murder, rape, or gang rape often takes place along with sex.<sup>12</sup>

The themes of sexually explicit ladies' comics tend to revolve around lust and physical pleasure of the ultimate kind. They are not shy about displaying sexuality visually and in frank language. Many four-letter words, very derogatory names and terms for female body parts, and onomatopoeia of the sounds of sexual acts and various bodily liquids appear in these stories, as will be discussed in more detail below. For some examples, one sees beads of sweat running down the face, breasts, bellies, etc., semen being ejaculated, vaginal fluid pouring, and urine and feces released by suppositories. The pictures realistically depict the biological processes of sexual arousal and orgasm as written in a home medical guide. One guide, for instance, explains that sexual "excitement makes breathing quicken, heart rate increase, and blood pressure rise," and notes that "In a female, the labia and clitoris swell, the vagina lengthens and becomes lubricated, and the breasts enlarge."<sup>13</sup> Ladies' comics use this same level of description, and venture into activities that are not allowed such frank discussion in more mainstream publications. All lead to the sexual excitement of the comics' characters. Urination scenes also appear in many S & M themed stories, and they seem to excite some Japanese men who appear in ladies' comics. Female characters are often

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<sup>12</sup> Kinko Ito, "Images of Women in Weekly Male Comic Magazines in Japan," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27/4 (1994): 81–95; and Kinko Ito, "Sexism in Japanese Weekly Comic Magazines for Men," in John A. Lent, ed., *Asian Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), pp. 127–137.

<sup>13</sup> David R. Goldmann and David A. Horowitz, *American College of Physicians Complete Home Medical Guide* (New York: DK Publishing, 2003), p. 762.

forced to perform urination in front of them as well as a form of sex play called “golden shower.”

Sexual scenes predominate in the sexually explicit category of ladies’ comics, but the genitals are always obscured due to censorship. In erotic Japanese ladies’ comics, a blocking technique known as *bokashi* is used to cover from view what obviously must be erect or thrusting penises, swollen vaginas, and the union of genitalia as well as oral and other kinds of sex. *Bokashi* takes the form of a white oval, square, or rectangle space, or the area may appear to be digitally pixelized as in Japanese pornographic movies. Holmberg states that *bokashi* actually “serves to draw attention to... the very thing that it presumes to hide.”<sup>14</sup> Ladies’ comic artist Asako Shiomi<sup>15</sup> told me in her interview in 2007 that she always draws the details of genitals even though her editor always puts a white rectangle or oval shape over a certain areas in order to comply with the ordinance that prohibits showing of genitals in comics. Hiroki Otsuka, a male Japanese erotic manga artist, said in an interview, “In sex scenes in manga, the editorial staff will draw black lines particularly over sexual organs and their union, just barely obscuring things. *Bokashi* are inserted so that it is *as if* things cannot be seen” (Italics in the original).<sup>16</sup> *Bokashi* obscures and dissimulates the drawn material in order to comply with censorship laws.

#### **S & M Scenes in Ladies’ Comics**

S & M scenes make use of all kinds of paraphernalia and disguise. Common devices include whips, eye-masks, chains, bondage, suppositories, and enemas. The protagonist may wear sexy underwear and negligee for a feminine look, or don kinky leather straps and boots to create

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<sup>14</sup> Goldmann and Horowitz, *American College of Physicians Complete Home Medical Guide*, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup> Asako Shiomi was born in 1950 in Yokohama and started her manga career while she was an undergraduate student at Chuo University. She drew girls’ comics at the beginning of her thirty some year career, but currently she draws only ladies’ comics. Her manga is available both in the traditional paper form and on the cell phone and the Internet. She loves depicting touching human stories and sensual adult material.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan Holmberg, “Let We Go: An Interview with Hiroki Otsuka,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 10/1 (2008), p. 202.

a dominatrix image. A heroine often goes through a transformation of personality when the props or equipment are introduced by a man who is her master and trainer. Notably, in the world of ladies' comics, she is awakened to and learns the joy of S & M through these experiences, especially when she is being dominated. She gains more power as the sexual adventure progresses and becomes a very active participant, engaging in energetic sex. So enthralling is the experience that the heroine ends up becoming an addicted sex slave.

