

## NEW TRENDS IN THE PRODUCTION OF JAPANESE LADIES' COMICS: DIVERSIFICATION AND CATHARSIS<sup>1</sup>

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*Manga*, or Japanese comics, has a long history beginning in ancient times, and it forms a prominent aspect of Japanese modern culture affecting entertainment, social norms, education, economy, and even politics. It is cheap and readily available at bookstores, convenience stores, train and subway station kiosks, coffee shops, restaurants, waiting rooms of clinics and hospitals, barber shops, and beauty salons. Many children and students, as well as adults, read manga not only at home, school, or college but also on trains and subways. Manga certainly is a huge and lucrative mass entertainment business along with *anime*, or Japanese animation, and it reflects very important social and psychological functions. There are various kinds of manga classified according to the readers' sex, age, content, and genre. Japanese ladies' comics, or *Redikomi*, as they are commonly called in Japanese, are for young and mature adult women.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the production of today's Japanese ladies' comics and the magazines' function as a means of catharsis. Many stories in recent ladies' comics are based on contemporary Japanese women's experiences. Editors and manga artists pay a great deal of attention to TV, radio, internet, and newspapers in order to get ideas for their comic stories. Different magazines revolve around various themes, and there is more diversification among them.

Some publishers ask for readers' contributions, and their comic stories are created based on their everyday life experiences and social situations. An editor and comic artist discuss the contributors' stories,

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gravett, *Manga The Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2004); Kinko Ito, "Images of Women in Weekly Male Comic Magazines in Japan" *Journal of Popular Culture* 27 (1994): p.25; "The *Manga* Culture in Japan" *Japan Studies Review* 4 (2000); and Frederik Schodt L. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1988).

modify them in order to protect anonymity, and depict whatever they think may appeal to the readers.

The contributor, by writing of her particular case, experiences catharsis. According to the Britannica Online Encyclopedia, catharsis is defined as “the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art.”<sup>3</sup> Catharsis is often used in dramaturgical uses as well as in the fields of medicine (e.g., psychiatry) and religion. The writer releases her stress, anxiety, or frustration that derives from her particular case, and she can also get rid of guilty, unpleasant, uncomfortable, afflictive, or negative emotions and feelings which have been building up within her. She is able to see herself and her experience in a more objective manner as an observer when she writes down her experiences. The readers, on the other hand, enjoy reading the comics because they make them realize “that there exist those who could suffer a worse fate than them,”<sup>4</sup> and this leads to relief. The effectiveness of catharsis has been debated over the years,<sup>5</sup> but the discharge process such as “crying, shivering, laughing,” etc. can be very pleasant and can lead to positive results such as “clarity of thought, relaxation, and feelings of renewed energy or exhilaration.”<sup>6</sup>

For this article, seventeen randomly chosen Japanese ladies’ comic magazines were studied, and several editors and manga artists were interviewed in Tokyo and Yokohama. The ladies’ comic magazines that were selected contained a total of more than 9,400 pages of comic stories, which were read as artistic and “literary” texts that are subject to a hermeneutic inquiry. They were published by various publishers in Tokyo from 2003 to 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> “Catharsis,” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008. Encyclopedia Britannica Online, (accessed in 2008, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/99492/catharsis>).

<sup>4</sup> “Catharsis,” Wikipedia, February 8, 2008 (accessed 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharsis>).

<sup>5</sup> Alan E. Kazdin, ed., “American Psychological Association,” *Encyclopedia of Psychology 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> T.J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1979), p. 67.

### **A Brief Introduction to Japanese Ladies' Comics**

The predominant form of ladies' comics is the magazine, and they are published monthly, bi-weekly, bi-monthly, and seasonally. Some women's weekly and monthly journals and magazines have a small section for ladies' comics as well. Publishers often issue special issues in addition to the regular issues. The size of almost all the ladies' comic magazines published in Japan today is about 15cm x 21cm (approximately 6in x 8in), and they are usually from 1 1/2 to 2 inches thick. The prices range from about US\$3.80 to \$6.00. The quality of paper is rather coarse, bulky, and cheap, however, it is congenial to printing with different colors of ink that do not smudge fingers. Many Japanese women purchase a few magazines at a time, and they read them at home.

