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Representations of Women in Six Japanese Folk Tales

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Abstract

Folk tales are a valuable means of socializing children into the accepted cultural practices and beliefs in any given society. They are designed to entertain but also "to reflect and disclose our cultural presuppositions and values" (Toolan 1998:164). However, just what these values are depends on the nature and priorities of the culture in which they occur. For example, the purpose of the folk tale in Japanese is to acknowledge the cyclic structure of life (Tosu 1985).

This social purpose of the folk tale is achieved, in part, by how the protagonists in a story are portrayed: the way the characters are evaluated by the author, the events and actions in which they engage and their 'habitual tenor of existence' (Hasan 1996:55). Real life cultural values and behaviour are thus reflected in folk tales, including the conceptualization of women.

This study demonstrates the linguistic choices which operate to represent women as both powerless and powerful, depending on the context, in six well known Japanese folk tales. The study uses transitivity and appraisal analyses with the results suggesting that the attitudes of and towards women within the tales reflect and disclose Japanese presuppositions towards women.

1 Background

Within the realm of Western critical discourse analysis, the representations of both men and women are well documented (see for example, Cranny-Francis 1992; Tannen (?)....). Men are construed as active, competitive, rational and heroic, while women as passive, helpless, emotional, nurturing etc. These images reflect a patriarchal discourse of sexuality. The images of masculinity and femininity

*have a powerful normative effect, they establish particular ways of behaving as feminine or masculine, so that any individual who attempts to dress, behave or event think differently faces the social sanction of being, by (patriarchal) definition, abnormal. As such they are an important part of understanding both how texts are engendered and how they engender their consumers (Cranny-Francis 1992: 2).*

In relation to Japanese society, there is lots of anecdotal evidence to suggest that Japan, too, operates within a cultural framework of patriarchy. The central claim of this study is that women in Japanese folk tales are represented stereotypically within a traditional hegemonic discourse - a discourse which 'naturalises' the good woman as self-sacrificing, domestically agentive, powerless without spousal or parental permission, aspirational in marriage and a good hostess, and the bad woman as duplicitous, agentive over men and punishable for crimes and indiscretions. Quantitative and qualitative evidence will be presented to support this claim.

The quantitative analysis involves two methodologies. Firstly, the female roles in the tales are classified according to Petrova's (2004) classification system, originally developed to investigate male characters in Japanese folk tales. The female roles are classified according to their role in the tale, their physical state of being, their associations, their capacity to transform and their origins. Secondly, a transitivity analysis of the females is conducted, mapping the process types they enter into and the participant roles that they play. This analysis is correlated with an ergative analysis, noting if and when women are agentive and when they are not. Finally, the experiential analyses are then complemented qualitatively by an appraisal analysis. All evaluations of women, are coded, noting who appraises them, how they are appraised, and on what basis they are evaluated.
The content and linguistic analyses set out to discover how women are represented in folk tales, the character roles they play, their habitual tenor of existence and what socialization messages they present to young women in Japan.

The six tales investigated in the study are:

1. Meshikawanu Onna (The woman-who-does-not-eat)
2. Momotaro (The Peach Boy or Peach Taroo),
3. Tsuru Nyooobo (The Crane Wife)
4. Ugisu no Sato (The Nightingale’s Town),
5. Urashima Taroo (Undersea World Taroo)
6. Urihimeko (The Melon Princess),

Meshikawanu Onna (hereafter Not Eating) is about a bachelor who wishes to marry but wants only to marry a woman who doesn’t eat. Such a woman visits his house and so they marry. She is a hard worker, doing many chores for him, however, she really is a woman who eats everything (even humans). The husband tries to escape after he sees her eating his friend. She then captures the husband, but just before she eats him, he manages to poison her and she dies.

Momotaro (hereafter Peach) is about a boy born from a peach who is raised by an old couple. He decides to subjugate the devils who have stolen treasure from the local people. He gathers together a band of animal warriors and together they go to Devil’s Island to demand the treasure be returned. Momotaro and his band successfully subdue the devils and return home with the treasure triumphantly.

Tsuru Nyooobo (hereafter Crane) is about a young man who rescues a crane from a hunter’s trap. On the night following the rescue a woman comes to his door asking for a place to stay. Subsequently she asks to marry him. After the wedding, she weaves beautiful cloth which he sells, becoming wealthy. However, to weave the cloth, she has to revert to the crane. Eventually the husband discovers her true identity so she flies away. The husband searches for her, finding her on the Island of Cranes. They eat a meal together and then he returns home alone.