Readers are encouraged to participate in S & M play as consumers. All of the comic magazines in the pornographic category have, inserted between the comic stories, advertisements for adult toys such as vibrators, dildos, electronic beads for anal sex, clothespins for pinching nipples, massage oils and lotions as well as love potions. The advertisements invite the readers to explore their bodies, find carnal pleasure, and be liberated sexually.<sup>17</sup> Fees from these advertisers support publication of ladies' comics.

### **Rape Play Fantasy**

Many stories in the pornographic category deal with rape as a sexual act that can be satisfactory or pleasurable for women. Actual rape is violence, and of course, must be recognized as a crime that violates basic human rights. However, in certain ladies' comic stories Japanese women, especially those who are sexually neglected by their lovers or husbands, are depicted as having a desire for being raped and enjoy being raped not only by one man but also by a group of men. It is important to distinguish fantasy from reality when discussing readers' engagement in displays of rape. Such involvement does not mean that women enjoy a forced sex act in reality, but love the notion that they – through the fictional heroines – are objects of male desire. In such scenes, the heroine is desired, needed, and wanted by a man or a group of men in an extraordinary, non-everyday situation. Such thoughts may sexually arouse the reader. Of course, the reader is always in control of her reading and is most likely to be contemplating these scenes in an environment which is actually safe. There is no real threat to her and she is free to spin the fantasy from any perspective she likes.

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<sup>17</sup> Ito, "The World of Japanese Comics," pp. 68–85; and Jones, "'Ladies' Comics,'" pp. 3–31.



Instead of labeling the element of rape in these stories “rape fantasy,” it may be more appropriate to call it “rape play fantasy” because these fantasies “are designed with particular structures and features.”<sup>18</sup> Usually the men who rape the female protagonists are young and very handsome. They are sexually attractive and desirable and they take time in sex. In the pages of ladies’ comics, female characters’ stimulation increases in proportion to the number of rapists.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the fantasy is about being the object of uncontrollable desire and not the victim of violence.

Kaoru Nanbara’s “Shietsu no Yado” (The Inn of the Ultimate Pleasure) that appeared in *Ai no Taiken Special Deluxe (Lustful Experiences – Special Deluxe)* in January, 2006, is a very good example of “rape play fantasy.”<sup>20</sup> In this story Masami, the female protagonist comes (no pun intended) to find the ultimate kind of carnal pleasure with multiple men at the inn. The action starts when Masami is dumped by her fiancé who left her for another woman. Lonely, sad, angry, and resentful, Masami decides to take a week-long trip to a deserted inn at a ski resort before the ski season. The inn is managed by two brothers, and has a large, open-air bath surrounded by large rocks. She takes a bath and started masturbating. She fondles her nipples and pleasures herself. All of sudden four completely naked, young, handsome men with great bodies appear in front of her. Two of them are the inn keepers. All four of them want to join her and help her to extinguish the fire of her sexual desire. They begin touching her body all over at once. Masami resists their moves at first, but gradually she falls deep into a carnal pleasure that she has never experienced in her normal courtship. The scene is a safe one, however, and told from the view of the pleasures that Masami experiences.

### **Lesbian Sex**

Lesbian sex takes place quite often in erotic ladies’ comics. In these

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<sup>18</sup> Setsu Shigematsu, “Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics,” in John A. Lent, eds., *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Kaoru Nanbara, “Shietsu no yado” [The Inn of the Ultimate Pleasure], *Ai no Taiken Special Deluxe [Lustful Experiences – Special Deluxe]* (Tokyo: Take shobō, 2006).

scenes, two women engage in French kissing, oral sex, or sex with dildos and vibrators. The comic book readers may also consist of lesbian women to whom this is more personal. As well, readers self-identified as heterosexual may be curious about displays of lesbian sexuality.