These magazines are source of disposable entertainment and mostly get thrown away after reading or are passed on to another reader. The inferior Japanese housing situation with very small rooms and no extra closet space, rarely makes the ladies' comics a collector's item as with other Japanese comics for boys, young men, and girls. The categories of stories found in ladies comics include drama, romance/fantasy, and pornography as well as variously themed stories based on the readers' own experiences that were submitted to the magazines. The ratings range from an American equivalent of G, PG, and R to X. The majority of readers are women from their twenties to forties; however, some may start reading them as early as in their middle teens, and others may keep reading well into their fifties and sixties. The authors of comics are mostly female artists, but there are some male artists as well.<sup>7</sup>

Japanese ladies comics emerged in the middle of the 1980s, and are actually the latest addition to the scene of modern Japanese comics that developed after WWII. Their popular predecessors are the so-called *Shojo Manga*, or girls' comics, that started around the end of WWII. Many manga artists who drew girls' comics in those days were men, while female artists

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<sup>7</sup> Miya Erino, *Redisu Komikku no Joseigaku* [Gender Studies of Ladies' Comics] (Tokyo: Kosaido Shuppan, 1993); interview with an anonymous editor-in-chief of a leading ladies' comics magazine (2007); interview with an anonymous editor of *Desire SP* (Tokyo: Akita Shoten, 2007); interview with Tsuyoshi Koike, an editor of *Silky* (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2007); and Kinko Ito, "The World of Japanese Ladies' Comics: From Romantic Fantasy to Lustful Perversion" *Journal of Popular Culture* 36/1 (2002).

were rather rare because women's occupational and career choices were very limited. Talented female manga artists such as Masako Watanabe and Miyako Maki debuted in the 1950s and many female artists have followed since then.<sup>8</sup>

At first the target readers were elementary school girls. However, as Japanese girls' comics evolved, the readers became older and quit reading or moved onto reading ladies' comics. New types of girls' comics, as well as the new generations of readers, have emerged in the last sixty years or so. Some popular girls' comics such as *Nakayoshi* (Good Friends) and *Ribon* (Ribbon) have been around since the mid-1950s and *Shōjo Furendo* (Girls' Friend) and *Maagaretto* (Margaret) emerged in the 1960s. By this time the majority of artists were female, and some have been quite popular and successful in becoming millionaires while gaining much fame and respect from society in general.<sup>9</sup>

In June 1968, *Shukan Sebuntin* (Weekly Seventeen) debuted as girls' comics for older girls including teenagers, and certain new magazines that targeted the same age group followed. They were not successful commercially, but they played a very important role as a bridge to the emergence of ladies' comics targeting young and adult women.

The mid-1980s was the time when many ladies' comic magazines were established one after another, and became truly popular. Those readers who grew up reading girls' comics were now becoming young adults, and they wanted to read comics appropriate for their age and life situations. They no longer wanted girlish fantasy and romantic comics that mainly took place in conjunction with seasonal events at school and college. Instead, they desired more realistic and often sexual adult material. Girls comic artists, who got married, had children, and tended to retire in their

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<sup>8</sup> Kinko Ito, "Manga in Japanese History," *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark W. MacWilliams. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008); and Yoshihiro Yonezawa, *Sengo Shōjo Mangashi* [The Postwar History of Girls' Comics] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, *Sengo Shōjo Mangashi*, interview with Mika Tabata, an ex-editor-in-chief of *JOUR* (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2007) Masako Watanabe, *Mangato Ikite*. ([www.futabasha.co.jp](http://www.futabasha.co.jp), 2007).

thirties, started to draw comics for adult women in response to the new demand.

As with any other publication in Japan today, the sales of ladies' comics have been dwindling since the early 1990s; however, the volume of sales is still very high. According to *2005 Shuppan Shihyo Nenpo* (2005 Publication Index Annual), the sale of regular ladies' comic magazines was 42,450,000 copies and the sale of special or additional issues was 21,960,000 copies, which totaled 64,410,000 copies.<sup>10</sup>

The readers of ladies' comics aged over the years, and the content of some of the comic magazines shifted from those that revolved around finding a Prince Charming and getting married to having children and raising them. Many stories now deal with taking care of elderly parents and depict stories of the sandwich generation who have both children and elderly parents to take care of. Even within a single magazine, the female protagonists are not limited to a particular age group or a social category any longer. It seems that the magazines are trying to depict more diverse heroines in order to expand their reader base.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Themes and Contents for Catharsis**