Ugisu no Sato (hereafter Nightingale) is about a young woodcutter who discovers an unusual house in the forest. He is asked by the mistress of the house to mind it while she goes to town. He agrees but is asked NOT to snoop around the house. Despite this, he does and, in the process, breaks three nightingale eggs which he finds in one of the rooms. The mistress is so distraught upon her return that she turns into a nightingale and flies away. The woodcutter is left alone in the woods.

Urashima Taroo (hereafter Turtle) is about a young fisherman whose mother begs him to find a wife. While fishing, he catches a turtle which transforms into a underwater world princess. He is entertained by the princess in her world however, upon returning to his home, he finds his mother long dead. In desperation he opens a box given to him by the princess which transforms him into a crane. The crane and the princess, once again a turtle, dance together in the Dance of the Isc.

Urhimeko (hereafter Melon) is about a girl born from a peach who is raised by an old couple. While her parents are away she is enticed to go out and play with a witch. The witch promptly kills her and returns to the old couple’s house impersonating Urhimeko. The witch attempts to marry the wealthy landlord but is found out and murdered by the old couple on the way to the marriage ceremony.
2 Classification of female characters

In this corpus of tales, the protagonist, the main character, is typically male except for the protagonist in Melon. Table 1 sets out the classification of the female characters in the tales.

It is in the supporting character roles that women feature. Every story in the corpus has supporting female roles. They are either nuclear, in the sense, that these characters are crucial to the unfolding events on the story, or non-nuclear, in that they are incidental to the events of the story. The typical non-nuclear female character in the stories is the human, mother figure. The other non-nuclear figures are the daughters of the significant female character in the story.

Otherwise, the females are nuclear, supernatural and transformative. The transformations of the female characters are of three kinds: from supernatural to human, from supernatural to animal, and from animal to human, such as the crane wife. For example, there is the devil who transforms into the woman-who-does-not-eat; the dragon princess who transforms into a turtle and the nightingale who transforms into a woman. These supernatural women are both good and evil. The dragon princess, the nightingale woman and the crane wife are all good female characters, while the witch and the woman-who-does-not-eat are evil. These nuclear female characters are all ‘other’ worldly and out-group. They are either strangers or travelers to the male protagonist or his mother.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tale</th>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Female Characters</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Nature of being</th>
<th>Associati on</th>
<th>Transformations</th>
<th>World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Turtle</strong></td>
<td>the fisherman</td>
<td>1. Fisherman's mother</td>
<td>Other: non-nuclear</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>In group: Mother</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Dragon princess</td>
<td>Other: Nuclear</td>
<td>Super-natural: water world</td>
<td>Out group: Stranger</td>
<td>Turtle to princess</td>
<td>Other: Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Dragon daughters</td>
<td>Other: non-nuclear</td>
<td>Super-natural: of the dragon</td>
<td>Out group: Stranger</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Other: Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>palace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Not</td>
<td>A bachelor</td>
<td>1. A woman</td>
<td>Other: Nuclear</td>
<td>Super-natural: Devil woman</td>
<td>Out group: Traveller</td>
<td>Supernatural to human to supernatural</td>
<td>Other: kingdom of the devil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N'gale</strong></td>
<td>A young woodcutter</td>
<td>1. A Woman</td>
<td>Other: Nuclear</td>
<td>Supernatural: Nightingale</td>
<td>Out group: Stranger</td>
<td>Bird to human to bird</td>
<td>Other: Sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Her three</td>
<td>Other: non-nuclear</td>
<td>Supernatural: Nightingales</td>
<td>Out group: Related to stranger</td>
<td>Bird to human to bird</td>
<td>Other: Sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>daughters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crane</strong></td>
<td>A bachelor called</td>
<td>1. His mother</td>
<td>Other: non-nuclear</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>In group: Related to protagonist</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karuko</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. A woman</td>
<td>Other: Nuclear</td>
<td>Super-natural: a crane</td>
<td>Out group: Traveller</td>
<td>Bird to human to bird</td>
<td>Other: Sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Melon</strong></td>
<td>The Melon</td>
<td>1. The Melon</td>
<td>Main character</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>In group: Adopted daughter of old couple</td>
<td>Born from a fruit (melon)</td>
<td>Real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Princess</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. The witch</td>
<td>Other: nuclear</td>
<td>Supernatural: Witch</td>
<td>Out group: But known by parents</td>
<td>Witch to princess</td>
<td>Real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Transitivity and Ergativity analyses

Across the corpus, the material process is the most common process type. This is illustrated in Graph 1. The stories are mostly about happenings and doings with some dialogue. The verbal process is interesting in that the verbal projection by a nuclear female role often requests marriage. The woman is not proposed to but, rather, proposes. The relational processes are present to assign qualities to the women, typically in relation to their appearance: their beauty, their age etc., while, the existential process tends to be formulaic, occurring in the opening stages of the stories, as in “there once was an old couple”.

