

## Comics Forum

# Shōjo Manga Research: The Legacy of Women Critics and Their Gender-Based Approach by Masafumi Monden

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Shōjo manga varies in style and genre.[1] But despite this diversity, there is a certain conception of shōjo manga aesthetics, dominated by images of flowers, ribbons, fluttering hem skirts, and innocent-looking girls with large, staring eyes.[2] Traditionally, the beginning of shōjo manga has been equated with Tezuka Osamu's *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no kishi*), but more recent studies have instead focused on prior texts,[3] namely the creations of Takahashi Macoto, who was influenced by the so-called lyrical illustrations (*jojōga*) of artists such as Nakahara Jun'ichi, Takabatake Kashō and Takehisa Yumeji.[4] Manga influenced by *jojōga* have arguably prioritized visual qualities.[5]

The importance of visual qualities has increasingly been recognized in shōjo manga studies.[6] However, most critical examinations of shōjo manga place emphasis on the role of narrative structure and representation of gender. This applies particularly to those who read shōjo manga as a medium to challenge conventional gender roles. As Iwashita Hōsei points out, female manga researchers especially have tended to focus on biological and socially constructed gender (2013a: 58). This column discusses two such works, Fujimoto Yukari's *Where is my place in the world?* (1998, revised edition 2008) and Oshiyama Michiko's *Discussion of Gender Representation in Shōjo Manga: Forms of "Cross-dressed Girls" and Identity* (2007, revised edition 2013).

While studies of shōjo manga have been around since the 1970s, it is still a new and developing discipline. However, on closer inspection, a pattern emerges. Studies of shōjo manga, both in Japanese and English, particularly but not exclusively by female scholars, examine the genre as a subversion of patriarchal order which is assumed to limit young women to a state of powerlessness due to their fixation on "female" gender.[7] As stated by Takeuchi (2010: 96), such reading of shōjo manga usually focuses on works published in the 1970s, notably gender bending narratives about boys in love with other boys (e.g. Hagio and Takemiya's famous works), or cross-dressed heroines (as Ikeda Riyoko's *The Rose of Versailles*). This discursive trajectory then leads to the "queer" genres of Boys' Love (BL, or *yaoi*) or more recent fighting heroines in male attire.[8] Conversely, this leads to a lack of scholarly interest in "typical" or "conventional" shōjo manga, typified by flowers, ribbons, and innocent girls with large, staring eyes.

Remarkably enough, those who use shōjo manga to challenge conventional gender norms often revoke "girlish qualities," and by implication (girlish) femininity. For example, shifting the focus from the specific 1970s titles to BL or cross-dressed fighting girls in the late 1990s, and from there to more recent shōjo manga, sidelines the majority of 1980s and 1990s shōjo manga. That period was predominated by so-called school-life narratives set in Japan, in continuation of the "maiden-esque" (*otomechikku*) style of the 1970s.[9] Perhaps because of their emphasis on girlish qualities, such mainstream shōjo manga like Honda Keiko's *Moon night, starry dawn* (*Tsuki no yoru hoshi no asa*, 1983-5) have been perceived as less subversive than the ones which visually, and hence explicitly, blur the distinction between masculine and feminine.

<sup>1</sup> of The underlying perception of (girlish) femininity as unfavorable, is exemplified in the monographs by 8/04/15 4:34 PM

Fujimoto Yukari and Oshiyama Michiko. Fujimoto's *Where is my place in the world?* (1998), one of the most frequently cited works in shōjo manga studies. Based on her extensive experience as a magazine editor, Fujimoto offers close readings of shōjo manga through the concept of gender. Her book illuminates changes in shōjo manga, and rather than merely following the usual trajectory of shōjo manga discourse (starting from the 1970s and jumping into the 2000s), she casts light on understudied artists such as Nishitani Yoshiko, Ichijō Yukari, Matsunae Akemi, and Shimizu Reiko. Moreover, her analysis of shōjo manga pursues not just one, but several representational issues, including romance, growing up, family, society, career, and female relationships. Fujimoto's analysis is strongly influenced by her personal experiences as an informed reader "who has immersed herself in reading shōjo manga for 30 years" (190). In other words, her reading of manga is neither supported by solid social, cultural, or historical evidence, nor by a theoretical framework. Furthermore, due to her initial position as an editor and manga critic, her writings may be classed as journalism rather than scholarship. In addition, Fujimoto tends to describe her personal reading history as a shared experience among female readers, as distinct from male readers who supposedly do not read shōjo manga.