One of the newest trends of Japanese ladies' comics currently taking place is diversification. The ladies' comic magazine publishers need to seek their own niches in a very competitive market. Different comic magazines specialize in certain themes; many solicit the readers' inputs. They ask their readers to answer a survey which is like a popularity contest of manga artists at the end of the magazine. They actively ask the readers to contribute their stories based on their own experiences, whether they are about neighbors, mothers-in-law, husbands, sexual encounters, etc. both in the magazines and on their websites. When the reader's story is adopted for publication as a comic story, the contributor gets paid by the publisher. For example, Bunkasha's *Hontoniatta Shufuno Taiken* (The True Experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Zenkoku Shuppan Kyokai, *2005 Shuppan Shihyo Nenpo* [2005 Publication Index Annual] (Tokyo: Zenkoku Shuppan Kyokai, 2005), p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with an anonymous editor, *Desire SP* (2007); interview with Tsuyoshi Koike; interview with Fumie Nozaki, a manga artist (2007); interview with Mika Tabata; interview with Masako Watanabe, a manga artist (2007).

of Housewives) gives a 10,000 yen cash gift (approximately US\$100), and Take Shobo's *Aino Taiken Supesharu Derakkusu* (Lustful Experiences, Special Deluxe) gives adult goods that are worth 10,000 yen along with a 5,000 yen (about US\$50) bookstore gift certificate. The cash reward is especially nice for the self esteem of those housewives and adds to their own spending money as well.

The themes of Japanese ladies' comics in general are about the reality of everyday life as experienced by Japanese housewives, office workers, and college students: love, romance, friendships with women, lifestyles, mother-child relations, and the PTA. Nowadays, certain ladies' comics magazines, many of which are additional issues, have specific themes such as women's medical issues, mother- and daughter-in-law relationships, crimes committed by women, troublesome neighbors, idiotic husbands, addiction to sex, adultery, etc. These ladies' comic stories also cover social problems such as sexism, divorce, domestic violence, injustice, relationship with the in-laws, abortion, prostitution, crimes against women, etc. that are of interest to sociologists.

For example, *Onnano Byoki Supesharu* (A Special on Female Diseases), a special issue published by Take Shobo in November 2003, contains 13 comic stories and 579 pages as well as several other short comic stories with female protagonists who suffer from various diseases such as ovarian cancer, cervical cancer, fibroids, STD, depression, social phobia, Alzheimer's Disease, hot flashes, palate disorder, Crohn's disease, hemorrhoids, brain tumors, dieting, and alcoholism. The magazine also offers medical columns (not comics) on the diseases covered in the comic stories along with more information on infertility, allergies, panic disorder, etc. All the comic stories feature typical symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments with useful and pragmatic medical information and advice. These comics not only offer entertainment but also provide the readers with medical knowledge which might not be available to them otherwise. In a sense, this kind of special comics belongs to a category of *kyoyo manga*, or educational and informational comics.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kinko Ito, "The *Manga* Culture in Japan."



Figure 1: A scene from Hitomi Mizuki's *"Egaono Mamade."* (Tokyo: Take Shobo, November 2003). Alisa is a housewife who has lost her daughter to a malignant brain tumor two years ago. She is now diagnosed with the same disease. In these scenes at the doctor's office, Alisa asks her doctor, shivering with fear, "How long can I live?" The doctor replies, "Your best bet is one year. If the treatment is successful, maybe you can live a bit longer."

In this particular medical special issue by Take Shobo, all the stories showcase sick women who have to go through an ordeal of one kind or another. They are very sick to begin with, and continually encounter uncontrollable and uncomfortable social and medical situations. Some heroine's mothers-in-law, for example, are depicted as cold-blooded and demanding while their daughters-in-law suffer. There are also husbands who demand that their wives perform their regular household chores as well as take care of the children, while they run up huge debts gambling. The husbands are often very selfish, and they think that their wives should take care of everything domestic whether in health or sickness. The sick heroine must have surgery followed by hospitalization and radiation or chemotherapy. Some require a long rest and rehabilitation at home, too. There still exists a high double standard in regard to gender roles in Japan.