Yuki Lee's comic story "Dankin Gekijo Benigumi" (Women Only Theater Group Beni) appeared in Take Shobō's *Ai no Taiken Special Deluxe* published in January, 2006.<sup>21</sup> The protagonist Naomi, a 22-year old, ex-office worker, who is a single mother, performs as a striptease dancer at a theater that caters to lesbian women only. She is a leader of the theater troupe. Years pass and when her daughter turns 18, she wants to become a dancer like her mother. Naomi trains her and the daughter debuts as a new dancer. In this comic the performers engage in lesbian strip tease acts including S & M. The audiences, who obviously are repeat customers, bring flowers to their favorite dancers, and enjoy friendly relationships. This story depicts women as sexual subjects engaging in acts of sex, and at the same time these women performers are also objectified and treated as commodities by women who are the audience of the lesbian show. Traditionally male-female voyeurism is considered sexually exciting, but this comic story frames the situation as female-female voyeurism. The female audience gazes at and is aroused by female bodies. No matter what the readers' own sexual orientation, they may find viewing female-female acts as arousing as the heterosexual acts described above. Again, in ladies' comics, almost anything goes.

### **Adultery**

Women who commit adultery are common in many ladies' comic stories that depict a protagonist who is a neglected wife or a girlfriend. Like many contemporary societies, Japanese society is very stressful. Division of labor between the sexes still prevails in many arenas. Gender roles are often obvious and rigid. Men usually leave everything domestic to their wives and focus on working at their companies. Women who have jobs are expected to perform the role of a supermom, doing two shifts, one at work and another at home taking care of children and household chores. Even the married heroines in ladies' comics admit that they feel more like a housemaid than an adult woman who can be sexy and sensuous.

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<sup>21</sup> Yuki Lee, "Dankin gekijo benigumi" [Women Only Theater Group Beni], *Ai no Taiken Special Deluxe* (Tokyo: Take shobō, 2006).

There are various reasons for the sexual dissatisfaction of protagonists. Some are in a sexless marriage, their husbands may have mistresses for their sexual outlets, or their husbands are simply too tired from working all the time. Sexual temptations take various forms in ladies' comics but the most common are that women engage in adultery with men they meet at work, salesmen who visit in their homes, or sometimes total strangers whom they meet on the internet or while they are traveling. As in the scenes of rape described above, the heroine, and by extension, her reader, engage in adventurous and anonymous sex within the safe world of comic reading.

Many sex scenes that revolve around adultery include cunnilingus and the stimulation of the clitoris as well as fellatio. Some protagonists delight in the sensation of oral sex performed on them by a lover. The heroines' husbands (and maybe the readers' as well) had stopped providing it long ago. These scenes depict the characters as filled with the joy of being wanted and desired anew. As their most private parts become stimulated, they begin to feel like "a real woman." In this sense, the woman's lover is a technician who brings her to the ultimate climax. As artist Shiomi said, "carnal desire and pleasure must be both ways. A woman should enjoy sex not only as an object of men's pleasure but also as a subject with independent will."<sup>22</sup>

### **Incest**

Incestuous sex also takes place in the pornographic ladies' comics. The most common patterns of incest depicted in ladies' comics of recent years are those between a young aunt and her handsome nephew, who has a great body, and between a step-daughter and a step-father. Other patterns include a widowed stepmother and her stepson, a brother and a sister, a mother and a son, a mother and a daughter, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and a granddaughter and a grandfather. These stories view incest "as an erotic theme" and "derive erotic value from incest as a form of transgressed taboo."<sup>23</sup>

Incest, in ladies' comics and in reality, is viewed as detrimental to maintenance of the family system. Incest is not openly talked about in

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<sup>22</sup> Kinko Ito, "The Touching and the Sensual in Japanese Ladies' Comics: An Interview with Asako Shiomi," *International Journal of Comic Art* 10/2 (2008): 186–198, especially p.193.

