

**The Tanka Poetry of Yosano Akiko:
Transformation of Tradition Through the Female Voice**

*Harriette D. Grissom
Atlanta College of Art*

The poetry and life of Yosano Akiko are marked by intriguing ambiguity: An emblem of female daring and willful self-determination who inspired a younger generation of Japanese feminists, she was nonetheless the mother of eleven children, the apparently devoted wife of a difficult man who had once been her mentor, and the main support for her family. One of the first Japanese poets of her era to speak openly of female sexuality, she is sometimes characterized as “unfeminine” by both Asian and Western critics. Direct and uncompromising in her expression of intense emotion in life and poetry, she inspired the Romantic movement in Japanese poetry; yet few Romantics have been so pragmatic, constant, and down-to-earth in realizing their visions of love and art. Regardless of the controversies about her character and artistic vision, critics are beginning to acknowledge Yosano Akiko’s pivotal importance in transforming Japan’s traditional 31-syllable waka poem from a sterile exercise in formulaic sentimentality to a bold, resilient medium equal to the complexity of the modern condition.

It would not be the first time that a woman could claim credit for transforming the literature of Japan. Murasaki Shikibu, with whom Yosano felt great empathy, was also a definer of Japan’s aesthetic traditions. Women, if they were brazen enough to seize the writing brush, stood outside the universe of expectations that comprised the kata of literature and hence were free to innovate in a way that men were not. Even when Yosano Akiko attempted to follow the lead of her early male mentors, she spoke with a female voice that realized their visions in surprising ways. If the poetry of her husband Yosano Tekkan and his group is marked by unconvincing imitation of certain surface aspects of European late Romanticism, interesting mainly for historical reasons, Akiko’s poetry riveted her contemporaries and generations of readers to come with its iconoclastic energy.

To what extent is Akiko’s poetry a legitimate reflection of the female voice? Janine Beichman in her thoughtful essays asserts that in the

early works, of which *Tangled Hair* (*J. Mideragami*) is the most well-known, Akiko had not yet found a truly female voice, but was in fact imitating men in order to write (Beichman, p.207 ff.). This accounts, she believes, for the defiant, sexually blatant quality of the work and for what she and other critics characterize as its “narcissism.” I believe that Beichman is partially accurate in her assessment that “Akiko’s poetic voice came in part from her own impersonation of the male” (p.207). In Japanese culture (and in others as well) an aspect of what Akiko describes as “being stuck inside a woman’s body” is swallowing defiance and carefully removing the sharp edges of one’s passion lest they cause an injury (p.207). Cultivation of individuality, which Tekkan promoted as the basis for the new tanka poetry, was alien ground for women who had been culturally schooled to accommodate and harmonize. In attempting to match the West, Meiji Japan adopted an image of womanhood that reflected the values of Victorian Europe. Celebration of sexuality—certainly a woman’s celebration of her own sexuality-- was shunned as part of the embarrassing past of “Floating World” libertinism. To speak with the poetic force and honesty advocated by Tekkan and his school, Akiko must imitate the freedom of the male condition. However, I would argue that while the act of speaking openly and directly is an imitation of the male condition, the voice that speaks in Akiko’s poetry is a uniquely female articulation that redefines what the tanka form can achieve.

In *Tangled Hair*, Akiko’s confrontational directness, her expression of female sexuality and full-blown passionate feeling, and her rejection of the sanctity of religion and war are radical departures not only from the constrictions of traditional female roles but also from aesthetic values that had dominated Japanese poetry for centuries.¹ The sound of the

¹ Beichman contends that critical attention to Akiko Yosano’s early work overlooks the strength of her later work, which deals with issues of childbirth and less glamorous aspects of femininity (p. 204 ff). She attributes the adulation of *Tangled Hair* and the relative obscurity of the later work to a male critical bias toward the sensual and sexual dimensions of femininity. Beichman’s arguments are convincing, but I think she fails to appreciate the importance of Akiko’s affirmation of female sexuality as a critical aspect of “claiming” and articulating the experience of being a woman.

female voice speaking openly transforms an atrophied aesthetic tradition. To an extent that is unusual, Japanese artists traditionally appropriated the persona of the feminine (largely defined by a male-dominated tradition) in their aesthetic undertakings. One of Akiko's mentors, Toson, even adopts a female persona in writing his tanka (Beichman, 207). But what we have here is the male fantasy of the female voice. The actual female voice thus challenges both the stereotype of woman and the primacy of an entrenched aesthetic tradition based on the image of femininity created and appropriated by a male tradition.