Bunkasha's *Dokusha Toko! Biyoseikei Shippaidan* (Contributions From The Readers: Experiences of Failed Plastic Surgeries) was published in September, 2007. This magazine has six comic stories with 262 pages

and is very affordable at 380 yen, or about US\$3.80. All six stories showcase examples of failed plastic surgery that the contributors experienced as the title of the magazine specifies. The majority of the comic's stories deal with the heroine's anxiety, frustration, and stress of being born so ugly, their social alienation, psychological agony, difficulties with maintaining relationships, and their decisions to have plastic surgery. The heroine becomes a new person after the surgery, but the story does not end happily there. She encounters reactions from others, both positive and negative. Usually the reactions are very positive at first, and she is elated. It is a new and wonderful world; then, when it is revealed that "the beauty" is a result of plastic surgery, the comments turn very negative and the people start to bully and insult the heroine. We can observe a deep-seated and sinister type of Japanese bullying in several stories. The heroine's boyfriend or husband blames her and says that she lied to him and lacks integrity. She must also cope with the consequences of her decision and live with them, whether happily or unhappily, for the rest of her life. The comic stories have closure at the end of the story when the heroine comes to terms with her life and plastic surgery.

The readers read these horrible and rather sad stories and come to realize how lucky they are just to be able to have an ordinary day. It could be a dull and boring day, but when compared with these deformed heroines, being able to get up in the morning and spend a day without being sick and miserable with pain, both physical and psychological, is truly a blessing. The distorted faces of the heroines, the tears and sweat that accompany their fear or pain are often depicted in detail. These visual texts make the stories appeal to the readers in a much more powerful manner, inducing pity and fear that they could be next. The heroines are in a much worse situation, but they are trying their best to deal with a particularly bad situation and focus on a realistic solution to the problem. They actually give the readers energy to keep going. The stories cause the readers' catharsis that derives from terror, pity, or fear.

*Hontoniatta Shufuno Taiken* (The True Experiences of Housewives) published by Bunkasha in June 2005, featured "The Moment When I Wanted Divorce." All of the 14 comic stories with the total of 548 pages were submitted by the readers, except one story which was based on a manga artist's own story. The comic stories depict the worst and most horrible scenarios for divorce. The women are often denied love and affection, and they are abused verbally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically, not only by their husbands but also by their mothers-in-law or



sisters-in-law. The husband's family often uses the wife as a domestic slave. The husbands are characterized as irresponsible, uncaring, immature, selfish, and cold. They are basically the worst cases of Japanese lazy bastards and jerks. Some are mama's boys who are under their mother's reign and cannot defend their wives. Other men are out of work and are not willing to find a job to provide for their families. Some are not interested in having sex with their wives because they are having an affair or in a condition of perpetual impotence. The husbands from hell are persistent and do not easily let their wives go or give them any freedom. Some stories showcase a lack of communication that leads to misunderstanding and resentment as well as frustration and anger.



Figure 2. A scene from Miu Ichikawa's "*Yumekara Sameta Yume.*" In this comic story, Ichikawa depicts Yoko (herself), a manga artist who married a mediocre manga artist. Her husband is vain, lazy, obsessive, and violent. He abuses her physically, emotionally, and verbally. She cannot stand his escalating domestic violence, and tries very hard to get a divorce for her and her daughter's safety and peace of mind. In this scene, her husband has been trying to choke her in his anger and frustration. Suddenly he notices that she passed out. In *Hontoniatta Shufuno Taiken* (Tokyo: Bunkasha, June 2005) p. 26.

Regardless of the story lines, the heroines want a divorce, and some do get divorced, despite all the odds. The readers who are not satisfied

with their marriage and family may identify with the heroines since the problems they encounter are social facts which a prominent sociologist, Emile Durkheim, calls “normal.” These are phenomena that have existed since the beginning of history and in every society. They are widespread and common. When there is an abnormal phenomenon which has not existed before or certain rates, such as divorce or crime, go up unusually high, Durkheim calls the social phenomenon “pathological.”<sup>13</sup> In recent years, Japan has been witnessing pathological cases of child and wife abuse, as well as violent crimes such as murders committed by family members. These cases are also featured in many ladies’ comic stories.

Social problems, which had been hidden, ignored, or considered rather “normal” by the majority of people before, have now been emerging. They are everywhere in Japan, and they are being recognized by the mass media, which tend to sensationalize matters. Kasakura Shuppansha publishes the monthly *Katei Sasupensu* (Family Suspense). In July 2005, they published *Tonarino Hanzaisha* (The Next-door Criminal) as an additional special issue. The magazine featured 16 comic stories with a total of 580 pages that contained stories about sexless marriages, adultery, bullying, domestic violence, sexual abuse, abortion, murders, child abuse, internet crimes, high school girl prostitution, etc. Obviously the editors and artists of ladies’ comics find their topics and hints for comics as they read newspapers, novels, books, magazines, the internet, listen to radio broadcasts, or watch TV shows.<sup>14</sup>