<sup>23</sup> Holmberg, "Let We Go," p. 204.

Japanese social life. In ladies' comic stories incest appears as a variation of sex, but usually it is a forbidden and secretive pleasure that is the focus of the stories.

### **Sexuality and Modernity**

Sociologists have always been interested in modernity and what a modern society entails. Modern society has been characterized by anomie (a social condition where weakened respect for norms prevails), alienation, increased amounts of surveillance by the government, disenchantment, rationalization, and the dislocation and disorientation of self that emerges from social change. Modern society often brings confusion and mental strain.<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault noted that modern social life is governed by disciplinary power and shows the “characteristic of the prison and the asylum.” He also wrote that the discipline that civilization requires “implies control of inner drives, control that to be effective has to be internal.”<sup>25</sup> Durkheim noted that obligation and desirability are two characteristics of morality and the sacrifice of individual desires is essential for keeping social and moral order.<sup>26</sup>

Japanese ladies' comics that belong to the sensual category contain aspects of love and romance but they also depict the extreme, extraordinary, or “abnormal” cases of sex such as forbidden or illegal copulation, humiliation, fantasies, degradation, or fetishes. However, it is the aspects of the forbidden that are very important ingredients for the success of ladies' comic stories. In real life most people refrain from actions that are forbidden

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study of Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1966); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, & Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1953).

because society exists above and beyond individuals' desires, and a sanction is entailed in the violation of norms.<sup>27</sup> However, conformity to social norms, rules, and laws, means sacrificing certain desires, wants, and needs that humans have naturally. Inappropriate desires must be quenched including one's abhorrent sexual desires. As Richardson observes, "Because the forbidden is supposed to arouse us sexually indeed, that is a good part of why it is forbidden, tabooed encounters are experienced as sexually exciting."<sup>28</sup>

As for the sexual fantasies in the world of pornographic ladies' comics, little social constraints are placed upon women, and they are free to do as they like. There is a complete separation of sex from reproduction, and the protagonists do not need to think about the social or psychological consequences of copulation.

Ladies' comic stories, as we have seen, showcase indeed a great variety of sexual actions and relationships including S & M, adultery, incest, masturbation, and rape. For example, in Yukiko Nishimori's "Nibihiro no Namida" (Tears of Dull Color) that appeared in Bunkasha's *Hontoniatta Shufu no Taiken* in October, 2005, the protagonist Nana is raped by her mother-in-law. Her strange life began when Nana married Masami Ochi, a man with a severe case of Oedipus complex, and moved in with him and his mother.<sup>29</sup> In her odd new family, Nana experiences restraint, control, abuse, despair, and confinement. Even her wedding night is traumatic: the mother-in-law ties Nana's legs and rapes her, turning Nana's new life into a nightmare. Her mother-in-law is obviously a crazy woman and a control freak, who also exploits Nana as a housemaid. As well, her husband starts to abuse Nana, until she finally decides to go to a women's shelter to get away from her toxic husband and in-law. This story is an example of exceptional sexual experience that epitomizes modernity because the variation "is part of a broad-based set of changes integral to the expansion of modernity."<sup>30</sup>

In the world of Japanese ladies' comics women seek out sexual pleasure in many different ways, and in this sense the protagonists are modern

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Laurel Richardson, *The New Other Woman: Contemporary Women in Affairs with Married Men* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Yukiko Nishimori, "Nibihiro no namida" [Tears of Dull Color], *Hontoniatta Shufu no Taiken* (Tokyo: Bunkasha, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 34.

women. For them, the old marriage plots, the traditional division of labor, and rigid gender roles of dominance and submission “are more than old: they are painful, even oppressive.”<sup>31</sup> After the passage of the EEOL, for many young women education and career became more important than looking for a husband and settling down. They emerged as a new generation of independent women and they delayed marriage but were sexually active. As in the West, women were no longer “pawns in elaborate property exchanges at marriage, their value no longer depended on their ‘purity’ in Japan in the 1980s.”<sup>32</sup> For many women, there was no more denial of their sex drive.

