

Beyond witches, mothers or wives

On the power of feminist narratives and historical memory in Manga

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Abstract: This paper examines how Manga can be used to counter mainstream historical narratives, taking Fumiyo Kōno's *In This Corner of the World* as an example. The first half of the article addresses the connection between feminist historiography and power in a poststructuralist framework. Then, the focus turns towards the Manga to highlight some parallelisms between Kōno's narrative and feminist history writing. Two main questions are examined: how she depicts womanhood, as well as the political connotations of setting the plot in Hiroshima during World War II.

Keywords: feminism, historiography, Manga, womanhood, memory.

Més enllà de bruixes, mares o esposes. El poder de les narracions feministes i la memòria històrica al manga

Resum: Aquest article parteix de l'obra de Fumiyo Kōno *In This Corner of the World* per explorar com el manga pot contrarestar les narratives històriques hegemòniques. En la primera meitat, s'examinen els vincles entre la historiografia feminista i la noció de poder en un marc postestructuralista. Tot seguit, el focus se centra en el manga i es ressalten alguns paral·lelismes entre la narrativa de Kōno i l'escriptura de la història feta amb perspectiva de gènere. Principalment, s'examinen dues qüestions: el retrat que fa de les dones i la connotació política de situar l'acció a Hiroshima durant la II Guerra Mundial.

Paraules clau: feminisme, historiografia, manga, dones, memòria.

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A tale of the periphery?

History can appear represented in a myriad of places; manga is one of them. Analyzing how history is depicted in this graphic art can be useful to understanding how Japanese communities experience, construct and deal with historical memory through popular culture. Insofar as manga can reflect a great variety of facets of Japanese society—to mention a few: its myths, rituals, and fantasies, or social phenomena like order and hierarchy, sexism, ageism, and racism (Ito, 2005: 456)—it also has the soft-power¹ cultural potential to re-tell history (Rosenbaum, 2013: 1). The countless forms of interplay between fabrication and historical similitude as well as the broad spectrum of narrative and graphic techniques, topics, and genres, allow manga and graphic novels to show “the transcultural soft power of a ‘global’ media that has the potential to display history in previously unimagined ways. Boundaries of space and time in manga become as permeable as societies and cultures across the world” (Rosenbaum, 2013: 3). In this paper, Fumiyo Kōno’s *Kono Sekai no Katasumi ni* (*In This Corner of the World* – published between 2007-2009) has been used as an example to approach the depiction of history in the ninth art.

In This Corner of the World is a slice-of-life centered on Suzu Hōjo, a 19-year-old woman from Hiroshima who moves to the Hōjo household in Kure after getting an arranged marriage to the son of the family, Shūsaku. The reader follows Suzu from December 1943 until January 1946 as she gets used to her new family, her duties as a wife, and the unfamiliar environment while coping with the ever-present repercussions of World War II. She mostly finds refuge in drawing—a habit that she has had since childhood—and the story is flooded with Suzu’s doodles, which help her to express herself and to connect with other characters. At the same time, Kōno uses these drawings as a narrative device to show the reader all kinds of historical details, such as maps, common practices, how-to-act guides, and recipes.

¹ The term “soft power”, which may be briefly defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye, 2004: X), and its connection to Japanese popular culture has been vastly explored. Although the variety in the approaches used to discuss the strategy of using cultural assets to position the country in the global market makes simplifying it under one single “take” rather difficult, perhaps Sugimoto’s (2009) explanation is one of the better summaries of its key points.

The huge influx of historical data and details that Kōno provides throughout the story is further expanded in the afterword of the manga, where she lists the advisors she consulted, the references she used as well as the places she visited to gather information when developing the story. Although some authors have defined her work as being “superbly realistic” and giving “unparalleled attention to historical details” (Yoshimoto, 2019: 16), the mangaka herself is rather cautious regarding the historicity of the manga: “this work is, in the end, little more than my interpretation. I simply took the ‘memories’ of the cheerful and quiet ‘lives’ they [*scil.*, people from Hiroshima and Kure] must have led as a cornerstone, and began to draw” (Kōno, 2017b: 156).

