Gender and Atomic Victimhood: Hayashi Kyoko and the Reclaiming of the Female Body

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The body has largely been neglected in the narratives of the atomic bombings that came out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the end of the Asia Pacific War in 1945. It is an irony that the body that was burned, mangled, riddled with maggots, and exposed to deadly radiation in the two Japanese cities has been erased from these narratives.While there is no dearth of information regarding the bomb's effects on human bodies, these are purely scientific details that lack the horror and despair of the victims.For example, notice the following paragraph from a report on the effects of the atomic bombings compiled by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey:

> . . . Flash burns thus followed the explosion instantaneously. The fact that relatively few victims suffered burns of the eyeballs should not be interpreted as an indication that the radiant heat followed the flash, or that time was required to build up to maximum heat intensity. The explanation is simply that the structure of the eye is more resistant to heat than is average human skin . . . [1]

Carol Cohn has argued that the language used to talk about nuclear weapons relies heavily on sexual and domestic images. The phallic missile is seen as masculine and it penetrates a target assumed to be female. Using everyday words while talking about nukes, Cohn writes, has not only domesticated and humanized the weapon but made it alright "to ignore sentient human bodies, human lives",

i.e. the victims.[2] Humans are invisible in the nuclear discourse as exemplified in the passage above.

Now, compare the US Strategic Bombing Survey report to a survivor's account of witnessing the very effects the report lists. Here is hibakusha writer Yoko Ota describing the state of hibakushas or atomic bomb survivors:

> Their bodies were distended. Like the bodies of people who have drowned. Their faces were fat and enormously puffed up. Their eyes were swollen shut, and the skin around their eyes was crinkly and pink . . . and hanging down from both arms like rags was gray-colored skin.[3]

The act of violence is performed on the body. In Hiroshima it was the body that was burned and bloated in the aftermath of the atomic bombings. The heat from the bombs melted the corpses, making it impossible to distinguish between male and female, human and animal. Even years later, hibakushas lived under the looming threat of radiation, worried that their bodies could betray them anytime. Hayashi Kyoko's writings are deeply influenced by her experience of the atomic bombings of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. Hayashi was born in Nagasaki in 1930 and spent her childhood in Shanghai. She returned to her hometown in March 1945 and was mobilized to work at a munitions plant when the US dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Since her debut in the 1960s, Hayashi has written extensively about the atomic bomb. Her writings reflect her anxiety about her body and her fears of passing on her radiation sickness, and hence her hibakusha identity, to her child. The violated and scarred female bodies of atomic victims are central to Hayashi's writings. In a society that laid stress on women's domestic and reproductive roles, what did it mean to be a woman who fulfilled neither of the two roles of a wife and a mother?—first because female atomic survivors were not seen as ideal partners and second because the bomb had

altered their bodies. Hayashi explores motherhood as experienced by the hibakusha woman and in her writings it takes on a different meaning. While her contemporaries like Kono Taeko and Takahashi Takako were, through their writings, subverting the traditional idea of a Japanese woman and exploring subjects like female identity, sexuality, and subjectivity, Hayashi grappled with questions about what it meant to be a woman and an atomic victim. Can one be both or either? When the female body has been violated and its biological functions disrupted, what does it mean to be a woman? This paper discusses, through an analysis of two short stories "Procession on a Cloudy Day"and "Masks of Whatchamacallit", Hayashi's reclaiming of the female body. The first section explores the writing of the body in postwar Japanese literature while the second looks at the representation of the hibakushas in film and literature. The third and final section of the paper analyses Hayashi's stories and the portrayal of the female hibakusha body.