Certain hardcore ladies’ comic stories definitely show attributes of pornography such as “violence, dominance, and conquest.”<sup>33</sup> According to Paul, “In pornography, sexuality frequently accompanies or provokes disgust and hatred – something to be done quickly, and just as quickly disposed of.”<sup>34</sup> However, sexually explicit Japanese ladies’ comic stories also have definite story lines that follow the heroine’s sexual encounters as well as the emotional experiences that result from them. Moreover, the comics’ plots always offer some sort of resolution, contentment, or justification about the whole incident at the end. As we have seen, ladies comics’ heroines are often frustrated at home due to a sexless marriage, insensitive husbands, or lack of communication and affection. If they work outside the home they are not happy because of toxic bosses, incompetent colleagues, or the lack of excitement and stimulus in everyday work life. Readers of ladies’ comics, who may identify with these characters’ frustrations, clearly love to escape to the world of fantasy and explore their own sexuality in a safe place where they can indulge themselves for a while without suffering from the consequences such as arrest by the police, social humiliation and stigma, or sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>35</sup>

The heroines in ladies’ comics are often quite ordinary women who

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<sup>31</sup> Richardson, *The New Other Woman*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Helen E. Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery, and Divorce* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> Paul, *Pornified*, p. 248.

<sup>35</sup> Asako Shiomi, interview by author, Yokohama, Japan, 2007.

become involved in extraordinary activities. They are housewives who have sex with salesmen, delivery men, neighbors' husbands, men whom they met on internet, former classmates, or teachers at cultural centers voluntarily or involuntarily. They are always portrayed to be content after the sexual encounter. Just like the "Cosmo Girl" much celebrated in the United States, the heroine experiences her own sexuality by "having sex with an 'inappropriate' man, by tasting the 'forbidden fruit,'<sup>36</sup> and an illicit and deviant relationship helps "women to overcome their sexual repression."<sup>37</sup>

In a case where the ladies' comic protagonist gets raped, she is a victim of violence, and her perspective of men, trust, and humankind often changes after the incident. Some become vindictive and decide to take revenge. The heroines in pornographic ladies' comics no longer obey the rules of sexuality that are prescribed by society as normal or ideal. They explore their sexuality and new possibilities without much hesitation or inhibition. The body becomes a temple of carnal pleasure. In ladies' comics the female body is no longer an object to be manipulated by the other sex but a subject which has its own wills, preferences, and sense of control. In this sense, sensual Japanese ladies' comics do not belong to pornography but erotica. Erotica is a more flowery, romantic, and mutually pleasurable version of the same sex acts that appear in pornography without objectification or exploitation of female bodies.<sup>38</sup> The female readers can enjoy themselves in the fantasy world that is safe and secret. In this way, they can find the stories empowering.

### **Carnal Pleasure and Self**

Japanese ladies' comics' depiction of sex, whether it is mutually consensual or even in the case of rape or gang rape, often leads to the heroine's obtaining self-awareness. The incident also prompts her acceptance of her true self of which she was not previously aware or which she did not want to accept. The protagonist's narrative of self differs before and after the sexual encounter. Sex has something to do with intimacy that "touches upon prime aspects of self."<sup>39</sup> The heroine becomes more in tune with her true

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<sup>36</sup> Richardson, *The New Other Woman*, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Richardson, *The New Other Woman*, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Paul, *Pornified*, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 78.

sexuality and desires. Her sexuality becomes “a quality or property of the self.”<sup>40</sup>