There are also comics that specialize in manga stories dealing with *kando*, which are positive, touching, and moving emotions. Hiroko Kazama, a manga artist, said in my interview, “Comics is a human business. I want to express human beings and humanism in my stories.”<sup>15</sup>

The readers are truly moved by tear-jerking, wonderful, and more serious human stories and dramas. Usually the story deals with women’s social and psychological experiences and their development as a human being that entail her life, family, work, etc. Other themes include more

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<sup>13</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Midori Kawabata, a manga artist, (2005, 2007); interview with Hiroko Kazama, a manga artist, (2007); interview with Tsuyoshi Koike; interview with Fumie Nozaki; interview with Masako Watanabe.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Hiroko Kazama.

psychological and psychosocial factors such as independence, co-dependence, dealing with bosses, identity crisis, pursuing careers, aging, senility, compassion for the less fortunate, etc. The lines that the characters speak are often very realistic and contain wisdom that comes only to those who have experienced these specific things. The intricate relationship is also often the key to the success of the story, and, usually, there is a great ending, whether a happy one or a tragic one, that leaves the readers quite touched and moved. Some stories are truly great and are comparable to great literature when it comes to the emotional reaction of the readers. For example, in *Dejiiru DX* (Desire Deluxe) published by Akita Shoten in January 2006, as an extra number, has 11 stories with the total of 597 pages.

Most comic stories feature all-inclusive human love and affection among family members, couples, friends, lovers, co-workers, and neighbors. They cover not only feelings and emotions of contentment but also sad and difficult ones such as the ones we encounter with the sickness and death of our loved ones. The stories often contain happy and comical, as well as serious and tragic elements. For some heroines, bad luck and hard times come again and again like the waves of a tsunami. Beautifully drawn humanism and human love touch the heart of the reader. A box of Kleenex is a must in order to deal with the tears and runny nose! The stories become a catharsis for emotional release. An anonymous editor of *Desire* said, "We want our readers to feel good and heartened after reading our comics. We want to provide them with hope and positive feelings about everyday life. We would like them to feel healed."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with an editor of *Desire SP*.



Figure 3: A scene from Setsuko Kaneko's "*Omoizaka Mayoimichi*" in *Desire DX*. (Tokyo: Akita Shoten, January 2006) p. 53. In this scene from her childhood memories, her mother is hugging Izumi very tightly. She is apologizing to her by saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She found out that she has terminal cancer and does not have many days left. Young Izumi says to her crying, "No, please do not go to heaven." Her mother's heart is broken because she has to leave her family behind. She hugs all her children to convey how much she loves them, while their father is crying along with them.

Tsuyoshi Koike used to be an editor of a girls' comic magazine before he became an editor of *Shirukii* (Silky, a ladies' comic magazine) at Hokusensha in Tokyo in 2003. *Silky* magazine was founded in 1985. Koike said in my interview, "The contents and themes of our ladies' comics are basically those stories that make readers feel compassionate, gentle, and tender after reading." Koike wants the readers to be reminded of feelings such as falling in love and the happiness a woman felt upon getting married, which she tends to forget as time passes. He said, "Of course, human feelings and emotions entail various kinds and shades. Even when the protagonists hate each other at the beginning of the story, they take care of the problem, and the ending is a very positive one." For Koike the most important thing about his ladies' comic magazine is that it is not only entertaining but that it also touches the readers' hearts. They will learn from

a female protagonist, that when she faces a problem, she tries very hard to deal with it instead of blaming others and finding an easy way out. The heroine matures in the process of solving the problem. Koike said, "Many housewives, who are the readers, tend to lose their identity as an individual. They are a 'mother of this child,' 'a wife of that husband,' etc. Their lives revolve around the roles they play, and they lose their own sense of self." They should recognize that their place is here and that they are truly loved by those who surround them. Everyone needs to be supported, and mutual support is the key to happiness. As with all other stories, ladies' comic magazines contend that our social life consists of structures of relations. Thus the most crucial element of ladies' comics is the relationship that the protagonists maintain.