Donald Keene, in his analysis of Kenko's *Essays in Idleness* as a cornerstone of Japanese art traditions, identifies "suggestion" as a critical aspect of Japanese aesthetic sensibility. Understatement, muted colors, subtle innuendoes, "beginnings and ends . . . move us more profoundly" says Kenko "than the full moon shining over a thousand leagues" (Keene, 30). From the perspective of traditional Japanese aesthetics, the full-blown flower is crude compared to the bud or the fallen blossom. This value is also manifested in the emotional behavior prescribed for women: while passions may rage internally, the fully cultivated Japanese woman allows only the most restrained, oblique expressions of them, out of consideration for those who might be upset by strong feelings. She speaks in a language of intense subtlety that parallels the poetic language of suggestion described by Kenko, and the beauty of her emotions is measured precisely in proportion to the extent of their compression.

By the time of Akiko and Tekkan, the aesthetic ideal of "suggestion" had become little more than allusion to a set of stock sentiments and symbols. The critical tension between the depth of emotion and the sparsity of the means by which they might be expressed was lost, and waka had become dry and lifeless. Tekkan's prescription for remedying this condition was revival of the individual voice and a new investment in the expression of emotion. When Tekkan attempts this, however, the result is sometimes bombastic:

I am a male child
 A child of temper, a child of pride,
 A child of the sword,
 A child of poetry, a child of love,
 And ah! A child of anguish.

(Takeda, "The Modern Tanka and Akiko Yosano," p.1027, tr. Keene)

and sometimes bathetic:

too emotional
hence his brittle love
too talented
hence his eccentric verse
take pity on this poor man!

(Ueda, *Modern Japanese Tanka*, p.4).

One understands immediately why understatement, emotional restraint, and subtlety had been so long valued in Japanese verse. True to Kenko's assessment, there is something off-putting in these unvarnished appeals, as if the "yang" of male emotion, untempered by the "yin" of a subdued aesthetic, goes over the top and falls flat.

When Akiko expresses emotion directly, however, the dynamic is entirely different. The force of the female voice, so long muted, is arresting, bold and incisive:

In love
And frail as the stem
Of this summer flower—
Yet will I bloom
Deep red under a dazzling sun!

(46, Goldstein and Shinoda)

Whereas boldness of expression in Tekkan's poetry combines with temper, pride, swords, an excess of feeling and talent to produce bluster and pathos, in Akiko's poetry it announces courageous fragility and ephemeral beauty to produce a life-filled spectacle. The "yin" of Akiko's femininity expressed through a direct, "yang" determination to manifest, both in poetry and in life, produces vital, engaging emotion.

The image of the red flower, which appears frequently in Akiko's works, is a potent symbol of the fullness and directness of the poet's feeling and sexuality. Aside from suggesting passion and seductive beauty, the color red is also an indication of the power and persistence of feminine energy:

Let poems bear witness:
Who dare deny the flower of the field
Its color red?
How moving!
Girls with sins in spring.

(9, Goldstein and Shinoda)

The idea of sin in the last line appears as an ironic nod to the mentality that judges the young women Akiko describes. So pale this assessment—it is clear that the intolerant have a feeble argument against the undeniable beauty they condemn.

In nearly one-fifth of the tanka in *Mideragami*, Akiko addresses the intended audience directly and more often than not, confrontationally. The target is sometimes a lover, but it may also be an accusing moralizer, a priest or even Buddha. The result, as Shinoda and Goldstein note, is a highly charged dramatic quality that brings terrific energy to Akiko's poems. The message is typically a challenge asserting the legitimacy of women, their emotions and sexuality, over against the insensitivity of men and their heartless institutions, religion, morality and war.