Asako Shiomi told me in an interview that her manga always have a plot and a story line that involves the intricate web of human emotions and feelings between the male and female protagonists. Shiomi includes in her comics much romance, sensual, sexy, and flowery language as well as sexually explicit expressions that evoke sensuous feelings. Her manga appeal not only to the readers’ sexuality but to their emotions as well. She depicts psychological change that has behavioral consequences, namely sex itself. She portrays female carnal pleasure as well as the very moment when the heroine admits or realizes that she is a sexual subject. Sometimes it is a realization that she is a masochist or that she prefers much younger men with sexual prowess. The heroine also wants the man’s heart. Shiomi emphasizes the emotional component that is embedded in sexuality, and she believes that sexuality is part of one’s sense of self. In her manga, the heroine becomes aware of her sexuality which is almost like an awakening as she acknowledges and accepts what she really is. This awareness might work as catharsis to get rid of one’s repression or at least to seek a temporary release from it through fantasy.<sup>41</sup>

Many pornographic ladies’ comics still contain elements of romance in terms of unexpected sexual encounters. However, passionate love and lustful experiences in which sexual attachment occur are the main themes. The themes and actions of the copulation scenes are more or less the same from story to story. For example, erect nipples are always drawn as the protagonist gets sexually aroused at the expectation of intercourse that is about to take place or by stimulation by a man or men. Other scenes suggest a stiff clitoris and swollen labia, part of which is meticulously covered with a white rectangular, square, or oval shaped space – the above-mentioned *bokashi* – which actually evokes more imagination. The protagonist may have involuntary, rhythmic, muscular spasms or contractions in the vagina.

Ladies’ comic stories also show diversity in the protagonist’s orgasmic experience. This mirrors speculation about female orgasm: “women

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<sup>40</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ito, “The Touching and the Sensual in Japanese Ladies’ Comics”; and Kinko Ito, “New Trends in the Production of Japanese Ladies’ Comics: Diversification and Catharsis,” *Japan Studies Review* 13 (2009): 111–130.



may exhibit a far wider range of orgasmic experience than men so, in both degree and kind,” and even though there has been controversy about this fact, variations in orgasmic experience are more common than previously thought.<sup>42</sup>

Many ladies’ comic stories showcase the clitoris as the main source of carnal pleasure. It is often referred to as *mame* (it literally means a pea in Japanese), and the protagonist has it stimulated orally, manually, or by other devices by a man or men. In the case of lesbian sex, cunnilingus is provided by a woman or women. As Nuland suggests “effective and dependable clitoral stimulation must usually be direct, whether manually or by some other stratagem.”<sup>43</sup>

Many husbands who appear in pornographic ladies’ comics are depicted as lethargic at home whether at night or on weekends. After long hours of work and long distance commutes, they do not seem to have enough energy to please and entertain their wives in bed. In contrast, a protagonist, who is a bored housewife, stays home all day long daydreaming about fabulous sex. She may try to get her husband’s attention and affection by changing her hairdo and wearing elaborate make-up and sexy underwear or a negligee. She might light candles and use potpourri to produce a more romantic mood, or cook his favorite dinner. All her husband wants to do when he gets home after drinking with his co-workers, however, is to take a bath, eat dinner, and sleep. He does not even notice any difference in her appearance or the room. If the wife is lucky, her husband may reluctantly agree to intercourse, although without much foreplay. He will finish rather quickly, and fall asleep right away afterwards. The protagonist should be happy now that she had the intercourse that she had craved all day (or all week or for months!) but she feels rejected and worse than before because there is no romantic post sex conversation or caressing. All she hears is the sound of her husband’s snoring.

Nuland states “expectations of simultaneous orgasm are in real life more likely to be frustrated than fulfilled,” and that many wives in sexless marriages experience disappointment and disillusionment in marriage.<sup>44</sup> In

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<sup>42</sup> Sherwin B. Nuland, *The Wisdom of the Body* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 177.

