More than Skin Deep: 
Masochism in Japanese Women’s Writing 
1960-2005

by
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Emerald L. King
Abstract

This thesis investigates the use of masochistic imagery and masochistic scenarios in the narratives of Kōno Taeko, Yamada Eimi and Kanehara Hitomi, and also in the visual imagery of ‘ladies’ comic’ artist, Watanabe Yayoi. The textual production of these women is examined against the background of the social, economic and cultural conditions at the time of publication. Without making claims to any kind of teleological development, I argue that there is a chronological genealogy that connects the work of the women listed above through the different eras in which they were writing. Kōno is a key writer from the late Post-war/pre-Bubble period of the 1960s to 1970s; Yamada invokes the heady ‘Bubble jidai’ years of the 1980s and early 1990s; while Kanehara is a product of the so called ‘Lost Decade’ of the 1990s and the early 2000s. While all three also produced a considerable body of narrative and essay material outside the times identified above, it was during these periods that each author produced what are arguably their representative works. The chapter on ladies’ comics overlaps chronologically with the discussion on Yamada Eimi in that it loosely covers the period from the early 1980s, when the first manga of this genre was published, to the early 2000s.

In addition to textual analysis chapters on the works of Kōno, Yamada, Kanehara and Watanabe and, occasionally, their contemporaries, the thesis examines theories of masochism as found in both Japan and the west. While avoiding a closed understanding of the term – which can alter according to the social context – I argue that masochism is not simply pleasure in pain, but pleasure in the expectation of pain. It is this expectation that is the key to the pleasure of the masochistic experience. I further demonstrate that, contrary to popular interpretation, in the relationship between the masochist and their chosen consort/partner/torturer, it is the masochist who very often holds the balance of power.

While providing an overview of the contribution made to understandings of masochism by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud and Theodor Reik, I draw principally on Gilles Deleuze, in particular his essay “Coldness and Cruelty,” to demonstrate that masochism can be a personal choice made by women in order to resist the social expectations and restraints placed on them.

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1 Orbaugh 1996, p. 126; Bullock 2010 a, p. 6.
2 McCargo 2004, p. 58.
3 Driscoll 2007 a, p. 169.
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