BODY IN POSTWAR JAPANESE LITERATURE

During the wartime period, the Japanese state had laid claim to the bodies of its citizens and the body was at the centre of the country's nationalistic discourse. The individual body (nikutai) that was seen as carnal was contrasted with the 'kokutai' or the national body. "The kokutai became something of a state religion, with the mystical emperor at the apex, and it transformed in the war years into a particularly formidable edifice that brooked no dissent."[4] Wartime ideology encouraged the Japanese to contribute to national projects and abandon their personal needs. The condition of the nikutai was seen as directly reflecting the state of the empire. There was a direct relationship between the body of an individual and the body of a nation, with the condition of one determining the condition of the other. A strong healthy nation must have strong healthy citizens. Hence, the Japanese empire initiated disciplinary measures to control

individual bodies so that they served the interests of the state. The kokutai took precedence over the nikutai. The military had used the bodies of Japanese soldiers and civilians as easily dispensable resources. The latter, too, had come to believe that by sacrificing their physical bodies for the state, they were dying a noble death. The kamikazi pilots who conducted suicide missions are perhaps the most popular example. The body was dedicated to the service of the nation and every Japanese was expected to sacrifice it if asked to do so by the empire. The individual body, according to Slaymaker, was "suppressed and pitted against the cause of the national body".[5] It only seems natural then that in the postwar period, once free from the control of the state, Japanese writers glorified the individual body and saw it as the source of liberation.

Douglas Slaymaker, while analyzing the fiction of three writers he calls "flesh writers", argues that the writings of Tamura Taijirō, Noma Hiroshi, and Sakaguchi Ango were a protest against the wartime undervaluation of the body. Through their literature, they redefined the conceptions of the body in postwar Japan. By redefining the body as carnal, the postwar Japanese writers were subverting the taking over of the body by the state. They were rejecting the wartime ideology of self-sacrifice and liberating themselves from the state's control. According to Slaymaker:

> They (the flesh writers) were convinced that the mistakes of the past war were attributable to the wartime state's undervaluation of the body. Establishing a proper respect for the individual body promised a new start. The flesh writers suggested that renewed emphasis on the physical could offset the disastrously mistaken focus of the militarist past and help avoid another lapse into militarism.[6]

In the new democratic Japan, the body became a source of freedom and liberation. But the body that they imagined was gendered

and clearly male and depended on the body of the female 'Other'. Moreover, the occupation of Japan by foreign men had emasculated the Japanese male identity and it was only through the sexualized body of the female that they could create a new male subjectivity. As the occupying forces dismantled the Japanese empire and the military establishment, it also broke down structures that had anchored Japanese male identity. With the dismantling of the military, that supreme image of masculinity—the soldier—was destroyed and all expressions of aggression prohibited. Not only were gender roles redrawn, the reconfiguration of society meant men lost their sanctioned roles which "threatened their masculinity and therefore their identity".[7] Many postwar male writers sought to reimagine the male body and liberate it from the clutches of not only the prewar military state but also the post-war foreign authorities. This liberation was through the body of a woman. In Nosaka Akiyuki's short story "American Hijiki", Toshio believes that Japan's defeat was brought on by the weak bodies of the Japanese people as compared to the muscular bodies of the American. As a young boy growing up in the occupation era, Toshio's image of the Americans is based on his encounters with the American GIs. The strong and healthy bodies of the Americans are tied to Toshio's memories of postwar Japan and defeat.

Michael S. Molasky notes that many male postwar writers articulated their experience of the defeat through the sexual violation of women. The women's bodies became a site of violence where the country's history was symbolically played out.[8] In the immediate aftermath of Japan's surrender, the top priority of the authorities was safeguarding the Japanese women from the brute American soldiers who, they believed, would rape their women. This fear was, in fact, born out of their own experience as perpetrators. To handle the sexual desires of the Occupation soldiers, the Japanese resorted to organized prostitution, setting up state-sanctioned brothels. Women who "volunteered" for the job were thanked for their self-sacrifice.[9]

Thus, the post-war period in Japan began with the exploitation of women's bodies. With the abolishment of regulated prostitution in 1946, the Japanese government found another way to monitor and control the female body: by hunting down prostitutes and taking them in for forced medical examinations. The 'panpan' was an icon of the early postwar period. Due to their close links to the American GIs and their uncontrolled sexuality they were seen as a threat to Japanese values of chastity and virtue. As Molasky notes, the panpans rejection of traditional female roles of domesticity and motherhood were seen as subversive. This subversive nature was heightened by the panpan's sexual relations with the occupiers.[10] In the writings of postwar male Japanese writers, the prostitutes become a symbol of liberation. They offer an antidote to the traditions and laws of society that bind men. In the female body of the prostitute the men search for salvation and freedom. However, in their attempts to liberate the (male) body, the writers were still resorting to the prevailing patriarchal structures.[11]