<sup>43</sup> Nuland, *The Wisdom of the Body*, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> Nuland, *The Wisdom of the Body*, p. 175.

modern society, she argues, women now “expect to receive, as well as provide, sexual pleasure, and many have come to see a rewarding sex life as a key requirement for a satisfactory marriage.”<sup>45</sup> The increasing divorce and remarriage rates recently in Japan show that women are not disillusioned by the institution of marriage but by their husbands, and many are willing to remarry in hopes of achieving a more satisfying family life. Many matchmaking agencies, in person or online, now cater to those who were divorced and looking for new partners.

As many of the stories in ladies’ comics indicate, one of the causes of marital dissatisfaction is a lack of spousal communication. Japan has a high context culture where communication is not in messages only but in contexts such as facial expression, tone of voice, silence, grunts, gestures, and postures.<sup>46</sup> The samurai tradition makes Japanese men not really good at expressing themselves especially when it comes to private feelings and emotions such as love and romance, and it is often taxing to decipher subtle nonverbal cues. Communication in intimate relationships often requires tuning into what others are saying without words, and the visual texts such as comics are more powerful medium than the texts alone.

Newly-wed husbands may show love by purchasing gifts and flowers, frequent telephone calls and love-making, but once the excitement of the newly-wed days pass, children arrive, and the reality of family responsibilities sets in. After so many years of marriage, the husband may not be as vocal about his love as before. Her love and devotion to the family that they created together are taken for granted. The protagonist is not happy in regard to her romance or sex. She thought she married a prince, but he has turned into a lazy toad as time went by.

A bored and sexually frustrated heroine, whether a housewife or an office worker, finds her everyday life tedious and not fun. Then, all of sudden, she finds herself in a situation where her boss or co-worker makes a sexual advance. As Richardson notes women “by and large, underestimate the impact of their sexuality in their working relationships with men.”<sup>47</sup> A housewife may sexually arouse a delivery man or a salesman in her house.

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<sup>45</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>47</sup> Richardson, *The New Other Woman*, p. 26.

What is noteworthy is the tenderness of the stranger who suddenly becomes her lover. The man may shower her with flowery language complimenting her beauty and sexual attraction as he undresses her. Even though she has invited his attention and she now is an object of his desire, she feels a bit shy and even embarrassed. She may be concerned about the age difference, her wrinkles, sagging breasts and underarms, or stretch marks. Instead, she hears, "Madame, you look great! I love your plump beautiful breasts! You must be excited. Look at the love juice pouring from your lovely garden...", he says as he fondles her body in the kitchen or living room of her house, a storage room in an office, outside in the mountains, in a hotel room, or on a Ferris wheel. "I want you right now," he says and kisses her passionately in the mouth. Gradually the heroine succumbs to his advances happily. "Oh, well, if you say so, maybe I am still beautiful and desirable," she says and appreciates the joy that this unexpected sexual encounter brings to her long lost and forgotten carnal sensations. His sweet words become auditory stimulus that excites her even more. Women need "not just to be admired, but told that they are appreciated and valued" and she "sees herself only in the reflection of male desire."<sup>48</sup> The bodily sensation that she is totally desirable and the confidence that a sense of being loved by a man is important for the character's emotional and psychological well-being.

Ladies' comics allow women linguistic freedom, enabling them to feel free about using all kinds of slang to describe the body and sex. Fancy words, four-letter words, and derogatory profanity are often included in ladies' comics, as mentioned above. Once the initial romantic conversation is completed and a sexual act begins, words and sentences are uttered that are completely inappropriate in other normal social situations in life. Female protagonists are often forced by their men to repeat words such as 'pussy' and to say sentences such as "I love your big cock," "My cunt wants you," "Please insert your dick." These are words and phrases most decent and well-mannered Japanese women find rather difficult to utter in their real life. As the protagonist reaches orgasm, she screams with pleasure at the top of her lungs. In a normal Japanese house or apartment where the rooms are small and walls and doors are paper thin, this is not really possible because of the neighbors. In ladies' comics, however, a protagonist can even scream obscenities as she likes. She can let herself go and is able to speak the

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<sup>48</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 128.

forbidden language of illicit sex.