Orders of Buddha,
Orders high and low,
Do you think
I chant these sutras
Without anguish?
(67, Goldstein and Shinoda) or,
Who calls me sinner
For pillowing his head
Against my arm?
The whiteness of this hand
Not less than God's!

(64, Goldstein and Shinoda)

She frequently baits priests, eager to demonstrate the folly of their celibacy

You have yet to touch
This soft flesh,
This throbbing blood—
Are you not lonely,
Expounder of the way?

(7, Goldstein and Shinoda)

Priests seem to represent to Akiko a naïve, impossible or sometimes hypocritical, disregard for the beauty, sensuality, and feeling embodied in the female.

The consequences of ignoring the female side of existence are more serious than the mere adaptation of unrealistic programs of celibacy, however. Disregard for the bonding power of eros also leads men and nations into pointless wars. At a time when most of Japan was swept up in

a patriotic war frenzy, Akiko wrote a poem that could have gotten her executed. Addressed to her brother, who had been drafted, the poem questions the legitimacy of the entire enterprise of war:

O my dear brother, I am in tears for you:
 Did your parents teach you to wield the sword
 to murder other people?
 Did your parents raise you
 for twenty-four years
 to kill and die?
 You should not be killed.
 The Honorable Emperor would not personally
 engage in the war.
 Since the Emperor's heart is so merciful,
 how could he possibly ask
 others to shed blood
 and die like beasts
 and believe that dying is honor?

(Hamill and Gibson, p.122-23)

The poem produced a furor. Not only was patriotism required by the state, but other poets of the time believed that poetry should encourage the war effort and celebrate the glory of combat. Only back-peddling into a plea that these were merely the personal sentiments of a woman saved Akiko from prosecution.² Once again, the female voice can say things that the male voice cannot say, and Akiko has confronted the misguided excesses of the masculine political and literary establishments with the force of the female perspective.

In order to speak so directly, openly, forthrightly, Akiko had to break inwardly with the ideal of Japanese

² Beichman's contention is that the poem was indeed merely a personal statement, and not an indictment of Japan's war effort, however, the execution of the feminist anarchist Kanno Suga several years later indicates that the dangers Akiko faced were serious. It seems more likely to me that her recanting in "Open Letter" was more a matter of self-preservation than of genuine support for the war against Russia. It is clear from this poem that Akiko thinks the war is hardly worth the human cost of it. See Beichman, pp. 210-214.

womanhood. She had already done so externally by pursuing her own choice in marriage against her parents wishes and precipitating the break-up of Tekkan's former marriage. Even the bohemian poets of Tekkan's circle were critical of his defection from his wife to marry Akiko. The cost of freedom for Akiko was ostracism from the ranks of respectable womanhood. She was not insensitive to her status as "sinner," but with characteristic determination, she seemed to embrace the stigma placed upon her. If the cost for being a full human being was the label of sinner or loose woman, then so be it. Once beyond the pale of respectability, Akiko was free to explore her experience of being female with unvarnished honesty. Her poetry seems to suggest that at the heart of the "good wife, wise mother" (and Akiko seems to have been both) was a wild girl with tangled hair.

Throughout her poetry Akiko deals with the Victorian proposition that only "fallen" women experience sexuality vividly. She seems quite willing to embrace fallenness if in doing so she is able to celebrate her sexuality. In some of her poems she assumes the persona of a dancing girl or prostitute. The image of tangled hair, which pervades Akiko's collection of poems by that name, is appropriately ambiguous. In the introduction to their English translation of *Midaregami*, Shinoda and Goldstein note: ". . . In the days before World War I, the image of a woman with even slightly disordered hair had a peculiar aesthetic and erotic association . . . it was considered a disgrace for a woman to let others see her disheveled hair" and "Women who had disheveled hair were considered immoral, loose creatures (pp.22-23)." In Akiko's tanka, tangled hair suggests not only erotic potential, but also the complexity of feeling and distress that emerge when a woman acknowledges her sexuality and her creative power in defiance of tradition.

thousand lines	A
black black hair	Of
tangled—	All tangled,
too	And tangled
of love. (104)	My thoughts