Fujimoto argues that shōjo manga represents girl readers' fear of sexuality, and hence their perception of "femininity," a word which she uses almost synonymously with "female sexuality" in a derogatory tone (50). For Fujimoto, shōjo manga is a medium for women, a text that reflects the values of women most accurately, including the ideology of romance, which teaches female readers to dedicate themselves to love, whether mutual or unrequited (14). Men, she writes, do not fall into that "trap" because they know romance is another name for lust (25). Her negative casting of "femininity" is also evident in her interpretation of Boys' Love, where she endorses the view that "beautiful boys" in shōjo manga (and yaoi) are nothing more than girls without the female body, and are hence liberated from (unfavorable) feminine sexuality, which for her is synonymous with passivity and objectification in the beginning (142-3).

Takahashi rightly notes that critics like Fujimoto (and Yokomori Rika in a similar way) overestimate the power of shōjo manga narratives in influencing their readers while undervaluing their visual properties (2008: 134). In addition, as Takemiya Keiko states, manga is a popular media, aiming at appealing to a wider audience (2011: 96). This latter remark relates to the necessity for manga of staying sensitive to social trends and creating an affinity between the readership and its contents. It also illuminates the fundamental characteristic of manga, let alone shōjo manga: to entertain. Moreover, even among female readers, reading experiences of shōjo manga can differ depending on factors such as social status, generation, and taste. In this regard, Fujimoto's almost fan-like approach actually indicates how readers make sense of shōjo manga differently.

Fujimoto mentions that the aim of her book is to trace changes in shōjo manga through the themes of romance, sexuality, family, and business, and she begins with the description of "genuine" shōjo manga works (by Nishitani Shōko and Ichijō Yukari) (4). However, in the chapter where career is concerned, she uses manga clearly not targeted at girls, but more precisely described as "women's (*josei*) manga" – probably because she attempts to illustrate the deviation of shōjo manga from works where heterosexual romance was a quintessential tool to affirm the identity of the insecure and passive girl, to those where the girl has started to actively claim a "place for herself." This raises questions about what shōjo manga, after all, is.

There seems to be a growing concern about this issue. Kan et al. (2012), Iwashita (2013a), and Kuramochi (2013) offer the following definitions: Kuramochi, a curator at Kyoto International Manga Museum and specialist in shōjo manga, cites the museum's criteria of: "works that are initially published in shōjo manga magazines" (2013: 203). This is based on a media studies approach with a special focus on readership, which Iwashita also utilizes. But manga are increasingly published without specific age and gender targets or format specifications (e.g. online). Correspondingly, Kuramochi suggests defining shōjo manga as graphic narratives that turn on the "maiden (*otome*) switch," triggering dreamy, girlish imaginations (204). Visual properties are, quite obviously, essential for such imaginations.

Oshiyama Michiko's study of cross-dressed heroines in shōjo manga (2007) takes a path similar to Fujimoto's. Her work offers extensive data on shōjo manga featuring female characters in male attire from the 1950s to 2000s, with interviews with the artists (particularly Ikeda Riyoko) and reader comments published in magazines. Oshiyama's numerous examples of manga works, most of which were initially published in such shōjo-targeted magazines like *Nakayoshi*, *Margaret*, *LaLa*, and *Chao*, correspond with Kuramochi's general definition of shōjo manga and thus are more "typical" than Fujimoto's. It is quite obvious, however, that Oshiyama, too, tends to perceive (girlish) femininity as a negative quality that restricts women. In such a view, "masculinity" equates to intelligence, agency, and independence while "femininity" equates to passivity, dependence, and oppression. For Oshiyama, Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles* (*Berusaiyu no bara*, 1972-3), a cross-dressed heroine who becomes the commander of the Royal Guard and is responsible for the safety of Marie Antoinette in France on the eve of the Revolution, is the "first" example of a cross-dressed young woman who truly possesses both masculine and feminine attributes, and is unrestricted by the conventional gender norms (209). Another manga to which Oshiyama pays particular attention is Saitō Chiho's *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (*Shōjo kakumei Utena*, 1996-8) in which a teenage girl dressed in male school uniform engages in a series of sword duels whose winner will receive the "power to revolutionize the world." According to Oshiyama (278), after *Utena*, the heroine in male attire that had challenged the established notions of gender became rare while the theme of cross-dressing continued to exist in manga such as Nakajo Hisaya's *Hana-Kimi* (*Hanazakari no kimitachi e*, 1996-2004) and Hatori Bisco's *Ouran High School Host Club* (*Ouran kōkō hosuto kurabu*, 2002-10). But here, the concept of cross-dressing has become a fashionable prop to make the narrative more dramatic. The loss of gender-subversive challenge is further highlighted in the 2013 revised edition of Oshiyama's book where she provides a close analysis of Hatori's work.