*Silky* solicits the readers to contribute their own stories every other month. In general, Koike receives between 100 and 200 stories. Most comic stories in *Silky* have between 40 and 50 pages, and all the protagonists are female. Koike considers that ladies' comics are a reflection of the realities of everyday life of Japanese women, and that they are the products of the time in which we live right now. The freshness of the stories will evaporate soon, and Koike, just like other ladies' comic artists and editors, keeps up with current affairs. He reads different genres of comics (boys', young men's, girls', and ladies' comics), weekly magazines for women, novels, books, checks internet blogs, and watches TV. He needs to know the new trends in society in order to keep the popularity of his ladies' comics, which leads to sales, and eventually, to the survival of the magazine.<sup>17</sup>

For the publishers of ladies' comics, the bottom line is sales. When the sale of a magazine dwindles, usually it is the editor-in-chief who gets blamed, fired, or moved to another section of the company.<sup>18</sup> The magazines are truly supported by the readers, and the editors need to be very sensitive to the readers' reactions, support, and shifts in interests. Several ladies' comic magazines have a section for a survey at the end of the magazine. The questionnaire asks the readers to provide information such as their name, address, age, phone number, occupation, and marital status. The publisher also asks them to list the best three stories as well as the worst three stories. The readers are also asked to vote for their favorite

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Tsuyoshi Koike.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with an anonymous editor of a leading ladies' comic magazine (2007).

artist, and give their comments, reactions, and suggestions. The magazines also solicit readers' input and stories in the same section.<sup>19</sup>

Midori Kawabata, a manga artist who has many suspense comic stories, told me in my interview that she gets most of her story ideas from TV and the internet. She said she is constantly studying and researching topics for her comics in order to draw satisfactory comics for adult women. Kawabata said, "There may be claims sent to the editorial office when the information given in comics is inaccurate. When a claim comes, the manga artist has to post a note in the next issue apologizing for the errors. Artists with too many claims, as in any business, are not appreciated."<sup>20</sup>

Both the artist and the editor must be very sensitive to what the readers' needs are in order to remain popular. Fumie Nozaki who draws manga for the humanistic kind of ladies' comic magazines said, "Once, I drew a manga in which a female protagonist was having an affair. Some readers wrote to the editorial office protesting that they did not like the story. I think the readers of *Judy* are good-hearted, healthy, and moral. They did not like the unethical aspect of committing adultery."<sup>21</sup>

Ladies' comics, in general, are realistic and down-to-earth. They contain very practical and pragmatic information and advice on legal issues, medical knowledge, domestic technology, social relations, etc. which women can use in their everyday lives.<sup>22</sup> This is partly because many ladies' comic artists consider ladies' comics to be entertainment for adult women who have more social experiences and who are more aware of current affairs. The comic artists are also in their thirties and forties like their readers. Hiroko Kazama thinks that real life experiences, including her own, are very important ingredients of ladies' comics because whether they are about a success or a failure they can teach the readers lessons about life.<sup>23</sup> Fumie Nozaki also said in her interview with me that all her living experiences with her husband, daughters, and parents helped her create her stories. Nozaki says that the ladies' comics are more realistic than girls'

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with an editor of *Desire S*; interview with Tsuyoshi Koike; interview with Mika Tabata.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Midori Kawabata (2007).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Fumie Nozaki (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Kinko Ito, "Japanese Ladies' Comics as Agents of Socialization: The Lessons They Teach," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5/2 (2003): 59.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Hiroko Kazama (2007).

comics in terms of content because they depict the everyday life experiences of ordinary women. She wants to keep drawing ladies' comics that are heart-warming and give the readers positive messages about life.<sup>24</sup>

### **Vicarious Experience in Occupations and Gender Roles**

Japanese ladies' comic stories feature protagonists in many pink collar occupations such as an actress, bar hostess, clerk, cook, elevator attendant, housekeeper, housewife, model, nurse, office worker, prostitute, sales woman, S & M Queen, secretary, sex slave, shop owner, stewardess, stripper, student, teacher, and waitress. Other occupations include attorney, detective, doctor, executive, locksmith, police woman, taxi driver, travel agent, and writer. There are indeed a variety of heroines with different ages, occupations, and social and marital status within a single comic magazine. In many cases, the readers vicariously experience the terrible situations that the woman encounters such as toxic bosses, unfriendly and bullying co-workers, long and exhausting hours of work, and accepting the consequences of mistakes, etc. Certain situations are so bad that the readers feel pity and also relief that they do not have to go through the things that the female protagonist struggles with. Housewifery is often dull and boring and lacks excitement, but it does not have the hardship that comes with pursuing one's career or working outside of the house. This leads to catharsis.