Without suggesting that Kōno’s work should be read as reliable historical evidence for scholarly purposes regarding the Japanese Empire and its actions throughout World War II, in the following pages I will argue—albeit the impossibility of providing a comprehensive discussion—that *In This Corner of the World* offers a feminist retelling of the war period centered on Japanese civilians, mostly women. I will also go over some of the previous scholarly works that have examined this manga to sustain the analysis. Kōno’s narrative is seen as feminist not because the author herself is a woman or just because the story features women, but because of the non-essentialist fashion in which women are portrayed as well as the distance Kōno puts between normative hypermasculine accounts of war and her story. In this sense, it can be argued that her work presents parallelisms with feminist historical theory. Additionally, the historicity found in the manga also exemplifies the capacity of this kind of publication to re-imagine and approach history-writing that I have previously alluded to.

Surviving in the wild

Before commenting on Kōno’s work, a few considerations about feminist historiography are required. It is no secret that the explicit preoccupations towards the closure of terms are eminently poststructuralist. Many authors of this intellectual movement have pointed out that if we fail to acknowledge that categories are dynamic and that their meanings are not self-explanatory nor transparent, we might end up endorsing a process of giving these notions an appearance of immutability. This façade, in turn, will end up reinforcing normative social definitions which are the foundations of power relationships. Michel Foucault

noted that, in all societies, multiple power relationships pierce and define the social body. These relationships cannot exist nor be implemented without the production and circulation of discourses of truth (Foucault, 2012: 70). Thus, truth and power work together in a somewhat symbiotic relationship. In other words, as Alun Munslow wrote, “language, as *the* cultural and intellectual form, is the medium of exchange for power relationships and the ultimate constitutor of truth” (Munslow, 2006: 203).

Sara Ahmed commented that there is a sense of fatigue when it comes to discussing feminism *and* postmodernism because most of the debates are centered on the relationship between the two terms. She stressed that the dialogical model that has been established in the exercise of bringing them together, largely framed the discussions under the question of identity: is feminism (like) postmodern(ism) or it is something different altogether? (Ahmed, 2004: 2-3). She then suggested that “rather than staging the debate by considering feminism’s relationship to postmodernism in terms of identity or difference, feminism needs to ask questions of postmodernism: we need to speak (back) *to* postmodernism, rather than simply speaking *on* (our relationship to) it. [...] This agonistic role of speaking back not only opens the stage by interrupting the designation of postmodernism as a reference point but also re-figures the vitality or animation of the feminist whose speech is no longer authorized from a single place” (Ahmed, 2004: 4).

I take feminist historiography to be a result of embracing the sort of role that Ahmed wrote about. For if history is understood as a theorized practice that challenges the assumption or the “naïveté about the possibility of unpositioned (untheorized and, by extension, impartial, disinterested, objective) knowledge” (Raddeker, 2007: 8-9), then not only can it speak back to postmodernism (or use its tools actively to stage new discussions) but it can also defy narratives that systematically render women and minorities invisible. Scott (1988) argued that feminist history is a crucial participant in the production of knowledge about sexual difference and not just the mere record of the changes in the social organization of the sexes. Here, knowledge refers to the understanding of human relationships produced by cultures and societies: it works like an umbrella term that covers ideas, everyday practices, rituals, institutions, and structures. Scott also noted that the uses and meanings of this form of knowledge become contested politically and are how power relationships are constructed and enforced (Scott, 1988: 2). She also

insisted that feminist politics and academic studies of gender emerge from the same political project: a collective attempt to confront and change existing distributions of power (Scott, 1988: 6).

Additionally, Scott not only mentioned that the act of writing history is necessarily political in itself because historians have to choose the categories they historicize and work with and, at the same time, acknowledge their stake in the production of knowledge (Scott, 1992: 37-38), but she also defended that history writing is always partial because it is necessarily affected by the historian’s priorities: “Such an admission of partiality, it seems to me, does not acknowledge defeat in the search for universal explanation; rather it suggests that universal explanation is not, never has been possible” (Scott, 1988: 10). In actuality, many feminist historians brought up this point in their work. For instance, Raddeker stated that “history always is an ethico-political project and should be accepted as such. I see no need to try to deny or eliminate this sort of presentism that involves [...] leaving the politics *in* history. [...] I take it to be an inevitable byproduct of studying the past in the present: one of the paradoxes intrinsic to the discipline” (Raddeker, 2007: 57-58).