Although focusing on cross-dressing, Oshiyama does not pay much attention to dress (apart from the ribbons and dresses of Tezuka's *Princess Knight* and Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles*). Instead, she substantiates gender differences by means of differently depicted chins, eyes, and eyelashes. Eyes are important in shōjo manga [10], but as their rendering can vary between artists, they might not be the most reliable analytical tool for examining gender-related meanings. Moreover, Oshiyama seems to imply a one-dimensional appearance of femininity with Oscar being the only character able to assume both female and male traits according to context and partner. Her argument can be summarised thus: male attire indicates the female character is liberated and active, while female dress suggests she is oppressed and passive. This is particularly notable in Oshiyama's analysis of *The Rose of Versailles* where she perceives the frill and lace-clad female characters as being "trapped" in conventional femininity (2007: 184). Both Fujimoto (134) and Oshiyama emphasize the importance of cross-dressed heroines in shōjo manga, and both argue that the history of shōjo manga begins with a princess in male attire. However, though cross-dressing has been vital, it has also been overemphasized. In fact, other genres have been likewise important, such as ballet manga, for example.

Ballet manga have been created since the early 1950s [11], and thus the history of ballet manga may correspond to the history of shōjo manga itself. But until recently, ballet manga has received almost no serious scholarly attention.[12] One reason for this lack is that ballet manga have been perceived as not "gender-transgressive" enough. This brings to mind the inclination of shōjo manga studies to perceive (girlish) femininity in a derogatory way.

Are other interpretations of femininity in shōjo manga possible? The concept of "feminine" beauty as conveyed visually in shōjo manga through a cascade of gauzy ballet costumes and fluttering dresses can indeed be a very powerful, and empowering, tool. The graphically voluminous decoration of women's dresses as such can very well signify power through visibility. Full skirts, bodices, and sartorial decorations give substance to female claims of importance by increasing their physical size to at least double that of men. This idea applies to the depiction of Marie Antoinette, juxtaposed against the uniform-clad Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles*, for example in the scene at the ball where Oscar declines Marie Antoinette's persuasion to dance like other court ladies because she is, first and foremost, a military person.[13] While the scene itself might be symbolic of Oscar's "transgression"[14], visually, readers are drawn to the "feminine" presence of Marie Antoinette who, due to her dress, appears

almost three times bigger than Oscar. Ikeda herself stated in an interview that in order to keep girl readers engaged in historical manga, she needed to use beautiful and glamorous props such as beautiful dresses.[32]

Indeed, the meanings ascribed to “feminine” or “girlish” dresses in shōjo manga can be far more complex, as ballet manga of celebrated artists like Takahashi Macoto and Maki Miyako have exemplified.[33] From the 1970s onwards, manga by artists such as Yamagishi Ryōko and Ariyoshi Kyōko increasingly used the romantic beauty of ballet as a means to offer more serious and realistic depictions of psychological complexity and sexuality. Takeuchi Naoko’s figure-skating manga *The Cherry Project* (1990-1) and Mizusawa Megumi’s *Toe Shoes* (1997-8), originally serialized in *Nakayoshi* and *Ribbon* (Ribon) both predominantly shōjo-targeted, are addressing such realities as the value of ambition, hard work, and daily practice, while confronting also the negative effects of training like injury, however lightly. The highly romantic art of Yamagishi, Ariyoshi, Takeuchi and Mizusawa, which manifests itself in the flowing full skirts of tulle, ribbons and scattering flowers, undoubtedly helped such underlying themes to be comfortably communicated to the reader. Therefore, highly “girlish” visual qualities materialized in the use of dresses, flowers, and romantic narratives should not be missed.

The above survey of shōjo manga studies is intended to show that attention to qualities other than explicitly gender-subversive narratives can be equally important for advancing the genre as a scholarly topic. Paying more attention to visual and fashion aspects as well as less known works and thematic sub-genres can further illuminate the cultural uniqueness of shōjo manga.

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[1] Iwashita 2013a: 11; Schodt, 1983: 101

[2] Honda 2010 [1980]; Kan et al 2012: 7

[3] Iwashita 2013b: 196-7

<sup>5</sup> of 6 [4] Fujimoto 2012 [2007]; Kuramochi 2013; Takahashi 2008

[5] Kuramochi 2013: 208

[6] See Welker 2006, Takahashi 2008, Fujimoto 2012[2007], Suter 2012, Iwashita 2013a

[7] Ogi 2001; Kan et al. 2012: 14; Dollase 2010: 74

[8] See Ogi 2001; Oshiyama 2007; Shamoon 2012

[9] Kan et al. 2012: 17-8; Prough 2011: 51

[10] Iwashita 2013b: 195

[11] Yamada 2013: 32-5

[12] See Monden 2014

[13] Ikeda 1994 [1972]: 89

[14] Oshiyama 2007: 168

[15] 1980 cited in Oshiyama 2007: 241

[16] Kyoto International Museum 2013: 11; Monden 2014: 274-8

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