As for gender roles, the women are depicted in very typical gender stereotypes, and are more or less the traditional and domestic gender roles. Many stories revolve around the dilemma and stress of being a working woman and being a wife and mother at the same time without much domestic help from their husbands. Many female characters, both the heroines and the supporting characters, appear as aunts, caretakers, daughters, daughters-in-law, girlfriends, granddaughters, grandmothers, housewives, lovers, mistresses, mothers, mothers-in-law, neighbors, nieces, nymphomaniacs, nurturers, sisters, sisters-in-law, wives, and widows.

Japanese women have made small advances in their jobs and careers, and more and more heroines in non-pink collar occupations are featured in recent ladies' comics. They are more powerful and those women in pink-collar jobs, who are more traditional with more nurturing and feminine traits, also tend to show more active selves. The readers meet

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Fumie Nozaki, (2007).

these new types of Japanese women as they read the comics. The readers may be frustrated in their everyday life as a bored housewife or a career woman whose male colleagues put her down or insult her because of her sex. However, by identifying with the capable protagonist who is independent, intelligent, and who has problem-solving abilities along with an uncommon assertiveness, the readers can enjoy the social situations depicted in the comics as bystanders. Readers are also free to use the tactics in their actual social interactions. It seems that Japanese women are gaining more power in their intimate relationships; they know what to do with their lives without sacrificing themselves and some attain recognition as career women or community leaders, at least in the world of Japanese ladies' comics.

Closely related to the notion of gender roles in Japan are the notions of obligations in human relationships that many protagonists find very difficult or that contradict their true feelings. There are different terms for obligation in Japanese that are unique to the social relationships.<sup>25</sup> For example, a female protagonist owes *on* to her parents, who had her and raised her. *On* is a passively incurred obligation that needs to be repaid but there is no time limit. She can return *on* to her parents by getting married and having her own children, not to mention giving gifts and spending time together with them. She owes *gimu* to her children. It is an obligation that is "compulsory" in nature, as a parent she needs to take care of her children, love them, and socialize them. The protagonist owes *giri* to her in-laws. This obligation must be repaid in full and there is a time limit. In many ladies' comic stories, the protagonist is caught between these different obligations that she needs to attend to, and she suffers because often times it is not her desire but her social obligation that takes a priority. She wants to do certain things first, but it is impossible and the dilemma occupies the center of the story.

### **Pornographic Japanese Ladies' Comics**

Many ladies' comics in the pornography category depict women as sexual and sensual animals; therefore, anything sensual and sexual goes into the stories! Four-letter words, very derogatory names and terms for female body parts, and onomatopoeia of the sounds of the sexual act appear very

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<sup>25</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1986), pp.114-143.



often. The women initially have some hesitation to go into the sexual act or relationship with a man (or men) even though they admit that they think of it. Gradually they are exposed to the ultimate joy of sex, including oral and anal sex as well as bondage. Incest, orgies, self-eroticism (especially with certain devices), and voyeurism are often popular themes. However, a recent censorship issue makes the publishers very careful about the depiction of sex and violence.<sup>26</sup>

Asako Shiomi said in my interview with her that she enjoys drawing both dramatic and emotional ladies' comics as well as pornographic comics. She debuted as a girls' comic artist in 1970, but now she draws exclusively for ladies' comics. Shiomi's comics always contain an extraordinary sexual fantasy not found in everyday life and an imaginary setting. Shiomi said in her interview:

The Japanese women are not really open to their sexuality. I want my readers to explore their sexuality in a safe place called ladies' comics where they do not have to take responsibilities for their sexual encounters. It is the world of fantasy, and I want to depict the ultimate female carnal pleasure in my comics where male characters serve the needs of a female protagonist. Men are there to serve her, not the other way around, as in comics for men.<sup>27</sup>

In the world of ladies' comics, some protagonists are loved by multiple men or have relationships with much younger and more handsome men. The heroines are sensually seductive, sexually aggressive, and assertive in the search for the ultimate joy in sex. They experiment with their sexuality, and the good-looking men are mere sexual "tools" for them. This is the complete opposite of men's comics in which women are often depicted as convenient sex objects and slaves at the mercy of Japanese men.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Asako Shiomi, a manga artist (2007); interview with Mika Tabata (2007); and "The World of Japanese Ladies' Comics: From Romantic Fantasy to Lustful Perversion."

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Asako Shiomi (2007).

<sup>28</sup> "Images of Women in Weekly Male Comic Magazines in Japan."