Meanwhile, the Japanese women writers writing in the 1960s were unhappy about what it meant to be a woman in modern Japanese society. Through their writings they sought to redefine the role of women as more than just "good mothers and wives" and break away from the normative gender roles assigned by society. Their female protagonists were "frequently wanton, excessive, or selfish and brazenly cynical with regard to "traditional" conceptions of love, marriage, and motherhood".[12] Though post-war legislations introduced equality of the sexes, in truth women were still in charge of the domestic sphere even as the men went out to rebuild the nation. In 1960s Japan, the term feminity was associated with the nurturing and passive qualities that women were supposed to exhibit. Feminine was seen as the opposite of masculine and the two characteristics were mutually exclusive. The counterpart of the modern Japanese male, the salaryman, was the housewife. This was a remnant of the pre-war ideology that saw women in supporting roles that had been carried

over to postwar Japan. During the wartime period, women were traditionally seen as "producers of future soldiers" and "protectors of hearth and home" which is why, according to Bullock, Japan was reluctant to use the services of married women.[13] This view of women as the anchor of the household continued into the postwar era. Being a woman in 1960s Japan meant taking on the roles of mothers and wives. The state played an important role in disciplining the female body by pushing the ideals of pure love. A woman was expected to satisfy her sexual desires only within the confines of marriage. Writing during a period of high prosperity and economic boom, women writers like Takahashi Takako and Kono Taeko challenged and critiqued the gendered division of labour and the view that women were sexually passive.[14] If these writers were trying to subvert the constructed notion of the female by redefining the role of women in Japanese society, this avenue was not open to Hayashi.

REPRESENTING THE BOMBED BODY

In literature, film, and popular culture, the bodies of atomic survivors are often portrayed as monstrous. The nuclear fears of the 1950s that shook Japan following the Lucky Dragon incident gave birth to Godzilla, a monster that awoke following the hydrogen nuclear tests. Much has been written about Godzilla and nukes; about how the Japanese confronted their violent past through the grotesque figure of Godzilla,[15] of the monster as a metaphor for Hiroshima with its "heavily furrowed skin or scales" representing the keloid scars of atomic bomb survivors.[16] Such representations dispel the experience of the hibakushas to the realm of fantasy. Meanwhile, other narratives sought to portray the survivors, especially women hibakushas, as pure and innocent victims who suffered the bomb's atrocities in silence and with courage. Their victimization was seen as fate rather than the result of a violent war. Their stories, we are told, exemplified fortitude and resolve. The case of the 'Hiroshima Maidens' illustrates this

point. The maidens were a group of 25 women who were burned and disfigured during the Hiroshima bombings. In 1955, they were taken to the US to undergo plastic surgery on their faces and bodies. The maidens' visit put on public display the damaged bodies of atomic victims but it also sent the message that they could be cured. If the sight of the maidens' scarred faces elicited horror, it also gave people hope. The American media failed to distinguish between emergency plastic surgery and "elective cosmetic surgery used to facilitate beauty" thereby suggesting that the Maidens hoped to and could regain their beauty. As David Serlin has pointed out, the Maidens became "the poster children for whom the stigmas of bodily damage inflicted by the chaos of applied physics could be healed through the miracles of modern medicine".[17]

Atomic victimhood was gendered with more instances of bomb-related illnesses and deaths being reported among female victims. They also faced harsher discrimination due to their status as hibakushas. Many female hibakushas even hid their identities as victims to avoid social stigma. Studies found that women who were exposed to the bomb faced increased chances of miscarriages and stillbirths. Children born to female hibakushas risked birth defects and other disorders. Their status as hibakushas also made it difficult for women to find a suitable marriage partner. In 1945, there was limited knowledge about radiation illness but rumours were strife that their disease was contagious which made it difficult for hibakushas to find housing and employment. Atomic victimhood made it impossible for the women to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother. Rodney Barker explains:

> A society that placed such great emphasis upon aesthetic presentation and losing face in every sense offered no place for their kind. Some were kept in back rooms for years by parents ashamed of them, while others were so afraid of public ridicule that whenever they ventured out in daylight they scurried down