Chizuko Ueno noted that feminist historians have been criticized by mainstream scholars for being too political or ideological—as if they were able to suspend their morality and goals when choosing a narrative emplotment or the contents of their research—and summarized quite straightforwardly the point feminist authors are making when being unapologetically aware of their priorities: “the reply of feminists in response to this is, that is exactly right, all history is political, then throwing back at them the question: ‘Is there any history that is not political?’” (Ueno, 2004: 125-126).

Corners that matter

Needless to say, Kōno’s work is not the only example in manga, anime, and graphic novel’s history to explore the effects of war on civilians. Works like *Hadashi no Gen* (*Barefoot Gen*) by Keiji Nakazawa, the animated movie adaptation of Akiyuki Nosaka’s novel *Hotaru no Haka* (*Grave of the Fireflies*) by Isao Takahata, or *Cocoon* by Machiko Kyō can also be mentioned. Additionally, since it uses the framework of comics, graphic journalism could be considered in this list as well.

The historicity found in *In This Corner of the World* surely evokes the necessary partiality feminist historians mention because it consciously departs from mainstream masculinized accounts of the war.

Instead of using an epic narrative, Kōno puts women at the center of her story and highlights their agency while celebrating the mundane and seemingly irrelevant daily activities of a housewife. By doing that, she draws the reader's attention to the gendered division of labor in imperial Japan. Her narrative style can be quite reminiscent of Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*, where the author denounces the systematic erasure of women from mainstream narratives and historical accounts: "everything we know about war we know with 'a man's voice'. We are all captives of 'men's' notions and 'men's' sense of war. 'Men's' words. Women are silent" (Alexievich, 2017).

Jocelyn Allen noted that, "*In This Corner of the World* rewrite[s] history to tell us the story of those on the other side, people who tend to exist in the background of the historical record and the stories we form out of that record. [...] Less often are we afforded a glimpse into the women left behind who somehow kept moving forward as the world around them was upended" (Allen, 2020: 8). The personal experiences of the protagonist are of paramount importance to the story. Thus, Kōno's narrative is a practical example of how narrating the experiences of those that have been systematically left outside historical accounts—women, children, people of color, queer or gender diverse people, amongst other collectives—serves to challenge the notion of "an official history" and to highlight that history can be "compositive and pluralistic" (Ueno, 2004: 104). An in-depth analysis of the manga, however, should not be taking the meaning of these experiences as self-explanatory. Rather, it would have to be aware of how the identities of the characters are forged.

From the very beginning, the Japanese government made a clear distinction between the "battlefront" and "the home front", and used various strategies and media to include women in the latter. In other words, women were never mobilized as soldiers and were always thought of as providers of various forms of support (Ueno, 2004: 15-21). Furthermore, subjecthood in Japan was gendered and the duties required of men and women as well as the relationships they had with the state varied accordingly. In that system, women were doubly subject: to the Emperor and the authority of the father in the patriarchal family (Mackie, 2003: 6). Thus, as Wakakuwa highlighted, "the image assigned to Japanese women during the war was not a morale-boosting picture representing war itself, but the figure of motherhood holding a boy child" (in Ueno, 2004: 20). Surely enough, Kōno depicts the gendered roles women were assigned. However, by including female charac-

ters from different backgrounds with very different roles, who also voice contrasting opinions on sensible topics like motherhood, she can present women in a non-monolithic way, with inherent tensions and contradictions. This narrative style is rather akin to Raddeker's methodological precaution:

We should not, indeed, always and only be painting women as the victims of capitalism, imperialism, misogynistic religions, patriarchy, father figures, men, or whatever. But nor, however, should we be losing sight of the ways in which women are often in situations that render them simultaneously *both* victims *and* agents, rather than *either* one *or* the other (Raddeker, 2007: 128).