![Graph 1: Process types](image)

When considering the ergative roles (see Graph 2), women in the stories are Mediums significantly more often than they are Agents. They are the Actor, mostly in middle clauses, involved in happenings, sayings and being. For example, in terms of happenings: the woman ‘comes’, ‘goes’, ‘lies down’, ‘wakes’, ‘runs’ etc. In terms of sayings: she ‘says’, ‘shouts’, ‘begs’, ‘whispers’ etc. and in terms of being: she is ‘beautiful’, ‘skillful’, ‘old’ etc. Typically she does not act on other people or the natural world.

There are occasions when the woman is the Agent. Agency occurs in two contexts: firstly when the woman seeks marriage, for example, when the turtle princess, wanting to be married to the fisherman, tries repeatedly to be caught, ‘grabbing the side of the boat with both flippers’ and secondly, when the woman engages in self-sacrifice. For example, the crane wife ‘pulls out her own feathers to weave the fine cloth’. Further there are two kinds of agency: domestic agency and negative agency against men. Domestic agency impacts on inanimate participants, such as the activities of cooking rice and fish, that is, the typical chores of women in the kitchen. Both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women have domestic agency in these tales. Negative agency impacts men and is reserved for the ‘bad’ woman. Acts such as ‘catching the man and his friends’, ‘eating the man’, ‘carrying the man like a cat’, ‘killing Urihimeko’ occur. The good women are more often Mediums than Agents, including the good supernatural woman, the crane wife. In contrast, the bad supernatural women, the witch and the woman-who-does-not-eat is Agent more often Medium.
4 Appraisal Analysis

The pattern of evaluation is identified by the appraisal analysis as follows. Overall, women are evaluated negatively. This even includes the good women in Turtle, Crane and Melon. Only the women in Nightingale are evaluated positively. However, the Nightingale story is interesting in that the main male character is the one who is bad. It is a reverse of the typical good man/bad woman scenario.

In the other stories, apart from Peach which has no female nuclear supporting role, the ‘good’ women do things which are evaluated negatively. For example, the crane wife because her husband believes she won’t stay; and Urihimeko because she could not resist the witch’s persistence etc. The ‘bad’ women, the man eating wife and the witch are also negatively appraised. The spread and ratio of negative to positive evaluations are detailed in Table 2.

In summary, women are evaluated according to their appearance, circumstances and behaviour. Mothers’ ages are indicated and women who are young are typically described as cute or beautiful. In conjunction with their beauty, there is also a reference to some kind of domestic skill, such as weaving or cooking. The pattern of evaluation in the stories usually begins with positive appraisals of the nuclear female characters which are then replaced with negative appraisals as the story complication appears and the sequent events unfold.

Table 2: Female evaluations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Total clauses</th>
<th>% Appraising clauses</th>
<th>% Appraising female clauses</th>
<th>Ratio Neg vs Pos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turtle</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No eating</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>20:7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightingale</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crane</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melon</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Conclusion

From the linguistic analyses, the habitual tenor of existence of women in Japanese folk tales seems to be that women as Actors/Mediums are engaged in happenings and beings, while as Actor/Agents, they are conscientious domestic workers and agentive in the pursuit of marriage and in the act of self-sacrifice, however, female agency can be used negatively against men. As Goals, women are affected by men and her parents.
Apart from her domestic power, women seem powerless in the real world. They aren’t free to act independently and crimes against women go unpunished, yet a woman’s crime doesn’t. Women appear to be a cost burden to men and have the potential to be capricious and duplicitous. Typically in the tales, they are not protagonists, rather they are responsible for the complications in the stories, either requesting something from the protagonist, or repaying the protagonist for good or bad deeds.

So what does this tell contemporary females, in most cases, the little girls who have these stories read to them by their parents about the socialisation of women in Japanese society? From the evidence of these six stories, I would posit that young women are socialised to aspire to marriage, entrust power to others and ask permission to do things, to anticipate being a domestic worker, to sacrifice themselves for others and to accept that injustices will be done to them.

6 Acknowledgment
I would like to thank Dr. Motoki Sano for the use of his folk tale spreadsheet which I adapted for the purposes of this study.

References
Petrova, G. (2004), Male characters in Japanese Fairy Tale: Classification and Analysis, Ph.D Dissertation, Faculty of Arts, University of Zurich, Switzerland.