> side streets with shawls wrapped tightly around their bent heads. Employers refused to hire them because, they said, it would be too demoralizing to have them around, and marriage was out of the question because it was roundly believed they would give birth to a generation of genetic monstrosities.[18]

While discussing the representation of young hibakusha women in films, Maya Morioka Todeschini argues that while the female survivors of the bomb are portrayed as "pathetic victims" and their innocent beauty and purity contrasted with their deformities and illness, they are also seen as embodying womanly values that allows them to endure their pain stoically and grow stronger in the process.[19] Such representations, she points out, not only make suffering aesthetic, they also endow hibakusha women with existing traditional notions about womanhood. In the process, the bodies of the women become ahistorical and apolitical.[20] By romanticizing their illness and death, such portrayals of atomic survivors turn the Hiroshima experience into yet another tragic story about untimely death and fail to explore the hibakushas' experience within the larger context of war, violence, and imperialism. Moreover, their bravery in the face of trauma and their innocence and beauty transform them into romantic heroines. The female hibakushas in such films are never scarred or disfigured for such images neither appear romantic nor inspiring. According to Todeschini, the bomb only serves to increase the women's spiritual qualities and highlight the virtues of an ideal Japanese woman[21]. Hayashi Kyoko abandons such optimism and focuses not so much on the suffering of the hibakushas but their fears and anxieties. She eschews the self-sacrificing and stoic "heroine" in favour of women who may appear un-victim like, thereby subverting the very idea of how a victim should or should not behave.

The body of a hibakusha was a mysterious and terrifying object that was a harbinger of the atomic age and perhaps, even the end of the world. This mystery and fear was further heightened by lack

of information, and sometimes intentional suppression of such information, regarding radiation disease. The press code imposed by the US-led allied force that occupied Japan between 1945 and 1952 prohibited the publication of photos showing the disfigured survivors and victims of the bombings. Such censorship further removed the bodies of hibakushas from narratives about the bomb.

WRITING THE FEMALE HIBAKUSHA BODY

Hayashi explores the dehumanization of the female body and shares in her works the anxiety of other female hibakushas. In her stories, the female body is a source of anxiety and fear where the fate of the nuclear world plays out. Alienated from their physical self, their bodies become the 'Other'. Hayashi often juxtaposes the diseased and decaying bodies of the female survivors with the healthy male bodies of non-survivors, indicating that atomic victimhood is gendered. In "Procession on a Cloudy Day", the sight of a group of anti-nuclear protesters drives the unnamed hibakusha narrator to contemplate the bomb, a-bomb disease, and motherhood, as if the three were intricately linked. Walking the streets of a beach town near Tokyo, the narrator is stifled by the sight of healthy bodies that exude sexuality. These sexually-charged bodies provide a foil for a young keloid-scarred hibakusha activist who appears "as small and ugly as worm-eaten fruit" in front of his peers.[22] The narrator is intensely aware of the fragility of her own body. She admits that she never blows her nose for fear of nose bleeds; not even when she has a cold. Instead, she opens her mouth and takes gulps of air. Her body, she thinks, is only bones held together to look like an ordinary human but if one were to press them between their fingers, they would fall apart.[23] Teiko's story only seems to confirm the narrator's fears about her body's vulnerability. Teiko recounts to her the cremation of her brother who had died after being exposed to atomic radiation. A man at the crematorium had told Teiko that all bomb victims had

the bones of an old man, brittle. He explained that since they had once been burned alive, their bones crumbled when the heat was turned up.

Even the free medical examination that survivors are expected to undergo every six months becomes a source of anxiety for the narrator. The notification from the private health center reminding her of the tests feels "like a fingernail scratching off the scab of a partially healed wound". The narrator and Teiko had defied the odds and survived despite experts' predictions that anyone within 1.5 km of the hypocentre would perish: "Teiko and I had survived in a place where death was a foregone conclusion. We were freaks. Freaks given the name of special A-bomb victims."[24] But her survival itself seemed insignificant and random. She had done nothing more to survive than the people who had died. They had tried to save themselves just the way she had.