There are three female characters in the story that allow Kōno to accomplish this multifaced portrayal, and each of them represents a different historical woman archetype. Suzu, the protagonist, had quite a lot of privileges when growing up and she is always doing as she is told. Although she struggles to find her place in the world throughout the story, she embraces the role she was supposed to assume and becomes a housewife, fully dedicated to satisfying the needs of her new family. Keiko is Suzu's sister-in-law and acts as her direct counterpart: she was a *mōga* (modern girl) and acts on her free will as much as she can; for instance, she married out of love. She is a widow, who lost custody of her son, and is living on her own with her daughter. Lastly, Rin is a courtesan from the pleasure quarters who befriends Suzu. Despite illustrating how poverty and being an outcast rendered women extremely vulnerable, she is also the one to advise Suzu—and, by extension, the reader—not to think of people like her as *just* victims without a place of belonging: "Even if babies get sold, they live their lives as they can. Everyone in the world's short something or another, but places to belong don't go away so easy... Suzu-san" (Kōno, 2017a: 41). The interplay of these characters, especially how they influence one another, highlights the permeability and ubiquitous nature of power relationships and is quite evocative of the Foucauldian explanation: "[Power] is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980: 98).

This kind of narrative, centered on pointing out the non-static nature of her characters, is also found in

how Kōno presents Hiroshima. Her work can be interpreted as a political declaration that Hiroshima and its citizens are much more complex than the mere victims of the nuclear bombing. According to Rosenbaum, depicting Hiroshima, a place closely associated with victimhood and trauma, “is not only a complicated and intensely politicised process. [...] Nowadays, Hiroshima is so much more than a single discourse. It is a part of a tapestry of unconventional texts and cultural dimensions that constitute the cultural enclave we refer to as Hiroshima” (Rosenbaum, 2020: 144).

As for the history of A-bomb manga, it was Kōno who first lifted the taboo around Hiroshima back in 2003 when she began to serialize *Yūnagi no Machi, Sakura no Kuni* (*Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms*). Until that moment, Japanese society was going through a period of repressive silence and a sense of fatigue towards the A-bomb, the depiction of *hibakusha* (atomic bomb victims), and other war imaginary that began in 1990, once the serialization of Katsuhiko Ōtomo’s *Akira* was completed (Rosenbaum, 2020: 143-144). The resurgence of this kind of manga, led by Kōno’s work in the early 2000s, inaugurates what Masashi Ichiki considers to be the fourth period in the history of A-bomb manga, which is still ongoing. Its comeback not only was accompanied by an acute sense of urgency regarding how the Japanese could pass on the memory of the experience of the atomic bombings—as survivors were getting older—but it also brought a drastic change in the whole aesthetic of the stories: “It is noteworthy that the resurgence of A-bomb manga in the 21st century tells the tragic story of beautiful girls in the shojo² manga style. The realistic, horrifying description of the A-bomb, along with the sheer anger towards it, that characterise works from the preceding era [...] is once again replaced by beautiful, even romantic, portrayals of aesthetically pleasing characters” (Ichiki, 2011: 44).

The *shōjo* nature expressed by Ichiki can also be found in *In This Corner of the World*. However, it’s noteworthy to mention that this manga was first published in a *seinen* magazine. With that in mind, one may wonder if Kōno designed Suzu—a cute, young, hard-working wife, who is a bit clumsy and appears to be rather naïve—to be appealing for a masculine gaze or, on the contrary, if she used the pages of the mag-

azine to subvert gender tropes and the limits of the genre.

For instance, Keiko and Suzu’s relationship may illustrate this sort of ambivalence. At first, Keiko is shown to be on bad terms with Suzu: she scolds her a lot and is quite eager to mention all the mistakes she makes. This dynamic not only serves as comic relief but tends to emphasize Keiko’s flaws a lot more than Suzu’s. These scenes—which appear comic and innocent—not only are using the trope that the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law (if not both) have to be especially harsh with the young protagonist in an attempt to preserve their social standing, but they also illustrate the patriarchal social pressure women have to prove their worth. Which, more often than not, encourages women to compete against one another to do so. It is only when Keiko opens up to Suzu and shows her empathy and a form of sisterhood, that the protagonist makes up her mind regarding her future:

The man I loved died early. His shop was torn down in the house pruning. And now, I can’t see either of my two children again for a whole host of reasons. All of that is unfair, yes. But I won’t say I’m unhappy. Into that life came a country girl who did as she was told, marrying a man she didn’t know. She minds the house and does chores, just like she’s told. To me, her life seems like it must be dreadfully boring. That’s why I think, if she wants to leave, she should leave. If she doesn’t like this place, she should leave whenever she wants. [...] As long as you don’t hate it here, this house is your house, Suzu-san. Don’t worry about what folk will say. Make up your mind for yourself (Kōno, 2017b: 74-75).