Orgasm is also the climax of many ladies' comic plots. As Giddens comments on sex in modern society that "the high of orgasm is a moment of triumph as well as physical and emotional release; but many sustain a high also in the building up to a sexual encounter, in which they feel peculiarly alert and even euphoric."<sup>49</sup> The ecstatic moment of orgasm that entails physical, psychological, and emotional release is referred to in French as *le petit mort*, or the little death. The releasing experience enables the protagonist to give up self and abandon the self-identity. She becomes one with the man and the universe, and there is no notion of self or ego at this moment. She then triumphs in the glow of euphoria that follows afterwards, an emotional state that the comic celebrates. This experience of reaching an orgasm, especially with a new person, is "set apart from the ordinary, from the mundane characteristics of everyday life,"<sup>50</sup> and thus it is exciting and stimulating. Transcending everyday life experience is a key element for ladies' comic stories. The protagonist may be an ordinary woman such as an office worker or a housewife, but her sexual encounter may be extraordinary, illicit, forbidden, and removed from reality. This in itself may make the readers of pornographic ladies' comics sexually aroused.

In ladies' comic stories men are there to serve women's need to feel sexy and good about themselves. What Giddens observes about romantic novels of today also holds true for Japanese ladies' comics – women seek in fantasy what is denied in the ordinary world, and ladies' comics also help them "come to terms with frustrated self-identity in actual social life" by liberating them from repression and letting them experience excitement and euphoria vicariously.<sup>51</sup> The experience may be "a conquest of mundane prescriptions and compromises."<sup>52</sup> Sexuality "functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity, and social norms."<sup>53</sup> Those protagonists who suffered from low self-esteem before their ecstatic sexual encounter gain confidence as they prove their sexual prowess and ability to give and receive sexual pleasure. The body that

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<sup>49</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 79.

<sup>50</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 44.

<sup>52</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 15.

tasted the extraordinary carnal pleasure becomes the domain of sexuality and part of the self conception of the heroine.

### **Summary**

Ladies' comics are relative late-comers to the scene of modern manga. The freedom of sexual expression was one of the major attractions of the comics for adult women. They provide the readers with dreams, romances, and fantasies that cannot be easily materialized in real life and by experiencing them vicariously the reader may be able to get rid of the monotony of everyday life as well as stress in her personal and work situations. The majority of ladies' comic magazines solicit real stories from the readers who want to tell their personal stories whether they are real or fantasy.<sup>54</sup>

Japan indeed is still in many ways a man's paradise where men dominate the society except in the domestic sphere. Women are daughters, wives, and mothers. They are supposed to be soft-hearted and nurturing as well as wise and strong when it comes to the socialization of children. Women who stay home or work at the bottom of the labor market hierarchy do not have much power or status in reality and in ladies' comic stories even though they are the very people who support and contribute greatly to the Japanese family as well as capitalistic system.

In ladies' comic stories, however, women are the heroines who overcome their shyness, inhibitions, and fears. They solve emotional and psychological problems. They enjoy sex as subjects, not as objectified commodities or submissive and subordinate sexual beings. Some of the heroines may be surprised at the sexual encounter and may not appreciate it at first. They might be rather bewildered and passive, but as the sexual act continues they are awakened by the ultimate kind of carnal pleasure which they never had experienced in a normal courtship. The sense of self is transformed into something more positive and enjoyable. In this sense many ladies' comic stories are empowering to women readers at least psychologically. The sensuous, extraordinary, passionate, unforgettable sex with a dream man exists only in the world of ladies' comics, and the readers may also derive much satisfaction from experiencing it vicariously without taking responsibility for the consequence.

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<sup>54</sup> Ito, "New Trends in the Production of Japanese Ladies' Comics," pp. 111-130.