During a quiet moment with her son, the narrator receives her medical tests reports that show abnormalities in her blood. The happy moment is shattered by this seemingly mundane piece of paper and her earlier confidence and contentment seem like an illusion. Constantly living under the threat of atomic diseases, a survivor is never free from the event of the atomic bombings. Their bodies are reminders not only of the tragedy but also of the death they narrowly and miraculously missed; that they survived when so many could not and that their lives may as easily be snuffed out one day by the bomb that continues to live on in their bodies. Now, she sees her son in a new light, through the eyes of a hibakusha mother. He is smaller than his first grade classmates and you can easily put your hands around his thin neck, she observes. His physical make-up resembled hers and he even had a lymph node on his neck, just like she did when she was a student. Observing these similarities, she is suddenly gripped by fear: has she passed down her atomic disease to her son?The thought of dying brings not the fear of death but of leaving her son alone, weak and unprotected. She thinks:

> If I died now, I thought, my son, sucking his thumb, a sock down around his ankle, would still tag along behind his bigger friends, playing outside until it got dark . . . But he might not stay outside. He might go to his room and read, alone. The light switches in our house are up high. When it gets dark, will he be able to reach them? I can't bear to think about such things.[25]

Her husband who did not experience the bomb has a more pragmatic approach to her sickness. "Leave it to the experts," he always told her. While he seemed to know all about the bomb, even how long his wife would live—when asking for her hand in marriage he had simply said, "You're a bomb victim, but you have ten years to live. I guarantee it"—his attitude toward the bomb was different from the survivors.

In Hayashi's story, there is a tension between the victims and the non-victims, especially husbands and wives. In "Procession on a Cloudy Day", she acknowledges the loneliness of a survivor who must learn to endure things alone. Refusing her husband's offer to take her to the hospital, the narrator remarks, "It's just that even if he's near me, I am still alone. I am the bomb victim. And the sooner I get used to enduring things alone, the better."[26] Like Teiko, all she can hope for is dignity in death. Going through her medical check-up, she finally understands why Teiko refused to see her son even on her death bed. She had wanted to die with the bomb, with its damages hidden inside her. The narrator concedes that hibakusha mothers only want to protect their sons and daughters from the same fate:

> Our sons are second-generation bomb victims. They might die the same way. There's no need to show them what it's like, or even what leads up to it. That's why I go to the hospital alone.[27]

The story concludes with a cheerful crowd joining the anti-nuclear

activists marching towards Hiroshima. The weary keloid-scarred hibakusha youth leads the group. The narrator remarks that the crowd of young people who have joined him will see him off and return back to their normal lives. Only she and he will continue to plod ahead. Hayashi situates their bombed bodies within the country's postwar nuclear history and suggests that their bodies carry memories of the atomic bombs and it is only they, the survivors, who will continue the fight against nuclear weapons. While non-survivors can return to their "normal" lives, the hibakushas are denied the right to do so.

Popular representations of hibakusha women subscribe to the dominant narratives of how a "good" female atomic survivor ought to behave. In "Masks of Whatchamacallit", Hayashi dwells on the bomb's effects on women's biological, particularly reproductive, functions. Survivor testimonies have generally focused on the day of the bombing and its immediate aftermath but the bomb's effects spanned decades and affected those born after 1945. The bomb had put the future at risk by violating and polluting women's bodies. Hayashi notes in "Masks":

> With women, many cases of sterility were reported due to the death of reproductive cells. The percentage of miscarriage was also high. The greatest disturbance, I heard, was seen among growing children. It was not rare that menstruation began suddenly after the bombing, or that bleeding did not stop.[28]

Their bodies had become 'other' that could betray them without any warning. Their biological rhythms, particularly menstruation cycles, were disrupted and that only heightened the hibakusha women's insecurities and anxieties about their bodies and their reproductive capacities. If in Kono Taeko's stories, a regular menstruation cycle affirms her female protagonists' negation of motherhood, in Hayashi's work it becomes a symbol of their healthy bodies and an affirmation of their potential to become mothers. In a society that idealized

women as mothers and wives, the hibakusha women were seen as abnormal. Further, the survivors feared that the bomb had affected their wombs and their children would be monstrous. In "Masks", Takako and the narrator, both atomic bomb survivors, grapple with these fears. Their hibakusha identity disrupts their assigned roles as wives and mothers and threatens the lives of their children.