In addition to Suzu’s design, Kōno’s manga features other elements that could be defined using the term put forth by Jaqueline Berndt when she examined them: *shōjomangaesque*. She suggested that the inclusion of these features could be a way to reduce the otherness produced by the appropriation of all kinds of visual formats that appeared drawn by the artist’s hand— and, by extension, Suzu’s hand. She also mentioned that despite the great variety of elements and drawing techniques Kōno deployed, that blended aspects from *seinen* and *shōjo*, the mangaka did not commit completely to either of these genres (Berndt, 2020: 93-94). Thus, it can be argued that Kōno used a multi-genre narrative strategy that was more centered on answering the needs of the story rather than sticking with conventions. Berndt also noted that *In This Corner of the World* “slipped into the last corner [of the magazine], like a humorous extra,

2 Manga in Japan has been traditionally divided into four main categories that are age and gender-specific: “*shōnen* [manga for boys], *shōjo* [girls], *seinen* [male youth] and *josei* [women]” (Berndt, 2020: 176), a categorization that hardly has a direct equivalent in other popular comic traditions like the American or the French-Belgian.

a 'gag manga', not to be taken too seriously" (Berndt, 2020: 94-95). This situation created an overlapping between the marginal positioning of the manga within the magazine and Suzu's moving to the peripheral part of the world that Kure represents.

Alternatively, Rosenbaum's take on the inclusion of *shōjomangaesque* features stressed the possibility of rendering Kōno's manga as representative of "the latest generation of artists who engage the graphic tradition of war stories retrospectively" (Rosenbaum, 2020: 151). Her work can fit within the corpus of *shōjo* manga that specifically deals with the atomic bombing in Japan, which Yukari Fujimoto refers to as "feminist rewritings" (in Rosenbaum, 2020: 150). Rosenbaum also highlighted that *In This Corner of the World* reflects the two major questions used in 21st-century *shōjo* manga to convey contemporary expressions of angst: "Where do I belong?" and "Can I find someone to accept me as I am?" (Rosenbaum, 2020: 151). The emphasis that Kōno puts in Suzu's struggles to survive as well as to find her place, can echo with modern readers who, although not living through war, may still feel very sympathetic towards the manga's characters because they also have to face dire challenges like precarious jobs, economic and climate crises, or even a worldwide pandemic.

Conclusion

As Kameron Hurley recaps in the title of her essay, "We Have Always Fought: Challenging the 'Women, Cattle, and Slaves' Narrative" (2016), women have always been there. It is not a matter of miraculously unearthing proofs that women were part of history; this stage has been long overcome. Throughout this paper, I have examined some of the possibilities of using a product from Japanese popular culture, the manga *In This Corner of the World*, to explore how this kind of media can deal with the past as well as how it can introduce shifts in historical narratives. I have highlighted some parallelisms between feminist historiography and Kōno's narrative, particularly in regards to her non-monolithic depiction of womanhood and the emphasis she put on women's agency. "Think of patriarchy as an octopus, with each of its tentacles representing the oppressions it utilizes to move through our world"—proposed Mona Eltahawy—"We must be reciprocally nimble and multifaced in our fight against it" (2019: 43). Thus, in this sense, feminist historiography is one of the tools we have available to counter patriarchal discourses. It is an exercise of consciously defying the mainstream

narratives that render invisible, hence dehumanize, women and the rest of the oppressed groups in society. Although Kōno's manga is not centered on depicting politically conscious and active women, it does emphasize their complex nature as well the gendered division of labor they had to face. It departs from war stories centered on soldiers and military campaigns and highlights the struggles the civilians—mostly women—went through. She invites the reader to engage and rethink historical narratives and look beyond the bloody battlefields.

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