Figure 4: A scene from Asako Shiomi's *'Fuyuno Sange.'* (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2004), p. 13. In this scene the female protagonist, Natsuo, remembers her first kiss when she was a teenager. She visited her uncle and was kissed by her handsome cousin who was engaged. After this incident she went to her cousins' bedroom because she could not sleep. With the bedroom door slightly open she eye witnessed her cousin and his fiancé engaging in S & M. Shiomi writes Natsuo's thoughts as: "The kiss was somewhat sensual and as she was being kissed, she felt an aching desire in the innermost part of her body. It was a scary sensation." It is not only the visual images but also the sensual wording of the narrative that adds sensuality to Shiomi's comics.

Pornographic ladies' comics range from romantic soft porn to hard core S & M and other types of sexual acts. For example, the innocent and pure protagonist gets raped or gang-raped. She is initiated into anal sex or S & M, etc. both involuntarily and voluntarily. The heroines eventually reach the climax of ultimate carnal pleasure. There is always a struggle of the psychological sort in the process though. The female protagonist who gets raped feels ashamed and betrayed by other human beings at first, and this is what her mind feels. Her body, on the other hand, cannot forget the pure pleasure of hot and lustful sex which her husband can never provide her, and her body always reminds her of the unforgettable sexual encounter. She

starts to crave the excitement again. Some women take revenge and even kill the men who violated them.<sup>29</sup>

Today's Japanese women are more liberated in terms of their sexuality, and many have sex at a much earlier age than ever before. The protagonist's sexual encounter and actions are legitimate because it is a consequence of true love, or maybe the illegitimate affair was due to the lack of love, appreciation, attention, and affection shown by her uncommunicative and unappreciative husband. On the other hand, the tradition that a decent Japanese woman must be demure and submissive dies hard. Many Japanese women are very ambivalent about their sexuality, and suffer from the gap between the prescribed role of a decent wife and the real self that craves good sex. The ladies' comics can release such repression and let the women enjoy and explore their sexuality in an imaginary and safe place called the world of ladies' comics. This leads to their catharsis.

### Summary

Japanese ladies' comics is a form of entertainment that appeals to one's emotions and sexuality as a connection to social, intellectual, and human existence. They cover a wide range of stories that depict ordinary women's everyday lives. They provide the readers with the wonderful world of fantasy, romance, and sex as well as pragmatic social, psychological, legal, and medical advice for women. The key element in ladies' comics is relationship. Women's social life revolves around structures of relationships pertaining to love, family, work, etc.<sup>30</sup>

The heroines and characters that dominate in the Japanese ladies' comic stories are usually housewives and their family, young women who are in the marriage market, and sometimes career women. The protagonists are rather simple, ordinary, and common women. The superhero characters such as Cat Woman, Wonder Woman, and Hawk Woman in American comics never appear as protagonists in Japanese ladies' comics.

With the advent of new technologies, the ladies' comics are even available on the internet and cellphones. Readers can easily download

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<sup>29</sup> Kinko Ito, "The World of Japanese Ladies' Comics."

<sup>30</sup> Kinko Ito, "Growing Up Japanese Reading Manga," *International Journal of Comics Art* 6/2 (2004), "Japanese Ladies' Comics as Agents of Socialization: The Lessons They Teach."

comics at a cheaper cost, and some editors worry about the future of ladies' comics not using the medium of paper. As with many other publications in Japan, the sales of ladies' comic magazines are slowly dwindling, and both the editors and artists are very concerned. The publishers are very sensitive about the needs of the readers and pay a great deal of attention to their reactions, comments, and support.<sup>31</sup> The bottom line for the publishers is sales. In order to find a niche in a very tight market, many publishers are now focusing on certain themes and topics for their publication. Diversification characterizes today's Japanese ladies' comics both on the level of the magazine, and within a single magazine with different types of heroines. Many publishers solicit contributions from readers, and when their stories are adopted, a gift of one kind or another is given.

Life is full of surprises, but, at times, it can get repetitive, dull, and boring. Many Japanese women suffer from social alienation both at home and at work as well as psychological stress, frustration, and problems that seem to have no answers or solutions. The ladies' comics are cheap and readily available mass entertainment for Japanese women, and they function as a catharsis for feeling a bit of happiness found in everyday life situations as the readers read the stories and get into the world of ladies' comics that ends in emotional and psychological release as well as an escape from reality. A reader ends up feeling a bit of happiness as she finishes reading ladies comics thanks to a catharsis.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Akiko Miyazaki, a manga artist, (2007); interview with Mika Tabata.