Hayashi points out that hibakusha women held no hopes for marriage because "No one would choose to marry a woman with a bad background".[29] Those who did get married either hid their identity from their partners or lived in constant threat of the a-bomb illness. While Takako and the narrator never shed their victimhood, their marriages were overshadowed by it. Takako believed that her marriage was ideal for "she neither loved nor was loved" [30] suggesting that that is perhaps the only kind of marital relationship a hibakusha can hope for. Once divorced from her husband, she is free from societal expectations about how a wife and hibakusha women should behave. K tells the narrator that Takako buys young men for money because that is the only way a hibakusha who has lost one breast to cancer can get a man to hold her. Hayashi subverts the idea of how a 'good' hibakusha woman should behave in portraying the divorced and childless Takako as a sexual being. Through her carnal body, Takako affirms her own life: "I wish to hold young men, imbibe some of their energy, and make sure of my own life. I want a solid sense of being alive. There's nothing else in my hands." [31]

During her interactions with hibakushas, Maya Todeschini found that male hibakushas were not as anxious about transferring their radiation disease to their children as the women survivors. This is understandable as any birth defects were usually considered the women's fault.[32] Such views were internalized by the hibakushas. Takako saw their bodies as "flawed merchandise" that should be handled carefully.[33] Worried about giving birth to a deformed baby, she gets an abortion only to find that her baby would have been born healthy and normal "with perfect fingers and toes".[34] The narrator,

too, shares Takako's fears and wonders if her baby will be strange. In order to give birth to a normal child she seals away in an envelope all bomb-related images that may influence her pregnancy:

> Among the photos I put in the envelope was one of a little girl in a padded air raid hat, eyes and nose indistinguishable because of burns. Whatever might have happened to her mother, the girl sat all alone on the rubble . . . I put the photo of a mother's charred body into the envelope, too. A baby was by her side, charred uniformly black just like the mother . . . [35]

Women hibakushas kept a close watch on their bodies and even the slightest variation in biological functions was a cause of concern. The bomb's violence on their bodies was relentless. A week after the bombing, Takako began menstruating. She bled for three months. The narrator associates menstruation with a healthy body that is now ready to give birth. But when her own cycle starts, she is terrified for it could either mean normal growth or a result of radiation. "Each time a clot of blood was discharged, I felt it in my as yet thin pelvis, and each throbbing flow of blood took something away from my body. I felt insecure."[36] What should have been a cause of celebration and an intimate moment between a mother and daughter is instead marked by terror. As a little girl, the narrator had run through the streets of Shanghai to buy the mysterious box of "Queen Rose" for her sisters. The task of purchasing the sanitary napkins had been a secret shared in hushed voices that carried "womanlike tenderness" between the mother and daughters. Lured by the talcum scent of the Queen Rose, the narrator would open the crimson box alone in a room. "I felt as if that would be enough to make me a beautiful adult."[37] But when the day of celebration arrives, her body is rotting and there is no Queen Rose to mark her transformation to a woman. Queen Rose had held two meanings for the narrator: "a sign of passage to beautiful

adulthood" and "a healthy body capable of giving birth".[38] In its absence, such meanings collapse suggesting that the narrator can neither hope for a healthy body nor a beautiful adulthood. Faced with the fear and dilemma created by her own body, she wishes to go back to her "genderless" childhood.

Hayashi Kyoko's representation of the female hibakusha raises important questions about body, gender, and identity. Her writings reflect the anxiety and trauma of the female atomic survivors that were directly linked to their irradiated bodies. Hayashi was a survivor herself and she grappled with issues of sexuality, motherhood, and feminity. Her hibakusha characters are made of flesh and bone; they urge us to reflect on the threat of complete annihilation in the nuclear age. They expose their decaying bodies as proof of what violence and modern warfare can do to humanity. Hayashi's stories are inhabited by women hibakushas like Takako who subvert the traditional notion of a 'good' victim and force us to consider questions of gender when discussing victimhood.

NOTES

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