The visual character of the tanka poems, executed side by side, each poem a single line of characters, most likely written in the spontaneous grass script favored by poets, suggests wispy strands of hair. The imagery in *Midaregami* is often characterized as "narcissistic". Shinoda and Goldstein point out that this type of imagery is a certain break from

tradition in a culture that shuns self-admiration (p.21). Indeed, the word “breast” had apparently not appeared in poetry prior to Akiko’s tanka (Shinoda and Goldstein, p.21). The human body was not a focus of aesthetic attention in Japanese art and literature, despite a lively tradition of erotic art. Though Akiko clearly asserts the seductive power of the her body, these statements seem fraught with a kind of virginal wonder at her own beauty, which is finally the beauty of her womanliness.

In my bath—
Submerged like some graceful lily
At the bottom of a spring,
How beautiful
This body of twenty summers. (p. 16)

By becoming the object of her own gaze, Akiko neutralizes the claim on a woman’s body that tradition yields to men. This maneuver is essential in a culture that for centuries advised “respect the man, despise the woman”.³

Akiko does not have to look to the West for models of feminine assertion. Rather, she delves back into the classical Japanese tradition of Murasaki to identify with a vision of womanliness, albeit idealized, that is both passionate and artful, sensual and intelligent, capable of deep devotion but deeply aware of creative freedom and its power.⁴ This vital image she brandishes in the faces of those who sought to soften the view of women in Japan through imposition of Western values that only camouflaged the enduring oppression of women. The image seems to strike a chord for both Japanese and Western readers, who continue to relish the beauty of her

³ Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt, The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* Stanford: University Press, (1983), p. 6. This book offers an excellent analysis of the complex of attitudes toward women in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan.

⁴ See G.G. Rowley’s “Textual Malfeasance in Yosano Akiko’s *Shin’yaku Genji Monogatari*,” in which he asserts convincingly that Akiko’s translation of *Genji* idealizes the situations of Genji’s lovers and his attitudes toward them. Rowley believes that this distortion can be traced to Akiko’s intense identification with Murasaki and with the situations of the *Genji* tales.

work.

WORKS CITED

- Beichman, Janine. "Yosano Akiko: The Early Years" in *Japan Quarterly*, January-March 1990, pp. 37-54.
- _____. "Yosano Akiko: Return to the Female" in *Japan Quarterly*, April-June 1990, pp. 204-228.
- Higuchi, Chiyoko. *Her Place in the Sun*, tr. Sharon Rhoads. Tokyo: The East Publications, 1973.
- Keene, Donald. "Japanese Aesthetics" in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. Nancy Hume. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Lowitz, Leza, ed. and tr. *A Long Rainy Season*. Berkeley, Ca.: Stone Bridge Press, 1994.
- Morton, Leith. "The Canonization of Yosano Akiko's Midaregami" in *Japanese Studies*, December 2000, Vol.20, No. 3, pp. 237-254.
- Robins-Mowry, Dorothy. *The Hidden Sun, Women of Modern Japan*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1983.
- Rodd, Laurel Rasplica. "Yosano Akiko and the Bunkagakuin: 'Educating Free Individuals'" in *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese*, April 1991, Vol. 25, No.1, pp. 75-89.
- _____. "Yosano Akiko and the Taisho Debate Over the 'New Woman'" in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- _____. "On Poetry' by Yosano Akiko, with a Selection of Her Poems" in (find full source), pp. 235-246.

Rowley, G.G. "Textual Malfeasance in Yosano Akiko's Shin'yaku Genji Monogatari," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, June 1998, Vol.58, No. 1, pp. 201-220.

Sievers, Sharon. *Flowers in Salt, the Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan*. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1983.

Takeda, Noriko. "The Modern Tanka and Yosano Akiko" in *Candaian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Litterature Comparee*, December 1996, pp. 1025- 1037.

Ueda, Makoto, ed. and tr. *Modern Japanese Tanka*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Yosano, Akiko. *Tangled Hair, Selected Tanka from Midaregami*, ed. and tr. Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda. Tokyo: Charles Tuttle company, 1987.

——— *River of Stars, Selected Poems of Yosano Akiko*, tr. Sam Hamill and Keiko Matsui Gibson. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.